In field-capital theory, people acquire economic, social and cultural capital which they deploy in social arenas known as "fields" to compete for positions of distinction and status. Competitive behaviour in these fields is of interest to marketers. Examining human behaviour through the lens of field and capital theory highlights the importance of the competition motive in explaining consumers' actions.

Fifty years ago, people who wanted to "stand out" used primarily economic means to do so, with only the upper middle classes in the habit of distinguishing themselves through their tastes. To demonstrate superiority over one's fellow man then was a matter of affording a holiday abroad, or an expensive car. Now, mass affluence has muddied the waters of these strict economic hierarchies and there has been an explosion of life-choices: fewer people wanting to "fit in" and more wanting to "stand out."

An interesting development has been the competitive component to this. There is insecurity here – "have I chosen the best, most fulfilling lifestyle?"… "Are others having a better time than me?"… "Keeping up with the Joneses", or even differentiating yourself from them, has become a source of angst.

For marketers, field-capital and how cultural practices express taste and status are very important. We can apply the theory to everyday life. A field may be a group of friends competing on "do-it-yourself" home improvement expertise, or who has the best car. If a marketer gets to know a person's field of choice and understands the rules of behaviour (such as how capital gets deployed) in that field, they will have insight into that person's values and behaviour.

So, what fields do consumers compete within, and how are these fields defined? What capital types do they prioritize, and how are the "rules of the game" organized and communicated? Finally, is there scope to potentially segment consumers according to field-capital dimensions?

To illustrate this, take a moment and think about a close friend of yours, someone of similar age and with similar interests. What kind of things do they value? How do they like to be seen by others? Are they competitive in some areas of their life?

**Field-capital theory, consumerism and socio-economic class**

Viewing the world through the lens of field-capital theory allows us to see the way people compete and compare themselves with others. Many of life's everyday activities are an opportunity to adopt a position relative to others. The most competitive social arenas are often located within ethnic minorities or specific religious groups. Examples of this were apparent from answers given by respondents in a recent study into everyday competitive fields.

These are from a woman of Jewish origin, and a British-Asian respondent – their religious and cultural societies exerted influences and pressures to compete that were very strong:
I know my parents sometimes go round people's house and someone will say "Oh, my son's a doctor" and stuff like that and my parents just turn round and say "My son's this and that" and they are always striving to get one over the other. You can never win, because someone has always done something bigger and better. To an extent, that has filtered down into the second and third generations, but not to the extent that it is in the oldest.

Most of [my Jewish friends] have husbands who are professors or something or other, it is status and money that are extremely important … doctors and professors. Also, an academic professorship is not as valuable as a medical one. I don't know whether that's true in the general public, it's certainly true in our community. Generally it is the rule; the hierarchy in the synagogue are the people with a lot of money. I don't mean just well off, I mean millionaires.

Well educated people of middle class background pressured each other socially to compete, with even those who were naturally reluctant "competers" feeling social pressures to join in:

You know it's quite hard when you talk to friends and colleagues and they have strong ideas that in ten years' time they want to earn quadruple what they do now … and if I say I'm quite happy doing what I'm doing, it just sounds a bit meek.

Competers and comparers

There are subtle but important differences between the highly competitive set – the "competers" – and their counterparts – the "comparers". Competers operate in a shallow, broad sense across a multitude of unspoken and barely acknowledged fields, whereas comparers are more covert in their competition fields.

Their consumption-based fields allow room for "winning" without having to acknowledge the whole unseemly business. The use of "unseemly" here is culturally specific to the UK. Competing for position and status is subject to varying levels of acceptability in different cultures. The USA has always prided itself on its robust, open society in which it is a source of pride that an individual can achieve through hard work. Britain, in contrast, prides itself on achievement being apparently "effortless" and consequently competing openly is seen as rather tasteless and not the done thing.

From comparers to life-balancers

At the other extreme are people who are well educated and socially highly aware and deliberately set their stall out not to compete, but instead to exhibit a set of values that reflect their moral stance on life.

"Life Balancers" maintain a strong self image as liberal and caring people, and may be highly driven and ambitious, but in what they regarded as an uncompetitive way. These people often have an advanced sense of the emotional importance of social capital and the spiritual importance of cultural capital. They can be remarkably clear-headed about planning their lives to ensure they live a "balanced" life. A key driver to this is a high awareness of their own happiness and not to get caught in what they saw as the social pressures of "keeping up with the Joneses".

Traditional mainstreamers

Positioned within the lower middle classes, traditional mainstream respondents prioritized economic capital and, thanks to their accepting views of traditional norms, were likely to choose to compete in unremarkable fields such as home improvement, gardening, or perhaps a bit of gentle competition with parenting issues or holiday
destinations.

We can further categorize people in this category as "savers" or "spenders" – with differing attitudes to money and hedonism, planning long-term or living for the moment. Spenders respond well to the marketing-driven notion of status derived from consumer goods, whereas savers are harder to engage.

Deprived communities set low priority on competing

The most deprived groups in UK society set low priority on competing. When asked, respondents from the lowest social strata regarded the idea of cultural competition as self-indulgent middle class behaviour. The study found that working class respondents did deploy capital within fields to acquire status – but the conditions had to be right, and the "rules" were strict.

Explaining behaviour using habitus theory

Habitus theory can explain behavioural differences in fields.

Habitus is a Latin term referring to a habitual or typical condition. For our purposes, this means a set of fluid predispositions to behave in a certain way according to the individual's background, upbringing, influences, and experiences. However, the habitus will bridge structures (cultural norms, peer pressures, "normal" behaviours) with agency (free will to act as an individual). So, individuals with more developed sense of individualism may be attracted to more nebulous fields which allow more flexibility to compete; those who value social structures may be attracted to well-defined fields.

The desire to reach positions of status remains, and has major implications for commerce and society. Successful competitors will be more likely to outsource domestic services that then free up time for them. Those who value trading off social and economic capital to hit the right balance need products that help manage that elusive balance; so time savers, ways of communicating efficiently, short break cultural opportunities and the like, will be attractive for these people.

Some sectors of society will reject economic capital in favour of cultural capital as they seek to "make a difference" or self-actualize. Are people getting tired of empty materialism and eschewing it in favour of changing the world - maybe so.

We need to be careful about predictions that society is moving to post-consumerism, but nevertheless we predict commercial providers will need to increasingly tune-into subtle, often non-consumerist fields of competition. The middle class elite fields of social competition seem to be shifting towards education, green issues, town politics, sports organization, or exotic (non-commercialized) travel.

Marketing has always thrived on meeting unacknowledged needs, on satisfying wants that relate to people's less attractive motives – greed, for example – as well as socially desirable ones. The need for people to compete and compare is not socially attractive but a major, even dominant theme of some lives. Commerce, the public sector, and non-profits may all be able to better position and target opportunities for people to better compete, whether it is lifestyle lessons, organizing social gatherings, self help, the right clothing, or whatever.

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The authors are Alan Tapp and Stella Warren.