



SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE NEW ENVIRONMENT OF CONSUMPTION: CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION REDEFINED

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ABSTRACT

Social media can be defined as a computer-based technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and information through the building of virtual networks and communities. A research conducted in 2021 shows that 78% of the people access social media platforms from their mobile phones. The present paper considers the role of popular social media platforms like You Tube, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter in creating and disseminating the culture of 'conspicuous consumption'. 'Conspicuous consumption', a concept developed by Thorstein Veblen, is that behaviour of social actors, by virtue of which they utilize goods and services not for the satisfaction of their actual needs, but for the sake of showing off to others and gaining self-esteem, which is very much dependent upon the esteem accorded to them by others in the society. In the present era of increasing influence of digital media, this trend has become the order of the day. This trend however does not remain confined to any particular class, but has a trickle-down effect, thus creating a mass culture marked by false needs. Based on a content analysis of social media posts and personal experiences, and taking lead from Veblen's theory of the Leisure class and the theory of Mass Culture as developed by the Frankfurt School, the present paper attempts at an understanding of how social media acts as a mirror as well as a tool for reinforcement of behaviour marked by conspicuous consumption, which due to the tendency of pecuniary emulation, gives rise to a homogenized society.

1. INTRODUCTION

Media has always played a crucial role in society. The significance of mass media, has been, to a large extent, replaced by social media. Social media is a group of websites and applications that provide their users the opportunity to their users to communicate with each other through it, from the private accounts of the users. It gives them the ability to create and share content through it that can range from photos, videos, group games, and written texts. The term 'social media', thus, connotes a set of interactive internet applications that facilitate creation, curation and sharing of user-generated content. Examples of social media platforms are numerous. Some of the top platforms include WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, My Space, Live Journal, You Tube, WeChat, so on and so forth.

The features which make social media unique as a platform for communication are:

- Personal accounts of the users
- Wide-spread participation, the property that encourages contributions and reactions from interested people, thus blurring the line between media and audience
- Openness: Barring some exceptions, almost all the social media sites provide open access to any content and opportunity for feedback
- Friends / Connections
- Option of sending message even to a person who is not included in one's friend list
- Photo albums
- Any content created / uploaded on social media is known as 'post'



- Community and groups created on the virtual media on the basis of some common interest
- A feeling of connectedness
- Anonymity (in some cases)

Scholars label several subsets of social media, with special emphasis on social network sites. Boyd and Ellison (2007) differentiate between social network sites from social networking sites. According to them, the term 'social networking' implies meeting new people and making new connections. Social network site users tend to interact with existing, rather than making new social contacts. The present paper however argues that the use and connotation of each of this sub-category depends solely on the intent of the user perse. A second sub-category, according to them, consists of microblogging sites. These allow account holders to disseminate short messages to broad audience, often through links and images. Twitter is an example of such site.

According to Data Reportal – Global Digital Insights (2025), globally 64.7 % of the global population uses social media, equating 5.31 billion active users. This represents 94.2% of all internet users across the globe. The average daily time spent on social media by a person is 2 hours 24 minutes. These latest statistics suggest that the typical internet user spends more than 1 working day each week using social media.. In the last year 241 million new social media users joined the already-existing population, with an annual growth rate of 4.7 %. Widespread use of smart phones and reasonable net packs make this possible as the users can easily gain entry into this virtual world just by a tap on their smart phones.

The figures clearly suggest that social media is an arena where we get access to other peoples' lives very easily. The ways of their consumption (often conspicuous) are displayed on these platforms. 'Conspicuous consumption', as defined by Thorstein Veblen (1899) , is the practice of acquiring goods and services primarily for the purpose of demonstrating wealth and status, rather than their functional value. The concept highlights the role of social norms and cultural expectations in shaping consumer behaviour, suggesting that individuals often derive identity and self-worth from their consumption choices.

