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Title: **The history of conspicuous consumption in the United Kingdom: 1945 – 2000**

Abstract

Purpose

This study aims to provide a historical understanding of conspicuous consumption phenomena in the context of the United Kingdom, between 1945 and 2000. It considers how status-driven consumption has been shaped by economic, technological and cultural factors.

Design/methodology/approach

Adopting a periodization scheme, concerning two time structures between 1945 and 2000, this paper is based on research stemming from a wide range of data such as academic studies, research articles, narrative history books, past advertisements, novels and biographies. Rich interdisciplinary data from the realms of political economy, sociology, cultural geography and consumption studies have been synthesized so as to provide a marketing-oriented historical outlook on conspicuous consumption phenomena.

Findings

Status-driven consumption in the United Kingdom has been heavily influenced by economic policies, cultural changes and public perceptions towards wealth during the second half of the twentieth century. Post-war rationing, youth-driven fashions, free-market economics and technological advances have played a crucial role in forming consumers' tastes and engagement with ostentatious economic display.

Originality/value

Although the vast majority of marketing studies have approached luxury consumption through a psychological angle, this examination identifies the capacity of historical research to uncover and highlight the interrelationships between socio-economic factors and status-motivated consumption.

Introduction

Since antiquity conspicuous consumption practices and behaviours have been occurring in various cultures and civilizations. The colour purple was a sign of wealth and prestige in ancient Greece (Wilson, 2006) and the organization of spectacular rituals attributed eminence and honour to the highest members of the Inca caste system (McEwan, 2008). Social differentiation through wine consumption in ancient Rome (Seltman, 1957; Purcell, 1985), ostentatious display of blue porcelain and embroidered silks during the Ming dynasty in China (Brook, 1998) and the public exhibition of luxury goods in the late nineteenth century America (Bronner, 1989), represent only few cultural examples and contexts where individuals sought to distinguish themselves, belong or compete via material status consumption. Apart from observations and written accounts from ancient historians (for example Herodotus in Weatherford, 1997; Berry, 1994), courtiers, voyagers and merchants - in Western and non-Western contexts -, superficial references to ostentatious behaviour and luxury consumption can be identified in the works of early economists such as Adam Smith, John Rae and Alfred Marshall (Mason, 1981). Undoubtedly, none of them approached and explicated this exceptional consumer behaviour with the academic depth, breadth and witticism of Thorstein Veblen.

In his first and most acclaimed book titled *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Veblen, 1899), the famous economist and social critic coined the term “conspicuous consumption” and provided an incomplete (Hodgson, 2004) but original and imaginative evolutionary framework of status driven consumption (Patsiaouras and Fitchett, 2009). Producing one of the earliest socioeconomic and interdisciplinary studies of consumption, Veblen critically analyzed how members of the American “*nouveau riche*” social class employed inherited wealth, conspicuous leisure, wasteful consumption and extravagant status symbols as visible means of social distinction and differentiation. Consequently, he correctly observed that, to the extent that financial resources allowed them, working and middle class consumers sought to emulate conspicuous consumption practices to achieve upward social mobility and attain increased social status. Although Veblen’s (1899) books and later work elaborated on a variety of business practices - such as the role of advertising (Hamilton, 1989; Plotkin, 2014), institutional evolution (Hodgson, 2008) and business tactics to increase sales (Veblen, 1903; Tadajewski, 2010) - his contribution to the academic field of marketing became almost synonymous with

the term ‘conspicuous consumption.’ The evolution, (mis)use and terminological reinvention of conspicuous consumption in primarily marketing, sociology of consumption and institutional economic studies has been recently discussed in this academic journal (Patsiaouras and Fitchett, 2012). Primarily focusing on the context of the United States of America during the twentieth century, the authors observed that early models of consumer behaviour offered a cursory examination of Veblen’s arguments and more contemporary marketing studies related to luxury consumption, prestige brands and consumer socialization, amongst others, provide surface readings and superficial references to Veblen’s thoughts (Patsiaouras and Fitchett, 2012). Although negligible research exists around the evolution of this generic and all-encompassing - but also seminal and diachronic - consumer behaviour concept, an increasing number of cross-cultural, country-specific or regional empirical and theoretical studies related to luxury consumption can be observed.

Apart from Western contexts, over the last twenty years the widespread presence, economic and societal impact of conspicuous consumption phenomena have been identified and explored in China (Lianxi, 2008; Podoshen et al, 2011; Zhan et al; 2012; Schroeder et al, 2014; Xiaotong 2015), India (Jaikumar and Sarin, 2015; Roychowdhury, 2017), Russia (Oushakine, 2014; Roberts, 2016) and Brazil (Rocha et al, 2016) in conjunction with other emerging economies. Cross-cultural studies on economic extravagances and excess (Mason, 1993; Souiden et al, 2011), support the evidence that there is a growing interest on status-driven relationships and consumption in developing markets; where middle classes and nouveau riche segments perceive the ostentatious display of goods and services as vehicles of social advancement and prestige. However, the majority of the aforementioned studies place an increased focus on the measurement and analysis of conspicuous consumption ‘variables’ – for example consumer aspirations/desires, pre-purchase evaluations and perceived income inequality – and their interaction with status considerations and flamboyant consumption practices. While their empirical findings offer novel insights on how the cultural environment and nationality, for example, influence the demonstration of status symbols, authors’ engagement with the historical development of conspicuous consumption phenomena is very limited. Unsurprisingly and compared to marketing scholarship, social theorists and academically trained historians have shed more light to the history of status consumption in emerging economic powers like China, India and Russia (Jaffrelot and van der Veer, 2008; Glunas in Trentmann, 2014; McNeil and Riellio, 2016) amongst others. Similarly, few sociologists

(Edgell, 1999; Edgell, 2001), economic historians (Mason, 1995, 1998; Hodgson, 1999) and marketing scholars (Page, 1992; Patsiaouras and Fitchett, 2012) attempted to investigate the history of conspicuous consumption, mainly focusing within the geographical and social context of the United States of America.

