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p-ISSN 1232-8766; e-ISSN 2450-1328
https://doi.org/10.21852/sem.1910

Research Article

From Visibility to Recognition? Veblenian Status Logic in Young Adults' Platform Culture

Od widoczności do uznania? Veblenowska logika statusu w kulturze platform cyfrowych młodych dorosłych

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Received: 2026-10-04; Revised: 2026-11-10; Accepted: 2026-11-18; Published Online First: 2026-11-20

Abstract
The article examines how platform-mediated representations of lifestyles may become reference points for young adults' aspirations and judgements of success. Its aim is to clarify the relationships between the display of resources, platform-organised visibility, status recognition and status emulation, and to identify their significance for critical media education. The theoretical analysis combines a critical reconstruction of Veblen's concepts with conceptual comparison and synthesis and draws on a purposive, iterative selection of literature. The resulting heuristic framework distinguishes resources, their display, platform-organised visibility, social interpretation, status recognition and status emulation. The central argument is that visibility does not in itself establish status, while recognising another person's social standing does not necessarily mean adopting that standing as a reference point for one's own aspirations. The application of the framework to a selected empirical study illustrates the distinction between relationships supported by the measures employed and those that would require additional evidence. The pedagogical contribution lies in identifying three interconnected areas for reflection: what evidence a representation provides, whose judgements confer status value on it, and whether the criteria underlying those judgements should guide one's own aspirations. The framework provides a basis for analysing the formation of standards of success while taking unequal conditions of participation into account. Its educational implications remain theoretical and require evaluation in specific contexts.

Keywords
Thorstein Veblen; status emulation; conspicuous consumption; platform-organised visibility; social comparison; critical media education; young adults; platformisation; social status; media literacy

Abstrakt
W artykule podjęto pytanie o to, w jaki sposób obrazy stylów życia, z którymi młodzi dorośli stykają się za pośrednictwem platform cyfrowych, mogą stawać się punktem odniesienia dla ich aspiracji i sądów o tym, co

stanowi sukces. Celem artykułu jest wyjaśnienie zależności między prezentacją zasobów, widocznością przekazów kształtowaną przez platformy, uznaniem statusu społecznego i dążeniem do dorównania innym pod względem pozycji społecznej, a także określenie znaczenia tych zależności dla krytycznej edukacji medialnej. W analizie teoretycznej dokonano krytycznej rekonstrukcji pojęć Thorsteina Veblena oraz porównano i poddano syntezie pojęcia zaczerpnięte z literatury przedmiotu. Literaturę dobierano celowo, doprecyzowując dobór źródeł w miarę postępu analizy. W opracowanych ramach heurystycznych wyodrębniono zasoby, sposób ich prezentacji, widoczność przekazu kształtowaną przez platformy, jego społeczną interpretację, uznanie statusu oraz dążenie do dorównania innym pod względem pozycji społecznej. Zgodnie z główną tezą artykułu sama widoczność nie przesądza o statusie społecznym, a uznanie pozycji innej osoby nie oznacza jeszcze przyjęcia jej za punkt odniesienia dla własnych aspiracji. Zastosowanie tych ram do analizy wybranego badania empirycznego pozwala wskazać, które zależności znajdują oparcie w wynikach uzyskanych za pomocą przyjętych miar, a których wykazanie wymagałoby dodatkowych danych. Wkład artykułu w krytyczną edukację medialną polega na wskazaniu trzech powiązanych obszarów refleksji. Jakie wnioski można oprzeć na tym, co ukazuje dany przekaz? Czyje oceny sprawiają, że przedstawiony w nim styl życia zyskuje znaczenie jako wyznacznik statusu? Czy kryteria leżące u podstaw tych ocen powinny wyznaczać własne aspiracje odbiorcy? Zaproponowane ramy pozwalają analizować proces kształtowania się kryteriów sukcesu z uwzględnieniem nierównych warunków uczestnictwa w środowisku platform cyfrowych. Wnioski pedagogiczne mają charakter teoretyczny, a ich przydatność wymaga oceny w konkretnych kontekstach edukacyjnych.