2. EXPLORING THE TRENDS

The digital world has opened up space for social visibility of consumption which in turn has reinforced the tendency to show off the consumption of luxury goods and exquisite experiences. Conspicuous consumption manifests itself in three forms – through displays of wealth and status, and the two very contradictory tendencies of the pursuit of individuality and the desire to blend in with the prevailing social norms. In this new age society, conspicuous consumption does not limit itself to communication within a network of acquaintances, but also involves global communication through the posting and tagging of attractions, schedule and location on social media. This suggests the growing trend to show off not only material consumption, but non-material consumption as well. The point shall be illustrated with the help of some examples.

- Brand obsession and luxury display: It has become a practice for a good number of social media users to display premium and costly products – be it gadgets, cars, clothing, shoes, or accessories. It is often seen that the 'netizens' (term used for habitual users of internet, especially social media) tag the brands they are going for to satiate their luxury needs. Photos of purchasing a new car or gadget or clothing abound the social media as an expression of their pleasant experience of consumption.
- A whole lot of social media users are accustomed to tag current location which is invariably an airport or a railway station, and their schedule to travel to an expensive place for a vacation is visible to all the followers of these digital media users. It is then followed by some exclusive photographs and videos of their vacation, suggestive of the happy moments that they are going through. If , for some reason, (may be due to network issues of their destination), they missed it during the vacation, immediately after they get back to their native place, their social media page gets flooded with photos and videos of the past few days with a word of apology - 'late post'. This apologizing demeanor of course implies how, in the present era, displaying one's happiness and experience of consumption has gained relevance.
- Wedding occasions have gained a new dimension with the increasing impact of this new age media. Nowadays,



marriage ceremony is not so much for the sake of the marriage itself, but more for the spectacular event it can be. Wedding ceremony has transformed itself into a wedding ‘event’, with some typical photographs of the bride, groom, their family members and acquaintances. Pre-wedding photo shoot which demands the would-be bride and groom to deck themselves up with various costumes and get-up capturing different moods, has become commonplace. Destination wedding, yet to gain popularity among common people, has not failed to mesmerize them.

- Home décor with some expensive items are often on display on social media.
- Visiting a multiplex to watch a movie also gets posted on these platforms and the location invariably gets tagged.
- It has become mandatory for a large number of netizens to tag any food joint or café they visit, and take clicks of the food that they enjoy over there. Often it tells about their experiences of satisfying their palates with cuisines from different countries. But the irony lies that even if they go for having their own staple food, they would like to show that off. This tendency, following the social media vocabulary, might be summarized in a tagline – ‘Local’ is the new ‘Global’.
- Altogether a new profession has come into being with the rise of social media that is the profession of content creation. Social media gives the opportunity for interested people to showcase their acumen on different channels and pages through either written content (blogging) or videos (vlogging). It goes without saying that vlogging has gained more popularity than blogging. There are so many types of vlogging like travel vlog, fashion and beauty vlogs, food vlogs that very often portray a luxurious lifestyle, influencing the target audience in the process.
- This trend takes us to a very pertinent question of some typical social media vocabulary and a unique social media culture with their implications. There has been a rise of Influencer Culture on these online platforms. Social Media Influencers (SMIs) are the new trend setters in society, who share their daily experiences about products and lifestyles on social media platforms. They are the new celebrities or ‘social media stars’, who display a noticeably luxurious lifestyle. They have a large number of ‘followers’ or ‘subscribers’. The point to be noted here is that the term ‘follower’ has assumed a new connotation in this era where we live in the virtual world. It implies those on social media who admire these trendsetters and often end up emulating their lifestyle. Another term which has come to gain much importance is ‘trending’, that , like wildfire becomes ‘viral’. Some very recent ways of consumption patterns are referred to as ‘in’ or ‘trending’, and through the process of emulation it becomes ‘viral’. Thus, the term ‘viral’ which was essentially used to refer to some contagious diseases caused by some virus, has acquired an altogether new meaning. An example would be Dalgona coffee that gained huge popularity among netizens during the lockdown days of COVID 19 in 2020.

