

**Rethinking Veblen's contribution to Consumer  
Research: a phenomenological enquiry into the  
perception of 'status consumption' by middle-income  
British consumers.**

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# ABSTRACT

## **Rethinking Veblen's contribution to Consumer Research: a phenomenological enquiry into the perception of 'status consumption' by middle-income British consumers.**

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The name of the American economist and social analyst Thorstein Veblen has been inextricably linked with the term "conspicuous consumption" referring to the competitive consumption practices and leisure activities that aim to indicate one's membership in a superior social class. However, the 'classical models' of consumer behaviour face difficulty in accommodating and understanding the nature of conspicuous economic display and a serious study of Veblen's arguments on the consumption practices of the 'nouveau-riche', non-utilitarian and status-directed behaviour has been noticeable only through its absence. This Thesis suggests and encourages a rereading of Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* through a critical examination about the adoption and discussion of his work. Thereupon, it argues that although many marketing theorists and consumer researchers will be aware of some of the terminology popularized from his book, surprisingly little attention seems to have been paid to the substance of Veblen's arguments and ideas. Also, via a series of existential phenomenological interviews and employment of vignettes, this study sought to draw broader conclusions about how ostentatious consumption activities and 'status consumption' are perceived nowadays by adult middle-income British consumers. Overall, the findings suggested that the notion of 'achieved status' receives a more intangible and honorable connotation compared to the excessive features of luxurious products and services and participants' accounts indicated that conformity and individual's need for a socially acceptable identity can be viewed as the primary motivations behind conspicuous consumption practices. In conclusion, it is argued that negative connotations associated with ostentatious economic display necessitate the reappraisal of Veblen's accounts about consumer's rising expectations and desires together with further research as regards the 'taboo' and sensitive issue of upward social mobility via consumption.

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Seeing a woman all dressed up for a trip to the city, Socrates remarked, “I suspect that your trip is not to see the city, but for the city to see you.”

- Socrates (470-399 B. C.)

“A volume published twenty-six years earlier, and just then reprinted for the ninth time...Veblen demands much of his readers, and not everyone who sips will have the stamina to drink.”

- Wesley Mitchell in the *Economic Journal* for the *Theory of the Leisure Class*, 1927

“We are still not sure what to do with Thorstein Veblen. The classical economists dismiss him as a mountebank. The Marxists scorn him as a petty bourgeois dilettante. Practical business economists wish to take over his methods of concrete analysis without his rejection of the system of business enterprise. His cavalier treatment of money, credit and interest outlaw him from Keynesian circles. Institutionalists have decided to claim him as ancestor while they reject him as a prophet. And no one has ever been altogether certain what he meant.”

- James Burnham, 1956

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## **Introduction**

There is a common belief that in Western societies, the arrival of the twenty-first century intimates and denotes an era of a highly refined modernity, advanced civilization and miraculous technological growth. Such optimistic views on economic and social development, somehow, legitimize and support the idea that mass consumption and the ‘democratization of consumption’ involve the spread of prosperity, diversity of consumer goods and increase in individual’s purchasing power up to an unprecedented level. One interpretation of this mass consumption phenomenon suggests that rise in affluence and consumer spending have been outcomes of escalating ‘progress’ which eventually instigates more choice, freedom, well-being and happiness to consumers. To a great extent, these rationalistic viewpoints have been based on the legacy of neoclassical and utilitarian economic theories and their philosophical assumptions have constructed a conceptual platform for contemporary approaches to consumer behaviour theory. Nonetheless, the representation of the consumer akin to Robinson Crusoe, who maximizes his self-interest through the utility derived from the consumption of goods, has been questioned and challenged as a premise that neglects and marginalizes the significance of irrational motives, interpersonal relations and the dynamics between social groups on consumption choices (Baudrillard, 1970/1998; Douglas and Isherwood, 1979; Ormerod, 1994; Ahuvia and Wong, 1995; Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Shankar, Whittaker and Fitchett, 2006). As one of the main pillars of orthodox models of consumer behaviour theory (for example Engel, Kollat and Blackwell, 1968; Howard and Sheth, 1969; Paul and Olson, 2007), the rationality of consumer demand facilitates the presentation of a simplified - and widely comprehensible - picture of market exchanges with special emphasis placed upon how

consumers get involved with the purchase process, rather than a deep understanding related to the generation of (often) irrational desires. Without aiming to challenge the usefulness and viability of the aforementioned models of consumer decision processes, it can be said that their mechanistic<sup>1</sup> views of human behaviour and embodied functionality limit our comprehension of how status and prestige considerations construct, shape and influence not only a consumer's buying decision but also the way he perceives and categorizes himself and others within a wider societal network. The adoption of practices such as ostentatious display of goods and status consumption maintain a leading role in our lives and social relationships, with material or immaterial conspicuousness being conveyed via individuals' actions. Some examples taken from everyday life can illustrate the aforementioned point.

### **Representations of status-seeking consumers**

In the suburbs of Mexico City, a middle-aged construction worker is driving his old Fiat Punto during the hottest afternoon of July. Stuck at red traffic lights, he observes the four-seated Lexus Cambrio pulling up next to his car and gently smiles at the co-driver, a well-dressed young lawyer whose enigmatic eyes are hidden below the luxury Roberto Cavalli sun-glasses. As the traffic light goes green and the Lexus accelerates to overtake the nearby cars, the construction worker opens the window and takes a deep breath of the humid and polluted air while he is mopping his brow. "At least, she assumed that I have air-conditioning" he thought and drove back home after a hard day's work. In the same afternoon, Kevin, a senior executive manager employed in a bank in London, is organizing

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<sup>1</sup> These models interpret buying behaviour as a process which involves several inputs, as information used by the consumer, and outputs as outcome of consumer action.

a party for his colleagues and holding a glass of red Australian wine, almost authoritatively says to the interior designer: “I want to highlight this furniture below the abstract paintings and next to one or two striking sculptures. I want enough lighting, and you know, an atmosphere which makes everyone feel comfortable and unique...Well...you can leave the piano and some interesting books there...I like this cultural side of the apartment.” The interior designer smiles politely and agrees. On the other side of the Atlantic, Maria is waiting with great impatience for one of the most promising lawyers in Detroit. Her failure to save money for her bank loan and credit card debt is a concern which has occupied Maria’s thoughts lately and she questions her ability not only to refresh her spring wardrobe but also to pay off her apartment. Apologizing for the delay and after listening to Maria carefully, the lawyer hesitates slightly and then says: “Actually, many clients of mine face similar financial problems these days. Times have changed and trying to ‘keep up with Joneses’ is not a great idea.” Overall, the intentions and everyday realities of the aforementioned characters reflect and to some extent mirror the anxieties, incentives and desires of socially driven consumers in Western societies. Considering the importance of status consumption practices in our everyday lives, the following PhD Thesis seeks a) to remind the work of the first scholar who detailed the existence of conspicuous consumption phenomena, b) to examine the reception of his ideas by social scientists interested in consumption and c) finally to comprehend how adult middle-income British individuals perceive and interpret the motivations behind the actions and decisions of status-seeking consumers.

## **The universality of conspicuous consumption**

Based upon the scenarios of the aforementioned vignettes, we can ask what connects the imaginary display of a technological device with the possession and exhibition of artistic related products and one's desire to emulate on credit a specific consumption lifestyle. Consumers purchase, possess and demonstrate products as a process or means to achieve social status. Conspicuous consumption, public display of goods or a desire for uniqueness and social membership via the possession of status symbols are diachronic and cross-cultural phenomena that define and characterize our consumer behaviour, even if their explanation in marketing and consumer behaviour models has remained inadequate (Solomon, 1992; Mason, 1998; Chaudhuri and Manjumar, 2006). From a gang member in Los Angeles who injures his rival for a pair of Nike Air-Jordan shoes to the preparation of a ritual in a tribe of central Africa, we observe individuals' need to signal and compete for prestige, primarily, via the available possessions or well-recognized status symbols. Belk (1988:104) points out that the motivation to gain status from the acquisition and consumption of goods can be observed even in members of Third-World countries who are "often attracted to and indulge in aspects of conspicuous consumption before they have secured adequate food, clothing and shelter", verifying Veblen's (1899) assumption that individuals of every social and cultural background might develop a tendency to participate in the process of consuming socially acceptable goods. Leaving aside the universality and timelessness of status-motivated consumption and focusing on Western developed societies, there is limited doubt that individuals' concern with their self-image, fashions, brand associations along with marketing and advertising techniques strengthen and multiply the dynamics of consumer behaviour as a process which apart from satisfying

basic needs, also substantially contributes to the establishment of social relations and the structure of social organization. For example, our clothes do not only assist in protection from the cold but inform others about our professional identity and the degree of social standing that we possess. Similarly, the display of long-successful luxury brands proclaims and signifies a way of self-expression together with our desires and motives to signal wealth and uniqueness. Status products, such as cars and expensive watches, might indicate an owner's propensity to compete with others in terms of financial resources and purchasing power. Finally, conspicuous display of goods can be driven by the adoption of a conforming mentality, public compliance and need for group membership, apart from mere ostentation, distinctiveness and exclusivity. The insecurity of the Mexican construction worker towards a lawyer's membership in a superior social group represents only one aspect of conspicuous consumption phenomena that can also be observed in Maria's desire to emulate and adopt an upper-class lifestyle and Kevin's efforts to impress his peers through his taste and accumulated cultural capital. In these examples, taken from the lives of middle-class consumers, we can identify a generic but realistic interpretation as to the way we perceive ourselves and others: there is an element of status consciousness and status sensitivity in almost every member of socially stratified societies. Individuals, as consumers tend to compete, collaborate and exclude others in a social arena of public display of commodities and cultural symbols. Given that existing economic and cultural differences constitute the basis for social differentiation in developed societies, then we can assume that the power of product symbolism and the role of commodities as social signifiers will continue to increase. Such phenomena and practices can be observed everywhere, from press releases about the extravagant consumption caprices of celebrities to marketing campaigns for the promotion of luxury brands and from the boost of one's ego

after the purchase of a new car to the exclusion of a casually dressed man in a luxurious restaurant. As was mentioned before, despite their importance for a deeper understanding of contemporary consumer behaviour, the constructs of conspicuous consumption and socially-driven consumption practices have received limited attention from literatures of marketing and consumer behaviour theory and there is a lack of systematic studies seeking to re-examine and investigate these processes from theoretical and empirical perspectives. Where is the problem?

Reviewing literatures of consumer research and marketing theory related to the construct of conspicuous consumption, we observe that the conventional models of consumer behaviour make limited references to the economically irrational and socially complex phenomenon of ostentatious economic display (Mason, 1998; Solomon, 1992; Chaudhuri and Manjumar, 2006). Apart from the original and fundamental models of consumer behaviour, we notice that contemporary studies on the notion of branding and status symbolism have pointed out the terminological and conceptual confusion around the interpretation of the term conspicuous consumption and status consumption phenomena in general (O’Cass and Frost, 2002; O’ Cass and McEwen, 2004; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Truong et al, 2008; Kapferer and Bastien, 2009). Additionally, most of the aforementioned authors aimed to develop conceptual frameworks in which the perception of luxury by consumers turns into an observable, measurable and comprehensible marketing phenomenon, with special attention to be placed on the literatures of luxury products. Thereupon, this study suggests that there is lack of a historical understanding regarding the development of status-seeking consumption phenomena and inadequate focus and analysis on interdisciplinary studies

related to conspicuous consumption. Taking as point of departure individuals' preoccupation with materialism and the growth of luxury markets over the last twenty years, the existing studies argue that marketers ought to monitor and continuously assess the prestige of brands so as to increase their quality and competitiveness in order to satisfy the social, emotional and utilitarian needs of the conspicuous consumer. Measuring the perception of a luxury brand can assist in the differentiation and development of the product, yet nonetheless, delimits the study of status consumption within a person-object approach. Such process occurs at the expense of understanding in-depth how interpersonal/social relations, sociability and cultural norms reshape individuals' experiences and interpretations of status-seeking phenomena. Considering that notions such as social referencing, symbolic value and socially-oriented perceptions are superficially analyzed, the outcome of the research process favors a positivistic and quantitative representation of structural evaluation and analysis on luxury brands. Subsequently, whilst ongoing research adds dimensions and factors on the notion of brand luxury (such as the terms luxurious, exclusive, unique, superior, sophisticated to mention but a few), the understanding of how individuals perceive others, in the form of conspicuous consumers, has been diminished and overlooked. In other words, the quality, exceptionality or distinctiveness of the luxury brands and status symbols is reassessed from a critical and analytic viewpoint; however, the social and ethical standards of the meaning and contemporary perception of socially-directed and conspicuous consumption phenomena have been taken for granted. To a great extent, the examination of status consumption by employing questionnaires which aim to test and assess participants' awareness of luxury brands marginalize the primary prerequisite for the occurrence of ostentatious economic phenomena. A site for display and the social visibility of goods have always been the main

motivators for the purchase of status-conferring goods. What is more, contemporary studies on luxury branding and conspicuousness approach consumers by constructing an artificial environment wherein the image of brand prevails and overshadows social comparisons and the bridgeless gaps between the average individual and archetypes from higher social and reference groups. Conspicuous economic display is not an isolated phenomenon and its very existence springs from the interplay between wealth, ownership, culture and social structures. Thereupon, this thesis suggests that the employment of innovated qualitative tools can elaborate on the patterns through which modern individuals perceive status consumption *within* the social arena. A lack of historical understanding of status-seeking phenomena and historically informed research as regards conspicuous consumption also produces myopic views on the structuring of consumer behaviour. Apart from the employment of innovative techniques so as to approach the consumption of goods and services shaped by social relations, the first step necessitates moving back in order to rethink our intellectual ancestors. Namely, the work of the first man who first coined and analyzed the term conspicuous consumption: Thorstein Veblen.

### **Who remembers Thorstein Veblen?**

Over the last ten or fifteen years a growing movement in consumer research has sought to challenge and move away from classical models of behaviour which focused on individual decision making, utilitarianism and cognitive processes. This trend in the academic literature has attempted to draw upon alternative traditions from across the social sciences which emphasize the cultural, sociological, anthropological and historical systems of consumer society and the place of the individual within them. While the field of consumer

behaviour has always made space for a discussion of some group based processes, such as conformity, influence of group norms and fundamental notions of social class; it is only more recently that a broader socio-cultural paradigm of the consumer has been attended to in any depth. The results of this shift are evidenced by the considerable body of research looking at issues of identity (Belk, 1988), humanistic perspectives of consumption (Shankar and Fitchett, 2002), ethnicity (Holt, 1997), sub-cultures (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) and ritual aspects of consumer culture (Belk et. al, 1989). As a consequence, increasing interest and attention has lately been given to academics and theorists who have examined the processes of consumer culture, like Bourdieu and Baudrillard. However, limited research and discussion occurs around Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* as one of the earliest and most complete accounts of the dynamics and structures of late Victorian and early American consumer society. Although many consumer researchers will be aware of some of the terminology popularised in the book - such as the term 'conspicuous consumption' - surprisingly little research engages with the substance of Veblen's arguments and ideas. On the contrary, as Mason (1998) suggests, both economists and consumer researchers have a tendency of forgetting, misinterpreting and marginalizing Veblen's ideas. Taking into account the increasing chronological divergence between the publication of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* and recent studies on consumer behaviour, it seems that the 'process of forgetting' (Tadajewski and Saren, 2008) Veblen's ideas will probably strengthen and intensify in the future. The phenomenon of amnesia in marketing theory and consumption studies has been approached and critically discussed by Tadajewski and Saren (2008), who persuasively argued that a combination of factors such as the 'publish or perish' mentality, increasing circulation of 'up to date' studies in citations and references and lack of interest in marketing history contribute in the marginalization of

intellectual predecessors whose theories enabled the widening and expansion of the discipline. The failure to stand on the shoulders of these, quite often, ‘dead men’ and to reconsider their penetrative insights so as to look further, results in the weakening of our capability to re-examine and comprehend the development of marketing ideas and consumption phenomena. Therefore, the following study focuses on the phenomena of ostentatious consumption and social display of commodities by offering a reminder of and encouraging a rereading of the first theorist who shed some light on the social processes within which consumers participate to gain status and prominence.

In his classical textbook, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen reminded us that the use of possessions as means of indicating one’s success and prosperity has occurred for centuries and described how the possession and exhibition of trophies, together with women and slaves, were fulfilling men’s desire for status. Moving his analysis from the barbaric stage to modern industrial and impersonal societies, Veblen argues that increasing production of surplus, followed by technological progress, marked a new era of economic activity. At this stage, social status manifested itself through the acquisition, accumulation and display of luxurious and (preferably) wasteful goods which demonstrated one’s membership of a superior social group. Attacking the economic orthodoxy of his time, Veblen produced the first theory of status-led consumption by recognizing that individuals’ demand for commodities and services is also formed by social networks and the need to secure prestige within society. The ostentatious consumption of wealth and the act of wasting time (conspicuous leisure) served as indicators of success for those who wanted to join higher social classes and economic groups. Consequently, people of each class demonstrated their belongings as symbols of power and wealth, attempting to emulate the

consumption preferences of the class above. Veblen characterized this type of universal consumer behaviour as ‘conspicuous consumption’, an ongoing process which played the most important role in the economic development of the United States at the beginning of the 20th century.

### **Main objectives and overview of the Thesis**

Of course the patriarchal societies and aristocratic elites Veblen described in his seminal book do not exist today, although the game of conspicuous consumption continues to be present and operative albeit in an adapted and evolving form. Individuals consume and demonstrate products, symbolic brands and services in order to construct and communicate their social identities (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Shankar, Elliot and Fitchett, 2009) and to achieve a desired status designation (Holbrook, 1999; McCracken, 1986). Moreover, sellers along with marketing and advertising agencies today produce, supply and promote goods and images which aim to satisfy consumers’ tendency to imitate and associate themselves with ‘superior’ lifestyle groups. Consciously or unconsciously, the acquisition and display of objects assists us in creating and expressing ourselves and social considerations for status and prestige stimulate our buying decisions. However, marketing theorists seem reluctant to explore the nature of status-seeking consumer behaviour by rethinking Veblen’s observations (Mason, 1984; O’Cass and Frost, 2002). This study argues that contemporary consumer researchers must venture beyond the limits of their own field of application and re-examine literatures from sociology, economics and cultural studies in order to access more theoretically substantial and detailed applications of Veblenian ideas. Accordingly, the purpose of this Thesis is twofold: a) from a theoretical perspective to examine the (mis)interpretation of Veblen’s ideas by consumer researchers,

marketing theorists, sociologists and economists interested in conspicuous consumption phenomena and b) by deploying a combination of qualitative methods to rethink how the notion of prestige is perceived nowadays by adult, middle income British consumers. As regards the empirical part of the Thesis, my main research objectives are the following:

- Firstly, this study seeks to gain a generic understanding of how contemporary middle-income consumers experience the phenomenon of ‘status consumption’ and also to elaborate on the different perceptions and interpretations between the terms ‘prestige’ and ‘luxury’ consumption.
- Secondly, this project aims to comprehend how participants perceive their own image and consumption lifestyles, in comparison with the archetypes of ostentatious economic display, and to examine informants’ experiences and opinions regarding the actions and consumption practices of individuals who can be recognized as conspicuous consumers.
- Thirdly, this study aims to probe into participants’ beliefs and attitudes regarding the motivations behind socially driven consumption in relation to the employment and discussion of vignettes and written scenarios which portray and discuss conspicuous consumption practices.

- Finally, this study attempts to draw broader conclusions from the findings about how the meaning of ostentatious consumption activities is perceived by contemporary middle income consumers and to what extent these findings reflect, update or challenge Veblen's ideas.

The investigation of the abovementioned research questions and objectives commences with a brief biographical examination of the author who coined and analyzed the term 'conspicuous consumption.' Chapter One seeks to shed some light on the upbringing, primary education and early academic life of Thorstein Veblen. Afterwards, I discuss Veblen's most productive intellectual period, as Assistant Professor at the University of Chicago and author of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (TLC henceforth). From a critical perspective, I approach and discuss the main features of the academic environment wherein Veblen produced his ideas related to consumer behaviour as well as key events that stigmatized his unconventional academic career. The first chapter closes with references to the impact of dominant academic theories and ideological standpoints on Veblen's intellectual background and work in general. The second chapter aims to offer a close rereading (reminding) of the TLC opening with an epigrammatic analysis as regards the influence of evolutionary and anthropological theories on Veblen's views and their impact behind his decision to divide the examination of conspicuous consumption phenomena into three socio-cultural stages (primitivism, barbarism, modern industrial societies). A brief reference to the importance of ostentatious economic practices during the stages of primitivism and barbarian communities scrutinizes the emergence of emulation and antagonism amongst individuals willing to display their trophies and private property as mechanisms of signifying social standing. Focusing on modern industrial societies, we can

reread Veblen's ideas about the interplay between the social meaning of commodities, affluence and social status. The second chapter concludes with a critical outlook on the conceptual and methodological limitations of the TLC. Chapter three draws some attention to the manifestation of conspicuous consumption phenomena in ancient and traditional societies and subsequently the analysis focuses on the early reception of the Veblen's ideas by his contemporary economists interested in consumption practices; immediately after the publication of the TLC and until the outbreak of the WWII. Finally, I observe how the spread of Veblen's ideas informed the intellectual movement of institutional economics, early theories of consumer demand and motivational research theorists who paid attention to the basic drives and incentives behind socially-driven consumption practices.

In the fourth chapter, I examine and critically discuss the reception of Veblen's work during a thirty-year period - from 1945 (post-War II era) up to 1975 - of mass consumption, prosperity and technological development in the emerging service-driven Western economies. The interpretation of Veblen's work from a sociological agenda is followed by the critique of the TLC by members of the Frankfurt School. Also, we notice how Packard's views about the maintenance of socially-driven consumption practices in America and Galbraith's outlook as regards status consumption and the generation of artificial needs are informed by Veblen's theory. The chapter closes with a detailed exploration on how Veblen's ideas have been updated and challenged by Bourdieu's work on class consumption and Baudrillard's anthropological comments related to the importance of the 'sign value' of commodities for the reproduction of social order. The opening of the fifth chapter investigates the rise of consumerism in Western developed

societies during the 1970s and its influence on ostentatious economic display and socially motivated consumption practices. Afterwards, the impact of the behaviourist movement to the first detailed models of consumer behaviour comes under close scrutiny and I suggest that the popularity of the latter has weakened and to some extent marginalized Veblen's ideas from mainstream consumer behaviour theory. After some critical comments about the emergence of the discipline of consumer research during the mid-1970s, my analysis centres on the revival of conspicuous consumption phenomena during the materialistic and self-driven period of the 1980s. In conclusion, the reception, discussion and reproduction of Veblen's ideas by contemporary consumer researchers becomes feasible via a citation analysis based upon the use of Veblen's book in leading journals of consumer research and marketing. The chapter closes with a summary of the literature review, a detailed discussion as regards the limitations of contemporary studies related to luxury consumption and theoretical assumptions which can assist in the development of a concrete methodological and empirical framework.

In the beginning of the sixth chapter, I embark upon the central research questions of the thesis, after a thorough consideration of the methodological principles which can be found in existing studies related to conspicuous consumption. I justify the selection of a series of existential phenomenological in-depth interviews with a small group of adult and middle-income British consumers, as the most appropriate methodological framework. Seeking to understand the meaning of consumers' experiences related to ostentatious economic display and the collection of detailed, 'first person' descriptions of consumers' life worlds, I explain why supplementary techniques – in the form of vignettes – have been employed throughout the data collection. The chapter closes with the explanation of selecting the

specific sample of participants, the description of the research process, data analysis and existing limitations. The presentation and discussion of the findings commences in chapter seven, where I focus on informants' consumer experiences about how the notion of social status receives a more intangible and honorable meaning compared to the extreme and superfluous features of luxurious products and services, which do not offer sufficient information for the attribution of social standing. I discuss the fact that participants' interest in the personal history, social background and work achievements of the conspicuous consumers indicates that the superficial observation of socially-directed consumption phenomena provides limited information for the ascription of prestige. Synthesizing participants' accounts, I argue that the attribution of status becomes a continuous and incomplete experience since a series of events, actions and social criteria constantly alter and modify the standards both for the conspicuous consumer and the observer. The eighth chapter pays particular attention to informants' self-perception related to the experience of status consumption and the incentives behind the conspicuous consumption activities of the others. I seek to interpret why the respondents suggested that a 'moderate' ethos characterizes their consumption lifestyles and they attributed rivalry for social status exclusively to *other people*, drawing examples from the consumption activities of friends, relatives and colleagues and to what extent these accounts challenge Veblen's observations about aggressiveness and increased competition, as the most prominent features of conspicuous consumption practices. I also discuss how participant's unwillingness to elaborate on the topics of conspicuousness and upward social mobility via consumption indicates that the notions of social class and status consumption constitute sensitive and taboo issues; thus supplementary techniques in the form of vignettes should be employed. The employment of vignettes is described in the final chapter of the thesis where I narrate

how their presence enabled and facilitated the participants to describe their experiences related to conspicuous consumption practices and also to discuss the phenomena of upward social mobility and differentiation via consumption in a less threatening way. In conclusion, I critically approach why issues of social conformity related to consumption was acknowledged as the primary motivation for socially driven activities of middle income individuals. The thesis closes with a summary of the philosophical and historical defence of Veblen's ideas in the literature review and I also reconsider how the findings can be viewed as means of challenging and updating the Veblenian observations. Directions for future research on the taboo topic of conspicuous economic display and the limitations of the study can be found in the last part of the thesis and before the presentation of the bibliography.

“It is ironic that the United States should have been founded by intellectuals, for throughout most of our political history, the intellectual has been for the most part either an outsider, a servant or a scapegoat.”

*Richard Hofstadter* (1964) – American historian and public intellectual

## **Chapter 1: Thorstein Veblen**

How can we reread and rethink a classic book of social and economic theory that contributed strongly to the advancement of economics, consumer demand theory (Hamilton, 1989) and possibly marketing thought? Perhaps, the best possible start could be a brief look at the biography of its author with emphasis to be placed on his academic career and the development of his ideas. The following chapter aims to offer some insights into the motives, impulses and intentions behind the scholar who offered the first thorough analysis of American consumer culture and socially-driven consumption phenomena. Thereupon, we can reexamine the major events, stimuli and academic influences which prompted Veblen’s interest in the irrationality of consumer behaviour and the display of conspicuous consumption practices. A succinct look at Veblen’s upbringing and (early) student years is followed by an examination of his academic career as professor of economics and author of *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. The final section concludes with a reference to Veblen’s final years and discussion as regards the impact of dominant academic theories and ideologies to his intellectual background.

## 1.1 The early years

Thorstein Bunde Veblen was born in 1857 in a small farm in Cato, Wisconsin, the sixth of twelve children in the family of the Norwegian immigrant farmers, Thomas Veblen and Kari Bunde (Dorfman, 1934). Born two years before the publication of Marx's *Critique of Political Economy* and Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, Veblen grew up in an agrarian environment of a mid-Western Norwegian community, whose members learnt steadily to speak English but also continued to read Norwegian literature (Dobriansky, 1957). Thorstein's parents had an important influence on the shaping of his thoughts during the seventeen years that he spent at the farm. As David Riesman (1953) argues, Thomas Veblen was one of the most enterprising<sup>2</sup> and innovative men in the community and his love for industry had a great impact on what Veblen later coined and analyzed as one of the most important incentives behind any economic activity, the 'instinct of workmanship' (Veblen, 1914). On the other hand, the soft, protective and ingenious qualities of his mother can be traced in Veblen's sympathy for the peaceful and uncompetitive pre-barbaric communities, as these have been described in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Veblen, 1899). In general, an intellectual stimulation and oscillation between the ideas of parental power, social status, authority and technocracy (Veblen, 1904; 1921) along with maternal empathy and understanding (Veblen, 1899; 1917) characterize some of Veblen's later academic work.

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<sup>2</sup>He was the first farmer in the agricultural community to introduce farm machinery and new farming techniques. He was considered as a substantial landowner and one of the most powerful and influential members of the Norwegian community (Dorfman, 1953).

The gradual growth of the farm facilitated the realization of Veblens' prime objective: to provide their children with formal education. Thereupon, in 1880 Thorstein Veblen graduated from Carleton College Academy in Minnesota with a bachelor's degree in economics. Along with his interest in economics, Veblen was absorbed in philology, natural history and primarily philosophy (Dobriansky, 1957; Qualey, 1968). The interest in philosophy, in particular the works of the Immanuel Kant and Herbert Spencer, prompted Veblen to pursue further graduate studies at the John Hopkins Graduate School in Baltimore, where he enrolled in 1881 to study philosophy with economics as a minor. Disappointed with his course and facing financial difficulties, Veblen resumed the following year (1882) his studies in philosophy at Yale University. As a student at Yale University, he became a supporter of the political economist William Graham Sumner, known for his commitment to Social Darwinism. But perhaps the most important intellectual influence on Veblen's work came from Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, whose publications in the second half of the 19th century introduced an evolutionary framework for social life (Dorfman, 1934; Riesman, 1953; Hodgson, 2004). Under the supervision of Yale President Noah Porter - whose research was laying emphasis on the work of Kant - and interested in the social theories of Sumner and Herbert Spencer, Veblen received his doctoral degree in 1884 for a (still missing) thesis on *The Ethical Grounds of a Doctrine of Retribution*. The award of his PhD degree was immediately followed by Veblen's (1884) first publication, an essay on *Kant's Critique of Judgment*. However, failing to secure an academic position in the field of philosophy, despite excellent recommendations and due to illness (malaria), Veblen had to return to the parental farm at Nerstrand. According to Dorfman (1934), university professors with philosophical inclinations were primarily selected on the grounds of their religious, ethnic and moral

background. During the end of the nineteenth century, very few philosophical faculties in the United States were interested in a Norwegian emigrant with agnostic tendencies.

Veblen remained on the farm for seven years (1884-1891), a period of futile efforts to find a teaching post. In 1888, despite being unemployed, Veblen married his Carleton classmate Ellen Rolfe and the couple moved to the aristocratic farm of Ellen's father - who was gravely disappointed by the marriage of his daughter to a Norwegian atheist - at Stacyville, Iowa. During the following seven years of unemployment, Veblen retained his humor and reacting surprisingly calmly he tried to secure an income by writing for Eastern newspapers and magazines (Dorfman, 1934). Though remote from academic circles and discourses, Veblen did not fall into intellectual lethargy. His intellectual curiosity, research interest and love for reading vigorously intensified:

“He read everything he could possibly obtain, including books from the libraries of Lutheran ministers, novels, poetry, hymnbooks, as well as learned treatises. As one pile of book disappeared, he promptly secured another. For days all that one could see of him was the top of his head at the garret window” (Dorfman, 1934: 57).

Possibly, the disturbing rumors of Veblen's idleness by his Norwegian neighbors led him to translate the *Laxdaela Saga*<sup>3</sup> from Icelandic so as to impress members of his family and the

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<sup>3</sup> The Laxdaela is one of the most important medieval epical stories of Iceland, with high reputation for its literary qualities. Veblen's translation remained unpublished until 1925 due to publishers' unwillingness to print it without guarantee.

community. However, Veblen didn't read alone. Together the Veblens (Thorstein and Helen) studied ancient Greek and Latin, science, philosophy, economics, history and many novels. Edward Bellamy's (1888) socialist utopia with the title *Looking Backward* had been their favourite book (Dorfman, 1934; Dobriansky, 1957) and a major intellectual influence on Veblen's later ideas related to status emulation, monopolies and the economic function of political regimes (Titman, 1985). The seven years of unemployment might have been a period of hardship for Veblen but it unquestionably gave him the opportunity to acquire insights from various academic fields so as to enrich his theoretical background. In a final effort to position himself in the academia, Veblen registered at Cornell University in 1891 as graduate student of social sciences and history or, according to the University records, as "a student who was working for an advanced degree" (Dorfman, 1934). His long absence from an academic environment was justified via the story of ill health and recuperation and it was also mentioned that the 'mature student' had been working on Nordic literature and history. Thorstein Veblen was now thirty-four years old.

## **1.2 The productive years**

At Cornell University, Veblen's intellectual vitality and curiosity for learning attracted the attention of Laurence Laughlin, the head of the department of economics. Veblen's (1891) bright essay on *Some Neglected Points in the Theory of Socialism*, partially inspired by Spencer's ideas, prompted Laughlin to obtain a special grant for Veblen so as to continue his studies (Dorfman, 1968). The following year (1892), Laughlin was appointed head of the department of economics at the newly opened University of Chicago and he managed to

secure a teaching fellowship for the mature student. Veblen remained at the new University of Chicago for a period of fourteen years (1892-1906), initially teaching as a fellow a course in social science and eventually reaching the rank of Assistant Professor and managing editor of the newly established *Journal of Political Economy*. Furthermore, it was at the University of Chicago where Veblen published his magnum opus *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Veblen, 1899) together with *The Theory of Business Enterprise* (Veblen, 1904), a series of famous essays on economics and evolutionary theory (Veblen, 1898), the origins of the concept of ownership (Veblen, 1898), the barbaric status of women (Veblen, 1899) and some points on Marx's socialist theory (Veblen, 1896). He wrote feverishly on a variety a topics, including the analysis and interpretation of anthropological, bio-social, economic phenomena and political theories, but he also had the (mis)fortune to research and teach these topics in a period where the necessity for the methodological organization of social sciences was growing (Dobriansky, 1957). For example, the scientific and methodological rigor of biological and evolutionary studies was becoming popular amongst economists who were seeking a methodological framework for the organization of abstract theoretical concepts and business facts. Additionally, endless controversies between economists and sociologists regarding the boundaries of their intellectual spheres had been the main issues of departmental meetings and academic conferences. Finally, the work of Franz Boas (1897) on the Kwakiutl Indians of British Columbia, which explicated the notion of conspicuous waste in tribal uses of possessions, was invigorating the research interest in anthropological research, primitive behaviour and the historical development of social structures and institutions. Whilst the majority of social scientists were gradually seeking to take sides and position their ideas within one of the newly formulated and structured disciplines, Thorstein Veblen was sitting in the eye of the intellectual cyclone -

between economics, sociology and anthropology - and he sat there consciously and comfortably until the end of his academic career.

During the productive years at the University of Chicago, Thorstein Veblen acquired the reputation of an eccentric, iconoclastic, original and somewhat of an 'irritant' thinker (Tilman, 1992). Veblen's groundbreaking article, "*Why is economics not an evolutionary science?*" (Veblen, 1898) enthralled the interest of some institutional economists who had considered the application of mechanisms of natural selection and biological ideas to their embryonic discipline (Hodgson, 1992). However, his unconventional personal life, teaching methods and reputation as a womanizer resulted in him having to move from many academic posts, generally involuntarily. In 1906, the Chicago administration forced him to resign as Associate Professor because of flagrant marital infidelities and a landfill of lies. Back at home, his domestic troubles were increasing and his wife's attempts to understand his eccentricities only annoyed him. Despite the fact that the cutting satire in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* was enjoyed by students, radicals, socialists and liberals all over the country (Dorfman, 1934), Laughlin wasn't able to get his appointment renewed in Chicago. In 1906, Veblen got an appointment at the University of Stanford as Associate Professor. Thorstein Veblen was now forty-nine years old.

Veblen remained in Stanford for almost three years. Meanwhile, after a continual cycle of separation and reconciliation with his wife Ellen, the Veblens had a final break that forced Thorstein to provide over half of his salary to his wife. Apart from delivering a series of

famous lectures<sup>4</sup> at the Harvard department of economics on the ‘*Followers of Karl Marx*’ and ‘*The Distribution of the Socialist Sentiment*’, during the Stanford period Veblen produced only two critical essays on Fisher’s dominant economic theories (Veblen, 1908; Veblen, 1909) and a paper on the evolution of scientific perception (Veblen, 1908). In December 1909, he was forced to resign his post due to problems of ‘romantic nature’ and his unwillingness to reappear and continue one of his courses. Although Veblen’s name as an educator and pedagogue was blackened after Stanford, he had no problem in receiving excellent<sup>5</sup> letters of recommendation from leading economists and scholars in America. In 1911, Veblen got an appointment at the University of Missouri as lecturer, with the authorities of the economic department flattered to be able to attract a man of his reputation. He remained there until 1917, when his health grew poorer and his students were disappointed by his contempt. Always remaining an active researcher, Veblen published three major works, *The Instinct of Workmanship and the State of the Industrial Arts* (Veblen, 1914), *Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution* (Veblen, 1915), and *An Inquiry into the Nature of Peace and Terms of its Perpetuation* (Veblen, 1917). In 1914, Veblen married one of his former students at the University of Chicago, Ann Fessenden Bradley, mother of two children from a previous marriage, yet their happiness didn’t last for long. Four years later Ann suffered a mental breakdown and remained in a sanitarium until her death in 1920. Veblen, who had suffered from severe pneumonia a few years earlier, was already sixty-three years old.

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<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, the lectures were published in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* as “The Socialist Economics of Karl Marx and his Followers” (Veblen, 1906).

<sup>5</sup> President Jordan from Stanford described Veblen as “one of the highest living authorities in certain specialized lines, one being the economic theory, and the other the theory of the origin and economic development of primitive man” and also argued “he has a mind that, in certain lines of subtlety and keenness of apprehension, has no superior in the country.” Professor Taussig of Harvard also claimed that “Veblen came as near to being a genius as any economist we have”. (Dorfman, 1934:299).

### 1.3 The final years

In the fall of 1918, Thorstein Veblen became associated with the *Dial* magazine, a New York radical - literally and politically - magazine, and many of his essays appeared in its issues (Dobriansky, 1957). Additionally, by the end of 1920 Veblen, together with John Dewey, Wesley Mitchell and James Robinson, became one of the founding members of the Faculty at the New School of Social Research in New York City. His salary at the newly opened University was primarily paid by some former students and admirers. Between 1919 and 1925, Veblen lectured at the New School and he also continued to write and publish some of his last works including: *The Vested Interests and the Common Man* (Veblen, 1919), *The Industrial System and the Captains of Industry* (1919) and the *Higher Learning in America* (1918) where he explicated, in a sardonic and humorous manner, how business culture infected and dominated American universities and subsequently the production and diffusion of free and unbiased knowledge. The publication of the book and its numerous reviews corroborated and verified Veblen's reputation as one of the most salient social critics in the United States (Dorfman, 1934). Ironically, the *American Economic Association* offered in 1924 its presidency to a man who couldn't secure an academic post in one of the leading institutions and whose personal expenses were paid primarily by sympathizers of his books and ideas. Veblen politely refused the nomination and in 1925, after two years of illness and unable to teach or research, he was forced to leave the New School at the age of sixty-eight.

In 1926, Veblen retired to Paulo Alto California accompanied by his nursing step-daughter Becky Bradley. He lived there until his death from a heart attack, on the 3rd of August 1929, few days after his seventy-second birthday. At the age of seventy, Veblen was already a mythical figure in the fields of economics and social sciences in general. Admirers, former students and ambitious writers visited his house in California, sometimes from considerable distances, either to meet the 'Master' or to hear a comment on their work. After Veblen's death, an unexpected financial crisis took place in America which led to one of the greatest depressions in history. Ironically in 1932, Veblen's ideas on 'business cycles' and the future of capitalism flashed his name into the front pages of New York newspapers, referring to the economist who carried the solution for the depression (Dorfman, 1968). However, his name was primarily associated with the *Theory of the Leisure Class* which had already published 20.000 copies. In 1934, Dorfman closed Veblen's finest biography and examination of his ideas with the following question:

"Has his thinking actually become so assimilated in prevailing common sense that, as one scholar has said, 'there would be no point in republishing *The Theory of the Leisure Class*,' or is he so far ahead of his time that the best of the economists, as another scholar has declared, are only beginning to catch up with him? Is the vital and profound meaning of the *Theory of the Leisure Class* taking precedence of its satirical appearance? The answers rest with the future." (Dorfman, 1934:518).

One hundred and ten years after the publication of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* and in line with Professor Dorfman's question, the first part of this thesis will aim to reread and

shed some light on the legacy and (mis)use of Veblen's ideas by the literatures of consumer behaviour and marketing theory.

#### **1.4 The background of Veblen's ideas**

A brief look at Veblen's biography discloses two undeniable facts. These are: (1) Thorstein Veblen had been a seminal mind whose theories and ideas challenged, and to some degree reshaped, the conventional doctrines of economic and sociological thinking; (2) he was an irritant, both intellectually and personally, to the established economic orthodoxies and protocols of behaviour within academic institutions of his time. Focusing on the first fact, it will be useful to draw our attention to the intellectual influences behind the author of the *Theory of the Leisure Class*. And these influences are numerous, thus the most prominent will be mentioned. To begin with, Dewey's philosophical criticism on the assumption of neoclassical economics (Tilman, 2004) together with Pierce's<sup>6</sup> view on pragmatism and scientific enquiry (Dyer, 1986) influenced Veblen's ideas regarding scientific enquiry, during the early years of his career and before the publication of the TLC. Also, the contribution of the Scottish economist Rae (1834/1964) to early theories of consumer demand and the relation between luxury consumption and social superiority shaped Veblen's observations on emulation and conspicuous consumption (Edgell and Tilman, 1991; Alcott, 2004). Furthermore, the writings of the leading American anthropologist Franz Boas in 1890, whom Veblen knew in Chicago, inspired and prompted Veblen to reject the universal and teleological schemes of social and cultural evolution; introduced by

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<sup>6</sup> Veblen was student of Pierce at John Hopkins University. Additionally, Veblen and Dewey were colleagues at Chicago University and two of the founders of the New School of Social Research.

Spencer and his followers (Hodgson, 2004). Moreover, Veblen's intellectual interest wasn't limited to scientific works and according to his biographers he was a great fan of literature. In his utopian socialist novel *Looking Backward*<sup>7</sup>, Bellamy's (1888) imaginative assumptions on waste, emulation, competitive advertising and retailing seem to inform ten years later some of Veblen's ideas in the TLC.

As a thinker and writer, Veblen possessed a unique skill in synthesizing and discussing diverse academic literatures - from philosophy to economics and anthropology - with critical observations from everyday life experiences and socially-driven phenomena. His first and foremost book, the TLC, is an exemplar of Veblen's interdisciplinary background. It can be said that few intellectuals of his time possessed similar conceptual and writing skills, but undeniably two of them changed the way we perceive and comprehend the world: Karl Marx and Charles Darwin. Without attempting to unravel the complicated intellectual relationship between Marx's and Veblen's theories, we notice that Veblen, while never embracing the Marxian materialistic interpretation of history, retained a Marxian influence in his writings as regards the phenomenon of economic and class inequality. However, the Marxist teleology about class struggle and human action was rejected, since for Veblen individual's interests, either as worker or aristocrat, do not necessarily lead to particular (revolutionary) individual actions (Hodgson, 2004). On the contrary, man's conceptions and habits of thought can be so irrational that a human agent – either as exploiter or exploited – can act in an absurd, irrational and often 'funny' manner, akin to the working class consumers who emulate their 'superiors' in the TLC. Status, as

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<sup>7</sup> Bellamy describes the story of a man in 1887 in Boston who fall asleep and awoke in a socialist America in the year 2000.

means of a social stratification amongst humans, represents the most fundamental concept in Veblen's work and through the expression of culturally transmitted instincts and proclivities generates emulation and *invidious comparison*.

In his seminal book *The Origin of Species* Darwin (1859) wrote generally, without explicating in great detail, the evolution of particular species and especially that of humans. Hence, the appearance of *The Descent of Man* (1871) represents his first effort to discuss mental resemblances between animal and human instinctive behaviours. The main hypothesis of the book - which remains almost the same in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) - is that natural selection prearranges and evolves some psychological functions of the human mind. Intelligence and human language constitute central features of adaptive change and therefore natural selection also operates upon individuals. Darwin suggested that the theory of evolution and natural selection could be applied beyond the scopes of biology and might apply to the evolution of language, moral ideas, cultures and even societies (Hofstadter, 1955; Flew, 1984). Amongst the few social thinkers who have followed Darwinian principles in their writings about social and cultural phenomena, we find Bagehot (1881) who linked natural selection with human learning and scientific development; Ritchie (1896) who considered how institutions, customs and habits follow their own evolutionary path and James (1897) arguing about issues of epistemological and political evolution. Veblen was the last and most influential amongst the social scientists of his generation to establish the basis of a Darwinian socio-economic evolution by the turn of the 20th century. For Veblen, evolution and change, contrary to the notion of equilibrium followed by neoclassical economists, should be intrinsic to the

thought of economists and social theorists. Throughout his academic work he showed a continued interest in how individuals progress under the influence of evolutionary selection, considering how the mental processes of learning, imitating and acting are imparted through instincts, habits and human culture.

We notice that Veblen's ideas represent an intriguing and original amalgam of American pragmatism, political economy, European and American socialist thought (Marx and Bellamy), and anthropology and evolutionary theory, particularly Darwinism. Accordingly, the adoption and diffusion of his theories and ideas by (primarily) economists, sociologists, critical and cultural theorists, anthropologists, philosophers and historians of the sociology of knowledge throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries should not cause surprise. Nowadays, he is considered as one of the founding fathers of institutional economics (Dorfman, 1963; Seckler, 1975), the founding father of evolutionary economics (Hodgson, 1993; Stoelhorst, 2008), one of the originators of 'naturalistic' approaches to economic phenomena (Herrman-Pillath, 2009) and one of the most famous American classical founders of sociology (Mestrovic, 1993). As was mentioned in the introductory part of this study, the majority of contemporary consumer researchers seem to consider Veblen as the sociologist who coined the term 'conspicuous consumption' and explained how consumers' desire to emulate luxurious lifestyles generates increased social mobility. Aiming to challenge these somewhat shallow and superficial interpretations of Veblen's work, the following chapter of the thesis offers a close (re)reading of the TLC and suggests that apart from the overused term 'conspicuous consumption', Veblen's book includes some seminal and diachronic insights for contemporary consumer research regarding the interrelations

between property, status consumption, social class, dissatisfaction and generation of desires.

## **Chapter 2: Consumer Research and the Theory of the Leisure Class**

As Banks (in Raison, 1979: 119) notes in a discussion on Veblen, “there is no other sociologist of his generation whose words are so often quoted but whose works are so little read.” Indeed, Veblen’s name has been inextricably linked with the term ‘conspicuous consumption’ which refers to the consumption practices and leisure activities that aim to indicate one’s membership of a superior social class. Astonishingly, very little attention seems to have been paid by the literatures of consumer research and marketing to the substance of Veblen’s observations and ideas (Mason, 1998). The following chapter offers a close rereading (reminding) of the TLC and it opens with a brief analysis related to the influence of evolutionary and anthropological theories on Veblen’s ideas and their impact behind his decision to divide the examination of status-driven consumption phenomena into three socio-cultural stages (primitivism, barbarism, modern industrial societies). Subsequently, I focus my attention on the relevance of consumption practices during the stage of primitivism. In the next section, I discuss the emergence of emulation and competition amongst members of barbarian communities and how the exhibition of private property and possession of trophies turned into means of signifying social status. Moving to the final socio-historical stage analyzed in the book - modern industrial societies - we can reexamine Veblen’s views on the interplay between private property, wealth and social class and the chapter closes with comments on Veblen’s satiric insights about the consumption habits of the leisure class and a critical outlook on the conceptual limitations of the TLC.

## 2.1 Veblen's socio-historical framework of consumption

The first edition of Alfred Marshall's (1895) book *Principles of Economics* was published in 1890. The book became the cornerstone of neoclassical<sup>8</sup> economic view for many decades. Marshall superficially acknowledged a social as well as a psychological dimension to consumption and the need for recognition and attribution of status as a major feature of determining the purchase of clothes. However, in the main thrust of his book can be found the representation and description of a one-dimensional, rational and mechanistic 'economic man' (consumer) whose status considerations play a secondary and negligible role for market realities. Veblen's perception of economic reality, and market reality in particular, was quite different and probably far more sophisticated. As Ayres (1963:50) argued about Veblen's work:

"From his student day onward, primitive culture was one of Veblen's most intense and continuous interests...he was enabled, by a different set of circumstances, to view the economy in a totally different perspective. Veblen seems to have viewed modern Western economy in the perspective of primitive society."

As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, Veblen's (1898, 1899) essays on the *The Beginnings of Ownership* and *The Barbarian Status of Women* displayed his continuous

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<sup>8</sup> The term neoclassical refers to various economic views and schools of thought that followed the classical economic theories of Adam Smith and Ricardo on value and distribution theory. Neoclassical economics place emphasis on individuals' rational preferences, maximization of utility and maximization of profit. The term was introduced by Thorstein Veblen (1900) so as to distinguish the work of Marshall from the Austrian School of economics.

interest in the developing nature of status consumption phenomena, socio-economic change and cultural norms. In 1899, he included and interrelated these ideas into a single thesis and published the *Theory of the Leisure Class*, a book that aimed not only to attack the economic orthodoxy of its time but also to produce an evolutionary account of status-seeking phenomena from primitive to modern industrial societies. Leaving aside his academic, historical and anthropological background, it can be said that Thorstein Veblen was a very good observer of human nature and socially-driven economic phenomena. In the preface of the book he wrote:

“partly because of reasons of convenience, and partly because there is less chance of misapprehending the sense of phenomena that are familiar to all men, the data employed to illustrate or enforce the argument have by preference been drawn from everyday life, by direct observation or through common notoriety, rather than from more recondite sources at a farther remove. It is hoped that no one will find his scientific fitness offended by this resource to homely facts...” (Veblen, 1899:5).

According to Mason (1981), during the American Industrial Revolution (1865 – 1914), the apotheosis of the successful/self-made businessmen strengthened both the movement of commercialism and also individuals’ desire for competitive consumption and display of status symbols. As outcome of the aforementioned social processes, the traditional old money elites experienced the rise of an affluent and competitive business community. The ‘status war’ between the well-established social elites and the traders and businessmen of the emerging middle-classes, whose financial strength was becoming evident via economic

display, intensified during the period known as ‘Gilded Age’ (1860-1914). Given that precise class distinctions had never been established in the consciousness of many Americans, the huge influx of immigrants, high levels of achievement motivation (McClelland, 1961) and the prevailing doctrine of self-help exhorted the ideology that increased individual endeavors could be rewarded with economic prosperity and social status. Golden fruits decorating luxurious parties, lavish expenditure and the extravagant lifestyles of Americans didn’t escape the attention of Thorstein Veblen.