Słowa kluczowe
Thorstein Veblen, dążenie do dorównania innym pod względem pozycji społecznej, konsumpcja na pokaz, widoczność przekazów kształtowana przez platformy, porównania społeczne, krytyczna edukacja medialna, młodzi dorośli, platformizacja, status społeczny, kompetencje medialne

Introduction

More than 120 years after Thorstein Veblen published *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, the social display of status remains an important object of inquiry, although both the resources used to communicate social status and the infrastructures that condition their social visibility have changed. Veblen analysed a social order in which social position was validated primarily through socially legible signs of wealth, freedom from productive labour and consumption beyond utilitarian requirements. Contemporary scholarship, however, shows that conspicuous consumption cannot be equated exclusively with luxury or with any single type of good. A systematic review of 955 publications by de Groot et al. (2026, abstract) points to a shift in the field towards understanding conspicuous consumption as a historically and socially variable practice of status signalling.

Analysing the environment in which potential status markers circulate requires attention to both audiences and technical mediation. Goods, experiences and ways of allocating time may all communicate position, but their significance depends on social interpretation. Digital platforms help structure flows of

content, relationships with audiences and conditions of visibility (Poell et al. 2019, 5–6). This raises the question of how circulation relates to recognition and emulation.

For young adults, these relationships raise an educational question: How do representations of other people's lives become standards for judging achievement and relative position? The article approaches this question through conceptual analysis informed by selected empirical studies while recognising that studies based on student samples and creator environments cannot be generalised to all young adults.

Faucher (2014, 40–42) connects online status practices with presumption, quantification and the neoliberal attention economy. Bainotti (2024, 339–356) examines how conspicuous consumption becomes productive in social-media status construction, while research on visibility labour and the visibility game addresses the practices through which content reaches audiences (Abidin 2016, 86; Cotter 2019, 895). The present article brings these perspectives together around a specific interpretive problem: attributing status to a displayed lifestyle does not establish that an observer accepts it as a model for their own life. Its contribution is to distinguish the evidence required to move from display and platform-organised visibility to status recognition and emulation. This distinction also identifies an educational question: How can young adults examine the grounds on which socially prestigious representations become standards for evaluating their own achievements and worth?

The aim is to reconstruct Veblenian status logic and develop a heuristic framework for interpreting platform-mediated status practices, with particular attention to young adults. The guiding question is: How can the relationships between display, visibility, status recognition and emulation be conceptualised, and what does this clarification contribute to understanding the educational significance of status comparison for self-formation? The framework does not presume that platform participation is necessarily status-oriented or that transitions between these processes are automatic.

The article combines conceptual reconstruction, comparison and synthesis. Literature selection was purposive and iterative rather than systematic. Searches were conducted between May and September 2026 through the EBSCO interface available via the Jagiellonian Library and refined as conceptual questions emerged. The literature search was intended to support a theoretically focused conceptual analysis rather than to provide comprehensive coverage of bibliographic databases such as Scopus or Web of Science. Accordingly, the selection of sources was guided by their relevance to the analytical distinctions developed in the article, and no claim of exhaustive database coverage is made. No separate searches were conducted

directly in Scopus or Web of Science. Sources were selected for the final analysis when they contributed directly to reconstructing Veblenian status logic, clarifying one or more of the analytical distinctions developed in the article or examining empirical relationships relevant to those distinctions. Particular attention was given to studies whose concepts or measures made it possible to assess which inferences between display, visibility, social interpretation, status recognition and emulation were supported by the available evidence and which were not. Veblen's 1899 text provided the basis for reconstructing the relational logic of status. Contemporary studies of consumption, status signalling, platform visibility and social comparison were compared to establish which processes they conceptualised or measured and what evidence supported relations between them. This comparison differentiated six categories: resources, display, platform-organised visibility, social interpretation, status recognition and emulation. The synthesis organises these distinctions into a heuristic framework without assuming a necessary causal sequence. The procedure is non-exhaustive; differences in study populations, platform environments and research designs limit the transferability of the proposed framework, which has not yet been empirically validated.

1. From the Leisure Class to Status Logic

The starting point of Veblen's theory is not consumption itself, but the relational character of reputation and social position. The significance of wealth derives not only from its absolute magnitude, but also from comparison with others and from the possibility of converting available resources into socially legible evidence of advantage. Veblenian pecuniary emulation should, therefore, be understood as a mechanism through which individuals position themselves in relation to others rather than simply as a propensity for costly consumption (Veblen 1899, 33).

