

6-15-2023

Working Paper No. 77, Deconstructing the Kardashian-Based Economy

Alec van Rossum
Portland State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/econ_workingpapers



Part of the [Economic Theory Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Citation Details

Alec van Rossum, "Deconstructing the Kardashian-Based Economy, Working Paper No. 77", *Portland State University Economics Working Papers*. 77. (15 June 2023) i + 18 pages.

This Working Paper is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Working Papers in Economics by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

Deconstructing the Kardashian-Based Economy

Working Paper No. 77

Authored by: Alec van Rossum

A Contribution to the Working Papers of the
Department of Economics, Portland State University

Submitted for: EC 460 “History of Economic Thought,”
15 June 2023; i + 18 pages

Prepared for Professor John Hall

Abstract: This inquiry seeks to establish that connections can indeed be made between Thorstein Veblen's contributions towards our understanding of social stratification related to patterns of consumption, and the rise in importance of the Kardashian family. We take Veblen's seminal and enduring book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* [1899] and relate some of the ideas therein to what is being coined herein as a “Kardashian-Based Economy.” By drawing connections between selected ideas that Veblen's advanced, and some of the influences displayed by some members of the Kardashian family on consumer culture, we aim to understand the interplays between social status, consumption patterns, and cultural values in contemporary times. It is noted that through their reality TV shows, along with their ubiquitous presence in various venues on social media, the family name has essentially become synonymous with wealth and excesses in material consumption, effectively embodying principles of a definable and contemporary “leisure class” with influences affecting consumer behavior across the globe. It can be argued that the *Kardashian-Based Economy* could be associated with what Veblen defined as a type of “conspicuous consumption” that when emulated leads to the emergence of novel social hierarchies. Understanding these relationships helps to shed light on the dynamics of contemporary consumer culture and the plausible influences of high-profile figures—such as the Kardashians.

Journal of Economic Literature Classification Codes: B3, P46, Z13

Keywords: Conspicuous Consumption, Consumption Patterns, Invidious Emulation, Kardashian-Based Economy, Thorstein Veblen

This inquiry draws key ideas from Thorstein Veblen’s enduring book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Though this book first appeared back in 1899, this inquiry shall argue in support of the enduring relevance of the ideas that he advanced. In particular, this inquiry considers Veblen’s notion of “conspicuous consumption” and seeks to establish its contemporary relevance for understanding the dynamics of a modern-day phenomenon that shall be referred to colloquially as the “Kardashian-Based Economy,” what appears to occupy segments of the U.S. and also the world economy. Through taking into account Veblen's thinking and also considering some of the influences stemming from members of the Kardashian family on consumer culture, this inquiry aims to shed some needed light on the plausible interplays between social status, consumption patterns, and cultural values that could drive a segment of the economy, powerfully influenced by what Veblen more than one hundred and twenty years back began to refer to as “conspicuous consumption.”

The Kardashian family can be known for several things, including their reality TV shows, social media presence, and entrepreneurial endeavors, that have left an indelible mark on U.S. and global consumer culture that now stretches over at least the past two decades. Through their concerted efforts—and marketing savvy—some members of this family have granted us glimpses into their lavish, even opulent lifestyles. Their meticulously cultivated public personas and

endorsements of specific luxury brands have made their family surname more or less synonymous with the pursuit of fame, wealth, and material excess. These tendencies goad us to think backwards and begin to formulate parallels to what Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) had introduced as his notion of a “leisure class.”

It can be contended that the Kardashians epitomize either the byproduct of late-stage capitalism or, conversely, one of the most authentic manifestations of the American entrepreneurial spirit. Let the reader be the judge. With our consideration of what has now been dubbed as the *Kardashian-Based Economy*, and while relying upon Veblen's understanding of conspicuous consumption, this inquiry seeks to elucidate and refine the underlying social ideologies that assign immense importance to celebrity culture and a modern-day materialism within this distinct, contemporary economic framework.

I. Veblen, the Kardashians and Social Stratification

As profiled by the lauded scholar, Mark Blaug, in his *Great Economists Before Keynes* [1986], we can readily learn that Veblen needs to be appreciated as an economist of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He advanced many ideas that have endured the tests of time and making significant contributions to our understanding of consumption patterns and their observable tendencies found within the dynamics of capitalist societies and the social hierarchies that have

emerged. As Blaug (1986, 257) styles him, Veblen registers as a critic, harshly scrutinizing the prevailing culture and the associated wealth and opulence that had emerged during his lifetime. He challenged conventional economic theories and provided new perspectives on the interplay between economic systems, social classes, and cultural values.

