

UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL CAPITAL FOR
IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT IN SENIOR
EXECUTIVES

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Abstract

While most consumer studies rely on a cross-sectional approach and focus predominantly on leisure and home settings, this thesis 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 advances the work of Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu by revealing mutability as key to understanding the work habitus as a malleable structuring-structure that is intimately entwined with the ongoing construction of the self.

Using narrative interviewing and walking-with methods, the study finds that cultural resources and practices for impression management evolve over the career of professionals. Junior executives are found to predominantly rely on ‘socially conspicuous sign-vehicles’ while senior executives deploy more ‘subtle embodied capital’ to differentiate their ingrained habitus. While field-specificity continues to prevail in the workplace, this study reveals a new dimension to Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital, which is found to transcend field boundaries in a more ‘superior’ and resilient manner among senior executives. By synchronising competences of ‘self-knowing’ and ‘field-sensing’, they attain ‘*self-field symbiosis*’ in optimal fields that provide a cultural fit for their habitus. Premised on the assumption that ‘habitus shapes and enables impression management’, this study also advances the current theory of symbolic consumption in a way that goes beyond conceptualising possessions as signifiers of the self. Rather the thesis gives primacy to understanding how consumption practices reveal competences in mobilising resources that project a gestalt performance of the self.

While Bourdieu focuses mainly on primary socialisation, this study demonstrates that the workplace, including the to-and-from work routes, is in itself a potent ground for appropriating embodied dispositions. Through various sources of socialisation, executives *acquire* and *consume* diverse forms of cultural capital and overtime come to embody idiosyncratic changes to their workplace habitus in a way that straddle the duality between production and consumption.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

“It’s indeed freer and more casual in academia. Unlike before when I must wear formal suits in accounting firms, I can now wear any favourite long dress. But all in all, the outlook is not that important later. At the end, it’s my work ability that counts... But even now, I would still wear suit-like clothes in the first class to establish a kind of authority to the students. Gradually when they know me more, I would be less formal since what they care is my teaching and personality.”
(Jane, lecturer of accounting and finance, a former senior accountant)

This casual conversation with my colleague, Jane, on her new one-piece summer dress made me ponder a few interesting questions about consumption and self-presentation at work. How do consumption choices and life practices matter in people’s working life? What role do they play in enacting the self in the workplace where people devote time and effort every day? It appears that Jane’s sartorial choices and the role of appearance evolves over the course of her career, which is evident when she became more senior in the accounting field and when she changed her profession to the academia. To create a good first impression, Jane also prioritises her outlook to impose an authoritative influence on the students she meets in her first lesson. This emphasis on the outlook appears to gradually give way to other forms of resources or practices of self-performance, such as work ability. Listening to Jane, I could not help but reflect on my own career path and interestingly find very similar patterns in my impression management practices as I switch from being a marketing profession to being an academic. Despite my practical knowledge and experience in marketing, which helps my teaching, upon changing to the academic field, I developed an urge to pick up a host of new skill sets to adapt to the scholarly culture. These involve obtaining a PhD and equipping myself with the know-how of class management, lecture presentation, coaching and relationship building with students, as well as competence in research and soliciting funding. These skills or capitals, which were not particularly required in the commercial field, are apparently necessary in the scholarly arena. Based on Jane’s and my own career experience, I am wondering, in light of self-presentation and self-construction, how do the role and importance of different consumption resources and daily life practices vary by contexts and change over time in people’s professional trajectories? What competencies or capitals would people pay effort to solicit or acquire to help advance their career?

While the questions I raise above appear intriguing, it is surprising to find that consumer researchers have paid little attention to consumption in the workplace - despite its mundane nature and ubiquity in an individual's daily life (Christiansen, 1999; Laliberte Rudman, 2002; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). The discipline of consumer research has tended to focus on consumption practices within the home and leisure settings (e.g. Davies & Fitchett, 2015; Elliott & Elliott, 2003; Epp & Price, 2008; Jun & Kyle, 2012; Juniu, 2000; Katz-Gerro, 1999; Magaudda, 2011; Price & Epp, 2015), while the mundane workplace is often overlooked as a site of consumption. This, I argue, is attributed to the prevailing assumption that the workplace is predominantly a domain of production (Beer & Burrows, 2010; Max Weber, quoting Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), while consumption is relegated to social spaces outside the workplace (Baudrillard, 2016; Featherstone, 1991). Such an assumption reinforces the dualism between production and consumption (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995), and thereby reasserts the modernistic thinking that has dominated the discipline until recently (Joy & Venkatesh, 1994). With the advent of the service industry and the rise of the digital economy, consumer researchers (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Xie, Bagozzi, & Troye, 2008) are beginning to challenge this dualistic binary that separates production from consumption (Beer & Burrow, 2010). Most notably, the concepts of 'prosumption' (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), co-creation, collaborative consumers (Cova & Cova, 2012; Humphreys & Grayson, 2008), as well as crowdsourcing (Goodman & Paolacci, 2017; Huang, Vir Singh, & Srinivasan, 2014) have blurred the demarcation between the two domains. This leads us to rethink who the consumers/prosumers are in the workplace. It is unlikely that an individual would participate in the workplace solely for the purpose of production without also engaging in the practice of consumption. Similarly, an individual who engages in workplace consumption is simultaneously embroiled in the act of production. This raises the interest of understanding how executives perform both strands of practices and act as both producers and consumers in the workplace, and how these two processes/roles are inter-related. While the above studies focus on how consumers contribute to the value production process, my study explores how executives forge their professional identities through consumption practices in a way that empowers their 'perceived productivity' in the workplace. While organisational studies have long studied the formation of workplace identities (Gini, 1998; Miscenko & Day, 2016; Sealy & Singh, 2010), this body of work tends to assume a pragmatic perspective of identity formation as one that is tied to workplace performances. These include employees' identification with their

organisation (Walsh & Gordon, 2008), expectations on work performance and functions (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). In contrast, my study argues that consumption practices play a recursive role in the formation of work identity. By rethinking the workplace as a site of consumption, this thesis aims to understand the formation of the workplace habitus as a progressive hybrid involving ongoing practices of production and consumption.

Apart from overlooking the workplace as a site of consumption, existing consumer studies also focus mainly on snapshot analyses. They seldom offer a temporal perspective to reveal possible changing patterns in the employment of different cultural and consumption resources or work practices as people continue to pursue their career. At different stages of one's career, I wonder if the resources and practices used for impression management would vary over time. Would their relative importance also change in the course of career advancement? Moreover, most consumer literature tends to concentrate on studying how particular resources or capitals are used for self-construction, such as appearance management (Entwistle, 2017; Ericksen & Sirgy, 1985; Gillath, Bahns, Ge, & Crandall, 2012; Peluchette, Karl, & Rust, 2006; Solomon, 1985), dining consumption (Beckert, Rössel, & Schenk, 2017; Bisogni, Connors, Devine, & Sobal, 2002; Maciel & Wallendorf, 2016; Olsen, Warde, & Martens, 2000; Warde & Martens, 2000), or language performance (Bourdieu, 1991; Grenfell, 2011), etc. Such a domain-specific approach will refrain us from understanding how different types of cultural resources and practices emerge and interact at different stages of life or under different social situations. For instance, would appearance management gain or lose its importance for self-presentation when executives become more senior at work? Would the changing patterns happen in the same way when executives change their jobs or even profession?