"Status emulation" denotes orienting aspirations or conduct towards a socially valued standing exemplified by others. It extends Veblen's pecuniary emulation while retaining its concern with comparative standing and socially legible evidence of advantage (Veblen 1899, 33, 36). Potential markers include goods, experiences, competencies and uses of time, but become status markers only when audiences interpret them as evidence of relative standing. Social comparison involves assessing one's position relative to others without implying that another's standing is desired (Festinger 1954, 117–118); relative deprivation concerns perceived disadvantage relative to a comparison standard, typically accompanied by negative affect (Smith et al. 2012, 203); status recognition involves attributing standing to another person. Emulation requires the additional step

of making that standing a reference point for one's own desired position or conduct. Admiration, inspiration or learning constitute status emulation only when this aspirational orientation is present.

A central assumption in Veblen's theory is that mere possession of wealth or power is insufficient to secure esteem: it must be made perceptible to function as evidence of position (Veblen 1899, 36). Thus, for the status practices considered here, the analytical issue is how resources become socially interpretable evidence rather than whether possession alone produces recognition.

Conspicuous leisure should be understood within this logic. It does not simply mean free time or idleness, but the demonstration of freedom from productive labour. Leisure outside an audience's direct gaze requires socially perceptible evidence (Veblen 1899, 44). Veblen also discusses immaterial accomplishments, including acquired knowledge and manners, as such evidence (Veblen 1899, 45). Therefore, experiences and competencies are not wholly new additions to a previously material repertoire. In conspicuous consumption, expenditure similarly matters insofar as it communicates resources and relative position.

This makes it possible to distinguish two levels of analysis. The "leisure class" and "Veblenian status logic" are not interchangeable categories. The former refers to a historically specific configuration of property, labour and reputation. The latter is reconstructed here as a mechanism in which unequally distributed resources become a basis for social comparison insofar as they can be displayed and interpreted as markers of relative position.

This distinction guards against simply identifying influencers or affluent platform users as a new leisure class. Faucher (2014, 40–42) and Bainotti (2024, 339–356) have already demonstrated the relevance of Veblenian questions to digital environments. Our task is to specify the relationships through which potential markers are circulated, interpreted and valued while allowing those relationships to vary between audiences and settings.

2. From Possession to the Displayed Lifestyle

Contemporary studies help identify the different forms that status signalling can take, without establishing a universal historical shift from goods to experiences. Material goods may communicate position through subtle rather than overt signs. Berger and Ward (2010, 555) show that consumers with relevant expertise can use signals that are less legible to a broad public, but recognisable to knowledgeable audiences.

Read alongside Bourdieu (1984, 50–58), these findings direct attention to the competencies required to produce and recognise a marker, as well as to its economic value.

Experiences provide another setting for status signalling. Bronner and de Hoog (2021, 300) examine how participation in cultural events can perform this function when socially visible. Merrell and Ackerman (2026, 2065) find that conspicuously displayed experiences can communicate status as effectively as material goods while conveying different interpersonal information. These findings support analysing goods and experiences together; they do not demonstrate that experiences have displaced objects or gained importance across society as a whole.

Time occupies a particular place because its non-productive use was one of Veblen's central markers of position. Contemporary research, however, complicates the relationship between leisure and status. Bellezza et al. (2017, 118–19) found that in certain contexts, especially in American culture, busyness and a lack of free time can be interpreted as signs of competence, high demand for a person's labour and high status. Subsequent analyses point more broadly to the symbolic value of how time is allocated (Keinan et al. 2019, 58). Rather than relying on a simple opposition between work and leisure, it is, therefore, more useful to ask how different ways of allocating time are socially coded.

Together, these studies suggest that goods, experiences and uses of time can form configurations of distinction whose significance depends on context and audience competencies. In platform settings, the ways in which such elements are recorded and selected become part of their presentation. The relevant question is how a particular display reaches an audience and becomes evidence of standing for that audience.

