Assembling the Self, Marking Boundaries: Consumption as a Practice of Identity and Social Distinction

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ABSTRACT

This literature study critically examines consumption as a core social practice for identity construction and expression in contemporary society. Through a qualitative thematic synthesis of scholarly works from 2000 to 2013, the analysis addresses three focal points. First, it elucidates how material products, service subscriptions, and experiential consumption interact and complement each other in forming coherent individual identity narratives. Second, it explores the dialectic between individual agency and social structures particularly class and gender in shaping the choices and meanings attached to consumer goods. Third, it investigates the evolution of social distinction mechanisms within a fragmented cultural landscape and an experience-driven economy, moving beyond traditional hierarchical models towards forms based on cultural omnivorousness, experiential capital, and curatorial expertise. The study concludes that identity is assembled through curated bricolage of market-provided symbols, a process constrained by social structures yet expressing individual agency. Distinction increasingly operates through knowledge and performed experience rather than mere ownership. The findings contribute to a nuanced theoretical understanding of consumption's role in social stratification and self-formation, highlighting new forms of symbolic inequality in digital and experiential capitalism.

INTRODUCTION

Consumption behavior has transcended economic activities oriented towards fulfilling basic needs. In recent developments in social science, consumption is understood as a meaningful practice laden with symbols and cultural values. Academic approaches over the past decade have shown a shift from a rational instrumental view towards an analysis that places consumption as a productive social process in the formation of meaning. The goods and services chosen by individuals do not stop at utilitarian functions, but become a medium for articulating values, affiliations, and social distinctions. This change goes hand in hand with the transformation of cultural values and social practices in the digital age, where new media help shape the way individuals relate and express themselves (Al Hakim et al., 2021). Through everyday consumption practices, individuals participate in the process of meaning production involving symbolic negotiation, collective interpretation, and social recognition. Therefore, consumption is increasingly positioned as an important entry point for reading the dynamics of modern life and the social relations that accompany it (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Warde, 2014).

The theoretical struggle regarding consumption as a social practice is largely influenced by Pierre Bourdieu's legacy of thought on social differentiation, which continues to be developed in contemporary literature. Recent studies confirm that tastes and consumption choices function as expressions of cultural capital internalized through a long process of socialization. Preferences for certain types of music, food, art, or lifestyle do not arise randomly, but are closely related to educational trajectories, social environments, and accumulated experiences. Research after 2010 shows that the framework of differentiation remains relevant for explaining how consumption operates as a mechanism of social classification, even though its forms are increasingly diverse and subtle in modern society (Featherstone, 2014; Lizardo, 2014).

The development of advanced capitalism and the expansion of global market culture have strengthened

the link between consumption and identity formation. In societies characterized by a plurality of choices, personal identity is increasingly produced through reflective actions involving the selection of symbols from the market. Individuals construct narratives of themselves through their choices of commercially available fashions, technologies, mobility, and recreational experiences. Recent sociological studies show that the market functions as a space that provides symbols that enable individuals to assert their continuity while displaying social differentiation. Consumption thus becomes a means of articulating identity that is constantly renewed through interaction with trends, brands, and cultural representations (Bauman, 2007; Giddens, 2013).

Consumption practices also serve as a means of affirming group membership and establishing symbolic boundaries. Choices regarding specific products, styles, or experiences are often collectively understood as internal codes that signify social affiliation. Research on subcultures and lifestyles shows that consumption can strengthen internal solidarity while distinguishing groups from the mainstream. Consumption patterns also intersect with social categories such as gender, ethnicity, and generation, where the market offers specific narratives that are then adopted or reinterpreted by consumers. In this process, entrenched social dynamics and stereotypes can contribute to opportunities and inequalities, including in access to resources and intergroup interactions (Sajjapong et al., 2022). Through this mechanism, consumption contributes to both the reproduction and transformation of existing social structures (Bennett & Woodward, 2014; Elliott, 2015).

This study focuses on critically examining the role of products, services, and consumption experiences in shaping and expressing individual and collective identities. This study attempts to connect micro-level analysis, of how individuals use commodities for self-projection, with macro-level analysis, of how consumption patterns contribute to the reproduction of social structures such as class and gender. The approach taken views consumption as a social practice embedded in networks of meaning, routines, and competencies. The material objects and immaterial experiences of consumption are seen as elements in an interconnected system of practices. By investigating the symbolic and social mechanisms of consumption, this study aims to uncover the logic behind everyday consumption choices and their implications for the construction of identity and the maintenance of social differences in contemporary society.