To address the above theoretical gaps, this study aims to take a processual as well as an open, inductive approach to advance Goffman's (1959) framework of impression management in the context of workplace. By tracing the career trajectories of ten senior executives who have dynamic work experience, this study explores how they manage their self-presentation not only at certain situations, but at different career milestones. My investigation aims to understand, at different work situations, how executives deploy

diverse ‘sign-vehicles’ to enact a desirable ‘personal front’ so as to solicit favourable impressions from others.

While presenting a desirable self requires an individual’s *competence* in choosing socially appropriate ‘props’ and ‘costumes’, Goffman’s dramaturgical concepts are yet to provide clear insights on how individuals *comprehend* social situations so as to make prudent *choices* from the ‘identity kit’ (1961). I therefore draw on Hallet (2003) and use Bourdieu’s practice approach (1977, 1990) to study Goffman’s social interaction in the workplace. I argue that it is through on-going mundane practices of cultural consumption that equip people with the ‘know-how’ to form desirable impressions. In other words, “habitus shapes impression management” (Hallett, 2003, p. 132) through one’s incorporated dispositions, which constitute an affordance that shapes the way in which workplace identities or impressions can be enacted and played out. In the study, I explore *what* and *how* ‘cultural capital’ are acquired at different stages of individuals’ career and understand how their ‘habitus’ develops and evolves as they gain a sense or ‘feel’ for the game in their respective ‘fields’, be they corporations or industries. Such an observation reveals the convergent metaphor of the ‘actor-as-player’ in Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective and Bourdieu’s analogy of the games. Here, the actor-as-player exercises agency through embodied performativity as they engage in social structures such as the workplace. Following Hallet’s observation then, I am able to gain insights into how self-presentation is legitimately performed through embodied competence and internalisation of situational rules.

Although some consumer studies also adopt Bourdieu’s framework (e.g. Daenekindt & Roose, 2011; Holt, 1998; Maciel & Wallendorf, 2016; Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013; Üstüner & Holt, 2007; Üstüner & Holt, 2010), they have yet to consider the temporal changes involved. I wonder if executives need to acquire diverse sets of cultural competence in face of different structural rules when they shift their fields of work like the case of Jane and me. Would they face cultural shock and how might they accommodate this through consumption practices? These questions relating to processual changes across fields would add nuanced understanding to Bourdieu’s theory. By drawing on Goffman and Bourdieu and applying them to understand professional trajectories, I attempt to advance their theories by focusing on the *process* with which incorporated *dispositions* – the habitus – enables executives to make ‘instinctive’ use of cultural practices for impression management over time.

As Bourdieu purports, the formation of the habitus is a recursive accumulation of cultural capitals. As such, the workplace constitutes a promising site to understand how individuals acquire and appropriate resources and competence to be inventoried for consumption when the need for projecting the desirable self arises. By focusing on the ‘act of consumption’ within the workplace, this thesis therefore has the potential to bridge the duality between consumption and production in the social setting of the workplace (Goodman & DuPuis, 2002; Jamal & Kim, 2005; Labelle, 2004).

In terms of methodology, as my study aims to understand how *contextual meanings* frame the perception of working people concerning their work structures and cultural capital, I have adopted *constructionism* as a philosophical stance to underpin my research approach. As such, I hold the assumption that meanings are socially (re)constructed and therefore should be contextually comprehended. I also appreciate the processes involved in meaning construction and hence, I am attuned to possible changes and evolutions underlying the central contribution of this thesis. Accordingly, I adopted *interpretivism* as the theoretical perspective since I aim to empathetically understand (*verstehen*) the meanings of cultural resources and practices from the perspectives of my participants. To follow the interpretative perspective, I employed dual methodological tools to collect inductive data from ten senior executives in Hong Kong, including the traditional ‘*biographic narrative inquiry*’ and the ‘*walking-with method*’ – in which I conducted en-route interviews with participants while accompanying them to and from work and/or to and from lunch.

Following this *introductory* chapter, I will first review in Chapter 2 the current *literatures* related to the concept and nature of self, the impression management theories of Goffman, theories of practices and social distinction of Bourdieu, as well as contemporary development of practice theories. The gaps of knowledge identified in the literature review then inform the potential contributions of this study, which shape my two research questions. I will then explain the details of my *methodological design* and the underlying research philosophy in Chapter 3. The findings of the two research questions will be presented in Chapter 4 and 5 respectively. Lastly, Chapter 6 will outline the main contributions of the thesis made to current theories and my reflection on the methodological design. The potential limitations of this study will also be discussed to provide suggestions for future studies.

Chapter 2. Literature review

Introduction

As this study is interested in exploring how the self is presented and constructed so as to influence perception and reaction of the audience towards an individual in the workplace, it builds on the sociological framework of Goffman's *impression management* (1959, 1961, 1963) as well as the *practice theories* of Bourdieu. This chapter will start with a review of impression management in social interactions, including the workplace setting. As the self is a central concept of impression management, I will also review the various natures of the *self*, followed by a discussion on consumer studies that relate to resources and practices used for self-enactment. As consumption practices for impression management in different situations and life stages require competence to make discerning choices, this study also draws on the concepts of *field*, *cultural capital* and *habitus* developed by Bourdieu (1984, 1986, 1990), which shed light on how people's dispositions manifest and are manifested to demonstrate distinction in tastes in relation to the perceived social rules. The contemporary development of practice theories will also be reviewed to further understand the relationships among people, skills and resources. Overall, the literature review shows that although various theories have contributed to our understanding on self-presentation in social structures, they lack a processual perspective to explore how impressions are formed, changed and managed over time, especially in the workplace. Based on the identified gaps of knowledge, two research questions for studying impression management over people's professional trajectories are developed and will be discussed in the last section.

Impression Management

In social settings, individuals and organisations attempt to create desirable impressions that influence how other people perceive, evaluate and treat them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Tedeschi, 1981). Scholars consider such a practice of selective disclosure of personal details for manipulating others' responses as *impression management* (Hogan, 2010; Leary, 1996; Schlenker, 1980; Tedeschi, 1981). As Schlenker asserts, impression management is a "goal-directed activity" (2012, p.542), aiming to controlling information regarding a person, a group, an event or an idea so as to shape the impression formed by the audience. Such purposeful management of personal details is also regarded as a type of *self-monitoring*, with which people attempt to affect other people's

perceptions towards themselves when engaging in social interaction (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000; Snyder, 1987). Among the various theories regarding impression management in social life, Goffman's dramaturgical analogy presented in his seminal work "*Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*" (1959) has been regarded as a valuable framework to study social behaviour (Schlenker, 2012), including consumer studies on self-identity (Banim, Guy, & Gillen, 2005; Schembri, Merrilees, & Kristiansen, 2010; Tseëlon, 1995). More recently, it has also ascended in popularity among scholars interested in investigating self-presentation in the virtual world (Hogan, 2010; Jensen Schau & Gilly, 2003; Sekhon, Bickart, Trudel, & Fournier, 2015).

Inspired by Mead's (1934) conceptualisation of social interactionism, Goffman analogises daily social interactions to stage performances. In the presence of others, individuals are akin to actors who manipulate a set of "sign-vehicles" – including their appearance, manners, verbal and non-verbal cues – to cast desirable impressions on their audience (Goffman, 1959, p. 1, 24). By choosing different resources, individuals control the kind of information conveyed to the target audience so as to influence responses made towards them in social interactions. Goffman terms such repertoire of self-presentation resources as the 'personal front' (1959) or 'identity kit' (1961), comprising of "insignia of office or rank; clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like" (1959, p. 24) as well as our names, properties, personal possessions or access to supplies such as cosmetics and clothing (1961, p.18-20). Goffman (1961) explains that such personalised resources work like props, costumes, language and manners on stage, which give off information through which the audience can glean clues from or predict the type of person the performer is. He therefore also refers to these resources and practices as "predictive devices" for impression management (1959, p. 249). This follows that to form desirable impressions or make self-presentation successful in social interaction, individuals must possess the ability to choose and consume the '*right*' set of 'sign-vehicles' so that the audience can make the expected inference and respond accordingly.