Unquestionably, environmental, socio-economic and cultural factors define and reshape individuals' needs and desires to engage with any form of economically irrational status-inspired consumption practices. Identifying an intellectual neglect regarding the theoretical depth, cultural complexity and geographical breadth of status-driven consumption, in the realm of marketing, this paper seeks to examine and critically discuss the historical development of conspicuous consumption in the post-WWII United Kingdom. Although the emergence of consumer culture in the United Kingdom has been explored by historians (Hilton, 2003; Gurney, 2017), a detailed study on the evolution of status-driven consumption has received limited attention by marketing scholars and social scientists. Thereupon, this study seeks to answer the following research question: what are the key socio-economic factors that shaped conspicuous consumption practices in the United Kingdom between 1945 and 2000? Taking into account the lack of historical accounts around ostentatious consumer behaviour in this country, the analysis of data from a variety of political economy, sociology, cultural geography and consumption studies allowed the emergence of a rich synthesis and a marketing-oriented historical outlook on how conspicuous consumption has evolved in this context. A wide range of data stemming from academic books, research articles, narrative history books, past advertisements (e.g. the UK History of Advertising Trust), the Internet (e.g. The Advertising Archives), novels (e.g. Dickens), biographies and media reports (e.g. BBC archives) were employed to support the historical observations and findings of this paper. Drawing upon a variety of sources (Witkowski and Jones, 2006; Bastos and Levy, 2012) offered the opportunity to examine the historical development of conspicuous consumption in the UK from different perspectives and accordingly to enhance the validity of the interpretations, comprehend the context under investigation (Fullerton, 2011) and explain some non-linear and dynamic aspects of change as regards status-driven consumption. In order to facilitate the presentation and analysis of the study, a periodization scheme based on two time structures between 1945 and 2000 has been conceptualized and used. Inevitably, an exhaustive and thorough historical investigation for such socially complex and unique consumptive behaviour would require much more space. This study aims to provide to the readers a brief, but coherent and original,

interpretation of socio-economic factors, events and trends that influenced and altered conspicuous consumption over time in the United Kingdom.

Luxury goods and status communicators before the Second World War

The creation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in 1801 occurred during a dynamic era of industrial growth, colonial and overseas trade, international conflicts and outward immigration among others (O' Morgan, 2001). Synoptically, the Industrial Revolution (circ. 1760 – 1820) induced technological innovations which led to simultaneous increase in population, urbanization, per-capita income, production of consumer goods and emerging consumption lifestyles (O'Brien and Quinault, 1993; More, 2000). Such historical discontinuity brought forward rapid economic and technological growth accompanied with rising inequality and social costs; a repeating socio-economic phenomenon thoroughly reported in our days (Kanbur, 2005; Stiglitz, 2013). Almost half century prior to the Industrial Revolution, Mandeville (1714/2003) - a Dutch immigrant in London - identified a rise in conspicuous display and wittily suggested that waste, competition and the popularization of luxury consumption contributed to nation's economic prosperity. Despite the outbreak of the Napoleonic wars and the war of 1812 with the United States, technologically innovative entrepreneurship, trade and mass production established the availability of new and superfluous commodities, both for the long-lasting elites but most importantly for the newly emergent middle classes (Berg, 2005). Although this mass body of individuals did not perceive themselves as 'consumers' - following a contemporary socio-economic understanding of the term (Trentmann, 2004) - gradually they began to acknowledge the role of products and services as communicators of status and social differentiation. This new commercial modernity and the development of material culture induced a consumer boom in the United Kingdom "that reached revolutionary proportions" in the third quarter of the 18th century (McKendrick et al, 1982: 9).

In synopsis, the Victorian era (1837-1901) was characterized by relative peace, industrial and political reform as well as economic prosperity which was not shared by every social class (Engels, 1886). UK's population doubled between 1841 and 1901 (Banks, 1968) and primarily the Victorian London turned into a social heterogeneous global capital, where the accumulated wealth was spent on luxury consumption and public display of goods (Berg and Clifford, 1999;

Steinbach, 2011). As McKendrick et al (1982) persuasively suggested a plethora of newly-introduced goods, services, tastes, fashions and leisure activities altered conservative perceptions towards conspicuous consumption and engaged with ostentatious economic behaviour both the rich and also the middle and working classes (Johnson, 1998). Imported luxury goods - like silk and blue porcelain - silk stocking, watches, fashionable hats, expensive clothes and umbrellas constituted some visible luxury commodities along with domestic emulative spending on ceiling fans, pottery, silver spoons and lavish tea tables. Apart from tangible goods, club memberships, beef consumption, books and trips to the seaside were acting as vehicles of self-differentiation and upwards social mobility (Cunningham, 1980). Additionally, newspapers, fashion magazines, exhibitions and frenzied advertising not only manipulated consumer demand but also heavily encouraged status-seeking spending. Observing the economic benefits from emulative consumption, self-made and innovative entrepreneurs were carefully designing advertising campaigns to “attract the attention of the coffee-house set and the London clubs, the leisured male market with time on its hands, money to spend, and always in search of novelty and improvement” (McKendrick et al, 1982: 153). The first department stores for fashionable clothing and semi-luxuries were established in London (Harrods, 1834), Liverpool (Lewis, 1856) and Manchester (1860), facilitating the middle classes to identify and purchase status markers (Whitaker, 2011). While the Industrial Revolution and financial euphoria steadily reshuffled the working and middle class structures, the Victorian aristocratic class maintained its coherence and distinctive patterns of communicating their social positioning (Harrison, 1991). Titles, rules of dress, personal maids, manners, exotic animals, education and above all unlimited leisure activities related to gambling, fox hunting, horse racing and long holidays in country estates have been recorded both by historians (Bailey, 1978) and novelists (Austen, 1813/2016; Dickens, 1861/1993). In this era of contradictions, the socially stratified Victorian context set the economic and socio-cultural foundations for the creation of a dynamic consumer society wherein status-driven consumption gained prominence; although its presence and outcomes were debated throughout the century by strict moral standards, liberal thinkers and religious principles (Berg and Clifford, 1999). From a holistic perspective, at the dawn of the twentieth century the growing importance and symbolic role of goods and services as means of securing and enhancing social status was welcomed by middle and working class consumers and it paved the way to an orgy of overspending during the following years.

