



SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND LIFESTYLE IN CONSUMER SOCIETY: STATUS EXPRESSION THROUGH CONSUMPTION AND TASTE FORMATION

Ella Anastasya Sinambela, Siti Nur Halizah

Universitas Sunan Giri Surabaya

correspondence: easinambela@gmail.com

Abstract

This study employs a qualitative literature review to examine the interplay between social stratification and lifestyle within consumer society. It investigates how social status is expressed through consumption and how structural positions shape individual taste. The findings highlight that status expression relies on symbolic differentiation, where consumption reflects not just wealth, but cultural capital and exclusive access. Media and digital platforms further intensify these pressures by fostering aspirational curation. Simultaneously, taste is molded by class-based socialization and the internalization of habitus, making social distinctions appear inherent. While the upper class prioritizes uniqueness and cultural knowledge, the middle class often faces a tension between aspiration and resources, leading to compensatory consumption. Conversely, the lower-class experiences taste stigmatization, which serves to legitimize broader social inequalities. Ultimately, the study concludes that consumption is a primary arena for reproducing social stratification. It shifts the theoretical focus from production-based class structures to the symbolic practices of everyday life, suggesting that addressing inequality requires policies that consider both symbolic dimensions and material deprivation.

Keywords: social stratification, lifestyle, consumption, taste, social class, consumer society, symbolic distinction

Introduction

In modern society, the relationship between social status and lifestyle has become one of the most significant dimensions shaping an individual's life experience. Social stratification is no longer solely determined by productive factors such as ownership of the means of production or position in labor relations, but also by how someone presents themselves through daily consumption choices. This shift reflects a fundamental change in the structure of contemporary society, where class boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred and status symbols are shifting from what is productively owned toward what is demonstratively consumed. This shows how important it is for us to understand how everyone strives to find their place amidst such rapid changes (Saputra & Darmawan, 2021). A person is no longer judged solely by their job or income, but by the clothing brands they wear, the type of vehicle they use, the holiday destinations they visit, and even the style of language and musical tastes they choose. In daily life experiences, individuals constantly perform self-presentation through the goods they consume, whether consciously or not, as an effort to assert their position within the social hierarchy (Mello & Paula, 2019). This process takes place in intense social interactions, where everyone reads and is interpreted by others based on their appearance and the consumptive behavior displayed. On the other hand, the way we interact and relate to the people around us is also strongly influenced by the environment in which we live and general public health conditions (Warin, 2023). Thus, consumption is no longer merely the fulfillment of material needs, but has become the primary arena where class identity is constructed, maintained, and contested.

The consumer society that has developed rapidly in recent decades has fundamentally changed the way individuals understand themselves and others (Çiçek, 2022). Modern capitalism no longer just produces goods, but also produces the cravings and desires to keep consuming. Advertising, mass media, and the entertainment industry work simultaneously to create the illusion that happiness and social recognition can be achieved through the acquisition of certain goods. Sometimes, the desire to continuously buy new items can clash with long-standing traditional values in our society (Mardikaningsih et al., 2021). In such an environment, individuals are faced with constant pressure to update their

appearance, replace obsolete items with newer ones, and follow ever-changing trends. The subjective experience of this pressure varies greatly depending on one's position in the social structure. For those in the upper class, consumption becomes a means to differentiate themselves from the classes below them, creating an exclusive lifestyle accessible only to a few. For the middle class, consumption becomes an endless race to show they are worthy of a higher status, often at the expense of savings and by incurring debt. For the lower class, consumption becomes a source of anxiety and feelings of inadequacy due to limited access to goods considered legitimate markers of status. This phenomenon often creates a sense of discomfort and social distance between different groups in society (Sulistyo & Hartanto, 2023). This dynamic shows that consumer society is never neutral; it is a symbolic battlefield where social hierarchies are constantly reproduced and occasionally disrupted.

The relationship between social stratification and lifestyle cannot be understood without considering how social class shapes tastes and consumption preferences from an early age (Wang et al., 2022). The socialization process that takes place within the family, the living environment, and educational institutions forms long-lasting dispositions regarding what is considered beautiful, valuable, and worthy of pursuit. The life lessons we gain from our immediate surroundings usually become the foundation for determining what is important and what is not (Nurmalasari & Nuraini, 2021). Someone growing up in an upper-class family inherits not only material wealth but also knowledge of branded goods, the ability to appreciate high art and culture, and the self-confidence to display tastes that are deemed superior. Conversely, someone from the lower class might develop tastes considered "low" by the dominant class, not due to a lack of aesthetic ability, but because they lack access to the education and environment that shape the tastes valued in society. In life experience, these differences in taste are often experienced as something natural, as if reflecting differences in talent or innate character, when they are actually products of inherited social positions. This process of naturalizing differences in taste is what makes social stratification feel legitimate, as inequality appears natural and inevitable. Thus, lifestyle is not merely an expression of individual choice, but a subtle

mechanism that perpetuates social hierarchy through distinctions that seemingly base themselves on personal tastes and preferences.