Applying Goffman's impression management framework to consumer studies, the resources and practices in the 'identity kit' symbolically represent the extension of the self (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988; Ericksen & Sirgy, 1985) in different social encounters, such as in home and family settings (Davies & Fitchett, 2015; Elliott & Jankel-Elliott, 2003; Epp & Price, 2008; Price & Epp, 2015; Wong & Ahuvia, 1998), in leisure arena

like arts and music (Arnould & Price, 1993; Jun & Kyle, 2012; Juniu, 2000; Katz-Gerro, 1999; Magaudda, 2011) as well as in the workplace (Tian & Belk, 2005). At the same time, people also forgo or conceal inappropriate gestures and behaviour that stigmatise their social identity (Goffman, 1963). They would avoid consumption of goods and practices that mar their desirable self (Karanika & Hogg, 2010), for instance, in the form of negative consumption (Banister & Hogg, 2004).

While impression management is applied in different social fields in consumer study, the working environment is under-researched despite its mundane nature in working people's daily life (Christiansen, 1999; Laliberte-Rudman, 2002; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). However, studies show that people do pay attention and put effort in constructing a desirable occupational self with an aim to influence the perception and responses of the audience or the stakeholders at work, including colleagues, supervisors and business partners (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). A significant body of literature in organisational psychology also found that 'self-monitoring' – "the active construction of public selves to achieve social ends" (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000, p.564) – is closely associated with people's job performance and leadership advancement (Day, Shleicher, Unckless, & Hiller, 2002; Day & Schleicher, 2006; Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass, 2001). A more recent strand of literature that explores the idea of 'personal branding' also observes that individuals in the corporate world can achieve success not only through 'self-improvement' but through a personalised 'self-packaging' management (Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005, p.1; and Shepherd, 2005). Executives and professionals market themselves in the manner of a self-commodified brand in an attempt to create socially desirable images in other people's minds. In other words, these studies show that impression management for professional identity can contribute to career success and advancement. Organisational research also explores how professionals develop 'identity work', which refers to people's involvement in forming, maintaining, reinforcing, or revising their identities (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) especially during transitions at work (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010) such as promotions or change of employers. This body of work, however, is predicated on the dualistic assumption of the workplace as a site of production, and thus, the formation of workplace identities is often explored in relation to discourses of productivity such as work performances and organisational association (e.g. Kreiner et al., 2006; Walsh & Gordon, 2008). As such, these studies overlook how

work-related consumption practices constitute a crucial process in the production of workplace identity and its entanglement with productivity.

At the same time, while consumer research finds that material goods play important roles in self-enactment in domestic and leisure settings (e.g. Davies & Fitchett, 2015; Elliott & Jankel-Elliott, 2003; Jun & Kyle, 2012; Magaudda, 2011; Price & Epp, 2015), we have a limited understanding on how consumption choices and practices play a role in the *process* of impression management in the *workplace*. It is possible that consumption in the forms of goods, materials, space, time, competencies, etc. might contribute to self-performance at work, which in turn influence the social responses and treatment received by the performers. To bridge the duality of production and consumption, my study therefore attempts to address the relatively unexplored terrain of the centrality of consumption in creating, managing and maintaining work identities throughout one's career trajectory.

Since most consumer studies that explore self-presentation take a snap-shot view and offer limited insights into how consumption practices change over time (e.g. Belk, 2013; Dittmar, 1992; Elliott & Davies, 2006; Kressmann et al., 2006; Tian & Belk, 2005; Vartanian, Herman, & Polivy, 2007), the workplace setting offers an exciting temporal platform to study the ongoing management of impression, since one's career follows various developmental routes of progression. This study could therefore contribute to a processual perspective to understand how self-presentation changes and evolves over time when executives pursue their career paths. As such, the investigation can advance Goffman's theory by revealing how working people's repertoire of sign-vehicles – the props, costumes, scripts, gestures, etc. – may change in its combination and relative importance at different stages of their career.

2.2.1. The self in the workplace

As Schlenker (1980) points out, the concept of self is imperative to the theory of impression management since it involves the enactment of a desirable self. To give a better picture on how impression management is situated in the workplace, I will discuss some fundamental natures of the self, including its 'social', 'situational' and 'processual' nature, which relate to the context and structure in which the self is constructed to form impressions. Subsequently, I will take a deeper look into the consumption theories that

inform the nature and kinds of resources and practices that people deploy for impression management.

2.2.1.1 The social self

According to Goffman (1959, 1967, 1971), impression formation is synonymised to a stage performance and it involves ‘others’ to play the role of audience. They evaluate, judge and respond to the social ‘performers’ who use impression management strategies to shape and create the social self (Schlenker, 1980). For sociologists, the self is an other-oriented social entity, where the management of it centres on establishing, maintaining or refining an image of the individual in the minds of others (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980). Goffman also asserts that successful impression management concerns how the performer “guide(s) the conviction of his audience” (1959, p. 10). The projected ‘face’ of an individual is “only on loan to him from society” (Goffman, 1967, p. 10). He observes that an individual is socially constrained as the definition of ‘*him*’ is closely attuned to the one that others accord him (Goffman, 1971, p. 366). This is also in line with a Chinese proverb which claims that “face of an individual is only accorded by others”. As the workplace is a social field played by different stakeholders, it is therefore important for ‘performers’ to identify who the ‘audience’ or ‘others’ are in the working environment and their relative importance in the formation of impression.

Baumeister (1982) asserts that along with the motive of pleasing the audience in self-presentation, a performer constructs his/her ‘public self’ that is in congruent with his/her idealised self-image. Markus and Kitayama (1991) find that the expectations of ‘others’ contribute heavily to the construction of the “public/interdependent self”, which emphasises the “self-in-relation-to-others”. They claim that it is the perceptions of others, including their expectations, responses and standards, towards oneself that serve as important references for organising an individual’s perceptions and actions. Cooley’s (1902) “looking glass self” also suggests how one’s mental feelings and actions are expressive responses to the judgements or imagined appraisals of others. As we care about how others evaluate and connect with us, and we understand other people will gather information or indicative cues about us (Jones & Davis, 1965), to reduce uncertainties in social interaction (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), we consciously and selectively convey information that controls others’ inferences so as to project a desirable public self in social life.

While the above perspectives uphold the significant role of ‘others’ in self-construction, Leary and Kowalski (1990) argue that the classic theories of impression management have ignored the internal judgement about oneself, which could also play a vital role in shaping the ‘self’ in social interaction. Considering these two perspectives, it would be a balanced view to say that instead of just passively taking in the perspectives of ‘others’, individuals might use their judgemental sense to assess and adjust the influence of ‘others’ in the course of shaping the self. The above perspective also tends to view the concept of ‘others’ as a generic whole, ignoring the diverse impacts of that different types of referent others that might exert on impression management. In the workplace where hierarchies of ranks and power exist, different audiences or stakeholders might exert different forms of influence to one’s career well-being. Individuals might therefore take on different levels of others’ influence on them. They may, for example, concern more about the views and responses of particular referent others such as direct supervisors and clients. Such nuanced influence of ‘others’ on the public self and in turn on impression management could relate to one’s competence acquired and embodied from structural exposures in the workplace. I will explore these concepts in greater details in the next section when it comes to the structure-agency theory of Bourdieu.