Although the literature has convincingly established the relationship between consumption and identity, there is a complexity that has not been fully unraveled regarding the specific mechanisms of how material objects of consumption, such as clothing, gadgets, or cars, interact with immaterial aspects such as experiences, services, or digital access in the construction of identity. Many studies tend to separate the analysis between goods and services, or between ownership and experience. In reality, however, individuals often combine both simultaneously to create a coherent narrative of themselves. An identity that one wishes to project, for example, can be constructed through a combination of a particular clothing brand (material product), a subscription to a particular streaming platform (service), and attending a particular music festival (experience). The question is how these three forms of consumption products, services, experiences operate as a unified practice to shape identity, whether there is a hierarchy or complementary logic among them, and how the economic shift towards the experience economy affects these dynamics.

Furthermore, there is a theoretical tension between individual agency in using consumption as a means of self-expression and social determinism that limits and directs those choices. Popular narratives and some postmodern theories emphasize consumers' freedom to choose and mix various lifestyles, creating fluid and flexible identities. On the other hand, critical social theories such as those from the Frankfurt School and Bourdieu remind us that markets and class structures impose strict constraints, and the illusion of choice often only conceals more subtle forms of domination. These dynamics have implications for psychological well-being, where pressure to conform or differentiate oneself through consumption can be a source of discrimination and social pressure (Udjari et al., 2021). The main issue that arises is how to understand the dialectic between agency and structure in everyday consumption practices. To what extent are individuals truly free to construct their identities through consumption? How do class habitus and massive marketing forces shape tastes and preferences that are perceived as personal choices? Bridging the gap between micro sociological perspectives that emphasize subjective meaning and macro sociological perspectives that emphasize the reproduction of inequality is an important intellectual challenge. To that end, strengthening the legal system that guides and supports social welfare policies is an important prerequisite in creating a fair framework for all social practices, including consumption (Marsal et al., 2021).

Understanding how consumption functions to create social distinctions in an increasingly fragmented and multicultural contemporary society

requires renewal. Bourdieu's concept of 'distinction', which is closely related to social class in 1970s French society, needs to be re-examined in today's different social settings, where dividing lines may also be formed by the logic of ethnicity, generation, or cross-class subcultural affiliations. The question is whether the logic of distinction through consumption is still hierarchical and vertical (seeking to demonstrate higher status), or has shifted towards a more horizontal and tribalistic distinction (demonstrating different group identities without claims of superiority). Furthermore, with global lifestyles and products accessible to many circles, how have new mechanisms of differentiation been developed to maintain social distance, for example through esoteric knowledge, authenticity of experience, or access to more exclusive versions of the same product?

The economic transformation towards a model that is more driven by services and experiences has fundamentally changed the landscape of consumption. The shift from ownership of goods to access to services (such as shared transport versus car ownership) and the search for experiences that can be shared on social media has created a new repertoire for identity construction. Society, especially young people, is increasingly allocating their financial resources to attending concerts, travelling, or participating in workshops, which then become central components of their identity in both digital and physical spaces. Thus, the foundations of sustainable public policy must be able to reflect these new dynamics of social welfare, ensuring that economic transitions do not leave vulnerable groups behind (Rizky & Udjari, 2021). These changes in economic structure require a re-examination of consumption theory frameworks that may have previously been too focused on material objects. Understanding how identity is constructed through temporary and often digital experiences, rather than through enduring physical objects, is an important step in mapping new forms of social attachment and self-expression in the 21st century.

The explosion of digital media and social platforms has amplified and modified the function of consumption as a marker of identity. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, or Pinterest are not only catalogues of lifestyles, but also arenas where the performativity of identity through consumption is staged, assessed, and curated. Consumption is now often "programmed to be displayed", where the value of a product or experience is largely determined by its potential to generate attractive digital representations. The dynamics of social interaction in this digital era have profound implications for interpersonal relationships and individual psychosocial well-being

(Oluwatoyin, 2021). These dynamics create a feedback loop that accelerates changing trends and intensifies the pressure for visible consumption. This study is important for dissecting the new logic behind consumption in the digital age, where the boundaries between consumption for oneself and consumption for a virtual audience are blurred, as well as its implications for the concepts of authenticity, the digital divide, and new forms of surveillance capitalism that utilize consumption data to shape identities and desires.

In a social situation marked by increasing economic inequality and political polarization, consumption has once again become an important symbolic battleground. Consumption choices are often politicized, becoming markers of loyalty or rejection of certain values. Movements such as boycotts or buycotts demonstrate how political identity is expressed through decisions to buy or not to buy. At the same time, consumption patterns also reflect and may widen the social distance between different groups. These social inequalities have real impacts that spill over into the realm of public health, affecting access to services, quality of life, and demanding comprehensive policy solutions (Nalin et al., 2022). Analyzing the role of consumption in the formation of identity and social differentiation today provides valuable insights into how material inequalities are translated into symbolic inequalities, and how group solidarity is built or hindered through consumption practices. This understanding is essential for responding to complex contemporary social challenges.

