



City Research Online

City, University of London Institutional Repository

Citation: Atanasova, A., Bardhi, F. & Eckhardt, G. M. (2024). The democratization of the status game. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 27(4), pp. 325-334. doi: 10.1080/10253866.2024.2369090

This is the published version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/33496/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2024.2369090>

Copyright: City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

Reuse: Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.



The democratization of the status game

Aleksandrina Atanasova, Fleura Bardhi & Giana M. Eckhardt

To cite this article: Aleksandrina Atanasova, Fleura Bardhi & Giana M. Eckhardt (24 Jul 2024): The democratization of the status game, Consumption Markets & Culture, DOI: [10.1080/10253866.2024.2369090](https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2024.2369090)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2024.2369090>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 24 Jul 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 166



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

ARTICLE COMMENTARY



The democratization of the status game

Aleksandrina Atanasova^a, Fleura Bardhi^{a,b} and Giana M. Eckhardt^c

^aBayes Business School (Formerly Cass), University of London, London, UK; ^bDepartment of Marketing, Copenhagen Business School Solbjerg Plads, Frederiksberg, Denmark; ^cKing's Business School, King's College London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Consumption has traditionally been a reliable indicator of one's social status in society. In today's marketplace, however, the sharing and digital economies are making signifiers of affluence and high culture more accessible than ever, and the markers that denote one's position in the status game are becoming increasingly blurred. We posit that in an increasingly digitalized and platformized social and material world, the market changes and democratizes the status game. It emerges as a catalyst for adaptability, enabling more people than before to transcend or reshape embodied resources and emulate high status positions more easily. This does not mean that social class has lost its role; rather it puts into question what is considered a high-status possession, occupation or practice and propels the emergence of new cultural scripts that alter the rules of status signification. In this essay, we outline these dynamics and suggest directions for future research.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 February 2024
Accepted 11 June 2024

KEYWORDS

Status signalling; cultural capital; conspicuous consumption; platforms; sharing economy; social class

Introduction

Platformization of consumption and the sharing economy has democratized the status game. Luxury goods, widely within reach thanks to proliferating fashion resale and rental platforms (e.g. The RealReal) and credit lending options at checkout (e.g. Klarna), are increasingly easier to acquire. Numerous mobile apps coach how to master a posh accent, YouTube videos offer step-by-step guidance on high society etiquette, and teach how to look expensive on a budget, how to sound smart and well educated in a conversation, or how to invest in the stock market. Online courses on platforms such as LinkedIn and Coursera offer affordable or free courses from top Universities worldwide, helping individuals to build marketable skills and bypass expensive university credentials. Having many followers on social media and being able to monetize them is now a valuable source of power and legitimacy, sufficient to get YouTubers and TikTok influencers invited to the MetGala (Lane 2021). The digitalization and platformization of the social and material world are increasingly putting people from various backgrounds on equal social footing, in online settings and beyond. As Currid-Halkett (2017a) asserts, “in the face of rising social inequality, both the rich and the middle classes own fancy TVs and nice handbags. They both lease SUVs, take airplanes, and go on cruises. On the surface, the ostensible consumer objects favoured by these two groups no longer reside in two completely different universes.” With increased accessibility of cultural and status signifiers

CONTACT Aleksandrina Atanasova ✉ aleksandrina.atanasova@city.ac.uk 📧 Bayes Business School, 106 Bunhill Row, London, EC1Y 8TZ, United Kingdom

Authors are listed alphabetically and have contributed equally.

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

comes a deflation of their value and the markers that denote one's position in the status game are becoming increasingly blurred.

At the same time, in today's accelerated world (Rosa 2013), the cycle of emulation is pronouncedly sped up, putting pressure on individuals to keep up and engage in a new model of in-the-now status culture where the cycle of production of new signals is constant and often takes place in the digital and social media fields (Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Samsioe 2020). Such status culture is also altered due to the algorithmization of taste. Marx (Marx and Pazzanese 2022) considers, for instance, how for a long time buying music required the expertise and recommendations of the record shop owner – knowledge and taste were acquired through more knowledgeable others who asserted their status through their knowledge, and pushed individuals to expand and deepen their tastes. Today, algorithms match rather than expand taste, feeding us more of much the same to what we and many others “just like us” listen to or like. In today's world where platforms make knowledge more accessible and standardized, the value of more traditional notions of cultural capital as embodied knowledge (Bourdieu 1984) and its institutionalized form in possessions are being questioned or revised (Marx 2022). These dynamics call into question whether consumption continues to be a reliable indicator of patterns of structuration and relations between individuals, as it has traditionally been in the past.