Technological developments and globalization have added a new layer of complexity to the relationship between social stratification and lifestyle (Bögenhold & Naz, 2018). Access to information and goods from around the world has expanded consumption horizons, but it has also created new forms of inequality. We cannot deny that the presence of today's sophisticated digital technology has brought many changes to how we lead our daily lives (Wahyudi et al., 2021). The upper class can now consume luxury goods from various parts of the world, demonstrating their status through collections of items not available in the mass market. The middle class has access to luxury imitations or more affordable global brands, creating an illusion of participation in an upper-class lifestyle at a lower cost. Meanwhile, the lower class can often only access counterfeit goods or local brands that lack the same prestige. Social media exacerbates this dynamic by turning lifestyle into a spectacle constantly consumed by the public. Every uploaded photo of a vacation in an exotic location, every photo of food at an expensive restaurant, and every photo of a newly purchased item becomes a status statement viewed by hundreds or thousands of people. In such an environment, the pressure to display a lifestyle consistent with a desired status becomes increasingly intense, while the gap between appearance and reality continues to widen. Individual experiences in navigating this pressure are often colored by anxiety and dissatisfaction, as the standards to be met keep moving upward, never reaching a satisfying endpoint.

In increasingly individualistic contemporary societies, lifestyle also functions as a means to build community and a sense of belonging amidst the weakening of traditional bonds (Gerhards et al., 2012). People with the same social status tend to develop similar consumption patterns, which in turn strengthens group identity and distinguishes them from other groups. A shared passion for something often becomes a bridge for people to gather and feel as though they have comrades-in-arms (Rejeki, 2021). The specialty coffee lover community, for example, not only unites people with the same taste but also creates symbolic boundaries that distinguish them from instant coffee drinkers. Similarly, communities of lovers of certain branded goods, fans of specific sports, or visitors to

certain entertainment venues become vessels for the formation of collective identities based on lifestyle. In individual experience, being part of such a community provides a sense of recognition and solidarity that might previously have been obtained from kinship ties or residence-based communities. However, lifestyle-based communities are also exclusive, as membership requires material resources that not everyone possesses. Thus, lifestyle is not only a marker of status but also a highly effective mechanism of social inclusion and exclusion. Those unable to follow consumption patterns considered "appropriate" within a community will feel marginalized, while those who can will gain recognition and validation that reinforces their position in the social hierarchy. This process shows that in a consumer society, consumption is never a private matter, but is always a social act fraught with meaning and consequences for one's position in the social order.

In a society that makes consumption the primary arena for determining social status, a fundamental question arises about how individuals can build an authentic identity when self-expression is constantly overshadowed by the demand to display a lifestyle appropriate to a specific social position (Belk, 2020). On one hand, individuals are encouraged to be themselves, expressing uniqueness and individuality through consumption choices. On the other hand, this freedom of choice occurs within a space already compartmentalized by social hierarchies, where every consumption choice has a specific status value that has been socially determined. This situation often makes many people feel caught between personal desires and economic demands that are increasingly difficult to meet (Mahmudah, 2022). Someone from the lower class may develop tastes that the upper class considers worthless, so they will constantly face delegitimization of their self-expression. Someone from the middle class may feel trapped in the necessity to constantly upgrade their lifestyle so as not to lose the status they have achieved, yet without ever feeling like it is enough because the standards keep moving up. Someone from the upper class may feel shackled by the expectation to maintain a certain lifestyle that is actually no longer personally meaningful. The tension between the urge to be authentic and the pressure to conform to status expectations creates a deep experience of alienation, where

individuals feel that the lifestyle they lead is not a reflection of their true self, but merely a mask worn to meet social demands.

Another equally complex problem relates to the widening inequality of access to prestigious lifestyles amidst the narrative of an increasingly open and meritocratic society. Consumer society promises that everyone can achieve their desired lifestyle through hard work and the right choices. However, reality shows that access to the goods and experiences that serve as high-status markers is heavily determined by one's initial position in the social structure. The upper class not only has greater financial resources but also possesses knowledge of what is considered valuable, networks that open access to rare items, and the self-confidence to claim exclusive social spaces. Lower and middle-class individuals who try to chase an upper-class lifestyle often get entangled in consumer debt that worsens their economic position, without ever truly achieving the desired status recognition. This condition makes us realize that the struggle for a decent life is not just a matter of making money, but also about how we can have a voice in national life (Rojak et al., 2021). This inequality creates an illusion of mobility that actually perpetuates existing class structures, as individual energy and resources are exhausted in efforts to pursue a lifestyle they can never fully achieve. In the experience of many, the struggle to display a lifestyle consistent with a dreamed-of status becomes a source of constant stress, anxiety, and feelings of failure, because the standards to be met are always out of reach (Sherman, 2018).