The salience of the public self also varies in different social contexts. It is found to be more prominent in audience-oriented and other-directed milieus such as collective culture (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987; Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002; Tai & Tam, 1996; Triandis, 2018; Wong & Ahuvia, 1998) or the workplace (Day et al., 2002; De Clercq & Voronov, 2009; Mak, 1999; Mehra et al., 2001; Solomon & Anand, 1985), where others’ expectations often prevail over the individual’s will (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In the workplace, self-monitoring of the ‘public self’ links closely to job performance and achievement (Mehra et al., 2001), in which higher self-monitors show a higher chance of becoming professional leaders, since they make an effort to ‘monitor’ and ‘manage’ their impressions among their audiences (Day et al., 2002). Brewer and Gardner (1996) further categorise the public self into a relational self (interpersonal dyadic relationship) and a collective self (impersonal identification to a group). In the work environment, such as the medical field studied by Hoeve and Roodbol (2014), the collective self often prevails once a person engages in a job, since she belongs to and identifies with certain collective groups. The person shares the collective norms and cultures in the workplace as she denotes a social membership

pertaining to that group, such as a licensed member of a profession, an employee of a company or a team member of a department. Since most consumer studies use nationality bases to study how the collective versus individual self affects consumption (e.g. Souiden, M'Saad, & Pons, 2011; Tse, Wong, & Tan, 1988), my study can give additional insights by exploring how the collective self in the workplace may affect consumption practices for impression management. For instance, would executives forgo their personal preferences to comply with the collective norm when making consumption choices pertaining to grooming, dining or leisure activities in order to project desirable impressions? From a temporal perspective, would such compliance to collective norms persist throughout the career?

Regarding the formation of the public self in a social context, Stone ascertains that self-identity is not defined absolutely but is “a consequences of two processes, apposition and opposition, a bringing together and setting apart” in a network of social relationship (1962, p.94). In other words, the self is “fundamentally social” (Lunt & Livingstone, 1992, p.24), being “the product of a dialectical relationship between interior cultivation and external cannons of acceptance” (Shields, 2003, p.198). The dual processes or forces for enactment of the self is also found in the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1981, p. 255) which suggests that the self is derived from one’s knowledge of one’s membership of a social group, including the values and emotional significance associated with that membership. Stryker and Burke (2000) also assert that identity involves not only the internal process of self-verification but also the relation of social structures to identities. The two processes intertwine and influence each other. The self should therefore be understood on a relational basis, which is derived from a simultaneous practice of connection with and separation from distinct social relations. To understand how the self is constructed in the workplace, it is also necessary to observe how people associate themselves with, and at the same time, set apart from some work relations, structures or even counterparts in order to enact their work self for desirable impression management. In the course of job promotion, for instance, executives may disassociate themselves from or avoid practices and consumption lifestyles that characterise the junior or lower rank colleagues (Mak, 1999). They would purposefully ‘change their wardrobe’ (meaning changing the clothing styles and brands) when they are promoted so as to project a higher-rank image (Mak, 1999). They evade the ‘not-me’ self (Markus & Nurius, 1986) while making an effort to project the new, desirable self

in the upper hierarchy. The formation of self for impression management therefore requires both the process of bridging with and fencing from symbolic sign-vehicles, in which changes in consumption practice could constitute evolving self-presentation in the workplace.

2.2.1.2 The situational self

Social contexts, like different scenes on the stage, change from time to time, which necessitate different facets of the self to respond to situational needs. Leary's (1996) self-presentation theory also purports that individuals tend to tailor the presentation of identity to specific social settings. Stryker & Burke refer this as *identity salience*, in which an identity will be "invoked across a variety of situations, or alternatively across persons in a given situation" (2000, p. 286). The "malleable" (Markus & Kunda, 1986) or "multiple" selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) therefore are like stocks inventoried inside a person, from which a specific facet of the self can be called up to address certain situational performance. In other words, the part of self with higher salience may "spring to life" (Gergen, 1991, p.71) when the relevant situations come into place. In Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor, different stage scenes are analogized to different situations in daily life, which necessitate different portfolios of costumes and props (the personal front) to bring out the specific role or self of the actors. In the workplace, some situations may provoke the needs for a more formal and presentable self than ordinary work days in regular office settings, such as attending job interviews (Von Baeyer, Sherk, & Zanna, 1981), meeting clients, especially new ones, giving a speech, doing a sales presentation, etc. In short, the co-existence of different (and at times conflicting) selves is therefore possible within the same individual (Singelis & Brown, 1995). However, it also necessitates the discerning competence of an individual to pick the right self from his/her 'archive' for contextual needs. The specific self to be selected for presentation requires a person's ability to comprehend the surroundings so as to be made contextually and temporarily accessible. It further entails the competencies or affordances to appropriate the corresponding resources (Bourdieu, 1984) for self-enactment in the identified situation. Such competence relates to the embodied calibre of the 'habitus', which will be further addressed when we discuss the practice theories of Bourdieu in section 2.3.

2.2.1.3 The processual nature of self

The self is also an ever-changing entity. While multiple selves exist, the portfolio of the self is constantly shifting, in which the old, unwanted self is discarded for the pursuit of the new, desirable self. Giddens (1991) asserts that the self is a “reflexive project” in which continuous reconstructive endeavours are made and that “we are not what we are, but what we make of ourselves” (p. 75-76). This ‘making’ implies a continuity in self-development. He emphasises that the self stretches over various cohesive phases of our lifespan and “forms a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future” (p.75). How a person lived through his past was linked to his anticipation of the future. Markus and Wurf (1987, p.306) also regard the self as a “working self-concept”, which views the self “as a continually active, shifting array of accessible self-knowledge”. It is found that people especially strive for new selves and dispose of old ones as part of their rites of passage (Gennep, 1960; Ibarra, Snook, & Guillen Ramo, 2010; Schouten, 1991; Tansley & Tietze, 2013), such as at the time of job promotion (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), graduation (Holmes, 2001), adulthood, marriage, etc. This also happens when there are contextual changes (Ethier & Deaux, 1994). For example, assimilation and acculturation theories focus on the process of identity change among immigrants (Aguilar, 2008; Juniu, 2000) who need to cope with their new social relationship which brings them culture fracture (Davies & Fitchett, 2010; Wallendorf & Reilly, 1983).

In view of the processual perspective and ‘temporal nature’ of the self (Wilson & Ross, 2000), studying impression management which aims to project the ideal self should also go beyond cross-sectional exploration. In fact, consumption studies also discover that at different stages of life, people appropriate different self-identities and corresponding possessions to make sense of their existence (Kleine, Kleine, & Laverie, 2006). Other consumer studies also show that material objects do play significant roles in the ‘project of life’ when people go through life stages (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998b; Kleine & Kleine, 2000; Kleine et al., 2006). As people are advancing in their career or experience changes in their jobs such as shifting professions, corporations, role duties, departments or even changing supervisors or bosses, they are going through different situations or stages over their work life. The evolving and processual self may necessitate different resources, practices or even skills to achieve impression management. The way executives enact the self, including what they do and do not do, may vary at different

stages of their career or in different work situations. However, as most consumer studies on the self take a cross-sectional view and seldom attend to the workplace arena, we lack a temporal perspective to understanding how impression management changes over people's career.