The Edwardian era (circa 1901-1910) was defined by widespread prosperity, the rising status of women and the labour movement, modernism as well as unprecedented levels of ostentatious economic display, especially amongst the new-rich and the upper classes (Hattersley, 2006). King Edward VII himself publicly indulged in luxuries and pleasure seeking activities and through the commercial introduction of photography the masses were exposed to the flamboyant dressing and lifestyles of the noble born and landowning (Hynes, 1992). The amassed wealth of the Victorian period, was exhibited in social gatherings, receptions and excursions where a large number of well-dressed butlers, housekeepers, chefs and chauffeurs were acting as means of 'pecuniary decency' and conspicuous leisure, confirming Veblen's (1899) observations across the ocean. In his book *Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution*, Veblen (1915) critically argued how Britain's industrial growth and economic prosperity permitted country's upper classes to indulge in wasteful consumption practices and leisure activities. Inherited wealth, leisure and time are essential requirements for the cultivation and development of an aristocratic consumption lifestyle, Veblen sarcastically observed, that deals with "this knotty problem of how to dispose of their disposable margin of goods and energies without leaving a materially serviceable residue" (Veblen, 1915: 56). Despite the political crises and growing inequalities (Hobsbawm, 1987) of the period, historians went so far as to suggest that "more was spent on sport - largely hunting, shooting and racing - than on the whole British navy" (Aslet, 2012: 9).

The entrance of the United Kingdom in the Great War (1914-1918) ended an almost centenarian period of economic growth and increased commercial activity. The human losses and financial catastrophe following WWI gradually transformed the old Victorian and Edwardian order and strengthened social representation¹, inclusion and a spirit of egalitarianism (Roberts, 2001). New welfare programmes were supported by unprecedented taxation on luxury products, the incomes and land values of the elites, whose members now focused on the loss of their political significance and economic power, rather than expenditures on conspicuous consumer goods (Cannadine, 1990). United Kingdom's return to pre-war gold standard in 1925 was followed by falling demand for country's exports and manufacturing goods and the outbreak of the Great Depression four years later triggered economic stagnation, long-term mass unemployment and poverty which lasted until the mid-1930s (Mowat, 1932).

¹ The Representation of the People Act in 1918 reformed the electoral system and offered voting rights to millions of women and especially returning soldiers.

Although the introduction and popularity of cinema and radio broadcasting annihilated time and space and communicated emerging fashions, trends and lifestyles, the pre-war excessive levels of status consumption were over. The United Kingdom experienced a social and cultural transformation during the inter-war years and embracing modernity - especially during the 1920s - status and taste were modestly conveyed through luxurious forms of travelling - by cars, early planes and ocean cruises - arts engagement and organized leisure activities for the growing middle and shrinking upper classes. In 1939, the United Kingdom declared war on Nazi Germany and during the most cataclysmic event of the twentieth century severe rationing was imposed and luxury items were withdrawn from public display.

Conspicuous consumption after WWII (1945 – 1979)

In the immediate years after the WWII rationing continued in the United Kingdom for food portions as well as clothing, paper, soap and fuel. In this austere economic climate, previously mass consumer goods - like razor blades, bacon and cosmetics - turned into minor luxuries. Roodhouse (2013) competently outlined how black markets eased the distribution of goods whose scarcity attributed a prestigious signification. Especially during holidays - like the Christmas period - socially acceptable grey markets were formed for the exchange of gifts and scarce commodities that enhanced community bonds and neighbourhood relations. Focusing on this “age of austerity”, Kynaston (2008) described a sceptical, undernourished and class-ridden society whose members could not express, differentiate or position themselves through consumer choice. The influence of the war remained strong until the early 1950s, however a new period of economic stability and consumerism gradually arrived in the United Kingdom.

The end of rationing, in July 1954, was met with celebrations by citizens and housewives in particular (BBC, 1954). Following a rapid global economic boom, increased free trade, high employment and modernization of the economy, a relative degree of affluence and higher standards of living penetrated everyday life (Rosen, 2003). Although the two World Wars and the gradual dissolution of the British Empire diluted the old class structure, class distinctions and upward social mobility were expressed via status-driven consumption in the late 1950s and 1960s. Due to the shortage of housing after WWII, the large number of urban slums and post-war immigration from Europe and Asia, new towns were introduced through the building of

prefabricated and council houses on the edge of cities like London, Birmingham and Glasgow (Dunleavy, 1981). Primarily working class members and individuals who were living in overcrowded urban areas or bomb-damaged neighbourhoods perceived the indoor toilet, central heating, modern kitchen and small living room as semi-luxuries representing a higher standard of living (Kynaston, 2014). Concurrently, the geographical isolation of council estates reinforced class barriers. For the middle classes, the renting or purchase of modern style and new-build houses in the suburbs became fashionable and turned into a status symbol of affluence. Subsequently, house ownership began to increase and, until the early 1960s, domestic products like electric refrigerators, fourteen-inch screen televisions², music systems and modern furniture were considered as luxury items. Surprisingly, by contemporary standards, a luxury status was attributed to the consumption of poultry, olive oil, sweets and fruits (BBC, 2007; Godley and Williams, 2009). Following the popularity of large self-service grocery stores in the United States, the number of British supermarkets rose from 175 in 1958 to 2083 ten years later (Rosen, 2003), offering a wide expansion to product range and establishing class-based cultural norms via an environment of consumer affluence and social comparison based on visible purchasing actions (Du Gay, 2004; De Grazia, 2005). Furthermore, the arrival and heavy promotion of American products - like Heinz ketchup, Kraft and Kodak for example - broadened consumers' brand awareness and knowledge around the use and display of product's name or logo as marker of social positioning. As Holt (2002) suggests the mid-twentieth century early mass branding phenomenon both conveyed prestige and legitimacy to the manufacturers and also appealed to the status-driven desires of the aspirational post-war emerging middle classes and members of the affluent working class. Unable to compete with the pecuniary strength of the elite classes, these individuals acknowledged and utilized the slight superiority of branded goods – compared to low priced items – as trajectories that signified and communicated a good standard of living, social identity and leisure time (Bastos and Levy, 2012; Holt, 2012). Exploring through historical lens the evolution of brand consciousness in the United Kingdom, Elliott and Davies (2006) observed how newly introduced and mass-produced brands in 1950s - like cigarettes and radios - communicated social status and group membership.