The study of the relationship between social stratification and lifestyle has become highly relevant amidst the growing awareness of social inequality in various parts of the world. Data regarding the widening economic gap between the wealthiest and poorest groups has captured public attention, yet the cultural dimension of this inequality often escapes notice. In fact, how inequality is experienced and reproduced through daily consumption practices has a massive impact on the psychological well-being of individuals and the social cohesion of society. The poor do not only lack material resources, but also face stigmatization through judgments of their lifestyles, which are deemed inappropriate. The wealthy not only enjoy material advantages but also gain social recognition through tastes and preferences considered superior (Friedman & Reeves, 2020). Understanding the subtle mechanisms that perpetuate inequality through

consumption is essential for designing interventions that address not only material gaps but also symbolic ones, which are often more difficult to change. Without this understanding, efforts to reduce inequality will remain stuck at the level of resource distribution without touching the cultural structures that make inequality feel legitimate and natural.

The importance of this study is also driven by the radical transformation of the consumption landscape due to the development of digital technology and social media. Digital platforms have changed the way people display and evaluate lifestyles, creating a new arena for status competition that is more intense and broader in scope. An individual can now compare their lifestyle with thousands of others in a matter of seconds, creating unprecedented pressure to meet ever-increasing standards. Influencers and social media celebrities become new idolized lifestyle models, yet they often display versions of life that are highly unrealistic and unattainable for most people (Chae, 2018). The younger generation growing up in this digital environment faces unique challenges in building self-identity amidst a flood of information about the lifestyle they are "supposed" to have. Understanding how these new dynamics affect the construction of class identity and individual psychological well-being is an urgent necessity, given their broad impact on mental health and social cohesion. A systematic literature review on this topic can provide a foundation for developing digital literacy and more critical consumption education, which are much needed in an era where the line between real needs and manufactured desires is increasingly blurred.

This research aims to systematically analyze the relationship between social stratification and lifestyle in a consumer society, focusing on two main dimensions: the mechanisms of social status expression through consumption patterns and the formation of tastes and lifestyle preferences based on position within the social structure. The theoretical contribution of this research is to formulate a conceptual framework mapping how consumption practices function as a mechanism of class distinction, as well as how lifestyle tastes and preferences are shaped by social position and, in turn, reproduce social stratification. Practically, the results of this research are expected to provide a better understanding for educators, policymakers, and development practitioners regarding how inequality is reproduced through consumption, allowing for the design of interventions

that address not only material disparities but also the symbolic gaps that are often harder to alter. This research is also expected to serve as a foundation for developing critical literacy regarding consumption amidst the increasingly intense pressures of a consumerist society.

Method

This research utilizes a library research design with a qualitative approach aimed at exploring and synthesizing various theoretical perspectives and empirical findings regarding the relationship between social stratification and lifestyle in a consumer society. The selection of this method is based on the characteristics of the topic, which requires an in-depth exploration of concepts that have developed within the sociology of consumption, social class studies, and cultural studies. As explained by Creswell (2009), qualitative research in the form of a literature study allows researchers to understand social phenomena through the interpretation of existing texts without having to conduct primary data collection. In this study, the primary data sources are academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and scholarly essays discussing consumption, lifestyle, stratification, and class distinction. The data collection process was carried out through systematic searches of academic databases using a combination of relevant keywords. Each identified source was then evaluated for credibility through an assessment of the publisher's reputation, the methodology used, and the consistency of the arguments with findings from other reputable sources. This approach enables the researcher to build a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of consumption as an arena for the formation and reproduction of social stratification.

Data analysis in this study uses the thematic analysis approach developed by Boyatzis (1998), which allows researchers to identify recurring patterns in the literature and organize them into meaningful themes. The analysis process began with open coding of all collected library materials, followed by grouping codes with similar meanings into more abstract categories, and concluded with the formulation of main themes that answer the research questions. This approach allows the researcher to do more than just summarize what others have written, but also to perform a critical synthesis that generates new understanding of how social stratification is expressed and reproduced through lifestyle. To maintain

the validity of the findings, this study applies a source triangulation strategy by comparing findings from literature with diverse disciplinary backgrounds, theoretical traditions, and geographical contexts. As emphasized by Denzin and Lincoln (2005), triangulation in qualitative research serves to increase the credibility of findings by considering various perspectives that may differ. Additionally, the researcher conducted searches for literature with different or contradictory perspectives to ensure that the resulting conclusions were not biased due to an overly narrow selection of sources. The entire analysis process was systematically documented so that each step can be traced back by other researchers wishing to conduct verification or replication.

Result and Discussion

Mechanisms of Social Status Expression through Consumption Patterns and Lifestyle

The expression of social status through consumption occurs through symbolic differentiation mechanisms, where consumed goods are not valued merely for their practical functions but for the social meanings attached to them (Ma, 2014). In contemporary society, a car is not just a means of transportation; it is a statement about how successful the owner is. A handbag is not just a container for carrying items; it is a marker of which social class the owner belongs to. Understanding human behavior in this constantly changing society indeed requires a broad perspective, especially from our psychological side as social beings (Darmawan et al., 2021). This meaning-making process takes place through continuous social interactions, where individuals learn to read status signs from the appearance and behavior of others, while simultaneously displaying the signs they wish to communicate about themselves. Daily experience shows that people instinctively perform social categorization based on what is worn, what is driven, where they shop, and how they spend their leisure time. This categorization happens so quickly and automatically that it is often unconscious, yet its impact on the treatment a person receives is very significant. Someone wearing a specific brand of clothing will be treated differently by security officers in a luxury shopping mall compared to someone wearing ordinary clothes. This difference in treatment, repeated

daily, reinforces the awareness of the importance of displaying the right status signs through consumption.