In contrast to Veblen's life that Blaug (1986, 258) has detailed, Veblen devoted earnest attention towards scholarship. When he was at the University of Chicago, he was selected to edit the *Journal of Political Economy*, a quarterly that has maintained relatively importance over the last hundred years. The Kardashian family, on the other hand, rose to prominence through their involvement in reality television and their skillful use of social media platforms. As outlined by Lisette Voytko in a profile for *Forbe's 2022: 50 over 50* list, *How Kris Jenner Made the Kardashians Famous, Rich and Insanely Influential* [2022], the family's matriarch—Kris Jenner—appears to have played a pivotal role in orchestrating and facilitation this family's rise to fame and also fortune. The family's initial exposure came with the reality television show titled: "Keeping Up with the Kardashians," which premiered in 2007 and provided an unfiltered look into the lives of some of the family members. Furthermore, as author Ellis Cashmore details in her book *Kardashian Kulture: How Celebrities Changed Life in the 21st Century* (2019), one of the daughters—namely, Kim Kardashian—gained significant attention in the

media (2019, 171), initially due to a leaked personal video. This attention propelled her into the public eye, and she capitalized on it by leveraging what at the time was the emergence of social media platforms. In effect, Kim Kardashian relied upon the novelty of social media to cultivate her personal brand. We could consider some of the other family members, including Kourtney and Khloé Kardashian, as well as sisters Kendall, and Kylie Jenner, with these sisters taking the surname of their mother. Then we need to consider the decorated Olympian, Caitlyn Jenner, who achieved fame when he was known as Bruce Jenner. It seems a bit odd but what occurred is that family members moved quickly—following in Kim’s path—and linked their high visibility for also launching businesses, with some proving successful and that lead to their endorsement of brands.

Arriving on the scene about a century after the appearance of Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* in 1899, the Kardashian family registers as something on the order of a societal phenomenon. In his groundbreaking and seminal book, Veblen delved into plausible relationships between social stratification and consumption patterns. Veblen ([1899] 1926, 1-3) was of the opinion that the American society of his day was divided into different and identifiable social classes, with the upper class constituting the leisure class. According to Veblen ([1899] 1926, 69), the leisure class sought to distinguish itself from the lower classes by engaging in activities that were considered wasteful. In Veblen’s view,

wastefulness included activities such as extravagant displays of wealth, and the prioritization of leisure activities over productive labor. Veblen ([1899] 1926, 36-37) highlighted that this behavior was driven by a desire for social recognition and the need to signal the height of one's social standing. Furthermore, Veblen ([1899] 1926, 25-26) argued that these displays of wealth by the leisure class generated societal responses as the classes of relatively lower status engaged in emulating the leisure class. In short, Veblen advanced the notion that members of the lower socioeconomic strata would respond to the instinct of emulation and striving to imitate the consumption patterns and social displays of those perceived to be above them. Such was undertaken in a conscious or unconscious effort to elevate one's standing. Emulation along these lines appears to have contributed to the perpetuation and reinforcement of social hierarchies based upon a capitalist system that came to stress the importance of consumption.

This inquiry advances the idea that what Veblen coined as his “theory of pecuniary emulation” can be extended to contemporary times to provide a framework for understanding the interplay between social stratification and the emergence of what has been noted as a *Kardashian-Based Economy*. As Lisette Voytko (2022) points out, the Kardashians have creatively and adeptly utilized their celebrity status and social media presence to cultivate a brand associated with wealth, luxury, and material excess. These efforts appear to embody the

characteristics of what Veblen's ([1899] 1926, 2-3) had described as the “leisure class.” Through the strategic use of social media—particularly Instagram—the Kardashians have allowed themselves to present a carefully curated image of their lavish lives, while promoting branded products to millions of followers. As Cashmore (2019, 175-177) contends, selected members of the Kardashian family have successfully tapped into the desire for social recognition through emulating the lifestyle they project, positioning themselves as arbiters of taste and therewith influencing consumer behavior on a grandiose scale.