2.2.2 Resources and practices for impression management

To project the desirable self in different social situations, people will deploy impression-relevant behaviour for *self-completion* by engaging themselves in 'identity-related activities' (Gollwitzer, 1986). These activities include self-congruent consumer behaviour, in which people are motivated to pursue specific ways of consumption (Oyserman, 2009) so as to bridge the gap (Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1985; Jacobi & Cash, 1994) between the current self and the 'possible/ideal selves' (Markus & Nurius, 1986). At the same time, they also keep themselves away from committing practices that are associated with the unwanted self (Markus & Nurius, 1986), such as lower rank workers in the workplace. As discussed before, Goffman (1959) purports presenting the desirable self requires an array of self-congruent resources and practices, resembling the props and postures of stage performers. These 'sign-vehicles' or 'predictive devices' include verbal and non-verbal communications ranging widely from immediate appearance such as sex and age, to clothing accessories, possessions, body and speech, as well as office ranks. etc. (Goffman, 1959).

2.2.2.1 Symbolic consumption

Among different 'sign-vehicles' in the identity kit for self-presentation, material possessions are found to be powerful in extending our perceived self (Belk, 1988; Ferraro, Escalas, & Bettman, 2011; Kleine et al., 2006). Consumption becomes symbolic rather than utilitarian when people define themselves as well as others based on the notion of 'we are what we have' (Dittmar, 1992; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998b; Wattanasuwan, 2005). Products carry meanings that signify personal traits and social status (Belk & Pollay, 1985; Bellezza, 2015; Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010). Self-product congruity (Sirgy, 1985; Sirgy, Johar, Samli, & Claiborne, 1991) suggests that people are motivated to consume material products as well as brands that are congruent with their desirable self (Kressmann et al., 2006). At the same time, they retract or hide the self by evading from possessions that contaminate their identities (Banister & Hogg, 2004; Tian & Belk,

2005). Consumer goods thereby act as bridges and fences for creating ideal impressions as they convey desirable information and hide away undesirable ones about the self.

In the workplace, appearance management is particularly found to play an influential role in self-presentation (Entwistle, 2015; Ericksen & Sirgy, 1985; Mak, 1999; Solomon & Anand, 1985; Tian & Belk, 2005). Executive grooming and professional apparels like suits and ties are potent resources for enacting a work identity (Cash, 1985; Kaiser, 1990; Rucker, Anderson, & Kangas, 1999; Solomon & Anand, 1985; Wright, 1996). Studies reveal that dressing up properly can impart ‘power’ to professionals and warrant career success (Molloy, 1975; Molloy, 1977). Some studies particularly investigate the appearance management of female executives who struggle through the masculine world of professions (Bushman, 1988; Howlett, Pine, Cahill, Orakçioğlu, & Fletcher, 2015; Solomon & Anand, 1985; Solomon & Douglas, 1987). More recently, Entwistle (2017) and Tsaousi (2019) also investigated how ‘power dressing’ helps working women construct a strong and convincing career identity. These studies find that working women deploy attiring styles such as trouser suits and blazers to project broader figures while covering up their feminine streamline bodies (Entwistle, 2017; Tseëlon, 1995). Such symbolic fashion imparts females with more masculine characteristics, like competitiveness or even aggressiveness, countering the usual female stereotypical traits of being weak and dependent. Other studies on professional grooming also find that appearance is exceptionally influential in job interviews where first impression is important (Gillath, Bahns, Ge, & Crandall, 2012; Howlett, Pine, Orakçioğlu, & Fletcher, 2013; Von Baeyer et al., 1981). These studies reflect the symbolic power of dressing which could be a crucial mean for impression management in the competitive and cut throat milieu of the workplace (Molloy, 1975; Rucker et al., 1999).

Most of the above studies, however, are mainly dated back to the 1980s or 1990s except a few (Entwistle, 2017; Peluchette, Karl, & Rust, 2006) and we lack updated insights on the roles of appearance management in constructing a professional identity, which could include accessories and gestures apart from fashion and clothing only. Besides, they mainly take a domain-focused approach to study the function of appearance and attires only without comparing their roles with other resources and practices. A more open-ended and trajectory approach would help discover the relative importance of appearance in impression management and how it would change as people undergo different career stages.

Consumer research has tended to focus on how brands facilitate the symbolic presentation of the self (Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001; McCracken, 2005; Schembri et al., 2010), among which luxury brands are found to project high status, economic power and high-brow tastes (Han et al., 2010; Joy, Sherry Jr, Venkatesh, Wang, & Chan, 2012; Phau & Prendergast, 2000; Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). By imparting unique personalities to goods, brands are found to differentiate possessions and thus their owners or users (Elliott, 1994; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998a). Studies also found that occupational hierarchy could also be reflected by levels of brands used, since work ranks offer people the economic power to afford (Mak, 1999). These literatures suggest that brands used for work could become nuanced resources for impression management. Similarly, services offered by different brands, such as dining, grooming (e.g. hairstyling, beauty-salon) or other leisure activities could also illustrate consumption practices for self-construction (Green, 1998; Juniu, 2000; Rosenbaum, 2005; Üstüner & Holt, 2010; Warde, Martens, & Olsen, 1999). More recently, brands are also found to be a means for on-line self-presentation (Sekhon et al., 2015). Despite the nuanced function of brands, its role in enacting identity at *work* and forming impressions in the professional milieu has seldom been researched.

As the workplace involves hierarchies of positions where people look to ascend, literatures on consumption for upward social mobility is also considered in my study. Among various means or vehicles for self-presentation, “*status symbols*” are regarded by Goffman as one of the important “*predictive devices*” for impression management (1959, p. 249). Studies on status consumption or conspicuous consumption also find that people use distinct possessions and luxury leisure activities to demarcate their class and project a social image or status (O’Cass & Frost, 2002; Trigg, 2001; Üstüner & Holt, 2010). The lower social class strives to climb the social ladder by emulating ‘lifestyles’ and ‘legitimate tastes’ of the upper class which signify prestige status (Bourdieu, 1984; Veblen, 1899). In the workplace, junior executives are also found to look up to the brands, attiring styles and consumption choices of their seniors and make an effort to imitate once they are promoted (Mak, 1999). These evidence that symbolic consumption would be particularly conspicuous for establishing the new self in impression management when role transition takes place in one’s career. However, what resources and practices are used for career advancement in the workplace remains unclear, and it is also not

known how they may change when people advance the hierarchy. Would different repertoires of personal front be needed for upward mobility at different career stages?

2.2.2.2 Going beyond *'we are what we have'*

While symbolic consumption has been broadly studied since the 1990s (Halkier, Katz-Gerro, & Martens, 2011), people increasingly define themselves not only by what they own (Dittmar, 1992; Wattanasuwan, 2005), but by what they can access, as well as their competence to appreciate and share (Belk, 2007; Belk & Llamas, 2011; Belk, 2014; Chen, 2009; Rui & Stefanone, 2013; Scaraboto, 2015; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). These recent modes of consumption involve access to and sharing of possessions like household items or cars (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Belk & Llamas, 2011; Belk, 2014), activities, knowledge, experience, opinions, skills & competences (Belk, 2013; Magaudda, 2011; Sekhon, Bickart, Trudel, & Fournier, 2015; Siddiqui & Turley, 2006), which relate to consumptions beyond ownership of possessions. One's self and class status are predicated on the cultural taste (in Bourdieusean terms) to appreciate and practise the consumption (Chaudhuri & Mazumdar, 2006; Chen, 2009). For instance, Beckert et al. (2017) find that it is not the owning of expensive wines that demarcate people. What forms social distinctions is the ability to taste wines, the competence to identify their origins and proper ways to consume them, as well as the knowledge to talk about them in social interaction. Self-presentation is also increasingly omnipresent in the virtual world (Belk, 2010; Belk, 2013; Hogan, 2010; Rui & Stefanone, 2013; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). People manifest their 'personal front' (Goffman, 1959) through the creation and sharing of pictures, posts and responses on social media (such as LinkedIn for professionals). In other words, impression management through consumption is now characterised not only by 'we are what we have', but also 'we are what we access' or 'we are what we share' in both the physical and virtual world. These studies suggest that understanding self-presentation should go beyond symbolic consumption and mere economic ownership. Instead, we should capture how people project their social class by exercising their competence in aesthetic consumption.