Recent research has begun to offer clues by showing how in today's marketplace, decoding these patterns is becoming increasingly challenging. For example, Bellezza (2023) notes that as traditional luxury goods and conspicuous consumption are becoming mainstream and lose signalling value, new alternative status signals, such as inconspicuous consumption, emerge (see also Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Samsioe 2020). Other works show that individuals increasingly blend luxury and budget and thus mask established relationships between status and consumption (Atanasova and Eckhardt 2021; Bellezza and Berger 2020). It has been also demonstrated that liquidity (Bauman 2000) further implicates social status and distinction and that there is an emerging disconnection between ownership of possessions and status (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020). These shifts suggest that what the status game looks like, how it is played and what forms it takes is changing and that how social positions are constituted through consumption is evolving. It is not becoming easier to gain status, but the game for how one does so has shifted. Yet, this remains largely a blind spot in consumer research, where the dominant perspective on status and class tends to leave the shifting role of traditional cultural, educational and occupational capital in the status game unaccounted for, and to view emergent status dynamics as indistinct from what established literature on social structures has already uncovered (e.g. Caldwell and Henry 2020; Henry 2005).

In this essay, we argue for the need for consumer research to account for the evolving nature of the status game in the digital era and to expand the discipline's grasp of how consumers participate in this game, equipped with new tools, values and aspirations. It is necessary to consider whether our conception of how status relations are structured – specifically, what types of capitals and resources allow individuals to distinguish from one another and how people can acquire such resources – continues to reflect present-day social dynamics. To that end, we bring examples from the sociological and marketing literatures, as well as illustrative cases, to suggest that in many ways, the market has democratized the status game, opening access to resources and markers of status that were previously restricted to a select few. This democratization of access to markers of class shows that the processes for cultural legitimation (Bourdieu 1984) are evolving, opening avenues for more people to master the dominant culture on the basis of which social hierarchy is established. While the status game has become more democratized, allowing more people to play it, it does not mean it is easier for people to accrue status; rather, it means the game now needs to be played differently.

We see two parallel shifts. On the one hand, the market increasingly opens new opportunities for individuals to perform and consume desired status positions, enabling unprecedented permeability of status, and potentially class boundaries. As before, social capital continues to play a significant role in shaping status positions (Bourdieu 1984). However, we show that when it comes to

economic and cultural capital, the market, specifically via platforms and the sharing economy, emerges as a catalyst for adaptability and social mobility, enabling more people than before to transcend or reshape embodied resources and to emulate high status positions more easily. In this way, for these people the status game is much the same but the rules to play it are easier. On the other hand, the sharing and digital economies are problematizing how economic and cultural capital are valorized in the status game, putting into question what is considered a high-status possession, occupation or practice. This in turn propels the emergence of new cultural scripts that alter the rules of the status signification game, imbuing new forms of capital with value that individuals leverage in a digitalized and platformized social and material world. While these shifts in status games are especially prevalent in social media and platform spaces as well as among technology (Marwick 2013) and aspirational elites (Currid-Halkett 2017b), we also are highlighting subtle but important shifts that unfold broadly in the digital era. We note that while social capital is also an important component of the status game, in this analysis we focus on cultural and economic capital, as they are more directly implicated by the marketplace resources which we suggest consumers tap into to play the status game today.

This democratization of the status game does not suggest that social class is no longer relevant or that the well theorized interplay of emulation and distancing (Bourdieu 1984; Simmel 1957; Veblen 1899) does not take place in today's context. Rather, it places a sharper investigative focus on this interplay and invites a more nuanced exploration of it in relation to the evolving qualities of today's marketplace and the socio-cultural landscape. Next, we outline the tenets of the traditional status game, map out some of the new dynamics that drive its democratization and suggest directions to guide future research.

The tenets of the status game

We build on Bourdieu's (1984) theory of distinction to discuss how people come to occupy and enact relational status positions as outcomes of economic, social, cultural and symbolic power resources, or capitals, at their disposal (Bourdieu 1984, 1987). Importantly, different capitals vary in value in different fields – distinct arenas of practice (e.g. artistic, cultural, academic, governmental) with their own sets of rules, where social positioning is dependent on one's ability to accumulate and master the specific types of capitals that matter most in that specific field. To exemplify these dynamics, Bourdieu draws an analogy with players in a card game: the game is the field of interaction where players are dealt different cards (e.g. certain types of capital), but the outcome of the game is dependent on not only the cards and the rules of the game, but the knowledge and skills with which individuals play their cards. For Bourdieu, these knowledge and skills are determined by one's habitus – “a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class” (1972, 86) – that is rooted in one's family setting, which predisposes one's initial position in the social structure, and is later further shaped by other institutions such as education.