This literature study aims to conduct a critical synthesis of the body of knowledge regarding consumption as a social practice and identity. Specifically, this study seeks to analyses and explain the complex interactions between three forms of consumption, namely material products, services, and experiences, in the process of constructing and expressing individual identity, by tracing how the three are combined in everyday self-narratives. Furthermore, the objective of this study is to examine in detail the dialectic between the agency of individuals in utilizing consumption for self-projects and various forms of social determination, particularly those originating from class structures and gender norms, which limit and shape the framework of choices and interpretations of the meaning of goods and services consumed. Finally, this study seeks to examine the transformation of social differentiation mechanisms through consumption in contemporary society, focusing on whether the logic of classical hierarchical differentiation is still

dominant or has shifted towards horizontal forms of differentiation based on tribal or cultural affiliations. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich discussions in the sociology of consumption and cultural studies by providing an integrative framework that connects the analysis of objects, experiences, structures, and agency. Practically, the resulting understanding can provide a nuanced perspective for various stakeholders, including industry players, policymakers, and educators, in understanding the socio-cultural dynamics underlying consumption behavior in the modern era.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is a qualitative systematic literature review with the aim of conducting a thematic synthesis of key concepts and empirical findings related to the topic of consumption as a social practice and identity. A qualitative approach was chosen because it is well suited to exploring the complexity of meaning, interpretative processes, and social constructions inherent in the phenomenon of consumption, as advocated by researchers such as Denzin and Lincoln (2005). This study does not aim to test hypotheses or make statistical generalizations, but rather to build a rich, interpretative, and theoretical understanding by synthesizing various academic perspectives from the existing body of literature. Thematic synthesis methods, as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), served as the main guide in the process of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns of meaning that emerged from the collection of academic texts reviewed. This process enabled the drawing of coherent insights from various sources to answer the research questions that had been formulated.

The literature search strategy was conducted systematically to ensure comprehensive and relevant coverage. Primary searches were conducted on leading academic databases such as Sage Journals, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. The main inclusion criteria included peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and academic book chapters that explicitly discussed the social, cultural, or symbolic dimensions of consumption in relation to identity, class, gender, or subculture. Works that focused purely on the managerial aspects of marketing, psychological consumer behavior without social dimensions, or macroeconomic analysis were excluded from this study.

The analysis stage began with initial coding of the selected texts. Each work is read carefully and given descriptive codes that capture its central ideas, theoretical concepts, and empirical findings, following the principles of qualitative content analysis as

outlined by Krippendorff (2004). These codes are then grouped into broader candidate themes based on their conceptual similarities and relationships. This process was iterative, in which the themes were continuously revised and refined to ensure their clarity and explanatory power in relation to the research question. To ensure the quality and credibility of the analysis, this study implemented an audit trail by documenting all decisions in the selection, coding, and theme development processes. In addition, triangulation of theoretical data sources is carried out by comparing and contrasting perspectives from various disciplines, such as sociology, cultural anthropology, and consumption studies, to obtain a stronger and more nuanced synthesis. This effort is in line with the principle of validity in qualitative research, which emphasizes depth and precision of argumentation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Constructing Individual Identity Through Products, Services, and Experiences

Studies on identity highlight its connection to consumption practices and social symbols. Identity can be defined as the way a person perceives themselves and the way others perceive them (Ogbanufe & Gerhart, 2020). Literature analysis reveals that the construction of individual identity in contemporary society rarely relies on a single form of consumption. Instead, identity is built through a mosaic or assemblage that strategically combines material products, services, and experiences. These three forms operate in a mutually reinforcing symbolic ecology, where each element makes a unique contribution to the narrative of the self. Material products, such as clothing, jeweler, or technological devices, offer material stability and continuity. These objects function as visible and transferable markers of identity, serving as physical anchors for the concept of self in everyday interactions. However, old traditions as sources of social identity formation now interact and often compete with the narratives of identity offered by the modern consumer market (Binti Ismail, 2021). A study by Woodward (2007) on clothing in everyday life shows how individuals use clothing not only to cover the body, but as a medium for dialogue with the social world. The choice of certain materials, cuts, and brands becomes a readable statement about aesthetic preferences, social affiliations, and even emotional states. Ownership of these objects provides a sense of permanence and concrete evidence of one's identity choices, which can be displayed in the home or worn on the body. This shows that material consumption serves as a means of continuous self-expression.