In most of his books, likewise in the TLC, Veblen followed the same strategy of organizing and presenting his arguments. The theoretical background of the thesis is thoroughly scrutinized in the first chapters, while the remaining chapters discuss and analyze a plethora of examples deriving from everyday social and economic life so as to support the substance of the theoretical part. In the introduction of the TLC, Veblen begins to unfold, gradually but not systematically, the socio-historical background of the formation and evolution of status-driven phenomena and the leisure class, introducing the reader to the origins of conspicuous economic behaviour. A fundamental distinction amongst the three evolutionary stages of savagery, barbarism (early and later barbarism) and modern (industrial) societies is drawn in the pages of the first chapters of the TLC. This schema is based on the historical periods traced out by Henry Morgan’s (1877) *Ancient Society*, an anthropological work that proposed a scheme of Darwinian evolution from primitive to modern societies. Veblen explicated how individuals’ craving for status consumption develops and evolves from one stage to the other as will be discussed below. At the same time, he observed and described the survival, learning and preservation of particular

barbaric traits and their manifestation in modern conspicuous consumption practices which seek to secure for the individual social standing and prestige.

## **2.2 Primitivism and consumption**

Following a chronological order, Veblen claimed that the oldest and more archaic 'cultural' scale in the evolution of humanity can be traced back to the primitive communities. Focusing on the social organization of such communities - Veblen named the Andaman and Toda tribes in India and the Eskimos - we notice that the differentiation through social classes and employments didn't exist. Veblen described the members of small groups, unaware of social structures and superior economic groups, who struggle to secure the basic means (food, housing and warm) for survival against hostile environmental conditions. The possession of the essential means for survival becomes the main objective for individuals defining and characterizing, to a significant extent, their social actions. As Veblen explains:

“They are small groups and of a simple (archaic) structure; they are commonly peaceable and sedentary; they are poor; and the individual ownership is not a dominant feature of their economic system.” (Veblen, 1899: 8)

The acquisition and symbolic display of commodities possessed no meaning during the stage of peaceable savagery, since consumption simply served the primordial needs of

hunger and thirst. Additionally, antagonistic activities amongst the members of the tribe were absent, or of negligible importance, thus the incentive for emulation was weak. A collective system of economic and social organization prevailed over the social life of primitive communities. In his essay *'The Beginnings of Ownership'* published one year before the TLC, Veblen (1898) developed a deep anthropological interest in the origins of consumer behaviour and its expression during the earliest period of the peaceable cultural stage.

“As regards this common stock, no concept of ownership, either communal or individual, applies in the primitive community. The idea of a communal ownership is of relatively late growth, and must by psychological necessity have been preceded by the idea of individual ownership. Ownership is an accredited discretionary power over an object on the ground of a conventional claim; it implies that the owner is a personal agent who takes thought for the disposal of the object owned.” (Veblen, 1898: 357)

Throughout an academic career that included many critical comments as regards the function of institutions and the absurdity of human action oriented towards increased profit and wasteful consumption of resources, Veblen showed admiration for the peaceful organization of social life in archaic communities. His biographers suggested that Veblen's individual lifestyle included respect for harmonious interpersonal relationships, abstention from attachment to objects and consumerism and corresponded with the lifestyles of the members belonging in the primitive communities. However, both in the TLC and other works of Thorstein Veblen, the references and analysis of the peaceful stage of primitivism

is limited and is gradually superseded by the stage of savagery and barbarism. As will be discussed below, Veblen considered barbarism as one of the most critical stages of human development and argued that a competitive and aggressive spirit is evident in individuals' actions during this period and also becomes obvious via the expression of subtle consumption practices in modern societies.

### **2.3 Barbarism, antagonism and the emergence of individual ownership**

Without references to particular dates or historical periods, Veblen suggested that the stage of peaceful savagery communities progressively evolved into the cultural stage of barbarism which triumphed for centuries. Veblen's major concern was to focus and examine how technological development and the rise of economic surplus exhorted the nonviolent members of archaic societies to evolve into the warlike people who dominated barbaric life. Securing the basic means for survival and through the inheritance and learning of new habits related to ownership and display of commodities, individuals began to realize that dynamics of antagonism and rivalry were created within the group.

“On the transition to the predatory culture the character of the struggle for existence changed in some degree from a struggle of the group against a non-human environment to a struggle against a human environment. This change was accompanied by increasing antagonism and consciousness of antagonism between the individual members of the group. The conditions of success within the group, as well as the conditions of the survival of the group, changed in some measure; and the dominant spiritual attitude of the group gradually changed, and brought a different range of aptitudes and propensities...” (Veblen 1899: 220).

Veblen suggested that the long-lasting stage of barbarism was divided into two sub-stages. During the first sub-stage, war and hunting pervaded social life and the seizure and exploitation of women by warriors produced the institution of private property, a feature absent from the life of savage communities. Together with the establishment and development of individual ownership grew the incentive of emulation, since the diversification of employments and the exploitative activities of men motivated escalating comparison. Booty and trophies became evidence of honour, force and superiority amongst hunters and warriors, whilst aggression was deemed an honorific action. Emulation and competitive behaviour introduced to the barbaric communities new standardized social rules and cultural norms:

“The opportunity and the incentive to emulation increase greatly in scope and urgency. The activity of the men more and more takes on the character of exploit; and an invidious comparison of one hunter or warrior with another grows continually easier and more habitual. Tangible evidences of prowess – trophies – find a place in men’s habits of thought as an essential feature of paraphernalia of life. Booties come to be prized as evidence of preeminent force. Aggression becomes the accredited form of action, and booty serves as *prima facie* evidence of successful aggression.”  
(Veblen, 1899:13).

Additionally, during the first stage of barbarism the acquisition of goods deriving from unskilled manual labour was considered by men as unworthy or of low importance.

Epithets such as ‘honorable’, ‘respectable’ and ‘meritorious’ were attributed to the warriors and hunters who exhibited the ‘qualities’ of superior force, violence, aggression and in some extreme scenarios extermination of their competitors. The skilful use of arms was considered as a sign of honour, along with the possession and display of a large number of women, slaves, horses and booties in the form of status symbols. On the other hand, the use of tools and construction works were deemed as inferior activities.

With the arrival of the second sub-stage of barbarism, what Veblen described as later barbarism, the recognition and attribution of status according to the aggressive behaviour of the members of the community was replaced by the acquisition of goods. The ‘struggle for subsistence’ has been substituted by the ‘struggle for wealth’ and progressively, private affluence replaced the good repute attributed to bellicose and competitive activities.

“Gradually, as industrial activity further displaces predatory activity in the community’s everyday life and in men’s habits of thought, accumulated property more and more replaces trophies of predatory exploit as the conventional exponent of prepotence and success. Therefore, the possession of wealth gains in relative importance and effectiveness as a customary basis of repute and esteem.”  
(Veblen, 1899: 19).

The acquisition of property and wealth conferred honour on the individual and replaced the display of heroic and violent achievements. However the possession of wealth, as an outcome of acquisition and continuous accumulation of money and goods, didn’t aim solely

to satisfy consumer's physical and intellectual needs, it also strived to fulfill the primordial motive of emulation which is for Veblen "probably the strongest, most alert and persistent of the economic motives proper" (Veblen 1899: 110). Considering that the publication of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* coincided with the rapid expansion of utilitarian economic orthodoxy by the end of 19th century (Hamilton, 1989) as a newly scientific theory of consumption, Veblen offered an unfamiliar and alternative cross-cultural observation and a socio-cultural analysis of status consumption phenomena. Confining our reading to the first two chapters of *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, we notice the sequencing of phrases as they appear in the discussion of one cultural stage compared to the other. The 'struggle for existence' in savage societies is substituted by the 'struggle for wealth' and 'struggle for pecuniary reputability' in quasi-barbaric/industrial cultures and 'industrial aggression' succeeded 'primitive aggression'. Veblen adopts the Darwinian concept of inheritance and drawing on his anthropological background, suggests how the instinct of survival and self-preservation steadily transubstantiates into a habitual impulse to display possessions. In the same manner, individual ownership evolves into consumption practices within a social context. A long period of peace and prosperity for the community idolizes a certain standard of (if possible hereditary) wealth outdoing the features of physical endurance, skills at combating and cunning as means of status. The Marxist interpretation of economic surplus provides an explanation for the transition from barbarism to industrial societies, yet Veblen at this stage does not probe into the value of commodities. His contribution to a Marxist dichotomy of use-value and exchange-value originates from an anthropological and cultural viewpoint (Bronner, 1989). Veblen embarks upon the analysis of the instinctual aspects of human economic behaviour and then positions the individual in the centre of a cultural process, so as to emphasize how social aspects result from instinctual

drives such as emulation (Dugger, 1984; Wiltgen, 1990). Thus, for many scholars, he proves to be a far superior observer of human nature compared to his contemporaries. As we can see in the following part of this chapter, Veblen quickly shifted the emphasis from the barbaric stage to modern industrial societies and focused his analysis on the possession and display of commodities as basic means of securing social differentiation and prestige.

## **2.4 Modern industrial societies and the display of wealth**

Focusing his interest on a post-agrarian environment which partially reflects an economic and social context as outcome of the Industrial Revolution, Veblen suggested that the production of surplus contributed to the emergence of the institution of private property and the distinction between industrial and economic employments. Consequently, individuals undertake to satisfy their needs for self-respect, high esteem and social standing not only through the reputability of employments but also via the acquisition, accumulation and display of goods. Property, possessions and their conspicuous exhibition became the key vehicles for securing success and accomplishment in modern societies. What is more, the importance attributed to the quality of employments and industrial activity increases and subsequently influences men's perception of social status:

“With the growth of settled industry, therefore, the possession of wealth gains in relative importance and effectiveness as a customary basis of repute and esteem. Not that esteem ceases to be awarded on the basis of other, more direct evidence of prowess; not that successful predatory aggression or warlike exploit ceases to call out the approval and admiration of the crowd...but the

opportunities for gaining distinction by means of this direct manifestation of superior force grow less available both in scope and frequency.” (Veblen, 1899:19).

Display of wealth becomes the conventional basis of esteem and confers honour on its possessor. The standards of physical endurance, cunning and skill at arms are replaced at the eyes of the community via the acquisition and accumulation of wealth. Furthermore, an excess of wealth is far more meritorious than a certain standard of wealth. The rules of the game of competitive striving for status and prestige, evident since the first stage of barbarism, had been modified and gradually consumption practices began to dominate the social arena and to affect individual’s perception and understanding of what is considered as meritorious. Veblen claimed that any member of the community, apart from exceptions associated primarily with religious convictions, seeks to boost his self-esteem or suppress feelings of inferiority by the possession of property and display of wealth.

“So soon as the possession of property becomes the basis of popular esteem, therefore, it becomes also a requisite to that complacency which we call self-respect. In any community where goods are held in severalty it is necessary, in order to his own peace of mind, that an individual should possess a large portion of goods as others with whom he is accustomed to class himself; and it is extremely gratifying to possess something more than others.” (Veblen, 1899:20).

Whilst Veblen’s epigrammatic analysis on status consumption practices of the primitive stage includes somewhat sympathetic accounts (possibly because of its absence) and the

barbaric socio-cultural stages were approached from a descriptive perspective, individuals' craving for status in modern societies was analyzed from a rather analytical and critical viewpoint. For the first time in the history of economic thought, a study was devoted to comprehending and understanding how individuals strive to manifest their social superiority through possessions. Veblen argued that we can view modern consumers as impulsive creatures caught up in an endless attempt to show themselves as in some way remarkable, and primarily more remarkable than others.

“But as fast as a person makes new acquisitions, and becomes accustomed to the resulting new standard of wealth, the new standard forthwith ceases to afford appreciably greater satisfaction than the earlier standard did. The tendency in any case is constantly to make the present pecuniary standard the point of departure for a fresh increase of wealth; and this in turn gives rise to a new pecuniary classification of one's self as compared with one's neighborhoods.” (Veblen, 1899:20)

Arguably, at the end of the nineteenth century none of the existing economic textbooks could welcome such a view on consumers' incomplete needs and endless desires for social recognition. During an economic period dominated by a Protestant ethic of saving and under-consumption (Weber, 1930), Veblen's analysis of consumers' expectations and dissatisfactions brought forward some original and provocative insights into the interrelations between consumer behaviour, private property and social status. Disengaging his theory from the established views on consumer demand, which supported the idea that consumers are rational and occasional hedonistic agents, Veblen used his ironic writing style as an analytical tool so as to highlight how commercial culture augments the

irrationality and absurdity in individuals' actions. Thereupon, the ideas in the TLC illuminate not only some of the everyday meanings of commercial reality but also probe deeper into the untold and oppressed aspirations of consumers. Attempting to demythologize and intellectually attack the caricature of the Economic man, Veblen immersed himself in anthropological literatures suggesting a socio-cultural understanding of economic display and competitiveness amongst consumers. The accumulation of property and wealth enhances the incentive of emulation and stimulates competition for financial resources. The inevitable comparison amongst individuals in modern industrial societies has an enormous impact on their self-perception and subsequently self-esteem. In Veblen's words:

“So long as the comparison is distinctly unfavorable to himself, the normal, average individual will live in chronic dissatisfaction of his present lot; and what he has reached what may be called the pecuniary standard of the community, this chronic dissatisfaction will give place to a restless straining to place a wider and ever-widening pecuniary interval between himself and this average standard. The invidious comparison can never become so favourable to the individual making it that would be not gladly rate himself still higher relatively to his competitors in the struggle for pecuniary reputability.” (Veblen, 1899:20).

It is possible that the commercial success of the book was due to the fact that numerous American readers recognized themselves, their neighbors and colleagues amongst the ‘competitors in the struggle for pecuniary reputability’ during the materialistic ‘Gilded Age’. Another reason for the book never to have gone out of print can be that many

contemporary readers of the TLC might admit that the same feelings of ‘dissatisfaction’ govern the thoughts of many consumers and to a great degree define and influence our economic and social actions. One hundred years after the publication of the TLC, prominent sociologists of consumption and consumer researchers are in line with Veblen’s observations. One of the most persuasive critics of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* is Campbell (1987) who condensed the rise of modern consumerism as follows:

“the modern consumer (although not proof against such temptations) is characterized by an insatiability which arises out of a basic inexhaustibility of wants themselves, which forever arise, phoenix like, from the ashes of their predecessors. Hence no sooner is one satisfied than another is waiting in line clamouring to be satisfied; when this one is attended to, a third appears, then subsequently a fourth, and so on, apparently, without end.” (Campbell 1987: 37)

Similarly and from a humanistic and psychoanalytic consumer perspective, Shankar and Fitchett (2002: 504) argued that:

“Economic efficiencies and market democracy has meant that individuals are increasingly able to have more and more, whilst at the same time feeling equally (if not ever more) dissatisfied with their on-going state of being. It is not problematic for the market as it is currently organized if individuals recognize that life is tedious and incomplete as long as they also believe that having a BMW, or the latest fashion will make it less so. However, marketing becomes increasingly

vulnerable once consumers have BMW's and have the latest fashions but still feel that life is tedious and incomplete.”

Although technological/scientific advances have enriched the areas of information technology and mass communications (Riesman, 1961; Mason, 1981), both Campbell (1987) and Shankar and Fitchett (2002) claim that contemporary consumers remain trapped within a cycle of massive and quite often dissatisfying consumption, as a prominent characteristic of the socio-economic scene of Western advanced societies. Marketing and advertising strategies continuously adjust their methods for the satisfaction or creation of emerging needs related to social status and the perception of prestige. Of course, Veblen's theory focused on the consumption habits and cultural preferences of the emerging 'leisure class', many decades before the appearance of sophisticated advertising techniques and the discipline of marketing as we know it today. Despite his aspiration to thoroughly attack utilitarian economic thought, his theory of consumption remained primarily engulfed within a status system wherein individuals' actions and the cultural meaning of consumption collaborate in securing social distinction and prestige. Following Veblen, the 'chronic dissatisfaction' and continuous comparison for social status doesn't only derive from a surfeit of commodities and cultural norms but it is also historically and socially constructed via the inheritance of the propensity for achievement which has accompanied individual's everyday activities since the predatory stage where:

“self-seeking in the narrower sense becomes the dominant note, this propensity goes with him still, as the pervasive trait that shapes his scheme of life. The propensity for achievement and the

repugnance to futility remain the underlying motive. The propensity changes only in the **form of its expression** and in the **proximate objects** to which directs the man's activity. Under the regime of individual ownership the most available means of visibly achieving a purpose is that afforded by the acquisition and accumulation of wealth." (Veblen, 1899:33)

From the first chapters of the TLC, Veblen's message becomes somewhat straightforward and not the type of intellectual account that many American academics wanted to hear. A warrior's ability to outdo many competitors in fatal battles (during the first stage of barbarism) aims to satisfy the same need for social recognition with the carpenter who is displaying the ownership of ten horses (during the second stage of barbarism) and from a contemporary perspective the middle-aged manager who owns and shows off with his Ferrari car. Referring to the diachronic 'propensity for achievement' Veblen concluded the comparative analysis of one historical stage to the other at the end of chapter two (Pecuniary emulation) and from chapter three onwards centered his discussion primarily on the 'forms of expressing' conspicuous economic display, the objects (commodities) and cultural practices used for this purpose during the Gilded Age. Simultaneously, retrospective references to the customs, ceremonial practices and consumption habits of the primitive and barbaric stages occur throughout the text and seek to elucidate the development, adaptation and adoption of these status-consumption phenomena by individuals in the changing socio-economic environment. In the following section, we can see how Veblen begins to position himself as an original armchair anthropologist and active observer of his contemporary Western consumer culture, retaining his humorous look on human nature. The concept of 'conspicuous consumption' and the formation of the leisure

class come into examination and the section will close with an overall assessment of Veblen's book, together with its limitations.

## **2.5 Conspicuous leisure, social class and conspicuous consumption**

Unlike most of his contemporary economists, Thorstein Veblen broke new ground in the intersection of social sciences and economics and retained in his theory a very deep understanding of hierarchical social structure. The distinctive traits of the rising leisure class are examined in depth from chapter three onwards and Veblen pointed out the consumption practices and habits which aim to distinguish the middle from the upper classes. At the end of the nineteenth century, one of the most important requirements in participating or indicating membership in an upper class was the abstention from productive work:

“Conspicuous abstention from labour therefore becomes the conventional mark of superior pecuniary achievement and the conventional index of reputability; and conversely, since application to productive labour is a mark of poverty and subjection, it becomes inconsistent with a reputable standing in the community” (Veblen, 1899:23).

Consumption, display of wealth and abstention from work characterize higher social groups and to a great extent the generic perception of status is dominated and influenced by the cultural practices and the caprices of the leisure class. Apart from its honorific or

meritorious characteristics ascribed to affluence, the abstention from work contributes to the industrial differentiation of social classes. The non-productive consumption of time and evidence of wealth demarcate the social-cultural limits of one social group from the other. Drawing on the Darwinian concept of inheritance, Veblen argues how social organization retains its hierarchical nature throughout human evolution with the following generic account:

“As the population increases in density, and as human relations grow more complex and numerous, all the details of life undergo a process of elaboration and selection; and in this process of elaboration the use of trophies develops into a system of rank, titles, degrees and insignia, typical examples of which are heraldic devices, medals and honorary decorations.” (Veblen, 1899:26).

The conspicuous leisure of aristocratic families, as evidence of honour and social status, is accompanied by the possession and consumption of ‘immaterial’ goods. Veblen discussed a parade of scholarly and artistic activities that occupied the everyday activities of affluent and nouveau riche Americans. The learning of dead and archaic languages, knowledge of domestic music, furniture, the latest fashion of dress, correct spelling, games, unpopular sports and the ownership of dogs and race-horses represented the accumulated culture that aimed to distinguish members of the upper class from those of so called ‘new money’ or emerging middle class. Pre-empting the discussion of cultural capital by Pierre Bourdieu (1984), as the accumulated stock of knowledge related to intellectual traditions and products of artistic value, Veblen pointed out how the aesthetic taste of individuals

conduces to one's status position. The learning and display of gentle and sophisticated manners indicates unproductive consumption of time and can be exercised as a mark of social distinction. The exhibition of specialized servants, as evidence of the ability to pay and train them, adds prestige to master's reputation. Moving back to the ownership of women and slaves during the first stage of barbarism, Veblen skillfully explicated how the employment of a qualified servant and the marriage with a woman of gentile blood represents adaptations of individuals' continuous craving for status. Competitiveness and antagonism amongst individuals aren't constrained only by the means of wealth but also manifest according 'to the competitive struggle for proficiency in good manners' and the 'competitive struggle for conspicuous leisure'. Contrary to Campbell's (1995) criticisms as regards Veblen's fascination with the attribution of status to 'aggressive' conspicuous consumption practices, in the third chapter of the TLC Veblen suggested that ostentatious economic display is also produced via incentives and motivations stemming from the cultural background of the consumer. The idiosyncrasies and singularities of the leisure class individuals can be ascribed to 'snobbery', as an incentive and social process whose origins can be traced back to 'the evolution of gentile birth' and upbringing. Moreover, Veblen becomes one of the first economists to highlight the impact of conformity and submission on consumer behaviour and status consumption in particular.

"There are, moreover, measurable degrees of conformity to the latest accredited code of the punctilios as regards decorous means and methods of consumption. Differences between one person and another in the degree of conformity to the ideal in these respects can be compared, and persons

may be graded and scheduled with some accuracy and effect according to a progressive scale of manners and breeding.” (Veblen, 1899: 29).

In the final chapters of the TLC, it is highlighted that individuals express their conformity not only through pecuniary evidence but also via the aesthetic value of reputable goods (for example golden forks, expensive clothing, artistic works and domestic items). Veblen analyzed how the consumption of such items becomes the basis of good reputation and conveys meaning to others. Similarly and from a contemporary viewpoint, McCracken (1988) observed the transitory nature of the cultural meaning of goods, Du Gay (1997) discussed how branding can be seen as a marker of social difference and Elliot and Wattaswan (1998) proposed that consumers use brands and commodities to contrast their social roles and identities. Veblen becomes the first theorist (with the possible exemption of John Rae) who stated that consumption is an active process of socialization and goods function as markers of social class, throughout a highly competitive race for gaining prestige. He characterized this kind of activity as ‘conspicuous consumption’ and argued that its existence influences not only the buying habits of the rich but also the consumption preferences of middle and working class consumers.

“No class or society, not even the most abjectly poor, foregoes all customary conspicuous consumption. The last items of this category of consumption are not given up except under stress of the direct necessity. Very much of squalor and discomfort will be endured before the last trinket of the last pretence of pecuniary decency is put away.” (Veblen, 1899:44).

The growing aspirations and need for social status becomes a never-ending process and individuals should continuously strive to accumulate and display goods so as to maintain their social position. In Veblen's words:

“The standard of expenditure which commonly guides our efforts is not the average, ordinary expenditure already achieved; it is an ideal of consumption that lies just beyond our reach, or to reach which requires some strain. The motive is emulation – the stimulus of an invidious comparison which prompts us to outdo those with whom we are in the habit of classing ourselves.” (Veblen, 1899: 52).

“The result is that the members of each stratum accept as their ideal of decency the scheme of life in vogue in the next higher stratum, and bend their energies to live up to that ideal.” (Veblen, 1899: 84).

For Veblen, consumers' main motive is the yearning to outmatch others, in terms of conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption, so as to live up to a cultural ideal of a superior social stratum. The lines between competition and imitation are blurred and the socio-cultural significance of consumption generates social mobility and becomes the vehicle for social status (Campbell, 1987). Max Lerner (1948) argued that ‘Veblen is the most creative mind American social thought has produced’ and without attempting to idolize or eulogize Veblen's ideas, there are some reasons for agreeing with his assertion.

He was the first theorist to understand and detail how the members of ‘inferior’ social groups were seduced by the superficial shine and pecuniary extravagance of the dominant consumer culture. He applied the interplay between culture and power relations within the field of consumer behaviour and he simultaneously highlighted the embodied cultural meaning of consumer actions aiming to secure prestige. Apart from his reputation ‘as the most creative mind in economics’, Veblen did his best to gain and preserve the reputation of one of the best social critics in America. Possibly, contemporary consumer researchers who are skeptical of social climbing via consumption, superfluous and wasteful display of wealth, unnecessary spending on advertising and individuals’ endless efforts to keep up with the Joneses, owe an intellectual heritage to Thorstein Veblen and his most famous book. As Lears (1989) claims, it is primarily the irrationality, rather than the injustice, of capitalism that constitutes Veblen’s primary target of attack, the failure to secure the same standards of efficiency and productivity for individuals, the amazing misdistribution of wealth and power and the oppression of basic (true) needs for the sake of secondary (false) and wasteful needs. Given this intellectual position, Veblen became a sort of threat and the prevailing economic doctrine of his era (Hamilton, 1989). But at the same time his realization of the near-universal ‘conspicuous consumption’ and ‘conspicuous leisure’ has informed and influenced political economists, sociologists of consumption, and to a lesser extent consumer researchers and marketing theorists throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The newly emerging lifestyles of the American nouveau riche at the turn of the 20th century included new patterns of expression and distinctiveness through the consumption of clothes, adornments and luxurious domestic items, prefiguring the contemporary consumer system of status in Western developed societies. Over the last fifteen years lavish spending, availability of credit, the increased sophistication of marketing technologies and a desire for

luxurious 'lifestyles' has intensified the game of conspicuous consumption (Page, 1992; Mason, 1998). Working and middle class consumers have been motivated to struggle for a place within educational and occupational elites and to distinguish themselves via ostentatious economic display and status-enhancing activities. Veblen's views on the symbolic value of commodities, emulation, and status consumption can provide contemporary marketing theory with useful and diachronic insights into consumer behaviour, waste, desire and experience. Also, we ought not to forget that the message of the TLC didn't only refer to the aristocratic and patriarchal families of the *Gilded Age*. Veblen analyzed the evolutionary nature of customs and consumption phenomena and he compared the socially-driven consumption of the Kwakiutl chieftain with the status seeking activities of modern businessmen.

As expected, Veblen's insistence on attributing refined aggressiveness to the consumption patterns of a metropolitan and superficial leisure class disturbed and shocked the bourgeois self-perception. Perhaps the impact and popularity of the satire upon the mannerisms of the upper classes obscured Veblen's imaginative and innovative endeavours to explicate some socio-economic aspects of consumption and prestige. Furthermore, the incorporation and critical analysis of so many innovative ideas within a single book, comprised of two hundred and fifty pages, brings forward and necessitates the discussion of the limitations which can be observed in Veblen's work. His effort to combine a theory of institutional change by intermingling social class relation, mimetic behaviour and the notion of private property into an incomplete theory of status-seeking phenomena, offered a super-ambitious and generic explanation of consumer demand and its impact on the perception of

individuals. The discussion of one cultural stage compared to the other isn't systematically organized and Veblen's psychology remains narrow by emphasizing the co-existence of instinctual drives and institutional forces. As the first economist who paid attention to individuals' tendency to consume for status, at the end of the nineteenth century, Veblen generalized and simplified the analysis of socially-complex consumption phenomena (Bronner 1989) and limited his descriptions primarily to ostentatious and visible consumption actions (Campbell 1987). Lack of academic references in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* together with generalizations and ambitious efforts to offer an alternative to utilitarian theories of consumption also complicate the contemporary reexamination and application of his ideas to consumer research. Overall, as Russett (1976: 153) argued below, Veblen's analysis and research programme in the first chapters of TLC remained narrow and somehow superficial.

"Veblen was something of an intellectual butterfly, and he often lacked the patience to elaborate his ideas into a coherent system. But he teemed with fragmentary insights, and these can be pieced together to suggest the outlines of a Veblenian scheme of cultural evolution – what might be called a 'pre-theory' of cultural change."

Although I concur with Russett's view, it can be said that it is Veblen's lack of stamina and patience to organize his ideas into a complete theoretical system that facilitates and prioritizes the emergence of the critical comments in the TLC. Whether Veblen intended or consciously avoided to offer a methodical and carefully organized theory of socially-driven consumer demand will remain a mystery. What this thesis seeks to observe is the reception

and discussion of Veblen's incomplete but imaginative ideas by consumer researchers and marketing theorists. To begin with, in the following chapter, I aim to offer a brief examination of the phenomenon of conspicuous consumption in ancient and traditional societies and afterwards to move on to the discussion as regards the adoption of Veblen's ideas by economists of consumer demand and early theories of consumer behaviour.

### **Chapter 3: The legacy of Thorstein Veblen to economics of consumer demand and early theories of consumer behaviour (1914 – 1945)**

The previous chapter aimed to offer a reminder of Veblen's theory and viewpoints about the evolution of conspicuous consumption practices, together with his critical and satirical insights as regards the consumption choices of the American upper class. Also, I aimed to shed some light on Veblen's intention to criticize the pillars of neoclassical economic theories, as an interdisciplinary economist who suggested that non-historical and one-dimensional views on human nature, institutions and economic behaviour are inherent in the principles of utilitarianism (Seckler, 1975). This chapter begins with a very brief examination of ostentatious economic phenomena in ancient and traditional societies so as to enrich our understanding and knowledge as regards individuals' motives behind status consumption. The next section focuses on the early reception of the TLC, immediately after its publication and until the outbreak of the WWII, both from the public audience and neoclassical economists interested in consumer theory. Afterwards and based on the same period, I seek to examine the adoption of Veblen's ideas by the movement of institutional economics and its influence of early theories of consumer demand. The chapter closes with a short analysis as regards the interrelations between Veblen's ideas on conspicuous consumption practices and motivational theorists who aimed to examine and understand some of the basic drives and incentives that underpin status-seeking consumption phenomena.

### **3.1 Conspicuous consumption before Veblen's era**

As was discussed in the previous chapter, Veblen referred to the social and cultural conditions that encouraged members of primitive and traditional societies to display wealth as a legitimate form of status seeking activities. This section will examine, synoptically, the manifestations of socially driven consumption in ancient and traditional societies from a cross-cultural perspective. Anthropological studies (Yamey, 1964) on capital, saving and conspicuous consumption practices of primitive societies suggested that display of wealth was deemed as wasteful action and the individual who was aiming to promote his material superiority was condemned and often exorcised from the community, a phenomenon verified by Veblen's theory. A kind of primitive communism could describe the economic organization and activity of these societies, where the exhibition of individual wealth indicated lack of interest in the ideology of the community (Mason, 1981). From an early stage of his academic career, Veblen had immersed himself in anthropological studies and admired the work of Tylor (1881, 1903) about the connections between primitivism and modern civilization, Frazer's (1923) arguments regarding the sequential replacement of magic by religion and science and of course the work of Franz Boas and Henry Morgan as was mentioned in previous chapters. According to Tilman (1992), Veblen envisaged a modern society capable of adopting traits existing during the predatory stage and implementing the principles of equality, goodwill and human solidarity. Nevertheless, the profound impact of the evolutionary school of anthropology on Veblen's comprehension of material culture and consumer behaviour has been discussed by only few of his contemporary economists and modern-day evolutionary economists (Teggart, 1932).

Since economic surplus was steadily being concentrated in the hands of few individuals and families, status claims and a hierarchical organization of society began to occur. The importance of conspicuous economic display to social stratification of the community or society was defined, to a great extent, by environmental/political conditions and cultural norms. For example, in the social caste system of India, prestige and social status were attributed primarily in terms of hereditary group membership and occupational categorization, with status consumption playing a minor role in the arena of social competition (Lannoy, 1971; Chaudhuri and Majumdar, 2006). Following Franz Boas (1897), whose work had a major influence on the TLC, Lienhardt (1964) claimed that ‘potlatch’<sup>9</sup> ceremonies allowed the distribution of goods according to increased social status, a ritual which indicated social standing and prestige. Ostentatious display had also been evident since the time of the Roman Empire. Cicero portrayed Mark Antony as a general accompanied by lions, mime actresses and custom chariots which aimed to demonstrate his power and social status to both friends and enemies. Besides, gladiator shows in the Coliseum stadium used to promote the aesthetic consumption of aristocratic elites. Under the pressure of Mercantilists and Calvinist religious beliefs (Weber, 1930), saving and investment dominated the economic life of Western Europe and conspicuous economic display was suppressed as a cost-effective activity which didn’t support prosperity (Mason, 1998). Production, instead of consumption, was considered during the 1500 – 1700 in Europe to be the main economic mechanism and impetus behind the advancement of a wealthy nation and luxury consumption was condemned. Nevertheless, developments in communication, transportation and construction after the Industrial

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<sup>9</sup> Potlatch is a North American Indian term, which has been widely used by social anthropologists, aiming to describe the ceremony of social distribution of goods. The term was described to the anthropologist Franz Boas by the chief of Kwakiutl American Indian tribe.

Revolution created a new commercial reality with emerging fashions and product symbolism to shape interpersonal relations. As Page (1992) argues, increasing income, new employments and geographical mobility generated an ambitious middle class, whose members enthusiastically participated in the game of ownership and ostentatious behaviour, a privilege of the aristocratic elites until then. In the England and especially the America of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ‘old money’ families realized that their dominant social position was under attack by the conspicuous expenditure and consumption of the newly rich. These phenomena prompted Veblen to conduct research during the golden age of American conspicuous consumption (1860 – 1914), where the financial rise of the industrial elites exhorted conspicuous economic excess and a status revolution. Although the expansion of population through immigration and industrial growth, as two main incentives behind ostentatious economic display, continued during the arrival of the twentieth century, historians agree that the Gilded Age period came to an end at the end of the nineteenth century for reasons that will be explained in the following section.

### **3.2 World War I, behavioural economics and the Theory of the Leisure Class**

Following Mason (1981), the escalation of conspicuous consumption, recorded in the period 1890-1910, was followed by public reaction against the phenomenon of the ‘idle rich’ and high spending at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Progressive political programmes were put forward so as to encourage and stimulate more and better education and simultaneously to diminish competitive economic display. The surplus of wealth and

individuals' desire to compete for social status was reduced after the outbreak of the First World War. Although the TLC had a considerable impact on the intellectual circles of economists and sociologists at the time of its publication (1899), Veblen was disappointed by the reception of the book as a sociological treatise on the mannerisms of the aristocratic classes (Dorfman, 1934) and he refrained from producing another study on the origins and development of American consumer culture. The mainstream economic theorists of his day ignored his arguments and considered Veblen to be a sociologist of consumption who was working on a political agenda (Dobriansky, 1957). Dorfman (1934) underlined the fact that radicals, socialists and Marxists passionately embraced his ideas, although Veblen never regarded himself as a radical socialist, and Veblen's views on the nature of status-directed consumption received wider public and to a lesser extent intellectual recognition. Diggins (1999) notes Veblen's popularity during this period:

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

Leaving aside the reception of TLC on the public audience, Veblen's view that a significant part of our consumer behaviour is driven by aggression, competition, irrationality and status-seeking considerations prompted neoclassical economists of consumption to marginalize the message of TLC. Everything changed after the Great Depression (1929 –

1933) and its disastrous impact on the industrial wealth of America and the conspicuous expenditure patterns of the rich. Beforehand and immediately after the publication of the TLC, the economist John Cummings (1868 – 1936) had been the most persistent and conservative critic of Veblen's views about the consumption of socially acceptable goods (Tilman, 1992). In a polemic review of the TLC, Cummings (1899: 432) pointed out that “in Dr Veblen's philosophy...all our judgements are based on invidiousness” and “the more universal and dominant the spirit of emulation is, the more essentially generic it is in its character.” In part, he intended to interpret the main thrust of the TLC on the grounds of individuals' desire to compete and excel via their consumption preferences and avoided acknowledging Veblen's efforts to highlight consumers' hidden motives, desires and the wasteful side of conspicuous consumption activities. In 1931, two years after the death of Thorstein Veblen and the outbreak of the Great Depression, Cummings wrote about the TLC:

“It was hard for me to accept him or his philosophy. It went against my grain. I was eager to find it lop-sided and unreal....My review gives good evidence that I didn't at the time fairly appreciate the contribution Veblen was making to our economic and social philosophy. I have often wondered how I could have been so blind. In the years since, we have all seen the accumulating evidence of the widespread influence of Veblen's analysis of social and economic behaviour, as set forth in his Theory of the Leisure Class...I know I should write a very different review today.” (Dorfman, 1934: 507)

Notwithstanding the TLC and Veblen's works receiving wider attention after the recession, economic theorists remained sceptical about the infusion of social considerations with their assumptions, believing that such approach questioned and attacked the orthodoxy of their doctrines. Apart from Wesley Mitchell (1914), supporter of Veblen's views on economics and one of the founding fathers of institutional economics, who claimed that a deep and penetrating understanding of market behaviour is rendered impossible without a social analysis of economic behaviour and consumption, many economic theorists (Wieser, 1914; Carver, 1918; Knight, 1925; Viner, 1925) hesitated or resisted acknowledging the importance of socially-inspired consumption and preferred to marginalize Veblen's arguments as regards the interpersonal effects on consumer demand. One of the most dogmatic supporters of laissez-faire was the famous economist Frank Knight (1960:76) who attacked Veblen's ideas in the TLC as follows:

"I do not see how we can talk sense about economics without considering the economic behaviour of an isolated individual. Only in that way can we expect to get rid by abstraction of all the social relations, mutual persuasion, personal antipathies, and consciously competitive or cooperative relationships which jeep the behaviour of an individual in society from being, in any closely literal sense, economically rational. Crusoe would be in this position: he would actually use given means to achieve given ends, his purely individualistic wants."

Orthodox economists, like Knight, had persistently expressed their rejection of the Veblenian 'social' consumer, defending the concept of Robinson Crusoe 'economic' man, as an archetype of inherent rationality and seeker of self-interests. Veblen rejected the

methodological approach towards an individualized consumer, given that consumption is primarily an emulatory process and indicating that consumers are agents who act within a wider social network. As expected, mixed and critical views on Veblen's ideas about conspicuousness and status consumption came from neoclassical economists and perpetuated the debate of the 'Rational vs. Social Man' in the economic literatures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Tilman, 1992). During the 1920s and 1940s, Veblen's name and reputation was affiliated with members of the institutional economic movement, who were proposing a historical understanding of human institutions, more focus and attention on problems of social (inter)action and critical examination of business and financial institutions (Hodgson, 1988; Hodgson, 2006). As a founding father of the institutional approach, Veblen was considered as a threat by the mainstream economists of the time. Once again, in the same period, the satiric and often funny representation of the consumption practices of the conservative leisure class obscured Veblen's anthropological understanding of social development, economic status and consumption practices. Perhaps, the most intriguing feature about Veblen's critics since the publication of the TLC and throughout the twentieth century has to do with their plethora political and ideological background. Radicals, democratic liberals and conservatives have produced polemics, positive, negative and well-justified criticisms, and often mistaken interpretations about Veblen's (holistic) work, whose intellectual curiosity - and breadth - penetrated various disciplinary lines between biology, anthropology, economics, history, governmental issues, aesthetics and philosophy. The following section of the thesis will attempt to focus its interest on the relation between Veblen's ideas on conspicuous consumption and early theories of consumer demand stemming from the amalgamation of economic theory and embryonic marketing thought.

### **3.3 Veblen and his influence on early theories of consumer demand**

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, economists and sociologists presumed that advertising would become a new science rooted and defined by the theoretical principles of psychology (Mason, 1998; Friedman, 2004). Simultaneously, manufacturers began to realize that the promotion of many goods could be increased by underlining the ability of the product to confer status on its owner/consumer. Additionally, developments in retailing encouraged conspicuous consumption practices and early marketing theorists borrowed and applied the ideas of distribution and commodity markets to their newly-formulated fields (Bartels, 1965). As Friedman (2004) has discussed in his informative book, *The Birth of Salesman*, from the 1910s up until the 1930s, psychologists encouraged and promoted to businessmen and retailers the perception of a new economic reality, wherein unsatisfied wants need to be completed and new methods should be employed so as to motive individuals to participate in the buying process. Salesmanship was recognized as an essential tool of strategy by businessmen and academics and the image of a skilful salesman going from door-to-door and promoting goods was reflecting the entrepreneurial spirit behind the rising consumer culture. The application of psychological techniques to sales rapidly changed the representation of and public perceptions towards salesmen.

“They changed the vocabulary of salesmanship, adding new terms like “suggestion”, “instinctual wants”, and “cognition” that had objective and experiential connotations. Psychologists invented procedures for personal selection and methods for investigating consumer behaviour. They also elevated the status of selling and promoted the idea that salesmanship was becoming more efficient

and ethical, which for some businessmen was academia's most important contribution." (2004: 167).

In the same period, the term marketing was connoting a division of economics. Jones and Monieson (1990) convincingly argued that between 1890 and 1910 a growing body of American economists working on the field of consumer behaviour had been exposed to economic theories which didn't conform to the principles of neoclassical views. According to Jones and Monieson (1990) most of these economists had been German-trained and followed the scientific principles of the Historical School of Economics, a social scientific approach interested in a) a pragmatic approach to economic phenomena, b) statistical analysis and observation of human behaviour and c) focus on a historical understanding of socio-economic events. This type of approach towards economics was more willing to accommodate the Veblenian observations of emulatory consumption compared to the rational views and calculus principles of neoclassical economics.

### **3.3.1 The impact of institutional economics on early marketing theory**

Despite the fact that the German Historical School didn't manage to offer a serious substitute to neoclassical views or to propose a detailed theory of consumer action, its existence gave a fresh impetus to the amalgamation of institutional economic thinking and early marketing theories (Jones and Monieson, 1990; Mason, 1995). Partially influenced by the work of Thorstein Veblen, and especially his observations in the TLC, institutional economists embraced the idea that 'group behaviour' should be an essential theme of

economic study since human economic behaviour is in a state of constant flux and individuals' motives are mostly instinctive (Webb and Shawver, 1989; Schmid, 2004). Themes such as the origins, evolution and impact of institutions on human economic behaviour occupied their research agenda and heavily criticized the assumption of rational self-interests as basic motivators of consumers' preferences. Thereupon, contrary to classical economic theory, the institutional approach emphasized consumption instead of production, favoured 'societism' instead of individualism and defended the existence and distribution of public wealth contrary to private riches held by entrepreneurs (Dorfman, 1963; Ebner, 2008). As Bartels (1951:3) argues, progressive economic ideas had been the main stimulus of early marketing thought and institutional economists like John Rogers Commons (1862 – 1945) had a significant role to play in the development of these ideas. As Professor of Economics at the University of Wisconsin, the original centre for the development of marketing thought (Bartels, 1962:34), Commons taught and tutored some early thinkers of marketing like Paul D. Converse. In his groundbreaking publication *Institutional Economics – Its Place in Political Economy*, Commons (1934) suggested that any phenomenon observed in the marketplace which possesses a 'dynamic' instead of 'static' nature should come under the close scrutiny of institutional economics and defined an institution as "collective action in control of individual action" (Commons, 1934: 69). Commons and his former teacher Ely popularized a historical approach to economic science with emphasis to be laid on the general welfare of society and its contribution to answering economic (and marketing) problems (Jones and Monienson, 1990). Amongst their students we find a generation of scholars (Kinley, Jones, Hammond etc) who played an important role for the development of marketing thought.

From its inception in 1892, the School of Economics at the University of Wisconsin developed an institutional approach to the study of economics. This approach included an inductive, statistical methodology with a historical perspective and a concern for the application of knowledge and skills to social ends. Directly and indirectly this approach was derived from the German Historical School of economics.” (Jones and Monienson, 1990: 104)

As Webb and Shawver (1989) suggest we can trace some indirect linkages between early marketing theorists, such as Converse and Beckman - who approached the concepts of dynamism within the marketplace, business cycles, patterns of consumer spending and the causality behind the development of marketing phenomena - with the institutional ideas of Commons and his precursor Thorstein Veblen. Nevertheless, the neoclassical interpretations of consumption phenomena prevailed over the development of economic and marketing thinking until the outbreak of the WWII (Goodwin, Ackerman and Kiron, 1996) and the inability of institutionalists to offer a methodical treatise of their theory together with an explanation (or remedy) for the Great Depression led to the decline of their intellectual movement (Hodgson, 1988). Subsequently, Veblen’s ideas regarding the social and interpersonal effects on consumption preferences and practices remained vague and under-researched by the conventional economic theories of consumer demand.

### **3.3.2 Motivational research and conspicuous consumption**

The most dominant early school of marketing thought - the Functional School (Bartels, 1965) - didn't pay particular attention to the notions of ostentatious economic display and status symbolism. According to Mason (1995, 1998), a few economists after 1925 began an exchange of ideas with other disciplines (primarily psychology and sociology) so as to elevate the understanding of the complex consumer theory and many professionals interested in market research followed. Such a disciplinary shift gave the opportunity to some consumer behaviour specialists to examine the contradiction of orthodox economic analysis and to focus on consumers' motivations behind their buying decisions. As result, trained psychologists and psychoanalysts experimented via the application of psychological principles on consumers' impulses, preferences and motivations with very profound effects on the development of advertising. In line with Tadajewski (2006), back in the 1930s Paul Lazarsfeld initiated the field of qualitative motivation studies aiming to understand some of the basic drives and motivations underpinning consumer behaviour. The inability of consumer demand theory to explain the psychological factors and social incentives of buyer behaviour led to the emergence of psychoanalytic methods, interviews, and participant observation for the prediction of consumption choices under particular and prearranged circumstances. In the same period, a few sporadic studies adopted a Veblenian approach to the dynamics between status emulation and consumption preferences. Nixon (1936), as one of the pioneers of marketing science, proposed the measurement of consumers' attitudes based on the archetypes of a superior (businessman) and an inferior (gangster) individual. His participants were asked to reveal their consumption preferences compared to these of the two contradictory characters and the results indicated that products preferred by the

superior individual were considered more appropriate for the majority of the sample. In line with Veblen, Nixon concluded that certain products appreciated by the upper social groups will receive higher status among individuals of the lower and middle classes. Although the interest in consumption phenomena and marketing research was continuously developing, the embryonic discipline of marketing was still recognized as a derivative of (agricultural) economic thought and as a useful tool to interpret the complexity of consumption theory (Mason, 1995).

It is only after 1935 that the intellectual gap between economists and marketing theorists was becoming noticeable and it was John Maynard Keynes (1936) whose seminal publication entitled *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* affected the way economists viewed and interpreted consumer demand theory. Keynes attacked the idea that the end of consumer behaviour is utility and profit maximization (a view held by the majority of neoclassical economists) and without elaborating on the formation of consumption preferences and desires, he argued that luxury consumption and ostentatious economic display had a positive impact on demand, employment and money circulation. By acknowledging, in economic terms, the importance of the propensity to consume for status, Keynes seemed to hold a sympathetic view of Veblen's ideas (Vinning, 1939; Mouhammed, 1999). Without attempting to unravel the interrelations<sup>10</sup> between Veblen's consumer theory and Keynesian multifarious economic thinking, it is worth mentioning that Keynes' publication destabilized economic theories of consumption and his impact is

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<sup>10</sup> Keynes never admitted to have read Veblen's books, while Veblen reviewed one of Keynes books. Also, Keynes was primarily concerned with the uncertainty of free markets and Veblen proposed a socio-economic evolution of institutions and economic behaviour.

still relevant today. He aimed to provide interpretations and antidotes to the economic recession and the rising uncertainty embedded within the market systems after WWI, thus his theory was mainly concerned with the understanding of a complex economic organization whose variables included unemployment, wages, competition, inflation, monetary policies and (to a lesser degree) *under-consumption*. As expected, his remarks on consumption remained obscured and possibly Keynes' *magnus opus*, an influential work for generations of economists until today, introduced the field of macroeconomics and contributed to the marginalization of micro-economic demand theory. However, the impact of Keynes' theory on the economics of consumer demand, and possibly early marketing theory, is far more complicated and lies outside the scope of this study. Leaving aside the impact of the Great Depression on consumer behaviour, the following chapter aims to examine followers and critics of Veblen's theory in the post-war period of mass consumption.

## **Chapter Four: Followers and critics of Veblen's consumer theory (1945 – 1975)**

In the following chapter, I aim to examine the reception and discussion of Veblen's ideas during a thirty-year period (1945-1975) of mass consumption, technological development and affluence in Western economies. The first part of the chapter focuses on psychological and economic studies related to socially driven phenomena and the interpretation of Veblen's ideas by prominent sociologists, such as Parsons and Giddens. Subsequently, it follows the critique of the TLC by members of the Frankfurt School along with discussion about the similarities in the work of Thorstein Veblen, David Riesman, Erich Fromm and Mills. The next section explores how the work of Vance Packard on social-stratified consumption and Galbraith's views about the generation of artificial needs related to status update and challenge Veblen's theory. Finally, I will draw my attention to the work of two leading French sociologists, Bourdieu and Baudrillard, who analyzed the phenomenon of class consumption together with the importance of commodities and 'sign value' for the reproduction of social order. I will discuss how Veblen's views on consumers' tendency to emulate his superiors have been critically discussed and updated by Bourdieu's work and Baudrillard's ideas about a gigantic and subtle network of signs which produces meaning and communication of consumer desires.

### **4.1 Post-war period and mass consumption**

A long period of economic depression, beginning in the 1920's, was followed by the most destructive event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Second World War. Consumption of goods and

services was reduced to the minimum given that public policies, and subsequently advertising campaigns, aimed to meet the needs of a war economy (Blum, 1976; Covert, 2003). Wartime restrictions on spending and rationing on personal consumer preferences decreased and - especially in England - substantially reduced demand for luxurious products (Deaton and Muellbauer, 1980). Bocoock (1993) examined the rise of consumerism in the era of Fordism and in his analysis interweaved and related the methods of mass-production with the gradual appearance of the phenomenon of mass consumption in Britain and America during the post - WWII period. It is not until the middle of the twentieth century (1947 – 1950) that consumption preferences began to boost the escalating rise of capitalism in Western developed societies. Television advertisements produced increasing visibility of product images associated with social prestige and radically altered the communication of conspicuous consumption preferences (Galbraith, 1987). More players, from a variety of socio-cultural backgrounds, began to participate in the competitive game of conspicuous consumption; which seemed to formulate a broader, more sophisticated and complicated character, compared to the extrovert rivalries of the ‘Gilded Age.’ During the mid-1950s, the archetype of Veblen’s conspicuous consumer, together with Veblen’s ideas in the TLC, were back in fashion and as expected became themes of close academic examination.

## **4.2 Interdisciplinary approaches to Veblen’s consumer**

Industrial prosperity, technological advances and mass demand for products characterized the socio-economic scene of America and high levels of job mobility in the rising service

sector, together with increased educational opportunities created a new middle class of white-collar workers (Riesman, 1953). Urbanization, along with increases in job mobility and expansion in interpersonal relations removed traditional social barriers and broadened the space for employment in the industrial business and service industry (Collins, 2000). The mass affluence raised educational opportunities and caused not only redistribution of income but also evidence of wealth and the monetary ability to enjoy it (Mason, 1981). Spending rose again after the war period and the consumer boom introduced a series of new products to markets, invigorating individuals' desire to emulate others (Abrams, 2000). What is more, new forms of media introduced a communicative field wherein individuals were exposed to consumable images, products and opinions. The rapid economic development induced a significant increase in consumption and socio-economic phenomena such as ownership of status conferring goods, socially-motivated consumer demand and display of wealth kept the agenda of sociologists of consumption, marketing theorists, advertisers and economists occupied during the 1950s and 1960s.