Overall, following Bourdieu (1984), we conceptualize social class as denoting a certain variation in opportunities which inform and are informed by how much status and power some individuals have compared to others. Social life is thus conceived as a complex status game in which people leverage different capitals (economic, social, symbolic or cultural) to attain status and class. Status positions, in turn, reflect and determine one's ability to master the status game that unfolds within different fields, such as those of consumption, work, education and art, where individuals compete for a place in the social hierarchy (Bourdieu 1984). Across these fields, consumers lifestyles, tastes, and patterns of consumption have been used as reliable indicators for one's position within the social hierarchy, for they reflect the complex interplay between the economic, social and cultural resources which individuals draw upon to affirm their social position.

To that end, consumer research, with its focus on consumption patterns and behaviors, has offered valuable insights into how social class positions are reproduced in consumption. How

objects and practices of consumption have been utilized to play the status game, the amount and types of capital they possess, and consumers' skills to leverage these capitals have been important insights to emerge over the past twenty years (Allen 2002; Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013; Henry 2005; Holt 1997, 1998; Holt and Thompson 2004; Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013; Üstüner and Thompson 2012; Weinberger, Zavisca, and Silva 2017). Notably, while economic capital has been shown to be reflected through the exchange value of consumption objects, which are used as symbolic signals of status positions, cultural capital is expressed through consumption of ideationally difficult objects that embody aesthetic and interactional styles that fit with the cultural elite sensibilities and that are socially scarce (Holt 1998). In turn, status positions have traditionally been reinforced through consumption by the virtue of not only one's access to (marketplace) resources, but use of these resources and knowledge of how to leverage them to assert status boundaries. That is, it matters not only what is consumed, but how and to what ends (Holt 1998). We contend that there is merit in revisiting precisely the "what" and the "how in this relation."

How the market democratizes the status game

In late modernity, much of the developed world is structured around a neoliberal, market economy where the economy takes precedence over other social structures (Bauman 2000). As such, economic logics seem to permeate and shape all spheres of social life (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017), including the relation between class and social status. Additionally, over the last decades, the market has undergone rapid digital transformations that implicate the connection between consumption, status and available capital by democratizing consumers' access to the different forms of capital in unprecedented ways. Digitalization of services, entertainment and education, and the proliferation of the sharing economy, have opened new opportunities for individuals to perform and consume class positions, rendering established markers of class less meaningful than before. For example, fashion rental and luxury real estate platforms, such as Rent-the-Runway and AirBnbLuxe, allow consumers with modest means to perform elitism in ways that are difficult to detect (Atanasova and Eckhardt 2021), thus not only weakening the explanatory power of economic capital as inscribed in consumption, but diluting the signaling qualities of such traditionally elitist consumption (Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Samsioe 2020). This can be observed not only in relation to access consumption but also ownership where inconspicuous consumption is increasingly popular (Eckhardt, Belk, and Wilson 2015). For instance, among a set of highly affluent New York socialites, counterfeit luxury bags are more popular than the originals for they signal possessing a certain type of savvy and prioritization of stress-free life, as opposed to being enslaved to the luxury status game (Singh-Kurtz 2022). Other luxury consumers are specifically looking for a scuffed up secondhand items to signal carelessness of sorts: it is not the bag that is the status symbol but the lack of concern about its condition (Meltzer 2023). With many rapidly growing digital players, such as the e-commerce secondhand luxury platforms The Circle or The RealReal, luxury has never been more affordable or easily accessible deflating the value inscribed in such traditionally high-status consumption.

These examples demonstrate how in today's market, consumption behaviors do not necessarily provide strong signals for life conditions or the quality and nature of our social lives, including economic resources that we control. In many ways – and importantly, without negating the rampant and increasing economic inequalities globally – the market has been increasingly leveling the playing field among many individuals, allowing more consumers to "perform" class and enact status regardless of inherent limitations or opportunities. In other words, it has allowed for the emergence of "transclass"-ness (Jaquet 2023) which characterizes modern individuals' unprecedented ability to deconstruct class through "a work of de-identification in relation to the original class, taking a distance with respect to its codes and ways of being and a redefinition of oneself that does not necessarily consist in an identification with the habitus of the class of arrival" (166). The existence of such transclasses does not necessarily change the established order and can even serve to reinforce it, but

it opens up the possibility of individual or collective change, preventing the transformation of social determinism into destiny and showing that social reproduction is not inevitable (Jaquet 2023)

The status game has always unfolded around continuously shifting status symbols in response to social emulation and the market has always played an important role in this dynamic. For instance, Bellezza and Berger (2020) illustrate how the market mediates new status signaling dynamics and “trickle-round signals” of distinction adopted by elites from lower-status groups to distinguish themselves from middle-status individuals. In turn, when objectified cultural capital loses signaling potency, distinction pivots on display of embodied cultural capital. This, however, is increasingly problematized in today’s market, where social mobility is framed as an opportunity where consumers can learn scripted cultural codes to reframe their social class positions as well as invest in embodied cultural capitals that will enable upward social mobility. For instance, recent research has highlighted the role of the market in actively creating and managing consumers as class subjects (Dion and Borraz 2017) and carving out opportunities for upward mobility and lifestyle facilitation (Bernthal, Crockett, and Rose 2005). Service providers of luxury brands socialize new money consumers into understanding cultural codes and acquiring cultural capital (Dion and Borraz 2017). Dion and Borraz (2017) demonstrate that servicescapes and brands can act as class brokers, objectifying consumers’ position in the status hierarchy and reconfiguring class membership. Market actors, such as brands, service providers, celebrities, and influencers can act as class socialization agents in facilitating and enabling consumers to occupy desired class positions.