As reviewed above, facing the ubiquitous supply of resources for self-presentation, managing impressions at work therefore necessitates cultural skills to choose socially legitimate resources so as to produce practices that influence others' responses. In addition, as discussed in the section on 'situational self', impression management also

calls for prudent comprehension of social ‘structures’ that a person is situated in so that the socially recognisable self could be ‘called up’ and performed. Given Goffman’s focus on micro-sociological interaction between individuals (Verhoeven, 1985), his theory of impression management does not tell us much about how social structure and cultural norms may influence an individual’s competence in distinguishing situations and socially legitimate resources or practices. This study therefore draws on the practice theories of Pierre Bourdieu to provide a macro and ‘relational’ perspective to explore structure-agency relations (Vandenberghe, 1999) in the workplace. Drawing on Hallett’s (2003) observation, I argue that workplace “habitus shapes impression management” (p. 132). In other words, my study positions impression management as an embodied practice that is recursively performed through one’s professional dispositions. From a Bourdieurian perspective, agents (the executives) learn and internalize the field rules and norms of the workplace (*structured structures*). Overtime, the incorporated cultural capital constitutes the *habitus*, which gives rise to legitimate work practices that in turn reproduce the field rules (*structuring structure*). As such, Bourdieu’s concepts shed light on the structural shaping of aspect of Goffman’s agentic perspective. In the making of habitus, executives are likely to be orientated to consume cultural capital and resources that situate them within their established work structure and norms. Through such an assumption, we can seek to understand how individuals learn and engage in broader social structures, as their “habitus enables and constraints impression management” (Hallett, 2003, p. 132). In the course of learning and practising cultural consumption, executives are guided by the incorporated dispositions to create ‘affordances’ that help them make aesthetic distinctions. As such, an individual’s ingrained habitus enables him/her to appropriate and discard ‘props’ and ‘postures’ to produce desirable impressions that can influence others at work. While Goffman’s impression formation sheds light on the conscious and purposeful direction of impression making, the ‘habitus’ provides a practice-based perspective to understand individuals’ embodied ‘*feel for the game*’ that facilitates self-performance at work. Such a performance can only be staged by actors-as-players who inhabit the incorporated know-how or ‘feel for the game’ within their habitus. In this manner, my thesis paves the way towards a practice-based approach to understand the performative roles of executives as ‘players’ in the field of work, who deftly acquire, consume and discard cultural and corporeal resources akin to skilled actors on stage.

Furthermore, since the *accumulation* of cultural capital and *building up* of habitus suggest a processual nature of social existence, applying Bourdieu's concepts to study Goffman's impression management over people's career can unveil the *changes* in an individual's competence to *sense* the rules and *to choose* resources for establishing the on-going reflexive self (Giddens, 1991).

Bourdieu's Theories of Practice and Social Distinction

Bourdieu's theories of practice and social distinction have been widely used in consumer studies (e.g. Arsel & Bean, 2013; Daenekindt & Roose, 2011; Holt, 1998; Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013; Üstüner & Holt, 2007; Üstüner & Holt, 2010), and contribute to our understanding of how people (*as agents*) use their tastes of judgement to adapt to and make advancement in social settings (*the structures*). I will discuss in this section how Bourdieu's triad concepts offer a theoretical framework to understanding how the workplace could be conceptualised as a '*field*' of power struggle, where people appropriate structural rules and accumulate relevant '*cultural capital*' for upward mobility over the course of their career. The constituted '*habitus*' in turn endows working people with the embodied competence to differentiate resources and practices to form socially desirable impressions. Bourdieu's work can therefore complement Goffman's dramaturgical framework to facilitate my analysis of how impression management evolves when people pursue their career.

I will start my discussion by presenting how Bourdieu's practice theories reconcile the long debate on the dialectics between social structures and agents (Bohman, 1999, p. 130), which offer insights into how consumers as agents negotiate structural rules to help them make sense of themselves in social interactions. I will then devote to a more thorough explanation on Bourdieu's triad concepts that underpin my study. This will be followed by a discussion on the recent development of practice theories and other contemporary concepts which try to criticise, review and enrich Bourdieu's notions in the present world of consumption.

2.3.1 Reconciling structure and agency

“...if language is essentially social, deriving its meaning from the complex and content dependent social practices in which it is used, then the analytic project of clarifying meaning must be in terms of those social practices and contexts.”
(Shusterman, 1999, p. 4)

As denoted by Shusterman (1999), behaviour and practices of individuals can only be understood with reference to the social context in which they reside and experience. However, social theorists diverge in their views on the relative influence exerted by the

contextual structures on the agent, and the relative freedom and ability of the agent in negotiating what is prescribed and imposed on him/her by the structure. Hay (1994) explains that the pure structuralist approach (proposed by theorists such as Claude Levi-Strauss) implies that people behave functionally as if they are programmed under the prescribed pattern of the structure. Voluntarism, spontaneism or agency perspective, as well as existentialism on the other hand, attributes much liberty and power of choices to individuals (Hays, 1994). These oppositions engender much debate which calls for the need to find a midway to reconcile these two extreme positions. Among the various propositions, Pierre Bourdieu's 'theory of practice' and 'social distinction' have made important contribution to reconcile these two extremities (Bohman, 1999; Dobbin, 2008). The related publications such as the *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) and the *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (1984), as well as other subsequent writings that further extend his ideas (such as the *Logic of Practice*, 1990) remain as the few most cited publications in sociology (International Sociological Association, 1998). In particular, his concepts of *cultural capital* and *habitus* have provided important theoretical backgrounds for consumer research that studies class consumption in different social settings (e.g. Daenekindt & Roose, 2011; Holt, 1998; Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013; Üstüner & Holt, 2007; Üstüner & Holt, 2010).

Through an empirical ethnographic fieldwork of Kabyle of Algeria, Bourdieu proposes his influential "theory of practice" (Bourdieu, 1977), encompassing mainly the ideas of *field*, *habitus*, *capitals and practices*. These inter-related concepts offer reconciliation to the dichotomic understanding of the relation between the objective 'structure' and subjective 'agency':

"Notion like that of habitus (or a system of dispositions), practical sense, and strategy, are linked to my effort to escape from structural objective dub without relapsing into subjectivism." (Bourdieu, 1990a, p.61)

To reconcile the dualism in social sciences, Bourdieu emphasises the interactive and interdependent relationship between the structure and agency (Chudzikowski & Mayrhofer, 2011). In a particular *field* (the macro objective level of structure), *rules of games* are being internalized and embodied by *agents* (the micro subjective level of individuals) through primary socialisation (mainly family origin) as well as secondary socialisation (other life experiences such as education, exposures, social associations).