#### **4.2.1 Psychological and economic approaches to status-seeking consumption phenomena**

Ernest Dichter (1907 – 1992) has been acknowledged as one of the founding fathers of motivational research, building his theory on Freudian psychoanalysis so as to unravel consumers' subconscious desires and feelings about commodities and services (Savitt, 1980; Stern, 2004, Tadajewski, 2006). Establishing the Institute for Motivational Research in 1946, Dichter became a pioneer of advertising research, who not only adapted

psychoanalytic methods to study marketplace behaviour but also introduced and founded the field of qualitative consumer research methods and shifted the interests of marketing activities onto the study of the consumer. Experiencing the age of mass consumption in the United States during the 1950s, he produced rich and useful insights into consumers' subconscious motivations and emotional responses to products and luxurious brands (Packard, 1959). Flirting with cultural anthropology, Dichter (cited in Tadajewski, 2006: 436) seems to be very close to Veblen's ideas by arguing that "the day-to-day behaviour of twentieth century man - even if he lives in Brooklyn, on the outskirts of Paris, or in South Italy - is as worthy of study as the Samoans or the Trobrianders." The absurdity of the modern upper class American consumer was placed on the centre of Veblen's (1899: 5) analysis positioning him, in a comparative manner, next to the members of the Polynesian, Icelander and Andaman tribes. During the same period and drawing upon early theories of consumption, McMurry (1944) summarized the main psychological findings on buyer behaviour and pointed out how feelings of inferiority - stemming from economic comparisons and social status considerations - have the potential to turn into decisive factors in the mimesis of purchasing decisions. Notwithstanding, the main thrust of McMurry's argument is grounded in the display of wealth through consumption, the term 'conspicuous consumption' and Veblen's name are noticeable only through their absence. This is only the beginning for consumer behavior to focus more explicitly on issues of product symbolism, ostentation and consumption for social status. The fresh impetus came from advertising, an activity Veblen considered that to a great extent produces an antagonistic rivalry amongst corporations for profit (Mestrovic, 2003), and some pioneers of marketing research showed interest in the psychological underpinnings between status seeking economic phenomena and symbols of status (Leavitt, 1954; Katz and Lazarsfeld,

1955). Trained in psychology and economics, Katona (1951, 1953) observed that the wealth and material comfort of the post-war years encouraged individuals to actively seek status and prestige through the display of commodities and leading status symbols. Apart from qualified American psychologists with a genuine interest in the study of consumer behaviour and conspicuous consumption practices in particular, the work of the French librarian and philosopher George Bataille (1949/1988) offered an intriguing and alternative economic theory. Bataille suggested that economic action is essentially a social process wherein individuals seek to destroy and increase their expenditure on excess goods and services. Like Veblen, Bataille claimed that contemporary economic organization favors and supports excess and waste as outcomes of consumer action. Discussing the organization of warfare and sacrifice in Aztec societies, he argued that once the growth of a society and existing affluence achieves its limits then violent consumption and excess turn into the social mechanisms of destroying wealth without utility and producing waste. The proliferation of surplus status symbols and affluence disorientate the modern consumer and although he develops an addiction to accumulating wealth, gradually realizes a sense of incompleteness and dissatisfaction with his current state. Rethinking mainstream economic theories on expenditure, Bataille concluded that instead of assuming that consumers behave as individuals who seek to maximize their utility and possession of goods, we can also consider them as masters of things whose insatiability and willingness to accumulate more goods will contribute to destructive - for the environment and society- modes of waste. Bataille's interdisciplinary and imaginative book, originally published in 1949, gained popularity amongst philosophers and cultural theorists many years after its appearance and received limited attention within the field of orthodox economics. One year later, Veblen's name appeared on the title of an economic paper - fifty-one years after the TLC - when

Leibenstein (1950) published his well-known article “*Bandwagon, Snob and Veblen effects in the Theory of Consumer Demand*”. Leibenstein intended to remind mainstream economic theorists of Veblen’s contribution to their discipline and coined the term ‘Veblen effect’:

“By the Veblen effect we refer to the phenomenon of conspicuous consumption; to the extent to which the demand for a consumer’s good is increased because it bears a higher rather than a lower price.” (Leibenstein, 1950: 189).

According to Leibenstein, consumers’ desire to emulate particular lifestyles or to look exclusive had remained out of the sphere of inquiry of theories of consumer demand and the analysis of the interpersonal effects of consumption should be divided according to functional and non-functional demand. He also mentioned that one of the non-functional forms of demand was ‘irrational demand’ and without detailing the nature or the psychological needs of the consumer himself, a central trait of Veblen’s analysis, Leibenstein moved his discussion to the concepts of bandwagon and snob effects. He defined the term bandwagon effect as the economic phenomenon which causes increasing demand for a commodity due to the fact that economically ‘superior’ individuals consume the same product. The bandwagon effect helps consumers to ‘get into the swing of things’, to associate their image with superior lifestyles, or to be fashionable; in other words to keep up with the Joneses. On the other hand, the snob effect refers to an individual’s desire to differentiate himself from the ‘common people’, thus the purchase, exhibition and

consumption of a popular and widely accessible commodity is rejected. Overall, Leibenstein's original and short paper offered some novel insights as regards the importance of external factors on consumer demand theory and suggested that the price of commodities are shaped according to consumer's socio-psychological needs. However, his analysis can be situated within the economic orthodoxy of his time, a fact partly substantiated by the complete lack of specific references to the ideas of Thorstein Veblen. Although he borrowed Veblen's name so as to introduce an economic phenomenon under the eye-catching phrase 'Veblen effect', Leibenstein considered that the motives underpinning conspicuous consumption and ostentatious economic behavior are phenomena that should be analyzed by social psychologists and sociologists. As an economist himself, he categorized Veblen's ideas within a sociological agenda:

"Although the theory of conspicuous consumption as developed by Veblen and others is quite a complex and subtle sociological construct, we can, for our purposes, quite legitimately abstract from the psychological and sociological elements and address our attention exclusively to the effects that consumption has on the demand function." (Leibenstein, 1950: 203).

Leibenstein's summary of 'Veblen effects' aimed to expand consumer demand theory, nevertheless, it had little to do with a full understanding and advancement of the Veblenian analysis. By reducing Veblen's complex arguments into a one-sided theorem of determining specific prices, Leibenstein encouraged students interested in Veblen to marginalize the anthropological insights of the TLC regarding the evolution of emulatory

motives, desires and consumers' continuous dissatisfaction, to mention but a few. A year before Leibenstein's publication, another economist, Duesenberry (1949) recognized and underlined the importance of social factors for the formation of consumption preferences. He argued that luxurious commodities and high standards of living have emerged as means of social differentiation and superior status. The acquisition and accumulation of goods aims to boost consumers' self-esteem by eliminating feelings of inferiority and by positioning themselves within a superior consumption lifestyle. However, he moved his analysis from the interpersonal dynamics amongst consumer and issues of competitive economic display to the 'superiority' amongst goods.

"The superiority of one good over another for a specific purpose may be a technical superiority, as in the case of automobiles or refrigerators. In other cases it may be an aesthetic superiority or superiority with respect to some criterion such as newness of design." (Duesenberry, 1949: 6).

Again, the analysis on the interrelationship between the technical or aesthetic superiority of objects considerably decreased the importance of Veblen's anthropological conceptualization as regards the conspicuous consumer and empowered functional rather than irrational aspects of individuals' perceptions (McCormick, 1983). Although Duesenberry acknowledged the contribution of Veblen and his ideas are closer to Veblenian accounts, at least compared to Leibenstein, he implied that his achievement constituted an original explanation of consumer behavior without building on Veblen's 'conspicuous consumption.' Conclusively, it can be said on the ideas of Leibenstein and

Duessenberry, that although they offered a macro-economic analysis of status consumption, they remained engulfed in a quest of producing theoretical models for consumer demand theory, which seemed to adopt an apathetic and static position to the complexity of consumption during the post-war rising affluence.

#### **4.2.2 Sociological views on Veblen's work**

Focusing on the advancement or challenging of post-Keynesian ideas, generations of orthodox economics either marginalized or superficially examined Veblen's observations but as mentioned above, the phenomenon of mass consumption, frenzied advertising activities and psychological findings on the motives of consumers captivated the interest of academics in other disciplines. The so-called conventional sociological stream also had a limited appreciation for the ideas of the TLC (Mestrovic, 2003). Veblen's socio-cultural accounts of excess competition and status consumption have been largely irrelevant to Parson's theories on the structures of social action; ideas which have been very popular and influential for the sociological agenda of their time (Mestrovic, 2003). Also, Parsons himself criticized Veblen's theory supporting the assumption that his ideas lack a deep understanding of the structural – functional nature of social institutions (Tilman, 2007). Veblen's unusual and imaginative vision of a post-Darwinian economic discipline, a curious synthesis of Darwinism and evolutionary anthropological theories, together with his rejection of orthodox Marxist political thinking complicated and made almost impossible his classification within an established school of social theory. Giddens' (1971) classical textbook entitled '*Capitalism and modern social theory*' popularized the writings of Marx,

Durkheim and Weber and enhanced their well-deserved reputation as the founding fathers of sociology and social theory in general. A series of popular and commercial books (Poggi, 1972; Connolly, 1974; Alexander, 1982; Hughes, 1995) adopted Giddens' framework and gradually caused the exclusion of Veblen's name from the pantheon of social scientists. Like Parsons, Giddens believed that the peculiar writing of Veblen on the dominant culture of the leisure class and Simmel's (1904/1957) observations on the transition of fashions and imitation lie outside the sphere of structuration and social action (Mestrovic, 1998). Furthermore, both Parson's and Giddens envisaged how social behavior can be clarified through *grand theories* of human action, thus Veblen's irrational consumer seemed to represent a simple paradox of socio-economic theory. As a result, Veblen's social theory remained peripheral to mainstream thought.

### **4.3 The other-directed consumer and the Frankfurt School**

Veblen's espousal of cultural anthropological principles for the description of hilarious tribal customs and their comparison with latter-day consumption practices found difficulty in capturing the attention of the majority of classical sociologists, however, with few exceptions such as the case of David Riesman. In addition, the authoritarian impact of rising consumerism on individuals' perception of freedom and choice has been critically approached by European theorists (Marcuse, 1968; Adorno, 1991) who could foresee the psychologically destructive effects of obsession with mass and material culture along with environmental damage and waste. In the following section, I will discuss the resemblance

between Veblen's and Riesman's ideas on conformity and consumption and the critical discussion of TLC by members of the Frankfurt School.

#### **4.3.1 David Riesman on conspicuous consumption**

Apart from producing an intriguing biography of Veblen, Riesman (1961) was very quick to observe and respond to the rise of the service-based and consumption-driven new economy, with his seminal publication '*The Lonely Crowd: a study of the changing American character.*' In this influential study, he presented a model of different American social characters and he identified and explored the main features of three cultural archetypes: the tradition-directed, inner-directed and other-directed individual. His main argument, built upon Veblen's tradition, is that social norms govern and direct the consumer behavior of the majority of people. Challenging the orthodoxy of the social and economic theories of his time, Riesman claimed that other-directed individuals, a category wherein most Americans belonged, were in a constant search to behave according to norms established by peers and their consumer behavior was primarily driven by their concern to conform to the societal standards or to properly fit in social groups. He named the group of other directed individuals as the *lonely crowd*.

We observe that Riesman's other-directed character and Veblen's conspicuous consumer share many psychological and cultural traits, as Riesman himself has admitted to Mestrovic (Mestrovic, 2002), and also that both characters express the same increased sensitivity to fashion, mimetic behaviour and conspicuous display of wealth. Riesman suggested that 'the

other-directed individual' wants to be loved rather than esteemed' and portrayed young, energetic and flexible Americans whose conformity to consumer capitalism and prevailing fashions turned them into indifferent political entities, hyper-active consumers and entrepreneurs. Easily influenced by friends and members of the working environment, other-directed individuals hesitate to embrace change and are afraid of being 'different', thus being rejected by their peer group. Fifty years before Riesman's publication, Veblen's following account comes very close to the origins of conformity amongst conspicuous consumers.

"The accepted standard of expenditure in the community or in the class to which a person belongs largely determines what his standard of living will be. It does this directly by commending itself to his common sense as right and good, through his habitually contemplating it and assimilating the scheme of life in which it belongs; but it does so also indirectly through popular insistence on conformity to the accepted scale of expenditure as a matter of propriety, under pain of disesteem and ostracism." (Veblen, 1899: 47)

Like Riesman, Veblen referred to the 'popular insistence on conformity' of consumption lifestyles and how individual's noncompliance with the accepted social norms can cause feelings of guilt and disesteem and also the penalty of 'ostracism' from the social class where he/she aspires to belong. Undoubtedly, Veblen's perceived social stratification comes from a much more hierarchical (and outdated) viewpoint compared to the social structures of America during the 1950s, yet it must be emphasized that Riesman is a very good reader of Veblen and his typology of the other-directed character can be seen, to some

extent, as an adaptation of the American status-seeker described in the TLC. Both studies have offered central and important examinations of the changing American social character and his consumption habits.

Veblen's book, with a delay of almost thirty years, came to the academic surface and the observations on status-seeking consumers reflected, to a certain degree, some of the cultural values and societal codes in the post-war period of American consumerism. Additionally, popular culture began to portray middle and working class Americans whose desire for material success and social glamour manifested a propensity for achievement, other-directedness and aspiration to keep up with the Joneses. F. Scott Fitzgerald's (1950/1926) *Great Gatsby* is an exemplar study on the apotheosis of the American material culture in the 1920's (Ellis et. al, 2010) and Arthur Miller's (1949) protagonist (Willy Loman) in the *Death of a Salesman* struggled to impress his sons by pretending to excel in commerce and outdoing his neighbors in terms of success and social standing. In Riesman's (1995:188) words:

“For one thing, the Arthur Miller drama is archaic in presenting the failure of the failure, rather than, as more avant-garde does, the failure of success. And when success is called into question, whether from a Christian basis or some other, the American social pyramid itself is called into question – it is no longer a pyramid but a sphinx, an asker of questions rather than an answer to them, a touchstone of new values rather than a memorial to old and accepted ones springing, Veblen would say, out of the Barbarian past.”

We can say that Veblen's sarcasm and Miller's critical insights can be seen behind Loman's imaginary expectations and obsession with prestige. But not everyone shared Riesman's sympathetic views towards Veblen's work and in the following section we can observe the reception of the TLC through the lens of critical social theory.

#### **4.3.2 Conspicuous consumption and critical theory**

Being one of the first American intellectuals to question some benefits of increased commercial culture, Veblen's economic thought became subject to comparison to Marxist political economy. Both men adopted a historical approach to the study of economic phenomena, although Veblen rejected the Hegelian dialectic of process, history, change and (especially) progress within one single model (O'Hara, 2000). It can be said that what Marx and Hegel envisaged as progress, Veblen has merely interpreted as *change* driven by the causality of evolutionary phenomena (Tilman, 2004). Veblen's writings, together with his reviews on Marxist thought, created a center of attention for the scholars of the Frankfurt School, some of Europe's most prominent socialist theorists before, during and after the WWII. Their analysis and attack on Veblen's ideas vary and include criticism of Veblen's technocratic views regarding the development of the American economy, technological determinism, false interpretation of America's class conflict and finally Veblen's misunderstanding of consumer culture and aesthetics, as a theorist who conceived anything beautiful as wasteful and insufficient (Adorno, 1941; Stabile, 1982). Veblen's dislike of

wasteful consumption habits was criticized by Adorno (1941:401) who referred to Veblen's most famous phrase as follows:

“conspicuous consumption is actually a realm of artificial imagery...created by a desperate compulsion to escape from the abstract sameness of things by a kind of self-made and futile promesse de bonheur”

Building on the Marxist idea of ‘commodity fetishism’, Adorno aimed to explain how the ceremonial/conspicuous consumption practices connect with the transcendence and emancipation from industrialized work life. Although there is limited analysis on Veblen's anthropological and socio-historical framework of consumption practices, Adorno attacked Veblen's almost melancholic and nostalgic admiration for the primitive stage of human organization and incapability to propose future plans for social change and development. Later on, Adorno's argumentation expanded to Veblen's character, idiosyncrasies and intellectual precursors and to a great extent his analysis ignored Boas' influence on Veblen as regards the non-teleological conception of history. However, in the following years, Marcuse's (1968) thorough critique of the one-dimensional modern man in capitalist societies concurred with Veblen's satirical comments on the American conspicuous consumer, who is continuously manipulated by fashions and participates in a national system of status and prestige (Simich and Tilman, 1980). The well-justified criticism of the members of the Frankfurt school on Veblen primarily derived from his failure to offer a systematic presentation of his ideas within the field of economics and sociology. According

to Tilman (1999), both Marcuse and Horkheimer eschewed to examine Veblen's treatise and positioning on the American economic and political environment, in which the ideas were formulated. Putting more emphasis on the understanding of consumerism, Fromm (1948) dived into the abyss of human nature and critically analyzed the incentives behind the everyday actions of '*the marketing man*'. Similar to the eccentricities of the conspicuous consumer, the marketing man is obsessed with social status and his insatiable desire for prestige translates everything into objects of transaction and consumption. Theorizing about the amalgamation of humanistic drives with cultural needs, Fromm suggested a more authentic and autonomous stance for the consumer who is socially-driven by a *having* mode orientation instead of a *being* orientation, as a path leading to self-actualization (Shankar and Fitchett, 2002). It is probable that Veblen and Fromm would agree on individuals' inexorable appetite for the ownership and accumulation of goods, a state that enhances the idea of *having* instead of becoming an active entity. Adopting a critical perspective on extravagant consumption and wasteful activities of his contemporaries, Veblen considered that in modern societies the 'instinct of workmanship' "begins aggressively to shape men's views of what is meritorious, and asserts itself at least as an auxiliary canon of self-complacency" (Veblen, 1899:39). Based on his anthropological understanding of human economic behaviour, he defined the 'instinct of workmanship' as a prominent characteristic existing in individuals' dispositions capable of directing their actions and stance towards commodities and status symbols (Veblen, 1914). Social status becomes '*something that you have to work for*', contrary to the 'wasteful' nature of luxury which strengthened an apathetic state of having, consuming and displaying. Similar to Fromm's ideas, Veblen's theory questioned the ever-increasing gap between *having* and *doing* from the primitive stage to modern industrial societies. What

irritated Veblen (1899: 28) is the non-productive consumption of time dedicated to the display of wealth:

“It has already remarked that the term “leisure”, as used here, does not connote indolence or quiescence. What it connotes is non-productive consumption of time. Time is consumed non-productively as an evidence of pecuniary ability to afford a life of idleness.”

Referring to the perception of luxurious commodities by his contemporaries (decoration, tapestries, silver table service, silk hats, jewellery and dress), Veblen claimed that economic activity and status consumption in particular should be awarded according to workmanship and contribute to the advancement of everyday life and well-being:

“The indispensability of these things after the habit and the convention have been formed, however, has little to say in the classification of expenditures as waste or not waste in the technical meaning of the word. The test to which all expenditure must be brought in an attempt to decide that point is the question whether it serves directly to enhance human life on the whole — whether it furthers the life process. For this is the basis of award of the instinct of workmanship, and that instinct is the court of final appeal in any question of economic truth or adequacy.” (Veblen, 1889: 42)

Erroneously, Veblen’s writings and ideas on human nature have been interpreted as outcomes of Veblen’s cynicism and inherent and esoteric pessimism. In 1995, Riesman went so far to argue that “it is [Veblen’s] pessimism that attracted so many people nowadays” (Mestrovic in Riesman, 1995) and specifically his gloomy forecasts about the

future of the educational system and capitalist economies. Nonetheless, both Veblen and Fromm considered individuals as ‘active agents of being’ whose actions should be meaningful and productive. In Veblen’s words:

“...man is an agent. He is, in his own apprehension, a centre of unfolding impulsive activity – teleological activity. He is an agent seeking in every act the accomplishment of some concrete, objective, impersonal end. By force of his being such an agent he is possessed of a taste for effective work, and a distaste for futile effort. He has a sense of the merit of serviceability or efficiency and of the demerit of futility, waste, or incapacity. This aptitude or propensity maybe called the instinct of workmanship.” (Veblen, 1899: 8).

Veblen’s use of the terms ‘instincts’ and ‘habits’, and how their interplay produces human action, bears a striking similarity with Fromm’s ‘normative humanism’, as a concept that combines cultural determinism and basic (natural) drives (Tilman and Simich, 1984). In conclusion, even if Veblen’s name doesn’t appear in Fromm’s writings, we can argue that Fromm comes closer to the idea of the trapped and socially-driven conspicuous consumer than any other member of the Frankfurt School. Moreover, Wright Mills can be considered as one of the few American radical sociologists who combined Veblen’s social theory with a strong political overtone. Follower and fan of Veblen’s ideas - he wrote the introduction for the 1953 edition of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Mills, 1951, 1956) - Mills analyzed and criticized the dominant forms of ownership and command exercised by the ruling elite classes. Being an academic outcast himself, Mills incorporated the idea of ‘power’ in Veblen’s analysis of status emulation and the quest for prestige arguing that the competitive striving for economic resources created ‘codes of honour’ which served the

interest of the American power elite. Finally, the Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman (1951) adopted a Veblensque outlook on individual's desire to express prestige and class position through their consumption patterns; however his contribution to the advancement of Veblen's theory will be discussed later.

Overall, we notice a revival of Veblen's ideas after the 1940s, championed by a sociological agenda. Veblen's observations were beginning to receive the respect and admiration of sociologists and market researchers and graduate students' dissertations referring to his ideas were appearing in various departments at Harvard, Columbia and the New School of Social Research (Diggins, 1999). Veblen's descriptions of status-enhancing consumption methods became useful tools to support a platform for social criticism, inform market researchers as well as a precious intellectual resource. The interest in Veblen's work didn't remain limited to members of the Institutional School of economics but was also enthusiastically explored by a large number of post-war philosophers, sociologists, Freudian psychologists and historians of ideas (Diggins, 1999). Heilbroner's (1953) momentous and well-known book entitled *The Worldly Philosophers* praised and probed into Veblen's 'savage' understanding of socio-cultural phenomena and positioned Veblen's name next to leading socio-economic thinkers such as Adam Smith, Malthus, Marx and Keynes. Heilbroner's brief conclusion that Veblen's theories were valid only for his time (Gilded Age) and location (East coast of America) will be tested in the following chapters of the thesis. What immediately follows in the next section is a close examination of two American intellectuals and social analysts whose views and ideas had been heavily influenced by the TLC.

## **4.4 Status Seekers in the Affluent Society**

Following the discussion of the previous chapter, we notice that after the Second World War the ideology of the market revival and free capitalism dominated the socio-economic life of America and to some extent Britain. The increasing impact of these economic and industrial changes on individuals had been discussed between the 1950s and 1970s by a plethora of intellectuals and social scientists. American capitalism was in its phase of high mass consumption and the prevailing 'consumer ethic' changed the scientific study of the modern consumer into an extremely useful, fashionable and also profitable activity. A growing number of motivation research theorists began to unravel the irrationalities behind the decisions of the conspicuous consumer and more social scientists paid attention to the dynamics between social classes and consumer choices.

### **4.4.1 Social stratification and status symbols**

To begin with, Pierre Martineau (1958), the Research Director of the Chicago Tribune and an influential promoter of motivational research, infused social scientific approaches into marketing practice and based on the social mobility/stratifications theories of Warner et al. (1941) explored how a variety of consumption practices aim to improve consumer's social class position. Extending and building upon Veblen's general theory, Martineau's study (1958:130) crystallized the evidence of a social class system that activates and instigates the pressure for social differentiation and he suggested that the middle class consumer is a

‘mobile and risk taker individual’ willing to spend money ‘for various symbols of upward mobility, display and consumption.’

“Consumption patterns operate as prestige symbols to define class membership, which is a more significant determinant of economic behaviour than mere income...Social class position and mobility-stability dimensions will reflect in much greater depth each individual’s style of life.”  
(Martineau, 1958: 130).

Following an upward trend in the sociology of consumption and Martineau’s insights into social stratification and consumer behaviour, more sociologists rethought to what extent social class becomes an important determinant of consumer behaviour (Kahl, 1957; McCann, 1957; Newman, 1957; Coleman, 1961; Nam, 1963). Likewise, Woods (1960) suggested that consumer researchers can distinguish rational from irrational groups of buyers, with members of the second group being characterized as impulsive and emotional consumers who respond to symbolic appeals of ‘prestige products.’ Woods claimed that marketers should be aware of consumers’ irrational motives, thus a plethora of products exist in the marketplace in order to satisfy needs related to membership of an upper social class, enjoyment of status and extension of one’s ego. Prior to the escalating popularity of social group influences during the 1960s, Bayton (1958) highlighted the role of products as a means of enhancing personality traits, a technique used by marketing and advertising strategies. Acting as a forerunner of high and low involvement product theories, he argued that some consumer goods entail a higher degree of ego-involvement for the decision-

making activity whilst others have relatively low ego involvement. Although the increased attention to the concept of social class and spending behaviour together with an anthropological view of consumer action should logically involve more interest in Veblen's writings, his work and ideas have once again been marginalized. It is possible that, his classification as a salient social critic of American consumer culture and his inability to offer a systematic and 'scientific' explanation of status consumption impelled motivational researchers and sociologists of consumer behaviour to obscure some of the indigestible messages of the TLC. Nevertheless, there are always exceptions and in our case can be found mostly in the work of Vance Packard and Kenneth Galbraith. Both men provided some of the most popular discussions on consumption in the post-war period and adopting Veblen's satirical perspective, attacked the standardized economic assumptions of consumer demand. As Diggins (1999:8) argues:

"The very name "Veblen" evokes various images. Amongst general readers it recalls the eccentric professor and caustic satirist of status climbing and "conspicuous consumption."...On the one hand Veblen emerges as but the mentor of Vance Packard, on the other as merely the precursor of James Burnham or the spiritual ancestor of John Kenneth Galbraith. So regarded, Veblen can easily be relegated to the footnotes of American intellectual history, an author whose works are frequently quoted and seldom read."

Thereupon, the following section aims to shed some light on the legacy of Veblen's ideas for the work of Vance Packard with special focus on the arguments of the latter as regards

the impact of motivational research and psychological techniques for class consumption and social mobility.

#### **4.4.2 The Status Seekers in America**

Initially trained as a journalist and writer, Packard had been a reporter for the Associated Press until 1942 and afterwards he produced a humorous guidance on '*How to pick a mate*' (Adams and Packard, 1942). As an 'insider' in the business and commercial side of the television industry, Packard observed how the rising advertising medium entered almost every American household but was simultaneously turning into the most powerful mechanism behind the growing motives of status-seeking consumers. The escalating cultural authority of motivational researchers and advertisers during the 1950s (Holt, 2002; Friedman, 2004) was meeting the lethargic reflexivity of unaware consumerism and easily manipulated consumers. With his bestselling book *The Hidden Persuaders*, Packard (1957) demystified the unknown art of advertising to the general public. The book never went out of print and it is considered a pioneer work that exposed and critically explained the psychological techniques that motivation researchers and advertisers employed to govern and influence consumer action. Using as evidence products, political campaigns and television programmes, Packard painted a grim picture of an American prosperous economy whose citizens' desires and wants are under the continuous control of marketing corporate departments. In a chapter of the book entitled '*Selling Symbols to Upward Strivers*', Packard (1957: 106) quoted Lloyd Warner as follows:

“Within the status systems something else operates that is at the very centre of American life and is the most motivating force in the lives of many of us – namely what we call social mobility, the aspiration drive, the achievement drive, the movement of an individual and his family from one level to another, the translation of economic goods into socially approved symbols, so that people achieve higher status.”

This account, a brilliant paraphrase of what Veblen coined as the ‘*propensity for achievement*’, came almost sixty years after the publication of *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Apart from an assiduous and insightful social analyst of consumers’ hidden needs and desires, Packard shares Veblen’s intentionality to expose the unexplored world of material consumption and to point out how persistent aspiration for social climbing can lead consumers to feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction. The success of the *Hidden Persuaders* was followed by *The Status Seekers* (Packard, 1959), a Veblen-like critique of social norms and wasteful consumption habits. In this book, Packard’s historical analysis of status behaviour in America updates Veblen’s observations on the social dynamics of conspicuous spending. His message is acerbic and truthful: individuals buy luxurious products so as to impress other people with their financial resources and evidence of wealth. Though he included only a few direct references to Veblen, Packard retained Veblen’s critical spirit and the main idea of the book can be read as a reaction and criticism to the post-war myth that affluence and increasing social mobility were transforming America into a classless society. It was a period in which a growing body of intellectuals, academics and marketing researchers held and supported the view that increased consumption, job mobility and a new middle-income class had become the mechanisms of

building a truly 'open' and egalitarian political system. The uniqueness and affluence of the new social system were praised and eulogized by economists and political theories during the Cold War period (Horowitz, 1994). In opposition to those accounts, Packard argued that the escalating need for status striving strengthened social class distinctions, destabilized personal prosperity/happiness and served the interest of very few entrepreneurs. Therefore, it can be said that Veblen's work informs Packard ideas in various ways. Both men expressed their criticism to specific business tactics of executives; they offered an original treatise on the (seductive and often manipulative) meaning embodied in status symbols; and finally they shared a predilection for workmanship and expressed their scepticism about the wasteful consumption of luxurious products. Packard suggested a vivid, shocking and educational account of working/middle class consumers, who couldn't realize that the promotion of upper class symbols primarily aimed to steer status consciousness. Many parts of his theory modified Riesman's work on the other-directed character, nonetheless his contribution still remains original. Packard's arguments attacked the well-promoted idea of an affluent and classless society and the book explicated how advertising techniques increased class barriers. His work became popular amongst leftist intellectuals and the public - he is considered as a forerunner of pop sociology - but like Veblen his name was treated with respect only some decades later (Horowitz, 1994). He never got a great deal of attention during his lifetime and conventional academic thought always deemed his work to be a humorous critique. Similar to Veblen's 'conspicuous consumption', Packard's terminology enriched the American everyday discourses and his ideas communicated what many people would hesitate to disclose during the 'peaceful' 1950s. In the same period, two more terms were added to the American vocabulary: 'conventional wisdom' and 'countervailing power' both coined by Harvard Professor Galbraith.

#### **4.4.3 Status consumption and the welfare state**

The American economist and public intellectual John Kenneth Galbraith is said to be closer to Veblen's ideas than any other American social theorist (Waligorski, 2006). Similar to Veblen, Galbraith was raised by Scottish immigrants in an agrarian environment of Canada and as a young economist questioned the quantitative orthodoxy and dominance of traditional economic ideas. Both Veblen and Galbraith remained skeptical, for similar reasons, about the triumph of American consumer culture and the promise of 'consumer sovereignty', in particular as regards the patterns of these ideas which had been promoted by entrepreneurial interests and corporate advertising techniques (Diggins, 1999). Both men struggled to highlight the deficiencies of an economy that promises high-standards of living and affluence to its citizens and at the same time allows the 'vested interests' to exploit the public by increasing profitable productivity and consumer demand at the same time. Moreover, both scholars aimed to explain economic behaviour by combining social, political and cultural components so as to address the impact of affluence and material goods on individuals and their actions. Following Veblen, Galbraith argued that the phenomenon of status emulation lies at the very heart of power politics in modern American society. At the end of the 1950s, Galbraith's (1956/1987) best-selling book *The Affluent Society* revived and applied Veblen's and Mitchell's institutional economics to a popular audience (Hood, 2005) and he explained, in an accessible and friendly way to his readers, how mass production and advertising manufactured and reproduced human needs. Galbraith was quick to investigate the implications of mass consumption on the American

way of life and underlined the responsibility of the economists and consumer demand theorists to indicate how:

“partially monopolized prices or excessive advertising and selling costs for tobacco, liquor, chocolates, automobiles and soap in a land which is already suffering from nicotine poisoning and alcoholism, which is nutritionally gorged with sugar, which is filling its hospitals and cemeteries with those who have been maimed or murdered on its highways and which is dangerously neurotic about normal body odors.” (Galbraith, 1952: 102).

We can acknowledge that Galbraith’s attack on orthodox economic theory resembles the Veblenian analysis on dissatisfying consumption, as a phenomenon that destabilizes economic and social welfare. Furthermore, Galbraith remarked that escalation in production and advertising strategies intensify, propagate and proliferate consumers’ wants, however, these wants don’t always stem from intrinsic and basic needs but from an individual’s desire to increase his social standing and satisfy hedonistic wants. Advertising campaigns produce and promote “craving for more elegant automobiles, more exotic food, more erotic clothing, more elaborate entertainment - indeed for the entire modern range of sensuous, edifying and lethal desires” (Galbraith, 1957/1987: 115). Moving to the economic sphere and the implementation of welfare policies, Galbraith satirized how private over-consumption and spending on social differentiation oppresses the production of public goods and therefore increases poverty. Galbraith’s prosperous society is not able to offer a connection between increased consumption and well-being (Schor, 2007) and individuals seem incapable of escaping from a vicious cycle of spending, buying and consuming within

the function of an overpromising 'affluent' state. His analysis embraced Veblen's commodity system of social status but also goes beyond this point in order to discuss the impact of productive forces that enhance the industrial system. Therefore, to some extent we can view Galbraith as Veblen's follower and Baudrillard's (1975) ancestor. He admitted the permanent influence of Veblen on his work and how 'in his immortal, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen dramatized as none have before or since, the spectacle of inequality' (Galbraith, 1957/1987:45).

But we can also find important differences between the ideas of the two men. For Galbraith individuals are less irrational compared to Veblen's conspicuous consumer and, based on the chronological divergence of sixty years between the TLC and *The Affluent Society*, we notice that Galbraith's elite class is primarily interested in governance and power whilst the members of Veblen's leisure class were passionately participating in the game of ostentatious economic display (Waligorski, 2006). Veblen believed that the conspicuous consumer was more socially directed compared to Galbraith who attributed the generation of conspicuous consumption practices primarily to productive forces, advertising and manufacture revolution. Additionally, despite the fact that both scholars analyzed the distinction between genuine and artificial needs, Veblen's purely theoretical approach and armchair treatise of competitive human nature was rejected while Galbraith tirelessly<sup>11</sup> worked for liberal reform orientation, redistribution of wealth and alleviation of poverty (Parker, 2007). Overall, and despite their differences, Veblen and Galbraith have been two of the most important critical observers and analysts of the economic realities during the

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<sup>11</sup> Galbraith participated in presidential elections, also served as President's advisor and in many other government posts, as ambassador in India. He also opposed the Vietnam war and became a liberal democratic voice for continuous social reform.

20<sup>th</sup> century. Their vivid depictions of status emulation and consumer culture offer diachronic lessons on consumer's needs along with the social pressures and structures behind the generation of those needs. Both men had been astute observers of human behaviour and became social commentators of their times. As expected, their ideas have been superficially mentioned in economic graduate courses all over the world, compared to the doctrines of the orthodox economic episteme. They are considered economists who wrote for non-economists and biting satirists who enjoyed playing the role of 'heretics'. A nomination for a Nobel Prize, especially for Veblen who couldn't secure an academic post, would cause the frustration (or laughter) of many orthodox economists, who perceived their discipline as a 'science', rather than a study dedicated to the understanding and improvement of human condition. Ironically, few contemporary economists would disagree with Samuelson's presidential address at the meeting of *American Economic Association* who claimed that: "Ken Galbraith, like Thorstein Veblen, will be remembered and read when most of us Nobel Laureates will be buried in footnotes down in dusty library stacks."

#### **4.5 Bourdieu and Baudrillard**

The four previous sections offered a genealogical analysis on the dissemination, adoption and (mis)interpretation of Veblen's ideas from the 1940s to 1970s, primarily within an American intellectual context. The following section will focus its interest on two French theorists whose work discussed the meaning of objects and the impact of consumption practices on cultural reproduction, social stratification and individual's perception of identity and social standing. Subsequently, we can see how their ideas inform, update and challenge Veblen's views on status emulation and extravagant consumption.

#### **4.5.1 Agency, consumption and cultural capital**

In Europe, and especially in France, the work of the Swiss Saussure (1916/1960) on linguistics and Levi-Strauss (1963) in anthropology prompted the investigation of a system of symbolic communication and introduced the term *structuralism* as an innovative approach for the study of complex systems. These newly-formulated theoretical platforms were adopted and employed by sociologists, who argued that meaning can be continuously produced via both chaotic and organized structures of signification that embody similar cultural practices, economic phenomena and social activities (Katz, 1976; Sheriff, 1989). Also, during the 1960s, another sociological stream, under the term ‘agency’, aimed to emphasize individuals’ capacity to make their own choices and behave as independent actors and human beings (Cicourel, 1981). Initially, the structuralist movement seemed to hold an antithetical viewpoint and epistemological position towards theories of agency. The acclaimed French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu attempted to overcome the problematic relationship of these two epistemic streams and produced a social theory situated in between. His innovative theoretical approach proposed and promoted an extremely complex system of theoretical models, stemming from anthropology and philosophy to art and religion, and challenging the structure-agency paradigm he built his ideas extensively upon the theories of Marx, Levi-Strauss, Merleau Ponty, Elias, Weber and Durkheim (Swartz, 2005). The influence of the last two on Bourdieu’s theory about lifestyle consumption, domination, status and social classification and the interrelation of these concepts with Veblen’s views constitute the subject of the following analysis.

Bourdieu's (1984) most famous book *Distinction* is based on empirical research carried out in France from 1963 to 1967. The book was translated into English in 1984 and it is considered one of the most important works in sociology of the twentieth century. Conducting an extensive large scale data collection, based on the existing social classes of France in the 1960s, Bourdieu examined and pointed out how taste, cultural and economic capital have been used by members of specific social classes to differentiate themselves from the rest. Describing cultural capital as an accumulated stock of knowledge, Bourdieu focused on the process of how artistic and intellectual establishments reproduce inequality amongst social groups. Primarily, it is the aesthetic taste of individuals, rather than the Veblenian propensity for achievement expressed via material culture, according to which status-seeking consumers are positioned within social hierarchies and secure the desirable distinction (Trigg, 2001). Challenging and updating Veblen's ideas, which related mainly to products and services, Bourdieu claimed that the aesthetic aspects of preferences turn into the most eminent vehicles both for social upbringing and marginalization. Drawing his examples from the purchase and exhibition of furniture, food, manners and fashions, he suggested that the eating habits and intellectual taste of the upper classes represented the social barriers for the rest. Accordingly, it is individual's social upbringing and the notion of *habitus* which receive and communicate status symbols subconsciously and contribute to the maintenance and reproduction of these barriers. Reversing Veblen's 'trickle down' model, Bourdieu concluded that the upper classes borrow consumption habits and popular tastes from the working classes so as to confuse the pretentiousness of the middle class and retain their dominant position. The contribution of Bourdieu on consumption studies is

comparable that of Veblen (Bocock, 1993) and in Campbell's (1995:103) words: *Distinction* "bears comparison, in character and importance, with Veblen's Theory of the Leisure Class."

Although Bourdieu's ideas stem from an exclusive sociological field and his analysis gradually concluded with critical comments on the intricacy of social inequality and its reproduction via upbringing and education, his work can be seen as an imaginative extension of Veblen's theory about socially-driven consumption. Both men - Bourdieu via a much more methodical and systematic study - examined the origins of individuals' desire to differentiate and position themselves within a hierarchical social status game. Bourdieu built and developed Veblen's framework on the TLC and updated Veblen's observations by referring to the consumption of contemporary arts, products, ideas and services (music, decoration, films etc.). Both writers espoused an interdisciplinary agenda to theorize about the motives and propensities behind status consumption as an activity that affects social stratification and reproduces competition, social mobility and occasionally discrimination. Both Veblen and Bourdieu emphasized how the dominance of status groups, antagonism for economic and cultural resources and gender roles lead to consumption of goods and services that open up space between social classes. As Trigg (2001) argued, we can see Bourdieu's contribution as a complement to Veblen's theory and even recognize a potential development of the theory of conspicuous consumption. Nevertheless, it can be argued that Veblen and Bourdieu play the same game but with *different* rules. Both men became perceptive observers - Bourdieu supported his observations with empirical data - of human nature and focused on the socio-cultural practices that aim to social distinction and prestige. However, Bourdieu's concepts and analytical tools come from different traditions and

schools of thought compared to the Veblenian ones. As was mentioned above, Bourdieu's epistemology constitutes an amalgamation of anthropological insights and classical sociological theories aspiring to incorporate and discuss the potential intersection of agency and social structuring. He adopted primarily the Weberian status groups of subordination and domination, added the Marxian idea of economic inequality, applied both to the cultural life of French society and reinstated the idea of a 'homo aestheticus' man in the core of social science. On the other hand, Veblen was a late nineteenth century economist who borrowed primarily anthropological and evolutionary theories for the observation of the evolving luxurious consumption and status-driven phenomena. He focused on diachronic 'instincts', 'dispositions' and 'propensities' compared to Bourdieu's 'habitus', 'manners', 'upbringing' and 'quality of bearing'. Veblen's individual is characterized by an innate 'propensity for achievement', whilst Bourdieu's consumer is socially constructed according to the available resources of economic, cultural and social capital. Veblen examined the inheritance of bio-cultural/bio-social dispositions and the preservation of traits from one cultural stage of human evolution to the other. His theory emphasized the increasing importance to comprehend 'irrational' aspects of consumer behavior for social status considerations, the preservation of barbaric features and habits and how both construct and mirror the ostentatious economic display of the upper/middle class Americans at the end of the 19th century. Veblen's representation of the conspicuous consumer is a thorough attack on the superficial image of the rational economic man, a fact that mirrors Veblen's intentions as social researcher. Bourdieu presented a sociological exercise of domination, with emphasis on the symbolic dimension of taste as a tool of taxonomic struggle for French consumers who desire to improve their social position. The Veblenian 'struggle for status' and consumers' primordial desire for social mobility,

excluding the predatory stage, play a secondary role in Bourdieu's theory. As Bourdieu (1994: 6) argues in his book *Practical Reason*, the term distinction ('la distinction') has a different connotation and meaning:

"The very title *Distinction* serves as a reminder that what is commonly called distinction, that is, a certain quality of bearing and manners, most often considered innate (one speaks of *distinction naturelle*, "natural refinement"), is nothing other than *difference*, a gap, a distinctive feature, in short, a relational property existing only in and through its relation with other properties."

As represented in the diagram of the *Distinction*, the author aims to show and underline how 'social space' dictates hierarchical positions and lifestyles. The spatial differences illustrate social difference and together exhort the reader to consider how everyday socio-cultural practices reproduce the perception of social standing. For Bourdieu human actions occur within a social arena full of economic and cultural resources. However, his theoretical views were more interested in the symbolic power of the cultural system and to what extent defines individual's status. On the other hand, Veblen's system of social hierarchy is mostly economic and subsequently cultural and symbolic. For Bourdieu, primarily cultural 'taste' turns into an indicator of social competence and reveals social distinctions, whilst wealth and economic resources are pregnant with cultural meaning. For Veblen, the evolution of the concept of individual ownership, private property and wealth and the 'pecuniary strength' are the main mechanisms for the legitimization of social classes and social differences. Finally, whilst Bourdieu produced an extremely complicated sociological system, methodologically and as regards its terminology, so as to address his

observations and demythologize the agency-structure dichotomy, Veblen always wanted to be ‘funny’ and never abandoned his journalistic writing style. In conclusion, despite their differences, it is appropriate to acknowledge that the contribution of Pierre Bourdieu on the development of the Veblen’s ideas and their legacy for consumer research is seminal and he can be considered as the theorist who advanced Veblen’s work more than anyone else.

#### **4.5.2 Signs, structures and conspicuous consumption**

Thostein Veblen was first and foremost an interdisciplinary researcher of consumer behaviour. Few intellectual figures of the present time have combined and applied so many diverse disciplines to the examination of consumption phenomena. The French theorist Jean Baudrillard is possibly one of the most notable and controversial amongst them. Like Veblen, he studied philosophy, sociology and languages and later on he became a social analyst and critic of contemporary culture and society. Baudrillard worked as Lefebvre’s (1971) research assistant on projects related to the diffusion of meaning in consumer culture and Barthes’ (1968) semiological analysis of modern society had also been a major sources of inspiration for his early work. From the late 1960s and beyond, Baudrillard published a series of books that centered on the symbolic system of objects in contemporary culture (Baudrillard, 1968/1996; Baudrillard, 1970/1998) and the necessity to enhance the classical Marxist critique of political economy with semiological theories of the sign, underlining the several meanings signified by signifiers (Baudrillard, 1975; Baudrillard, 1981). The combination of Marxist political economy with semiological studies and the sociology of everyday life produced a radical and innovative exploration of

commodity signs and system of objects which form and construct our civilization and society. It can be argued that the 'early' Baudrillard (1968 – 1981) was quite close to Veblen and his ideas in the TLC. In his first and possibly more original book *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard approached the study of consumer culture from a Marxist (sociological) and psychoanalytic/structural perspective. Following Veblen, who proposed a person-status symbol-person system of status, Baudrillard aimed to explain how 'mental structures' and 'cultural systems' have arranged a symbiotic but not always synergistic relationship, wherein, objects and their embodied meanings define us. He attacked and attempted to demythologize the dominant idea about the functionality of objects and focused on the process we experience and perceive commodities, in other words a study which can be translated as a treatise on the self-perception of consumer culture. Although his ideas come into sight as a post-Saussurian classification of commodities and interior design, it is also a far more sophisticated classification of a new social order imposed by consumer 'freedom' and the increasing importance of advertising. Consumer sovereignty and modern-day consumption contribute to individual's self-actualization and the advertising messages permeate our awareness and everyday actions. And at this point Baudrillard posed a rather essential and imaginative question: what if the commodities can be viewed as linguistic categories? A communication between consumers' needs and the structure of commodities materializes here. Similar to a person-to-person communication, human desires, full of passion and fluidity, are moving towards a system of objects and demand their acquisition via the purchase. But the artificial language of objects imprisons, destabilizes and alienates human needs which have been historically constructed through existential, dialectical and oppositional situations. Baudrillard claims that the *coherence* of the system of objects, supported by consumerism and material culture, substantially

diminishes the enthusiasm of consumers' needs and classifies those within a silent hierarchical system. The categorization of commodities produces the categorization of individuals in our affluent society and objects manifest and proclaim our social standing. Even if Baudrillard is less concerned with mimetic behaviour (Clarke, 2003), his theory is informed by Veblen's idea that consumption becomes a form not only of symbolic communication but social classification. In his second book *The Consumer Society*, Baudrillard expanded Veblen's ideas on hierarchical social structure, competitive consumption and public display of commodities.

"Today, we are everywhere surrounded by the remarkable conspicuousness of consumption and affluence, established by the multiplication of objects, services and material goods. This now constitutes a fundamental mutation in the ecology of human species." (Baudrillard, 1970/1998:33).

A network of seductive objects, analogous to the Veblenian system of symbolic communication, directs consumers' needs and produces a system of allocating social standing and distinction. According to Baudrillard, the system of needs is organized by the logic of systematization, rationalization, homogenization and, following Veblen, hierarchical organization (Kellner in Ritzer, 2000). He partially concurred with Galbraith's remarks on the acceleration of 'artificial needs' by productive forces and the bewilderment behind 'consumer sovereignty' and he traced the *systematic* production of needs back into the industrial forces and puritan ethics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Baudrillard's analysis of a sign-system and a system of needs was situated within a historical framework, somewhat limited

but more organized compared to Veblen's, which expands from the early stage of competitive market (or a post-Marxist production period) up to the monopoly capitalism of the 1960s. Mass production and developing technologies generate and promote needs for extravagant goods, thus intensifying and strengthening the proliferation of the *sign value* of commodities and conspicuous consumption. The entire social system is arranged in a Veblenesque fashion, where the consumption and display of prestigious commodities promise a higher position in the artificial space of sign-value. Baudrillard's theory isn't limited to the recognition of a differential system of prestige and status but also expands to its implications for the well-being of individuals and society in general. He argued that "needs and consumption are in fact an organized extension of productive forces" (Baudrillard, 1970/1998: 43) and "needs are nothing but the most advanced form of the rational systematization of productive forces at the individual level, one on which "consumption" takes up the logical and necessary relay from production" (Baudrillard, 1970/1998: 43). Human beings are trapped between the dynamics of productive forces and material culture. The dominant and rational process of industrialization during the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been transferred into the sphere of consumption and forms the skeleton of an affluent consumer society. Why? The systematic positioning of the masses within an industrial system expired and the allocation of human needs into a system of consumption forces became a necessity. Individuals 'discovered' in consumption a new form of language and method of socialization and as expected excitement followed. But there is always a price to pay. Baudrillard (1970/1998: 46) wrote that "the world of objects and of needs would thus be a world of general hysteria" and we can trace the same signs of hysteric consumption back in Veblen's observation on extravagant consumption by the upper American social classes. Emulation and craving for participation in an upper class

enhanced consumer dissatisfaction and striving for social climbing. Veblen, contrary to Marx who expressed a dislike to the everyday life of the primitive culture, was very careful to provide a comparative framework for his readers, or at least for those who are willing to grasp the implications of frantic consumption. The evaporation of commodities in modern societies would probably cause such a loss of meaning that would eventually lead to the collapse of social structures and violence. But that wasn't a problem for members of primitive tribes and it is in these societies that Veblen traced the "formation of social solidarity", lost according to Baudrillard under the pressures of mass consumption. After *The Consumer Society*, Baudrillard will pay attention to anthropological literatures of pre-modern societies so as to propose emancipator remedies for individuals dissatisfied with modern culture. He concluded *The Consumer Society* by suggesting 'forms of refusal' against consumers' conformity to lifestyles and conspicuous consumption and goes further to imply that in the future "violent eruptions and sudden disintegration which will come, just as unforeseeably and as certainly May 68, to wreck this white mass" [of consumption] (Baudrillard, 1970/1998:196). Coming from a neo-Marxist perspective, Baudrillard argued that the commercialization of the social world will produce individuals' alienation and its abolition will become impossible since its roots lie in the very structures of the consumer society. However, Baudrillard's (1975, 1981) two subsequent books *The Mirror of Production* and *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* can be read as a critique of orthodox Marxist interpretation of economic life and perhaps, situated his work closer to Veblen's approach. Especially in the second book, Baudrillard quite explicitly expressed that he owes an intellectual heritage to Veblen's work:

“Goods and objects must necessarily be produced and exchanged (sometimes in the form of violent destruction) in order that the social hierarchy be manifest....The echo of this primordial function of objects is found enlarged in the notion of *conspicuous waste* (ostentatious prodigality, honorific consumption of expenditure) in the analysis of Thorstein Veblen. Veblen shows that even if the primary function of the subservient classes is working and producing, they simultaneously have the function (and when they are kept unemployed it is the only function) of displaying the standing of the Master.” (Baudrillard, 1981:32).