Embodied forms of cultural capital and knowledge that were traditionally perceived as strongly anchored in one’s class position and limited to the elite (Bourdieu 1984) have to some extent become more easily accessible to the masses. An abundance of free or relatively inexpensive platforms and personal development services (e.g. Masterclass, YouTube, personal shoppers, lifestyle gurus) offer consumers a plethora of resources enabling them to quickly acquire skills (e.g. etiquette, accent reduction) and thus overcome limited embodied forms of cultural and social capital that may hinder upward mobility. That is, digital technology today facilitates access to new, individualized, ways of performing class and achieving higher hierarchical positions that would have almost exclusively been the domain of the rich in the past. For example, prior to digitization of financial services, consumers’ disposition towards money as well as its management was anchored strongly to class background (Henry 2005). However, via fintech platforms and YouTube tutorials, the market has opened the access and the ability of consumers from a variety of age and class backgrounds to self-educate and participate in financial investment, exhibiting a proactive disposition towards money, wealth and investment (Barrett 2023). Until recently, tapping into this dominant form of capital would have been largely available only to consumers possessing high economic capital, with privileged backgrounds and socialized in higher forms of capital. As institutions are no longer exclusive gatekeepers of knowledge, the market mediates both new ways of acquiring institutionalized and embodied capital as well as providing new forms and signals of such capital: e.g. building knowledge through MOOC courses vs. through a traditional university degree. This is not to say that social mobility has become easier or more ubiquitous, but that there are now different resources and avenues which consumers can harness on their quests to move up the social ladder.

New status scripts and capitals

Overall, we see indications that access to status markers can be democratized to an extent that erodes the signaling value of previously coveted forms of capital, in turn pushing individuals to play the status game differently. Research has shown that knowledge and experiences are increasingly seen as status signifies rather than money or possessions (Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Samsioe 2020; Currid-Halkett 2017b). For instance, the aspirational class identified by Currid-Halkett (2017b) encompasses diverse individuals who are bound not by their income, assets, cultural capital or how they were raised, which varies, but by their reliance on *knowledge capital*. The rise of a new tech-oriented elite is a case which distinguishes itself on the basis of knowledge in relation to the

digital transformation of society. These tech elites consume and live differently from traditional elites, performing new forms of social hierarchy anchored on knowledge as a dominant form of capital rather than money (Marwick 2013), signifying status via immaterial consumption such as experiences or digital possessions (e.g. NTFs (non-fungible tokens) investments), or ability to capitalize early on new marketplaces (e.g. Metaverse). Marwick (2013) argues that because of their origin in autodidactic hacker culture where learning, information sharing and non-hierarchical service bartering are normative (Pearce 1996), new tech elites value openness, transparency, creativity and meritocracy while prioritizing entrepreneurship, knowledge, and solutions. In contrast to traditional elites, money is looked down upon, and is considered valuable only if it is used towards higher goals, such as personal or knowledge development, or unique experiences.

Digital technology platforms have also allowed for status games where new forms of capitals, such as *attention capital*, have emerged as valued currency in social media spaces (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020; Marwick 2013). Attention capital represents the attention one receives online in terms of followers, shares, and likes (Franck 2019). Consumers who have developed the particular skills/digital savviness and the ability to curate content appropriate to the affordances of each platform garner more attention (Arvidsson and Caliendo 2016), and thus occupy higher hierarchical positions relative to others. Status in such social media spaces is not necessarily attached to one's social class background; nor is it necessarily attached to real ownership of possessions; one can perform a particular class via consumption. In digital tech spaces, status is often decoupled from ownership of luxury goods; newness and experiences are valued instead as they gain one attention capital (Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Samsioe 2020). Overall, technology provides additional challenges to established notions of social positioning in the field of social media, offering consumers from vastly different backgrounds opportunities to engage in new distinction games where new forms of capital offer desired leverage (Marwick 2013; Rokka and Canniford 2016).