3. From the Demonstration of Status to Platform Visibility

Platform mediation changes the conditions under which potential status markers circulate and become available for interpretation. Platformisation encompasses the penetration of platform infrastructures, economic processes and governance frameworks into different spheres of life, together with the reorganisation of cultural practices around them (Poell et al. 2019, 5–6). Within this setting, displaying something, reaching an audience and gaining status are analytically distinct processes. Their relationships require attention both to the person presenting a potential marker and to the audiences interpreting it.

For the purposes of this analysis, the term "display" denotes the deliberate presentation of an object, experience, competence, or practice to a potential audience. Such presentation does not necessarily imply an

intention to secure status recognition. “Visibility” refers to the extent and manner in which displayed content reaches audiences and becomes noticeable to them; merely making content technically available does not establish that it has been seen. “Social interpretation” concerns the meanings audiences attribute to what is presented. “Status recognition” is a more specific judgement through which an audience treats that representation as evidence of the person’s relative standing. Status itself is understood here as socially attributed standing within a particular reference group, sustained through judgements of prestige and esteem. This working definition distinguishes status from wealth, numerical popularity, and momentary attention.

The term “platform-organised visibility” identifies the joint contribution of users’ practices, network relations, content formats, metrics and distribution mechanisms to the conditions of being seen. It is used as a synthetic formulation rather than attributed to a single theorist. Cotter’s (2019, 895) account of Instagram influencers’ visibility game and Abidin’s (2016, 86) analysis of visibility labour illustrate how visibility involves situated communicative practices. These studies concern particular creator environments; they support distinguishing publication from visibility, without establishing a uniform mechanism applicable to all platform users. At the conceptual level, this distinction also applies to short-form video recommendation feeds and gamified engagement metrics, which may shape opportunities for visibility without determining how audiences interpret the content or whether they confer status upon its presenter.

Metrics add another layer to these relationships. Christin and Lewis (2021, 1) show how numerical indicators acquire meanings within the practices of YouTube drama creators. Such indicators may inform judgements of influence or position, but their interpretation remains socially situated. A large audience does not necessarily confer esteem, and esteem within a particular group need not depend on a large audience. Therefore, the analytical question is which audience attributes status, on what grounds and within which field of comparison.

The proposed heuristic framework organises six analytically distinct categories—resources, display, platform-organised visibility, social interpretation, status recognition and emulation—summarised in Table 1. It applies to encounters in which displayed resources or practices are interpreted as potential markers of standing; it does not assume that all platform participation is status-oriented. Resources may be owned, temporarily accessible or merely claimed through a representation. Display concerns the presenter’s action, while interpretation and status recognition concern audience responses. Emulation involves whether the attributed standing informs an observer’s desired position. These distinctions do not constitute a necessary

sequence: a representation may attract attention without conferring prestige or confer prestige without becoming an aspirational model. The framework is intended to identify such differences rather than explain every source of status.

Table 1. Six analytical categories of the heuristic framework for platform-mediated status practices
The table summarises the six analytical categories, distinguishing potential status markers, their display and platform-organised visibility, social interpretation, status recognition, and status emulation.

	Analytical category	Definition and analytical focus
1.	Resources	Goods, experiences, competencies, uses of time and other resources or practices that may serve as potential markers of relative standing. They may be owned, temporarily accessed or merely claimed in a representation.
2.	Display	The deliberate presentation of resources or practices to a potential audience. Display does not necessarily imply an intention to acquire status.
3.	Platform-organised visibility	The extent and manner in which presented content reaches audiences, shaped by user practices, network relations, content formats, metrics and distribution mechanisms. Technical availability does not establish actual exposure.
4.	Social interpretation	The meanings attributed by audiences to a representation. These interpretations are socially situated and need not involve judgements of status.
5.	Status recognition	The attribution of relative social standing or prestige to a person by an audience within a particular reference group. Visibility and numerical popularity do not, by themselves, establish status recognition.
6.	Status emulation	The orientation of an observer's aspirations or conduct towards another person's socially valued standing. Recognising status does not necessarily entail accepting it as an aspirational reference point.

Note. The categories represent analytically distinct processes rather than a necessary or automatic causal sequence. Their relationships may be contingent, reciprocal or absent in particular contexts.