While Veblen’s ideas were conspicuously ignored by others, Baudrillard clearly recognized their importance for the social organization of a consumer society. Although the ‘later’ Baudrillard in the 1980s and 1990s became fascinated with a dystopic vision of a postmodern society, he still retained his respect and admiration for Veblen’s views. The Veblenian primitive and barbaric traits of upper-class individuals are intrinsic parts of Baudrillard’s (1988) post-Fordist America and extrapolate from Veblen’s ideas to stress that barbarism and civilization can co-exist under the peculiarities of consumer culture (Mestrovic, 1993). Baudrillard not only described several practices of consumption, using Veblen’s ideas, but also introduced the term ‘inconspicuous consumption’ as voluntary deprivation (Genosko, 1994). Both Veblen and Baudrillard pointed out the absurd and ironic consciousness of modern consumers as beings entrapped in the circulation of signs and money capital (Dyer, 1997). Both men criticized economic and consumer demand theory by indicating their superficial interpretations of a complex social system and by describing the consumer as a communicator who has to act as an agent. Finally, both Veblen and Baudrillard are considered to be provocative and original satirists of mass

consumption and their work has been either passionately adopted by their admirers or polemically hated by their critics. The arithmetical superiority of the critics does not only reduce the importance of their work but confirms and validates the remarkable sharpness of their ideas.

This chapter examined how economists, psychologists, sociologists and early marketing theorists received Veblen's ideas on status-driven consumption phenomena after the post-war period and throughout the emergence of service-driven and prosperous Western economies. Concurrently, we notice that Veblen's intellectual heritage for economic theories of consumer demand was marginalized and reduced under the introduction and popularization of the superficial term '*Veblen effect*'. The only exception can be found in Galbraith's contribution that kept alive and revived Veblen's institutional approach to economics and Packard's critical accounts on consumer culture and the generations of needs. We can also observe that limited attention to Veblen's ideas was paid by the agenda of mainstream and radical sociologists, motivational researchers, and behaviorists interested in the dynamics of social class and consumption. At the same time and during the mid-1970s the field of consumer behaviour (or consumption studies) developed an interdisciplinary approach to the study of consumption phenomena and blended a plethora of disciplines (sociology, social psychology, economics, anthropology etc) so as to approach socially-driven consumption. Thereupon, the following chapter will attempt to examine Veblen's legacy for consumer research and the (mis)interpretation of his ideas by consumer behaviour theorists from 1975 until today.

## **Chapter 5: Thorstein Veblen in Consumer Research and Marketing Theory (1975 – 2010)**

The following chapter opens with a succinct examination of the rise of consumerism in Western developed societies during the 1970s and its impact on practices of ostentatious economic display of goods. Subsequently, I seek to observe how the emergence of the behaviourist movement informed the first detailed models of consumer behaviour and the reception of Veblen's ideas within these studies. The formation of consumer research during the mid-1970s, as a discrete discipline from marketing, and its inter-disciplinary background comes under close examination before I move the analysis to the materialistic and self-driven period of the 1980s. I approach from a critical perspective the notion of the 'self-concept' in consumer research and its impact on the marginalization of the social class variables as indicators of consumption, thus Veblen's theory. Aiming to focus on the adoption of Veblen's ideas by contemporary consumer researchers, I have conducted a citation analysis based upon the discussion of Veblen's book in leading journals of consumer research and marketing. The chapter closes with a summary of the literature review, a critical evaluation of studies based on luxury branding and questions which can assist in the development of a methodological and empirical framework.

### **5.1 Towards consumerism and increased conspicuous consumption**

The era of widespread conspicuous consumption practices, beginning in America during the middle of the 1950s, continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s and business

organizations produced a wide range of status symbol products so as to meet consumers' growing demand for social status, distinction and differentiation (Mason, 1998). In the same period, marketers and advertising agencies adapted their strategies and campaigns by developing and promoting products which both satisfied consumers' intellectual taste and positioned them closer to aspirant social groups. We also notice that the transition from the socially conservative and highly materialistic 1950s to the rising counterculture and political activism of the 1960s reshuffled class structures and brought to the fore new reference groups. From a macro-economic perspective, the introduction of neo-liberal theories (Friedman, 1957), related to the 'open market' and its function, popularized the ideology of consumer sovereignty as motivator of social dynamism and competition amongst individuals for status and social differentiation (Slater, 1997) - consequently individuals' innate desire to conspicuously consume - in the Veblenian sense, grew again. The increased incomes explain activities like shopping from prestigious and fashionable stores (especially clothing) and the exhibition of these possessions, as vehicles for drawing class distinctions. Furthermore, status-motivated consumption ceased to be viewed as a primarily American phenomenon and following the post-war period, rising ostentatious economic display could be observed in many European countries, mostly in Britain (Bocock, 1993). From an academic perspective, the interest in status-seeking phenomena and consumption in general was growing steadily and as we can view in the following section eventually led to the emergence of the discipline of consumer research.

## **5.2 The emergence of consumer research**

Overall in the 1970s, academic efforts to amalgamate the principles of social psychology with economic behaviour revitalized the attention and interest in status consumption and product symbolism (Mason, 1998). Moreover, the legacy of motivation research theory and an upward trend in the experimental analysis of human 'behaviour' (Wann, 1964; Watson, 1970) advanced the emergence of general and all-encompassing models of consumer behaviour. Additionally, the introduction and popularization of the philosophy of behaviorism in the field of economic theory, marketing and consumer behaviour, during the mid 1960s and beyond, gradually led towards rationalistic interpretations of status-consumption phenomena according to the standardized methodological principles of objectivism. The sociological approaches on Veblen's views during the mid-1950s were replaced by the work of marketing theorists' and psychologists aiming to achieve the isolation, examination, understanding and subsequently prediction of human (primarily economic) behaviour.

### **5.2.1 The impact of behaviorism on consumer behaviour**

Paradoxically, despite its roots in the field of social psychology, the movement of behaviorism and its application as a novel scientific economic approach towards consumption favored the mechanistic theorization of the modern individual. Both experimental analysis of behaviour and radical behavioristic interpretations, as attempts to construe consumption phenomena, couldn't provide complete and adequate evidence that human behavior is produced according to the particular environment in which it takes place (Foxall, 1999). The representation and comparison of the socially-directed conspicuous

consumer next to a human machine responding to social conditionings and external stimuli of wealth, brings forward debates of the nineteenth century as regards the (ir)rationality of the archetypal Economic Man against the impulsive consumption habits of upper class individuals. Terms such as ‘stimuli’, ‘responses’, ‘rewards’ and ‘learning’ permeated and gained prominence in the intellectual consciousness of consumer demand theorists and supported the unfulfilled promise that under close scrutiny and scientific observation, human behaviour can be controlled and maybe move towards a ‘desirable’ direction. Veblen’s savage-like upper class consumer came under the observation of experimental psychology and his irrationalities, emulatory motives and status-driven desires were substituted by theories of emotion, memory and reasoning; concepts well-justified and analyzed in the most popular academic textbooks on behaviorism (Skinner, 1974, 1978). Such fascination with the principles and assumptions of experimentalism prompted Pinker (2003:20) to argue that with the advent of behaviourism: ‘the noble savage became the noble pigeon.’ To a certain degree, the legacy of motivational researchers, like Dichter who applied Freudian principles on the study of consumer behaviour and suggested the employment of innovative psychological methods (in-depth interviews, focus groups etc) for marketing research, fade away after the 1960s. Similarly, the influential sociological and psychological theories of the 1950s (for example of Maslow, Katona, Katz and Lazarsfeld amongst others), on the subconscious and irrational motivations of consumers were replaced by innovative and ground-breaking ideas stemming from the roots of cognitive psychology (Shaw and Jones, 2005). Such enthusiasm for popular psychological theories had resulted in an introduction of and emphasis of concepts such as risk taking, mental and information processes, outputs etc. related to cognitive studies of behaviour. As

we can see below, these concepts and terms have been heavily adopted by the first and comprehensive behavioral models of consumer theory.

### **5.2.2 Status consumption and the first models of consumer behaviour theory**

The first detailed description of a consumer decision model came from Nicosia (1966) and a series of textbooks with the ambition to offer a holistic explanation of the process of consumer behaviour followed. Nicosia's model suggested that the process of buying commodities can be identified, classified and explored by four different levels of consumption activity; specifically consumer attitude formation, information search and evaluation, purchase and post-consumption feedback. Even today, a plethora of contemporary academic textbooks and papers in the field of consumer behaviour recycle, promote and re-think these popular terms, introduced in the mid-1960s. Accordingly, the mechanistic representation and explanation of buying behavior has been spreading to the academic sphere of consumer theory and marketing research for decades. It can be said that Nicosia's model overlooked the phenomenon of conspicuous consumption and offered a somewhat unsophisticated explanation of individuals' motives to consume for status. Focusing on specific reference groups, Nicosia argued that status-directed consumption – and only under particular circumstances defined by the socio-economic context – can be construed as consumers' need to acquire and display socially visible products. A few years later, Engel *et al.* (1968) proposed a similar all-inclusive model of consumer behaviour and again the socially-complex actions of the conspicuous consumer were presented as a marginalized phenomenon of social class differences. Finally, Howard and Sheth (1969) added another popular model of consumer behavior which didn't differ much from the

previous two regarding the understanding of ostentation, differentiation and socially-driven consumption. Without any reference to Veblen's work, the authors remained preoccupied with the impact of utility theory on buying decisions and only partially recognized some social considerations for the consumption of luxurious goods. Presumably in the 1960s, the introduction of marketing/consumer behaviour courses in American business schools postulated and necessitated the production of related academic textbooks and as we notice, the very first academic theories of consumer behavior modeling were used mostly for pedagogical purposes and didn't escape from the legacy of utilitarian economics theories and conventional psychology. Overlooking the plurality of studies stemming from innovative motivational researchers and sociologists of consumption, who demystified the patterns in which status-seeking consumption practices culminated during the American (affluent) economic scene of the 1950s, the abovementioned behavioural scientists applied ideas of mainstream economics to their field and popularized grand theoretical 'models of consumer behaviour', followed by numerous revisions and editions. As Tadjewski (2006) argues, the very term 'behaviour sciences' was introduced during the Cold War as a label to undermine the political activism inherent in social sciences and to some extent the scientific knowledge of marketing was positioned under the same umbrella. Random references to the concept of conspicuous consumption as 'a limited social phenomenon' (Mason, 1984), the complete absence of Veblen's name and oversimplification of complex consumption phenomena in the generic models of consumer behaviour might have stemmed from the need to access a growing audience of students interested in consumer theory but, to a great degree, obscured the findings and intellectualism of interdisciplinary approaches to the phenomenon over the last thirty years. During the same period, Grubb and Grathwohl (1967) marginally acknowledged that consumers stress the importance of goods as

‘publicly recognized symbols’ and the purchase of luxurious and visible products aims to boost consumers’ self-enhancement. A more anthropocentric account of status consumption becomes evident here and for the first time the consideration of the self-concept was introduced and discussed in consumer behaviour theory.

Overall, the aforementioned economic and behavioural models can be easily categorized within general theories of consumer demand whose intellectual heritage is traceable to neo-classical microeconomic demand theory. The Veblenian conspicuous consumer, a construct introduced as an intellectual reaction to the rationalistic assumptions of classical economics, seventy years after Veblen’s initial description, is superficially examined or buried under the popularity and dominance of the theories infused by a spirit of behaviorism and the principles of objectivism, experimentalism and conditioning. However, scholars such as Sidney Levy and Philip Kotler had a different vision about the discipline of marketing as we can see below.

### **5.2.3 The broadening of marketing and consumer research**

Sidney Levy (1959) was possibly the first consumer behaviour theorist who placed special emphasis on the symbolic meaning of brands as indicators of consumers’ social status. Building on Martineau’s insights into social stratification and consumer behaviour, Levy suggested that the interrelationships and interactions amongst members of different social classes represent seminal factors for the (re)production and learning of consumer behaviour:

“Symbols of social participation are amongst the most important factors in marketing. Like it or not, there are social class groupings formed by the way people live, the attitudes they have, and the acceptance and exclusiveness of their association. Most goods say something about the social world of people who consume them. The things they buy are chosen partly to attest to their social position.” (Levy, 1959: 122)

Levy’s groundbreaking publication proposed an alternative to the functionalist perspective of consumer behaviour science, by viewing the symbolic aspects of products as possessors of social meaning. Challenging the logical economic nature of modern consumers, he adopted a Veblensque outlook on individual’s need to express his/her status, inner feelings and thoughts through purchase decisions. What is more, writing in a language understandable to everyone and blending simple anthropological and sociological theories, Levy substantiated some aspects of Veblen’s theory sixty years after its publication. Quite explicitly, Phillip Kotler (1965) had been the first marketing theorist who included and highlighted Veblen’s name and contribution to consumer behaviour in one of his early and less discussed academic publications. He argued that Veblen’s theoretical framework could be employed as a buyer behaviour model for social scientists and marketing theorists. A Veblenian Psychological model of consumer behaviour, along with the Pavlovian and the Freudian Psychoanalytic models, represent three theoretical approaches existing outside the marginal utility theory of demand. According to Kotler, the Veblenian model views man primarily as a social animal who complies with the norms of his cultural setting and as such with those of his subculture and face to face groupings. Although Kotler did not elaborate on the mechanisms of emulation and social class dynamics for consumer

behaviour, his study can be seen as the first attempt to recognize future theoretical potentialities in the study of conspicuous consumption. Both Kotler and Levy aimed to disengage the field of consumer behaviour from the prevailing micro-economic theories and found interesting insights in the work of Thorstein Veblen, as one of the first critics of neoclassical consumer demand theory. Additionally, their scholarly contribution to the field of marketing moved beyond the area of consumption studies and product symbolism. With a groundbreaking publication entitled '*Broadening the Concept of Marketing*', Kotler and Levy (1969) suggested the disentanglement of marketing ideas from a traditional business context and the application of the marketing concept to non-profit organizations, services, persons and ideas. The role of the marketing theorist/academic is not limited to the development of effective selling techniques but entails a deep understanding of human needs, values, wants and societal structures. Kotler's and Levy's publication emphasized the study of human behaviour and therefore considered the individual not only as a buyer, but also as a consumer and agent in general, nonetheless, contemporary marketing theory as represented in the majority of academic textbooks, remains mostly engulfed within a functionalist and business oriented agenda (Brownlie et al, 1998; Saren, 2006).

The same year, and following a conference about consumer behaviour theory, the *Association of Consumer Research* was formed and five years later the same organization published the *Journal of Consumer Research* (JCR). The emergence of mass consumption phenomena along with the popularity of consumer behaviour textbooks during the 1960s led to a growing interest in the '*interdisciplinary*' examination of consumption phenomena and gave life to a rising discipline and a new school of thought, namely consumer

behaviour. Any human behaviour related to the process of buying or consuming can constitute a topic for scientific study and interpretation, thus a plethora of psychologists and overall behavioural scientists excitedly entered the field with the aspiration of bringing consumers' perceptions, feelings and desires under close scrutiny. The increasing interest in the area gradually induced a schism from the discipline of marketing (Holbrook, 1987; Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy, 1988) and by the end of the 1980s the fields of (primarily) psychology, economics, sociology and anthropology provided the most popular sources of study for consumer researchers (Leong, 1989). Nowadays, consumer research has moved far beyond the simplistic concepts of buying and consuming and the influx of social scientific approaches has produced a complex mosaic that includes the study of: judgments, deviant and compulsive behaviour, illicit consumption, consumer learning, attention, involvement, innovation, cross-culture consumption, ethnic and geographical differences to name but a few. As expected, consumer researchers never ceased to examine and rethink long-established and diachronic concepts such as: motivation, status groups, consumers' perceptions and retentions, emotions, hierarchical needs, vicarious consumption, mimetic consumption, semiotics and status symbolism, hedonism, self-esteem and inferiority, status symbols, group dynamics and socialization processes. Directly or indirectly, the aforementioned concepts relate to the interpretations behind the motives of Veblen's conspicuous consumers and his observations in the TLC. It seemed like Veblen's centenarian oscillation between economics and sociology was finally coming to an end and his ideas could be easily adopted and accommodated within an 'open' and fresh discipline, whose agenda could potentially update his interdisciplinary views on consumption.

### **5.3 Post-affluent societies and consumption**

The archetype of Veblen's conspicuous consumer and individuals' desire to differentiate themselves via consumption didn't disappear during the 1970s. On the contrary, new educational and entrepreneurial status and reference groups reinforced middle class consumers' need to belong within a peer group or to a team of professionals who expressed their taste and occupational identity through distinguishable consumption lifestyles (Mason, 1981). At this stage, the term professionalism was connoting social status and association with the new power 'elites.' Galbraith (1971:72) was writing, at the beginning of the 1970s, about the rise of entrepreneurial heroes and educated elite managers:

“The professional manager or executive has taken away from the man of wealth the power that is implicit in running a business. Fifty years ago Morgan, Rockefeller, Hill, Harriman and others were the undisputed masters of the business concerns they owned, or it was indisputably in their power to become so. Their sons and grandsons still have wealth, but with rare exceptions the power implicit in the running of the firm has passed to professionals.”

Galbraith carried forward the discussion and pointed out that during the Cold-War period, 'the new industrial state' has privileged a business community of growing political and economic power. Large American corporations like IBM, AT&T Bell, Ford, etc, were rapidly developing and spreading throughout a global context and the business spirit changed the post-war attitudes towards social and economic inequality. The wave of egalitarianism, following WWII, with the effect of moderating conspicuous excess, was

declining under the pressure of corporate political change and commercial and industrial power. As expected, marketing and advertising strategies quickly incorporated the seductive lifestyle of business professionals into the promotion of aspirational status groups. The recognition of a more market-oriented society subsequently increased the significance of status-driven consumption and created a center of attention for behavioural and social scientists. Urbanization, fluid social relationships, product diversification and the breaking down of traditional concepts — such as education, social class and occupation — seemed to support and concur with Baudrillard's (1968/1996) views on the sign-value of commodities as communicators of social meaning and prestige. The Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) offered a detailed analysis of everyday actions via the prism of dramaturgical performances. Consumers can be viewed as actors who endeavor to play specific roles in society; therefore, commodities become the vehicles of status considerations and offer symbolic representations of social class. To some degree, Goffman's theory effectively mirrored the experiences and aspirations of the status-driven characters in the TLC. However, Goffman was mainly fascinated by the 'performative' nature of modern individuals and its relation to the reproduction of social structures. He concluded that consumers' performance plays a fundamental role in the creation of modern identities and frequently the attribution of prestige becomes the 'emblem' for individuals who seek to imitate the consumption lifestyles of upper classes. Following the semiotic tradition, Douglas and Isherwood (1979) suggested that goods can offer an explanation of social order by creating and attaching meaning to social practices and have been used by group members to tie their social relations. Reconciling structural anthropology with modern economics, an alternative system of consumption was proposed, where the meaning of products materializes through their capability to signify status, turning them

into symbols of membership within a particular social class. Douglas and Isherwood's (1979) comprehension of possessions as carriers of social meaning can be viewed in line with Veblen's perspective of consumption that stimulates the dynamics of competitiveness and emulation. The representation of such universe of commodities and desires offered a chaotic picture of the marketplace, thus in the mid 1970s marketing segmentation strategies aimed to identify homogenous groups of consumers (Smith, 1956; Green, 1977; Wind, 1978), and consequently similar groups of status-seeking consumers. Furthermore, the introduction of bank credit facilities and discounts shaped consumer society and liberated individuals' desire to acquire additional status symbols with the promise of continuous future credit support. The popularity of the credit (and debit) card industry fundamentally changed our intimate relationship and perception with money and affected the communication of social status. Ritzer (2001) viewed credit cards as part of the McDonaldization process and he accentuated their implications for the rationalization of social life as well as social status considerations.

“In fact, increasingly important symbols in our society are the number of credit cards one has in one's wallet and the collective credit limit available on those cards. The modern status symbol is thus debt rather than savings. In sum, credit cards emphasize a whole series of things that can be quantified – number of cards, credit limits, amount of debt, number of goods and services that can be purchased, and so on.” (Ritzer, 2001:83).

At the end of the 1970s, despite the fact that status sensitivity and display of wealth were increasing, Veblen's class-based theory of consumption was being challenged by marketing theorists. Additionally, innovative segmentation techniques and massive quantitative

marketing research were questioning the utility of traditional sociological constructs, such as social class. An academic debate about the validity of social class or income for the prediction of consumer behavior occurred in the mid-1970s and lasted until the 1980s (Curtis, 1972; Myers and Mount, 1973; Schaninger, 1981; Dominquez and Page, 1981). The academic conflict resulted in the diminished significance of social class for marketing theorists (Coleman, 1983) and hence of Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption. As we can see in the following section, the intensity of ostentatious economic display during the 'materialistic' decade of the 1980s had been similar to the frenzied extravagant consumption of the Gilded Age.

#### **5.4 Ostentation and the 'conspicuous' self**

With the arrival of the 1980s, the levels of heightened materialism and ostentatious economic display were comparable to the affluence and socially-inspired consumption practices of the 1920s (Mestrovic, 2003). Interdisciplinary approaches were applied to the study of consumer behavior, a fact that gave a fresh impetus to rethink an exceptional behavior like conspicuous consumption. As Page (1992) argues, the aspiring middle-class managerial elites of the 1970s evolved into the materialistic yuppies of the 1980s, representing individuals who enjoyed conspicuously consuming a variety of status symbols in order to position themselves within an elite professional class. Gatsby's envy for the old-money aristocratic elites and Loman's obsession with the American dream of prosperity and success seem to be middle-class caprices compared to Gordon Gecko's lust for financial power and eulogistic interpretation of the greed-is-good ideology. Mestrovic

(2003) goes so far as to argue that the contemporary American consumer culture never lost those barbaric traits Veblen had analyzed in the TLC:

“But how else can one explain all the billions of dollars that are wasted – from Veblen’s perspective – on diet programmes, fertilizers, that extra racing stripe on an automobile that will never be in race, a huge house with closets the size that rooms used to be in former days in order to accommodate objects that stem from constant consumption, athletic shoes and athletic suits for a generation that is less physically fit than previous generations – amongst the countless other wasteful, useless, and extravagant habits of this postmodern generation.” (Mestrovic, 2003: 15).

Mestrovic’s analysis moves beyond the overused term ‘conspicuous consumption’, follows Veblen’s anthropological insights and penetrates deeper into the aggressive instincts of modern consumerism. The American consumer culture of the 1990s is multifaceted and barbaric traits demoralize the belief in an advanced and civilized modern society. With only exception in Mestrovic’s study the exclusive and hyperbolic focus on the interplay between peaceable versus barbaric habits - and how these reproduce social actions in a postmodern world -, his investigation substantiated Veblen’s observation by awaking and introducing the reader to the ‘savage’ aspects of modern human behaviour. Although Veblen didn’t cite the evolutionary anthropologists of his time (see Morgan and Taylor), in his analysis the preservation of barbaric traits up to modern times occurred on a post-Darwinian evolutionary platform of social life. Agreeing with Mestrovic, in the post-Cold War political environment, an uncontrollable competition for wealth and affluence as signs of social status took place. The ideology of a free-market economy, privatization and a vision of business prosperity, during the 1980s, changed the political landscape and glorified

entrepreneurship along with consumerism (Adonis, 1994). A competitive consumer ethos was being cultivated, especially amongst middle-income individuals, since bank credit facilities, a surfeit of advertising messages and unprecedented conformity to emergent 'lifestyles' - as indicators of social group membership - increased the significance of status-motivated consumption (Mason, 1998). What Veblen described as the 'innate disposition' to social status or the 'propensity for achievement' via consumption found its means of expression in cosmetic surgeries, the display of Rolex watches and German-made luxurious automobiles, apartments in neighborhoods associated with a high quality of life and in general an overemphasis on increased excess and possessions (Fromm, 1978, Belk, 1985; Friedman, 1985; Richins, 1987).

#### **5.4.1 Materialism, advertising strategies and branding**

The term materialism began to be discussed more and more in media and academic papers. Belk (1986) detailed how the notion of conspicuous consumption was back for the masses and the yuppies' self-centeredness found relief in ostentatious economic display, hedonism and heightened status-seeking materialism. Displaying status symbols, the 'yuppies' aimed to position themselves within an upper professional class and impress others. Countless imitators from the working and middle classes found gratification in commodity culture and the reconstruction of their self via status products. Meanwhile, global consumer goods, in the form of brands, communicated collective cultural and status consumption identities to individuals interested in increasing their social standing (Holt, 2002). The popularity of prestige brands endorsed the predilection for consumption-focused lifestyles and the price competition between luxury manufacturing industries rendered more accessible for middle classes the possession and display of commodities with conspicuous value (Vigneron and

Johnson, 1999). Even nowadays, massive advertising campaigns and marketing strategies aim to reinforce the perceived luxury of specific brands, seeking not only to survive global antagonism but also to establish the image of these brands, in the consciousness of consumers, as the ideal status symbols (Truong et al, 2008). Also, the implications of materialism on consumers' *self* has been a very important topic for the academic agenda of consumer behaviour theorists.

Literatures from psychology dominate the study of the person-brand relationship and the legacy of behaviourism becomes evident in the field of consumer research. Psychologists and consumer researchers began to view the consumer as an entity and argued that the total of the individual's thoughts, perceptions and feelings, with reference to himself, define the 'self concept' (Schlenker, 1975; Rosenberg, 1979; Sirgy, 1982), which can be employed as a flexible and extremely useful tool for further research and understanding of consumption processes. And that was only the beginning. A proliferation of studies followed, with the self-concept to be broken down and analyzed in depth through its various dimensions such as the actual self, ideal self (Landon, 1974; Sirgy, 1985; Graeff, 1996; Graeff, 1997), public self (Gould and Barak, 1988; Stephens et al. 1994; Fransen et al., 2008), social self-image (Bogart, 1986; Sirgy et al., 1997; O'Cass and Frost, 2002) and of course the over-discussed concept of the extended self (Belk, 1984; Belk, 1988; Cohen, 1989; Tian and Belk, 2005). In a recent study, Saren (2007) suggests that the multi-dimensional approaches to the concept of the self, spanning from psychoanalytic to sociological readings, render problematic a unified and universal representation of a consumer who is 'capable' of expressing multiple identities through variations of his self concept, excluding

disadvantaged consumers and overemphasizing the over-discussed interrelation between consumer identity and choice. Inherent in the notion of the 'self-concept' is the self-esteem motive referring to the tendency to engage with (often conspicuous) consumption experiences that enhance the individual's self (Sirgy, 1982). Consumption preferences are produced through the relationship between the self and product's image, so as to achieve the ideal self-image. Therefore, an ideal social-self concept motivates individuals to purchase luxurious and status products. Excluding the notion of the extended self (Belk, 1988), the application of the multiple self-concept on the study of consumer behaviour validated the domination of a psychological-driven agenda, contributed to consumer attitude modeling and decision making theoretical research, produced an 'egocentric' representation of the modern consumer and to some extent marginalized the term conspicuous consumption which sounded like a generic, complicated and obsolete sociological construct of limited use. Subsequently, the accommodation of Veblen's observations within experimental psychological approaches became an extremely difficult task. Perhaps, Veblen's ideas were considered an old-fashioned consumption theorem, obscured from the popularity of the term conspicuous consumption, or as a popular consumer activity of the late nineteenth century which necessitated the occurrence of (emulative) status-seeking consumers, (luxurious) commodities and at least two particular and competitive social classes. Based on that assumption, conspicuous consumption can be illustrated with the following variables:

Conspicuous consumption = (emulative) Status seeking consumer + (Luxurious) Goods + (Middle or Upper) Social Class.

Assuming that the personal needs of the status seeking consumer can be adequately explained by the self-concept construct and its application to consumer behaviour, as discussed above; the luxurious goods and their meaning have been significantly transformed by marketing technologies into branding strategies (Friedman and Friedman, 1976; McCracken, 1988; Ambler, 1997; Holt, 2004); and studies in the dynamics of sophisticated reference group theories, 'status groups' and cultures of consumption (Campbell, 1987; Childers and Rao, 1992; Englis and Solomon, 1995; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Escalas and Bettman, 2005 ) have shown that social class comparisons play a negligible role in consumer motivation; then Veblen's theory has few things to add to a dynamic and extensive field of consumer research. Nevertheless, as was discussed in a previous part of this thesis, the term 'conspicuous consumption' is only the title of chapter four in the TLC, a sociological construct aiming to condense the motivations and social structures which support ostentatious economic display in modern societies. Veblen wasn't a single-minded theorist on the meaning of consumption for everyone. The increasing popularity of symbolic interactionist approaches, experiential consumption and semiotics at the beginning of the 1980s inspired the study of product symbolism, socialization theories of consumption and overall, the cultural meaning of objects (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Solomon, 1983; Appadurai, 1986; McCracken, 1986; Mick, 1986; Belk, 1988). The consideration of consumers within a larger social-cultural context where their actions rely upon the cultural meaning of products (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), reinstated Veblen's viewpoint of consumption as a means of performance and social positioning. Once again, as will be discussed in the next section,

references to Veblen's name have been rare and superficial, with few exceptions such as that of McCracken (1986; 1988) who explored the flowing nature and quality of cultural meaning and the patterns by which such meaning is transferred between consumer goods and people. Considering the cultural dynamics capable of shaping consumer behaviour and status consumption, McCracken argued that "only recently has the field of 'person-object' relations escaped the limitations imposed upon it by its founding father, Thorstein Veblen" (McCracken 1986: 81).

The lavish spending and group competition for status in the 1980s was followed by harder economic times and as an outcome of consumption excessiveness the consumer debt doubled (Page, 1992). Additionally, the levels of education were rising and during the 1990s consumers began to express their social awareness about the community and the environment (Prothero and Fitchett, 2000). Altruistic tendencies, globalization and acculturation processes, asset-based and service-driven New Economies, New Age spiritual practices and a progressive era of benevolence and activism synthesized some aspects of the socio-economic jigsaw puzzle in the 1990s (Trigilia, 2002) and to some extent these processes continue today. The flashy consumption of the 1980s was over, although the proliferation of counterfeit status goods in developed and developing countries substantiates Veblen's observations, at least from an empirical perspective (Mason, 1998). From a theoretical viewpoint, the popularity of identity studies (Bauman, 2001; Giddens, 1991) and the detailed examination of how lifestyles, images and product symbolism shape the perceptions and preferences of 'postmodern' consumers (Featherstone, 1991; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1992) substantially reduced the significance of social class variables, like income and education, for marketing and consumer research. Moreover, very

few studies (Kapferer, 1998; O' Cass and Frost, 2002; Belk, Ger and Askegaard, 2003; Amaldoss and Jain, 2005; Kapferer and Bastien, 2009) have focused on aspects of status consumption and the recent global economic recession seems to have had a huge impact on consumers' motivation to compete and collaborate for social status. We notice that throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century the game of conspicuous economic display and social differentiation through consumption has developed a remarkable adaptability to economic and social changes. However, the name of the man who first detailed and analyzed the origins and development of status consumption phenomena remains obscure. How do consumer researchers use Veblen's ideas almost one hundred years after the publication of the TLC? In the following section, a citation analysis based upon the discussion of Veblen's book in leading journals of consumer research and marketing will attempt to answer this question.

### **5.5 Veblen's ideas in consumer research and marketing theory: a citation analysis**

In the following pages, the adoption and discussion of Veblen's ideas by consumer researchers and marketing theorists comes under close examination, commencing from 1974 - as point of departure for the appearance of the discipline of consumer behaviour - up to 2008. Scrutinizing eight leading journals in the areas of marketing, consumer research and advertising theory, this genealogical exercise is interested in the totality of articles which have cited Veblen's book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Eight leading journals were chosen for the following analysis: 1) *Journal of Marketing*, 2) *Journal of Consumer Research*, 3) *Journal of Marketing Research*, 4) *Journal of Advertising*, 5) *European*

*Journal of Marketing*, 6) *Advances in Consumer Research*, 7) *Psychology and Marketing* and 8) *Journal of Business Research*. The *Journal of Marketing*, the *Journal of Marketing Research*, the *Journal of Consumer Research* and the *Journal of Advertising* were selected as most influential journals in their respective fields. Aiming to provide plurality and comparative antithesis to these major journals, four respected journals from a European and interdisciplinary perspective to consumption studies and marketing phenomena were added to the study. Each of these journals has been included, since the publication of their first issues, in the Social Sciences Citation Index. Therefore, the SSCI Journal Citations report was used as the platform for this data gathering, enhancing the validity and credibility of the analysis. The journal analysis is not a rare method in marketing and consumer behaviour theory and has been previously employed by researchers who examined and categorized references and citations of leading academic journals (Leong, 1989; Cote et al., 1991; Zinkhan et al., 1992; Phillips et al., 1999). Although the main purpose of the above-mentioned studies had been to trace and assess the scholarly influence of leading academic journals either within their discipline or towards other academic disciplines, the focus on the impact of a particular publication within the field of marketing has never occurred before. Contrary to previous citation analyses - which produced useful conclusions on the flow and diffusion of marketing theory, within and between disciplines, and the structure of marketing scientific knowledge - this study aims to discuss the influence of a specific book on the development of economic and consumption ideas. Consequently, the main aim of this section is a) to trace Veblen's consumer theory within the disciplines of marketing and consumer research b) discuss the interpretation of his arguments and c) draw conclusions on the understanding and representation of Veblen's ideas by contemporary studies of marketing/consumer research.

The analysis detected that amongst (approximately) 14131 journal articles, the *Theory of Leisure Class* has been cited 65 times; a rather surprising result for a classic book of social and economic theory that contributed strongly to the advancement of economic and marketing thought (Hamilton, 1989). As can be noticed in Table 1 the highest number of citations can be found in ACR and JCR; while in the journal of *Journal of Marketing*, the most influential journal for the discipline of marketing targeted at a more general audience, Veblen's work appears only in Kotler's (1965) article 'Behavioural Models for Analyzing Buyers', published outside the chronological scope of this study. Surprisingly, there is no reference to Veblen's classical book in the *Journal of Advertising* over the last twenty-five years. As has been mentioned in the previous chapters, much of modern advertising strategies and campaigns are built upon the notions of emulation, status-seeking consumer behaviour and product symbolism (Packard, 1959; Galbraith, 1984; Holt, 2004); socio-economic phenomena which were originally and thoroughly explored in the pages of the TLC.

Citation rate of 'The Theory of Leisure Class' for articles published in 1974- 2008		
Journal title	Number of citations	Total number of articles published in the Journals (In approximation <sup>12</sup> )
Advances in Consumer Research	22	4531

<sup>12</sup> The total number of articles in the specific journals has been approximately estimated, since the use of the SSCI Journal Citations couldn't report the exact number of papers published in each journal.

Journal of Consumer Research	18	1320
Journal of Marketing	1	1700
Journal of Marketing Research	4	1600
European Journal of Marketing	6	2000
Journal of Advertising	0	1200
Psychology and Marketing	8	480
Journal of Business Research	6	1300
Total	65	14131

I have separated (*proportionally*) and categorized the 65 papers into 3 broad categories based on their content and the discussion of Veblen's ideas in the following way: a) descriptive/historical b) anthropological/product symbolism c) critical/social class.

### **A) Descriptive/historical**

The majority of the papers fall into this category, wherein Veblen's work has been discussed adopting either a descriptive or historical perspective. Thereupon, consumer researchers interested in socially-directed consumption acknowledge Thorstein Veblen as the originator of ideas related to the function of American consumer culture, conspicuous

consumption practices, leisure activities and excess competition. Many authors use indirect references to the TLC and summarize Veblen's contribution by indicating a few terms and generic phrases such as the 'accumulation and display of material wealth' (Moorman, 2002), 'the ability of possessions to project a desirable self image' (Richins and Dawson, 1992), 'acquisition and possession of wealth' (Hirschman, 1990), 'research on symbolism and consumer behaviour' (Mick, 1986), 'keeping up with the Joneses' (McAlister and Pessemier, 1982), 'high-priced options to convey exclusivity' (Rao, 2005), 'social factors in consumption' (Amaldoss and Jain, 2005), 'the integral role of consumption' (Gronhaug, 1983), 'motives for social comparison' (Fitzgerald, 1995), 'consumption as an economic signal' (Robert, 1991), 'status as a motive underlying consumer behaviour' (Cunningham *et al*, 1974) and the origins of consumer culture (Davies and Elliott, 2006) amongst other similar remarks. Similarly, a large portion of the papers merely associated Veblen's name with the term conspicuous consumption (Belk, Bahn and Mayer, 1982; Holbrook and Grayson, 1986; Schindler, 1989; Lynn, 1990; Sheth, et al. 1991; Claxton and Murray, 1994; Dubois and Laurent; 1996; Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002; Rao, 2005), as a well-known and so often used in everyday discourse construct, which doesn't require further clarification. The concept of conspicuous consumption was approached as a phenomenon which signifies the accumulation, display and consumption of goods by the consumer who aims to boost his ego and impress other people. The notion of status consumption was also acknowledged as one of missing links between materialism and the self concept (Rose and DeJesus, 2007), applying and relating the Veblenian observations to the materialistic spirit of the last two decades. Following the discussion of the previous section, Rose and DeJesus (2007) examined Veblen's ideas strictly according to the premises of cognitive principles and psychological theories. A reference to *The Theory of Leisure Class* constitutes, for the

majority of the researchers, a theoretical tool to synopsise some of the socio-cultural aspects of consumption related to social status, wealth and materialism. The findings suggest a superficial examination of Veblen's observations and validate Banks's (in Raison, 1979: 119) note on Veblen's work, who wrote that his ideas "are so often quoted but his works are so little read." For the majority of marketing theorists and consumer researchers, Veblen's book serves as means of summarizing the complexity of particular consumption activities (usually involving affluence, symbolic and luxurious goods and a social context of display) under the celebrated term conspicuous consumption. Consequently, and considering the increasing fragmentation within the discipline of marketing (Brown, 1995; Wilkie and Moore, 2003), Veblen's publication in the year 2008 facilitates the summarization and transmission of scientific knowledge related to status-seeking consumption phenomena. As Wong and Ahuvia (1998: 425) argue:

"Early work on the public meanings of goods focused narrowly on their ability to convey messages about wealth and social class (Veblen, 1899). But more contemporary research has investigated products' ability to convey a much broader range of meanings pertaining to social values, sexuality, age, ethnicity, hobbies and a myriad of other aspects of identity."

Did Veblen's work focus exclusively on the public meaning of goods and the patterns commodities convey wealth and social status? A close reading of the fourth chapter of *The Theory of Leisure Class*, entitled 'Conspicuous consumption', discloses that Veblen's analysis of 'vicarious consumption' covered and referred to a plethora of consumption-

related topics, incorporating some of those Wong and Ahuvia (1998) mentioned above. A meticulous reading of Veblen's phraseology indicates how 'men consume what the women produce', and patterns such as 'unproductive consumption of goods is honourable', 'luxuries and the comforts of life belong to the leisure class', 'systems of hierarchical gradation' etc. Additionally, throughout his book Veblen insisted on highlighting the importance of the term "waste" for the existing consumer culture and the pressures of a hierarchical social system on the reproduction of consumers' needs, however, none of the contemporary citations referred to these notions.

"Throughout the entire evolution of conspicuous expenditure, whether of goods or of services or human life, runs the obvious implications that in order to effectually mend the consumer's good fame it must be an expenditure of superfluities. In order to be reputable it must be wasteful." (Veblen, 1899: 60).

Furthermore, Veblen approached many other issues in the same chapter, like eugenics, urban and rural differences of consumption, the role of servants as symbols of accumulated wealth such as cultural and consumption differences between social classes. Conspicuous consumption didn't simply represent a framework of consumption activities but it mirrored a significant part of social action through the materialistic behaviour and competence of its social classes. As an economist who has conducted research on consumer demand theory for many decades, Mason (1984) examined the evolution of the term conspicuous consumption from the appearance of the first models of buying behaviour until the 1980s

and emphasized that consumer researchers have marginalized or misinterpreted Veblen's arguments and ideas.

Shapiro (1973) indicated that the concept of 'snobbery', as means of judging others through the display of their material possessions, is one of the multiple faces of conspicuous consumption. One of the central themes in Veblen's work has to do with the individual's judgment according to his possession and display of commodities. Veblen's analysis on the topic is quite subtle and sophisticated referring to conformity to lifestyles, consumption patterns and how attachment to specific goods derives from "the accepted scale of expenditure as a matter of propriety, under the pain of disesteem and ostracism" (Veblen, 1899:111). The perception of social status by consumers is manifested via the aesthetic nature of luxurious goods (Petrosky, 1991), the establishment of wealth and status by gift-giving (Wolfenbarger, 1990) and how the non-functional characteristics of goods determine their price (Lynn, 1990). Whilst a plethora of consumption phenomena embody social status considerations, only the surface of Veblen's ideas have been taken into consideration by consumer researchers. He is acknowledged as the first theorist who examined economic excess and the function of wealth, nonetheless, the substance of his ideas seem to belong to a different and somehow indifferent historical epoch. Thereupon, parallel to the descriptive references to Veblen's work, a semi-historical interest in his ideas also emerged throughout the citation analysis.

Belk et al. (1982) presented and discussed Veblen's ideas on conspicuous consumption as the forerunner for theories regarding the communicative role of products. The authors also cite Simmel's (1900/1978) discussion regarding the social, psychological and philosophical aspects of the money economy, Packard's (1959) *Hidden Persuaders* and Goffman's (1951) work on the dramaturgical roles of the conspicuous consumer. Similarly, and citing Veblen as the original observer of the ostentatious economic display phenomena, Schindler (1989) suggested that the symbolic use of money and luxurious possessions have characterized the American consumer culture since the Gilded Age. Rassuli and Hollander (1987) proposed the employment of comparative history as a research tool for consumer behaviour and argued that the Veblenian trickle down model should be approached from a historical perspective for a deeper understanding of social and status-seeking consumption. Veblen's name was also discussed as the precursor of lifestyle consumption, the first theorist who observed the consumption practices of the American nouveau rich during the latter half of the nineteenth century, and he was also acknowledged as predecessor of the Weber's (1968) status groups theories (Anderson and Golden, 1984). Such views, stemming from the 1980s, invigorate the interest in Veblen's work, from a historical research perspective, but at the same time automatically acknowledge his contribution to marketing/consumer research *only* via the adoption, discussion and advancement of his ideas by other theorists. Simmel, Weber, Goffman, Packard and McCracken are the links between the Veblenian observations on conspicuous consumption and the contemporary nature of superfluous spending on visible products of high value and social status in Western advanced economies. Likewise, papers from the 1990s discussed the work of Veblen (1899), Simmel (1900/1978) and McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb (1982) as seminal historians of consumption (Smith and Lux, 1993) and referred to Veblen as the first

theorist of status symbolism (Lynn and Harris, 1997) considering Galbraith (1987) and Marcuse (1968) as two of his most important followers as regards the observation of human economic behaviour and status enhancing phenomena (Zavestoski, 2002). Apart from the chronological divergence between the TLC and modern studies, it is possibly Veblen's acerbic representation of the modern conspicuous consumer that added fame to his ideas after the publication of the TLC, which excludes Veblen's theory from contemporary academic circles of marketing and consumer research. As Tadjewski and Saren (2008) suggest, the need and aspiration of contemporary marketing scholars to position and highlight their contribution to knowledge and stress its importance to the future can lead to the marginalization of intellectual predecessors whose contribution grounded modern ideas. Rethinking and rereading the arguments of these often 'dead white scholars', from an analytical rather than descriptive perspective, supports the conceptual basis of our arguments and structures a systematic instead of superficial observation on the evolution of marketing ideas and consumption phenomena.

### **B) Anthropological/Product Symbolism.**

Marketing and consumer behaviour research, as embryonic disciplines compared to natural sciences for example, continuously question their epistemological assumptions (Anderson, 1983, 1986; Hunt, 1990, 1994; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1992), methodological approaches (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Thompson, 1990; Goulding, 1999; Shankar and Patterson, 2001; Davies and Fitchett, 2004; Davies and Fitchett, 2005) and the expansion of their theoretical boundaries (O'Shaughnessy, 1997; Brownlie et al, 1998; Zaltman, 2000;

Saren et al. 2007; Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008; Brownlie, Hewer and Tadajewski, 2009). Opposite research camps have legitimized and standardized the dichotomy between positivistic and interpretivistic approaches to the examination of consumption phenomena and from the mid-1980s up to the mid-2000s these research traditions have been carrying a polemic mentality of conflicting epistemological views (Davies and Fitchett, 2005). Such compliance with representative academic discourses led to continuous academic paradigmatic debates and repetitive argumentation which eventually produced a static rather than dynamic disciplinary process. We can argue that the interpretive and qualitative turn in methodological principles of consumer research came as a reaction to the dominance of positivism and, therefore, the theoretical pluralism and incorporation of research tools could be welcomed as being able to unravel consumers' mental events and subjective worldviews (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Belk, Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988; Levy, 2005; Arnould and Thompson, 2005). This fresh approach laid emphasis on the examination of an external and subjective perception of the social world, the multiplicity of socio-cultural groups and the interplay between marketplace ideology and human action. The majority of the studies discussed below can be viewed as outcomes of this interpretive turn, which approach Veblen's ideas from an anthropological perspective related to product symbolism and the meaning of status symbols.

Solomon (1983) discussed the role of clothing as a means of social interaction and a form of symbolic language for modern consumers. Following Veblen's insights in chapter seven of the TLC, entitled *Dress as the expression of the pecuniary culture*, Solomon argued that a century after the Veblenian observations, fashionable clothes, consumption lifestyles and

overall our clothed appearance generates a system of social communication. Products possess and convey symbolic features which play a prominent role in an individual's motivation to purchase and in the use of the object. The closing paragraph of the paper seems to be very close to Veblen's arguments:

“An abundance of products and services — from clothing, automobiles, cosmetics, and furniture to restaurants, office environments, and airlines — are rich in symbolic content. The nature of consumers' interactions with these symbol systems may determine their attitudes toward them and toward themselves. A further integration of products with social science constructs is a challenge for both social psychologists and consumer behavior researchers.” (Solomon, 1983:327)

From a practical rather than theoretical perspective, Solomon's viewpoint concurs with Veblen's observations on fashion, innovation, and consumers' conformity to lifestyles. Without elaborating on Veblen's sharp hypothesis that 'a cheap coat makes a cheap man' and Veblen's ideas on the aesthetic power of wealth, Solomon explored the space between the self-concept and brand choices and concluded that cultural meaning, ready to be discovered by marketers, resides there. Also, McCracken (1988) is one of the few consumer researchers who recognized Veblen as one of the founding fathers as regards cultural accounts on consumption and immersed himself in the interrelations between social categories and consumption practices. Commodities produce material culture and a visual field for social categorization according to existing cultural principles that permeate social life. McCracken's paper retains and meticulously discusses elements of Veblenian ideas on the cultural meaning carried by consumer goods but his anthropological insights favour the

analysis of objects themselves instead of their impact on the psychic world of the individuals and the perception of others, and therefore a 'person-object' approach towards consumption. On the other hand, it can be suggested that Veblen's theory is not restricted between a 'person-object' relation, but extends to a more complex 'person-object-society' interrelation; since the awareness of an individual's social position via his material belongings affects his esoteric taste and motivates his economic actions. Veblen's analysis on the status system moved beyond objects and penetrated many spheres of social life. He claimed that an individual's participation within a socio-cultural pyramid of status consumption influences his viewpoints regarding the material world and thus it prompts a variety of societal activities such as: charities, social-good fellowships, sociability, competitive struggle, snobbery, religious devoutness, inculcation of new tastes, ostracism and discrimination from a social groups to mention but a few.

Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) claimed that Veblen should be regarded as one of the forebears of consumer researchers interested in the phenomenon of attachment to objects and the importance of object ownership. Again, Veblen symbolizes the precursor of studies on the meaning of individual ownership and his contribution is defined by the historical development of the discipline. In one of the most cited papers of the last twenty years, Belk (1988) is the first author who dedicated a single paragraph on Veblen's theory discussing the contribution of possessions and how associate with individuals so as to reflect their social identities.

“Veblen (1899) saw wives and children playing a decorative and expressive role for turn of the century nouveau riche. In this view, clothing and bejeweling one's wife *is not* unlike decorating one's house - it is an advertisement for self. Similarly, Veblen noted that one can vicariously consume through one's dependents, so that consumption that enhances their extended selves enhances one's own extended self, of which they are a part. Although today's families are less patriarchal than those of Veblen's day, the tendency to vicariously consume through those who are a part of extended self perhaps is not dissimilar. We gain in self-esteem from the ego enhancing consumption of these people.” (Belk, 1988: 157)

Whilst, Belk acknowledged that throughout the twentieth century fundamental industrial and technological changes have reconstructed the social hierarchies in Western developed societies, the ability of consumption to enhance one's self plays a central role in a deep understanding of consumer behaviour. Consumers boost their self-esteem by advertising their peers, relatives, colleagues, fiancés and other individuals with whom they associate. Belk's study, contrary to the majority of the papers citing Veblen, adopts a highly interdisciplinary approach and skillfully interweaves the social-cultural meaning of objects with a consumer's self-perception, and it is this last term that truly associates Veblen's ideas with Belk's paper. His analysis overcomes and rises above the association between the characteristics of the self-concept (Sirgy, 1982) and the features of the objects or brands and encompasses the importance of signs (cigarette smoke, wine smell, skin colour) and non-material aspects of consumer culture (people, events, abstract ideas) so as to explore and encapsulate the complexity behind consumers' *perceptions* of their self-image. Consuming experiences, public figures, TV images and possessions surround and construct our fluid self-identities. Unlike Veblen, Belk did not centre his analysis on status

considerations. However, one hundred years after the publication of the TLC we find a detailed study that examined the contribution of possessions to a consumer's self-perception from an anthropological viewpoint.