Bringing *occupation choices* into focus as they relate to how consumers play the status game can also illuminate important shifts in how consumers think of work and leisure as part of their consumer identity projects. For instance, Ocejó (2017) demonstrates that a growing number of middle-class, highly educated consumers are embracing jobs traditionally associated with working class or precarity, such as artisanal jobs (butcher, shoemakers, bartenders, etc.) These occupations are not stigmatized; rather they are viewed as markers of desired status positions which emulate creativity and craft, and liberation from capitalistic logics (Ocejó 2017). While a traditional lens on class and social status would see such forms of freelance work as low-status and more closely aligned with working class social positions, these shifts suggest that new upscale occupational niches and new sources of value emerge at the intercept of changing notions of what constitutes upward or downward mobility (Gandini 2015). Embracing such forms of employment has brought into focus the status value of being able to control one's time and ways of working as well as to escape traditional office work (Atanasova et al. 2022; Mimoun and Bardhi 2022) which enables consumers to construct and occupy social positions that redefine notions of privilege. In addition, proliferating digital platforms for freelance work offer consumers the ability to untether from increasingly precarious 9–5 jobs and pursue liquid lifestyles that can be more adaptive to the neoliberal labor market and the agility it demands (Atanasova, Eckhardt, and Husemann 2023; Mimoun and Bardhi 2022). Notably, status fostered in this way is not accessible to everyone. Literature on the affective dimensions of platform entrepreneurs shows how promises of freedom and achievement, which are unachieved by many, serve to normalize precarious work, financial hardship, and ultimately anxiety and disappointment (Cockayne 2016). Nonetheless, as showcased by the examples above, for some consumers, notions of privilege and security relate differently to status, opening paths for alternative hierarchies to emerge. They are not replacing traditional patterns of structuration but offer additional ways for some groups and individuals to position themselves relative to others.

This was particularly evident during the coronavirus pandemic, for instance, when those who were able to take advantage of remote work to relocate to cheaper locales and thus gain more financial security found themselves in uniquely privileged positions, while others from within the same

social class were being laid off. Mobility has thus also emerged as an escape from high living costs, consumerism or insecure living conditions that threaten the previously secure positions of those traditionally considered middle-class (Atanasova, Eckhardt, and Husemann 2023). Relatedly, a source of symbolic power derived from global mobilities is the notion of *network capital* which reflects the social, financial, emotional and practical benefits of mobilities (Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould 2012; Elliott and Urry 2010). Network capital captures the infrastructure of mobilities (from travel documents and communication devices), the skills/know how of traveling, and the access to mobility infrastructure (Elliott and Urry 2010). People with high network capital engage in high geographical mobility, have extensive institutional contacts, and are comfortable with moving in and out of diverse settings. As with other forms of capital, it can be exchanged and commodified, and is of increasing importance in social stratification, namely related to privileged hypermobile groups. Different from Bordieuan forms of capital, network capital is largely “subject-less, communication-driven, and information-based” (Elliott and Urry 2010, 11).

A key difference between the emergent forms of capital we highlight here and traditional capital formulations is that the latter reinforce embodied class positions, while the former are the linchpin of alternative hierarchies that are employed in order to rebel against and escape from the trappings of parental class (Thornton 1995). We suggest that such emergent forms of capital can be accumulated through readily available marketplace resources and digital platforms, allowing consumers to accrue capital in ways not available previously. Importantly, this is not to suggest that upward mobility is now readily available to all. Rather, the distribution of these new forms of capital produces new forms of social inequalities between those who have surplus of such capital and those with a deficit. These inverted relationships between social status and objects of consumption indicate that how consumers think of themselves and others, what collective struggles and aspirations they share, and how today’s market facilitates new social identity positions by enabling consumers to transform embodied classed identities, are changing.

In sum, today’s market has become a key class socializing force that shapes consumption practices along with other primary socializing forces discussed in prior research such as family and education (Allen 2002). It generates certain structuring effects on the lives of people and influences how individuals relate to one another. The nature of today’s market, shaped by the access and digital economy, allows more people to share more things in common, seemingly equalizing disparities in their life chances outside of the market, and fostering the formation of distinct categories of consumers, which are subject to market-enabled forces of structuration. Consumer research can benefit from looking closer at the role of the market in challenging how the status game is played, structuring class relations and influencing new ways of signifying social hierarchies.

Future research on social status and consumption

In a seminal critical reflection on Bourdieu’s theory of distinction, Lamont and Lareau (1988) call for continued, contextually grounded, attention to the “permeability of class boundaries” and the need to detail the “multiplicity of forms” of cultural and other forms of capital, moving away from predefinitions of what counts as a high-status signal. Nearly 30 years later, these issues are just as relevant and in need of future research as they were then.

In light of shifting value orientations in society and an evolving marketplace, there is a need to map out the cultural scripts of the moment that guide how the status game is played. Consumer research would benefit from an updated, more nuanced and granular understanding of the rules of this contemporary game in different fields, and the resources and skills that enable individuals to master it. In expanding our existing vocabulary to allow for the identification of new forms of capital and the emergence of new fields such as social media, mobilities and others, consumer research will be better equipped to decipher and understand how consumption continues to serve as an indicator of status positions. This requires willingness to expand existing theoretical frameworks and critically reengage with them in light of shifting socioeconomic conditions.