² At the beginning of the 1950s only 350,000 households in urban areas of the United Kingdom had a television set. The televised coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in June 1953 had been a turning factor for the massive increase of household and public TV sets the following years (Scott, 1999).

The launch of the commercial ITV channel in the mid-1950s challenged BBC's monopoly in television services and television advertising began in September 1955 (Brian, 1986). These early presenter-based commercials together with the popularity of Hollywood films communicated images of post-war affluence and, most importantly, spread the idea that a lifestyle of consumerism and status expenditure ceased to be only the privilege of the middle-upper classes (Strinati and Wagg, 1992; Glancy, 2003). During the relative post-war affluence of the 1950s, the simultaneous introduction and plethora of modern and mass produced goods blurred the boundaries and complicated the classification amongst traditional necessities, semi-luxuries and status goods; always depending on consumer's social background and age. The growing material abundance and increased consumer choice generated political debates (Hilton, 2003) - between the Conservative and Labour parties – concerning the distinctions between luxury and necessity, ostentation and asceticism, wants and needs and the enhanced role of status-driven consumption for social differentiation and participation in the emerging consumer society. As Galbraith (1957/1987: 228) observed during the massive shift of cultural and consumer values in post-war USA, “in the affluent society, no sharp distinction can be made between luxuries and necessities.”

Whilst more affluent working and middle class consumers were learning, embracing and experimenting with the symbolic role of status commodities, the upper-middle class and members of the old elite perceived private school education, professional success, forms of speech, expensive housing and clothing as bearers of a distinctive social identity. In terms of leisure, their engagement with performing and fine arts, consumption of fine wine, air travel and access to luxury hotels were reflecting class-based differences and pecuniary strength, compared to the mass culture of commercial television, cinema going, pubs and popular music (Savage, 2010; Marwick, 2003). Women's emancipation, education reforms, pop-music, novel fashions and lifestyles during the 'Swinging Sixties' rendered status consumption and emulation as key vehicles for upward social mobility, expression and social belonging.

Status symbols and upward social mobility

The continuous economic growth during the 1960s raised living standards, encouraged individual and family consumption and engaged into status considerations and conspicuous consumption members from every social class. The proliferation of advertising messages through magazines and mass media, specialist retailers for luxury goods, exclusive brands and sophisticated marketing reinforced aspirations in securing social rank and position via the display of material goods and economic success. Labour party's extrovert criticism, throughout the 1950s, towards the formation of a consumerist society, individualism and attachment to luxury goods was altered into scepticism and uncertainty on the symbiosis between choice-based consumerism and socialist values during their return to government in 1964 (Black and Pemberton, 2004).

Technological advances in car manufacturing together with reduced prices almost quadrupled car ownership between 1951 and the late 1960s, turning the road vehicle into the most up-to-date and visible manifestation of prestige (Stevenson, 2004). Alvis, Jaguar and primarily Bentley and Rolls Royce were communicating the owner's social standing through their enormous prices, spacious passenger accommodation and innovative design. As Taylor (2016) has argued and visually displayed both the manufacturing process and promotion of these cars were targeting an exclusive market segment comprised of celebrities, business magnates, politicians and very wealthy families. These aesthetic and material elements of achievement, superior performance and excellence were displayed in strong advertising messages which both reflected the expectations and strengthened the aspirations of the upper classes and middle upper class consumers respectively. Terms such as 'power', 'prestige', 'tradition' and 'elegance' had been imbued in magazine advertisements (The Advertising Archives UK, 2017; Stevenson, 2004) for luxury cars, whilst the mass produced and family oriented Ford, Hillman and Vauxhall automobiles began to appear in the middle class suburbs of the United Kingdom (Pritchard, 2009). The massive influx of automobiles did not only conveyed social belonging but also facilitated the access to distant places and touristic destinations.

Since technology reduced the time needed for transportation, housework, delivery of information and communication, consumers could invest their time in leisure activities. For the more affluent working consumers and the middle classes, apart from several hours of television

a week (Rule, 2001), cheap holiday packages to warm European destinations offered an unfamiliar experience and a sense of achieved status to travellers of even tourist or economy class. Coach tours and mainly the charter flights from Gatwick to Southern Spain, Portugal's Algarve, Italy and some Greek islands acted as indicators of prestige for the happy and tanned tourists who returned with souvenirs and 'Kodak moments' (Mason, 2014). Low consumer demand due to high pricing and the limited number of flights turned a first class airline ticket into a symbol of status and luxury consumption. In the 'golden age' of air travel, the immersion in the first class experience with British Airways or Pan American involved an upstairs lounge, private berth, inflight movies, complimentary cigarettes, champagne, exotic menus and a very high stewardess-to-passenger ratio (Hudson, 1979; Jarvis, 2015). On thirty thousand feet above the ground, the pricing and comfort of seating was in the 1960s an essential mark of pecuniary prowess and social standing.