The framework can be applied to clarify what an empirical study establishes about platform-mediated status practices. The study by Niesiobędzka and Konaszewski (2022) is particularly useful for illustrating the framework because it examines young adults' platform activities in relation to conspicuous consumption while operationalising forms of activity that can be mapped onto, but not equated with, distinct analytical categories of the proposed framework. Niesiobędzka and Konaszewski (2022, 24–26) measured young adults' self-reported Facebook activities and propensity for conspicuous consumption. Their self-promotion measure included updating profiles and posting photographs of oneself. Within the present framework, these behaviours concern display, but do not establish which resources were represented or whether audiences encountered the content. The measure of self-verified activity concerned checking opinions and information about oneself. It therefore captures attention to feedback without directly establishing how audiences interpret particular representations or whether they attribute status to their authors. Neither measure demonstrates that an observer adopts the displayed person's position or practices as a reference point for emulation.

Self-verified activity was positively associated with conspicuous consumption, whereas the path from self-promotion to conspicuous consumption was not statistically significant in the authors' final model (Niesiobędzka and Konaszewski 2022, 26). The framework clarifies why this result does not settle whether displayed lifestyles become aspirational models: the study relates participants' own platform activities to their own consumption propensity, whereas that question concerns how observers respond to another person's presentation. Connecting the two requires evidence about the content encountered, the standing attributed to its author, and whether that standing is relevant to observers' aspirations. The analytical gain is, therefore, to distinguish an association between measures concerning the same participant from a relationship between a presenter and an audience. This distinction identifies the additional evidence needed to investigate emulation without treating either self-promotion or attention to feedback as its equivalent.

The framework also allows for feedback. Anticipated audience responses and platform visibility may shape later presentations, while pre-existing standing may condition subsequent visibility. These are propositions for analysis, not established effects. Thus, the framework situates the proposed relationships within ongoing social relations rather than assuming a self-contained, one-directional sequence.

4. Young Adults: Status Comparison, Inequality and Media Education

The discussion of young adults draws mainly on studies conducted in university settings and using student samples without equating young adulthood with emerging adulthood. Arnett (2000, 469–480) provides a rationale for examining identity and role exploration under particular social and cultural conditions. Noon et al. (2021, 134–145) identify age-related differences in associations between Instagram social comparisons and identity processes across adolescence and emerging adulthood. These perspectives motivate attention to how criteria of achievement and desirable ways of living are negotiated. The selected studies use different age ranges; student and creator samples cannot represent all young adults, and status comparison is not unique to this period.

The study examined in the preceding section highlights the importance of distinguishing specific forms of platform activity. The following studies extend the discussion to social comparison and relative deprivation, while differing in their populations and research designs.

Xu et al. (2023, abstract), studying 717 Chinese university students, found a positive association between social-network use intensity and conspicuous consumption, with upward social comparison playing a mediating role. Lu et al. (2024, 1210, 1213–1214) provide further evidence concerning self-presentation,

comparison and consumption through a survey and an experiment, although their survey covered participants aged 17–52. Yang et al. (2025, "Conclusion") likewise identify relative deprivation as a mediator and subjective socioeconomic status as a moderator of the relationship between passive social-network use and conspicuous consumption. These findings concern specific relationships under particular research conditions. They do not test the entire heuristic framework proposed here.

These studies matter because evaluation is relational: representations of others' circumstances can become reference points for assessing one's own position. Social comparison and relative deprivation may contribute to status-oriented processes, but neither is equivalent to status emulation as defined here. Comparison involves a relational assessment, whereas deprivation involves a perceived disadvantage; emulation additionally requires that another's valued standing become a reference point for one's own desired position or conduct.

Participation in these processes is socially differentiated. Drawing on 40 interviews with undergraduates at a US university, Cosens (2026, abstract) describes class differences in Instagram visibility work. Higher-income students' presentation practices were more proactive and more consistently aestheticised, whereas those of lower-income students were more reactive and sporadic. Students understood the ease of visibility associated with their resources as facilitating further capital accumulation. These qualitative findings illuminate participants' experiences and interpretations; they should not be presented as a measured causal effect of visibility on subsequent status.