In addition to more macro-level theorizing, there is merit in advancing our discipline's understanding of specific shifts within subdomains. For instance, what is the role of brands, especially luxury and craft brands, in contemporary social stratification? Prior research has established that brands are valuable heuristics for consumers when signaling belonging to social groups (Fournier and Alvarez 2019). Advancing this research stream, Dion and Borraz (2017) show how brands are not only status markers, but actors who can shape consumer's class subjectivities – that is, “they make consumers behave as class subjects who have a specific understanding of their position in the social hierarchy” (79). Future research can examine the role of brands in the construction of new social positions. Is the role of brands reversed with regards to their connection to social status, as suggested by the elite preferring counterfeit Birken bags to the real thing? And what types of brands are best positioned in today's market to shape varied class subjectivities?

Another important domain constitutes identity signaling of material and immaterial consumption. Different from traditional markers of status hierarchy and success anchored in ownership, we observe that investment and accumulation of immaterial consumption, such as novel experiences, digital possessions, attention, and knowledge can be leveraged by consumers to signal desired social positions (Atanasova and Eckhardt 2021; Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Samsioe 2020). What is the role of platforms in the types of distinctions they afford? How is social hierarchy performed in emergent digital social contexts such as the Metaverse (Belk, Humayun, and Brouard 2022)? Finally, consider that emergent forms of capital can illuminate previously unmapped sources of inequality which can aid policy development. For instance, extending Bourdieu's concept of the habitus to the contemporary digital context, Robinson (2014) introduces the concept of “information opportunity structures” to capture the range, diversity, and richness of various kinds of information sources available to different students. Placing focus on how emergent forms of capital in new fields can drive new types of opportunities or inequalities can bring into light vulnerable groups which might have otherwise been left out of sight.

In sum, with every new generation being financially worse off than the previous in the past fifty years (O'Connor 2018), and dynamics of status and distinction shifting (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020) in a changing sociocultural context, the nature of our social lives, the attitudes and sentiments that sustain our disposition within the status game, and the economic resources we have available to leverage within it, are markedly different today from what they were when the leading social theories of class were conceived. The shifts in how the status game is played are particularly evident in social media and platform spaces, and especially among techno and aspirational elites (Currid-Halkett 2017b; Marwick 2013). As the platformization and digitization of the social and material world continue to expand, how the status game is played will continue to shift in fields where attention and network capital (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2020) carry increased leverage. The continued evolution of telecommunication and AI technologies are transforming the domains of work, creativity and art, fundamentally challenging what kinds of jobs are performed by whom, and the types of skills, aesthetics and erudition that would play a role in structuring the social order. As today's marketplaces offer more people access to more resources and knowledge than ever before, while emerging technologies, such as AI, promise to, yet again, reshape notions of production, labor, and power, it is necessary to consider the paths to status and social stratification in this new environment.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Aleksandrina Atanasova is a lecturer in marketing at Bayes Business School (formally Cass), City, University of London, UK. Her research explores the effects of precarity, globalization, and shifting social norms on consumer behavior, particularly in relation to rising digitalization and dematerialization of consumption.

Fleura Bardhi is a professor of marketing at Bayes Business School (formerly Cass), City, University of London, UK. Fleura's research interests fall into the areas of (1) materiality, (2) access and ownership, and (3) consumer life transitions. Fleura's work has been published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *Harvard Business Review*, *Psychology and Marketing*, *Marketing Theory*, etc. Fleura is also a visiting professor at the Copenhagen Business School, Denmark.

Giana M. Eckhardt is a professor of marketing at King's Business School, King's College London. Giana regularly publishes on consumer culture, consumer ethics, sustainability, and branding in journals such as *Harvard Business Review*, *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, and *Journal of Consumer Research*.

