

Keeping up with the joneses consumerism and conspicuous consumption research pape...

[Business](#), [Marketing](#)



\n[[toc title="Table of Contents"](#)]\n

\n \t

1. [INTRODUCTION](#) \n \t
2. [PECUNIARY EMULATION](#) \n \t
3. [CONSPICUOUS LEISURE](#) \n \t
4. [CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION](#) \n \t
5. [DRESS AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE PECUNIARY CULTURE](#) \n \t
6. [THE HIGHER LEARNING AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE PECUNIARY CULTURE](#) \n \t
7. [CONCLUSION](#) \n \t
8. [Works Cited](#) \n

\n[/toc]\n \n

INTRODUCTION

In the film *The Joneses*, David Duchovny and Demi Moore play the heads of a household who move in to a very nice Stepford-y suburb. They bring with them their aesthetically perfect and perfectly pleasant children, as well as their house full of nice Ethan Allen furniture and amenities. They ingratiate themselves firmly with their neighbors and the rest of the community, but they have a secret - they are not a family at all, but a team of marketers sent to impersonate the perfect family. They are the quintessential Joneses - that perfect group of people down the street with the new car, the new house, all the latest gadgets and accessories. Their jobs are to make sure that everyone else in the community is jealous of their new gadgets, leading them to buy it themselves, thus increasing the team's sales.

This is a perfect example of the presence of conspicuous consumption and pecuniary emulation, two concepts which are present in Thorstein Veblen's book *The Theory of Leisure Class*. In today's consumerist culture, having the most things equates to social and cultural success - many people measure their self-worth and happiness by what they have instead of who they are (Cowen, 2009). The Joneses in the eponymous film perpetuate this concept, and it pays off in spades for them, but only to an extent. In this essay, we will examine how Veblen's concepts and critiques of pecuniary emulation and conspicuous consumption are evident in *The Joneses*, and how the film presents its own critique of consumerism. Veblen explains in great detail how the Joneses of the 2009 film, in their marketing strategies and idealized lifestyle, inspire their fellow neighbors into pecuniary emulation through their substantial levels of conspicuous leisure and consumption.

PECUNIARY EMULATION

In Chapter 2 of *The Theory of Leisure Class*, pecuniary emulation is described as that desire to own the most things. At first, we seek to own things as a result of necessity - we primarily seek the things that we require in order to survive and thrive. Once those basic needs are met, however, we look toward amenities, and our major criteria for what we want to get is what the others around us have. When someone has something very expensive, and is clearly enjoying it, it is a motivation to have that same thing in order to relate or compete with the other. It is the very essence of "keeping up with the Joneses."

In *The Joneses*, Steve Jones (Duchovny) begins using this strategy when his original marketing methods of simply being charming and advertising the product he possesses makes him lag behind the others in sales. He attempts to present his lifestyle and that of his family as an ideal unit that is endlessly happy, leading the neighbors, including Larry (Gary Cole), to wish to emulate them. During a golf game, Steve lets slip a (false) story about his and Kate's (Moore) active sex life, clearly intimidating and embarrassing the sexless Larry. This sets in Larry's mind the idea of emulating Steve through the products that he has, and as a consequence potentially getting the sex back into his own marriage.

All of this ties back in with Veblen's assessment of cultural evolution - "the emergence of a leisure class coincides with the beginning of ownership" (Veblen, p. 22). This means that, as humanity moved away from a survival-based, hunter-gatherer culture due to the advent of technology, a ruling class would emerge, known as the "leisure class." This class would not worry overmuch about the things needed to survive; those would be readily available to them. On the other hand, they would instead concern themselves with an easier, less physically demanding lifestyle. Today, the upper crust - CEOs, doctors, lawyers - are an example of this, those who do less physically demanding work than construction workers or farmers, for example, but are paid substantially more (Mortensen, 1995). These people have enough money that they are never living paycheck to paycheck, and in fact have money to burn. As a result, they focus a substantial portion of their time making sure that they are on top.

The people of the suburb featured in *The Joneses* wish to further their own lifestyles, as they all have high-incomes, and therefore the desire to be the best on the block. The presence of the Joneses, with their (unbeknownst to the community) donated display furniture and items, as well as their other symbols of status, make Larry and the rest of the families in the suburb envious of them. Suddenly, there is a new source for pecuniary emulation in the community, and everyone follows suit, just as they were meant to.

Veblen states that “ The motive that lies at the root of ownership is emulation; and the same motive of emulation continues active in the further development of the institution to which it has given rise and in the development of all those features of the social structure which this institution of ownership touches” (pp. 25-26). When people own something they don't need, it is often because they want to emulate their peers that they look up to.