One of the most fundamental mechanisms in status expression through consumption is the practice of conspicuous consumption, which is consumption carried out not to fulfill internal needs but to demonstrate financial capability to others (Ambrasat et al., 2016). In this practice, the consumed goods have higher value precisely because of their expensive price and non-functional nature. The more practically useless an item is, the more effective it is as a status marker because it shows that the owner can afford to waste money on unnecessary things. However, behind such luxurious lifestyles, we must also realize that there are still many major challenges related to the social inequalities occurring in our urban environments (Mardikaningsih, 2021). Diamond jewelry, luxury watches, and sports cars are classic examples of conspicuous consumption goods. The experience of owning such items provides satisfaction that does not stem from the utility of the item itself, but from the accompanying social recognition. When others see and admire the item, the owner feels their status has been acknowledged. However, this mechanism also creates a never-ending race, because when an item begins to be widely owned by the middle class, its status value declines, and the upper class will shift to other, more exclusive goods. This dynamic is what drives constant fashion trend changes, where what is considered prestigious today can become ordinary in a few years, forcing those who want to maintain their status to keep up with the changes.

The mechanism of status expression also occurs through differentiation in terms of cultural knowledge and tastes that are considered valuable (Skladan, 2018). The upper class does not only consume expensive goods but also possesses knowledge about those goods that other classes do not have. They know which brands are truly prestigious and which are merely imitations, know how to distinguish genuine items from fakes, and know how to care for and treat these items in a way that shows they are indeed worthy of owning them. Such knowledge and awareness often emerge from social movements desiring change for the better, where the role of women is also very important (Aisyah, 2023). This knowledge is acquired through socialization within the family and exclusive social networks; it is not something that can be

bought with money alone. A "new money" individual might be able to buy an expensive designer bag, but if they do not know how to carry it correctly, do not know how to pair it with other appropriate clothing, or do not know when and where the bag is fitting to use, they will still be regarded as someone who does not truly possess the status they claim. The experience of the upper class is often colored by efforts to maintain symbolic distance from the classes below them by continuously creating new distinctions that cannot be easily imitated. When the middle class begins to be able to mimic upper-class consumption patterns, the elite will develop new, more exclusive tastes, creating a hierarchy that constantly moves upward.

The media and the marketing industry play a central role in shaping and communicating what is considered a prestigious lifestyle (Ássimos et al., 2019). Advertisements do not merely sell goods; they sell dreams of a better life, of higher status, and of belonging to an exclusive group. The images displayed in advertisements create associations between specific items and attributes such as success, beauty, happiness, and social recognition. Often, the way service systems operate and how we treat one another in public spaces are also influenced by existing social standards (Khayru & Darmawan, 2023). Through constant repetition, these associations become so powerful that someone purchasing the item feels as though they are also buying the promised attributes. The experience of watching advertisements, reading lifestyle magazines, and observing social media posts from celebrities creates internal standards of what should be owned and what constitutes a proper appearance. These standards are often unrealistic, as they showcase a lifestyle achievable only by a few, yet they are felt as an obligation by many. Consequently, a feeling of "never being enough" arises a sense that what is currently owned is insufficient to gain the desired recognition, thus necessitating the continuous pursuit of new items promised to provide the long-sought satisfaction. This cycle creates a psychological dependency on consumption as a primary source of self-esteem, which in turn strengthens the marketing industry's position as the main arbiter of what is considered valuable in society.

In a digital society, the mechanisms of status expression through consumption are undergoing a significant transformation (Sievers, 2015).

Social media provides a stage where everyone can display their lifestyle to a wider public than ever before. For today's younger generation, social media is not just a place to play, but has become an important means for learning and demonstrating their self-identity (Kurniawan et al., 2021). Uploading photos of vacations in exotic places, meals at expensive restaurants, or newly purchased items serves as a way to communicate status to hundreds or thousands of followers. Interestingly, in the digital space, lifestyle presentations can be curated and edited in such a way that they display a version of life far more impressive than actual reality. Someone might borrow items for a photoshoot, visit an expensive restaurant once to obtain content that will be posted repeatedly, or use filters and editing applications to enhance their appearance. The experience of using social media is often characterized by intense social comparison, where individuals compare their own lifestyles with the lifestyles of others displayed on the screen. This comparison creates pressure to constantly raise standards, as what others display always appears more impressive. Ironically, almost everyone performs the same curation, resulting in a display of the best version of their respective lives rather than their ordinary daily existence. As a result, everyone feels that others' lives are better than their own, without realizing that those others are feeling the exact same way.