References

- Allen, Douglas E. 2002. "Toward a Theory of Consumer Choice as Sociohistorically Shaped Practical Experience: The Fits-Like-a-Glove (FLAG) Framework." *Journal of Consumer Research* 28 (4): 515–532. <https://doi.org/10.1086/338202>.
- Arvidsson, Adam, and Alessandro Caliandro. 2016. "Brand Public." *Journal of Consumer Research* 42 (5): 727–748. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucv053>.
- Atanasova, Aleksandrina, Fleura Bardhi, Giana M. Eckhardt and Laetitia Mimoun. 2022. "Digital Nomadism as Temporal Privilege." In *The Routledge Handbook of Digital Consumption*, edited by Russ Belk and Rosa Llamas, 22–34. Oxon & New York: Routledge.
- Atanasova, Aleksandrina, and Giana M. Eckhardt. 2021. "The Broadening Boundaries of Materialism." *Marketing Theory* 21 (4): 481–500. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14705931211019077>.
- Atanasova, Aleksandrina, Giana M. Eckhardt, and Katharina C. Husemann. 2023. "Liquid Consumer Security." *Journal of Consumer Research* 2023:ucad047.
- Bardhi, Fleura, and Giana M. Eckhardt. 2017. "Liquid Consumption." *Journal of Consumer Research* 44 (3): 582–597. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucx050>.
- Bardhi, Fleura, Giana M. Eckhardt, and Eric J. Arnould. 2012. "Liquid Relationship to Possessions." *Journal of Consumer Research* 39 (3): 510–529. <https://doi.org/10.1086/664037>.
- Bardhi, Fleura, Giana M. Eckhardt, and Emma Samsioe. 2020. "Liquid luxury." In *Research Handbook on Luxury Branding*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Barrett, Claer. 2023. "The First Lesson for Female Financial Education? Money is Power." *Financial Times*, March 8, 2023. <https://www.ft.com/content/c0044f60-3476-4a13-b1ee-15af1a7ac921>.
- Bauman, Zygmund. 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Belk, Russell, Mariam Humayun, and Myriam Brouard. 2022. "Money, Possessions, and Ownership in the Metaverse: NFTs, Cryptocurrencies, Web3 and Wild Markets." *Journal of Business Research* 153:198–205. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.08.031>.
- Bellezza, Silvia. 2023. "Distance and Alternative Signals of Status: A Unifying Framework." *Journal of Consumer Research* 50 (2): 322–342. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucac049>.
- Bellezza, Silvia, and Jonah Berger. 2020. "Trickle-Round Signals: When Low Status is Mixed with High." *Journal of Consumer Research* 47 (1): 100–127. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucz049>.
- Bernthal, Matthew J., David Crockett, and Randall L. Rose. 2005. "Credit Cards as Lifestyle Facilitators." *Journal of Consumer Research* 32 (1): 130–145. <https://doi.org/10.1086/429605>.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1972. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1987. "What Makes a Social Class? On the Theoretical and Practical Existence of Groups." *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 32:1–17.
- Caldwell, Marylouise, and Paul Conrad Henry. 2020. "The Continuing Significance of Social Structure in Liquid Modernity." *Marketing Theory* 20 (4): 547–572. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593120948111>.
- Cockayne, Daniel G. 2016. "Sharing and Neoliberal Discourse: The Economic Function of Sharing in the Digital on-Demand Economy." *Geoforum; Journal of Physical, Human, and Regional Geosciences* 77:73–82. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2016.10.005>.
- Coskuner-Balli, Gokcen, and Craig J. Thompson. 2013. "The Status Costs of Subordinate Cultural Capital: At-Home Fathers' Collective Pursuit of Cultural Legitimacy through Capitalizing Consumption Practices." *Journal of Consumer Research* 40 (1): 19–41. <https://doi.org/10.1086/668640>.
- Currid-Halkett, Elizabeth. 2017a. The Subtle Ways the Rich Signal Wealth. <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/author/elizabeth-currid-halkett>
- Currid-Halkett, Elizabeth. 2017b. *The Sum of Small Things: A Theory of the Aspirational Class*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dion, Delphine, and Stéphane Borraz. 2017. "Managing Status: How Luxury Brands Shape Class Subjectivities in the Service Encounter." *Journal of Marketing* 81 (5): 67–85. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jm.15.0291>.