This is definitely the case in *The Joneses*, as they present themselves as an ideal family; all of them have perfect skin, are trim, attractive, and present happy exteriors. They offer themselves up as an ideal family unit, something that everyone else wants to have - the only real option to emulate them is to buy the same kind of stuff. They set trends in consumer behavior throughout the community, which follows suit in the items that the local stores stock.

This showcases a power in the market that consumers have - those who buy the most control what is bought (Holzer, 2006).

CONSPICUOUS LEISURE

Another way in which The Joneses foster pecuniary emulation in their neighbors is through their abundant conspicuous leisure. Veblen defines conspicuous leisure as the avoidance of labor, the upper class having an abundant amount of sedentary free time (p. 35). Labor is “ a mark of inferiority,” a sign that you have to work hard to get the things you have, and therefore not as culturally or socially valuable as those who work less for more things.

However, for those people who do have that social status of substantial disposable income and a lack of scarcity in needed goods, they have a lot of conspicuous leisure. “ The life of leisure is beautiful and ennobling in all civilized men’s eyes,” says Veblen, meaning that it is the ideal to which all strive - not having to work (p. 38). With no work filling up that time, it is then filled with other things, such as the buying of things.

In The Joneses, due to their secret occupation as a marketing team, they are actually performing their jobs by simply living, meaning they do not have to take jobs within the community. This leaves them with more time for Steve to go golfing with Larry and some of the other men in the community, for Kate to visit the salon with her gay hairdresser and her female friends, and for the kids to use school as an opportunity to get socially close with their peers to make sales. This substantial amount of conspicuous leisure time is another way to advertise to their neighbors besides the mere use of the products they own; the fact that they have enough time to do these things is a goal that their peers wish to live up to.

It is important to keep in mind that 'leisure' does not equate to laziness, or doing nothing. Things are still being done with this time, but instead of performing needed tasks that are labor intensive and survival-based, they are taken up with status-related consumerism. These actions are not necessary, but they prove that idleness is something they can afford to do (p. 43). The purchasing of a flatscreen TV or getting a facial is an example of conspicuous leisure; it is a sign of wealth and status, and things that both parents of the Joneses inspire people to do, being guided by their product recommendations.

"Whoever has the most toys, right guys?" This rhetorical statement is said by Steve to his golfing buddies when comparing drivers and demonstrating his own ability for conspicuous leisure. Those who are socially less than him (the labor class) could not afford to spend his days off golfing; since he can, however, this impresses Larry and the others, leading them to desire the same.

Another property of conspicuous leisure is one that is, in some ways, misogynistic; according to Veblen, a man can be considered to be very high status if his wife does not have to work (Veblen, 1899). A trophy wife, for example, is a perfect example of this - she merely exists as a status symbol for the man, as she is allowed to fill up her time with hobbies and the pursuit of her own vanity, personified through expressions of beauty and purchases of expensive clothing.

In *The Joneses*, this concept is very much alive, though somewhat reversed; near the end of the film, Larry misinterprets an attempt by Steve to reveal the fact that he didn't buy any of his stuff as meaning that it is "her" money, making Kate the breadwinner and Steve the trophy husband. In this case, the conspicuous leisure falls mostly to him. At the same time, Kate still has her social time with her salon friends and the other women in the community. They shop and get their hair cut, trading makeup and the like.

CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

Conspicuous consumption is another symptom of conspicuous leisure – it is a result of having this free time on one's hands and no need to waste it on labor and the like. Instead of merely participating in hobbies and activities, things are bought, acquired and consumed, such as housewares, vehicles, gadgets, and food.

Veblen attributed this aspect of consumer culture largely to food; those who had more could eat more, and obesity is often linked to conspicuous consumption (p. 68). However, in the case of the Joneses, this can not be said to be true; while they may certainly eat finer things, they do not consume too much. If anything, their conspicuous consumption is instead replaced by conspicuous leisure that is attributed to exercise, athleticism, "hot yoga" and the like. It is an interesting development in the modern conception of conspicuous consumption that the rich place a greater emphasis on becoming fit, as they can afford to eat better food and work it off with increasingly complex methods of diet and exercise (Stein, 2007). Before this trend towards health and fitness, it was the upper class who

became fat due to the amount of food they could have, while poor laborers often had subsistence diets that precipitated their relative lack of fat (Veblen, p. 68).

This is not to say that conspicuous consumption is limited to food – the buying of goods and services is another instance of this. Spending done to promote or showcase one's own personal wealth, regardless of its nature, qualifies as conspicuous consumption. The Joneses have the people of their community buying golf clubs, GPS systems and touchscreens for their riding lawn mowers, as well as lipstick and beauty products for the women. These people buy these things in order to facilitate pecuniary emulation, because all of the neighbors want to have the spending ability and conspicuous leisure that the Joneses have.