The expression of status through consumption is increasingly evident in the form of participation in activities and experiences with high symbolic value, where the upper class does not stop at owning luxury goods but affirms its position through access to exclusive experiences such as traveling to remote destinations, limited club memberships, high-end culinary consumption, and involvement in prestigious cultural activities. We must not forget that behind such culinary luxury, the issue of food availability for underprivileged families remains a real problem that we must pay attention to (Mahmudah, 2021). This kind of experience demands a combination of economic resources, availability of leisure time, and strong social networks, making it not easily accessible to all individuals, including those who are financially capable but lack adequate social capital, which ultimately demonstrates that social status is formed through differentiation that constantly moves and adapts to the ability of other classes to imitate previous consumption patterns. This

ultimately reminds us again how complex the ways in which humans interact and try to understand each other in a social environment full of differences (Darmawan et al., 2021; Mahmudah, 2021). Consequently, when the middle class begins to be able to access luxury goods, the upper class shifts status markers to the realm of experiences that are harder to replicate, creating increasingly complex layers of hierarchy where life experience becomes an important indicator in the assertion of social position (Bourdieu, 1984; Veblen, 1899).

The mechanism of status expression also works through differentiation in things that are hidden or invisible (Siepmann et al., 2021). The upper class often develops a lifestyle referred to as inconspicuous consumption, which is consumption not intended to be seen by the public but instead indicates higher status because it does not require external recognition. Children's education in elite schools, top-tier health insurance, private consultant services, or donations to art institutions are examples of consumption that do not directly display status to the public, yet they become more legitimate status markers because they show that the status is already established and no longer needs to be flaunted. In the world of work, which is now increasingly sophisticated due to automated machinery, the way we view a person's value in their job has also changed and become more complex (Darmawan, 2023). The experience of having an established status is characterized by the comfort of not needing to constantly show off wealth through flashy items. Conversely, those whose status is newly acquired or still unstable tend to rely on more conspicuous demonstrative consumption to gain recognition. This difference creates internal stratification within the upper class itself, between those with old money and the new money (*nouveau riche*), which is often expressed through criticism of lifestyles considered too flashy or lacking class.

In a society increasingly aware of environmental and ethical issues, a new mechanism of status expression has emerged through ethical and sustainable consumption (Hahn et al., 2019). Consuming organic goods, eco-friendly products, or fair-trade items becomes a new status marker for the upper-middle class who want to show that they are not only wealthy but also possess a high moral consciousness. The decision to buy these eco-friendly items is usually heavily influenced by the values that grow

within our daily social circles (Mardikaningsih et al., 2022). Items with "fair trade," "organic," or "local" labels are often sold at higher prices, thus remaining exclusive, yet they offer a moral justification that allows consumers to feel superior not only economically but also morally. In this case, the role of women within the household turns out to be very significant in determining which product choices are better for the family and the environment (Halizah & Nuraini, 2021). The experience of consuming such goods provides a double satisfaction: the satisfaction of owning an exclusive item, and the satisfaction of feeling like one has done the right thing. However, the irony of ethical consumption is that it is still consumption, it still requires significant financial resources, and it often creates new forms of exclusivity accessible only to the upper-middle class. Those who cannot afford organic goods or fair-trade products are not only economically excluded but also morally marginalized, as they are deemed less concerned about the environment or less socially conscious. We can see that these lifestyle differences sometimes create a real gap or divide between groups of people living in big cities (Fauzi, 2021). This dynamic shows how the mechanisms of status expression continue to evolve, finding new forms that still maintain their basic function as tools for class distinction.

The mechanism of status expression through consumption cannot be understood without considering the role of emotions and desires that drive consumptive behavior (Kennedy et al., 2019). Consumption is never a purely rational act; it is always seasoned by the desire to be recognized, the fear of being marginalized, the anxiety of losing status, and the hope of becoming a better version of oneself. Before buying something, many people today like to look at the opinions or reviews of others so that they feel more confident in their choices (Negara et al., 2021). The experience of buying new goods is often accompanied by an intense sensation of excitement, yet this sensation quickly fades, leaving a void that is then filled by the desire to buy the next item. This cycle creates a consumption addiction that is difficult to break, as every purchase provides temporary satisfaction that is rapidly replaced by the need for the next purchase. Both the upper and middle classes are equally trapped in this cycle, albeit with different resources. For working mothers, this pressure might feel heavier because they must divide their time between work and household affairs

(Fauzi, 2023). For the upper class, this cycle may not endanger their financial position, but it still drains energy and creates chronic dissatisfaction. For the middle class, this cycle often leads to consumer debt that worsens their economic standing. Ultimately, all these choices come back to how we manage our life strategies and personal desires in the midst of society (Negara et al., 2021; Fauzi, 2023). In the experience of many, the awareness of the cyclical nature of this consumption is often present, yet it is difficult to change because the social pressure to continue following prevailing standards is so strong, and alternative lifestyles not based on consumption are still considered eccentric or even embarrassing.