It has been well documented and recorded an explosion in popular and rock music, artistic creativity, technological innovation, entertainment and fashion (Clarke, 1995; Mellor, 1993; Armstrong, 2014) throughout the 1960s. Conducting 200 interviews with young leading figures of the 'Swinging London' era, the journalist Johnathan Aitken concluded that:

"If one had to name the qualities most admired by the younger generation in London today, a quick attempt might run: wealth, sex, appeal, fame, youth, talent, novelty and quick success" (Aitken, 1967: 37)

A youth and artistic rebellion against old-fashioned morals and orthodox thinking challenged and attacked the stigmatization of success and economic status by groups of high-principled liberal thinkers, public servants, socialists, conservative members of the arts establishment and journalists who had been hostile to the 'Americanization' of everyday life in the United Kingdom (Ladesman, 2009). The professional and financial success of young artists and creative individuals like the Beatles, Mary Quant, Michael Cane and Twiggy - amongst others - received wide media attention, emphasizing their talent, upward social mobility and lifestyles. BBC's TV programme 'Man Alive' explored the meteoric rise of these "working-class stars

and celebrities” and presented their new experiences and attitudes towards meeting royalty and engaging with luxury goods and services (BBC Archive, 1967). Simultaneously, in the United States of America, advertising agencies had been quick to translate the free-spiritedness, hedonistic values and rebelliousness of the hippies and rock and roll countercultures into emotional branding campaigns and aesthetic commercials, targeted to young and innovative consumers who rejected the conservatism of the 1950s (Frank, 1997). The Beatles’ arrival and commercial breakthrough in the United States during 1964 paved the way for a mutual cultural exchange and synergistic influence between American and British countercultural movements (Stark, 2009). The creative output and powerful impact from this process has even today a lasting impact on the fashion, music, advertising and film industries amongst others. In general, the youthful innovation, entrepreneurial dynamism and celebrity culture of the 1960s paved the way to the emergence of novel fashions, conspicuous dressing and motivation for social achievement.

Although Paris had been the capital and hub of international fashion for several decades, the clothing industry of the United Kingdom and London in particular began to take off in the 1960s. The city of London could be conceptualized as an innovate collage of fashion districts wherein aspirations and desires for the display of taste, social standing, conformity or iconoclasm could be satisfied by a plethora of established fashion brands, affordable and imaginative clothing. Carnaby street was the home of new lifestyles and epicenter for trend-driven and relative cheap products that reflected a rebellious identity and social change; young middle class men and women could identify stylish outfits and embryonic brands at Knightsbridge and on King’s Road opened colorful boutiques with exotic names that attracted crowds of consumers and celebrities seeking flamboyant self-expression (Victoria and Albert Hall Museum, 2017). Pursuing to establish fashion trends that challenged old class structures and status consumption, the rising fashion designer Mary Quant stated in her memoirs back in 1966:

“Once, only the rich, the Establishment set the fashion... There was a time when clothes were a sure sign of a woman’s social position. Not now. Snobbery has gone out of fashion, and in our shops you will find duchesses jostling with typists to buy the same dress” (Weight, 2013: 4).

Despite the optimism of the fashion scene to employ clothes as cultural signifiers of a classless society, neither snobbery nor conspicuous consumption disappeared from the streets, gatherings and public spaces of the country. Celebrated dressmakers and traditional tailors continued to produce and sell elegant, exclusive and extremely expensive clothes for wealthy clients at Mayfair and the prices of velvet jackets and full party dresses at Piccadilly were affordable only by high-spending customers who enjoyed and communicated a considerable social status (Armstrong, 2014). However, it can be argued that the inclusivity, experimentation and dynamism of the sixties fashion movements, to some extent, reshuffled post-war class boundaries (Bourdieu, 1984) and for more than a decade amalgamated a large pool of like-minded young customers from diverse social backgrounds. Nevertheless, the political and economic turbulence of the 1970s will remove the overall optimism and disrupt the evolution of this steady and progressive period of economic growth and post-war consumer affluence.

Technological goods and conspicuous consumption

In the popular imagination, the 1970s in the United Kingdom are seen as a decade of economic slowdown, rising unemployment rates, widespread strikes by unions and a global oil crisis that increased energy/commodity prices and formally put an end to the Bretton Woods system (Coopey and Woodward, 1996). The economic boom came to an end and undoubtedly it had been the post-war decade with the worst press (Sandbrook, 2011), but simultaneously significant technological, cultural and social shifts redefined the meaning and style of the products and services displaying social status (Medhurst, 2014). In the early 1970s, the newly introduced and rather expensive colour television, with larger screen and sharp images, was viewed as a luxury good, along with digital watches, early forms of computer games (Pong consoles for example) and pocket calculators which were outdated by the end of the decade (Baird, 2011). Additionally, teasmaids, freezers, practical dial telephones and home ‘music centers’ (a combination of radio, record and cassette player) represented technologically advanced goods and highly priced luxury items. Supercars of extreme design and performance emerged and gradually foreign brands - for example Ferrari and BMW - began to compete with UK luxury sports cars, like Aston Martin V8, as conspicuous manifestations of wealth and success (Loveys, 2015). The astronomical price, hand-crafted curves and unparalleled speed of these exclusive status symbols attracted the interest of both upper class old-money young

consumers and aspiring new-rich entrepreneurs. An older generation of ultra-rich UK consumers participated - via club membership - in racing old luxury cars in continental Europe (Lemmonier, 2012), a classy and exclusive leisure activity that became more fashionable the following decades. Despite the technological growth and volume of touristic activity, members of the working class had been less likely to have holidays away from home and especially to afford holidays abroad (Benson, 1994). Simultaneously, the landing of the first Pan American Boeing 747 at Heathrow airport in 1970 and the first commercial Concorde flight in 1976 created exclusive market segments of celebrities and affluent passengers who conspicuously displayed their social standing to the public and the media (Fife, 2016). The term 'jet-set' was heavily associated with these flights and following the Concorde BA news "when you flew on Concorde you joined an elite band of travelers... Concorde used to be the last word of glamour, the choice of royalty, the aristocracy, rock stars and top businessmen" (Escolme-Schmidt, 2009: 185).