The reconsideration of Veblen's anthropological insights in the 1980s was followed by surface readings and references to the cultural meaning of fashion and clothing in the 1990s. Solomon and Buchanan (1991) conducted a large quantitative study so as to identify and evaluate the consumption habits of American 'yuppies' and suggested a strong map between status symbols and constellations. Likewise, Stuart and Fuller (1991) approached the communicative role of clothing for business-to-business sales settings and referred to the TLC as one of the first studies which explicated the symbolic meaning of clothing. More studies about the adoption and diffusion of clothing fashion as a vehicle of social reward (Fischer and Price, 1992), communication of membership within an esteemed group (Miller, McIntyre and Mantrala, 1993) and displaying household status through the appearance of servants (Eckman and Wagner, 1995) reminds us of Veblen's and Simmel's early contributions to the fashion system. McGraw, Tetlock and Kristel (2003) drew their attention to the value of things and described Veblen, next to many other authors in an indirect quotation, as a social relation theorist who combined political philosophy and cultural anthropology in his theoretical framework of status consumption. Moreover, Belk (2003) seems to champion the dissemination of Veblen's ideas with another paper on shoes and their capability to construct the self. Being one of the few consumer researchers who read and pay attention to Veblen's work, Belk referred to the function of high heels as markers of woman's upper social class. The final references, chronologically speaking, to

the TLC include the discussion of Veblen's ideas related to the symbolic value of commodities, emulation and mimetic consumer behaviour (Belk, Ger and Askergaard, 2003) and how the clothing of the upper classes signifies their 'social superiority' to other people (Coskuner and Sandikci, 2004). Such analyses, despite their application of Veblenian observations within a contemporary context, obscure the breadth of his ideas about the preservation of archaic forms of consumption and his evolutionary understanding about the system of dress which goes back to the first stage of barbarism. In conclusion, excluding Belk's discussion in the mid-1980s, marketing theorists and consumer researchers seem to acknowledge in Veblen's ideas some early anthropological analysis of the symbolic function of clothing, however, of negligible importance when applied to the understanding of contemporary fashion theories and luxury consumer goods.

### **C) Sociological/Critical**

The final category includes the papers related to Veblen's sociological views on the notion of social class and social mobility via status consumption and also studies referring to Veblen's critical interpretations of consumerism and material culture. During the culmination of behaviourism on marketing theory, Firat (1977) was one of the first scholars who centered his interest on the changing consumption patterns of advanced Western economies and aimed to explain how these affect and shape the individualized life and the production of social categories. With an indirect reference to Veblen, Firat suggested that the fascination with increased profits and capital accumulation in capitalist economies have imposed uncontrollable pressures for profit-maximizing consumption activities and in their

turn have increased the formation and strengthening of individual differences. In line with Veblen and Galbraith, Firat's argument came from a macro-economic marketing perspective and drew attention to the reproduction of social inequality through the acquisition of wealth. From an interpretive consumer research perspective, Belk (1984) proves to be Veblen's best student and continuously pays attention to his ideas. In his characteristic writing style, he visited the concept of the self and the outcome of the dynamics between having and giving for consumers, and subsequently Veblen's interpretation of 'having' comes into the discussion. Veblen's arguments regarding the capitalist economic system and its inequalities in the distribution of goods are placed next to Marx's understanding of political economy and Belk carried on his analysis by considering Veblen to be the first critic of consumer culture and the spending patterns of the nouveau rich in the late nineteenth century. The paper concluded with the view that conspicuous consumption and ostentatious economic display are becoming a consumption phenomenon available to the masses and they will grow in importance for consumer research in the following decades. Kelly (1987) goes back to Veblen's work so as to underline the different use of leisure time amongst social classes and he concurs with Ritzer's (2001) suggestion that it is the quality, rather than quantity, of leisure that functions as an indicator for status nowadays. Furthermore, he summarized Veblen's view on the superfluity of spending on luxury items by quoting one his phrases regarding the *"pragmatically useless forms of consumption requiring many years to learn."* The emergence and popularity of what we can name as consumption studies, in the 1980s, had as a result a growing interest in the work of the first consumer critic and the Veblenian observations on status seeking consumers and their desire for overspending came to the surface. Phenomena such as the economic excess and the mass consumerism of the 1980s

were translated by psychologists as materialistic tendencies supported by conspicuous consumption practices and a considerable waste of resources. Richins et al. (1992) traced the origins of consumers' continuous dissatisfaction to the observations of Thorstein Veblen and Erich Fromm and claimed that a hyperbolic attachment to commodities can turn into a pathological activity, hence individuals should pay more attention to the development of their social relations. Including indirect references and adopting an extremely superficial perspective, Horne et al. (1996) reminded us of Veblen's remarks on gifts as forms of cultural domination, Wong (1997) and Abela (2006) recognized Veblen as the first theorist who drew a parallel between materialism and competitive consumption for status and Wilhite and Lutzenhiser (1999) critically observed how the practice of 'wasteful' consumption distinguishes members of the upper classes from individuals of lower social standing. According to Holbrook (1999) conspicuous consumption in modern economies describes only one face of materialism and continued his arguments by placing the 'passive ownership of possessions' – as a means of indicating social status - in the centre of Veblen's theory. An individual's passivity and indulgence find expression in the accumulation and display of status symbols and reproduce a 'profitable' consumer culture. Furthermore, Holt (1998) embarked his analysis of poststructuralist lifestyles with references to Veblen, Simmel and Weber as some of the founding fathers of the discipline of sociology and superficially referred to Veblen's critical views on the leisure activities of the wealthy. Finally, we find a few references to Veblen regarding elite consumption and conservatism (Witkowski, 1998), consumption as expression of social organization (Kates, 2001), and economic signaling as a partial strategy of class consumption (Belk and Bonsu, 2003; Ustuner and Holt, 2003).

From the incomplete and surface assessment of Veblen's ideas as regards the economic capitalistic system and consumer culture, it can be concluded that consumer researchers find limited application of his ideas to contemporary (or over the last twenty-five years) social economy and his contribution to a critical examination of consumption can be interpreted as a product of its time. Although class-based consumption models were adopted by sociologists, the literatures of marketing and consumer research express their unwillingness to reassess whether dominant social groups set the standards of wasteful economic activity and in general elaborate on the complex construct of social class and consumption. In the majority of the papers, a reference to Veblen's name serves as an introduction to a semi-historical introspection of previous studies and Veblen is recognized as the sociologist who first described the relationship between visible consumption and status symbols, the 'trickle down' model of consumption and the impact of status competition on hierarchical social structures. The heightened materialism of the 1980s and the increased spending patterns of the last twenty years should remind us of Veblen's remark, that 'wealth becomes the popular basis of esteem', and a necessary requirement to secure social standing in the eyes of the community. In America in particular, where the recent financial crisis began, the high salaries and benefits of CEOs even in periods of declining sales, the purchase of extravagant houses under debt, the possession and exhibition of luxurious cars and a plethora of social signs by middle-income consumers who struggle to keep up with the Joneses indicate to us that Veblen's observations on status-consumption might have some relevance to contemporary consumer research.

Overall, the previous chapters have offered an original and unconventional examination as regards the discussion of Veblen's ideas in the literatures of consumer research and marketing theory. Although, Veblen's work has been widely discussed from economic and sociological perspectives, the literature review of this Thesis indicates that consumer researchers and marketing theorists should rethink and reassess the substance of Veblen's ideas. In the following section of the thesis, I will attempt to summarize the adoption and discussion of Veblen's views since the publication of the TLC and subsequently the possibilities and limitations of rethinking Veblen's observations from an empirical perspective will be discussed.

## **5.6 Perspective**

There is evidence that marketing scholarship has moved into a new era, with some of its most prominent characteristics consisting of the fragmentation of the mainstream marketing thought (Lusch and Vargo, 2005), increased academic specialization (Wilkie and Moore, 2003), driven by the expansion of business studies, research-based journals in marketing and augmented specialization within the community of scholars. Moreover, rising international/economic relations, the influence of mass media, the popularity of the World Wide Web, cross-cultural consumption and synchronized globalization/fragmentation dynamics reshape market structures and the consumption habits of the modern consumer, with profound effects on the construction of the social identity and well-being of the latter (Cornwell and Drennan, 2004). Can we rethink nowadays Veblen's engaging and somehow 'funny' insights into consumers' instinctual desire for social status? To what extent do Veblen's observations reflect the reality of modern consumer culture and status seeking

consumption phenomena? One century after the publication of the TLC, the sociologist Colin Campbell has expressed some sceptical views about the abovementioned questions. Campbell (1987) has been one of the most prominent and persuasive critics of Veblen's ideas on consumer culture. He condensed the inconsistencies between Veblen's ideas and modern consumer behavior into the following three main points: a) contemporary status-seeking consumption phenomena present a less aggressive and more sophisticated nature, compared to Veblen's times; b) Veblen's theory has never been tested and the researcher of 'conspicuous consumption' is not capable of entering the field without having prioritized if he/she is attempting to investigate conspicuous consumers' intentions *or* motives and to state if these are generated consciously, subconsciously or instinctively; and finally, c) Veblen's trickle down model, in which consumption habits are transmitted from the upper classes to the middle class individuals, is outdated and has limited effect on modern consumers. Overall, Campbell suggests that the theory of 'conspicuous consumption', primarily inspired by ritualistic practices of the foreign past, is not compatible with the complexity of modern consumerism. Indeed, Campbell's well-justified criticisms on the feasibility of Veblen's theory for the examination of contemporary consumption practices highlights that the chronological gap between the TLC and our society has brought forward tremendous changes to the way that we perceive the phenomenon of conspicuous consumption. As was mentioned in a previous chapter, Veblen did not aim to offer a coherent and complete theory of consumer behaviour but sought to detail the development of status-seeking consumption phenomena and their impact on the perception and well-being of individuals. A brief synopsis as regards the (mis)interpretation of Veblen's ideas during the twentieth century can become the starting point for possible ways to conduct an

empirical study related to his ideas and despite its limitations, rethink his contribution to contemporary consumer research.

We noticed in the discussion above, that to some extent the popular and common misconceptions about the message of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* derive from a lack of understanding, or lack of attention, to Veblen's theoretical background and academic career. In simple terms, a close reading of the TLC suggests that Veblen's work may *not* be a product of its time relevant only to the 'Gilded Age' but a seminal achievement of economic literature which combines and applies anthropological, evolutionary, sociological and cultural insights to the study of the consumer *himself*. Additionally, we can view the TLC as a reaction and thorough attack on the orthodoxy of economic/consumer demand theory, an interdisciplinary study par excellence and the first biting analysis of the nouveau riche's ostentatious economic behaviour. Finally, Veblen didn't aim to provoke an academic audience of classical economists but he merged his sociological accounts with American political radicalism, a combination that ascribed to the book its mythical reputation and satirical character. Veblen argues that consumer behaviour, similar to human and economic behaviour, is in a state of constant flux. However, through this change the preservation and survival of archaic/barbaric habits and instincts reminds us of the existence of diachronic irrational impulses. The term 'conspicuous consumption' *is* a product of its time and a phenomenon widely observed during the end of the nineteenth century but consumers' propensity for achievement and social standing has a long history beginning with the concept of individual ownership. An individual's desire for social status, supported by the instinct of emulation, is expressed in the symbolic world of objects

and it has a huge impact on our self-perception, actions and the organization of social life. This is what Veblen argued back in 1899 and since then economists, sociologists and marketing theorists have borrowed *selectively* from his ideas and observations. Classical and orthodox economic theorist deemed his work a sociological and political commentary on the wastefulness of consumer culture and the ‘funny’ aspects of the modern consumer. Institutional economists and early marketing theorists found value in Veblen’s suggestions for a historical understanding of dynamic consumption phenomena, although they did not cite him widely. American public intellectuals and sociologists adopted his satire, examined the role of wealth on individual and collective behaviour, played the role of the heretics and argued that popular socio-economic views and political interests do not always reflect a search for reality. Similarly, French sociologists advanced Veblen’s theory and noticed how the exchange of signs, status symbols and tastes communicates prestige, status and social differentiation. On the other hand, Veblen’s humanism and narrow instinct psychology was rejected by behaviourists and early models of consumer behaviour for the sake of a rational, information seeker and stimuli-driven consumer. Veblen’s conspicuous consumer, a social animal thirsty for status consumption activities, was far too irrational, insatiable and instinct-driven to comply with the scientific principles of conditioning, learning and reward. Such a wild animal in a cage could attribute to experimental studies the stigma of abuse. For Veblen, the socially-driven consumer reflects a post-barbaric gentleman, white-collar worker, middle-aged businessman and media celebrity, such as individuals engulfed in a universe of material culture, professional titles and social hierarchical structures. Such all-encompassing and generic views about an individual’s consumption activities and the origins of his/her needs constitute a first-class topic for a press-release, a theme for a novel, a scenario for a film. Thereupon, it is difficult to accommodate so much social reality

within a model of consumer decision, especially when it is written for pedagogical purposes. We observed that such a task requires and necessitates clarity, objectivity and conformity to the principles of dominant theories of consumer psychology. The legacy of psychological approaches to the study of the individual's needs and preferences, dominating in the 1970s, were adopted and applied to the field of consumer behaviour as the citation analysis indicated above. Veblen's description of a social competitive arena full of symbolic cultural meaning was translated into the term 'materialism' during the 1980s. Similarly, the propensities, proclivities, and instinctual habits of Veblen's consumer were encapsulated by the notion of the self-concept and its relationship to brands, luxurious goods and services. For the majority of consumer research theorists, Veblen can be seen as the sociologist who coined the term conspicuous consumption and explained how status-driven social systems motivate the purchase and display of luxury goods. Like Simmel and Weber, Veblen prophesized the proliferation of fashion and lifestyles. However, scholars in consumption studies argue that the modern consumer expresses a multiplicity of complex identities via his conspicuous consumption practices (Cova, 1996; Holt, 1998; Bauman, 2001). Finally, and in line with Campbell, Veblen's ideas cannot be turned into an empirical testable hypothesis, assuming the employment of questionnaires or the conduct of interviews in order to elicit information about status-enhancing activities will not provide the desired results since the act of consuming conspicuously might be perceived as stigmatic by the majority of respondents.

Taking into consideration the chronological gap between Veblen's thesis and the plethora of contemporary meta-theories of marketing such as its sophisticated, fragmented and

polymorphic character, the examination of Veblen's main thrust - adopting its holistic form - as a concrete or testable research theme for consumer researchers seems to be a rather difficult task. What is more, terminological confusion between the terms conspicuous consumption, consumer status and uniqueness via consumption (O'Cass and McEwen, 2004, Chaudhuri and Majumdar, 2006) complicates and makes more difficult the application of Veblen's ideas. How can we rethink Veblen's *observations* within a contemporary context? Possibly, we can find the answer in the pages of the TLC and the intentions of its author. Firstly, Veblen's name has been mistakenly associated with the term 'conspicuous consumption', the title of chapter four in the TLC. Conspicuous consumption is a big concept; it encloses and mirrors many different constructs like the display of leisure activities, status emulation, class mobility and consumption, self-advertisement and the symbolic function of status-enhancement and luxurious goods amongst others. Nonetheless, Thorstein Veblen as a social analyst of consumer culture did not aim to enrich, or constrain, the academic literature with a single term. On the contrary, at the very heart of his theory we find the description and analysis of man's perception of his fellow-men, the consumer's perception of other consumers. Veblen, intentionally, began his analysis with the most peaceful stage of human history, the primitive stage of social organization, and narrated how individuals observe, perceive and distinguish the economic and cultural activities within their communities. Veblen becomes an invisible observer and critically recounts how the primitive member of the tribe, the barbarian warrior and the modern American aristocrat perceive and experience the activities of their peers and aspirant groups. He described the peaceable rituals of individuals in the primitive tribes, explained the antagonistic nature of hunting and fighting amongst barbarians and finally became an active observer of lavish parties organized by the aristocratic families of

Chicago. With the possible exemption of the primitive stage, consumer behaviour obtains a prominent and rising role in the attribution of social status. Accordingly, individuals – no matter to which socio-cultural stage they belong – experience and categorize the other members of the community according to their possessions, manners, titles, social circles and leisure activities. And for Veblen, perception is a matter of training widely exercised during the stage of capitalism. Consumers not only classify others in social categories – in the modern industrial stage these groups were represented in the form of social classes - but at the same time position themselves in the social arena and express their wants and desires through consumption activities. Veblen claims that social status and prestige become the final trophies and the ‘propensity for achievement’ remains the underlying motive:

The propensity for achievement and the repugnance to futility remain the underlying motive. The propensity changes only in the form of its expression and in the proximate objects to which directs the man’s activity. Under the regime of individual ownership the most available means of visibly achieving a purpose is that afforded by the acquisition and accumulation of wealth.” (Veblen, 1899:33)

Following Veblen, we can adopt and update his research intentions by asking contemporary consumers how they perceive other individuals who seek to secure prestige via consumption practices. How do the form of the expression and the proximate objects of status-seeking activities change? How do contemporary consumers experience the new forms of status consumption? To what extent do these experiences reflect their own self-perception and social status considerations? As Campbell and Mason observe, it will be

difficult to answer the later question since modern individuals will not be willing to elicit information about status-enhancing activities and provide information on their self-perception, given that the act of consuming conspicuously can be perceived as stigmatic by the majority of respondents. Without doubt, Mason's and Campbell's argument about consumers' denial to admit emulatory motives might be to a certain degree valid. Nevertheless, it challenges the trustworthiness of psychological and sociological research studies concerned with more controversial subjects such as the social stigma of unmarried mothers, homosexuality, sadomasochism and others (Tilman, 2006). Whilst stimulating the intellectual debates amongst outstanding sociologists and economists about the theoretical underpinnings and interpretations of *The Theory of Leisure Class*, they put hyperbolic emphasis on a modern linguistic analysis and reappraisal of Veblen's terminology which mitigates the potential of consumer researchers to enter the fieldwork and rethink the perception of prestige by contemporary consumers. Contemporary consumer research on the status consumption activities of others and their impact on individuals' self-perception has focused on issues of branding and leisure activities instead of encapsulating a holistic view of the consumer's experience of prestige. What remain absent are accounts of the actual lived experiences of contemporary consumers that demonstrate the perception and impact of status-driven consumption activities for their everyday lives. Consequently, the following part of the thesis will aim to clarify the central research question of this study, examine and critique previous studies on status consumption and narrate the process of collecting and analyzing some first person description of status consumption by contemporary individuals.

## **Chapter 6: Methodology**

After the examination of the evolution, adoption and (mis)interpretation of Veblen's ideas in the literature of consumer research and marketing theory, the main purpose of this study is the collection and analysis of empirical data aiming to assist in the critical discussion and deeper understanding of how contemporary British consumers experience status consumption practices, similar to those which Veblen described in his most famous book. Aiming to research and discuss the patterns that contemporary middle-income British perceive and communicate their conscious experience of consumption phenomena, I have formulated the following central research questions:

- How do contemporary middle-income British consumers perceive the display of status symbols and luxury brands?
- How do they perceive their own self-image and consumption lifestyle in comparison with the archetypes of extravagant economic display?
- How do they experience and relate to the social practices and consumption choices of individuals who can be recognized as status-seekers and conspicuous consumers?
- The final research question seeks to probe into participants' experiences, beliefs and attitudes regarding the motivations behind socially driven consumption with the employment and discussion of vignettes and written scenarios.

- Finally, to what extent these findings reflect, update or challenge Veblen's ideas?

In order to find the appropriate methodological tools so as to answer these questions, I have traced the history of research methods and theories of consumer behaviour related to consumers' attitudes towards status-seeking phenomena, luxury brands, social comparison and status competition.

## **6.1 Theoretical assumptions**

According to Lehmann (1999), a dominant positivistic paradigm of information processing, borrowing concepts primarily and systematically from the disciplines of psychology and economics has placed extreme emphasis on a mechanistic representation of the contemporary consumer, as the rational decision maker and conscious human being who makes sense of the external phenomena. Such an approach has underpinned a rather homogeneous and monolithic study of a consumer's responses to various stimuli and advertising messages, with the ulterior motive to model human behaviour and to predict an individual's future reactions towards the proliferation of branding images, luxurious products and services. Based on the discussion of the literature review and following Lehmann's (1999) arguments, this study seeks to approach and study the individual from a micro-focus level, by drawing a historical analogy between modern day status-driven consumption and the insights of the TLC, to understand and illustrate the meaning that

contemporary consumers draw from their association with status symbols and the lived experience of observing socially-directed consumption phenomena.

As a result, my approach disengages its scope from previous research studies on ostentatious economic display by focusing on the measurement of the phenomenon of 'conspicuous consumption' (Chung and Fischer, 2001) through pre-established criteria behind consumer motivation (Lumpkin and Darden, 1982; Moschis, 1981) and the assessment of the divergence between a luxury brand's status and conspicuousness via the employment of statistical scales (Truong et al. 2008). In these studies, the notions of status and conspicuous consumption are perceived as external dimensions and variables of brand luxury management and the researchers offered a series of items to participants whose feedback aimed to evaluate the triadic interrelations between conspicuousness, branding and social status. According to the results, specific luxurious cars score higher than other brands, in terms of status, and without elaborating on a consumer's needs and perception of socially constructed status hierarchies, the researchers superficially discussed the discrepancies in individuals' attitudes towards status and conspicuousness as concepts embodied in brand images. With a profound lack of historical analysis on the development of socially-directed consumption and assuming that a modern version of social status is conveyed through more sophisticated ways - like taste -, the authors reduced Veblen's observations from an anthropocentric and socially complex perspective to a brand-related level. Similarly, Dubois and Paternault (1995) adopted a person-brand approach and understanding of status consumption and their respondents were asked to evaluate a '*wish list*' of luxurious products according to their taste and personal preferences. The results

indicated that a structural process amongst consumer's awareness, purchase and aspirations schematize a mechanical system of conspicuous consumption which luxury-goods companies ought to examine and possibly adopt. Such an approach neglects that consumer behaviour is shaped by social relations and anthropological readings of ostentatious economic display (Veblen, 1899; Douglas and Isherwood, 1979) which convincingly suggested that primitive, medieval and modern consumers do *not* aspire to an ornament, sword or Armani suit *per se* but the symbolic value attributed to the object by the qualities of its *owner* and his/her socio-economic status. Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, Vickers and Renand (2003) built upon the dominant theories of consumer decision models and espousing a familiar psychological approach tested and categorized luxury goods based on the dimensions of functionalism, experientialism and symbolic interactionism. Accordingly, modern luxurious products, no matter the context wherein they become visible, can be classified into these three categories. Undoubtedly, Veblen was much more interested in the classification of individuals within social hierarchies based on the conspicuous objects they used, rather than the categorization of products within clusters according to three psychological constructs. The perception of the luxury brand market was examined by Vingeron and Johnson (2004) who developed an impressive semantic differential scale for the measurement of high-luxury and low-luxury branding and Amaldoss and Jain (2005) who tested the assumption that the market consists of two groups of consumers: snobs and followers. Both studies applied conspicuous consumption practices within a rational expectations framework and concluded that pricing policies of luxury-brands have to take into consideration processes of consumer learning. Finally, from an Asiatic perspective, Chaudhuri and Majumdar (2006) attempted an expansion of the original meaning of conspicuous consumption incorporating the following three dimensions

of contemporary conspicuousness: ostentation and signalling, uniqueness and social conformity. Based on content analysis of Indian business magazines, the authors affirmed that the manifestation of the phenomenon and its dynamics primarily occur in altering socio-economic environments of developing countries, where the structure of the class system shifts from collectivism to individualism.

The brief observation of empirical studies related to luxury branding, conformity to lifestyles, snobbery and conspicuous consumption practices in general, reveals three facts that have been already discussed in the literature review, and thus will not be analyzed further here: a) An orthodox adoption, perpetuation and diffusion of behavioural principles and information processing models for the study of status-driven consumption phenomena. The application of a folk psychology controls the assumptions and hypotheses of the questionnaires and the assessment and prediction of the choices of the potential conspicuous consumer occur in a 'close setting', where intrapersonal, cultural and environmental forces play secondary or negligible roles. b) The totality of the studies on status consumption centre their attention and favor the symbolic dimensions of luxury brands, and therefore propose an object-person model of conspicuous consumption. Apparently, their main intention is to improve the functionality of the object (luxury brand) according to its status dimensions, instead of understanding the needs and the meaning the person (consumer) draws from his/her association with luxurious brands. Although some of the papers acknowledge that education, knowledge and cultural dynamics reshape status considerations, eventually, these hesitate to connect these variables with the consumer's perceptions and the impact of his/her self-esteem and self-respect. c) Finally, and more importantly, the focus on luxury branding as stimuli for consumer decisions discloses the

complete absence of the *person – object – person* approach and a holistic exploration of the experience of status-seeking phenomena, within a social context.

For this study, I intend to shift the interest from an object-person approach and the symbolic dimension of brands and to elaborate on how the active consumer perceives through his actual experience objects, services and leisure activities that indicate status consumption. A more detailed description and exploration of the motives and hidden desires behind conspicuous consumption practices can be derived from qualitative research aiming to examine *how* individuals make sense of such activities. Epistemological considerations, methodological challenges and a conceptual framework in which an individual's perception is related to status seeking activities can be explored, and will be discussed in the following section.

## **6.2 Epistemological and methodological considerations**

The distinction between objectivist (positivistic) and subjectivist (interpretive) research approaches to social phenomena has divided academics in social sciences for the last thirty years, since the predilection for one epistemological camp was automatically implying the rejection of the other. Whereas a subjective stance towards the production of knowledge characterizes some areas of social and critical enquiry – anthropology, critical psychology and radical sociology for example – the capability of empirical verification, inherent in positivist studies, has magnetized the interest of the majority of academics in social and business studies since it supports the validity and credibility of the research design together with accepted presentation and eventual dissemination of the findings (Crotty, 1998).

Similar dichotomies and distinctions between methodological approaches have prevailed over marketing and consumer research and only recently the conceptual barriers of the paradigmatic debate have been revisited and rethought against the process of normalizing and standardizing the polemic principles of opposite research cannons (Davies and Fitchett, 2005; Bryman, 2006). Additionally, researchers' tendencies, inclinations and oscillations are not limited between the major epistemological camps but intensify within those camps under the necessity of concurring with specific research traditions and theoretical assumptions. For example, nowadays qualitative researchers are prompted to locate their theoretical perspectives and take action according to the principles of popular or emerging research traditions, such as phenomenological research, hermeneutic inquiry, discourse analysis, grounded theory and others, and also to justify their philosophical and epistemological underpinnings (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1992; Goulding, 2005). A particular theory of knowledge (epistemology) should be embedded in the theoretical perspective of the research design and consequently inform the methodological directions of the researcher. The immersion in a subjective reality begins with the researcher, since his own history and conception of the self will be merged with a socially situated context with which he has to interact and produce meaning.

### **6.2.1 Researcher's positioning**

Ontological dimensions, such as a basic set of beliefs and feelings, affect the perception of meaningful reality and guide the researcher's actions towards the study and conceptualization of social phenomena (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). As was suggested in the

previous section, the majority of the studies conducted in the areas of product symbols, status-conferring goods and conspicuousness (especially as a procedure related to brand images and luxurious products) followed a positivistic tradition and quantitative methodology for the assessment of the objective and workable meaning of empirical phenomena. For marketing researchers, the utility of brands and function of symbols of status are pregnant with inherent meaning which reflects a generic picture of reality for themselves and the individual. Following such an epistemological assumption, they consider that the world of objects possessed by status-seeking consumers does not reflect a social site where human experience, acting and improvisation take place but a well-organized and highly systematic puzzle of uniformities, unwritten laws and absolute social codes. Such scientific abstraction reduces the experience of status consumption and the attribution of prestige into a fixed and standardized reality, composed of taken for granted social and economic principles. On the contrary, my approach adopts a relativist ontology (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), thus assuming that a diversity of interpretations can be applied to the experience of status-driven consumption and a constructionist (subjectivist) epistemology, and therefore acknowledging that the meaning is continuously (re)produced between the interaction of the observer and the object, of the participants and the conspicuous consumption practices they perceive and describe. The term *experience* deserves special attention and analysis at this point. The German philosopher and psychologist Brentano (1981) pointed out that the structures of consciousness can be unravelled and understood through the description of experience from the first-person point of view. Goods, symbols, services and visible commodities, associated with the notion of social status, can be perceived both from a material experience and an imaginary perspective. Individuals make sense of a luxurious car either by driving it or when they

daydream that they possess, use and display to others a similar status symbol. The experience of observing the car induces the stimulation of perceptions, emotions, imagination, desires and, in general, feelings that direct the same experience towards creating meaning from its relationship with the social context and the object. Such a process also implies that the broader experience and imagination of possessing and displaying or observing commodities is not simply a passive activity of judging and classifying products based on their specific features and qualities. Consumers perceive, interpret and reproduce such experiences - for example the action of driving a luxurious car - according to the intentional structures of their consciousness, including various forms such as: temporal awareness (the identity of the car's owner or knowledge about the brand), embodied action (whether the owner and the object are static or kinetic), the intention of the actions (whether the owner seeks to display his belongings), self-awareness (how the phenomenon affects the perception of the observer himself) and finally linguistic activity (involving meaning and communication of the experience). Possibly, a semi-structured interview based on everyday conversation might encapsulate the description of some of the abovementioned conceptual processes but it is unlikely to produce substantial data, in-depth and 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) of status consumption phenomena. Similarly, the conduct of an ethnographic study related to a consumer's status experience can approach and narrate the everyday life of the individual, but, with intense focus to be placed upon the ritualistic and cultural aspects of the process (Turner and Bruner, 1986; Crotty, 1998; Neuman, 2006). Therefore, the ethnographer/researcher views and understands human behaviour mainly as an outcome of cultural structures rather than as a procedure of experiential dynamics and the individual's perceptions (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975). Moreover, in line with Mason's (1998) argument, focus groups will face difficulties

in revealing and explaining the dynamics of emulation and status consumption, since the accounts of the majority of the participants, although agree that consuming for status is universal, will attribute conspicuous consumption practices to ‘other’ people. Consequently, I conclude that the best possible way to approach, analyze and describe the perception of status-driven consumption is via the first-person description of individuals’ experiences.

### **6.3 Phenomenology and consumer research**

The research dilemmas, mentioned in the previous section, lead me to a phenomenological approach, the study of experiences as resources for the emergence of new meaning or the enhancement of former understanding (Crotty in Willis and Neville, 1996; Holstein and Gubrium, 1998). Phenomenology, as a disciplinary field in philosophy and social sciences, proposes the study of phenomena and social action as they appear in our experience and its intellectual roots go back to the work of Husserl (1931) who criticized the strict empiricism of arithmetic and psychological approaches to social phenomena and convincingly argued that the intentionality of human consciousness is directed both to ‘material’ and ‘ideal’ objects. Husserl’s original views have been very influential on the thinking of prominent continental philosophers such as Heidegger (1978) and Sartre (1969), whose work emphasized how the researcher himself can not escape from his experiential relation with the objects and that the *self* becomes a social construction struggling to define his existence on a daily basis. This leads to the field of existential phenomenology and points out the distinctive features between the self and consciousness: the social researcher becomes an

ongoing project together with the phenomena under observation and reconstructs his own pre-understanding and views regarding the world, while making sense of the experiences of others.

### **6.3.1 Phenomenology and perception**

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) in his book *The Phenomenology of Perception* described phenomenology as the field of studying the human essences and prioritized the focus on the essence of *perception* as source for a direct description of human experience. For Merleau-Ponty, the notion of *perception* does not refer to the totality of atomic sensations related to an object but centres on the primacy of perception as an active disposition to the openness of the life world (*Lebenswelt*) and therefore his work constitutes a critique to the cognitivism of modern psychology. Subsequently, his arguments and the phenomenology of perception played a prominent role for the anti-cognitive stance (Dreyfus, 1979), as a critical evaluation of intellectual psychology and its limitations to grasp human subjectivity and experience. The history of phenomenology both as a disciplinary field or a movement in the history of science is rich, diverse and complicated and thus it is out of the scope of this study to reproduce and critically interpret how developed and diffused it is in social scientific thought. Overall, phenomenological ideas came together as a reaction to and critique of the Cartesian notion of a world that is considered to be an extension of our minds and turned into a full study of the meaning of experiences and how we can see the world differently through the experience of other people (Zaner, 1970; Farber, 1991; Holstein and Gubrium, 2005). The epistemological assumption of previous consumption

studies on the perception of luxurious brands and the consumer's desires are in line with the Cartesian dualistic view of body and mind, subject (the consumer) and object (commodities and status symbols), whilst a phenomenological approach of status consumption aims to tie together the two and understand the essence of the experience with its associated values and meanings. The consumer's consciousness is intentional and continuously bounded, in an ongoing process, with the perception of the object. Thereupon, I have to consider that Veblen's consumers did not relate or attach to objects and conspicuous consumption practices in an apathetic manner but that their experiences created a mental socio-historical background and subsequently affected their motivations, self-perception, wants and desires. Similarly, this study suggests that the description of status consumption, as a specific lived experience of a modern consumer, can overcome the person-brand approach and elaborate on *how* specific contexts reproduce multiple, subjective, dynamic and ongoing consumption experiences.

### **6.3.2 Phenomenological accounts in the literatures of consumer behaviour**

Phenomenological accounts in the literature of consumer behaviour first appeared during the mid-1980s by researchers who explored individuals' experiences of attachment to emotionally significant possessions (Myers, 1985; Fennell, 1985). O' Guinn and Faber (1989) employed existential phenomenological frameworks to probe into the fantasies, feelings and daydreams of compulsive buyers. Consumption phenomena, objects, brands and products are considered to be inseparable from our everyday observation of the world, and thereupon, the knowledge of the consumer researcher springs from an amalgamation of

participants' experiences, imagination and expression of needs. Thompson, *et al.*, (1990) conducted further research in the area and pointed out that a phenomenological approach offers the active researcher a holistic view of how individuals reflect consumption phenomena and a distinctive pattern in the way of seeing consumers as active beings in the world. Researching the everyday consumer experiences of contemporary married mothers, Thompson *et al.*, (1990) argued that since such experiences emerge in specific contexts, the researcher should place emphasis on a detailed, 'first person' description of the consumer's life-world. The individual experience of buying a luxurious product or the interpretation of an advertising message related to exotic holidays should not be analyzed separately, following an object-subject dichotomy, but mirror a holistic experiential field for examination. Thompson *et al.*, (1990) define 'first-person descriptions' as the outcome of the participant's own interpretation and narration of his actions of the phenomena under observation. Such useful assumptions facilitate the interpretive consumer researcher to approach the meaning of consumer experience. Nonetheless, these postulates should not reflect an exclusive understanding, taking into account the subjectivity and diversity of the contexts which surround us. For example, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) discussed and expanded the application of phenomenological approaches to the consideration of aesthetic and hedonistic experiences surrounding the everyday lives of contemporary consumers. This study considers that status motivated consumption emerges in different subjective contexts, according to the multiple everyday realities and prejudices of the consumer, a fact that indicates the rejection of the establishment of artificial environments for the encapsulation of the individual's perception of socially-driven consumption phenomena. On the contrary, it seeks to prompt the individual's imagination so as to reflect on how they

make sense of conspicuous consumption practices, and subsequently interpret the meaning of those experiential accounts.

After the collection of narratives and descriptions of participants' experiences and life-worlds, my main intention is to relocate their accounts within historical, social and cultural frameworks. By doing so, I am planning to overcome the explanation of simplistic structures and offer rich interpretive accounts (Thompson et al., 1990; Goulding, 1999; Holstein and Gubrium, 2005) related to the cultural norms and hierarchical social structures Veblen described in his seminal book. Thereupon, participant's accounts and their conceptual frameworks will stand next to the already mentioned and discussed observations/misinterpretations of Veblen's theory. As a result, the individual's description of his/her experiences will constitute a comparative framework so as to understand how and to what extent contemporary expressions of status-seeking phenomena reflect or challenge some of Veblen's insights.

#### **6.4 Data collection and analysis**

According to the principles of qualitative methodologies (Silverman, 1997), a phenomenological sampling aims to relate participants' descriptions of experiences with the phenomenon under investigation. During the 1990s phenomenological inquiries and hermeneutical approaches, primarily associated with Thompson's ideas and as an extension of his work, have examined a variety of consumption phenomena, such as feminine identities and the cultural reproduction of motherhood (Thompson, 1996), consumers'

relationships with advertising and mass media (Hirschman and Thompson, 1997) and how the adoption of fashion discourse affects consumption choices (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). In the aforementioned studies, the research design and number of participants varied according to the aim of the research and following Thompson *et al.*, (1990) in idiographic explorations of consumption practices, even a very small number of participants can be enough. For example, Thompson (1997) conducted only four in-depth interviews to examine the lives of working women and in another study expanded the number of participants to ten (Thompson, 1990). According to Holstein and Gubrium (1998) in phenomenological approaches the researcher should be aware of the multiplicity and variety of meanings derived from the same respondent. Therefore, the number of discourses and interpretations becomes a central issue so as to consider the desirable number of interviews. Consequently, for a phenomenological sampling, the number of informants is defined by the plurality of first-person descriptions and to what extent the examination of the phenomenon has been saturated.

For this study, I employed a series of existential phenomenological in-depth interviews with a small group of adult and middle-income British consumers. Based on the philosophical underpinnings of existential phenomenology (Holstein and Gubrium, 1998), I have aimed to focus and research the patterns that contemporary individuals use to communicate their conscious experience of status consumption phenomena. As a result, particular emphasis was placed on the understanding of the meaning of consumers' experiences and the collection of detailed, "first person" descriptions of consumers' life worlds. The research process has been concerned to comprehend how middle-income British consumers draw meaning from the perception and interpretation of conspicuous

consumption practices and status symbols and how they incorporate these meanings into their lived experiences. The data collection and analysis was divided into three stages: a) Initially, I aimed to gain a deeper understanding of consumers' views about status consumption, prompting participants to provide first person descriptions of experiences associated with competitive and status consumption, situated within their life worlds. b) Subsequently, I sought to identify specific and common themes which derive from the relation of the lived experiences within broader socio-cultural and historical frameworks. c) Finally, I attempted to analyze, discuss and explain the patterns in which participants' perception of socially-inspired consumption can be compared to Veblen's observations and previous works on socially-driven consumption.

A total of 18 adult, middle-income<sup>13</sup> British consumers were interviewed for this study. I focused on a sample of "middle-income" consumers in line with Page (1992) and Mason (1998) who have convincingly argued that the ostentatious display of goods and excess in consumption have been heavily adopted as social practices of status reinforcement by the contemporary middle classes. Educational background and income, two of the several faces of social class, were considered as the most relevant indicators of social positioning and selection of the informants. Most of the informants hold an undergraduate university degree and six of them have completed postgraduate studies at Masters level. Issues of access have been also taken into consideration for the selection of this sample. Participants were aged between 24-35 years old and the majority of them were recruited following a "snowballing

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<sup>13</sup> Following the analysis of Abercrombie and Warde (2000) about the class structures of contemporary Britain, the totality of participants are educated and skilled individuals employed in administrative and managerial positions of the service-driven sector.

technique”, asking the interviewees to recommend close friends, peers and relatives whose age, educational background and income fit with the criteria of this study. Participants were recruited from e-mails sent initially to three of them, whom I already knew and informed for the purpose of this study. The initial e-mail indicated that individuals of a specific age and income were wanted for a study related to consumer behaviour. Afterwards, the respondents contacted other friends, peers and colleagues from their working environment and eventually three different social networks of six informants were formulated. Each network included six individuals who were associated either through their job or had established close and friendly relations. The interviews took place between mid-October 2008 and early April 2009. The initial and basic set of the first twelve interviews was conducted with two social networks between the period of October 2008 and January of 2009. The second set of interviews took place between March and April 2009, after the transcription and data analysis of the first set of interviews and the presentation of the findings was given at an academic conference. Most of the participants were professionals in medium-size companies, some were married and the others single. Almost half of them were male and the other female, although the interpretation of data did not take into consideration the distinction between gender roles. The interviews were tape-recorded, lasting from 60 to 130 minutes, and all were conducted in the general vicinity of Leicestershire. All the participants live and work in the same area. In total, I spent about 35 hours with the respondents and recorded nearly 27 hours of data from 18 interviews. Most interviews took place at the library of the University of Leicester (12 interviews), where I had already booked a study room in the silent zone for the purpose of the research. The remaining interviews occurred in participants’ houses and only two in their workplaces. The design of the interviews was semi-structured and the procedure started by asking open

and general questions which induced dialogues related to participants' experiences of consuming for status and status conferring goods. Gradually, the participants were given considerable freedom to discuss issues and situations they wanted to highlight and eventually an unstructured dialogue around the themes of status consumption, emulation and prestige followed. In addition to the questions, which constituted the first part of the interview, I employed vignettes (Finch, 1987) so as to enable informants to offer detailed narratives and comments on emulative motives and status-inspired activities. Taking into account that the act of consuming conspicuously might be perceived as stigmatic by some of the participants - primarily by those who deemed luxury consumption as a wasteful and unethical activity - I used complementary methods so as to allow respondents' social actions, beliefs and perceptions to be further explored. Short scenarios in both written and pictorial form about lifestyles, the consumption of luxurious products and leisure activities offered a less personal and therefore less threatening way of elucidating individuals' experiences and views about social positioning, competition and differentiation through consumption practices. A total of eight vignettes assisted in the enhancement of the existing data, and the generation of new insights related to respondents' attitudes and experiences of conspicuous consumption practices.

As Goulding (2005) observes the application of phenomenological approaches in consumer research seeks to develop a thorough and deep understanding of social practices and consumption phenomena. Taking into account the complexity between phenomenology, either as philosophy or methodology, and its application to social scientific research, I would like to elaborate on the interpretation and categorization of participants' accounts by distinguishing between 'emic' and 'etic' levels of cultural analysis. Consequently, I will

attempt to justify the selection of extracts from the interview transcripts through the discussion of a specific interview and some thematic units deriving from it.

Originating from anthropology (Pike, 1957), the distinction between ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ perspectives has caused considerable debate on the patterns that the researcher should approach social and cultural settings. An ‘emic’ understanding, or viewpoint, reflects the views, values and meanings of the insider in a specific culture and according to Fetterman (1989) its theoretical principles and underpinnings support the acceptance and acknowledgment of subjective and multiple realities, which are crucial to phenomenology. On the contrary, the ‘etic’ perspective favours and supports the predetermined criteria and theoretical concepts that the observer - the ‘outsider’ to the culture - has already set so as to approach and discuss the phenomena under investigation. Following an ‘emic’ perspective, I will discuss below how the accounts of a specific participant mirror his willingness to express meaningful and subjective experiences which occurred within particular socio-cultural settings. The presentation of this worked example seeks to reinforce the rationale behind the selection of the extracts that will be discussed in the section of findings/analysis. I will use three extracts from the interview with Mike, a 32 year old office administrator, so as to elucidate how the specific participant communicates and explicates experiences and beliefs related to conspicuousness and consumption. In the following account, Mike described his spatial and temporal awareness of experiencing a status symbol.

“I mean just yesterday when I went to London and with my girlfriend we spot someone driving a particular nice car. I think it was a flash BMW convertible car. And I remember the assumption that she had money. She was a wealthy person. You don’t need to categorize them as having

money, but they have borrowed an HP or loan payment or anything like that. We kind of gifted them with status just through them driving around that way assuming that they had money, that they had wealth. Just the object was their possession really. So, I would say so yeah big status symbols are things like cars and fashion items.”

Later on, Mike referred to his association with a particular socio-economic group and cultural background and he recalled social practices and conspicuous consumption phenomena that occurred within this setting.

“You know, it is interesting because the class that I come from was a low income class. Where people would spend money on items like getting really expensive Paul Smith coats and they will be there dressed up in the very expensive sort of jackets, sort you know in Burberry and that type of clothing. This could be also an income bracket. And yeah, all that sort of status game within that group and after going to purchase and display them. I think that labels were very crafty those days.”

Subsequently, the participant described his experience as a member of a hiking team and how the tendency to consume conspicuously manifests itself within the group:

“I really enjoy looking other people’s stuff and clothes. I think that is an interesting way of looking this. Because I think that the commodity or the object that you have, there is an identity enrolled within the object and I think that it is a way of projecting some sort of ideal of ourselves to other people. Maybe hiking and self-walking for example. And again that’s a different

identity, a different way of consuming really. It can be very expensive in certain items you can buy and the equipment that goes along with hiking. So, I think that if you go to these places, if you are doing sort of adventurous hobbies it's a way of processing a sort of knowledge to people and your status. You have the best sort of equipment or the best tools. You know the hiking walking groups that I have been. It's quite strange thing cause you don't expect these sort of people to be embroiled or immersed within this world of consumption, probably you would think that have being from different class or being showy off.”

It becomes evident that the abovementioned extracts have been selected due to the reflection of participant's experiences and the interpretation of these experiences within a specific historical and socio-cultural context. The informant not only offered comprehensive descriptions, as a conscious individual integral with the environment, but also he provided a platform for reflecting and analyzing the meaning of his experience. Similarly, and during the analysis of participants' transcripts, I sought to identify and discuss accounts that mirrored participants' stories and lived experiences within broader and subjective socio-cultural and historical frameworks.

After the completion of each interview informal discussions followed and the majority of participants enthusiastically discussed, in a purely informal way, the phenomena associated with the symbolic representation of status. Additionally, the informants had been very interested in the employment of the vignettes during the second part of the interview and the experiential background gave them the intellectual freedom to overcome biases and express their thoughts. Indeed, in some interviews and after one hour of discussion,

participants felt tired and the presentation of vignettes enhanced their enthusiasm to comment on the ostentatious economic display of others and product symbolism. After the end of the interviews, most of the informants seemed very willing to assist in the research procedure by suggesting more interviewees. During the second set of interviews participants came with similar accounts and interpretations of the phenomena under investigation and after the fifteenth interview the research process achieved the levels of saturation. E-mail addresses were exchanged and I thanked all of them for participating in the research procedure. All interviewees were informed and assured about the confidentiality of the study. Therefore, in the table below, and in the presentation and discussion of the findings I have changed their names and some key information (such as place of work, and names of family and friends) in order to protect their anonymity.

### Sample

Name	Age	Occupation	Marital Status	Interview date	Time Recorded
Mike	32	Office administrator	Single	12/10/08	132min
Thomas	34	Senior marketing manager	Married	17/10/08	104 min
George	29	Customer services operator	Single	01/11/08	126min
Esther	34	Customer Advisor	Single	13/11/08	102min
Pamela	29	Charity company	Married	18/12/08	97min
Megan	28	Research Technician	Engaged	18/12/08	71 min

Clara	27	Environmental projects	Single	19/12/08	114 min
Helen	29	Customer service	Single	12/01/09	105min
Deborah	26	Health Promotion Officers	Single	27/01/09	91 min
Katherine	26	Environmental health technician	Single	27/01/09	90min
Matt	28	Public sector	Single	04/02/09	76min
Samantha	30	Businesswoman	Married	06/02/09	68min
Virginia	26	Recruitment Consultant	Single	06/03/09	64min
Sarah	36	Recruitment Consultant	Married	06/03/09	71min
Scott	27	Marketing Consultant	Single	08/03/09	63min
Keith	31	Recruitment Consultant	Married	14/03/09	58min
Jane	29	Recruitment Consultant	Married	14/03/09	56min
Paul	26	IT professional	Single	26/03/09	64min

The data consisted of written transcripts, narratives in response to vignettes and additional documents. The transcription of data began immediately after the first interview and the data analysis followed after the fifth interview. The data were both digitally recorded and transcribed and each interview was reviewed more than twice and eventually connections

between the sub-themes produced three key thematic areas for discussion. At an initial stage and immediately after data gathering, the written transcripts came under close and systematic scrutiny so that the analysis and organization of participants' responses could become feasible. The primary form of data was analyzed using open and axial coding strategies (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Rubin, 2005) and the additional data provided a more definite and in-depth understanding so as to enrich and reinforce the interpretation and analysis of the initial data (written scripts). The analysis of data took place between January and June 2009. Coding was employed as the main means of structuring the analysis so as to summarize and synthesize similar observations and to categorize statements and events (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). During open coding, the first stage of the data analysis, categories of responses referring to the same area or phenomenon were selected, numbered and classified. Outline forms of three broad categories emerged and have been identified as the theoretical framework of the findings. Subsequently, the employment of axial coding aimed to recognize and examine casual relationships between the abovementioned broad categories. Thereupon, throughout axial coding, each category was developed and refined not only in order to enhance the understanding of the phenomenon under investigation but also to fill the conceptual gaps between the generic categories and validate the findings through a coherent storyline. The relation and integration of the sub-categories under broad categories and the structuring of the phenomena around a central narrative completed the grounding of the theory and facilitated the presentation of participants' experiences and perceptions in a systematic and organized way.

Attempting to rethink the original Veblenian thesis through a literature review, integration of divergent concepts and primarily empirical evidence in order to arrive at a meaningful

conclusion regarding the contemporary nature and reception of conspicuous consumption practices does not constitute an easy task. As one of the first social scientists who sought to understand how consumption habits and the display of affluence communicate and reproduce social groups and a status hierarchy, Veblen elaborated on the patterns in which consumption assisted the late nineteenth century American upper class to build and maintain class barriers. Almost a century later, 'consumption continues to serve as a potent site for the reproduction of social class' (Holt, 1998:1) and the relevance of social class hierarchies for comprehending consumption patterns and behaviours is seminal (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). However, academic debates about the impact of social class on consumer behaviour, marketing segmentation and advertising, from the 1930s onwards, have shown that consistent and congruent views about the consideration and application of the concept of social class do not exist. For this study, the selection of a middle-income sample of adult British consumers occurred following literature which indicated the popularity of conspicuous consumption practices within a broad 'middle class' and considering problems with access to participants. As in any other qualitative study of in-depth interviews, the representativeness and validity of the specific sample is limited. What is more, the clarity, appropriate format and plausibility of the presented vignettes have been decisive factors in prompting respondents to discuss the 'hot' issues of status competition and emulative desires. However, the presentation of vignettes can contain insufficient context for respondents, direct or limit the responses based on the specific scenario and confine participants' perceptions and beliefs according to the eccentricities of the depicted characters. Nevertheless, according to participants' accounts after the completion of the interviews, the vignette stories mirrored the social realities, identities and everyday lives both of the researcher and the respondents', and thus participating in their discussion turned

out to be both a motivational and enjoyable experience. Definitely, the plausibility and realism of the consumption phenomena illustrated and depicted in the vignettes could be enhanced by the presentation of video-tapes. Time restrictions, as regards the availability of the participants and the timetable for the thesis, did not allow for the adoption and implementation of additional techniques.