In this *Kardashian-Based Economy*, the Kardashians serve as influential figures who could actually shape consumer preferences that lead to the promotion of selected products—that could also drive consumer spending patterns. This uncanny ability to monetize their profiles and leverage their social status has allowed for the building of successful businesses that have promoted the accumulation of vast wealth. The *Kardashian-Based Economy*, fueled by the dynamics of pecuniary emulation, exemplifies Veblen's thinking on consumption and highlights the nuanced relationship between social stratification, consumer behavior, and the influential possibilities stemming from high-profile figures in contemporary society.

II. Veblen, the Kardashians and Conspicuous Consumption Patterns

Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption stems from his observations of American society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Veblen ([1899] 1926, 69-70) noticed a distinct pattern in consumer behavior whereby individuals, particularly those forming in the upper classes, engaged in a conspicuous display of wealth through extravagant and wasteful consumption. In the view of Veblen ([1899] 1926, 75), such behavior served as a means of social signaling, allowing individuals to distinguish themselves and acquire social status within a hierarchical society. In addition, Veblen ([1899] 1926, 1, 4-8) argued that the concept of conspicuous consumption had deep historical roots, dating back to feudal societies, whereby the leisure class showcased their wealth through ornate clothing, lavish feasts, and other extravagant displays. What remains interesting and distinct to Veblen is that he could carry this behavior forward, considering the context of industrialized capitalist societies and how conspicuous consumption took on new dimensions related to the emergence of a money-based economy and increased social mobility.

The *Kardashian-Based Economy* and the foundation of pecuniary emulation upon which it is built, has had a significant influence on conspicuous consumption and consumption patterns. As stated above, through strategic branding and media presence, the Kardashians have associated their lifestyle with success, luxury, and

social status. Their carefully curated image, characterized by opulent fashion, extravagant vacations, and lavish homes, symbolizes wealth and prestige.

However, to more accurately understand the Kardashian effects we need to go backwards in time and consider the apparent originator of this genre of behavior.

Namely, we need to consider Kim Kardashian's one time friend and boss and hotel heiress. As Cashmore (2019, 102) posits, Paris Hilton needs to be understood as the originator of the sorts of behaviors that the Kardashians appear to have emulated. Her carefully orchestrated appearances and efforts to emulate her lifestyle generated measurable effects on consumption of luxury goods and services.

The Kardashians' endorsements and other efforts to promote products have profoundly affected consumer behavior with observable outcomes and patterns. As Craig Garthwaite explains in his paper *Demand Spillovers, Combative Advertising, and Celebrity Endorsements* (2014), consumers are often influenced by the association of a celebrity with a product. Garthwaite (2014, 80) relies upon the example of Oprah Winfrey's book club—and her efforts intended to encourage Americans to read more. To advance this end, Oprah would endorse selected book titles on her nationally broadcast television show. Clearly, her support offered products visibility and credibility, ultimately influencing consumption patterns and driving demand. While the Kardashians might be lacking Oprah's more altruistic

and authentic sensibilities, they appear to have leveraged their celebrity statuses, utilizing the a similar type of influence on consumers as Oprah. Exemplifying the intersection of their celebrity influence on capitalism, Cashmore (2019, 119) details, the measurable influences the Kardashian clan has wielded over seemingly innocuous products. For example, we could consider “banana powder,” a product that could find its way into makeup. What Cashmore notes is that after being associated with offering a “Kardashian look, the British retailer distributing banana powder could report a 41 percent increase over a measured time period.

As we can draw from Voytko’s profile of Kris Jenner (2022), and her seemingly making use of what Veblen had identified as the tendency for pecuniary emulation, we can report evidence of an aspirational nature of a celebrity brand. What is more, once a brand has been endorsed and promoted by what we could identify as a contemporary leisure class, what we could also expect is the creation of a self-perpetuating cycle of conspicuous consumption, what has been identified as the driving force in the *Kardashian-Based Economy*. Once sustained solely on the brand deals and endorsements of established retailers and goliaths in the fashion and luxury industries, the *Kardashian-Based Economy* can take on the characteristics of a self-sustained aspect of an economic system. As Voytko (2022) details, the Kardashians have replaced some of their endorsement deals with their own fashion, beauty, and entertainment brands. Thus, the emulation of their own

conspicuous consumption has come to begets additional revenues, furthering their accumulation of wealth, and consequently, allowing for yet larger acts of conspicuous consumption.