The dimension of identity is not only reflected in

objects, but also in the network of services that accompany them. However, the significance of these material products is often obtained and enriched through related services and experiences. Services such as music streaming platform subscriptions, exclusive gym memberships, or news curation applications provide continuous access to the flow of content and activities that shape tastes and knowledge. These services transform material products from static objects into portals to a dynamic cultural world. A smartphone (a material product) derives its greater identity value from the social media applications and content it accesses, which shape how its users connect and are perceived. Arvidsson's (2005) work on 'brands as lifestyles' indicates that the symbolic value of a product often depends on the ecosystem of services and communities that surround it. Services facilitate personalization on a mass scale, enabling individuals to curate streams of experiences and information that align with their desired self-image, thereby deepening and maintaining a particular identity over time. This demonstrates that services act as amplifiers of evolving identities.

Global population growth has consequences that are closely related to identity consumption patterns. As the population increases, global consumption rises and creates enormous demand for natural resources, such as food, transportation, energy, raw materials, and the chemical industry (de Morais et al., 2021). The social norms that conform this consumption choices can be understood within a broader socio-psychological framework, similar to how adolescents choose role models amid social pressures (Fajar et al., 2021). While products and services form the material foundation and access, consumption experiences provide peak moments that become the most powerful and shareable elements of identity narratives. Experiences, such as travelling to specific destinations, attending concerts, or participating in wellness retreats, are episodic yet intense in sensory and emotional terms. These experiences provide stories, visual memories, and claims of authenticity that are crucial for identity construction in the modern economy. According to Pine and Gilmore (1999), experiences have economic value because they create lasting personal memories. In the context of identity, these experiences become important chapters in an individual's autobiography. They are often recorded and shared via social media, transforming private moments into public evidence of a particular identity as an adventurer, art lover, or spiritual seeker. Experiences do not replace products, but rather contextualize them; a photo from a trip (experience) is shared using a particular camera (product) and edited through a particular application (service). This confirms that consumption experiences enrich identity narratives through memory traces and public representations.

The modern consumption framework reveals the close connection between objects, services, and experiences as identity formers. The interaction between material products, services, and experiences forms a dynamic and mutually reinforcing identity system. Consumption identity develops through the ownership of physical objects, repeated engagement with services, and participation in meaningful symbolic experiences. This logic can be contrasted with the trend of minimalism in consumption behavior, which consciously simplifies material ownership to create space for more substantive meaning and identity (Gani et al., 2021). Consumer behavior literature explains that material objects serve as markers of stability and long-term investment, while services reflect routinely renewed commitments, and experiences provide narrative moments that enrich self-meaning. The combination of the three allows individuals to construct layered and communicative representations of themselves, both to themselves and to others, through integrated and repetitive consumption practices (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Belk, 2013). These interactions collectively affirm that consumption identity is complex yet consistent in its expression.

Digital transformation has given rise to new consumption patterns that unite various dimensions of identity. The development of the digital economy has accelerated the interconnection of these three elements and blurred the boundaries between them. Platform-based services increasingly combine access, symbols, and experiences into a single value package. Subscription-based consumption provides a sustainable cultural experience, while sharing platforms package material assets as distinct identity experiences. Research shows that this pattern encourages individuals to continuously curate their consumption choices as an active identity project, where self-meaning is constructed through the selection, combination, and arrangement of various market offerings (Eckhardt et al., 2015; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). This phenomenon marks a shift in consumption identity towards increasingly complex digital integration.

The exposure of consumption in public spaces creates new demands for personal identity consistency. The pressure to maintain the coherence of identity narratives arises as the visibility of consumption choices increases. Individuals are driven to align objects, services, and experiences to be consistent with their desired self-image. Inconsistencies can trigger

psychological tension, although research also shows creative practices that combine contrasting elements to produce distinctive identities. Social perceptions that can stigmatize and cause psychological pressure in other contexts, such as for victims of domestic violence, parallel the pressure to maintain a coherent identity performance in the realm of consumption (Issalillah & Khayru, 2021). This strategy emphasizes the capacity of individual agency in constructing meaning, even though the symbolic materials originate from the market (Thompson et al., 2014). This highlights the flexibility of individuals in processing market symbols into unique identity constructions.