Adjusting to the economic turbulence, technological evolution and changing consumption patterns, UK advertising agencies swiftly and effectively altered their marketing strategies and promotional tactics. While events such as the three day week measures of 1974 and the widespread strikes during the winter of 1978/79 had a huge psychological effect upon UK consumers, it has been argued that manufacturers and companies selling luxury goods, automobiles and energy identified advertising channels and communications as means of overcoming the crisis (Nevett, 1982). Despite that during the 1960s early UK TV advertising was heavily influenced by American style commercials, creative agencies now focused on the development of a native style of television advertising with emphasis on eccentricity, sarcasm and class distinctions (McDonough and Egolf, 2002). Furthermore, the emergence of sophisticated marketing segmentation techniques on the interrelationships amongst social class, income, occupation variables and consumer behaviour (Assael, 1970; Peters, 1970; Ginter and Pessemier, 1978) informed advertising practices and introduced novel insights on the needs and desires of status driven, ethnically diverse and especially young consumers. From the 'teddy boys' of the early 1950s to the rockers and punks of the 1960s and 1970s, the symbolic display of clothing and brands - and public consumption in general - played a central role as a vehicle of expressing differentiation, independence and anti-conformity. As Benson (1994: 164) observes, the emergence and evolution of 'mobs' exemplifies a youth culture of consumption related to rebellion and a movement whose public appearance and consumption

patterns turned into “a symbol of affluent teenage consumption.” During the 1970s, and apart in the United Kingdom, in other European countries - like Germany for example - we notice that a younger generation of consumers - also known as baby boomers - have grown into post-war decades of economic prosperity, consumer choice and social security. Compared to their grandparents and parents who experienced periods of war and rationing, the younger generation will approach consumption as a vehicle for self-expression, belonging and differentiation. Critically discussing the “materialization” of youth cultures in the changing European societies of the 1970s, Schildt and Siegfried (2006: 13) suggest that:

“Consumption no longer focused on the safeguarding of basic survival such was shelter, clothing, or food, but on strictly speaking, dispensable things and possessions which could be arbitrarily combined: the nicer apartment, the more palatable food, the different clothes. It was the combination of excess and arbitrary selection that determined the distinct lifestyles – and that also revealed the 'slight differences'.”

Similar to these youth segments of consumers who engaged with subtle forms of conspicuous consumption, via the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s women’s rights, participation in the labour market, income and subsequently consumer confidence substantially increased (Cowman, 2010). Contrary to the established, effectively promoted and distinctive fashion trends of 1960s, technologically advanced equipment for clothing production introduced a plethora of local and foreign brands in boutiques and shopping centres (Fiell and Dirix, 2014). The declining prestige of well-known designers together with the fragmentation of fashion and rise of youth countercultures turned the ostentatious display of clothes into vehicles of primarily self-expression, anti-conformity, identity and individualism. In the following decade, radical political and cultures changes will introduce a spirit of materialistic individualism that will foster conspicuous consumption practices to unprecedented levels.

Heightened materialism and laissez faire economics (1979 – 2000)

The election of the Conservative party in 1979 inaugurated a period of austere economic modernization and radical policies which lasted until the 1990s and transformed both social life and consumption patterns. The privatization of public services reduced the power of trade

unions and the deregulation of the financial sector severely challenged the post-war Keynesian economic model, systematically reshuffled working conditions and income distribution and changed perceptions towards luxury consumption (Evans, 1997). In general, the privatization of public services like gas, electricity, water, telecommunications and the British airways - in conjunction with others - blurred the boundaries between the terms citizen and consumer and introduced the dominance of individual consumption preferences in several areas of the public sphere.

The emergence of major shopping precincts at the city center of several urban areas - Birmingham, Glasgow, Manchester and Newcastle for example - provided contexts of increased spending activity and spaces for the conspicuous display of newly purchased goods and brands related to clothing (Berry et al, 1993; Guy 1993). New transport links to Europe, TV advertising, airport expansion and cheap holiday packages, exponentially increased the number of people who took holidays abroad from 4.2 million in 1971 to 13.1 million in 1981 and up to almost 20 million in 1991 (Black, 2004). The easy access to European destinations together with the boom in overseas travel turned the ownership of property abroad as symbol of status for affluent UK consumers who could afford to buy a second house in Canaries, Italy, south Spain and especially south-west France. Adopting free-market mechanisms and introducing the Housing Act of 1980 - which permitted local authority occupants to buy their houses -, the new government heavily promoted home ownership as a trajectory of social success and upward social mobility. Through mortgages, tax relief for borrowers and discounts on the market value, a process that triggered debt and speculation which led to a housing crisis in the following decade, home ownership turned into national fascination and raised status-driven desires and aspirations throughout every social stratum and especially amongst the lower socio-economic groups (Ward, 2004). It has been well-documented that the liberalization of the credit supply conditions since the late 1970s and during the 1980s – especially in the mortgage market - incurred and spread rampant overspending and wasteful luxurious consumption amongst the working classes (Bertola et al, 2006). Together with the exposure to consumer credit, the implementation of macro-economic structural adjustments eventually diminished industrial activity, caused a drop in real wages and triggered high levels of unemployment throughout lower socio-economic groups. Being less immune to this suffocating economic conditions of simultaneous consumer debt and laissez faire economic policies, consumers employed in manual and industrial work played the leading role in

industrial action, strikes and protests against the Conservative government. At the same time, a small number of emerging and dynamic house building companies, with modern production and architecture, constructed and advertised the so-called 'executive homes': relatively large and narrowly separated sub-urban houses with their own front garden and garage (Moran, 2005). Similar to the Victorian era, these estates added a spatial dimension to the luxury housing market, since affluent customers preferred to move from the inner city within a local geography that signified a middle/upper class lifestyle and positioning.