DRESS AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE PECUNIARY CULTURE

The pecuniary culture is expressed in many forms, dress being one of them. One of the types of items that can be purchased for leisure is clothing – while it is a necessity to have clothes on your back, there are different types of clothing, some of which more ornate and less functional than others. Veblen states that “ expenditure on dress has this advantage over most methods, that our apparel is always in evidence and affords an indication of our pecuniary standing to all observers at the first glance” (p. 167). In short, the way we look is an indicator of our social status, and clothing is no exception. People will emulate the dress as well as the spending habits of those they wish to be like, typically the higher class.

In *The Joneses*, this is evidenced by the varying types of clothing that this team of marketers foists upon the unsuspecting members of this community. Jen, the daughter, displays a grey turtleneck sweater with ascot that other girls are soon seen wearing. Late in the film, a purple-dressed Steve and Kate murmur to each other to confirm which other guests, being inspired by their fashion choices, have also worn purple to this party. The Joneses are always seen wearing very high-end, expensive clothes, likely picked out for them by other marketing teams.

In a consumerist culture, a “sense of shabbiness” is evidenced as being indicative of poorness – it is “so keenly felt as it is if we fall short of the standard set by social usage in this matter of dress. People will undergo a very considerable degree of privation in the comforts or necessities of life in order to afford what is considered a decent amount of wasteful consumption.” (p. 168) In other words, people often place a greater importance on looking well dressed than actually being well dressed – the fashion of a piece is not necessarily tied to its value or price. In *The Joneses*, the hipster-chic of the son character and the rest of the high school students emphasizes this slobby stylishness, still evidenced as being conspicuous consumption while still being low-value and not high-class in appearance.

THE HIGHER LEARNING AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE PECUNIARY CULTURE

CONCLUSION

One other aspect of conspicuous consumption (and conspicuous leisure) comes in the form of the pursuit of the arts. As the arts and higher learning

are often thought to be signs of wealth and privilege, they are typically sought after and considered to be indicative of high-class people. This stems from the thought that many people in the labor class do not have the time or leisure to pursue disciplines that are not vocational or directly practical; the arts is one of them. Scholastic pursuits for those without conspicuous leisure often include more pragmatic subjects such as math and science; these can directly lead to higher-paying jobs where they can learn more about the physical world.

Art, on the other hand, is a much more abstract and subjective discipline, where empirical knowledge of the world is not strictly needed. For example, one can survive without learning how to paint, but one cannot survive without learning how to work. Getting the education necessary for the job you can do is the pursuit of the lower-class. Those in the pecuniary culture, however, often have the time to pursue higher learning, art school, film school, and other means of pursuing personal wants. This is due to the fact that they do not have to worry about steady income, as they are already cared for; this lifestyle, or the illusion of it, is the thing which inspires pecuniary emulation.

In *The Joneses*, the family never really spends much time with higher education. The only education the family receives during the events of the film is the high school experience of the teenagers; however, it is implied through their backstory that Steve and Kate have received substantial higher education and advanced to very mysterious yet lucrative jobs. This provides an adequate cover for the neighbors as to how they can afford all the

insanely posh amenities they have. The pecuniary culture that rises around this family is due to their dress, their gadgets, and their appearance of intelligence. They are always well-spoken, well-read, and endlessly polite. As Veblen also refers to higher education as the teaching of manners and politeness, and therefore a knowledge of that is a sign that you are one of the learned class (Veblen, p. 367).

Veblen's concepts of pecuniary emulation, conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure are demonstrated fully in *The Joneses*. In the end, the film is a satire the culture of pecuniary emulation, in that the family's lives are ultimately hollow, despite the fact that they have all of the things their neighbors want. This hollowness is echoed in the actions of those around them, particularly Terry, who takes his own life after racking up substantial debt - to the point of foreclosure - in order to "keep up with the Joneses." This is not an uncommon opinion to hold; a consumerist society is often thought to be damaging to the environment and to a lack of interest in public life (Cahill, 2001). In the wake of rampant consumerism, a "new age of frugality" has arisen as a result of the recent recession, deemphasizing pecuniary actions in favor of saving money (Perez and Esposito, 2010). Despite this, however, America remains a consumerist culture, perhaps remaining the primary consumerist country in the world. Spending will continue, particularly conspicuous consumption, due to a psychological need to maintain an affluent lifestyle in order to indicate status. People need to feel proud of themselves, and whoever has the most toys wins.

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