Discussions about contemporary identity emphasize the importance of viewing consumption as a mutually supportive network. Questions about which elements most determine identity become less relevant when understood as a network of interconnected practices. The relative importance of products, services, and experiences changes according to life stages and social group dynamics. What is crucial is the logic of complementarity: products provide symbols and tools, services provide access and continuity, while experiences provide narratives and legitimize meaning. Building the capacity of individuals and organizations to respond to the complexity of modern social challenges, including those related to identity and consumption, requires the development of effective leadership (Corte-Real et al., 2021). Together, the three form a repertoire of practices for presenting oneself in modern social life (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Belk, 2013). The unity of these elements shows how identity is adaptively constructed through diverse consumption practices.

Discussions of identity emphasize its nature as being formed through the creative assembly of market symbols. The construction of individual identity is a sophisticated process of bricolage, utilizing symbolic material from the market in its three main forms. Material products function as stable and transferable signs, services enable personalization and continuous access to cultural flows, while consumption experiences provide intense and shareable narrative moments. The three do not stand alone; their identity value arises from their interaction and consistency. Therefore, the technological innovations underlying many of these platforms and services must be accompanied by strong ethics and social responsibility to ensure sustainability and fairness in the consumption ecosystem (Da Silva & Gani, 2022). Individuals construct their identities by assembling personal combinations of these elements, creating a coherent system of signs that communicate who they are, both to themselves and to the social world around them. In consumer society, the self becomes an ongoing project through the curation of goods, services, and moments consumed. This entire process affirms that identity is dynamic and continuously constructed through consumption.

Agency, Structure, and Group Identity in Consumption

Modern consumption studies highlight the close relationship between individual freedom and restrictive social structures. The dialectic between individual agency and social determination in consumption is not a binary opposition, but rather a process of continuous mutual formation. Individuals do make consumption choices, but these choices are exercised within a social field that has been pre-structured by forces such as class, gender, and dominant culture. This process is part of the challenge of building social cohesion in urban environments, where social differentiation and inequality are increasingly visible through everyday consumption practices (Mardikaningsih, 2021). The clearest manifestation of this dialectic is seen in Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which functions as an intermediary between objective structures and individual practices. Habitus, as a system of enduring dispositions, shapes individuals' perceptions, appreciations, and actions without determining them mechanically. In the context of consumption, class habitus directs tastes and preferences that are perceived as 'natural' or 'personal'. An empirical study by Silva (2005) on the cultural practices of the working and middle classes in the UK shows how orientations towards the future, concepts of pleasure, and relationships with material objects are shaped differently by the material conditions and cultural heritage of each class. The choice to allocate income to family holidays, home improvements, or certain branded goods is not a free decision in a vacuum, but a reflection of a practical logic internalized from an early age, which makes some choices feel possible and desirable while others feel alien or inappropriate. Because each group has different norms, consumption choices can reveal a person's identity as a consumer (Atkin et al., 2021). This confirms that consumption always reflects the interaction between personal dispositions and the social structures that surround them.

The gender dimension of consumption shows how markets and individuals interact in shaping identity. Gender norms are another social structure that strongly regulates consumption practices, although individuals can negotiate and resist them. Markets historically and continuously produce and

reinforce gender categories through differentiated products, advertisements, and experiences. Consumption thus becomes one of the main areas where gender identity is performed and naturalized. Atkinson's (2008) research on male fitness culture illustrates how the consumption of nutritional supplements, high-performance sportswear, and specific gym memberships is not only related to health, but also to the construction of contemporary masculinity that focuses on discipline, performance, and defined physical appearance. Here, individual agency manifests itself in a commitment to specific training regimes and spending patterns, which are also forms of compliance with an ideal of masculinity sponsored by the market. Social perceptions and stigmas that reinforce gender norms can create an environment that is neither inclusive nor equitable, limiting the space for negotiating identity through consumption (Hardyansah et al., 2021). However, agency is also evident when individuals choose to reject or modify these gender scripts, for example by adopting styles or consumption activities traditionally associated with other genders, thereby creating space for more fluid identity expression. This phenomenon shows that gender consumption opens up opportunities for more flexible identity negotiation.

Social identity analysis emphasizes the role of demographic variables as determinants of legitimate consumption patterns. Demographic variables, often referred to as cultural variables, are interrelated aspects of a person's identity (Beaulieu & Jimenez-Gomez, 2022). The mixing and blending of various consumption styles, often associated with individual freedom in contemporary society, remains within the boundaries of a clear social structure. The ability to perform symbolic bricolage is highly dependent on the possession of economic and cultural capital that enables an individual to recognize, access, and legitimately combine cultural codes. This cultural capital and social competence are formed through early socialization and education processes, which influence how an individual navigates the world of consumption (Hariani et al., 2021). Individuals with high cultural capital tend to be able to navigate differences in taste and symbolic references across classes with greater legitimacy. Conversely, individuals with limited resources face the risk of delegitimization when the same consumption combinations are read as taste mismatches. Sociological research shows that class structures distribute symbolic competence unevenly, so that consumption agency always runs alongside hierarchical boundaries that define value and appropriateness (Khan, 2012; Bourdieu, 2012). This

condition confirms that freedom of consumption remains limited by the distribution of capital and social legitimacy.