- Eckhardt, Giana M., and Fleura Bardhi. 2020. "New Dynamics of Social Status and Distinction." *Marketing Theory* 20 (1): 85–102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593119856650>.
- Eckhardt, Giana M., Russell W. Belk, and Jonathan A.J. Wilson. 2015. "The Rise of Inconspicuous Consumption." *Journal of Marketing Management* 31 (7–8): 807–826. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2014.989890>.
- Elliott, Anthony, and John Urry. 2010. *Mobile Lives*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Fournier, Susan, and Claudio Alvarez. 2019. "How Brands Acquire Cultural Meaning." *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 29 (3): 519–534. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1119>.
- Franck, Georg. 2019. "The Economy of Attention." *Journal of Sociology* 55 (1): 8–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783318811778>.
- Gandini, Alessandro. 2015. "Digital Work: Self-Branding and Social Capital in the Freelance Knowledge Economy." *Marketing Theory* 16 (1): 123–141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593115607942>.
- Henry, Paul C. 2005. "Social Class, Market Situation, and Consumers' Metaphors of (dis)Empowerment." *Journal of Consumer Research* 31 (4): 766–778. <https://doi.org/10.1086/426610>.
- Holt, Douglas B. 1997. "Distinction in America? Recovering Bourdieu's Theory of Tastes from its Critics." *Poetics* 25 (2–3): 93–120. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0304-422X\(97\)00010-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0304-422X(97)00010-7).
- Holt, Douglas B. 1998. "Does Cultural Capital Structure American Consumption?" *Journal of Consumer Research* 25 (1): 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209523>.
- Holt, Douglas B., and Craig J. Thompson. 2004. "Man-of-Action Heroes: The Pursuit of Heroic Masculinity in Everyday Consumption." *Journal of Consumer Research* 31 (2): 425–440. <https://doi.org/10.1086/422120>.
- Jaquet, Chantal. 2023. *Transclasses: A Theory of Social Non-Reproduction*. London: Verso Books.
- Lamont, Michele, and Annette Lareau. 1988. "Cultural Capital: Allusions, Gaps and Glissandos in Recent Theoretical Developments." *Sociological Theory* 6 (2): 153. <https://doi.org/10.2307/202113>.
- Lane, Lexi. 2021. "This Year's Met Gala Shows How the Celebrity Pecking Order has Changed." *NBC News*, September 14, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/met-gala-2021-invites-social-media-influencers-addison-rae-needed-ncna1279085>.
- Marwick, Alice E. 2013. *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Marx, W. David. 2022. *Status and Culture: How Our Desire for Social Rank Creates Taste, Identity, Art, Fashion, and Constant Change*. New York, USA: Viking Press.
- Marx, W. David, and Christina Pazzanese. 2022. "Keeping up with the Joneses 2.0." *Harvard Gazette*, December 18, 2022. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2022/12/keeping-up-with-joneses-2-0/>.
- Meltzer, Marisa. 2023. "How a Growing Resale Market is Changing the Image of the Hermès Bag." *The New York Times*, March 4, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/04/style/17ermes-bags-resale-used.html>.
- Mimoun, Laetitia, and Fleura Bardhi. 2022. "Chronic Consumer Liminality: Being Flexible in Precarious Times." *Journal of Consumer Research* 49 (3): 496–519. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucab073>.
- Ocejo, Richard E. 2017. *Masters of Craft: Old Jobs in the New Urban Economy*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- O'Connor, Sarah. 2018. "Millennials Poorer than Previous Generations, Data Show." *Financial Times*, n.d. <https://www.ft.com/content/81343d9e-187b-11e8-9e9c-25c814761640>.
- Pearce, Celia. 1996. *The Californian Ideology: An Insider's View*. "Mute Magazine." Winter/Spring. <http://www.metamute.org/en/The-Californian-Ideology-An-Insiders-View-Re-Californian-Ideology>.
- Robinson, Laura. 2014. "Endowed, Entrepreneurial, and Empowered-Strivers: Doing a lot with a Lot, Doing a Lot with a Little." *Information, Communication & Society* 17 (5): 521–536. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2013.770049>.
- Rokka, Joonas, and Robin Canniford. 2016. "Heterotopian Selfies: How Social Media Destabilizes Brand Assemblages." *European Journal of Marketing* 50 (9/10): 1789–1813. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-08-2015-0517>.
- Rosa, Hartmut. 2013. *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*. Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/rosa14834>.
- Saatcioglu, Bige, and Julie L. Ozanne. 2013. "Moral Habitus and Status Negotiation in a Marginalized Working-Class Neighborhood." *Journal of Consumer Research* 40 (4): 692–710. <https://doi.org/10.1086/671794>.
- Simmel, Georg. 1957. "Fashion." *American Journal of Sociology* 62 (6): 541–558. <https://doi.org/10.1086/222102>.
- Singh-Kurtz, Sangeeta. 2022. "The Rich New York Women Who Love Their Fake Birkins." *The Cut*, April 28, 2022. https://www.thecut.com/2022/04/repladies-fake-luxury-bags.html?utm_source=instagram&utm_medium=social_acct&utm_campaign=cut&utm_content=curalate_like2buy_Icy7Dv3z__d9538e6e-a51f-44eb-a3b7-7f152a232bf7.
- Thornton, Sarah. 1995. *Club cultures: Music, media, and subcultural capital*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Üstüner, Tuba, and Craig J. Thompson. 2012. "How Marketplace Performances Produce Interdependent Status Games and Contested Forms of Symbolic Capital." *Journal of Consumer Research* 38 (5): 796–814. <https://doi.org/10.1086/660815>.
- Veblen, Thorstein. 1899. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Weinberger, Michelle F., Jane R. Zavisca, and Jennifer M. Silva. 2017. "Consuming for an Imagined Future: Middle-Class Consumer Lifestyle and Exploratory Experiences in the Transition to Adulthood." *Journal of Consumer Research* 44 (2): 332–360. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucx045>.