The emphasis on free-markets and limited government spending paved the way to the rise, and gradually deregulation, of the financial and service sectors and subsequently created emerging professional identities which found expression in consumerism and conspicuous consumption practices. Both in the United Kingdom and the United States, the term 'yuppies' was introduced as a stereotypical and cultural reference to young and well-paid urban professionals employed in the financial, banking, high-tech and creative industries (Belk, 1986; Burnett and Bush, 1986). Attaining higher educational levels and increased incomes, the new generation of managers and employers created an elite marketing segment whose members indulged in hedonistic consumption and could afford expensive leisure pursuits and luxury brands (Matthews and Gardiner, 1999). The proliferation of conspicuous consumption practices was reinforced by the growth of advertising (Michell and Bright, 1995; Jones, 1999) and the 'new cultural intermediaries' (Bourdieu, 1984; Featherstone, 1990), an expanding group of professionals - public relations, television producers and fashion writers for example - who played a seminal role in the introduction and cultivation of lifestyles, tastes and new experiences. Furthermore, the prevailing neoliberal political philosophy of Thatcherism cultivated an entrepreneurial spirit and corporate culture which changed attitudes towards money by embracing and celebrating wealth creation and ostentatious consumption. The traditional upper class elites were slowly reproduced into 'professional' elites and discourses around enterprise, creativity and commercial success were imbued in television, newspapers and magazines (Boyle and Kelly, 2012). Exploring the interface between power and money in Britain during the 1980s, the acclaimed writer Antony Sampson (1989: 23) noted that:

"For the forty years up to 1980 the British have shown a lack of interest in money-making which puzzled foreign visitors...The British disdain for money had long roots, going back to

the first reactions against Victorian vulgarities, and reinforced by the imperial tradition of service and by two world wars which underlined military and moral values.”

Although such generic statement does not encapsulate the social and economic complexity of changing national perceptions towards wealth, it skillfully reflects the radical and tremendous impact that the implementation of laissez-faire economics brought upon citizens. Overall, the 1980s saw an unparalleled upsurge in individualism, occupational status consumption and consumerism within an emerging post-industrial context. Despite the lack of academic marketing research on luxury during this decade, a cultural turn in humanities and social sciences rendered consumption and consumer culture into seminal sociological topics (Sassatelli, 2010; Slater 1997; Warde, 2015). For example, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural studies produced groundbreaking research in subcultures of consumption (Santoro, 2011) and critically explored how UK citizens pursued upward social mobility via the display of wealth. Moving from one-dimensional assessments on the consequences of consumption to empirical explorations around consumers’ desires, aspirations and attachment to status goods and services, this stream of sociological research and its findings informed status-related consumer research in the United Kingdom during the following decades.

Social status and experiential consumption

The spread of a consumerist ethos and implementation of economic liberal policies throughout the 1980s required vast amount of funds that eventually exposed consumers and companies to high levels of debt. Subsequently, the economic boom based on uncontrolled consumer borrowing and spending caused rising inflation, unsustainable interest rates and economic stagnation between 1990 and 1993 (Holden et al, 1995). Simultaneously, globalization, multiculturalism, urbanism and technological development induced a democratization of more affordable, mass available luxury goods in Europe, the United States of America and the United Kingdom (McCracken, 2005; Silverstein and Fiske, 2003; Taylor, et al, 2009). By 1994 almost 95 of British household possessed colour television (Black, 1994) and popular programmes around lifestyle consumption practices fostered a cultural homogenization amongst the millions of viewers. Conducting an ethnography of shopping in Northern London during the mid-1990s, Miller (1998) observed an emphasis on morality and thrift through the everyday

shopping activities of middle-income households, which stands in contrast with the hedonistic materialism of the previous decade. Some established British luxury car makers, media channels and water/energy providers came under foreign ownership and along with the arrival of satellite television and the multiplicity of television channels strengthened a commercially induced homogeneity around the mass consumption of foreign brands, tastes and lifestyles. Innovative and low-cost airlines, like Ryanair and EasyJet for example, managed to achieve extensive market coverage and have been carrying millions of price-conscious budget travellers and middle-class consumers to almost every major European city (Doganis, 2001). In general, public education, welfare benefits and progressive social policies around gender and race equality broadened the middle classes and caused a decline in the traditional upper class, whose members communicated in the past rank and privilege via consumption. Social campaigns in media produced increased information regarding the calamitous impact of technological change and pollution on the environment, a process that both enhanced consumers' awareness of sustainable consumption practices and prompted them to oppose waste, excess and overconsumption practices (McDonagh, 1998; Fisk, 1998; Fitchett and Prothero, 1999).

The enormous demand for counterfeit luxury products (Nill and Schultz II, 1996; Tom et al, 1998; Argavan and Lynne, 2000), such as clothing, perfume and apparel, gradually diluted and some extent diminished the symbolic role of luxury brands as indicators of social positioning. While the direct display of visible brand emblems, like Burberry and Asprey, continued to signal an element of uniqueness, UK consumers adopted most refined and sophisticated ways in experiencing and expressing their elegance, taste and existing or aspired social background. The meteoric rise of a small group of young visual artists, known as YBA art scene, enhanced arts engagement and investment in high art, display or aesthetic consumption of cultural goods and services became status markers for young, urban and well-educated professionals (Bradshaw et al, 2010; Stallabrass, 2001).

An over-plethora of inexpensive and widely available mass-produced consumer goods together with the growth of the service sector induced a cultural shift and emphasis on experiential rather than material consumption (Miles, 1998; Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Home computers connected to the newly-introduced World Wide Web, early mobile phones and portable CD players were highly priced commodities until the mid-1990s providing fun, connection,