## **Chapter 7: Formative status consumption versus ephemeral luxury**

Identifying the narratives of common consumption experiences and analyzing their meaning, I organized the findings around three major interpretive themes: (1) formative status consumption versus ephemeral luxury; (2) moderate self-image, the *others* and social acceptance; and (3) the four faces of status consumption. In the following part of this study, I will analyze and discuss separately the findings of these three thematic units. Simultaneously, I will attempt to relate participants' accounts and responses about socially-driven consumption phenomena with Veblen's observations aiming to rethink, challenge and update the insights of the TLC. It must be highlighted that the analysis and presentation of the empirical data does not seek to relate and *compare* the perception of conspicuous consumption practices of late nineteenth century American individuals with those of contemporary consumers. Considering that fundamental chronological and spatial differences occur between the sample of individuals that Veblen observed and analyzed and the respondents who participated in this study, my main aim has been to draw some broader conclusions from the findings about how the motivations behind ostentatious consumption

activities are perceived by contemporary middle income consumers and to what extent these findings reflect, update and of course *challenge* the theoretical background of the TLC. Thereupon, following the historical and philosophical defence of Veblen's ideas in the literature review, the empirical part of this thesis can be used as grounds for *critical reflection* about the relevance of Veblenian insights for contemporary consumer society.

## **7.1 The experience of status consumption**

At the beginning of the interviews, I aimed to develop a close rapport with the participants and I began to consider how they associate the experience of observing or using commodities and status symbols with the notions of status and prestige. Previous studies on the symbolic use of luxurious brands (Dubois and Paternault, 1995; Vickers and Renand, 2003; Vingeron and Johnson, 2004; Amaldoss and Jain, 2005) centered their attention on the measurement of luxury and consequently deemphasized and almost excluded from their analysis the social and experiential aspects of status-directed consumption phenomena. For Thorstein Veblen, conspicuous consumption practices and the generation of desire was first and foremost a social process. It involves perpetual exchanges of status-signs, transactions of cultural meaning and a procedure of continuous representations of selves, commodities and actors. The propensity and quest for recognition is inherent in a process of 'sociation' and since the beginning of the interviews, my main intention was to prompt participants to describe how they recognize such social processes related to consumption phenomena. According to the phenomenological approach, the personal histories and experiences of participants were continuously oscillating from their individual understanding of

ostentation economic activities to the symbolic value of expensive products and the social display of commodities by other conspicuous consumers. Tying together and critically analyzing the interconnectedness of these three experiential backgrounds, I attempted to interpret the meaning of informants' accounts and offer a holistic examination of the perception of status consumption phenomena. The opening question for each interview was: *"Could you please describe to me a product or service that you would like to buy but that you can't afford?"* The purpose of such a question was to stimulate interviewees' experiential thinking and induce open dialogues. A variety of products and consumption activities were mentioned by the participants but subsequently the conversations focused on narratives of specific consumer experiences related to the notions of social status and prestige.

## **7.2 Financial constraints, expectations and income**

At an initial stage, the conceptualization of status symbols was expressed via the tangible, materialistic and visible features of commodities. The participants recalled desirable products and services whose purchase/possession can be viewed as unusual or excessive and offered imaginary and descriptive accounts of similar brands. For example Mike, a 32 year old office administrator, referred to the image of a 'scooter' as a product which he aspires to buy but whose cost goes beyond his financial capabilities. He explains:

Yeah, I would say something like, something that I always fancy. I mean the most that actually spent for an object for myself will be probably 250 pounds. I have never spent more than that.

So, I think that will be a scooter, an object I like would be like this and maybe spending about a 1000 pounds. But it seems a lot of money to me to spend. But, yeah, I think like a scooter or something like that for the moment.

Similar to Mike's account, some participants referred to and described the desirable purchase of a house, digital cameras, laptops, clothes or the experience of exotic holidays. More than one product or service was mentioned by few informants; however, the majority of the narratives shared a similar characteristic. After the description of the commodity or the enjoyment of the leisure experience - in the form of a short daydream, fantasy or sensory pleasure - most of the respondents underscored and concluded that their current savings do not allow for the implementation of their consumption desires. References to the color of the desirable laptop, the advantages of visiting an attractive touristic destination and the size of an ideal family house were followed by the realization of a harsh economic reality. For example Pamela, a 29 year old member of a charity company, hesitatingly explained:

I would like to buy....more clothes I think...if I had the money... Everyday clothes, a few night things, but mainly just everyday kind of clothing, just a pair of jeans or maybe buy some nice new trainers or something like that. Cause trainers are quite...the trainers I like are quite expensive...so if I want to buy a new pair of trainers I have to save up for them, rather just going down in town and say, ah...I like them, I will buy them. I wouldn't probably do that. Only, if I had the money, I would get a bit mad in clothes and shoes and handbags.

Scott is a 27 year old consultant who associated his 'real' (or ideal) personality and the purchase of a desirable car with his current salary and working conditions:

I personally believe that the car says something about the person who drives it. At the moment I drive a Fiesta so, I don't think that it describes my personality...the best I am looking for is an AZ4 (BMW). I didn't have a car for long time. So it is all relevant to the circumstances. Because if I can afford and get a good salary, I will buy a new car.

Scott's aspiration is mainly connected with public and visible consumption and it is driven by social needs and considerations. Like Scott, the majority of the participants pointed out that a brand new car perfectly exemplifies and demonstrates an ideal product that they cannot afford. Famous brands and features of the specific cars were also mentioned by other informants.

I would like a new car...A Nissan Figaro. Well, it is a retro car, it is an old car but with a new engine. Like all the inside is new and nice but it still got that nice like old-fashioned, and so the engine is good cause it is new. (Megan, 28)

A fast car, like a sports car. Something like a sporty Mercedes. Four doors for the kids and stuff. Also a bigger house, luxurious. That's really what I want. (Samantha, 28).

Second to cars, the desirable purchase of a house as personal property was emphasized by the participants. Following their narratives, the possession of cars and houses aims to satisfy their prime objective of gaining economic independence from financial institutions (loans were mentioned) and offer a long-term sense of security. Once more, economic constraints monopolized participants' stories, who employed the terms 'expensive' and the phrase 'maybe in the future', disclosing and indicating a long gestation period of expectations and desires and a sense of impatience or disappointment. The area of consumer fantasy, either product or service-related, has been marginalized by consumer behaviour theory on the grounds of invalid primary data (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Nonetheless, the modern consumer finds a method of escapism and temporary aesthetic relief in the pleasure of imaginative hedonism and fantasizing. As Campbell (1987) argued, the construction of day-dream illusions (rather than fantasies) related to pleasure has a short duration, taking into account the intense every-day activities and work obligations in contemporary Western societies. The mixture of fantasy with reality, producing an imaginary consumption activity of commodities or experiences, is violently and consciously interrupted by pragmatism and the acknowledgment of financial constraints. For Veblen (1899), the members of the aristocratic classes not only possessed the time for extravagant fantasies but their economic superiority offered them the opportunity to realize and implement such daydreams. Displaying the accumulation of (possibly inherited) wealth, extravagant experiences and leisure, gradually, they were establishing some socio-economic boundaries for the aspirants of a 'leisure' class lifestyle. Unlimited leisure can welcome daydreams and fantasies without the possibility of being interrupted by the necessities of everyday productive and industrial life. On the contrary, the majority of participants hesitatingly illustrated desirable products and services; however, with certainty,

they recognized how the sphere of production and incomes becomes the starting point for the materialization of their desires and consumption fantasies. Following Veblen and Baudrillard, consumption both as an individualized and social process does not gain autonomy from economic and productive relations and also does not escape from the activity of workmanship and the use-value of commodities. Participants reflected a homogenization of similar needs, related to housing and means of transportation, and simultaneously associated their aspirations and ‘upper’ needs with the accumulation of economic resources. Thomas, a 34 year old marketing manager referred to the significance of resources for the purchase of a bigger house.

Hmm, possibly a bigger house. Hmm, but again for me it is a pretty functional service. I think, it is no urgent need, really. I think that obviously is price limiting and to afford at that moment. You could choose differently if you had more resources. I think you can look at what your income and resources are and you choose, accordingly. That means...the decision to have more expensive items...you choose accordingly to what you have.

Income considerations and availability of resources standardized the totality of the accounts and gave the impetus for further investigation of status consumption, social display and generation of desires. It must be mentioned that many of the participants hesitated or felt uncomfortable to elaborate on their lack of economic resources and after the opening questions the discussion moved to the generic perception of status-directed consumption phenomena expressed by other people.

### **7.3 Status consumption and the theory of the ‘busy’ class**

Conspicuous leisure and consumption can be seen as sociological processes of symbolic communication and the display of commodities has been the main vehicle of ostentatious economic activities. As Veblen argued, the exhibition of female prisoners and slaves was superseded by the possession and display of weapons and during the ‘Gilded Age’ expensive clothes served as the essential marks of pecuniary strength and participation in aristocratic circles. The period of Fordism induced the alignment of mass production and mass consumption but the low cost and reliability of the iconic T-Model could not secure the survival of identical and one-dimensional cars between the post-war period and the oil crisis of 1973 (Aldridge, 2003). Cars of aesthetic superiority, diverse colours and stylistic elegance were manufactured and turned into conveyors of symbolic meaning related to social distinction and prestige. As Bauman (1998) argued, in modern post-industrial societies, the possession and exhibition of automobiles involves an introvert symbolic rivalry for distinction, status and social differentiation through the meaning of object. Most participants recalled and described expensive cars as symbols of social status and distinction. For example, Mike recalled and reproduced the experience of observing the image of a luxurious car the previous day and Thomas referred to world-famous automobile industries whose products reflect ostentatious expenditure, style and prestige.

I think, I was just thinking about cars actually. Just recently. I mean just yesterday when I went to London and with my girlfriend we spot someone driving a particularly nice car. A think it was

a flash BMW convertible car. And I remember the assumption that she was a very wealthy person. So, I would say so yeah big status symbols are things like cars really. And also some fashion items. The clothing that people wear and things like that. (Mike, 32)

Probably, a house and car. Yeah, Lexus or something like that. A BMW or Mercedes or other sports cars... like Porsche. (Thomas, 34)

More interviewees recalled images of cars and named specific brands as contemporary indicators of social status. The visibility of a car, as means of public transportation, its size, colour and country of origin were mentioned as the most prominent factors that facilitate the ascription of social standing. Clara, a 27 year old environmental project manager described how the large size and formal colour of a strong vehicle like a jeep can signify to an observer images of affluence and high income and George, a 29 year old customer service operator went even further to suggest how the acquisition of an expensive car contributes to the advancement of social positioning, confirming Bauman's observations of the emulation and antagonism amongst middle-class consumers. The image of a Mercedes Benz discloses economic superiority, social climbing and personal success as aspects related to the personality of its possessor.

Hmmm, a car definitely. Cause it is something everybody can see. One thing would be the car that you drive. It is visible. If I saw somebody for example driving a Mercedes S Class, which is a car for business executives or very quite high up and is not a cheap car, certainly not a cheap car, to buy it or to show it. And if I saw them driving a Mercedes C class, then you know I

assume they aren't young adult professionals, then maybe I think they are not on the bottom of the ladder, you know just starting out. So, to me indicates how...maybe how far you have gone up in the ladder and how far you have gone in life. (George, 29)

In a similar manner, Scott suggested that the possession of a specific brand discloses information about someone's socio-economic status and possible working environment. An Audi A4 car indicates a prosperous economic background; nonetheless, the display of a big jeep outdoes the previous standards and demonstrates the participation in the 'higher pillars of the society'.

I will suggest an Audi A4, that indicates that you work in some sort of business environment. You are middle class or above and that is general about the A4 drivers. You certainly do it OK. And big jeeps. I think they are a different level of social status. They are a truly wanted level. Look at me. That level. And that's why you see mothers and their children driving around them and you know, it's their husbands who bought them or footballers. That's the people who can afford them and they wanna be, you know, higher pillars in society and in the fashionable sense. (Scott, 27)

Scott experiences a social arena where material excess and display of expensive and stylish road vehicles defines hierarchical levels of status and to some extent conspicuous leisure. For Veblen, conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption manifest themselves as social phenomena where social stratification exists. Living, observing and writing in a pre-

Fordist period, Veblen did not experience the surfeit of automobiles, as characteristic symbols of status in America from the 1950s and beyond, but originally and provocatively synthesized the interconnectedness of labouring, pecuniary strength and social class positioning. Apart from the features of the desirable cars, participants highlighted terms like ‘affluence’, ‘wealthy person’ and ‘cheap car’ according to the working activities and socio-economic background of the owners’ of luxurious products. With only two exceptions, the majority of informants refrained from experiencing and connecting status symbols with specific social classes, classifying individuals primarily according to income. Nevertheless, as we can notice in the following sections the personal and working achievements of the conspicuous consumers emerged as the most important indicators for the attribution of social status.

### **7.3.1 Ostentation, achievements and prestige**

It becomes noticeable that in the beginning of the interviews, the acquisition, visibility, size and quality of luxurious cars were acknowledged as signs of status. Participants’ accounts of the possession of these commodities seem to be consistent with many studies which elucidate how status symbols become part of the social identities of consumers (Veblen, 1899; Levy, 1959; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). Informants’ preliminary accounts confirm the fact that the ostentation of a luxury car conveys information about an individual’s level of wealth and social standing. Nonetheless, afterwards the informants questioned the authenticity and “origins” of prestige by critically approaching and discussing the owners’ financial competence and how this relates to their socio-cultural

background. Mike, who previously recalled the observation of a convertible BMW car in the streets of London, commented about the phenomenal status of its owner.

The assumption was that she had money. She was a very wealthy person. You don't need to categorize them as having money, but it have borrowed an HP or loan payment or anything like that. We kind of gifted them with status just through them driving around that way assuming that they had money, that they had wealth. Just the object was their possession really.

Similarly, Thomas offered an analogous assumption as regards the origins of the economic resources for the purchase of a status symbol.

The owners try to indicate social status. Whether they have it... it could be that they borrowed money or took big loans to buy this car. So it is just an indicator. And they probably have that status but it is the symbol, it doesn't mean that they have achieved that status.

More respondents gave similar explanations and I identified obvious parallels between their reflections. The experience of observing an expensive and high quality car, materializing itself as a status symbol, is followed by the assumptions about the procedure of the purchase. Social status considerations are transmitted from the lavish features of the object to the identity of the owner, whose occupation, achievements and socio-cultural background captured respondents' imagination. As Thompson, Locander and Polio (1990) argued, phenomenological descriptions seek to coalesce participants' lived experiences

with the contexts which synthesize the background of the experience. Illustrating the famous figure/ground metaphor of a double perspective, the authors discussed and underlined the multiplicity of contexts embodied within an experience. According to the narratives and personal stories of my participants, the initial focal awareness of a high-priced and stylish car (as a status symbol) suddenly recedes into the background of the story since the identity of the conspicuous consumer becomes the central aspect of the participant's life-world experience. Critical assumptions about the attribution of social status to the possessors of wealth were also expressed by Samantha who explicitly referred to issues of wealth and affluence deriving both from loan and inheritance.

...if he has worked hard then I will have even more respect for that person because he started from scratch and got into what he got. If it is on loan then I am not impressed. Not impressed, because I could get a car on loan for example. It doesn't impress me. The same with the house, if you live in a house that is completely fully on loan then I am not going to be impressed. I can do that. So, it's about working hard and getting to the top with your own powers, not living with loads of debt. You have got what you got because you worked hard. Inheritance, you can feel bad about that but that is your luck you know... You can't help it, you take it.

Samantha indicated that the level of income itself serves as a satisfactory, but not unique, indicator of status consumption. Workmanship and desire for upward social mobility epitomize two essential features for the ascription of social status. The status symbol, in the form of a prestigious car or bigger apartment, signifies only the means for a seductive and 'superior' social image. Commodities of affluence do not only indicate competitive display

but also establish and enhance social relationships as signifiers of human activity (Veblen, 1899; Levy, 1959; Baudrillard, 1970/1998). Samantha positioned the functionality of expensive products and comfortable domestic spaces on the back of her experiential background and described status consumption as an expression of the individual's productive forces and everyday activities. As Douglas and Isherwood (1979) argued, material wealth and its display can be translated as 'information of passing events' and a process of cultural communication. Participants' accounts divulge craving for more information and details about the personal histories of socially-driven consumers and owners of expensive products in general. Samantha's perception of inheritance and hereditary wealth considerably differs from Veblen's remarks on the seductiveness of conspicuous leisure as the utmost mark of higher social standing and success. Possession of inherited wealth signifies for Samantha a passive process attributed to 'luck', whilst status considerations should be pregnant with activity, risk and one's willingness to thrive in the occupational and social spheres of his/her life. At this point, the object and its features have been removed from a participant's life-world experience and a person to person understanding became the central theme of participants' accounts. Accordingly, in the following section, I will discuss how the respondents drew a distinction between the notion of materialistic luxury and the idea of prestige related to someone's achievements and social background.

### **7.3.2 The difference between luxury consumption and prestige**

In line with Packard (1959) and Galbraith (1987), anonymity, impersonal relations and social isolation prompt and stimulate multiple comparisons amongst status-sensitive consumers, who are exposed to a wider consumption-led environment. Extending Veblen's

observations on the competitive and aggressive nature of consumption practices, Baudrillard (1981) argued that the social arena in the post-modern marketplace continuously reproduces consumers' needs in an exponential, dynamic and competitive manner. The interrelation of objects and needs creates a system of communication for individuals whose possessions indicate, amongst other things, social status. The visibility of expensive products, such as luxurious cars, offers a superficial status experience, which gradually led participants to draw status/luxury distinctions based on the owner's ability to "build" rather than "buy" his social positioning. The description of the status-experience has been transcended from the object-person relationship to the examination of one's personality. Informants referred to a status system wherein prestige adheres primarily to the achievements of individuals and luxury to the qualities of status symbols. Participants showed willingness to personify social status and referred to the achievements and personal characteristics of individuals whom they regarded as prestigious. For example, George narrated below his meeting with a Chief Executive Manager:

This guy was high on the ladder. Hmm...I know a few...I met some...One of my relatives is a sales manager for Halifax. So, one of the companies that he is dealing with owned a group of restaurants, and they had restaurants all over the place, all over the UK, even as far as Spain as well. And once we had one of the opening events in the city centre along with my cousin, it was an event that he was invited to, and he introduced me to the head of the company. They call him Senior. He was very... suited and booted, very...you know if you turn on the TV and you see politicians very clean, well-groomed person. The senior, it was chatting away, he met many people, lots of eyes on him...

Later on, George recalled the personal appearance of the esteemed head of the company, laying emphasis on the quality and excellence of his clothes and the assumption behind his deep tan.

I remember his clothes...Again he looked suited and booted and well-groomed. He is maybe the kind of person who gets into the press machine every morning (laugh) doesn't bother doing anything himself. You know, there wasn't one hair out of the place, that kind of thing, he also looked quite...hmmm...quite tanned. I have expected that he travels quite a lot. And his suit didn't look second to anybody else's, it looked pretty much nice.

The symbolic power of status symbols, expressed via an elegant suit and well-refined excellent grooming, supplements but does not overshadow an individual's achievements and everyday performance. Actually, the display of expensive items and status symbols adorn and liven up the personal portrait of the main actor. George's description of experiencing a specific prestigious individual did not materialize itself within a world of objects but it took place in a social setting, wherein the individual had to act. According to Goffman (1959), a system of status symbolism sets a stage for a continuous communication game with social interactions both to compete and collaborate. Individuals are actors and Goffman (1959:22) defined their performance as "the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers." Conspicuous consumption activities and the display of status symbols categorize individuals, maintain solidarity within social groups and provide directions for someone's social placement. Similarly, and surrounded by a

crowd of people, the performer, in George's story the CEO of a company, denotes a distinct social standing by preserving a socially acceptable presentation and transforming his expressions into an activity which enhances his social category. But George, as an active observer, is not pleased only with the dramaturgical image of the performer. A series of assumptions and associations follow the initial experience, with the deep tan suggesting professional hyper-activity, mobility and business meetings while the appearance of the face implies advanced and possibly expensive grooming services. The actor stands out of the crowd and his clothes look superior compared to everyone else's. However, following George's experience, the placement at the top of the social order via clothes and mannerism is preceded by the actor's categorization in the professional/business hierarchy. Status symbols cannot be ignored and are embedded to a great extent in the personal experience; nonetheless, the actual attribution of status stems from the past, via the historicity of someone's achievements and accomplishments. Clara offered few examples of individuals which she perceives as prestigious and worthwhile of attributing social status:

I admire artists, I admire musicians or poets or writers because they have a skill for life. They are not trying to be someone or something or certainly a product. Not someone like Simon Cowell!!! But I have no admiration for someone who....that is someone purely for the money, like big businesses. Big corporations. My friend has to work in the construction industry and I don't agree with that, cause it is trying to build on prime land. Like far away places, beautiful places. And he is trying to sell it to me as being a good thing. He works because they have an environmental sector. It is just big businesses trying to fit a nice picture on it, you know. Something good doesn't come from it. It is just money-making at the end of the day...

Initially, Clara illustrated the notion of prestige with the productive and artistic qualities of musicians and writers, and afterwards, she expressed a critical disposition towards the business-culture and how the extravagant lifestyles of executives are shaped by entrepreneurial profits. She recalled the industry where her friend is employed as a sector superficially concerned with environmental issues, which on the other hand, contributes to the industrialization of everyday life seeking to maximize profits. Ethical concerns characterize Clara's account experiencing prestige as a reflection of quality, superior knowledge in a subject and moral stance towards social life. Such intangible values of status are conceived away from the realm of objects and their symbolic value can be associated with Bourdieu's (1984) notion of cultural capital as the means of expressing artistic and cultural related qualities. Diving into Clara's experiential context, it becomes obvious that the quality and visibility of possessions are marginalized by the personal features and ethical behaviour of a person. Esther, a 34-year old customer advisor described her own archetypes of social status below:

I don't think prestige is necessarily about income or wealth. For instance, I will say Richard Branson or Alan Sugar and self made people, built their business and reputation from nothing. They are completely different, aren't they? I think when I say self-made businessmen or women, because they worked very very hard for it and they are very savvy. They have worked very hard for what they got. And it takes a lot of determination to do that. And that's what I think. I don't think that income is necessarily prestigious.

Scott also offered a 'holistic' perspective on the perception of a prestigious person based on his/her achievements and overall contribution to society:

It is not about what they got, it is about what they contribute and...it is about their education. It is about who they are. How hard they worked. And what they give to society. That's how I personally see prestigious.

The personification of prestige via self-made and successful businessmen and famous artists epitomized most of the participants' narratives and description of experiences. An intangible and biographical overtone was synthesizing the perception of social status with the acquisition and display of inherited wealth to play a secondary role, challenging Veblen's theory. Gradually, the conversation with the majority of the participants focused on the differences between the notions of social status and luxury. Mike described the connotation of the term prestige as followed:

I think you could have some things regarded as being prestigious which wouldn't necessarily have a material value. They maybe achieve that status through other reasons, through history, through associations with other things... I think that is not just wealth. I think prestige is having a kind of, a class of knowledge of your consumer goods, prestigious items. It doesn't have to do with material wealth and possessions, it is something else built into that product or that good that you are actually purchasing.

Similarly, Megan, a 28 year old research technician, recalled and mentioned her recent luxurious dinner as an extravagant activity.

I associate prestigious with like being old and having history, whereas luxurious could be like a dinner that I had recently.

The association of prestigious items with ‘historical value’, ‘reputation’ and ‘past achievements’ added a socio-historical dimension to the experiential aspects of social status. The participants prioritized *the process of achieving status* compared to the monetary, utilitarian and exchange value of status symbols. The findings indicate that consuming for status becomes an ongoing and dynamic process where both actors (owners of objects) and observers (participants) dynamically participate. However, the observers are less interested in the object *per se* but seek to evaluate objects’ status symbolism according to owners’ creative qualities and work accomplishments. The owner should strive to maintain and expand those features so as to retain the prestige connotation in the future. For the participants, the process of assigning status value to a product is infiltrated through imaginary speculation about the possessor’s activities and especially considerations about his/her everyday activities. Baudrillard (1998) positioned the analysis of signs and everyday life within a broader socio-historical framework where the expression of consumption practices and luxury interweaves with status considerations and together they play an increasingly important role in the active reproduction of consumption and perception of status symbols. Additionally, whilst Veblen has been criticized (Campbell, 1987) for ascribing conspicuous consumption exclusively to aggressive and competitive displays of wasteful and extravagant commodities, his account below highlights the

honorific and historical features of reputable objects. Commenting on commodities such as gold, clothing and landscape paintings, Veblen argued that:

“the utility of these things to the possessor is commonly due less to their intrinsic beauty than to the honour which their possession and consumption confers, or to the obloquy which it wards off.” (Veblen, 1899: 72).

Apart from “sensuous beauty” and “material qualification”, Veblen argued that objects confer to their possessors’ honour, elegance and esteem. Similarly, the responses distinguished the difference between “the material, utilitarian and monetary values” of luxurious items and the historical progression upon which prestige has to be gained. A dialectical consideration between static/active characteristics of the status consumption construct begins to emerge here. As Holbrook (1999) notes, individuals desire to achieve higher social rankings through consumption activities which produce a dynamic and complex series of personal efforts, interpersonal relations, product symbolism and theatrical display. Eventually, most of the participants reduced the acquisition and social presentation of luxurious possessions into the realm of the stereotypical activity of purchase that aims to satisfy ephemeral and hedonistic needs:

Luxury is just something like you can buy if you want...and you don’t necessarily need it. But prestige is more like you earn something. (Helen, 29)

Luxury is something that you don’t even need but you have, prestige is something that you work for. (Katherine, 34)

Luxury is just something that you...you can just buy....something that you can buy and give to yourself, you don't have to earn it. But you have to be exceptional in many ways to earn a prestigious image. (Clara, 28)

Through the analysis of their answers, it becomes evident that a productive outlook on everyday life activities emerges as the primary criterion for social distinction and recognition versus the tangible and materialistic aspects of luxury. Participants' accounts seem to challenge Veblen's observations about the attribution of status to the members of the leisure class who displayed their social superiority through inherited wealth. Status consumption is experienced primarily through working accomplishments and distinctive qualities such as education and mannerisms; two features which explicitly relate to Bourdieu's (1984) notion of cultural capital as an accumulated stock of knowledge about artistic events and cultural activities. On the other hand, the perception of the notion of luxury was expressed through materialistic tendencies, buying activities such as the purchase of expensive services, special treats for someone and overall via examples of tangible and material culture. The interrelationships between the notion of luxury-brands, the perception of status-directed individuals and their everyday actions are going to be discussed in the following section and subsequently associated with the writings of Thorstein Veblen.

## **7.4 Conspicuous consumption and the instinct of workmanship**

In the literature review of this thesis, I attempted to examine the adoption and critical discussion of Veblen's ideas in the TLC by a plethora of scholars. Eschewing to repeat the findings of the discussion, I have identified two major facts as an outcome of the (mis)interpretation of Veblen's ideas: a) Veblen's comments and observations on the sybaritic, status enhancing and emulatory consumption has been understood as a painstaking critique to neoclassical economic ideas and the wastefulness of the American upper classes; and b) the popularity and universality of the term 'conspicuous consumption' has eclipsed almost any other argument and insight suggested in his work. Bearing in mind the period and context wherein Veblen produced his work, the majority of economists of consumer demand interpreted the central meaning of the TLC as an outdated treatise on the distinction between functional and status-enhancing consumption, product symbolism and socially-driven buying activities. Apart from commenting on the cultural foundations of modern consumption, Veblen expanded and enriched his anthropocentric view of modern individuals combining the interpretation of the 'instinct of workmanship' with socially-motivated phenomena and ostentatious consumption. As expected, Veblen did not include the term 'leisure' accidentally in the title of his book and throughout his academic career developed a research agenda extremely occupied with the dynamics between productive forces and material culture as we can see below.

#### **7.4.1 The Instinct of workmanship and material culture**

Veblen showed an interest in the socio-economic aspects of workmanship and leisure activities early in his academic career. In 1898, he published a paper entitled '*The Instinct of Workmanship and the Iirksomeness of Labor*' (Veblen, 1898) as a treatise on the changing perception of human agency and workmanship by individuals and the newly-formulated science of economics. He wrote on human intentionality:

“Like other animals, man is an agent that acts in response to stimuli afforded by the environment in which he lives. Like other species, he is a creature of habit and propensity. But in a higher degree than other species, man mentally digests the content of the habits under whose guidance he acts, and appreciates the trend of these habits and propensities. He is in an eminent sense an intelligent agent. By selective necessity he is endowed with a proclivity for purposeful action.” (Veblen, 1898: 188)

Building his arguments on a broad, rather than narrow, post-Darwinian platform of social and psychological phenomena (Patsiaouras and Fitchett, 2009), Veblen argued that human intentionality represents a capacity widely developed throughout human evolution. Humans, as agents themselves, seek to observe the activity [and productivity] of their fellow men:

“They like to see others spend their life to some purpose, and they like to reflect that their own life is of some use. All men have this quasi-aesthetic sense of economic or industrial merit, and to this sense of economic merit futility and inefficiency are distasteful. In its positive expression it is an impulse or instinct of workmanship; negatively it expresses itself in a deprecation of waste.

...Under the guidance of this taste for good work, men are compared with one another and with the accepted ideals of efficiency, and are rated and graded by the common sense of their fellows according to a conventional scheme of merit and demerit...The visible achievement of one man is, therefore, compared with that of another, and the award of esteem comes habitually to rest on an invidious comparison of persons instead of on the immediate bearing of the given line of conduct upon the approved end of action. (Veblen, 1898: 195-197).”

For Veblen “instincts are the prime movers in human behaviour” (Veblen, 1914:1) and innate tendencies of the human mind (Jensen, 1987; Cordes, 2005), with the instinct of workmanship - since the second stage of barbarism - developed as one of the most fundamental features of human nature that offers reason for purposeful action, guidance to man’s decisions and becomes a criterion for the ascription of esteem and status in the community. Despite the fact that his psychological observations can be considered as narrow and outdated in contemporary terms, his observations regarding the importance of workmanship for the ascription of status is of central importance for this sub-chapter of the thesis and directly relates to participants’ perception of prestige. As an activity, workmanship is oriented towards usefulness to the ends of life and like any other habit, instinct or propensity follows an evolutionary path. For Veblen, workmanship began with primitive tool-using activities, it progressed and evolved through the craftsmanship of ‘industrial employments’ and, as it was systematically analyzed in *‘The instinct of workmanship and the state of the industrial arts’* (Veblen, 1914), a modern expression of the instinct can be found in the ‘captains of industry’, businessmen and entrepreneurs.

“Any pecuniary strategist – “captain of industry” – who manages to engross appreciably more than an even share of the community’s wealth is therefore likely to be rated as a benefactor of the community at large and an exemplar of social virtues; whereas the man who works and does not manage to divert something more from the aggregate product to his own use than what one man’s work may contribute to it is visited not only with dispraise for having fallen short of a decent measure of efficiency but also with moral reprobation for shiftlessness and wasted opportunities.” (Veblen, 1914: 217).

The quasi-aesthetic sense of economic work induces comparison amongst men in terms of efficiency, merit and social standing. Analogous perceptions were expressed by the majority of participants who attached honour and social approval to individuals who are capable of demonstrating work achievements and a successful professional life. Observing the image and lifestyles of prominent businessmen (captains of industry), Veblen suggested that their work qualities, efficiency and (ultimately) accumulation of wealth introduces high-quality social standards in the eyes of the community and accentuates the failure of lost opportunities and wasteful consumption of time. However, wealth can be translated here as an extension of someone’s productive qualities, as a justified and socially-accepted reward and outcome of outstanding performance. Similarly, participants’ life-world experiences of status consumption favoured and distinguished the archetypes of ‘doers’ and individuals who achieved hyperbolic affluence after assiduous efforts. The ownership, accumulation and display of possessions is habitually the end of the race but the majority of the participants focused their interest and life-stories firstly on the progression of building prestige and afterwards on the material comforts offered by the acquisition of goods.

Veblen argued that the combination of workmanship with ownership and affluence *should* signify to the observer and members of the community seductive lifestyles and higher socio-economic status. Inevitably, activities such as emulation and imitative consumption follow:

‘But it is workmanship combined and compounded with ownership; that is to say workmanship coupled with invidious emulation and consequently with a system of institutions embodying a range of prescriptive differential benefits.’ (Veblen, 1914: 204).

Nonetheless, Veblen’s theory on the instinct of workmanship came to its final form after the publication of the TLC and his observations were mostly applied to the perception of emerging businessmen by working and middle class individuals. A ‘busy’ class theory, as a complement to the TLC, was suggested:

“The businessman is discussed under the caption ‘entrepreneur’, ‘undertaker’...and he is conceived as an expert workman in charge of the works, a superior foreman of the shop, and his gains are accounted a remuneration for his creative contribution to the process of production, due to his superior insight and initiative in technological matters...Probably, no class of men have ever bent more unremittingly to their work than the modern business community. Within the business community there is properly speaking no leisure class, or at least no idle class. In this respect there is a notable contrast between the business community and the landed interest....The business

community is hard at work and there is no place in it for anyone who is unable or unwilling to work at the high tension of the average...” (Veblen, 1914: 227)

Veblen’s use of terms such as ‘instincts’, ‘habits’, ‘proclivities’, ‘propensities’, ‘bents’ have produced a terminological confusion and prompted primarily sociologists to describe his work and psychology as narrow, unfashionable and unsophisticated (Diggins, 1999). Nonetheless, these justified critiques fail to comprehend the positioning of Veblen’s individual between natural/evolutionary and cultural forces and Veblen’s dichotomy between man’s institutional conformity and instinctual drives has also been neglected (Patsiaouras and Fitchett, 2009). The phenomenon of workmanship, similar to conspicuous consumption practices, follows an evolutionary path and in line with Veblen (1914) in industrial societies found expression in the expertise of technological skills and the adoption of technocratic views. Even if he always avoided offering teleological views and frequently criticized the capitalistic tendencies and antagonism amongst members of emerging business class<sup>14</sup>, Veblen considered that “highly trained technological experts and engineers” were more likely to overcome the refined meta-barbarism of the capitalist system by rejecting business culture, expressing the most creative aspects of workmanship and subverting the principles of individual ownership so as gradually embrace socialism (Edgell, 2001). Although Veblen’s prophesy and generalizations concerning engineers as the active reformers of the capitalist industrial system were never fulfilled, his admiration and high appraisal of workmanship is shared nowadays by middle income members of post-industrial societies, as the findings have suggested. However, for Veblen the notion

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<sup>14</sup> Veblen (1899:209) considered the so-called captains of industry as members of a sybaritic leisure class, whose relation to industry was one “of acquisition, not of production; of exploitation, not of serviceability”.

and the ideal of workmanship embodied and communicated radical political meaning. It was threatening the accumulation of individual ownership by the few, together with wasteful consumption practices and leisure activities, given that workmanship qualities emphasized cooperation rather than competition and ruthless antagonism, equality and creative expression of one's qualities rather than subordination and symbolic exploitation [and domination] of commodities by the members of the upper and leisure class (Veblen, 1914, 1899). Of course, there is a huge divergence between what Veblen conceived as the ideal and prevailing instincts of individuals and the modern perception of competition and collaboration amongst working and middle classes and definitely its discussion lies outside the scope of this study. A comparative brief look between Veblen's and participants' ascription of social status based on working achievements and symbolic display of wealth follows in the section below.

## **7.5 Occupational prestige and consumption**

The mass consumption following the World War II raised the income and purchasing powers of working and middle class families by 30 per cent (Coontz, 1992; Patterson, 1996) and as a result many wage-earning families strived to upgrade their social standing according to middle income status categories (Lichtenstein, 1989). Subsequently, for the working class families, the move to suburbs and the purchase of household appliances, refrigerators and automobiles became routine and the means of establishing their participation in the aspiring middle-class communities and also signifying social assimilation (Potter, 1954; Riesman, 1961; Galbraith, 1987). A 'more is better' ideology

was flourishing and reflected the aesthetic ideals of workers around the country. The unexpected co-existence and amalgamation of blue-collar and white-collar workers (geographically and socially) exhorted intellectuals, public-policy makers and mostly politicians to announce the erosion of class identities and the hypothetical commencement of a classless society. The automobile industry was quick to react to the rising working-class purchasing power and promote larger sizes and vivid colours to the 'more is better' taste of the emerging consumer (Patton, 1992). Also, motivational researchers recognized that the 'episodic' and provisional flat class equality will foster the middle class consumer's status anxiety and the design of sophisticated status symbols will intensify economic and cultural mobility (Martineau, 1957; Levy, 1959). The working versus business class dualistic understanding, an idea taken for granted by social scientists, was rejected by the sociologist Lloyd Warner who skilfully interweaved occupation, income and consumption practices as indicators of social status (Warner and Lund, 1941; Warner, et. al. 1949). From the 1960s onwards, more studies associated status-anxieties with the triadic system of occupation/income/consumption and the educational qualifications (especially Master's degrees) began to play an increasingly important role in the ascription of prestige. For the following decades, in the service-led American economy of mass consumption, occupational status will rise as one of the most important components of social status by synthesizing position in work-related structures and hierarchies with the power, income and educational requirements (Packard, 1959; Riesman, 1961; Featherman and Hauser, 1976; Schooler and Schoenbach, 1994; Wright, 1996). The notion of occupational status positions individuals within social structures as a marker of access to social networks, resources, income, educational level and a safe living environment. Additionally, rewards and prizes related to working performance and work achievements contribute to the boosting of one's

occupational prestige. As Bauman (1998) argues, the social status ascribed to work is evaluated according to aesthetic criteria which elevate specific professions, distinguish the performance of a particular job according to how ‘interesting’ it is and rank someone’s social standing in society:

“Work that is rich in gratifying experience, work as self-fulfillment, work as the meaning of life, work as the core or the axis of everything that counts, as the source of pride, self-esteem, honour and deference or notoriety, in short, work as *vocation*, has become the privilege of the few; a distinctive mark of the elite, a way of life the rest may watch in awe, admire and contemplate at a distance but experience only vicariously through pulp fiction and the virtual reality of televised docu-drama’s. That rest is given no chance of living through their jobs in a way the vocations are lived.” (Bauman, 1998; 34)

Referring to the ‘flexible labour market’ of England, Bauman argues that for the majority of the workers ‘vocation’ in work, instead of routine, is only the exception and it is experienced through the achievements of stardom culture: like actors, self-made businessmen, TV personas and top athletes. Similarly, many participants associated the perception of prestige with ‘top’ professionals, celebrities and individuals who stand out from the crowd through their achievements. Of course, the totality of informants belongs to a flexible and insecure employment environment of the new economy of fluid and changing organizational structures. After the 1970s, in Britain, extreme fragmentation characterized the field of class structuring and issues of employment began to gain prominence in the exploration of the processes of class formation (Crompton, 1996). Following the oil crisis

of 1979, the turbulent economic climate led to the decline of industries and the immediate reaction of trade unions. The collapse of manufacturing and increasing privatization induced a sharp rise in unemployment. A service-driven economy - similar to the American in the mid 1950s - was coming into view and traditional working class employment (like coalmining) not only declined but also prompted increased individuation in the lower socio-economic groups (Beatson, 1995). As Crompton (2008) argues, in the mid-1990s onwards, a huge wave of flexible, part-time jobs, self-employment and non-standard employment dominated the English labour market. Such a post-Fordist environment expanded the idea of service work, created and reflected economies of 'signs and space' and destabilized the distinction between 'consumers' and 'producers.' (Giddens, 1990; Bockock, 1993; Lash and Urry, 1994). A broad, instable and fluid 'middle class' of managerial, administrative occupations and service employees characterizes the social positioning of many British individuals nowadays and consumption reflects the distinct economic reality within different sections of the middle class (Featherstone, 1987; Featherstone, 1991; Goldthorpe, 1996; Savage, 2007). Supporting Bourdieu's (1984) views about the economic and aesthetic criteria of social distinction, we view that social status considerations oscillate between occupational accomplishments, economic robustness together with display of possessions, and a sophisticated taste reflected by cultural consumption activities.

Through the analysis of participants' answers, it can be concluded that a creative outlook on the experience of everyday life and, subsequently, conspicuous consumption of economic resources emerges as the main criterion for social status. The notion of prestige

was expressed with a more intangible and honourable connotation compared to the excessive features of luxurious products and services, which provide only a momentary and superficial representation of excess and glamour, but not sufficient information for the attribution of social status. Following the discussion above, I drew a parallel between the findings and Veblen's distinction of the "instinct of workmanship" as the moral indicator of social status compared to a waste of economic resources and luxury consumption. Veblen drew such distinctions between the "habit of wastefulness" and the "instinct of workmanship" and their impact on the attribution of social status. Adopting a critical perspective on extravagant consumption and wasteful activities of his contemporaries, Veblen considered that in modern societies the "instinct of workmanship" "...begins aggressively to shape men's views of what is meritorious, and asserts itself at least as an auxiliary canon of self-complacency" (Veblen, 1899:39). Based on his anthropological understanding of human economic behaviour, he defined the "instinct of workmanship" as a feature inherent in individuals' dispositions which directs their perceptions and actions towards material things and commodities. Similarly, participants described prestige as "*something that you have to work for*", contrary to the "wasteful" nature of luxury. Referring to the perception and classification of luxurious commodities (decoration, tapestries, silver table service, silk hats, jewellery and dress), Veblen argued that economic activity and status consumption in particular *should* be awarded according to workmanship and contribute to the advancement of everyday life and an individual's well-being:

"The indispensability of these things after the habit and the convention have been formed, however, has little to say in the classification of expenditures as waste or not waste in the technical meaning

of the word. The test to which all expenditure must be brought in an attempt to decide that point is the question whether it serves directly to enhance human life on the whole — whether it furthers the life process. For this is the basis of award of the instinct of workmanship, and that instinct is the court of final appeal in any question of economic truth or adequacy.” (Veblen, 1889: 42)

In conclusion, the findings suggest that participants conceive of status-seeking consumption activities as an active and constant quest for social honour and distinction, a view that concurs with Veblen’s ideal, moral and virtuous understanding of prestige that contributes to the “furtherance of human life”. On the other hand, the findings challenge and reject Veblen’s observations regarding the high social standing of the ‘leisure’ class and participants’ accounts reflect distaste towards unproductive consumption of time accompanied by material pleasures. The excessive and vicarious features of status symbols induce a transient experience of luxury but seem to provide inadequate information for the acknowledgment of status and reputation. While luxury is experienced via an observable and stereotypical display of eye-catching products or services, prestige emerges through the synthesis and interaction between the social reference of the status symbol, the possessor’s personal history/personality traits and the observer’s perception of both. The passage of time continuously re-evaluates the dynamic interrelations of status value for the possessor, observer and the status symbol. A triadic relation between the observer, the commodity and its possessor for the attribution of social status comes into play here and challenges previous studies focusing on a person-brand approach for the understanding of status consumption.

## **7.6 The triadic relation between consumption and social display**

The extraordinary pace of the market for luxury goods has motivated academicians and practitioners to develop a deep interest in luxury consumption research and some marketing theorists have gone even further to describe the phenomenon as the ‘democratization of luxury’ (Truong et al, 2008). Such views derive primarily from the luxury branding literature (O’ Cass and Frost, 2004; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Amaldos and Jain, 2005). For instance, Vickers and Renand (2003) attempted to explore the meaning of luxury goods by measuring the impact of two expensive products (luxurious cars and china/porcelain tableware) on consumers’ perception of status and Dubois and Paternault (1995) suggested that the power of luxury brands resides between consumers’ quest for upper quality, authenticity and social codes. It can be argued that the phenomena of luxury branding, conspicuousness and consumption have been approached from a non historical and mostly impersonal perspective, confining the perception of status consumption between the structural processes of the consumer’s awareness, the symbolic dimension of brands and the action of purchase. Overall, a two-dimensional construct comprised of luxury brands and potential customers characterizes and delimits the understanding of social status in the aforementioned studies.

As the findings suggest, the symbolic dimension and exploitation of status symbols interweaves and entangles class structuring, social struggle and interpersonal relations intending to produce *social* desire and wants. For Veblen, the conspicuous learning of archaic languages, the symbolic exchange of cultural meanings, emulation, display of leisure activities and of course public exhibition of goods offer a platform of general

collective processes where the generation of status-driven phenomena necessitates both the agency of an actor and the perception of an observer. Conspicuous consumption and material culture in the form of luxurious commodities take meaning and cause wants and desires to emerge via the sociation of the abovementioned elements, through a procedure of social collaboration and competition for the display of the 'self' to the 'other' and vice versa. These processes have always been in the core of consumer society producing and signifying dynamics of continuous re-presentation of selves, reappraisal of an individual's everyday performance and ascription of social status to actors and commodities. Consumption, conspicuousness and social desire do not constitute processes confined by the glitter of high-quality cars and an individual's rising expectations for social mobility but reside at the heart of a triadic relation between the observer, the others and the means of connoting and crystallizing status consumption superiority. Similarly, the participants argued that the attribution of status is an ongoing and incomplete experience since a series of events, theatrical actions, and social criteria perpetually change the standards not only for the conspicuous consumer but also the others. It is like participating in a social court where commodities can be used as supplementary documents after the initial proof of occupational achievements and recognition. A story of fraud, unethical behaviour or extravagant loans become factors which can easily withdraw a successful businessman, who possesses, accumulates and exhibits desirable status symbols of monetary value, from the pantheon of social recognition, honour and prestige. Participants' descriptions of experiencing status consumption illustrate a triadic social process of relatedness between the visibility of material things, observer's perceptions and references on the pre-purchase and possession of commodities. Socially-driven consumption activities aiming to secure status occur within a societal context, where desires for possessions fluctuate between

owners and observers, and yet, take concrete and substantial meaning only after the personal histories of the owner have become known. In the pages of 'The Theory of the Leisure Class', Veblen becomes the invisible observer who has *a priori* knowledge as regards the occupational, social and cultural conditions of the members of the sybaritic upper class. In the same way, for the participants, status considerations are elicited through the examination of someone's past, social background and work achievements.

The conspicuous self willingly associates with commodities and the extravagance of brands, via consumption and the display of wealth, so as to secure desirable status recognition. Its image and social performance captivates the interest and imagination of the observer and following participants' description of their life-worlds, the status experience initially focuses on the symbolic value of the product, functional qualities and price. The process of symbolic exchange produces subjectivity, desires and invidious comparison. Basically, the object itself infuses the experiential background of participants with aspirations for possessing a similar commodity, but, gradually the conspicuous self becomes the main protagonist of the experience. A BMW jeep car exhibited in a promotional campaign of the company can generate desire for the object and imaginary affiliation but such a view crystallizes first and foremost an unsocial process. Reflecting on participants' experiences of status consumption, I find that the dialectical and mutually coordinating generation of wants and desires related to prestige derive from the respective relations of the conspicuous self and the other. Nonetheless, the antagonistic tendencies express themselves in the interplay between consumption, display of commodities and work achievements. The participants challenged and questioned the attribution of social

status until adequate information on the social background and working qualities of the conspicuous self was available. Following the description of a phenomenological framework by Thompson et al (1990), we observe that the initial awareness of a status symbol suddenly moves to the background of the story since the working achievements and qualities of the conspicuous consumer become the central aspect of a participant's life-world experience. Signs, brands, assumptions, daydreams and desires synthesize and produce interpersonal preferences and status-motivated consumption contributing to the maintenance of social distinctions and possibly class hierarchies. To what extent participants perceive the relation of product-symbolism and status consumption according to an existing social hierarchy - based on the notion of social class - will be examined in detail in the following chapter of the thesis.

## Chapter 8: Moderate self-image, the others and social acceptance

Possessions can provide a positive sense of the self and also communicate a desired (and ideal) image to others (Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 1992). As Richins (1994) notes, a positive sense of self may be derived from many different sources. A whole gamut of expressed selves can stem from more socially conscious and ecologically concerned consumers to self-centered and materialistic individuals who place a higher importance on the status ascribed to their possessions. Social comparison and imitation constitute some of the main motives behind conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899; Mason, 1998) and other-directed individuals (Riesman, 1961) are more willing to conform to consumer capitalism and prevailing fashions. Elaborating on the interpersonal aspects of status consumption, I examined how participants experience and describe individuals who attempt to distinguish themselves through conspicuous economic display. Veblen's powerful critique of the neoclassical theory of consumption draws its originality from the critical representation of a hierarchy divided into groups with predetermined social roles, industrial activities and cultural habits. In the following chapter, I will attempt to explore the ways in which participants perceive status hierarchy according to consumption activities and how they experience other people's attempts to compete in social and cultural terms via their belongings and status-driven consumption habits. Earlier, I aimed to examine how the informants perceive and describe their own public image, by reversing the roles of the conspicuous self and the observer. I will also show that, overall, the informants expressed, indicated and defended a moderate consumer ethos and attributed rivalry for social status exclusively to *other people*. Participants' reluctance to elaborate on the topics of ostentatious economic display, social mobility and their own social positioning, suggested

that the notions of social class and conspicuous consumption constitute sensitive and taboo issues; thus in the final part of the research process I employed supplementary techniques so as to further explore the experience of status consumption.

### **8.1 Conspicuous consumption? No, thanks!**

In attempting to gain a deeper understanding about ostentation and status symbolism, I have already described the processes through which participants experience and judge the demonstration of status symbols and the imaginary presumptions continuously constructed in their minds. In this part of the thesis, I will attempt to comprehend how the respondents position their own self-images and these of other individuals within a stratification system that reproduces and communicates status via consumption activities. Previous research findings about the notions of the self-concept, social selves (Sirgy, 1982; Belk, 1988; Hackley and Tiwsakul, 2006) and self-view confidence (Festinger, 1954) suggest that contemporary consumers produce meaning and a sense of identity through identification with specific groups and the consumption practices of their archetypes. Dilemmas of identity can be negotiated via the acquisition and exhibition of symbolic brands which signify participation and belongingness within predetermined reference groups. Initially, the participants have been asked to express how they perceive their own self-image and to assess to what extent their public image is constructed and influenced by interpersonal and social status considerations. Thomas, a 34 year old senior marketing manager, provided the following account on this issue:

Probably, in the middle really. I wear branded clothes, because I feel more comfortable, wearing them. I wouldn't buy clothing because it is something that I have to buy or something that I can't purchase, unless it is a present from family. On clothes or grooming, I don't know...I go to the barber whenever I need that. I don't look for something expensive.