The role of media and advertising in consumption confirms how social meaning is shaped through symbolic representation. The media and advertising industry reinforce these boundaries through the production of narratives and images that direct the meaning of consumption. Repeated representations create a symbolic map of who is entitled to consume what and how consumption should be interpreted. Although individuals have room for interpretation, these choices still operate within a simplified and categorized symbolic repertoire. Studies of communication and visual culture show that consumption is an arena of active interpretation, where individuals can adopt, negotiate, or reject the meanings offered by the media, even though this process takes place under the strong influence of economic and ideological forces that shape the production of messages (Couldry, 2012; Schroeder, 2013). This condition shows that consumption is always influenced by systematically produced symbolic constructions.

Social class is often reflected through consumption patterns that distinguish one group from another. Social class position is largely formed and maintained through differences in consumption practices between groups, where members of the same group share similar views on how consumption provides value (Arsel et al., 2022). Consumption practices are often positioned as strategies for symbolic social mobility, particularly through the adoption of goods and lifestyles associated with higher-status groups. However, the effectiveness of this strategy is limited by the mastery of implicit knowledge and cultural competence associated with the objects of consumption. Research on social stratification confirms that material ownership without mastery of symbolic codes rarely results in sustained status recognition. Sustainable public policy must take these socio-economic dynamics into account to build a fair balance, where social mobility is not determined solely by consumption capacity (Mardikaningsih & Hariani, 2021). Social structures operate through subtle mechanisms that assess the way people speak, their cultural references, and their networks of relationships, so that economic consumption alone is not enough to change a person's symbolic position (Khan, 2012; Warde, 2014). This shows that consumption is not only about ownership, but also the symbolic legitimacy that accompanies it.

The phenomenon of subcultures shows that there are alternative arenas for the construction of

consumption identities outside the mainstream. Subcultures and interest-based communities provide space for the formation of alternative meanings of consumption that depart from the internal logic of the group. In this space, the symbolic value of an item is determined by collective agreement, not by the mainstream market. However, cultural research shows that economic resources still influence the level of participation and sustainability of subcultural practices. In addition, subcultural styles and symbols often undergo a process of commodification, whereby the market absorbs and reproduces the aesthetics of resistance into products that can be marketed widely. This dialectic confirms that collective agency is capable of opening up spaces for symbolic autonomy, but still faces the absorptive power of larger economic structures (Bennett, 2013; Muggleton, 2013). This condition shows that subcultural expression is always negotiated between group autonomy and market logic.

Consumption analysis reveals the complex dynamics between individual freedom and social forces that shape choices. The dialectic of agency and structure in consumption is a complex dance. Individuals are not passive drones confronted by social forces, nor are they actors who are completely free to design their identities from scratch. Consumption choices occur in a field that is already charged with class inequality, gender norms, and market forces. Agency manifests itself in the capacity to interpret, combine, and sometimes resist available meanings, as well as in reflective projects to use consumption as a tool for mobility or self-expression. This reflective process is also closely related to the management of emotions in daily life, which is an integral part of psychological well-being in pursuing identity projects through consumption (Irfan & Darmawan, 2021). Structures are manifested in the formation of tastes through habitus, in the regulation of material and symbolic access, and in the provision of a narrative repertoire limited by the culture industry. Group identities, whether based on class, gender, or subculture, are formed and maintained through distinctive consumption patterns, which on the one hand reflect shared social determinations, and on the other hand become a means for group members to actively assert their membership and solidarity. Thus, consumption as an identity marker is always at the intersection of personal desire and social constraints.