The Relationship between Social Structural Position and the Formation of Taste and Lifestyle Preferences

The formation of taste and lifestyle preferences cannot be separated from one's position within the social structure, as each social class possesses different material conditions that shape dispositions toward what is considered good, beautiful, and valuable. The upper class, possessing excess financial resources and leisure time, tends to develop a taste for items requiring significant investments of time and knowledge to appreciate, such as contemporary fine art, classical music, or haute cuisine. These tastes signify not only financial capability but also demonstrate that the owner has the capacity to spend time studying non-utilitarian matters (Bögenhold & Naz, 2018). On a broader scale, the balance between economic needs and the environment is indeed a vital key to the survival of us all (Mardikaningsih & Hariani, 2021). Conversely, the working class, living with limited resources and time, tends to develop a taste for items that are functional, practical, and provide immediate satisfaction. They value satiating food over food presented with complex aesthetics and prefer entertainment that is directly amusing over art requiring deep interpretation. In daily experience, these differences in taste are often felt as something natural, as if reflecting differences in innate talent or character. In reality, taste is a product of material conditions that shape what is possible and impossible to desire. Someone growing up in scarcity will develop tastes that value certainty and quantity, while those growing up in abundance will develop tastes that value uniqueness and quality.

The socialization process within the family holds a highly decisive position in the formation of taste, as the family serves as the initial space where individuals absorb values, habits, and preferences that subsequently form their cultural orientation throughout life (Mello & Paula, 2019). In upper-class families, children acquire not only economic resources but also a heritage in the form of cultural capital, which includes symbolic knowledge, ways of behaving, and sensitivity to specific aesthetic standards. This is also evident in how we work and manage diversity within an organization to maintain harmony (Irfan & Hariani, 2023). From an early age, they are introduced to cultural practices such as visiting art galleries, enjoying specific musical performances, or understanding high-value consumption etiquette. These experiences occur repeatedly, forming dispositions that feel natural and unquestioned. Through this process, taste develops as part of an internalized identity while simultaneously serving as a marker of social position that distinguishes them from other groups (Bourdieu, 1984; Lareau, 2003).

Conversely, individuals from lower-class families often lack access to the same cultural experiences, leaving them unfamiliar with the symbolic codes applicable in certain social spaces (Holbrook et al., 2004). When entering spaces dominated by upper-class tastes, they may feel a discomfort rooted in a lack of familiarity rather than intellectual limitation. The challenge of uniting these various differences is often influenced by political views or group identities existing in society (Fariz, 2021). This condition demonstrates that taste is not neutral but is closely linked to the social structure that shapes an individual's opportunities to access certain experiences. The feeling of being "out of place" that arises in such situations illustrates how social mechanisms work subtly to maintain class boundaries (Bourdieu, 1986). The family functions as a means of reproducing social stratification through the transmission of tastes that appear natural, even though they are heavily influenced by the uneven distribution of cultural capital in society (Swartz, 1997). Furthermore, we can also learn from how farmers or small business owners struggle to manage their strategies for survival (Darmawan, 2018).

Educational institutions function as important agents in legitimizing the tastes of the dominant class, as schools and universities tend to value and promote the tastes held by the upper class (Daenekindt, 2015). Formal

education curricula, especially in subjects such as art, literature, and music, are often based on a canon that reflects the preferences of the dominant class. Children from the upper class who have had familiarity with this canon since childhood will find it easier to excel, while children from the lower class must work harder to master what is already everyday knowledge for their peers. In reality, many women with successful careers still have to bear a double burden between work and household duties (Khairi, 2021). The school experience becomes an arena where differences in taste are not only reinforced but also assigned value. Those whose tastes align with the curriculum receive recognition and rewards, while those with different tastes are often judged as less cultured or less talented. This process makes inequality in taste appear as an inequality in ability, when it is actually the result of differing access to cultural capital from the start. Schools, instead of being tools for social mobility that level differences, become institutions that legitimize the superiority of upper-class tastes and the inferiority of lower-class tastes (Jewel, 2008; Bourdieu & Whitehouse, 2013).

Position within the social structure also shapes lifestyle preferences through the mechanism of habitus, which is a system of long-lasting dispositions generated by specific material conditions that shape how individuals perceive the world and act within it (Yaish & Katz-Gerro, 2012). Upper-class habitus encourages individuals to feel entitled to luxury goods, comfortable in exclusive spaces, and confident in displaying tastes considered valuable. Nowadays, we also frequently see how social media influencers strive to display certain lifestyles to capture our attention (Hariani & Mardikaningsih, 2022). They do not need to consider whether an item is too expensive or whether it is appropriate for them to visit a certain place; these things feel natural and obvious. Conversely, lower-class habitus encourages individuals to feel they have no right to luxury goods, to feel awkward in exclusive places, and to doubt their own tastes. Even when they are financially able to buy expensive items, they may still feel that such items are "not for people like them." The experience of the lower class is often colored by the feeling that there is an invisible boundary distinguishing what is appropriate for them and what is appropriate for others. Ultimately, all of this comes back to how we adapt and make the best decisions in daily life (Darmawan, 2018; Khairi, 2021). This boundary is not just financial, but also psychological, embedded in the body and

feelings as a sense of being out of place. It is this habitus that makes social stratification feel natural and difficult to change, because differences in taste and lifestyle have been internalized as part of one's deepest identity.