Over time, these cumulative '*cultural capital*' constitute the *habitus* - an ensemble of schemata of dispositions – to direct an agent's social practices rather unintentionally and unconsciously in conformity with the rules prescribed by the field (Bourdieu, 1977; Shusterman, 1999; Taylor, 1999). The practices of the *habitus* in turn reproduce the same rules and norms that further reinforce and consolidate the structure (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1990a), suggesting a circuit of mutual influence between the agent and its structure (Bourdieu, 1977). With these integrated ideas, Bourdieu is said to pull the two extremes of pure voluntarism and structuralism to a middle-ground, on which he attempts to overcome a series of oppositions characterising social sciences, such as subjectivism/objectivism, constructivism/structuralism, micro/macro, freedom/determinism (Fuchs, 2003; Jenkins, 2002, p.66).

Bourdieu's contribution to the structure-agency debate is highly recognised. Bohman, for instance, denotes that his reconciliation concepts offer an insightful "explanatory account of practical reason in the social sciences" (1999, p. 130). Taylor (1999) recognises Bourdieu's idea of *habitus* as it acknowledges behaviour as a result of the dual forces of the body and the other. Similarly, Dobbin (2008) asserts that Bourdieu's 'great power' comes from "its integration of a theory of the individual (*habitus*), a theory of social structure (the field), and a theory of power relations (the various forms of capital)" (p. 53). These recognitions point at Bourdieu's capacity to orchestrate the complementary roles in social relations. His works can therefore offer a beneficial framework to study workplace relations, which involve how individuals negotiate their social positions and form desirable impressions in the face of structural rules (of their industries or corporations for instance).

While Bourdieu's ideas reconcile the structure-agency debate, he also receives criticism, in particular, for being deterministic and overplaying the unconscious intuitions and reactive responses of *habitus* (e.g. Atkinson, 2010; Crossley, 2001; Reay, 2004; Sayer, 2005). To make a detailed account of Bourdieu's work, I will now take a deeper look into the three key components of his theory which are referred by Bourdieu as "thinking tools" or "conceptual tools" (Atkinson, 2010). In doing so, these tools can help me understand the social phenomena in the workplace I study. It will also be followed by a discussion on the potential limitations of Bourdieu's theories and the recent development of practice theories.

2.3.2 Bourdieu's 'trilogy': Field, Habitus and Capital

The three central concepts of Bourdieu, namely *field*, *capital* and *habitus*, act like a tripod to build the foundation of explaining the intertwining and interdependent relationship between social structure and agency. They should therefore be defined and understood in a relational manner “within the theoretical system they constitute, not in isolation” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 96).

2.3.2.1 Field

For Bourdieu, the network of social space, in which people carry out their daily life, is divided into different *fields*, which are the structures where agents produce patterned sets of practices and positions according to prescribed rules of games (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1986). The concept of *fields* is similar to what Elias refers to as “figurations” (Elias, 1978) and what Goffman terms as “frames” (Goffman, 1986), which prescribe implicit boundaries within which members’ behaviours are being regulated by social norms and rules. A person can simultaneously belong to different fields or social microcosms, such as career fields, academic fields, arts and music fields, sports fields, religious fields, etc. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). These broad categories can also be subdivided into finer fields or sub-fields, for example, by different professions or industries, academic disciplines, or different types of arts, music and sports, etc. In other words, a person could be governed by different rules of games when he or she is involved in different social fields.

2.3.2.1.1 Rules of games and positions

According to Bourdieu, a field resembles a *battlefield* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) with a ‘*locus of struggles*’ (Bourdieu, 1999). People struggle for ideal positions that are commonly recognised by other members or agents of the field. To advance their positions, members strive to accrue field-relevant capitals which become the basis of social power:

“These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species

of power (capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.)” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.97).

From this saying, what determines the relative position that one can occupy is the assets or ‘capital’ that one possesses, or which derive from a network of resources allocation. Possessing these field-relevant capitals enables a person to gain access to social advantages that are deemed valuable in the field. Bourdieu further emphasises that it is the power relations of the players that “define[s] the structure of the field” (p.99). The relative position that an agent occupies in the field generates self-evident rules that determine his potential cruising radius - the *doxa* - which forms a sense of what is possible and what is not in the given space (Bourdieu, 1977; Walther, 2014). The *doxa* is the agreed ‘belief’ that gives players a ‘*feel for the game*’ that confines their righteous scope of practices. The agreement or recognition of the immanent rules is expressed not by the way of a ‘contract’, but by the mere fact of participation or playing in the game (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 98). The membership or belonging to the field is therefore announced by one’s legitimate practices such as the right use of language and tone, the manner of handling works, the acceptable code of dress, the proper dining habit or simply the right gesture of walking and posturing. What is ‘right’ therefore attributes to the un-contractual rules commonly agreed upon by the daily performance and compliance of practices among members. For instance, in a corporation that allows casual wear on Fridays, it may not be noted in the staff handbook or notice board but is passed along or understood among colleagues through mundane practices which permeate throughout the office. It can only be recognised by observing and sensing how people ‘practice’ the ‘shared’ sartorial styles. By the same token, a colleague who wears formal suits on a regular casual-wear day would look abnormal or deviant. The conformity is thereby a demonstration of *illusio* – a collective recognition of “the value of the stakes of the game and the practical mastery of its rules” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.117). Members or agents of a field believe in the benefits and significance of the game. This idea is very close to what institutional theory conceptualises as *legitimacy* – the collective respect that members extend to a specific field essential for sustaining the well-being of its structure (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Such respect generates socially desirable practices which in turn ‘reproduce’ and consolidate the structural rules.

Giddens also posits the "duality" of social structures which are viewed as "both the medium and the outcome of human social action" (1981, p. 27) in which rules are simultaneously constraining and enabling. Similarly, Hays (1994) asserts that social choices "occur(s) within structurally defined limits among structurally provided alternatives" (p.64). Under such dialectic forces of limitation and provision, an agent thereby becomes a *structured structure* (internalising rules prescribed by the objective structure) whilst *structuring structures* (strategizing practices that reproduce and confirm the structure) (Bourdieu, 1977; Walther, 2014). As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) explain below, the field provides guidelines on how to deploy socially recognised practices or strategies in order to attain and secure desirable positions in the social space:

“...The field as a structure of objective relations between positions of force undergirds and guides the strategies whereby the occupants of these positions seek, individually or collectively, to safeguard or improve their position and to impose the principles of hierarchisation most favourable to their own products.”
(Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 101)

This hierarchical perspective of the social field suggests a relevant background for studying social behaviour related to career advancements, in which upward mobility and position attainment are important goals (Rosenbaum, 1979). A rather under-researched area in consumer study, the workplace environment clearly shares the characteristics of a *field*, be it a profession, an industry or a corporation, which prescribe a set of conduct, code of practices and specialised skills or qualifications for members (agents) to follow and comply. To pursue desirable *positions*, people compete to learn and perform the structural rules (such as certain qualifications, skills, experience, industrial networks, or even implicit gestures and language) that are valued and recognised in their corporations or industries. Those who fail to conform or fail to possess required forms of capital (for instance, failing a professional examination) would resort to less favourable positions.

2.3.2.1.2 Specificity of fields

Bourdieu also stresses the specificity of fields, which implies the need of contextual research if we are to understand the unique operation and relationship within different social arenas. Each field follows its own specific logic with different emphases and values. An artistic field, for instance, constitutes itself by opposing the law of material profit which dominates the economic field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 98). In his

study of the ‘scientific field’, Bourdieu (1999) stresses it is “the locus of a competitive struggle, in which the specific issue at stake is the monopoly of scientific authority... or... the scientific competence, in the sense of a particular agent’s social recognised capacity to speak and act legitimately in scientific matters” (1999, p. 19). In other words, each field possesses its own specific set of rules and requirements which provide objective conditions of existence.