The Evolution of Social Differentiation Mechanisms in Contemporary Consumption

Changes in consumption patterns indicate a shift in social differentiation mechanisms from classical hierarchies towards more flexible forms. Social differentiation mechanisms through consumption have undergone significant evolution since Bourdieu's classical formulation, shifting from a relatively stable hierarchical logic towards more fluid, horizontal, and knowledge-based forms. This transformation, as the formation of self-identity and social perception is now largely constructed through interactions on social media, creates a new and digital arena of differentiation (Darmawan & de Jesus Isaac, 2022). Contemporary society, characterized by cultural fragmentation and the dominance of the experience economy, has given rise to a new symbolic battlefield. The logic of vertical differentiation based on highbrow versus lowbrow tastes is no longer entirely adequate to understand the current configuration. Instead, there is a multiplication of consumption arenas or tribes, each with its own internal hierarchy and codes of legitimacy, as proposed by Maffesoli (1996) and further developed in consumption studies. In this model, differentiation occurs not only between upper and lower classes, but also between 'in' and 'out' groups centered around specific music styles, extreme sports, cuisines, or fandoms. The dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in these consumption tribes can be analogized to the mechanisms of discrimination in multicultural societies, where group identity and stigma play a role in forming social boundaries (Pakpahan et al., 2022). The distinction is more temporary and contextual, where an individual can be a respected member of one tribe (e.g., the specialty coffee community) and an outsider in another (e.g., the world of streetwear hype). This phenomenon confirms that social distinctions now occur through more fluid and situational symbolic membership.

The development of modern consumption places experience as the primary commodity that shapes the mechanisms of social differentiation. The experience economy has become the main arena in which these new mechanisms of differentiation operate. When experience replaces goods as the primary commodity, the basis of differentiation shifts from the ownership of physical objects to access to rare, authentic, or transformative experiences. Differentiation is now often claimed through the capacity to consume experiences that are 'unusual' or 'inaccessible to many people'. This gives rise to a new form of capital that can be called 'experiential capital'. This capital includes knowledge of hidden destinations, the ability to gain access to exclusive events, or the skill to transform ordinary experiences into compelling narratives. Schroeder (2005), in his analysis of consumer photography and identity construction, notes that experiences themselves are often consumed

for their potential to generate visual representations. Therefore, differentiation is also achieved through the quality and authenticity of these representations on social media, which prove participation in a desired experience. This phenomenon confirms that experiential capital has become the primary means of identity differentiation in the digital age.

Changes in the contemporary cultural landscape mark a shift in status mechanisms from exclusivity to diversity of taste. Cultural fragmentation has led to the relative devaluation of the single cultural canon that once served as the primary marker of the ruling class. Instead, what Peterson and Kern (1996) refer to as 'cultural omnivores' has emerged as a new status marker. High-status groups are now characterized not by their exclusion from popular culture, but by their broad range of tastes, which encompass elements of high, middle and popular culture. The mechanism of differentiation has shifted from exclusivity to selective inclusivity. The ability to appreciate opera and electronic music, fine dining and street food, demonstrates a flexible and cosmopolitan aesthetic capacity. However, this omnivore itself is a subtle strategy of differentiation. It requires resources of time, education, and cultural confidence to navigate various cultural realms without losing status. Thus, although it appears more democratic, this practice still reproduces inequality by making broad cultural competence a new criterion for elitism. This shows that cultural omnivores functions as a new mechanism for the reproduction of social status.

Technical and curatorial skills are now important dimensions of modern consumption practices. The mechanisms of differentiation in contemporary consumer society increasingly rely on technical knowledge and curatorial skills, particularly in assessing products and experiences. In a situation of abundant information, the capacity to distinguish quality, understand production processes, and assess the ethical dimensions of a commodity has developed into a highly valuable form of symbolic capital. Social differentiation no longer relies solely on the objects consumed, but on the manner and reasons for consumption. Knowledge about the origins, production techniques, and cultural narratives of a product serves as a marker of competence that is difficult to imitate instantly. Studies on cultural consumption show that this kind of expertise creates effective symbolic boundaries because it requires an investment of time, education, and experience that is not evenly distributed, thus transforming consumption into a performative practice that displays expertise and social legitimacy (Warde, 2014; Johnston & Baumann, 2015). This confirms that

consumption functions as an arena for demonstrating knowledge and social legitimacy.

The role of social media in consumption confirms how identity differentiation now takes place in the digital space. Social media reinforces and accelerates these knowledge-based differentiation mechanisms by providing a continuous public performance space. Digital platforms enable individuals to visually and narratively display their tastes, consumption choices, and experiences to a wide audience. In this space, differentiation often depends on aesthetic consistency, curation skills, and the speed of adopting trends before they become mainstream. Research on digital culture shows that social media forms a symbolic evaluation arena where recognition is gained through audience responses such as comments and other implicit assessments. The authenticity displayed still follows platform conventions, so consumption practices become a negotiation between self-expression and symbolic rules shaped by technology and participant norms (Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2016).