Social mobility, whether upward or downward, creates complex dynamics in the formation of tastes and lifestyle preferences (Childress et al., 2021). Someone experiencing an increase in status often faces the challenge of adopting the tastes of the upper class they have newly entered, yet without losing their roots of identity. This adoption process does not always run smoothly, as new tastes often feel foreign and inauthentic. They may feel as though they are pretending to be someone else, imitating a lifestyle they do not truly understand. The experience of the middle class rising to the upper class is often colored by feelings of insecurity, as they constantly worry that deficiencies in their cultural capital will be exposed, making them targets of ridicule as people who do not truly possess "class." They may diligently learn about the right brands, the restaurants to visit, and the behaviors to display, yet still feel that it is all a mask that could slip off at any moment. Conversely, those experiencing a downward shift in status face the challenge of maintaining tastes that have become part of their identity amidst new resource constraints. They may continue to desire items they can no longer afford or feel humiliated by having to adapt to a simpler lifestyle. In both cases, social mobility shows that taste is not something permanently attached to an individual but can change along with shifts in social position, though these changes are often accompanied by a significant psychological burden.

The existence of the middle class in a consumer society creates its own dynamics in the formation of taste and lifestyle (Henry & Caldwell, 2017). The middle class occupies an ambiguous position—not wealthy enough to fully adopt an upper-class lifestyle, yet unwilling to be equated with the lower class. This condition drives them to develop subtle differentiation strategies, often by adopting more affordable versions of upper-class lifestyles. They buy branded goods but only during sales, visit expensive restaurants but only on special occasions, or purchase imitation products that resemble authentic luxury items. The middle-class experience is often characterized by a constant struggle to maintain a "proper" appearance with limited resources. They live in a tension between the desire to display higher status and the financial constraints that prevent

them from doing so consistently. This tension often leads to excessive consumptive behavior, where they are willing to go into debt to buy items deemed essential for their status. In the long run, this pressure can lead to a financial crisis that ironically plunges them into the lower class. The middle class, therefore, becomes the class most vulnerable to the consumption cycle, as they possess the aspirations to move up but lack sufficient resources to sustain those aspirations without sacrificing their economic stability.

Mass media and the cultural industry play a highly significant role in shaping tastes and lifestyle preferences across classes (Ponte & Campos, 2018). Through advertisements, films, television shows, and magazines, the media creates and disseminates standards of what is considered cool, modern, and prestigious. These standards are usually based on the lifestyle of the upper class but are presented as something achievable by everyone if they are willing to try. The experience of watching television shows featuring luxury homes, expensive clothes, and exotic vacations creates a desire to possess the same things, even though for most people, it is unrealistic. The media also creates role models, both celebrities and influencers, whose lifestyles become models to be imitated. Those unable to replicate such lifestyles often feel like failures or less successful, even if they are objectively living well. The media, thus, becomes a continuous desire-production machine, creating standards that are always beyond the reach of most people. In this process, the media also contributes to the homogenization of tastes across classes, as more people desire the same goods and experiences. However, this homogenization does not erase stratification, as access to the same goods and experiences remains unequal. What occurs instead is an intensification of competition to acquire the same items, with those possessing greater resources still coming out on top.

The lower class faces unique challenges in the formation of taste and lifestyle, as they often not only lack financial resources but also face stigmatization of the tastes they possess (Maguire, 2019). The lifestyles of the lower class such as the clothes they wear, the food they consume, and the entertainment they enjoy are often ridiculed or belittled by the upper and middle classes as being "low-class," "tacky," or "uncultured." The experience of the lower class in enjoying what they can afford is frequently

accompanied by shame or a sense of inadequacy, as they are constantly reminded that their tastes are not good enough. This stigmatization extends to various dimensions of life, ranging from speech patterns and dressing styles to food choices. Those from the lower class who successfully move up often strive hard to abandon their old tastes, sometimes to the point of feeling ashamed of their families and communities of origin. This process shows that taste is not only a marker of social position but also a tool of social control that makes the lower class feel they are unworthy of receiving the same treatment as the upper class. The stigmatization of lower-class taste serves to legitimize inequality, as it makes disparity appear to be a consequence of "unworthy" taste differences rather than a result of an unjust social structure.

The development of a global consumer culture has created new forms of hybridity in the formation of taste and lifestyle, especially among the urban middle class (Gerhards et al., 2012). They are no longer exclusively tied to a single cultural tradition but can combine elements from various sources, whether local or global, traditional or modern. An individual might wear international designer clothing while consuming traditional food, or listen to global pop music while collecting local crafts. This experience of hybridity provides a sense of freedom and creativity, as individuals are no longer restricted to what is considered the "appropriate" taste for their class. However, hybridity also creates new complexities, as there is no longer a clear map of which tastes belong to which class. In this situation, knowledge of trends and the ability to read ever-changing cultural codes become increasingly important. Those with access to information and the right networks will be able to navigate this complex cultural landscape, while those without will fall further behind. Hybridity, therefore, does not abolish stratification but shifts its form from being based on the ownership of specific goods to being based on the ability to continuously follow rapidly changing trends.