Reflecting on his self-image and consumer experiences, George a 28 year old customer service operator seems to oscillate between a modest and casual self-image and occasionally a professional appearance that fits with the requirements and the dress codes of a job interview or business meeting:

I am kind of...hmmm....flicking between paying lots of attention and paying no attention. Hmm ...so sometimes...it seems for example....if I want to sit in front of my boss or job interview or going to a new job, I am sure that I have a nice haircut, clean clothes, etc. Or, if I am just going to be around with friends then I am in the situation where I am not trying to make something out of it. However, I am aware for a job interview that you are interested in those kinds of people, so you really have to raise the opportunity to make sure that you give the right image. I can't go to my boss looking horrible. It will just make them see that I am not paying attention or concentrating.

Similarly, Helen explained that particular attention to the presentation of her personal image takes place only if it is necessary. Otherwise, she claimed that someone has to be moderate and represent his 'real' everyday self.

Probably, I am moderate...like if I go out or something like that I spend more time. But in terms of going to work I don't have to think what to wear...I want to look attractive and, every woman wants to look attractive (laugh) but I think I am just moderate...I don't pay much attention. Not more than needed. Probably, someday I see something in a magazine or something like that. And then I go to the shop looking for that. I won't do any other things.

A “moderate” consumption ethos prevailed in the accounts of most informants, who distanced themselves either from excessive and ostentatious consumption activities or apathetic stances on their self-presentation. Celebrated studies on the role of possessions as parts of the extended self (Belk, 1988), the enhancement of the self-concept and self-esteem through consumption (Sirgy, 1982) and the importance of building ‘consumption identities’ (Ahuvia, 2005) have suggested seminal insights into the processes that consumption practices assist people to define who they are; nonetheless, narratives of consumers’ status-seeking self-presentation have always been absent from the existing literature of consumer behaviour. Some transparent reasons for the complete lack of status-seeking accounts can be found firstly in the fact that the empirical approach of ostentatious economic phenomena, through the employment of questionnaires or the conduct of interviews, can be perceived as stigmatic by the majority of respondents (Campbell, 1987; Mason, 1998). Secondly, the increasing popularity and adoption from everyday discourse of the term ‘conspicuous consumption’ connotes for the majority of individuals in Western advanced economies the notions of waste, consumerism and unnecessary consumer products as it was indicated by the participants in the first part of the interview. The amoral and occasionally unethical overtone attributed to the term luxury, as a wasteful activity associated with

excess and continuous accumulation of possessions, seemed to govern and direct informants' accounts when they were prompted to relate their own image with socially-directed consumption activities. A 'moderation in all things' motto prevailed over participants' narratives of their self-presentation and simultaneously overrode and counterbalanced both lethargic concerns with someone's image along with materialistic tendencies and inclinations. Members of the family, friends and the working environment shape, to some extent, the manifestation of their social selves, but overall their public self-consciousness is counterbalanced by dressing for comfort. For example Esther a 34 year old customer advisor, referred below to the most prominent cultural and social forces shaping her consumption activities and presentation of the everyday self.

Well, I have got a very individual style really. But I like to observe things around. For example with the digital camera, the idea came from, I would buy one two years ago and I think it is great that I have never been able to replace it. And clothes-wise. Unfortunately, at my work, there are some girls who always buy Heat magazines (laugh). And on Fridays, I have to do a reception for an hour, because there is no receptionist. She is having a lunch. They leave it on the reception, and although I hate the whole celebrity thing that is going on, I will flick to the advertising section and see what people are wearing. But also, I also do have my eyes...I am also aware what someone is wearing at the same time, the whole trend. You know I won't have a pair of those boots and I will never have that pair of boots. Then it is not for me...But I will have a different kind of boots....which probably look like that pair of boots, but it is slightly different.

In her account, Esther underlined her idiographic perception of taste and the uniqueness of her consumption lifestyle. She declared that as an active observer of trends, fashions and lifestyle identities, she seeks to assimilate and blend external stimuli in the form of images with her personal predilections, creativeness and self-expressiveness. Nonetheless, she was careful to emphasize that her awareness of cultural trends and dress codes is not limited or restricted by a superfluous celebrity system that fosters consumerism and consumption archetypes. Esther provided a characteristically ‘conspicuous’ explanation about how she gained access to the nit-picking magazines and attributed both the purchase of the magazine and interest into commercial and celebrity culture to her colleagues. It can be identified here the participant’s willingness to disengage her image not only from a personal lifestyle related to luxury and conspicuousness but also from the notions of materialism and consumerism suffused in celebrity magazines, advertising strategies and TV programmes. Similar to previous accounts, Esther adopts moderate and reasonable buying decisions and explains how her choices are influenced by her occupational identity and working environment:

..I think that you have to change your wardrobe. Because you have to meet people, you are in business, in meetings etc etc. One of the first things I will do next month, when I get my money, is to go out and buy a brand new wardrobe. Because it is...the way that people perceive you within your working environment it is the way they take you, the way that you look at work and if you go to work dressed very very smartly and seriously, people tend to perceive that you are doing your job seriously...

Likewise, Matt, a 28 year old manager in the public sector, referred to how he experiences the significance of dress codes in the workplace and clothing in general as a means of attracting the interest of the opposite sex.

Well, where I work, doesn't have a dress code but I still wear more formal clothes because I feel more professional. Sometimes, say on Friday we wear more casual clothing, but I do find that I buy certain shirts or trousers that I wouldn't really wear outside my workplace. I suppose, as I grow more older I realize that people will judge you on the appearance a bit more and since then I have started to dress a little bit more smarter or formal in certain occasions, like going out for a date. In certain, slightly more fashionable.

The interplay between style, clothing and consumption has been subjected to close academic scrutiny since Simmel (1990: 301 cited in Ashley and Orenstein) ascribed to fashion the role of being “the best arena for people who lack autonomy and who need support” given that “it intensifies a multiplicity of social relations, increases the rate of social mobility and permits individuals from lower strata to become conscious of the styles and fashions of upper classes.” Like Simmel, Veblen (1899:93) devoted a chapter of the *TLC* to dress as the most representative expression of ostentatious economic exhibition and highlighted that no other form of conspicuous consumption “affords a more apt illustration than expenditure on dress.” Writing with his familiar ironic and satiric style, Veblen argued that conspicuous waste together with the superfluous cost of observable status symbols set the standards of social standing and publicly confirm the expression that “a cheap coat makes a cheap man.” A more contemporary exploration of fashion and consumer culture

comes from Ritzer (2003) and his famous book *The McDonaldization of Society*. He suggested that the burning desire for economic prosperity in Western societies demands from white-collar workers in service sectors, like the participants, to adopt a professional appearance which signifies competence, civility and an image of [potential] future success and upward professional mobility. Such conformity in the professional arena generates and reproduces social fashion conformity, since young employees in the service-driven economy emulate and comply with the lifestyle which facilitates their integration in the business culture of their sector. In line with Ritzer's comments, the abovementioned account by Matt discloses that the workplace reality necessitates specific dress codes and it concurs with Samantha's account, who described how her self-image could be adapted according to professional obligations and social conditions.

For example when I worked in the industry and they required formal dress and different clothes and a different look to come all together, then of course I had to adapt to that. Only during working hours I would consume products that I haven't bought before for example like suits or formal clothes. I was happy to go out there and buy new products and make sure that they conform with the environment that I am working. And you get used to that eventually.

Overall, the majority of informants experienced and expressed modesty and sensibility in their consumption activities and it was only Mike a 32 year old office administrator, who offered a more detailed and personal account on the perception of his own self-image as consumer.

Does this mean how do I feel as regards my image? Yeah I don't know...I suppose. It has to do with insecurity I suppose and I think a way of overriding you know those insecurities. Helping our confidence is to surround ourselves with lots of objects which represent ourselves in a level that we actually aspire to and want to attain to. And I think yeah, purchasing these objects maybe we become neurotic, maybe we are just too neurotic that we can't live without these things. I think that it takes really confidence to say I am who I am and not to have these things, to be surrounded through the materials that represent you. How we want people to see something. You know, it is interesting because the class that I was from was a low income class. Where people would spend money on items like getting really expensive Paul Smith coats and it is like if you look and say football hooligans people who stand on terrorism of football. They all will be there dressed up in the very expensive sort of jackets sort you know in Burberry and that type of clothing. I think that labels are very crafty these days and people are showing. You know maybe a few years ago people have a huge brand but I think you have to be more subtle now about this...

Mike had been the only participant who explicitly perceived and experienced his background with a specific socio-economic group (working class) and narrated how some members of this group use brands so as to enhance their self-esteem and boost their ego by displaying expensive brands. In line with Veblen (1899) and Bourdieu (1984), and espousing a critical view on consumer culture as a means of attaining or maintaining social status, Mark experienced product symbolism as a subtle and refined social activity of overriding our insecurities. However, Mark's account has been the only exception amongst 18 participants who seem to attach a sort of social stigma to conspicuous consumption

activities, a fact which to a great extent confirms Campbell's (1995) objectives about the difficulty of testing Veblen's hypotheses. In general, the informants perceive and position their personal image within the limits of ethical/responsible consumption and hesitate to acknowledge their oscillation between extravagant lifestyles and low concerns about a socially acceptable self-presentation. As Barnett et al (2005) suggest, the increased individualization and self-interest in the UK between the mid-1980s and 2000 led to the decline of people's participation in political and religious activities (political affiliation, voting, church-going etc) and simultaneously cultivated the interest in ethical consumerism and collective organization in campaigning about the environment and sustainability. Although the understanding and interpretation of the term ethical consumerism varies and its analysis lies outside the scope of this study, it can be said that consumer oriented activism, both via individualistic and collective activism, and responsible decision-making in consumption have increasingly emerged as two universal and widely recognisable constructs in contemporary economy. As various scholars have argued (Bauman, 1999; Shankar and Fitchett, 2002; Needham, 2003; Clarke, 2007) individualization has depoliticized the meaning of citizenship which now has struggles to find escape in consumption actions. A plethora of academic studies, stemming mainly from psychologists and consumer researchers (Belk, 1985; Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Diener, 2000; Ahuvia and Wong, 2002; Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002; Abela, 2006) and non-academic critical voices on the detrimental impact of consumerism on individuals' physical and psychological well-being has induced an ethical awareness towards materialism and inevitably excessive material consumption. In a similar way, in the description of participants' experiences, the concept of consumerism/materialism receives negative connotations and an archetype of a moderate and reasonable consumer appears to delineate

the perception of their own consumption lifestyles. The description of their own self-images seeks to avoid association with primarily two notions, insensitivity to their look and willingness to display a luxurious lifestyle and personal ostentation. As Page (1992) observed, the flagrancy and flashy consumption of the previous decades (especially during the 1980s) seems to be out of fashion and consumers' increasing concerns about a quality of life, the environment and well-being has seemed to revive a social awareness whose duration and intensity none can predict. The periods of hedonism and escalating status-seeking consumption, the Veblenian Gilded Age and the materialistic 1980s, are succeeded by concerns and critical reflections on consumerism and excess. According to Bauman, Veblen's ostentatious consumption has been utilized as an instrumental means for social positioning and differentiation, whilst in contemporary Western societies consumption acquires the meaning of an autotelic, self-expressive and individualistic activity, isolating the necessity of displaying impressive possessions and socially inspired economic behaviour (Rojek, 2004). Overall, informants' descriptions of their own self-image have suggested that either limited attention to one's self or excessive economic display can attach to someone the stigma of exceeding societal standards. Additionally, the majority of respondents described their workplace environment as the most important factor in shaping their consumption preferences and the purchase of clothes, followed by friends and members of the family. Such views were expressed as a reduction of individuality according to workplace dress codes and the necessity of fitting within a professional group of colleagues. Finally, although the informants seem to express a kind of personal aversion and distaste towards materialism and conspicuousness, in dialogues which followed they indicated that the observation of other people's appearance and possessions constitutes a

habitual mental activity which they rather enjoy. Therefore, in the following section, the discussion moved to issues of social mobility through consumption, status and conformity.

## **8.2 Ostentation and the *others* as conspicuous consumers**

Spending money to publicize social success and participation in upper social groups is a universal and everyday phenomenon that intensifies and enhances the game of ostentatious ownership. Such a game has maintained its character throughout time by awarding to its winner trophies, social honour and prestige; nonetheless, in Veblen's era the aristocratic classes and nouveau riche possessed both the time and (hereditary) income so as to become the main protagonists of competitive consumption and seize distinctiveness (Veblen, 1899; Page, 1992; Mason, 1998). The prodigious appetite of middle classes for social mobility augmented the number of individuals who surrounded themselves with status products and, including societal concerns about materialistic tendencies and the environment, to some degree, demythologised and debunked flagrancy and ostentatious consumption. It can be said, that the abovementioned descriptions of participants' experiences momentarily reflect the stigmatization of conspicuous consumption, overconsumption and overall excess related to status symbols, cosmetics and expensive clothes. However, as will be discussed in this section of the thesis, the game still goes on in such a dynamic and exponential fashion that informants become its everyday observers whether they like it or not. Inevitably, and taking into consideration participants' reluctance to elaborate on how they perceive their own consumption habits, the discussion focused on the conspicuous practices of other people and the description of those experiences will be discussed below.

Whereas status-driven consumption and efforts to differentiate themselves and impress others are consciously and *totally* absent activities from the everyday lives of participants, the motivation of *other people* to consume for status and social positioning was highlighted. It emerges as a paradox how respondents hesitate to associate their self-identities with public display, while at the same time enthusiastically participate in the process of judging and categorizing others according to their public possessions. Competition for status goods and desire for social distinction was acknowledged and easily attributed to “*other people*”. Mike, a member of a hiking team, experienced how the tendency to consume conspicuously manifests itself within the group:

I really enjoy looking other people’s stuff and clothes. I think that is an interesting way of looking this. Because I think that the commodity or the object that you have, there is an identity enrolled within the object and I think that it is a way of projecting some sort of ideal of ourselves to other people. Maybe hiking and self-walking for example. And again that’s a different identity, a different way of consuming really. It can be very expensive in certain items you can buy and the equipment that goes along with hiking. So, I think that if you go to these places, if you are doing sort of adventurous hobbies it’s a way of processing a sort of knowledge to people and your status. You have the best sort of equipment or the best tools. You know the hiking walking groups that I have been. It’s quite strange thing cause you don’t expect these sort of people to be embroiled or immersed within this world of consumption, probably you would think that have being from different class or being showy off.

The desire for competition status consumption does not transpire only in the form of conspicuously wasteful expenditures but also can occur within small social groups and via recreational activities. Following Mike's experience, the sophistication and individual taste in the purchase of equipment generates and reproduces emulation, desire for acquisition and eventually informal contests amongst members of the hiking group. As Cova (1996) argues, the structures of societal micro-groups can establish and maintain such emotional and cultural links that sub-cultural consumption choices tend not only to be common but also to introduce standardised practices, norms and conformity levels. Aiming to attract attention from the rest, individuals combine the display of unique possessions together with knowledge and experience so as to gain a sort of symbolic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) and to confer status and prestige within the group. Later on, Mike elaborated on issues of ostentatious economic display and referred to friends and acquaintances who want to join the ranks of superior social groups.

To be honest I know quite many people. I can think of numerous people and it is the way they dress, the way they reconstruct their selves. The way they talk for their social identity, their individual identity has been changed to appear in class, a class which is higher than they were. So, again they try to attain more status and respect and the mechanisms they are doing that will be through commodities, through material groups, through material items. Trying to camouflage, where do they come from and attain an additional status really. But I was thinking...yeah...certainly friends and I think as well when I was a student and I was thinking where I was from, where I lived, especially then people are able to start their new identity maybe really. When they move away, they reallocate the geography change. Maybe they try to change

their characteristics or they try to change the way that they are represented. So, leave a part of themselves behind them and move on really.

For Mike, geographical mobility and anonymity offer to the individual the opportunity to rethink and re-promote his/her social identity and gain social status through public consumption. Obviously, consumption constitutes the primary means by which individuals convey and communicate who they are and what their positioning is in the socio-economic order. Socially visible consumption and antagonistic economic display receives greater significance in a social environment where anonymity increases the need for socially visible conspicuous consumption and extravagant exhibition (Booth, 2004). As Veblen (1899) argued in the TLC, conspicuous consumption and evidence of wealth are primarily characteristics of urban and modern industrial societies. Esther, a 34 year old customer advisor from Leicester, offered a kind of comparative description between the consumption freedom of individuals who live in London and Leicester.

You know, everybody is quite individual in London aren't they? And, it doesn't matter what you wear. You could have a pair of boots with a flower dress and a pink long cardigan and a green hat and you still look good. Bizarre, but if you wear that here. I really know that in town is a lady walking around Leicester over her pink long cardigan...It will scare people. Because London is such a big, massive city and there are so many different people living there, I think that you can wear whatever you want. Where in here, because it is smaller and people are pretty much the same, I think that it will be too scary for people to do that.

The way that Esther experiences ostentation and differentiation supports the view that an urban and metropolitan environment reduces and diminishes the stability of long-term social networks and raises to the surface the indispensability of adopting and employing conspicuous consumption methods for social differentiation. Also, in economies with high-labour mobility, like Britain, interpersonal relations and networks have been continuously reformulated to the extent that a large number of individuals find in consumption the most important means for personal expression and the establishment of social relationships with desirable social groups. On the contrary, in rural settings and small towns, intimacy and neighbourhood gossip minimize the capability of expressing and re-positioning one's self through desirable consumer goods which demonstrate status. Weak social ties and the relative anonymity of the city have elevated the status of consumption itself as human experience. Additionally, as Holt (1998) suggests, commodities do not stand for accurate representations of consumption, extending the selves of their owners, but facilitate the diffusion and dissemination of a variety of lifestyles. More participants overcame their reluctance to comment on their own consumption activities and excitedly offered narratives related on how experience others' predilection to adopt sybaritic consumption practices that aim to enhance their social standing. Pamela offered a '*to have is to be*' approach as regards someone's clothes and the degree to which these items reflect aspects of an ideal self:

I pay attention to things like that and how much effort they put into their clothes. Cause they buy what they are...you know if they are dressed really smart, is that because they like to look smart or is that because they want to make a good impression. Are they going somewhere to look smart? You can also see people who made a real effort and they want to look like many girls

who want to look like other girls in magazines and they wear all the right fashionable stuff and all the accessories. It is not just clothes, it is a whole outfit and I think how long they spend to put that outfit together.

Pamela experiences clothes and fashion as a means of communication and a series of assumptions which accompany the observation of one's public self. Her account incorporates a sense of categorizing individuals according to their personal taste and appearance. She described her experience of meeting people who seek to impress others, individuals whose lifestyle is influenced and shaped by magazines and consumer culture and finally people like her who show moderate attention to their self image. Although Pamela did not classify these categories of consumption according to specific social classes, George referred to the dress habits of members of working classes.

For example I think clothes. I think, yes design labels, design brands. You know...people. Certain times you see people. They maybe are plumbers, you know plumbers who work on mechanics and when they go home at night they go out at town and maybe they want to look their best, like a money show. But, well they wouldn't drive a money show everyday. So sure, the basic comfort of clothing is to cover your body, if you want. They save some money to celebrate that special occasion. You know, I think quite prominent at the moment is Jimmy shoes, for lots of women. And they only wear those on special occasions. They want to look their best. And they want to be more upper class and people at the head of the game.

Finally, Jane, a 29 year old recruitment consultant, comparatively referred to the presentation and extravagant spending of friends and her own modesty regarding consumerism and the ostentatious display of goods.

I think consumers imitate and are influenced by their peers. I also think they do it for themselves and they wouldn't feel perhaps confident going out without make-up or they wouldn't feel happy going out with clothes that have gone off. Clothes that they don't like. I think I would feel like that with those clothes actually. But not make-up...I think that is my friend with the handbags. I think she likes the way to live in luxury and she reflects that in what she wears. I think that they do it, cause they like, they like applying make-up and having different looks and things. And they like to dedicate their time to that. Whereas, I will prefer to dedicate that time to other things.

Overall, participants expressed and described how experiences of socially inspired economic behaviour and wealth display are manifested in their everyday interaction with *other* people. Friends, colleagues, complete strangers and members of recreational groups participate in a social process of conspicuous economic display, which according to respondents' accounts, aims to satisfy feelings and motives related to ostentation, competition and conformity. Factors such as anonymity in urban settings and social mobility enhance individuals' desire to extend their personal images through the possessions of status symbols and the overt exhibition of material and financial superiority. In line with Veblen's observations, clothes - usually followed by the recognition of brands and labels - still represent the most accessible and common means of ostentatious economic

display and status-driven consumption. However, the observation of a conspicuous consumer is accompanied by continuous assumptions of his socio-economic background, the origins of his/her behaviour and his/her personality in general. Additionally, competition and rivalry amongst consumers exists not only in the form of a display of wealth but also through expertise in material culture (Bourdieu, 1984), activities and workmanship within small groups of shared interests. Participants' experiences as regards ostentation and competition were expressed through the consumption habits of working class members who wanted to dress like upper class individuals and the conspicuous display of cars offering driving superiority in the social arena of highways. Although these experiences depict and to some extent verify Veblen's observations on emulation and social behaviour, overall, the majority of informants seemed to remain sceptical about the necessity and escalating need of the others to display material wealth so as to join the upper social classes. Thus, subsequently the interview process focused on the interpretations and meanings that participants attributed to the adoption of consumption practices driven by the desire for upward social mobility.

### **8.3 Consumption and social acceptance**

As discussed in the previous part of this chapter, the majority of the responses further suggested that conspicuous consumption practices are adopted by individuals as a means of status reinforcement and social positioning. However, ostentatious economic display was not attributed only to upward social mobility but, to a great extent, to the concept of social acceptance, conformity and the sense of belonging to desirable social groups. Conspicuous

economic display also serves the purpose of signalling through commodities, so the individual benefits by entering a team or specific professional group. In Veblen's understanding of conspicuous consumption practices, the participation in desirable status groups has been one of the main motives behind buying decisions; nonetheless, the end of an individual's action was to accumulate and display more goods compared to others, so as to signify a competitive financial capability and join superior social classes. Although participants' accounts recognized that a consumer's disposition to compete with his peers for material resources and commodities as an action which seeks to secure membership in aspirant groups, conspicuous consumption practices do not derive only from an innate yearning for outdoing others but can occur as an outcome of conformity. A less hierarchical and socially structured society, where the notion of social status and prestige becomes available for the masses, was acknowledged by informants. Concurring with the arguments of Galbraith (1987) and Mason (1998), who claimed that a growing number of people are able to behave ostentatiously and economic display has become commonplace, participants described experiences of working/middle class consumers whose buying preferences include luxurious products. Although the demarcations between social classes become evident in their accounts, the informants eschewed categorizing themselves and others *within* these classes. The findings indicated that differentiation through display of possessions and status-oriented consumption activities develops into a means of belonging and fitting within lifestyles, social groups and working environments. Overall, the participants experienced and interpreted the conspicuous consumption practices of the *others* as a continuous quest for a socially accepted identity.

### 8.3.1 Social class, consumption and status

As an exceptional observer of consumer culture, Veblen explicated and detailed how the evolution of social-class behaviour and status-seeking consumption generate social display, fashions and extravagance. More than one hundred years later, Veblen's universal meaning of the term 'class consumption' has been challenged and became a topic of increased controversy and debate amongst marketing theorists (Curtis, 1972; Myers and Mount, 1973; Schaninger, 1981; Dominquez and Page, 1981). The status hierarchy, and subsequently status mobility, according to which consumers are categorized on the basis of their personal belongings and prestige, has fundamentally altered. Income, source of income, occupation, reference groups, dwelling area, house type and education represent only some of the basic variables that social scientists have tried to combine and utilize for the social classification of individuals and the measurement of class membership. During the second part of the interview many participants offered a holistic conceptualization and description of how they experience the relation between the notion of social class and consumption. A confusion and reluctance to identify themselves or others *within* specific and standardized categories, mirrored in social classes, characterized the majority of informants' accounts. For example, Mike described how his social class associates with his consumption preferences below:

Hmm...Yeah, that's difficult to say. I don't know. I could have answered that question easier a few years ago with the occupation that I was doing. You maybe say that there is an income bracket and the nature of work I was doing. So today I think still belong there...but...I think that is the confusion that is so many different ways now of categorizing people in certain groups.

Different definitions, of what class is, working class or middle class. And so I think is hard for people to say where they want to belong or whether they are proud for the class they are in. Do they aspire to be in middle class or they are embarrassed about the way they are?

Similarly, Thomas the 34 year old senior marketing manager, hesitantly expressed his confusion over what actually constitutes the most indicative factor of defining a social class and how the concept itself relates to consumption. Available economic resources, income and education were mentioned in a brief account without privileging one term at the expense of the other.

I think...is due...today social class equals more economic resources, more than the past if you got more resources and you spend more...but as well is was pressure on people to stay beneath and certainly they are taking head now the last 30 years. Having a nice car, having bought a house, having cash to afford to pay the rent, then they feel that they increased their status basis. Probably, I will try to define class in...probably...maybe a middle class bracket, probably based on the fact that I am educated and have a reasonable job. Without really based on consumption, based on other factors...

The Veblenian idea that social class and the emulation of desirable consumption lifestyles is superior for understanding the preference of luxurious, highly symbolic and extravagant goods was challenged by participants' accounts. A complex combination of factors, including income, education and occupation for example, play a distinctive but

simultaneously interdependent and somehow autonomous role in the socio-economic classification of individuals. Probably, the most characteristic element of informants' descriptions is the diversity of terms that can be perceived as substitutes of the generic and all encompassing term social class. For example, George questioned and challenged the potentiality of consumption as a valid means of mobility from one social class to the class above, with the following account which relates to how he experiences his own background.

Yes and no. I mean people...It is quite easy in UK, it's quite easy to earn money. Somebody can quite easily work full-time and earn 15000 pounds buying a holiday to the Maldives and sitting next to someone who is CEO. But then again, the next day he will be back in Asda to buy small price staff. But I think the idea of social class now is too vague. It is too vague. The access to money, the access to credit means that consumption doesn't indicate social class. Many people who, my family for example, my father works in warehouses as a labourer, but we lived in a decent area, where house prices are maybe 2-3 hundred upwards. But my father drives a truck Cortina which is a very working man's car. Where people who are living in really poor areas, where the houses are about a hundred thousand, really small houses, driving Mercedes and Audi and BMW but all of them credit. But I think the access to credit maybe dilutes the concept of social class.

Throughout an era of increased consumer spending and mostly cheap credit, the appetite for the possession and public display of housing, cars, furniture and status symbols acted as a catalyst for the blurring of lifestyles and class consumption. The capability of a vast

number of individuals to possess and demonstrate expensive products and services has destabilized and disorientated the economic boundaries between social groups. Dwelling in working class areas, working as a white collar employee and driving a Mercedes Benz has become a socially hybrid lifestyle that can be easily adopted nowadays. George's experience of affluence seems to concur and additionally to verify scholars (Galbraith, 1987; Page, 1992; Mason, 1998) who noticed and remarked how lavish spending and the social display of goods have become commonplace. Also, the difficulty of perceiving and defining the notion of social class becomes obvious in Deborah's experience of class indicators below.

Well, yeah, I don't know. Social class is funny isn't it? Cause, I don't know if it goes by income or by job or family history. So, I don't know, cause when you say middle class you think someone that has quite lot money. When you say working class you think someone who doesn't have lots of money. So, I come in the between. I think maybe, I am. So, my job is not like that a working class job, like a factory. I work in a middle class job, in an office. So it is difficult isn't it? But, I think that your consumption definitely does reflect how much money you have got and your supermarket. Because with the supermarket, Sainsbury's, which is a nice posh supermarket, it is slightly more expensive than Asda and if you shop at Sainsbury's, you meet different types of people compared to Asda.

Deborah acknowledges and perceives class markers through the preference of supermarkets; nonetheless, the understanding of social class disperses and balances between income, qualifications, education and family background. Excellence in the combination of

the abovementioned criteria can indicate achieved status to the individual, and as was discussed in the previous chapter, can justify and support the conspicuous possession of material wealth. Social class proves to be a difficult and complex construct to be comprehended not only by academics but also to experienced by individuals surrounded by a plethora of products that function as social class indicators. The acquisition of consumption markers that indicate membership in a superior social class and good life does not evoke feelings of admiration, envy and emulation, like in the Veblenian times. Consumer debt and the use of credit cards signify and connote nowadays a technologically addicted lifestyle whose dark sides include compulsive expenses and extreme debt accumulation (Hirschman, 1979; Hirschman, 1992; Hill, 1994; Bernthal et. al., 2005). The assumption that behind a visible status symbol, that deceptively indicates social status, exists and grows an accumulated debt due to banking facilities discourages participants to categorize individuals according to class consumption. Apart from consumer debt, the multiplicity of consumption lifestyles and fashions render for the participants the social categorization and classification according to consumption as an extremely difficult task. As Holt (1997) suggests, in contemporary Western capitalist economies, the social collectivities and meanings expressed and conveyed through consumption share as common characteristics their subtlety, sophistication and fragmentation. In other words, the meaning of objects and consumption actions cease to be structured by one-dimensional semiotic designs and individuals interpret the social and cultural meaning of status symbols via continuous assumptions, metaphors and narrative associations. Lifestyles, consumers' changing identities and fluidity embodied in the meaning of consumption de-contextualize social status frameworks and subjectivity surrounds participants' understanding of social class and socially-driven consumption phenomena. In conclusion, it can be said that the

association of ostentatious economic display with participation in a specific social class, as expressed in the Veblenian sociohistorical setting, has weakened and diminished given that the instable social stratification, consumer debt and plethora of consumption identities have discomposed and obfuscated class consumption.

### **8.3.2 The need for social membership through consumption**

Visible consumption, the public display of commodities and socially-driven behaviour in general tend to have a deep impact on the reconstruction and reorganization of social life. Almost fifty years ago, Riesman (1961) suggested that powerful social factors and pressures such as the pervasive role of media and the advent of mass consumption as a way of living and expressing one's self have intensified individuals' need to conform with dress codes, consumption archetypes and dynamic fashions inherent in consumer culture. In a similar way, Leibenstein's (1950) 'bandwagon effect' aimed to shed some light on collective behaviour and consumption by analyzing individuals' tendency to follow the prevalent fashions and the consumption lifestyles of economically superior groups. The interplay between herd behaviour, aspirant groups and consumption has been a popular topic of examination for marketing and consumer researchers interested in the degree of consumers' conformity to different lifestyle groups (Venkatesan, 1966; Ariely and Levav, 2000; Papyrina, 2008; Starr, 2009). According to Bernheim (1994) one of the social factors that motivate individual behaviour is conformism and quite often social groups penalize and castigate consumers who deviate from socially accepted norms and codes. Also, psychologists have introduced the individualism-collectivism distinction (Brewer, 1991;

Brewer and Chen, 2007) to support that the cultivation of interdependent-self concepts and the principles of collectivistic societies promote consumers' needs for connectedness and belongingness to specific groups (especially referring to consumers from East Asian cultures). Apart from a need for uniqueness, the construct of conspicuous consumption has been always incorporating a countervailing need for conformity, justifying and verifying a consumer's emulation of reference groups positioned higher in the societal hierarchy. Following participants' vague and unclear accounts about the relationship of social class and consumer behaviour, issues of conformity, consumption and belongingness in social groups emerged in the discussions. After almost forty minutes of discussion, and since rapport was gained, the majority of the informants began to comment and elaborate on how they perceive the motives behind socially-driven consumption and ostentatious economic display. For example, Mike referred below to some reasons which can stimulate and encourage status-driven consumption.

I guess they do, when they want to appear to be something they are not or something they want to be associated with. And then I suppose it depends on the people who they are socializing with, where they are from. I suppose, if you are going let's say to a place location where people are of certain types, then you want to associate with them. Do you want to represent yourself in a certain way or do you want to carry on with the tradition of where you actually come from, so I think really that some people change as a necessity. You know and it's good to be different. I don't know. And I think what the idea of consumption is these days, is the idea of being free really, the idea of being different and it's just something to be holded to stand out to be noticeable. It's just something that you are trying to attain. A lot of people buy prestigious items and a class they have being is prestigious. Well, maybe is just good if you are not one of them!

And you are more noticeable and you are different. The idea of being different is something that is quite cherished nowadays and a lot of people try to attain that those days. The effort to be different from the masses.

Mike's account about conformity and consumption, to some degree, reflects Brewer's (1991) observations on the bipolar needs for in-group membership, as a meaningful part of one's identity, and an individual distinctiveness that provides confidence and boosts one's self-esteem. The representation of one's self within a group 'necessitates' conformity to the accepted cultural frames, traditions and consumption norms. Later on, the same participant narrated how he experienced compliance and conformity as regards his consumption practices in a new working environment.

Yeah, yeah I think that it is an interesting question. I think, how can you know, because maybe the products that people would buy then or before you got the job was that only because of the circumstances, because you didn't have the money to buy a more expensive product and this is actually a conscious decision. And I think maybe when you are given the opportunity, when you are in a better job, a better income bracket, so you can actually afford better items. You still have to purchase the items you used to and the way you used to represent yourself. I think maybe you would have a sort of traditional outlook.

Consumer socialization and consumption habits are formed not only through desire to emulate aspirational groups but also via conformity to existing groups. As Wooten (2006)

suggests, in his study about the process of consumption socialization, the use of possessions facilitates integration and the establishment of membership within the group, whilst someone's denial to comply with the customary lifestyles and consumption habits might induce ostracism and marginalization. Wotten (2006) observes how deviation from social customs can be penalized with a loss of esteem or social reputation and the same informal rules seem to be relevant to consumer practices within specific contexts. Later on, Mike elaborated on conformity and consumer competition as a means of distinction and socialization and simultaneously expressed his own viewpoint as regards compliance with consumption lifestyles.

I think that this is dangerous as well. But I think that the big danger is marginalizing yourself from the group, I suppose. I think the real fear that governs maybe most of us will be, what are they talking about? Can't I talk about that, because I am not buying that sort of things. I suppose is that familiarity with other people and the association, and the sort of bonding and the solidarity, buying the same things is what you can find relationships on really and if you are in a different class from a different place buying different products or representing yourself in a different line, then yeah, it's just gonna be hard to socialize with those people.

The participant's account ideally describes individuals who want to identify and associate themselves with reference groups that adopt a homogeneous attitude towards the purchase and consumption of specific brands. In line with Veblen and especially Riesman, consumers follow and comply with the rising expectations of the demanding social surroundings and afterwards strive to maintain the standards of the group wherein they seek

and attain membership. Pamela, a 29 year old officer in a charity company describes below how people's preoccupation with the image of their social selves strengthens and reinforces conformity to lifestyles and fashions. The participant experiences consumer culture and fashion as the main mechanisms and sources of motivation behind individuals' consumption needs.

I think people always try to copy what someone else is doing, because they want to fit in, they want to be part of the crowd. They don't want to be the one out...and yes they follow a lot. And following, things like following mainstream fashion would be a quite key one. You know, this at the catwalk and you see at the magazine and you get the magazine and you have an expensive version which is the one at the catwalk and the magazine shows you the cheap version of it that you can buy at the high-street and everyone else buys it.

However, and contrary to Veblen, nowadays it is not the upper classes that reproduce individual styles and advance social position, but a monstrous fashion industry which has been expanded through capitalism and mass production. In line with Veblen, Pamela's account verifies that fashion spreads through imitation and emulation but within a less hierarchical social structure. In a similar way, Clara's childhood experiences related to conformity highlighted the fact that social identities and the sense of belongingness within groups have been continuously constructed throughout one's life.

I guess they can buy products that they think. If they feel insecure, they can buy them because it means they fit into...with everyone else. It means, you know, when I was growing up as a kid, there is always particular, brands or clothes or shoes or...everyone had because that meant that if you had you fitted in, you know. That's how everyone grows up, part of it. We have to feel that we fit in. So, yeah, I guess there are people who do buy stuff...something which is accepted if you know what I mean.

Clara's account as regards the learning and reproduction of cultural habits can be associated with Bourdieu's (1984) notion of habitus; a construct which prompts individuals and consumers in particular to adopt certain standardized choices and actions. The habitus can be transferred both through family practices, children's dress as the participant mentioned, and the experience of belonging within a community or specific class. According to Clara, the necessity of fitting within an environment and need for belongingness predetermined the purchase of certain brands and preference of services. Similarly, Matt's workplace experiences indicate the feelings of compliance and conformity which exist behind ostentatious economic activities.

“Well, I think there is a degree of compliance involved. Certainly with people when they are buying clothes that they wear in their workplace, as an element of compliance. Well, not compliance, well it could be compliance if there is a strict dress code and the reason there will be an element of conformity I guess. There are told that they have to dress like that. They choose to conform in a stereotype as considered smart and professional.”

Overall, the abovementioned accounts indicate that conspicuous consumption practices assist individuals in fitting within groups of people as an act of *conformity* and *necessity* rather than as an *aspiration* to join a superior lifestyle. The findings reflect the descriptions of sociologists (Riesman, 1961) and consumer researchers (Ariely and Levav, 2000; Papyrina, 2008; Starr, 2009) who indicated that to a great extent our consumption practices are governed and directed by the opinion of our peers. Explicit references to the demands and lifestyle constraints of the contemporary working environment, with emphasis on dress codes, and the fashion industry supported by consumer culture suggest that individuals not only emulate certain reference groups and upper class consumers, but primarily utilize conspicuous consumption practices as a means of adapting to new environments and fitting within desirable groups. Finally, few of the participants highlighted the significance of consumer autonomy, as a necessary element of self-expression and well being, and concluded that a balance between conformity and individual freedom should characterize our everyday actions and consumption choices. As was mentioned in the literature review of this thesis, Riesman's other-directed archetype of consumption seems to reflect similar behaviour with the conspicuous consumers Veblen described in his book. Contrary to popular belief and the assertions of prominent sociologists (Campbell, 1987), that the Veblenian consumers are continuously inclined to express a competitive aggression in their consumption choices, Veblen also discussed how issues of conformity can affect an individual's actions and consumption preferences. In Veblen's words:

The accepted standard of expenditure in the community or in the class to which a person belongs largely determines what his standard of living will be. It does this directly by commending itself to

his common sense as right and good, through habitually contemplating it and assimilating the scheme of life in which it belongs; but it does so also indirectly through popular insistence on conformity to the accepted scale of expenditure as a matter of propriety, under pain of disesteem and ostracism. (Veblen, 1899:47)

Apart from the modern-day aggression of consumer culture, Veblen discussed how the dominant socio-cultural practices of the upper class consumers set the ideal standards of conformity for members of the middle and working classes. Veblen, occasionally, recognized that cultural patterns and predominant individual lifestyles function as a means of conformity. Analyzing the ways that conspicuous leisure legitimizes itself as the utmost criterion of attributing social status, Veblen remarks:

There are moreover measurable degrees of conformity to the latest accredited code of the punctilios as regards decorous means and methods of consumption. Differences between one person and another in the degree of conformity to the ideal in these respects can be compared, and persons may be graded and scheduled with some accuracy and effect according to a progressive scale of manners and breeding. The award of reputability in this regard is commonly made in good faith, on the ground of conformity to the accepted canons of taste. (Veblen, 1899: 51).

It can be said that social conformity is inherent and plays a significant role as regards the motivations behind conspicuous consumption activities. Since Veblen's time, behavioural economists have studied the shifts in the preferences of individuals according to rising fashions and class lifestyles. The findings of these studies (see Leibenstein), referring to the phenomenon of 'herd behaviour', have been replaced by contemporary reference group

theories of consumption which suggest that consumers turn their attention to other groups of people which promise the maintenance or improvement of their social standing. Following participants' experiences, it can be argued that the motivation to conform to lifestyles and consumption practices primarily derives from the indispensability in fitting in with groups of people which offer security and a sense of belongingness. Conclusively, it can be argued that the Veblenian observations about the notions of competitive and antagonistic consumption play a secondary role in participants' accounts as regards the consumption choices related to conformity and sense of belongingness. Although the informants have offered some detailed narratives of status consumption experiences, the employment of complementary research techniques – vignettes – has been used in the following section and enabled a deeper understanding behind individuals' incentives and motivations for the acquisition of luxurious goods and the adoption of distinctive consumption lifestyles.

## **Chapter 9: The four faces of status consumption**

In the previous two chapters of the thesis, I attempted to provide a holistic approach to the understanding on participants' experience of status consumption. Overall, the informants differentiated extravagance and luxurious consumption from the notion of social status, underlining the importance of someone's work achievements and personal qualities for the ascription of prestige. Status consumption represents a dynamic process where observers, actors in the form of conspicuous consumers, and commodities continuously reproduce meaning and social comparisons. Also, the participants argued that a moderate consumption ethos characterizes their self-image and social categorization according to class consumption is loose due to unspecified class barriers, credit facilities and escalating social mobility. Simultaneously, the conspicuous consumption practices of the *others* have been primarily experienced as the need of belongingness within social groups, motivated merely by conformity and compliance with the lifestyles and groups within working environments. Participants' insistence to acknowledge the ostentatious economic display of the 'others' substantiated the assumption that the phenomena of conspicuous and class consumption are sensitive areas of enquiry, even taboos (Mason, 1998). Therefore, in the final part of each interview, I employed additional research techniques, in the form of vignettes, so as to elaborate on the perception of the motivations behind ostentatious economic activities.

### **9.1 The necessity for complementary methods**

Taking into account the responses of the first part, according to which *the others* consume in an "amoral" way, I reduced the pressure on participants to provide socially desirable

responses so as to express how they truly experience and perceive the situation of status consumption activities. Therefore, I used vignettes as a complementary technique of data collection. Four scenarios of conspicuous consumption practices in written form and four scenarios in pictorial form created an experiential arena of conspicuous economic display which prompted the informants to express their views. The stories were real and plausible to them, and the informants admitted later that they had direct or indirect personal experiences of very similar situations. The reaction of informants to these particular situations was immediate and it excited imaginary assumptions and views on what they truly believe about the motivations behind conspicuous economic display. Therefore, the presentation and discussion of the vignettes stimulated and refreshed the interest of the participants to the phenomena under investigation and attracted their attention almost after forty minutes of semi-structured questions and answers. Due to word limitation, I will present and discuss participants' interpretations and responses towards three representative written scenarios and two pictorial vignettes in the following chapter of the thesis. Finally, I will suggest how the meaning from participants' consumer experiences can be organized and inform contemporary theories of status consumption.

### **9.1.1 Compliance, participation and status consumption**

Each written scenario described and illustrated imaginary or actual consumption choices of four different individuals disclosing some information about their socio-economic background, age, sex, working status and educational qualifications. Two scenarios depicted male characters and the other two female characters so as to countervail and counterbalance gender roles. The supplementary information about the personal traits of

each protagonist not only broadened the experiential background of the participants but also offered a solid conceptual basis for the expression of their perceptions related to the incentives of conspicuous consumption activities. Reducing participants' need to hypothesize about the identity of the conspicuous consumer, the informants impulsively expressed their experiences about the consumption lifestyles and choices of the protagonists without inherent bias or limited knowledge about their socio-economic status. The first vignette, as presented below, intended to break the ice and revitalize participants' interest related to conspicuousness, consumption and display.

**Scenario One:** Maria is a 34 year old qualified massage therapist who lives in the suburbs of London. Recently she was hired by one of the biggest and most luxurious spa centres in the city-centre and she decided to buy some clothes. She enters an expensive boutique and she says to one of the employees: Hi, I am looking for some eye-catching trousers and a long fancy dress...You know, something to make me feel attractive but also which has to do with prestige...

A variety of explanations, description of experiences and personal accounts followed the reading of the vignette. Twelve participants focused on the particular working environment (spa centre) and the dress code which it obliges its employees to follow. Consumption for status and the purchase of eye-catching clothes becomes indispensable and a prerequisite for fitting in within an institution and associating with a different group of people. Maria's concern to become accepted, through status-driven consumption, and to acquaint herself

with an unfamiliar setting was conveyed through participants' phraseology. For example, Mike described below how the spa centre, as an institution at the heart of the metropolitan city of London, indicates images of wealth, affluence and upper class consumption lifestyles.

It is this new institution that she works, this new spa centre, yeah in the city. I mean all this indicates and brings forward some images of wealth, and she has to work with clients who are going to be of a certain type and certain income, and identity. I suppose that she wants to stay along with them and associate with them, so I think she is feeling the natural need to go out and spend more money to try to feel comfortable with certain people. I think that, because she is going to offer services as well, then I think she maybe feels something of an obligation part of her job really, to actually do this to actually give to people a coming to that sort of environment that they expect really.

Similarly, Pamela referred to Maria's need to associate with the clients of the firm and also to fit into the new working environment. In her account below, Pamela attempts to empathize with Maria by describing her own experience and reaction to a new job. Additionally, the relation between the anonymity of the big city and issues of conspicuous consumption were highlighted by the participant.

I can understand that. You always want to make a good impression if you want to fit in. She has been hired by a luxurious spa centre. You have this image, when you go to the spa centre, people

there look perfect. They wear nice clothes, they wear nice tailored fitted clothing. And they got make-up and they look perfect. Because, they are working advertisement for spa and is like that thing. Comes to the spa, you can look as beautiful, there is beauty in their face...there is that feeling and I think if I was in that situation...I would feel like, I would have to do the same thing. I would have to, I wouldn't wear the clothes I wear now, I would make a real effort... More people want to look prestigious and want to live in the city. And also places like London, to live in the city you have to earn some pretty good wages....because it is so expensive to live there.

Veblen wryly observed that consumers' efforts to differentiate and distinguish themselves become noticeable in metropolitan areas where "in the struggle to outdo one another the city population push their normal standard of conspicuous consumption to a higher point" (Veblen, 1899: 53). In the same manner, Pamela described how she experiences the escalating game of status enhancement which occurs in big cities. Spending, social display and competitive consumption represent the vehicles for maintaining the norms of a social group wherein individuals seek to associate with and eventually belong (Schor, 1999). Inevitably, working class individuals, like the protagonists of the vignette, attempt to emulate upper class images through the purchase of clothes that indicate membership within a new reference group. Nonetheless, the participants argued that Maria's emulatory motives do not derive only from a tendency to compete with her colleagues but also from her desire to become accepted and fit in within an unknown setting. For example, Samantha describes below the incentives behind Maria's purchasing activities and identifies herself with the context and scenario claiming that she has also found herself in a similar situation.

The participant had experienced a similar situation and offered an idiographic explanation of her experience below.

I have been there, all the time. All the time when I go to somewhere new, where you gonna meet some new people, and you gonna see new people for the first time. Then, yes I go out and I feel that I need to buy something so as to go to this party. And I need something to wear. Like Maria, I would conform to an environment, because I don't want to stick out from what it looks like. I don't want to look different. And I will go out there and I will try to conform to buy products and buy clothing that will match. I will fit in, I don't want not to fit in...So, for that reason, yes I would.

Samantha's account brings forward some issues of gender and conspicuous consumption. Without attempting to generalize gender roles, from a female perspective, the personal image and preparation of the public self can be a time-consuming activity of extreme importance. Marketing strategies, advertising and consumer culture have strengthened and reinforced a whole industry around the socially acceptable presentation of the self and the body (Firat, 1991; Firat et al., 1995; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995; Elliot and Wattanasuwan, 1998). Following Samantha, the female body becomes a source of cultural meaning that blurs individuals' perceptions of self-care with those of self-advertisement and social status. Our self-presentation and public selves turn into vital arenas of status symbolism whereupon advertising messages and fashion reproduce more sophisticated products, cosmetics and overall commodities that enhance the image of an ideal self. Maria, the protagonist of the vignette, has been characterized by the majority of the participants as

one of the myriad consumers who seek to build an image of status so as to convey her capability to belong and fit into a group of affluence. Scitovsky (1976) has pointed out the importance of the need for membership and its impact on imitative behaviour and status consumption. In his most celebrated and influential book, *The Joyless Economy*, he developed a thorough critique of modern economic values and long-standing economic principles of consumer demand. Following the tradition of Veblen and Galbraith, Scitovsky suggested that an increasing fascination with status-seeking activities escalate conformity to superficial standards of wealth and prosperity. Focusing his observations on the American economy of the 1970s, where the levels of comfort and safety in consumption were rising, Scitovsky considered that in technologically and economically advanced (Western) societies the desire and qualification for membership within groups increases and inevitably seeks expression through status consumption. Scitovsky's assessment about the compliance to nouveau riche lifestyles becomes evident in his Veblen-like account below:

“Money income as a measure of one's success in life has the drawback that knowledge of it is seldom in the public domain. Therefore, to enjoy not only one's high income, but also the esteem it can secure, one must make it known through appropriate spending behavior. Part of it consists in buying what the rich buy. Not performing personal services and household chores for oneself used to imply a division for labour based on differences of income rather than of skill, and it has become a symbol of high income.” (Scitovsky, 1976: 119)

A common theme in the responses and reactions of most participants, after the reading of the vignette, was their empathy and self-identification with Maria's situation, merely expressed by the description of 'similar' experiences. For example, Deborah, a 26 year old employee in the health promotion service claimed that her reaction to the situation would be identical with Maria's.

Yeah, I think when I go for the interview for my jobs, I go into clothes shop, because they are doing a personal style estate, for free. So I tell them that I would like to have a personal style estate because I want to go for an interview and then she says that you can use some clothes and try them on. And I remember that last summer someone complained because member of the staff was wearing something and she had a tattoo on her arm and someone complained because what that would look like in the public.

Many similarities have been identified in the phrasing that participants used to elucidate Maria's incentives behind her consumption choices. Following references to the dress codes imposed by the luxurious working environment, the interviewees concurred that Maria 'wants to feel attractive and confident in her new job', 'bought the clothes to fit in', 'wants to give to the spa centre a good reputation', 'wants people to take her seriously', 'wants to compromise in order to feel comfortable', and overall accounts which reflect the choice of a consumption lifestyle aiming to conform to a new working environment. Embarking upon informants' accounts about Maria's conspicuous tendency toward conformity consumption, the following section will discuss a phenomenon which emerged

during the presentation and discussion of the vignettes. Whereas the participants explicitly disengaged themselves from the consideration or adoption of conspicuous consumption practices, the vignette's sufficient context and information prompted them to identify with the protagonist and admit that they had personal experiences of the described situation.

### **9.1.2 Self-identification, conformity and socialization**

Consumption practices represent a central pillar of the individual's everyday realities and define the behaviour of the majority of people in Western developed economies. Over the last few years, more authors have suggested that the boundaries between the notions of the consumer and citizen have been blurred (Bauman, 1998; Trentmann, 2007). As was discussed in previous parts of this thesis, consumption can be seen as an extremely useful vehicle for participation in social processes such as individual's socialization. Simultaneously, such processes play a major role in the creation of social groups, stimulate social comparison and emulation amongst individuals and eventually re-define the criteria and demarcate the boundaries for social inclusion and exclusion (Veblen, 1899; Duesenberry, 1949; Merton, 1957; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Ekstrom and Hjort, 2009).