Social hierarchy persists even though the mechanisms of differentiation have undergone transformation in contemporary society. Although the forms of differentiation have changed, the classical social hierarchy has not disappeared. Economic wealth remains an important prerequisite for accessing exclusive experiences, rare products, and the leisure time necessary to develop curatorial competence. The difference lies in the way that wealth is displayed and legitimized. Studies of cultural stratification show that high-status groups increasingly rely on cultural omnivores, technical knowledge, and selectively chosen experiences to assert their position. Wealth that is not accompanied by cultural competence tends to lose its symbolic power of differentiation. Thus, social stratification continues through more covert mechanisms, where status legitimacy is determined by a combination of economic resources and internalized cultural competence (Khan, 2012; Peterson & Kern, 1996). This confirms that status reproduction continues through a combination of economic and cultural capital.

Contemporary socio-economic transformations are reflected in the evolution of increasingly complex mechanisms of consumption differentiation. The evolution of differentiation mechanisms reflects the transformation of the social and economic structure itself. From Bourdieu's vertical model centered on class, we are moving towards a landscape consisting of many overlapping arenas of differentiation. Hierarchical differentiation persists but is filtered through the logic of cultural omnivores and information competence. Horizontal differentiation

based on tribal affiliations is becoming increasingly prominent. The experience economy and digital media have introduced experiential and performative capital as new currencies in symbolic exchange. Ultimately, consumption remains a powerful classification practice, but its categories have proliferated, its criteria have become more technical and knowledge-based, and its main stage has expanded into the digital realm. Individuals in contemporary society must navigate this more complex ecosystem of differentiation, where status markers are constantly shifting and must be continually updated through consumption choices that reflect not only what one has, but primarily what one knows, experiences, and performs.

CONCLUSION

This literature review has successfully synthesized a critical understanding of consumption as a central social practice in the formation and expression of identity in contemporary society. This study shows that individual identity is constructed through complex and complementary interactions between three forms of consumption: material products, services, and experiences. These three forms constitute a symbolic repertoire curated by individuals to construct a coherent narrative of self, in which products provide material stability, services enable access and ongoing personalization, and experiences contribute stories and claims of authenticity that can be shared. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that the dialectic between agency and structure in this practice is inherent and inseparable. Consumption choices, although perceived as personal expressions, are always shaped by pre-existing frameworks of class habitus, gender norms, and market forces. Agency is manifested in the capacity to interpret, combine, and sometimes challenge available meanings, while structure determines the limits of material and symbolic access and provides a limited narrative repertoire. At a broader level, the mechanisms of social differentiation through consumption have evolved from a single hierarchical logic towards a more fragmentary, knowledge-based configuration. In a fragmented economy of experience and culture, differentiation is no longer solely about what one owns, but about what one experiences, knows, and performs. Cultural omnivores, experiential capital, and curatorial expertise have become subtle yet effective new markers of status that reproduce social inequality.

The findings of this study have significant theoretical and social implications. Theoretically, this study affirms the need for an integrative approach in the sociology of consumption that is capable of capturing the dynamic interrelationships between material objects, immaterial practices, and social structures. An analytical framework that separates the three is inadequate for understanding the reality of contemporary consumption. Another theoretical implication is the strengthening of the perspective that sees consumption as an ever-changing symbolic battlefield, where meaning and value are not fixed but contested, revised, and adapted in accordance with broader social transformations. Socially, the understanding that consumption functions as an increasingly technical and experience-based means of differentiation highlights new forms of inequality. Inequality lies not only in the distribution of goods, but also in the distribution of cultural knowledge, leisure time, and the ability to transform consumption into a legitimate performance of identity. This challenges educational institutions and public policy to consider how this symbolic inequality is reinforced and might be overcome. For industry players, this analysis underscores that the values sought by consumers are increasingly shifting from functional utility towards identity and experiential value, requiring a more nuanced approach to marketing and service design.

Based on the findings and implications outlined above, several suggestions can be made for further research and practice. First, further historical-comparative research is needed to trace the specific evolution of product-service-experience interactions across different social groups and time periods, in order to strengthen the generalization of these findings. Second, future empirical studies could directly test the concepts of experiential capital and knowledge-based differentiation mechanisms in non-Western contexts, to examine cultural variations in the patterns identified. Third, it is important to encourage interdisciplinary research that links the sociology of consumption with fields such as digital studies, environmental psychology, and political economy, in order to capture the full complexity of value circuits in today's economy. In the realm of practice, educators and media literacy facilitators are advised to incorporate the critical dimensions of consumption and identity construction into the curriculum, in order to equip individuals with an awareness of the structural forces that shape their choices. Finally, regulators and policymakers need to consider the implications of the experience and data economy for social welfare, including aspects of privacy, psychological pressure to perform consumption, and equal access to public and cultural spaces.

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