While Veblen's writing on conspicuous consumptions provide valuable insights into understanding the dynamics of a *Kardashian-Based Economy*, it seems unlikely that Veblen could have foreseen the extent of influence and reach that the Kardashians and their brand would have in contemporary times. Nevertheless, Veblen's pioneering thinking continues to hold relevance and also support our understanding of the interplaying between this contemporary leisure class and the conspicuous consumption patterns that also prove integral to the success of the *Kardashian-Based Economy*.

III. Veblen, the Kardashians and Cultural Values

Veblen's theories on the leisure class and cultural values appear related in several key aspects. One of Veblen's ([1899] 1926, 38) central ideas includes the concept of conspicuous leisure; which refers to the engagement in non-productive activities as a way for offering displays of wealth and establishing social status. Veblen ([1899] 1926, 36-38) argued that members of the leisure class, characterized by their ability to pursue leisure and avoid productive labor, relied upon conspicuous leisure as a way to distinguish their class for the laboring class. This concept aligns

with the cultural values associated with the leisure class, in which idleness and leisure are seen as markers of social superiority worthy of emulation.

Additionally, Veblen ([1899] 1926, 93) explored the notion of “conspicuous waste,” and this involved a deliberate consumption of goods and services beyond what proved necessary for a person’s basic needs. This form of wasteful expenditure is understood with assistance of the Veblenian framework as yet another means to showcase levels of wealth and, relatedly, social standing.

Apparent in his principles of fashion, Veblen ([1899] 1926, 167, 173) suggests that the fashion choices of the wealthy could be understood as rooted in a deep-seated desire to display the cultural values—especially the principle of novelty—that could be associated with a leisure class. While the principles of expensiveness and ineptitude offer credence to Veblen’s ([1899] 1926, 168, 172) theories of conspicuous consumption and leisure, novelty—such as the belief that clothing is disposable, and should be changed frequently, allowing oneself to distinguish themselves and assert social status—lends credence to Veblen’s understanding of conspicuous waste. The leisure class’s celebration of such conspicuous waste serves as a demonstration of abundance and the ability to disregard economic efficiency, and also serves as a means to differentiate their class from the laboring class that tended towards utilitarian patterns of consumption.

What can be referred to as “invidious emulation” registers as yet another important aspect of Veblen's ([1899] 1926, 16) thinking that brings to life the importance of cultural values. The composite term: invidious emulation refers to the competitive nature of consumption, wherewith individuals seek to emulate and surpass the consumption patterns of those in higher social positions. In the context of the leisure class, this form of emulation is driven by the desire for social recognition and the need to maintain or improve one's social status. This type of emulation associated with the leisure class creates a competitive environment in which individuals strive to outdo one another with their ostentatious displays of wealth and conspicuous consumption.

It has been argued throughout this inquiry that the Kardashian family can be seen to align with Veblen's views on cultural values associated with the leisure class. As Cashmore posits (2019, 172), through their media presence and strategic branding efforts, the Kardashians have created a narrative that positions their lifestyle as the epitome of success, glamour, and social status. Their carefully curated image, showcased on reality TV and social media platforms, promotes the cultural values of conspicuous leisure, conspicuous waste, and invidious emulation. As another example, the Kardashians frequent attendance of high-profile events, by documenting these occasions of conspicuous leisure such as the Met Gala, courtside seats during the NBA playoffs, or private dinners at exclusive

restaurants, selected family members have further cement themselves as members of the leisure class. In combination with their style of dress, choice of transportation—luxury car, chauffeur, yacht, private jet—and endorsement of beauty and aesthetic procedures, further reinforces the cultural values associated with the leisure class, as their followers and fans seek to emulate their choices and align themselves with the perceived status and prestige of the Kardashians.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) advanced concepts underlying what got termed as “cultural capital” that offers additional insights into plausible interplays between Veblen's early thinking and the latter-day emergence of the *Kardashian-Based Economy*. As detailed by author Beverley Skeggs in her book *Class, Self, Culture* [2003], Bourdieu (2003, 17-18) argued that cultural capital—which could encompass knowledge, tastes, and social skills—needs to be understood as playing a crucial role in social stratification. Within the context of the Kardashians, the family's accumulation of cultural capital, such as their fashion knowledge, social connections, and media savvy, contributes to their influence and success in shaping consumer behavior. As Skeggs (2003, 16) further details, Bourdieu's concept of consumption also fits into this inquiry through highlighting how consumption patterns could be shaped by social class and cultural distinctions. What needs to be emphasized herein is that the *Kardashian-Based Economy* thrives on the consumption of products and experiences that are associated with high

social status and cultural capital. Consumers who might engage in this form of consumption could be aiming at acquiring symbolic value and distinction through their choices; thereby aligning with Bourdieu's notion of consumption as a means of reinforcing social hierarchies.