entertainment and differentiation to early adopters. Electronic commerce grew via Internet's popularity and consumers were provided with more choice, control and information regarding consumer electronics and new-luxury brands related to food, home furniture, beauty, spirits and sports equipment for example (Silverstein and Fiske, 2003). Less expensive than iconic luxury brands but also well promoted and high-priced to their competitors, these mass-produced luxury goods facilitated middle-class consumers to express their lifestyles, hobbies and cultural background. Extending his ground-breaking research on the experiential aspects of consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982), Holbrook (2000) suggested that millennial consumers enthusiastically embraced an entertainment and exhibitionism ethos through the imaginative promotion of events, commercial spaces, cultural and leisure activities provided by companies, media brands and experiential marketers. One of the most famous football players of the decade, David Beckham, turned into a fashion icon and celebrity endorser for companies like Vodafone, Pepsi and M&S along with some Japanese brands (Kelting and Rice, 2013). The Virgin Group, founded by Richard Branson, emerged as a multiservice provider of entertainment experiences for affluent consumers seeking personal attention, exclusivity and prestige. Apart from luxury holidays by the Virgin Atlantic airline and comfortable travel through Virgin trains, the company has been developing since the late 1990s and up today commercial spacecraft adventures aiming to target a small segment of exceptionally wealthy space tourists (Turner, 2009). Leaving behind the stratosphere, aviation clubs at the outskirts of cities introduced expensive flying lesson experiences and for wealthier consumers overseas tourism was not limited only to leisure and relaxation but expanded to skydiving at the sandy coastline of Florida, safari in Sub-Saharan Africa and ancient temple visits in the tropic forests of Laos and Cambodia (Boniface, 2009). Through processes of urban redevelopment large football stadiums and memorable buildings turned into arenas for spectacular, multisensory and collective music experiences (Goulding et al, 2001; O'Reilly et al, 2014) for the masses, while marketing practices for audience's engagement and co-creation of experiences were developed for the attraction of more affluent fans of classical music concerts and operagoes (Carù and Cova, 2005; Fraser, 2004). From a holistic viewpoint, it can be argued that luxury manufacturers' mass production strategies, globalization, higher levels of education and the broadening of the middle classes diminished consumption-based barriers and class considerations based exclusively on the ostentatious display of wealth and economic advantage. Undeniably, elite groups of consumers and their followers continued to perceive the display value of products and services as markers of status, nevertheless a hierarchical

social stratification of status-seeking consumers was diluted by the multiplicity of lifestyles, cultural experiences and new tastes during the 1990s.

At the dawn of the century, luxury consumption behaviour in the United Kingdom has become a more complicated and subtle social practice shaped by technological innovations, symbolic meanings, complex relationships and marketing technologies (Trigg, 2001; Truong et al, 2010). The exponential growth of the Internet, rise of social media and smartphones' popularity, enabled consumers to virtually identify, compare and assess luxury goods, leisure activities and consumption experiences through a few finger flicks (Croft, 2013; Eckhardt et al, 2015). The concept of conspicuous consumption has been empirically and fragmentally explored in the United Kingdom and the research findings highlighted further consideration on how variables like the self-concept (Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2014), individualism (Lindridge and Dibb, 2003; Shukla and Purani, 2012), age (Shukla, 2008), counterfeit products (Pham and Nasir, 2016), and the perceived value of premium brands (Dall'Olmo et al, 2015) interact with and shape luxury consumption choices. The global financial crisis of 2007/08 quickly affected the country and mitigated consumers' desires to compete for social status and simultaneously a rise in theft crime - as result of increased social inequalities - lessened the visibility of outwards and grandiose signs of wealth (Hicks and Hicks, 2014; Mejia and Restrepo, 2016). Conclusively, Veblen's (1899) central thesis that conspicuous consumption is of fundamental importance for the display of superior socio-economic status remains valid and well-grounded. Although the social structure, material living conditions, fashions, and technological infrastructures in the United Kingdom are in a constant state of flux since WWII, socially emulative consumption - expressed through subtle tastes, extravagant services or digital leisure experiences amongst others - comprises a key social practice in communicating pecuniary power, class membership and the ability to waste resources.

Concluding Comments

Employing historical lens, this study sought to critically explore some socio-economic factors, technological trends and fashions that shaped the development of conspicuous consumption practices in the United Kingdom. Following the disastrous impact of WWII and during the early 1950s, it can be observed that contemporary everyday items, widely accessible types of food and cheap household products – like radio, olive oil and well-designed furniture – were

perceived by the masses as luxuries and status symbols. The rapid introduction of mass produced goods and commercial television, throughout the 1960s, increased consumer choice and strengthened the role of status-driven consumption as a vehicle for social differentiation and distinction. The post-war material affluence, raised living standards and youth-driven cultural changes gradually fostered the rise of emerging consumption lifestyles and motivation for upward social mobility; a process which challenged old class structures and established means of ostentatious consumption. During the 1970s, the economic slowdown and social turmoil slowed and moderated the post-war consumer euphoria, however technological developments and advertising facilitated the popularization of domestic luxury items and leisure activities conveying social status. Laissez-faire economic policies and the marketization of public services altered public perceptions towards extravagant spending and subsequently cultivated a spirit of individualistic materialism during the 1980s. In the final decade of the previous century, ostentatious display of wealth was diminished since mass available luxury goods, globalization and cultural homogeneity democratized luxury consumption for the masses. Social differentiation and the display taste were performed through experiential consumption of technologically advanced goods and cultural services, whilst Internet's popularity shuffled traditional means and practices of communicating prestige.

The study identifies that although UK-based social researchers explored the interface between class belonging and wealth display since the late 1970s, consumer behaviour theorists and marketing scholars embarked upon empirical explorations of luxury consumption and brands from the late 1990s onwards. Contrary to more contemporary marketing studies that approached and conceptualized consumers' motivations and attitudes towards luxury through a psychological perspective, this historical piece of marketing research highlights the seminal importance of economic policies, technological advances and socio-cultural forces for the formation of consumer behaviour. For example, the legitimacy and morality of consumers' attachment to luxury goods was debated by the consecutive Labour and Conservative governments during the 1950s and 1960s, whilst the overt display of material wealth was perceived and promoted as a driver of economic development and sign of prosperity during the period of Thatcherism. Also, not explicitly financial factors - such as cultural values and particular sub-cultures (pop revolution and counterculture in the 1960s and 1970s) - challenged or reinforced individuals' tendency to signal wealth for social positioning. Consequently, this paper indicates the capacity of historical marketing research in uncovering and explaining how

structural economic changes and cultural factors (Mittelstaedt and Mittelstaedt, 2006; Reid, 2016) have influenced consumers, consumer culture and marketing technologies of the past. Considering conspicuous consumption as a diachronic and universal type of social and visible behaviour, further historical research of the phenomenon, in other countries, can provide a subtle and sophisticated awareness around the evolution of economic trends, public perceptions towards affluence and changing cultural lifestyles.

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