3. THROUGH THEORETICAL LENS

The examples discussed in the previous section amply testify that most of the posts on social media, either consciously or unconsciously, aim at displaying their ‘refined’ lifestyle on social media. That the concept of ‘Conspicuous Consumption’, developed by Thorstein Veblen a long way back in 1899, has stood the test of time, has been proved by the ways of consumption and its display on social media. The term was first used to signify the practice of consuming excessively expensive goods and services by the leisurely class. Veblen aimed at associating these traits within the typical idle class only. But the concept has acquired a new dimension in digitized society, where status-seeking behaviour has pervaded all layers of the society. Gaining status in society has come to be measured by a new rule, that is, the number of likes and positive comments that an individual has managed to acquire through displaying one’s consumption patterns, and this acquisition has become co-terminus with achievement.

The age which is marked by an unparalleled rise of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), a new milieu of consumption has emerged. Borrowing from Manuel Castells, the paper advocates that we are living in a ‘Network Society’, where communication technology has ushered in a new form of society that has witnessed social relationships transcending geographical boundaries, with the result that the world has become a ‘global village’ (



McLuhan: 1964). In 'The Rise of the Network society' (1996) Castells harps on the point that networks have an immense role in shaping contemporary social structures. Since the new age society is built on global networks, it does not need to be stated explicitly that the trends on social media have an immense impact on its viewers. Gaining status in society is being increasingly measured by a new standard, that is, the number of likes and followers an individual has been able to acquire through the showing off of one's consumption patterns, and this acquisition has become co-terminus with accomplishment.

This often results in FOMO (Fear of missing out). FOMO involves the feeling that missing out on things will make someone feel left behind personally and socially. The content that is shared on social media, and the approval it gains from others through likes and positive comments, lures others to indulge in such a luxurious lifestyle which they perceive they are missing out at the moment. They get shrouded with a feeling that they are deprived of immense pleasure and they lack in the capacity of self-presentation. This feeling of missing out, in the process, results in pecuniary emulation of the desired luxurious lifestyle.

'Pecuniary Emulation', a term again developed by Veblen, refers to the social practice of the people to strive to show off their wealth and status by imitating the behaviours and lifestyles of those who are wealthier than them. The concept amply explains the tendency of consumers to find trajectories to construct social status. Veblen brought home the point that this competition for status denies the rational side of individuals. Rather it envelopes their rationale with a herd mentality that prompts them to engage in extravagance, that, in no way, fulfills their real needs. Veblen's concept has been echoed through the consumer behaviour of people in the contemporary era.

Conspicuous consumption and pecuniary emulation are based essentially on some 'false needs'. Frankfurt School introduced this concept in early 20th Century, whereby the scholars argue that the culture industry, created by mass media, gives rise to some false needs which the consumers fail to understand. Mass culture, created by the mass media, is a standardized culture, which reduces individuals into passive consumers. Unrestricted expansion of social media has succeeded, in a similar way, to become the breeding ground for a new generation of consumers who have given legitimacy to a homogenized society, rife with pseudo-individuality. In essence, we are living in a consumer society, constantly responding to false needs, thus, transforming ourselves into mere agents of consumption, and disconnected from reality as well.

4. CONCLUSION

A Originally, Veblen associated the act of conspicuous consumption with idleness, which is no longer the case, courtesy the flourishing of social media. The intertwined relationship between consumption, technology and sense of identity has brought the society to a critical juncture where the division between 'private' and 'public' is getting blurred. It has become a new arena for status seekers which has transformed the landscape of conspicuous consumption. Consumption, in the present day, has surpassed the boundaries of personal choice and has become much of a performance, widely available for others to evaluate and follow. In the process, this new age media has generated a vicious cycle whereby it acts a reflective surface of conspicuous consumption, at the same time acting perhaps as the most powerful catalyst promoting this culture. Taking lead from Frankfurt School's mass culture theory, the paper tries to emphasize the point that though social media appears to be a democratic and liberating space, an analytical approach would not fail to uncover the truth that it actually is nothing but an appendage to the culture industry, which in the disguise of pseudo-individuality, is effectively producing commodification, homogenization and conformity to the dominant culture.

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