

## Revisiting symbolic consumption – cultural capital and habitus for gestalt self-performance

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While most consumer studies rely on a cross-sectional approach and focus predominantly on leisure and home settings, this paper adopts a processual view to understand *what* and *how* cultural capital for impression management is acquired and changes over the career trajectories of senior executives. Specifically, this study positions the workplace as a ‘site of consumption’ and premises on the assumption that ‘habitus shapes and enables impression management’ (Hallett, 2003). By introducing Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural capital and habitus (1977; 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), and the more contemporary theories of practice (Reckwitz, 2002; Shove & Pantzar, 2005; Shove, Trentmann, & Wilk, 2009; Warde, 2005) to Goffman’s impression management (1959; 1961; 1963), this study advances the current theory of symbolic consumption (Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 1992; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998) in a way that goes beyond conceptualising possessions as signifiers of the self. Rather the analysis gives primacy to understanding how consumption practices reveal cultural competences in mobilising resources that project a gestalt performance of the self.

Walking-with interviews (Bonnett, 2017; Shortell & Brown, 2016) with ten senior executives in Hong Kong were conducted over their to-and-from work routes and to-and-from lunch routes. Branded shops, service outlets and other lifestyle consumption omni-present on the street do not only enhance participants’ recall on their use of socially conspicuous resources for work identity, but also unveil the holistic meanings and complementarity among individual possessions.

Symbolic performance is found not necessarily resting upon the social meanings of discrete materials. More importantly, it is the users’ cultural competence in synchronising resources, tastes and lifestyles. Our analysis shows how senior executives understand and use their symbolic possessions such as fountain pens, cufflinks, branded fashion and make-up in a holistic way to achieve impression management at work.

The findings enrich the dramaturgical analogy of Goffman (1959) in the sense that performance ‘props’ or ‘personal fronts’ should not be understood separately and must be deployed in harmony with each other. To successfully orchestrate different resources and stage the gestalt self-performance, the embodied cultural capital must be employed to play a pivotal role. This finding calls for a reflection on the notion of “we are what we have” (Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 1992; Wattanasuwan, 2005), as classified tastes and lifestyles cannot be brought about without the practices and cultural sense of the users in orchestrating resources in a complementary way. It also advance our understanding that social class and legitimate impressions are manifested not only through the incorporated competence to appreciate (Chen, 2009) or to have aesthetic ‘conversation’ with individual artefacts (Holt, 1997), but also the know-how (Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al., 2009) to synchronize related cultural objects through the ingrained consumption skills of the users. Creating a dialogue between the practice theories of Bourdieu and the impression theory of Goffman has advanced our understanding that it is not ‘*what*’ we consume that signify who we are, but ‘*how*’ we consume by applying cultural discernment to contextualize resources.