During the first part of the interview – before the presentation of the vignettes – the participants referred to compliance and conspicuous consumption, adopting a depreciatory overtone, and some of them went further, suggesting that emulation processes and conformity to consumer culture constrain individual expression, autonomy and freedom. Nonetheless, after the presentation of the first vignette, the participants situated on the back of their experiential background Maria's conspicuous buying activities and promptly

focused their attention and remarks on the peculiarities and details of the situation. Also, for the first time throughout the interview process, the participants identified and empathized with a character who explicitly sought to express herself via ostentatious consumption activities. The plausibility of the story, described as an actual experience that included information about the actor, assisted the respondents to develop an understanding of the situation and prompted them to engage with the story by describing similar personal experiences. Without reference to the caprices of the 'other' conspicuous consumers, the majority of the informants rationalized Maria's decisions and claimed that she was acting in a socially acceptable way so as to fit into the new working environment. In this specific scenario, the participants experienced conspicuous consumption, emulation and imitation as vehicles of socialization, participation and social inclusion in general. Maria's conspicuous demand for 'some eye-catching trousers' that make her 'feel attractive' and 'has to do with prestige' is overshadowed by the anxiety of a young person to emulate the lifestyle of an upper social group and establish him/her within a luxurious working environment. Status consumption becomes a familiar experience for participants and the stigma of ostentatious economic display has been removed under the pressure of social obligations. Possibly this phenomenon occurred since the age, socio-economic condition and educational qualifications of the protagonist of the vignette were similar with these of the participants. A full understanding of the situation produced familiarity and vindicated Maria's motivation to distinguish herself through expensive clothes. Overall, the discussion of the first vignette stimulated and refreshed the interest of the informants, considering that 50 minutes of open-ended question came beforehand, and the presentation of the second scenario was widely welcomed.

## 9.2 Competition, differentiation and status consumption

Apart from conformity and a need for social acceptance, as the end of socially-driven consumption, informants linked Maria's visit to the expensive boutique with her desire to build her "self-confidence." Acknowledging that our common worldviews and self-esteem are socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1971), individuals are expected to build their confidence via specific actions so as to corroborate their common perceptions of reality. These days, commodities and status symbols are regarded as a means of indicating social superiority and marketing practices produce a series of competitive versions and updates of products so as to generate status rivalry amongst their potential possessors. The scenario of the second vignette aimed to examine participants' perceptions of competitive consumption and responses to the conspicuous display of luxurious goods, offering an *a priori* clarification about James' buying activities.

**Scenario Two:** James has worked hard for 32 years in three different estate agencies in Birmingham. Today, married with two adult self-funded sons, he plans to materialize one of his burning desires: to buy a GL-Class Mercedes jeep for £54, 275, using a large part of his pension fund. His wife argues that there is no utility in buying such an expensive car, but James replies as follows: "Carolyn, it's not the utility...it's Mercedes Benz!! None of our neighbours have that car!"

Through the analysis of the responses, the importance of historicity attributed to the efforts and work accomplishments of the conspicuous consumer was emphasized. Even if the purchase of such an expensive car was considered extravagant, James' biographical details

vindicated and supported his decision to engage in a status-conscious consumer decision. The commodity and its superb qualities received less attention by participants, who focused their experience on the personal characteristics and idiosyncrasies of the potential buyer. In his account below, Mike focused on James' career, professional progress and latent desires.

It's something like...You say something about prestige earlier on...is almost talking about the passage of time really. It's almost like, you know when you deserve that sort of prestige, yeah. Hmm...I mean, I think it's probably a good choice to spent his pensions really (laugh). I think, yeah, his wife argues that there no utility or value but again I think, I mean in depends on how desperate James is. This all idea and notion of having a Mercedes is just so ingrained within his identity and who he is. Then it is hard to exercise and getting rid of that I suppose, rather than repressing that sort of thing, I don't know to say no I rather have the car. How many tears did you have, because he will never be a happy man, just what has been working all his life, a long dream. But, I suppose when he said that none of the neighbours possess this car, again you know then is so crafty, I want them to know that I have this money; that I became to this stage in my life, I can afford.

Mike's narrative and perception of the situation oscillates between James' continuous, and almost gallant, efforts to accumulate his fortune and the unscrupulous aspiration to outdo his neighbours in terms of financial strength and status through the display of the status symbol. Nonetheless, the status symbol, as manifested in the scenario in the form of a luxurious and ultra expensive car, had been suppressed on the back of participants' experiences, centring their attention on the argument between the conspicuous consumer

and his partner. For example, Thomas experiences the financial debate between the couple as follows:

I think...I think he had the savings. I think I agree with both. James worked hard for thirty two years and he earned his money and really he can do with his savings, what he wants to do. If you pay attention to the real use of resources, if you really need something else, I think Karen got a point. You can probably afford a Mercedes, afford a nice car, paying 20000 pounds and still have his prestige. And he can satisfy his ambition probably. He worked all his life for it and he wants to enjoy it. Well, it is a symbol for him. He wants people say that he has bought it so he achieved that status in life.

The argument between James and his wife as regards the purchase of the car captured Matt's attention and he explicitly supported one of the two protagonists. Matt claimed that "I would probably support Carolyn, I mean his argument that no one possess the car in the neighbourhood is pretty shallow" and characterized James as an "arrogant and insecure man." Similarly, Esther experienced inequality in the relationship of the couple and aggressively took the side of Carolyn, and intervening in the scenario, offered an alternative buying solution for James which probably could satisfy his wife.

I think he is selfish. He says that none of our neighbourhoods possess that car...obviously it is a status thing, he wants people across the road to say oohhh there he goes with the Mercedes again. He wants (emphasis) people to say that. What about his wife...Poor woman...He can buy

a different...something different which doesn't cost 55 grants...Could he? Well but he isn't very indulgent. He isn't very indulgent spending 55 thousand pounds of his pension and it is a large part of his pension. So, he can buy himself something a little bit...which is still cool...but smaller or less expensive, then when it comes to selling it on he can save a lot of his pension, not just a little a bit.

Whilst the inside family debate initially monopolized the interest of the participants, gradually their accounts focused on James' character and the intentions behind his other-directed spending activities. James consciously and ardently partakes in the game of status consumption and considers the possession and display of the luxurious Mercedes car as a modern-day trophy of social standing and prestige. He perceives an undeclared war of status competition within the geographical limits of his neighbourhood and seeks to gain a status advantage by differentiating his public image from the rest. George experiences James' efforts to adopt status markers so as to claim a new higher status as a form of competitive behaviour.

Hmmm...he wants to look superior. Straight away. Nobody else in the area has that car. It's an expensive car and nobody can afford that car in the neighbourhood. This man wants to make himself to look superior and it has been an ambition all way through. So that suggests that he never really got to move to the very top. If somebody else in the neighbourhood had that car, right, and he would still buying in that would be to fit in but he wants to make himself stand out. Distinguish himself from the rest. I think this is the main reason for his buying decision.

Competitive consumption and antagonism amongst consumers is the basic drive and element in the early theories of conspicuous economic display (Veblen, 1899; Simmel, 1904; Packard, 1959). However, participants' narratives did not refer to the phenomenon focusing primarily on issues of conformity and status consumption. Following participants' remarks, the protagonist of the vignette does not aim to join a reference group or to 'keep up with the Joneses' but to lead the race in search of heightened and competitive social standing. Veblen was at his best when he elaborated on the continuous struggle of middle and upper class consumers who attempted to differentiate themselves through the purchase of status symbols. For Veblen, the main propensity and tendency behind ostentatious economic activities derives from man's desire to excel above his neighbours in pecuniary strength throughout a struggle for competitive standing. In Veblen's words:

“The tendency in any case is constantly to make the present pecuniary standard the point of departure for a fresh increase of wealth; and this in turn gives rise to a new standard of sufficiency and a new pecuniary classification of one's self as compared with one's neighbourhood.” (Veblen, 1899:14)

James's desire and expectation for the purchase and exhibition of a status symbol clearly demonstrates what Veblen described as a competitive display of goods for attaining higher social standing. Such struggle for competitive standing turns into an essential factor for the comprehension of modern economic behaviour and individuals' craving for status-conferring goods. Sarah, a 36 year old recruitment consultant, concurs with the

abovementioned accounts on competitive economic behaviour and elaborated on her experiences of status competition, as these derive from interpersonal relations and everyday life.

Actually my parents, they live in Yorkshire and their neighbour is a lawyer with a flashy car like James'. I don't like him particularly (laugh). And also, I mean my friends...If I won the lottery for instance and the rest of them haven't. And you don't give, it's on you. You can fly to Edinburgh overnight for a meal, you can go to Paris, or Milan for the weekend. You can do whatever you like and your friends can't. And eventually that person will socialize with people who can do many things. And leaves the other people behind.

Sarah is in line with the Veblen's and Bourdieu's observations by perceiving conspicuous leisure and conspicuous waste as economic barriers for less affluent consumers. Competitive consumption activities offer differentiation to the conspicuous consumer and simultaneously function in highlighting income inequality and limited economic resources at the expense of others. Overall, the participants considered that competitive desires and ego-driven motives lie behind James' need to possess and display a luxurious car. Conspicuous consumption activities are stimulated by a need for social distinction and differentiation, contrary to the status-seeking purchasing activities of the first vignette, which were attributed to social conformity and the need to belong. Additionally, whilst many participants identified with Maria and her consumption choices, the presentation of the second scenario brought forward a comparison between James and the 'others'. In the following sub-section it will be discussed how James' status motivated consumption has

been associated by the participants with the activities and buying decisions of ‘others’ as conspicuous consumers.

### **9.2.1 Competitive consumption and the ‘others’**

Since the early days of the Industrial Revolution, luxury expenditure and conspicuous consumption have been condemned and occasionally stigmatized as amoral individual actions associated with indulgence and hedonism (Marx, 1883/1981; Rae, 1834/1964; Weber, 1930). Some decades later, the social visibility of status-conferring goods and the amoral dimensions of conspicuous consumption came under the close scrutiny of Thorstein Veblen. The TLC became a standard reference work on conspicuousness and consumption and a detailed and critical examination of socially driven consumption practices. Veblen aimed to highlight that everyday micro-status consumption games mirrored the gap between the poor and the higher social groups not only in financial but also in cultural terms. Therefore, the manifestation of social inequality prompted members of the working and middle classes to focus their resources and energies on an escalating and never-ending struggle to secure higher social ranking. Given that the upper classes possessed the economic means of maintaining and continuously enhancing their social position, the participation in the game of status consumption will eventually affect the physical and psychic well-being of the ambitious conspicuous consumer. Ostentatious display and self-advertising tend to be more time-consuming, neurotic and aimless activities for socio-economic groups of lower/middle income.

Excess competition and upward social mobility via the saving, accumulation and display of status symbols has been also critically approached by the participants, who identified ‘the others’ as conspicuous consumers in the previous chapters. Subsequently, James’ ambition to exceed his neighbours in financial strength and social standing categorized him within such a group. The disclosure of James’ motives in the vignette offered to informants a concrete example of conspicuousness related to consumption and a situation which can be identified and compared with previous experiences. Thus, whilst during the first part of the interview the participants referred to the ‘others’ as abstract entities with whom they rarely associate or socialize, the presentation of James’ scenario prompted them to refer to real experiences of ostentatious economic activities, explicitly naming associates, relatives and friends. For example, Clara related and compared James’s desire for prestige with the buying activities of her friends. She describes below how experiences their consumption lifestyles.

It is fashionable, I mean these jeeps they are all at the same range...4 by 4 and everybody is buying them. It is fashion items more than anything. Like women and their handbags...men have these cars. I don’t know if I wouldn’t encourage James to buy the car. Obviously he feels he should have it, he wants to be treated and he has worked so hard all these years. Maybe he is having a middle life crisis. You never know. Actually, all men are like that, than women. I came across a lot of men who want to buy things because they say things about them. My friend was always the same...Liked to buy staff because he showed off. My friend Mark in London he always buys, he wouldn’t buy a particular brand of car or bike...or he wouldn’t shop in particular places...Because people in the social circle he lives in that’s the way they are used up. I suppose that is his identity. His lifestyle is like that, he wants to show off....

In a similar way, Deborah pointed out and named as one of the ‘others’ her closest friend who behaves like James as regards her buying activities and the public display of goods.

I think that he is driven by material things, definitely. And things that make you look to other people that you are doing well, that you are successful. So, I think that he is driven by how other people perceive them. First thing he said, none of our neighbours possess that car, so that he wants. He wants to be the best in the street. He wants to be the most successful. And I know a lot of people like him. Yeah a lot! Probably, my friend who wants to buy expensive handbags! She doesn’t drive and she wants to learn how to drive and I asked her what kind of car she would like to drive and the only car she wants is an Audi TT. That would be her first car, which is crazy. But that is what she wants, that is what will make her look successful and look like what she thinks. It looks good.

Both Clara and Deborah experience and interpret conspicuous excess and aggressive consumption as social behaviours and phenomena which can be adopted by very close friends and even members of the family. Gradually, the conspicuous consumers, or the ‘others’, became familiar faces and status-seeking and competitive consumption activities turned out to be recognizable and well-known practices. Likewise Virginia, a 26 year old recruitment consultant, pointed out her uncle’s ambitions and desire to accumulate and display wealth as a means of social standing. She characterized both James and her uncle as “ambitious” and “self-confident” men “who want to look superior” and “show off their money” to their peers and neighbours. Overall, the findings suggest that the use of the

vignette enabled and facilitated the participants to describe their experiences on the conspicuous consumption practices aiming to facilitate upward social mobility and differentiation. Whilst these practices have been described as somewhat amoral and unethical during the first part of the research process, gradually, the story of the vignette provided the opportunity for the participants to approach the phenomenon of competitive consumption in a less personal way and eventually to introduce their own everyday experiences instead of referring to abstract responses.

### **9.3 Social class, insecurity and status consumption**

The viewpoint that ostentatious consumption practices express our social position has been a major research topic for economists and sociologists interested in issues of social stratification (Veblen, 1899; Warner and Lunt, 1941; Warner, Meeker and Eels, 1949; Packard, 1959; Savage, 2007). Veblen's original and insightful observations about the development of social-class behaviour gave a fresh impetus to future research on the socio-cultural function of commodities and its impact on the class system. Since then, the idea that social markers of consumption reflect an individual's position within social classes has been scrutinized by a plethora of consumption theorists (Baudrillard, 1970/1998; Douglas and Isherwood, 1979; Bourdieu, 1984) whose ideas have been mentioned and analyzed in the literature review of this thesis. By updating Veblen's ideas, these theorists have called attention to the existence of highly sophisticated consumption practices as a means of interaction and association amongst individuals. Nonetheless, participants' accounts and their descriptions of experiences during the first part of the interview refrained from approaching the controversial notion of social class and paid particular attention to the

participation and sense of belonging within specific groups, rather than predetermined social classes. Anticipating this type of reaction on behalf of the informants, the third vignette was designed so as to prompt them to elaborate on the notion of class consumption and upward social mobility.

**Scenario three:** The big day has finally come for Sarah. She is going to Guildford with Phil to meet his parents. Working together for five years in the same security firm in Manchester, Sarah knows that Phil comes from one of the “old money” aristocratic families. She is expecting that Phil’s father will be wearing a tuxedo, sitting next to a billiard table and drinking the best Cognac, like the figures she has seen in the movies. In fact, Sarah has put on a spectacular dress in anticipation, and she wore a pearl necklace so this guy would know that she had some money too.

The participants approached and discussed Sarah’s efforts to look beautiful, attractive and rich as a ‘need’ to “seem upper class”, “to fit into a higher class”, not to look “lower than them” and to “look like a member of the upper class” so as to be accepted. Sarah’s conspicuous behaviour was perceived as an effort to climb up to an economically advanced social class and Phil and his father were recognized as members of this group. For example, Thomas discussed below the scenario and how experiences Sarah’s consumption activities.

She wants Phil’s parents to see that she is of a similar standing. Maybe not in terms of social class but in terms of wealth, or resources, even if she is not. She wants to get accepted by her potential father in law. She wants him to see that Phil doesn’t date someone who is beneath him. She wants to feel that she is equal to Phil. I don’t think she feels inferior to Phil, she probably

feels inferior to Phil's background. Because obviously she met Phil and she obviously liked him. However, she feels inferior with Phil's social standing. It is difficult, you do treat people differently according to social standing I suppose or situation.

Likewise, George pointed out that Sarah's consumption practices are related to a need for acceptance within an upper social class environment and her desire for possessing and exhibiting expensive clothes primarily stems from her insecurity.

I think the scenario has to do with acceptance and insecurity. You know, so she wants to associate with the family members. You know, he wouldn't marry with someone who they consider beneath them. Hmm...certainly she wants to be welcomed into the family. That suggests that the clothes will be a bit more expensive than she normally buys. So, Sarah feels a bit insecure, you know about her background, her level of wealth and her standing. She feels that she wants to belong there. If she doesn't get accepted she realizes, now, that...she is inferior in their relationship. Obviously she is insecure about Phil, she is insecure about him. How might he be influenced by his parents' perception and what they think of Sarah.

Almost every participant used terms such as "inferior", "superior", "beneath them", "social standing" and overall a terminology which indicated the conceptualization of a vertical social stratification. Some of the informants also recognized that Sarah's need for social acceptance was accompanied by feelings of insecurity and inferiority, regarding her social class and background. The presentation and discussion of the vignette induced a contradiction and challenged participants' accounts and descriptions as regards the

interrelationship between the notion of social class and the incentives behind conspicuous consumption practices. Contrary to the first part of the interview, where participants experienced differentiation through possessions and status-driven consumption activities as a means of fitting into social groups, the employment and discussion of the second and third vignettes brought forward and reflected a hierarchical representation of consumers who attempted to emulate superior lifestyles or to move into “upper” social groups. The majority of the informants described how they experience Sarah’s considerations of an upper social class and the employment of commodities as vehicles of economic signalling towards Phil’s father. Her consumer behaviour can be easily rationalized and explained via the hackneyed “keeping up with the Joneses” phrase, signifying someone’s efforts to maintain his/her social position within a specific class. From a Veblenian perspective, Sarah’s choices are driven primarily by emulation, as the main mechanism behind ostentatious economic activities, and her enthusiasm to seemingly increase her social status position. In Samantha’s idiographic account below, we can see how she had experienced issues of economic inequality and feelings of inferiority in the past.

I have felt like that, I think once or twice in my life, I have been in a situation where I felt that everyone around me is...what’s the word. Slightly above me in class. And I have felt like that. I hated feeling like that. But sometimes when you know from a fact that these people have lots and lots of money. You kind of feel inferior. But then it depends again in their personality. If they are welcoming if they are nice, if they are with a smile in their face and that inferiority goes away very quickly. If they act like they are mighty then that feeling makes you feel horrible. You do feel uncomfortable. Yeah, I felt very uncomfortable, it was a gathering that again it was

like friends that we never met before and we were supposed to go and meet them and say hello to them. And then I realized that the females, it was a family, and the females weren't independent in any way, whatsoever. Everything they owned, they owned because their husband's father owned them and that made me feel better. Because I said to myself that I everything that I owned it was from personally, from my own hard work. And that kind boosted me to say, OK, you might have lots and lots of money but it doesn't really belong to you because you haven't worked for it.

Samantha has been the only participant to position herself within a socially stratified system, wherein her self-image, consumption habits and economic background did not fit in with these of the rest. As Hammet *et al*, (1989) suggest, in Britain after the 1980s, consumption together with accumulation of wealth increased as distinct forms and indicators of social class differentiation. However, Samantha's account moves beyond issues of income inequality and she provides a first person description of her own insecurities along with a critical perception of conspicuous leisure and inherited wealth. Whilst the initial social comparison induced feelings of low self-confidence, Samantha argued that her workmanship and personal achievements boosted her ego and confidence compared to the leisure activities of upper class members. Leaving aside the complex notion of social class, the third interpretive theme brings forward a bipolar construct of self-confidence/inferiority via status consumption. While the protagonists of the first and especially the second vignette are perceived as individuals who want to distinguish themselves through material possessions in order to boost their self-confidence, Sarah's consumption behaviour was interpreted as an attempt to suppress feelings of insecurity and

inferiority. Mike offered a generic but perceptive explanation of how insecurities drive our buying activities.

It has to do with insecurity I suppose and I think a way of overriding those insecurities. Helping our confidence is to surround ourselves with lots of objects which represent ourselves at a level that we actually aspire to and want to attain.

Similarly, many participants concluded that Sarah is willing to engage in conspicuous consumption practices so as to ‘make an impression and rise to his level of social class’, ‘impress them in order to fit in’, ‘pretend that she has money’, ‘fit in a different social world’ and ‘face her own insecurities.’ What emerged from the data was that both feelings (self-confidence/inferiority) derive from individuals’ same inner motivation: to accumulate and display goods so as join the social group (or class) above them. One hundred years ago, Veblen described the existence of a similar inner motivation as “the propensity for achievement.” He argued that the propensity remains the same throughout the development of modern industrial societies and what changes is “the **form of its expression** and in the **proximate objects** to which direct the man’s activity.” (Veblen, 1899:33). Over the last fifteen years, in the face of high mass consumption, we ought to rethink the expression of the propensity for achievement and its implications for consumer culture and also individual’s well being. The later can be associated with participants’ acknowledgment that the inevitable comparison amongst consumers in terms of social status has a huge, and often negative, impact on their self-perception and subsequent self-esteem. Consequently, it can be argued that whilst Veblen’s ideas have been criticized (Mason, 1981; Page, 1992) as being irrelevant and anachronistic, his observations on the ostentatious display of wealth

and feelings of superiority/inferiority amongst conspicuous consumers can somehow reflect individuals' motivations behind ostentatious economic display and can be also applied to consumer research theory from a moral perspective, as it will be discussed in the conclusions of the Thesis. The final part of the presentation of vignettes included short scenarios of pictorial form which portrayed images of ostentatious economic display, affluence and wealth. The selected graphic scenarios offered an impersonal way to stimulate discussion on the notion of luxury, leisure and upper class consumption so as to close the interviews.

#### **9.4 Ostentation, leisure and status consumption**

As has been discussed in the literature review of this thesis, Veblen's ideas formed a general theory about the complex interrelations between prestige, social class, private property and waste. Signalling, luxurious consumption and ostentation are social practices which aim to attribute prestige to the possessor of goods or services and as Veblen (1899: 34) argued, to bring forward and induce "comparison of persons with a view to rating and grading them in respect of relative worth or value." Of course, Veblen was referring to the services and consumption activities of a leisure class during the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thus, in the final part of the interview I attempted to update the illustration of images of ostentation and wealth from a contemporary consumer society perspective. After sixty to ninety minutes of interviewing, for the majority of the participants, the final theme of the vignettes aimed to offer an amusing and more relaxing way to close the research process by employing pictorial scenarios of ostentation and conspicuous display of wealth. Whilst a distinction between luxury and prestige was drawn by the informants during the first part of

the interview, the description of a first person experience related to images of conspicuous and ostentatious economic display was missing from respondents' accounts and I considered that the most suitable part of the interview - so as to elicit their perceptions on increased wealth and extravagance - could be at the end of the process. Due to word limitations, I will offer a presentation and limited discussion of two (out of four) pictorial scenarios below. The first scenario portrayed the image of conspicuous leisure and consumption of luxurious services together with Steve's account, a 33 year old accountant.



*Sailing to the Mediterranean Sea on a luxury yacht chapter is more than a holiday. As soon as you get on board, you meet and socialize with interesting people and afterwards you can narrate the experience to people who have never been there.*

*Steve-33 year old, accountant*

Since Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) published their groundbreaking study, the concept of ‘consumer experience’ has magnetized the attention of consumer researchers. Over the next twenty years, the concept of ‘consumer experience’ has gained such rising popularity so as theorists have proposed the existence of an emerging experience economy and the area of experiential marketing (Pine, 1999). Embryonic references to the subject can be found in Scitovsky’s (1976) treatise on economic values and consumer demand, where the author emphasized the importance of tracing the concept of experience in the romantic roots of hedonistic consumption (Campbell, 1987; Caru and Cova, 2003). The purchase of luxurious services, mostly associated with public display, can embody the notions of pleasure and enjoyment as narratives of consumption experiences which can be conveyed to other individuals. The abovementioned pictorial scenario was perceived by the majority of the participants as an example of consuming and narrating an experience that mirrors and signifies images of luxury and affluence. For instance, Mike associates the notion of the consumption experience and leisure activities with the idea of belonging within an upper class status group.

I suppose it is interesting with the sort of taking the experience away from you. From away, in the sort of spatial, temporal sense, that prestige has more work because, yeah you can narrate that and dive in these stories for week afterwards, you know. And I suppose, you can describe the experience to people, you can narrate to people that never did that. And this idea of sort being elite really, of having some power, to other people then and possessing this knowledge.

In his account, Mike openly referred to members of an upper status group, financially capable of enjoying expensive services and narrating their experience as a means socialization, social participation and differentiation. Status and prestige connotations are communicated through the narrative of the experience instead of the wasteful display of status-enhancing goods and services. Similarly, more informants centred their responses on the communication of extravagance, luxury and status consumption experiences. For example, Thomas explained how a trip to India turned out to be an occasion for being associated with lavishness and how afterwards inevitably transmitted his knowledge to friends and relatives and in a similar way Pamela described her own experience of conspicuous leisure, ostentation and holidays.

Compared to the 'Gilded Age' and Veblen's times, the expansion and sophistication of the means of transportation together with increased leisure time render holidays as an ideal site for display and luxury consumption. The French Riviera, Ibiza and Greek islands are only few of the well-known destinations which offer resorts and facilities for a luxurious experience of conspicuous leisure and, with reference to the vignette, participants did not hesitate to express their desire for participating in these activities. The industry of tourism

has been rising continuously since the 1960s and the production of holidays has been promoted with an aesthetic, cultural and exotic image so as to attract members of the middle classes who aspire to join distinctive lifestyles (Dickens and Ormrod, 2007). As Crang (2002) argues, tourism becomes a commodity to be consumed and offers to the individual active participation to common experiences which can maintain and often reinforce his/her social identity. Thereupon, and along with participants' views, it can be said that Veblen's conspicuous leisure of unproductive forces can be expressed nowadays, amongst others, through holiday images and brochures which can communicate and construct contemporary consumption identities. Afterwards, the final pictorial vignette presented one of the most recognisable status symbols of our times, a Rolex watch, along with a short account of its owner.



*My watch is a kind of symbol for me. Also, it shows aspects of my character and personality to people around me.*

*Helen – 39 years old.*

Truong et al. (2008) argue that one of the main reasons behind the growth of luxury markers lies in the fact that the novel luxury goods are more accessible, affordable and oriented towards new customer segments, referring to the phenomenon as the ‘democratization of luxury.’ The luxury market in general, and luxury goods in particular, have close ties with an ostentatious display of goods as a means of indicating status and securing to its owner a distinctive social positioning. The final vignette aimed to explore how the participants perceive Helen’s ‘conscious’ decision of buying an expensive and observable status symbol in order to communicate aspects of her character. The informants have been asked to comment on Helen’s buying decision and describe their previous experiences with conspicuous consumers such as Helen. Initially, the majority of the responses centred upon the value of the status symbol; however, later on the participants referred to the personal characteristics of individuals who possess and display such expensive items. For example, Pamela discussed her own perception of a Rolex owner below:

I would look to someone who has Rolex, either you have lots of money and you buy good quality things or...the same time looking my hand you have lots of money and you want people

to know about it. So there is a double side of coin and I don't think if that is necessarily bad, I just don't like it. You know there are people here with lots of money. That's fine...and you don't have to tell everyone about it. You have a big house, you do have a swimming pool, you do have holidays and very extravagant and very expensive. You have got a nice car, and that is OK. But there is also that part of me that...maybe that jealous part of me that is going "hmm you are just doing that so as to show off" and maybe is that little monster inside me. Maybe because I don't have it and I think that I could...I don't know.

Similar accounts have been offered by more participants, who expressed that the possession and display of a Rolex watch signifies membership in a specific social group and seeks to impress other people. A Veblenian account related to hereditary wealth and conspicuousness came from Mike who assumed that the economic capital of Helen maybe was not derived by her personal efforts and labour process.

So, she inherited the money, she didn't work. It is a Rolex. OK. I think it is interesting the sort of, how you come into to that money and like the guy who wins the lottery and buys the boat or is it money a sort of wealth, hereditary wealth, where the money comes from? Or is it just work? I suppose that means how prestigious an item is. You see, when you work for your whole life for that object, then it is a prestigious created object anyway. So, maybe the guy with the BMW. Maybe the fact that he has worked all his life on a Rolex, makes that object prestigious, you know.

Mike offered a comparative status consideration between Helen and James, the potential buyer of the Mercedes, and contrary to Veblen's theory concluded that the display of hereditary wealth does not represent for him an indicator of social status. Such an account related to the findings of chapter seven, where the participants attributed social status considerations employing as main criteria evidence of workmanship and personal efforts. Despite the fact that the luxury branding literature (O'Cass and Frost, 2002; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Truong et al, 2008) suggests that the luxury marketplace has penetrated socio-economic groups and geographical barriers, the totality of the participants concurred that although the image of the Rolex brand is visible through media and advertising strategies, they have never been associated or socialized with an owner of such an expensive status symbol. Additionally, informants' responses to Helen's account discloses that whilst participants recognize that ostentatious display of status symbols represents the oldest and most fundamental form of status consumption, at least in modern societies, its existence within the social environment of middle-income consumers is questioned. Helen's consumer archetype is familiar to participants; however, they admitted that they have never had interpersonal associations and direct observation with an individual of similar socio-economic status and wealth. Actually, some of the informants argued that Helen's social group and lifestyle are far more alien, unfamiliar and remote compared to the other characters of the vignettes. One of the interviewees suggested that probably "Helen belongs in a small group of very rich people" and argued that the mere function of ostentatious display of wealth, although it exists, takes place within specific social groups which do not associate with what we can name as 'middle class' individuals. The presentation of Helen's vignette was the last part of the long interviews. After their completion, discussions followed with some of the participants who felt more comfortable

to express and describe how they could invest or consume a vast amount of money. Overall, the totality of the informants suggested that they rather enjoyed the interview and some of them admitted that both the questions and vignettes stimulated their imagination and exhorted them to think carefully about issues related to status, consumption and especially the notion of social class.

### **9.5 The four faces of status consumption**

The final chapter of the findings/discussion section aimed to examine participants' responses as to the presentation of the written and pictorial vignettes. Apart from building rapport with informants, the employment of vignettes in social scientific research seeks to explore taboo issues with respondents and elicit sensitive information about their general perceptions and attitudes (Barter and Renold, 1999). Indeed, the presentation and discussion of eight different scenarios related to micro-status consumption games, excess competition and ostentatious economic display enabled the interviewees to define the situation in their own terms and to offer first-person descriptions, critical comments and personal opinions on how they experience the consumption practices of the main protagonists. Also, the plausibility of the stories which were constructed around actual experiences prompted the informants to elaborate on the motivations, incentives and drives behind these conspicuous consumption practices. Focusing on participants' perceptions and consumer experiences, I have identified four different central themes regarding the interrelationships between status and consumption: a) status consumption as social conformity; b) status consumption as competition; c) status consumption as insecurity; and d) status consumption as ostentation.

For example, it becomes obvious that social conformity and a sense of belonging within a group of individuals who share similar consumption practices has been accentuated and mentioned far more often by the (middle-income) participants compared to ostentatious economic display, illustrated in the last vignette of the Rolex watch; as a phenomenon which they rarely experience and observe. Status consumption both as competition and also as an expression of individuals' insecurities have been two main characteristics that participants have equally highlighted and discussed. Consequently, we can observe that rising insecurities and emotions can activate consumption choices that produce as outcome herd behaviour, competitive consumption and grandiose display of status conferring goods. According to participants' accounts, James' desire to purchase and display an expensive Mercedes jeep together with Maria's aspiration to conform in the new working environment via her clothes and Sarah's aspiration to emulate the upper-class lifestyle of her potential husband are informed and driven by insecurity, desire to boost one's self-esteem and difficulty in embracing change. Drawing back to the literature review of the thesis, we see that these findings seem to substantiate and support the studies of marketing, economic and consumer theorists (Veblen, 1899; Dichter, 1955; Scriven, 1958; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Shankar and Fitchett, 2002) who have convincingly argued that consumer behaviour can be absurd, irrational and very often shaped by social and cultural relations. Also, it is interesting to notice that middle-income British consumers have acknowledged that their interpersonal relations and experiences with affluent, upper-class and status seeking individuals are rather limited. Almost all the totality of the respondents identified with the case of Maria whose consumption choices aim to signify belongingness

within a specific group and James' desire to buy the Mercedes after long-standing effort and hard work. Consequently, the findings of the vignettes, to a certain extent, suggest that the impact of excess, luxury and ostentatious economic display of the upper classes diminishes in the perception and buying habits of middle-income individuals. Although the informants have recognized the competitive nature of James's consumption preferences and associated him with people they already know (relatives, friends), competition and especially ostentation as outcomes of status consumption play a secondary role. Finally, and with reference to the pictorial vignettes illustrating extrovert and aggressive images of conspicuousness and consumption, it is important to point out that the majority of the participants have experienced identical or similar commodities and lifestyles only through television, magazines and advertising messages, a fact that also justifies the social-cultural gap and limited interaction between middle-income individuals and members of the upper classes.

## **Concluding comments**

The role and importance of interpersonal relations in defining consumer preferences and choices has been widely discussed in the literatures of economic and social sciences. For example, apart from explicating the impact of total income on individual consumer behaviour, Adam Smith (1776/1999) suggested that, to some degree, consumption contributes to the maintenance or improvement of an individual's social standing. Thorstein Veblen has been the first theorist to shed some light on how the process of social comparison has been strengthening and escalating via the display of status symbols by members of the affluent and aristocratic leisure class. Proposing a close reading (or reminding) of Veblen's most famous book, this study suggests that the exclusive and hyperbolic association of Veblen's name and work with the overused and hackneyed term 'conspicuous consumption' is problematic and eventually eclipses the first detailed effort to comprehend the motivations and outcomes of a collective (at least in Veblen's days) action of consumer behaviour. Therefore, we might start to think of Veblen's theory as an intellectual progenitor of contemporary theoretical approaches related to the meaning conveyed by status-conferring goods and socially-directed consumption practices.

## **Veblen's oscillation between economics of consumer demand and sociology of consumption**

A brief but critical review of Veblen's life and work substantiates the remarks of his biographers (Dorfman, 1934; Edgell, 2001) on how Veblen's failure to achieve academic status in the field of economics can be ascribed both to his eccentric character and his unconventional/unorthodox ideas about the amalgamation of economics ideas with social

theory. We can observe that the initial reception of Veblen's book as a critical observation upon the mannerism of the upper-classes accompanied his academic reputation until the end of his life and discouraged him from discussing and analyzing further the evolution of an emerging consumer culture such as its impact upon individual's behaviour. Despite the popularity of the TLC in public rather than intellectual circles, Veblen's contemporary economists could not digest that the consumption preferences of the Rational Economic Man could also be driven by impulsive and competitive forces such as aggression, emulation, invidious comparison, insecurities and status-seeking considerations. The catastrophic impact of the Great Depression on the income and financial capability of most consumers in the United States and Europe, exhorted a growing number of social scientists - until the outbreak of the WWII - to pay some attention to Veblen's observations about wasteful expenditure of goods and services. We notice how the exchange of ideas between economics and disciplines such as social psychology and sociology prompted few early specialists of consumer behaviour to question the orthodoxy of neoclassical economic analysis and gradually to offer some explanations of individuals' tendency to adopt competitive consumption practices.

In the fourth chapter, it was highlighted that the economic recovery of the post-war period and the advent of the phenomenon of mass-consumption reshuffled social structures and revitalized the interest in Veblen's observations. Rise in spending, new forms of media and the introduction of new products in the markets encouraged members of the working/middle classes to participate in the game of ostentatious economic display and simultaneously inspired sociologists and marketing theorists to examine how conspicuous consumption practices can be viewed as a means of symbolic communication in the

emerging service-driven economies. Without explicit references to Veblen's work, prominent sociologists interested in consumption phenomena (Leavitt, 1954; Katona, 1951; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955) sought to analyze the interrelations amongst rising material comfort, display of wealth and social mobility. Surprisingly, Veblen's name gained popularity in the 1950s via two economic studies on consumer demand (Duesenberry, 1949; Leibenstein, 1950), whose common assumption has been that consumers buy products in order to emulate 'superior' lifestyles and differentiate their image from the others. It can be said that both studies offered a simplistic conceptualization of Veblen's thesis and misleadingly repositioned and reintroduced Veblen's work in economics as a study on product symbolism. From the 1950s until the 1980s, we observe that Veblen can be viewed as the precursor or intellectual ancestor of Kenneth Galbraith (1987) and Vance Packard (1959). Both men offered some of the most popular discussions of consumption in the post-war period and, adopting Veblen's satirical and iconoclastic tone, criticized unethical advertising techniques and standardized economic assumptions about consumer demand. From a sociological perspective, Riesman's (1961) analysis of other-directed consumers validated the popularization of conspicuous consumption practices and early consumption theorists (Levy, 1959) verified Veblen's outlook on the symbolic use of commodities by arguing that the brands we choose reflect our status and produce social meaning. Additionally, some seminal studies related to the social meaning of possessions as symbols of membership in a particular social class (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979), the profusion of "taste" that differentiates and provides the means of exclusion, distinction and prestige (Bourdieu, 1984) and the "sign value of commodities" and consumption as a "system of communication" (Baudrillard, 1981; 1988) are in line with Veblen's characterization of objects as symbols of prestige. In particular, Bourdieu's (1984) theory

of status consumption can be understood as the most complete extension and development of the phenomenon that Veblen coined as conspicuous consumption (Trigg, 2001).

### **Status-seeking phenomena in marketing theory and consumer research**

We notice that even if economists have been at pains to shed some light on interpersonal effects and status-inspired consumption, the first theorists of consumer behaviour (Woods, 1960; Nicosia, 1966; Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Engel et al., 1968) - fascinated by the new market conditions of affluence and increasing consumer choice - reappraised both product symbolism and consumption for status. However, the emerging models of consumer decision making, widely used for pedagogical purposes, did not escape from the legacy of utilitarian economic theories along with the behavioural principles of cognitive psychology and information processing models. As expected, the general (grand) theories of rational consumer demand, whose intellectual heritage can be traced back to classical microeconomic demand theory, avoided acknowledging and discussing the irrationalities and absurdities in the behaviour of the Veblenian conspicuous consumer. Also, the huge impact of behaviourism and the dominance of psychological approaches to consumption become evident through citation analysis and a detailed examination of Veblen's ideas in eight leading journals of marketing and consumer research. Almost for the totality of contemporary consumer researchers, a reference to Veblen's work connotes the starting point of introducing the reader to a semi-historical introspection of previous studies related to the use of status symbols, public display of goods and competitive consumption. Criticized by his contemporaries as an eccentric study upon the consumption practices of the upper classes, Veblen's ideas were revived in the post-war period of mass-consumption

and affluence mainly by public commentators of consumer culture and to a limited degree their legacy has enriched the reassessment of public consumption by the intellectual movements of interpretivism, post-modernism and the work of few social theorists over the last twenty years. Nonetheless, attempting to trace Veblen's name in the literature of consumer behaviour, it can be easily noticed that his iconoclastic writing on ostentatious economic display, together with his intellectual oscillation between economics and sociology, discourages contemporary consumer theorists from embracing his ideas on the evolution of status-related consumption phenomena.

### **Prestige consumption and luxury**

Whilst the views of contemporary marketing theorists on status consumption have superficially acknowledged that higher levels of education and advanced communication systems have created somewhat classless and status-minded individuals, the perceptions of consumers *themselves* on status-driven consumption and prestige have never been examined in detail. Veblen's critical observations on the antagonistic character of human nature and consumer behaviour have also been reduced to one-sided arguments about social class mobility, materialism, luxurious branding and product symbolism by consumer researchers. Disengaging its interest from a brand-person model of luxury consumption, this study approached consumer's perceptions via a person-to-person understanding of the status consumption game by adopting an interpretive approach to phenomena of ostentatious economic display. Therefore, I aimed to explore how the active conspicuous consumer and the public exhibition of his status symbols are perceived and interpreted by individuals' actual experiences. Firstly, the findings suggested that the notion of prestige

receives a more intangible and honourable connotation compared to the excessive features of luxurious products and services, which provide only a momentary and superficial representation of affluence and glamour, but not sufficient information for the attribution of social status. The participants claimed that status considerations can be disclosed and expressed with accuracy only after a thorough examination of the personal history, social background and work achievements of the conspicuous consumer. Despite the fact that luxury consumption and leisure activities have limited significance as status indicators for contemporary consumers, a parallel can be drawn between the findings and Veblen's distinction of the "instinct of workmanship" as the moral indicator of social status compared to the increased waste of economic resources and lavishness. Additionally, participants' experiences reflect that conspicuousness, consumption and the generation of socially-driven desires do not constitute processes confined only by luxury items and individuals' rising expectations for social mobility but reside at the heart of a triadic relation between the observer, the conspicuous consumer and the means that the latter employs so as to create connotations with and communicate social superiority. Consumption activities aiming to secure prestige occur within a social context and take concrete and substantial meaning only after the personal histories of the conspicuous consumer have been divulged.

### **Conspicuousness, social conformity and consumption**

In the second part of the interview process, I elaborated on the participants' self-perceptions related to status and their experiences and perceptions of individuals who can be

characterized as conspicuous consumers. Overall, informants' accounts of their own consumption lifestyles indicated that both limited attention to one's self and excessive and ostentatious economic display can attach to the individual the stigma of exceeding the established social standards. Additionally, the totality of the informants expressed and highlighted that their own image reflects a moderate consumer ethos and attributed rivalry for social status exclusively to *other people*, drawing examples from the consumption practices of friends, colleagues and in general individuals who participate in a social process of conspicuous economic display so as to satisfy their needs for social conformity, competition and ostentation. Contrary to Veblen's references regarding aggressiveness and competition - as the basic motives of conspicuous consumption - the participants argued that ostentatious economic display does not aim only to achieve upward social mobility but nowadays mainly seeks to satisfy the need for social acceptance and a sense of belonging within desirable social groups. For example, the informants experienced and described the workplace environment as the most important factor in shaping the consumption preferences of a middle-income consumer, followed by peer-pressure and the family environment. A less hierarchical and socially structured society, compared to Veblen's times, has been experienced and acknowledged by the participants who focused on individual's needs to conform to specific consumption lifestyles. Participants' reluctance to elaborate on the topics of status consumption, social mobility and their social positioning, suggested that the notions of social class and conspicuous consumption constitute sensitive and taboo issues, thus supplementary techniques in the form of vignettes were employed during the final part of the interview.

The employment of vignettes to some degree challenged and enhanced participants' initial responses and brought forward in the discussion a hierarchical perception of conspicuous consumption practices, in terms of social class and in line with the Veblenian observations. It is very interesting that during the first part of the interview, and before the presentation of the vignettes, the participants clearly aimed to disengage themselves from ostentatious economic display and luxury consumption in general; however, the realistic depiction of the scenarios encouraged them either to identify with one of the protagonists or disclose that they have experienced similar situations. Feelings of self-confidence and insecurity were emphasized as two of the main motives behind the accumulation and display of status symbols. The majority of the participants identified with the scenario depicting status consumption motivated by a sense of belonging within a group but also recognized that competitive consumption and ostentation are practices adopted by peers, friends and members of their close environment. In conclusion, they perceived and discussed four main motives behind socially-driven consumption phenomena namely: social conformity, competition, insecurity and ostentation, emphasizing that social conformity plays a major role for middle-income individuals who rarely socialize with more affluent members of society capable of displaying commodities purely for ostentation. Overall, it can be said that the use of the vignette enabled and facilitated the participants to describe their experiences of the conspicuous consumption practices and also to discuss the phenomena of upward social mobility and differentiation via consumption in a less threatening way. Thereupon, the findings suggest that the examination of status consumption would remain shallow without the use of vignettes, which offered plausible scenarios and a vivid experiential framework to informants, who previously expressed a moderate consumer ethos and attributed rivalry for social status exclusively to *other people*.

## **Veblen and the morality of consumption**

As we can observe in the literature review of the Thesis, the ever-increasing influence of consumption in our everyday realities and social life in general has been gradually recognized and discussed by a plethora of social scientists. The use of consumer objects and the act of consuming material commodities or immaterial concepts construct, create and continuously expand a social arena within which images, meanings and ideas perpetuate our experiences and affect our perceptions. This thesis suggests that although the importance of status-seeking consumption practices has been long ago recognized as one of the most fundamental forms of consumption, the adequate and detailed examination of the phenomenon in the literatures of consumer research becomes noticeable only through its absence. By rereading, reviewing and scrutinizing Veblen's work in the literatures of marketing and consumer behaviour, this study argues that the lack of historical introspection as regards the intellectual antecedents of the discipline along with superficial examination of early accounts about the generation of consumer desires results in the marginalization of ideas that form the grounds of the conceptual basis of contemporary consumer research. Of course, we should also notice and link up the experiences of middle-income British consumers on the use of possessions as means of social acceptance and conformity which partially substantiate and mainly challenge Veblen's views. Also, whilst acknowledging that we live in less hierarchical socially structured and far more technological advanced societies - compared to Veblen's times - the empirical findings indicate how individuals' basic motives of competing for social status via consumption remain the same. What seems to have considerably changed are the social norms and

ethical standards of legitimizing luxury consumption and display of status symbols as indicators of prestige, especially after taking into account contemporary credit facilities. The ascription of status turns into an ongoing and complicated social process which questions the phenomenal exhibition of commodities and seeks to assess the personal achievements and socio-cultural background of the conspicuous consumer. Thereupon, contemporary theoretical and practical studies as regards the assessment and perception of the symbolic value of luxury brands should escape the limitations of a person-brand approach and orient their understanding to individual's needs and desires within a social context. Nonetheless, there is a price to be paid here. Veblen's observations have not been circumscribed within a trickle-up model of consumption preferences but his powerful analysis critically discussed the patterns that social dynamics and increased desire for social positioning reproduce inequality and negatively affect an individual's well-being. The conspicuous game of status consumption embodies an inconspicuous, esoteric and dark side for the individual who constantly aims "to make the present pecuniary standard the point of departure for a fresh increase of wealth; and this in turn gives rise to a new pecuniary classification of one's self as compared with one's neighborhoods" (Veblen, 1899:20).

One superficial reading of TLC can suggest that members of each social class emulate superior lifestyles so as to achieve a desired status designation. Paying more attention to the substance of Veblen's views, we notice that an individual's failure to gain more satisfaction from his current material and social position triggers a vicious cycle of insatiable human needs and wants. Assuming that the goal of the accumulation and display of commodities is

the gratification of securing higher social ranking, unavoidably the dissatisfaction with his current position will prompt the consumer to participate again and again in an endless game of status considerations. His fruitless efforts for the desirable self-satisfaction, confidence and self-actualization via competitive consumption practices proclaim and point out a problematic and contradictory side of the 'democratization' of luxury. Contemporary consumer researches interested in status and luxury consumption ought to take into consideration that the individual's desire for emulative spending and positional goods, apart from generating social comparison, can turn into main sources of frustration and dissatisfaction. Consequently, we can re-read and consider Veblen as a moral thinker, who pointed out the negative outcomes of wasteful consumption and emulation. Consumer behavior theorists ought to take into account that the symbolic value of status symbols might satisfy an individual's desire for self-fulfillment, excess, social standing, freedom of choice and gratification, however, with the expense of entrapping an insatiable consumer within a never-ending search for changeable and volatile archetypes existing in daydreams, media stories and images of neon advertising messages.

### **Limitations and future research**

Finally, some limitations as regards Veblen's work and this study should be accentuated. As one of the first theorists who observed and analyzed individuals' consumer behaviour at the end of the nineteenth century, Veblen oversimplified the analysis of socially-complex consumption phenomena (Bronner, 1989), focused his interest primarily on a trickle-down model of consumption tastes from the top to the bottom of the social hierarchy (Campbell,

1995; McIntyre, 1992; Mason, 1998) and limited his descriptions primarily to ostentatious and visible consumption actions (Campbell, 1987). His unwillingness to cite sources in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, generalizations and ambitious efforts to attack utilitarian theories of consumer demand also complicate the contemporary reexamination and application of his ideas to consumer research. Also, the universality of the term 'conspicuous consumption' renders difficult a precise and detailed genealogical exercise as regards the adoption and discussion of the concept by social scientists interested in theories of consumption. What is more, as in any other qualitative study that involves in-depth interviewing, the representativeness and validity of the specific sample is limited. As was mentioned in the methodology, a comparative analysis between the sample of individuals that Veblen observed and analyzed and the informants participating in this project can be viewed as an extremely difficult task, considering the fundamental chronological and spatial differences which occur and characterize the two studies; however, such comparative analysis can assist as a tool to challenge and update Veblen's ideas. Despite the employment of sophisticated research techniques (vignettes), it seems that participants persist in considering the social practices related to conspicuous economic display as a taboo subject. Perhaps, the use of research methods such as participant observation or the illustration of interpretive insights of consumption practices through the use of films, popular cultural and fiction, could enrich the findings. In conclusion, despite its limitations it can be said that Veblen's theory incorporates some diachronic ideas of seminal value, and thus his intellectual heritage needs to be reappraised by contemporary marketing theorists and, of course, consumer researchers.

What is the relevance of Veblen's theory for the 21st century marketing studies and consumer research? The emergence of evolutionism as a new trajectory in marketing theory recasts the core disciplinary logic (Saad, 2008), since the exploration of individual action and consumption preferences through the lens of evolutionary psychology has recently attracted the interest of a small but growing community of consumer researchers. Veblen has been one of the first theorists who adopted a Darwinian framework so as to explain the development of status-seeking consumption phenomena, and therefore, his work can be also read as an evolutionary one and remind contemporary consumption theorists past insights into the Darwinian roots of consumer behaviour. Additionally, we can rethink Veblen's ideas related to waste and extravagant consumption activities in the light of the contemporary financial turmoil. The rising popularity of Veblen's ideas after the Great Depression was due to his gloomy prognosis about the negative impact of over-consumption to economic development and individual welfare. From a contemporary perspective, Veblen's work can inform the ideas of marketing theorists and consumer researchers as regards the impact of excessive enjoyment of comforts and emulation of luxurious lifestyles on the environmental crisis, social development and consumer's happiness.

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