Awareness of the injustice in the formation of taste and lifestyle has given rise to movements that challenge the dominance of upper-class tastes (Childress et al., 2021). These movements, such as the food justice movement, ethical fashion movements, or minimalist living movements, attempt to build alternatives to consumption models based on class distinction. They encourage people to no longer measure self-worth by the

goods they own, but by values such as sustainability, solidarity, or simplicity. The experience of joining such movements provides an alternative for those weary of the endless consumption race. However, these movements also face the challenge of not becoming merely another exclusive lifestyle. Minimalism, for example, can become an expensive lifestyle if "minimalist" items themselves are sold at a premium price. Organic food promoted by the food justice movement is often more expensive than conventional food, making it accessible only to the upper-middle class. A critique of these movements is that they often fail to address the root of the problem: the social structure that makes consumption the primary arena for determining self-worth. They may provide an escape for weary individuals, but they do not change the fact that for most people, social status remains determined by what they consume.

The relationship between social structural position and the formation of taste ultimately shows that taste and lifestyle are not matters of free individual choice, but are products of one's position within the social hierarchy. The upper class develops tastes that allow them to differentiate themselves from the lower class, the middle class develops tastes reflecting their aspirations for upward mobility as well as their anxiety about falling into the lower class, and the lower class develops tastes that are often stigmatized as unworthy. This process of taste formation takes place through socialization within the family, formal education, media influence, and daily social interactions, such that differences in taste feel natural and unchangeable. In reality, these differences are the product of unequal access to resources, both material and cultural. Understanding this relationship is crucial to dismantling the illusion that a consumer society is an open society where everyone is free to express themselves through consumption. In truth, that freedom is strictly limited by one's initial position within the social structure, and consumption becomes the primary mechanism that perpetuates inequality by making it appear as a matter of personal taste rather than a matter of social justice.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that social stratification and lifestyle in a consumer society share a dialectical and mutually reinforcing relationship.

The expression of social status through consumption patterns occurs via symbolic differentiation mechanisms, where consumed goods are valued not for their practical functions but for the social meanings attached to them. Conspicuous consumption, cultural knowledge, participation in exclusive activities, and inconspicuous consumption serve as the primary means for the upper class to distinguish themselves from the classes below them, while social media and the marketing industry reinforce and expand the reach of these mechanisms. Conversely, the formation of tastes and lifestyle preferences is heavily determined by one's position within the social structure through family socialization processes, formal education, and the internalization of habitus, making differences in taste feel natural and inevitable. The upper class develops tastes that emphasize uniqueness and time investment; the middle class lives in a tension between aspirations and limitations that drive excessive consumption; while the lower class faces stigmatization of their tastes, which legitimizes inequality. Thus, consumption in contemporary society is not merely an economic activity, but a primary arena where social stratification is reproduced and perpetuated through daily practices that appear personal yet are laden with class meaning.

Theoretically, the findings of this research enrich the understanding of the relationship between social class and consumption by showing that class distinction mechanisms are no longer solely based on the ownership of the means of production, but have shifted toward a more subtle and complex symbolic realm. This implication shifts the focus of analysis from rigid structural approaches toward cultural approaches that understand how class is reproduced through daily consumption practices. Practically, these findings provide direction for the development of policies and interventions that are more sensitive to the symbolic dimensions of inequality. Poverty alleviation policies focusing only on income increases without addressing the stigmatization of lower-class lifestyles will struggle to achieve their goals, as poverty is experienced not only as material deprivation but also as a sense of inadequacy generated by the delegitimization of taste. Critical consumption education needs to be developed to equip society, especially the younger generation, with the ability to read the class differentiation mechanisms operating through consumption, so they do not get trapped in an endless consumption race

that worsens their economic and psychological positions. For development practitioners, an understanding of how lifestyle serves as a status marker can be used to design empowerment programs that not only transfer material resources but also build self-confidence and legitimacy for lifestyle choices consistent with one's capabilities and values.

An in-depth ethnographic approach is highly necessary to understand the subjective experiences of individuals navigating consumption pressures amidst resource constraints, as well as the strategies they develop to maintain self-esteem amidst the stigmatization of their lifestyles. Longitudinal research is also needed to understand how tastes and lifestyle preferences change alongside social mobility, as well as the long-term impact of consumptive pressures on psychological well-being and economic stability. For the broader community, it is suggested to develop a critical awareness of the class distinction mechanisms operating through consumption and to build alternative lifestyles based not on status races but on values such as sustainability, solidarity, and authenticity. This awareness is vital to breaking the consumption cycles that damage individual economic balance and societal social cohesion, and to building a more just society where a person's value is measured not by the goods they possess but by the quality of their humanity.

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