For the present analysis, Veblen and Bourdieu illuminate different aspects of this inequality. Veblen directs attention to comparisons and perceptible evidence of standing; Bourdieu (1984, 50–58) draws attention to socially differentiated tastes and resources. Applied here, this distinction prompts examination of both what is displayed and the competencies through which it is valued. The ability to publish content does not establish equal access to the experiences, time or communicative resources involved in producing a socially valued presentation.

The significance of platform-mediated status practices for self-formation concerns how representations of other people's lives become criteria for evaluating oneself and imagining a desirable future. The framework distinguishes attributing standing to another person from accepting the grounds of that standing as personally binding. A young adult may recognise that a lifestyle attracts prestige within a particular group while questioning whether it represents a worthwhile aspiration. This distinction locates a specifically educational

problem within status comparison: how socially valued representations acquire, retain or lose authority as standards of achievement and personal worth.

Buckingham (2007, 45) understands critical literacy as analysis, evaluation and reflection on the social, economic and institutional contexts of communication. Algorithm-literacy approaches similarly emphasise critical evaluation of how algorithmic systems shape information environments (Frau-Meigs 2024, 513–514). The framework proposed here raises a further pedagogical question: understanding how visibility is organised does not explain why a visible representation should acquire authority as a standard of success. Consequently, critical media education should address both how representations become visible and how their visibility is translated into status judgements and, potentially, standards that come to shape one's own aspirations. Three questions organise this reflection: What does a representation provide evidence of?, Whose evaluations give it status value? and Should those criteria guide one's own aspirations?

Platform-organised visibility also raises the question of why a particular representation becomes available and salient as a basis for comparison. Research on young people's awareness of social-media algorithms shows the relevance of examining algorithmic selection and filtering processes (de Groot et al. 2023, 711). Educational analysis can, therefore, distinguish what a post provides evidence of, what its circulation indicates, what audience judgement is required to treat it as a marker of standing, and what further justification would be needed to accept that standing as a model of success. This makes the transition from platform-organised visibility to status recognition and, potentially, emulation an explicit object of critical reflection.

These are proposed directions for educational inquiry, whose usefulness requires evaluation in specific settings. Their purpose is to support reflective judgement while keeping the unequal conditions of participation in view. Access to valued experiences, time and communicative resources shapes what people can display and how their presentations may be received. As a result, educational work should consider both individual interpretations and the social conditions that make particular standards of success more attainable for some young adults than for others.

Conclusions

The analysis demonstrates the continuing relevance of Veblenian status logic to understanding the relationship between socially perceptible resources and judgements of relative standing. In platform environments, this relationship requires attention to how representations circulate and how particular

audiences interpret them. The framework developed here makes these conditions explicit by distinguishing resources, display, platform-organised visibility, social interpretation, status recognition and emulation. Its contribution is to clarify the evidence needed to connect these processes. The application to a selected empirical study illustrates how findings about self-presentation and attention to feedback can inform the analysis while leaving audience judgements and emulation open to investigation.

For critical media education, the framework identifies a distinction between recognising socially conferred prestige and accepting its criteria as personally binding. Its proposed contribution is to make that transition an object of reasoned examination: learners can ask what inferences a representation supports, whose evaluation establishes its status value, and why that evaluation should influence their aspirations. Considering these questions alongside unequal resources and platform conditions connects individual judgement with the social organisation of visibility. Whether the proposed distinctions improve educational practice remains a question for evaluation.

These conclusions remain bounded by the article's theoretical design. Purposive literature selection and the varied populations as well as settings of the empirical studies constrain the scope of the synthesis. Further research could examine how identifiable audiences interpret particular displays, whether the standing they attribute subsequently informs their aspirations or conduct, and how these relationships vary with resources and platform conditions. Educational applications likewise require evaluation to establish whether the proposed distinctions support reflective judgement in specific settings. The framework offers a conceptual basis for such inquiry; its empirical adequacy and educational usefulness remain to be assessed.

Statements

Funding:
This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board / Ethics Statement:
Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement:
Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement:

No new data were created or analysed in this study.

AI Tools Declaration:

The author declares that no use of AI tools requiring disclosure under the Seminare Policy on AI in Scholarly Publishing occurred in the preparation of this manuscript or in the underlying study.

Conflicts of Interest:

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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