In analyzing Veblen's theories on cultural values of the leisure class and their interplay with the *Kardashian-Based Economy*, this inquiry stresses that the Kardashians could be seen as exemplifying the perpetuation of conspicuous leisure, conspicuous waste, and invidious emulation in the consumer culture of contemporary times. Clearly, this family's influence and branding efforts have created products and markets that revolves around the consumption patterns and cultural values associated with the leisure class; successfully making use of cultural capital in order to perpetuate the emulation of the Kardashian branded lifestyle throughout consumer societies.

Conclusion

This inquiry has sought to establish that ideas regarding the leisure class that Thorstein Veblen identified and elaborated upon more than one hundred and twenty years suggests the strength of their explanatory power and ongoing relevance. By making creative use of ideas that Veblen advanced, and juxtaposing these to some of the influences that members of the Kardashian family appear to

have wielded over consumer culture, we have aimed to shed light on the interplay between social status, consumption patterns, and the cultural values that could drive members of a consumer-oriented society with orientations towards conspicuous consumption. Through our inquiry we have stressed some of the effects that members of the Kardashian family appear to have wielded over consumer culture. What has been noted and emphasized is that carefully cultivated public personas and their endorsement of luxury brands have made their family synonymous with the pursuit of fame, wealth, and material excess. In this pursuit, we have drawn comparisons to the leisure class that Veblen so assiduously, yet sarcastically addressed. Indeed, it was noted that member of the Kardashian family propelled a rise to prominence through creative use of reality television and social media that has allowed for the shape consumer behavior on a global scale. Selected members of this family have seemingly emerged as influential figures that have not only influenced consumer preferences, but have also generated measurable effects over consumer spending patterns; facilitated through endorsements and product promotions. This family's ability to monetize their fame and leverage their social status has supported the rise of successful businesses and has contributed to the accumulation of vast wealth. The *Kardashian-Based Economy*, rooted in the dynamics of pecuniary emulation, has been argued to exemplify Veblen's thinking on consumption, highlighting plausible, intricate relationships between social

stratification, consumer behavior, and possible influences wielded by high-profile figures in contemporary societies. Furthermore, it has been argued that Veblen's concepts of conspicuous leisure, conspicuous waste, and invidious emulation align with the cultural values associated with the Kardashian family. Through their media presence and strategic branding efforts, the Kardashians have created a narrative that positions their lifestyle as the epitome of success, glamour, and social status. Readily, we could speculate that their followers seek to emulate their choices and align themselves with the perceived status and prestige of the Kardashians, reinforcing the cultural values associated with this latter-day leisure class.

In conclusion, the *Kardashian-Based Economy* stands as a contemporary manifestation that can best be understood through reconsidering 's key ideas advanced by Thorstein Veblen. These include distinct notions regarding conspicuous consumption, cultural values, and social stratification. Influence stemming from selected members of the Kardashian family in shaping consumer behavior and their embodiment of the leisure class helps to highlight the enduring relevance of Veblen's ideas in understanding the dynamics of consumer culture in contemporary times. As we navigate this era of conspicuous consumption driven by high-profile figures, the richness of Veblen's thought legacy continues to offer

valuable insights into the interplay between social status, consumer behavior, and selected cultural values that underpin our economic and systems.

‘

Bibliography

Blaug, M., 1986. *Great Economist Before Keynes*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Cashmore, E., 2019. *Kardashian Kulture: How Celebrities Changed Life in the 21st Century*. s.l.: Emerald Publishing Limited.

Garthwaite, C. L., 2014. *Demand Spillovers, Combative Advertising, and Celebrity Endorsements*. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 6(2), pp. 76-104.

Skeggs, B., 2003. *Class, Self, Culture*. s.l.: Taylor & Francis Group.

Veblen, T., 1899. *The Theory of the Leisure Class: an Economic Study of Institutions*. 1926 ed. New York: Vanguard Press.

Voytko, L., 2022. *How Kris Jenner Made the Kardashians Famous, Rich And Insanely Influential*. [Online] Available at:
www.forbes.com/sites/lisettevoytko/2022/10/14/how-kris-jenner-made-the-kardashians-famous-rich-and-insanely-influential