Field-specificity also distinguishes the relative values of different capitals with which people master to gain favourable positions. A highly regarded capital or ability in one field may not gain equal significance in another. For instance, a finance director’s professional knowledge and competence in the commercial field would yield little relevance when she engages in the field of music. Despite her high position in the finance field, her accumulated cultural capital in musical knowledge and skills may only be on a junior level. Similarly, the professional standards and compliance valued in the field of accounting may be stifling to the innovative capital highly treasured in the field of advertising and marketing. This field-specific notion therefore requires contextual research. As different fields have their own structural rules and culture, in order to understand how executives manage their impressions at work, we need to comprehend with reference to the structures and rules of different fields, as well as how these rules are formulated, understood and complied. Even for the same professional field such as certain arts or sports profession, when it comes to different sub-fields of cultural or social settings, e.g. European vs Asian, or in different teams or associations, the rules may also differ.

In light of the above understanding, Bourdieu’s ‘battlefield’ analogy could provide a useful ground for studying fields that stress competence and ability, and are where people struggle to survive and compete against others for desirable positions, such as the career field or professional field (Andresen & Walther, 2013; Chudzikowski & Mayrhofer, 2011; Walther, 2014). Although the workplace appears as more like a battlefield than other social contexts such as the home or leisure settings, it receives much less attention in consumer studies. In addition, while some consumer research utilises Bourdieu’s concepts to investigate how people occupying different classes and positions consume and behave (e.g. Arsel & Bean, 2013; Heikkilä & Rahkonen, 2011; Holt, 1997; Katz-Gerro, 1999; Üstüner & Holt, 2007; Üstüner & Holt, 2010), their research took place in a specific domain or field only. They offer little cross-field perspective to investigate

how *specificity of fields* can influence consumption behaviour. As career trajectories usually ‘involve’ changes of fields when people experience different professions, industries, employing companies, departments, etc., studying workplace consumption over time rather than taking a cross-sectional view could offer us new insights on how *field specificity* affects people’s consumption of objects and practices for impression management.

2.3.2.1.3 The boundaries of fields

As field structure is formed by networks of relations and reinforced by the *illusio*, the boundary of a field cannot be explicitly realised nor predetermined by imposition (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Rather, the boundary is ‘erected’ through the concerted compliance and mundane practices of agents in the field. The boundaries or limits of the field therefore “are situated at the point where the effects of the field cease” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.100). They are not commonly identified through written or contractual guides but can only be perceived through a ‘feel for the game’ incorporated like athletes’ skills over years (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.128). It is through prolonged practices and exposure, as well as adjustments, that an agent can gain the sense of what is implicitly legitimate and how far the boundary is stretched. This concept will be further discussed in the later section on *habitus*. Apart from the study of Arsel and Bean (2013) who investigate how consumers seek for subtle distinction within a broader boundary in home decors, the concept of field boundaries has not received much attention, not to mention consumption studies in the workplace arena. It is therefore interesting to explore how executives *feel* and *sense* implicit boundaries in their workplace and how they negotiate their self-expression. If boundaries are implicit, would more working experience help people gain the sense on what is and what is not ‘legitimate’ in their immediate work arena? In other words, would senior professionals be in a better position to sense these boundaries, and to what extent would this engender their capacity to avoid deviation while reaching higher positions in their workplace or field? In addition, it would extend our knowledge to explore whether multiple and layers of boundaries exist in the working field, such as among working teams or departments within the same corporations, or among corporations within the same professional industries.

2.3.2.2 Capital

In order to attain desirable positions in a particular field, an agent needs to acquire and master capitals which are relevant and deemed valuable to the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Over time, capitals should be obtained and accumulated from different sources to build up an individual's capital portfolio. In a professional field for instance, to survive or excel, an executive needs to be equipped with different forms of qualifications, capabilities or calibre. Bourdieu denotes that the meaning and value of a *capital* could only be understood in connection with the concept of *field*. It relates closely with and confers power over the structure, distribution of resources and regularities of the corresponding *fields*. Capital of different kinds therefore become assets for upward movement and position achievement in a field, as Bourdieu and Wacquant assert:

“A capital does not exist and function except in relation to a field. It confers a power over the field, over the materialised or embodied instruments of production or reproduction whose distribution constitutes the very structure of the field, and over the regularities and the rules which define the ordinary functioning of the field” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 101).

In the following, I will first discuss the various forms of capital identified by Bourdieu as well as their inter-relationship. It will be followed by a more detailed discussion on *cultural capital*, which is believed by Bourdieu as the main base of social distinction and class hierarchy. I will show how the concept of *capital* and in particular, *cultural capital*, could inform my study of impression management in the workplace.

In *The Forms of Capital* (1986), Bourdieu identifies three basic types of capitals that people own and strive for in social fields: economic, social and cultural capital. He particularly stresses the accumulation and conversion mechanisms among them.

Economic capital refers to revenues or fortunes of a person in the form of all-purpose convertible money and can be institutionalised in property rights (Bourdieu, 1986). It is more easily transformed into other capitals. For instance, we can use money (economic capital) to buy a ticket for an opera or for a painting exhibition. Through such consumption experiences, we gain cultural capital. We might also subscribe to a club membership to gain access to the shared facilities of the club or join its activities,

through which we may network with people of certain lifestyles to enhance our social capital.

Social capital refers to the entirety of an individual's social relations and acquaintance of others. It is one's legitimised access to immaterial and material resources, knowledge or information that resides in relationship with family, groups and class membership (Bourdieu, 1986; Chudzikowski & Mayrhofer, 2011; Walther, 2014). Burt (1992) claims that social capital provides beneficial resources and opportunities for capitalising a person's other resources such as financial (cash, bank reserves, etc.) and human capital (health, abilities, personality, etc.). His study also reveals that social networking helps bring about a series of work-related opportunities ranging from career advancement, chances to take part in promising projects and access to significant decisions (Burt, 1992, p.8).

According to Bourdieu, economic capital does not necessarily differentiate people; rather, *cultural capital* – which is a durable system of dispositions that characterises one's entirety of intellectual qualifications or human capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Navarro, 2006) – constitutes a key constituent for distinction. These qualifications are manifested in “the symbols, ideas, tastes, and preferences that can be strategically used as resources in social action” (Scott & Marshall, 2009).

Cultural capital exists in different forms (Bourdieu, 1986). The first form, which is also mostly discussed by Bourdieu and underpins his notion of *habitus*, is in the *incorporated* or *embodied* state, which refers to the long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body that reflect a person's intellectual qualification, including one's competence, experience and skills. Translating to the workplace, these resources can be realised in an executive's work experience, the skill-set in his profession, the sense of executive grooming and etiquette in business dining, the efficiency of project completion, and even his interaction skills with working parties. The formation of these skill-sets entails an assimilation process of embodiment over time, and is not readily tangible but can only be perceived through interpersonal communication. The second form of cultural capital is the *objectified* state which resides in more tangible cultural materials such as pictures, books, dictionaries, paintings, equipment, instruments, monuments, etc. In the workplace study of Tian and Belk (2005), these elements are found to be the extended form of the work self when people use and display them in their work stations. However, when

investigating art consumption, Chen (2009) notes that the self is not solely symbolised by the mere display or ownership of any intellectual artefacts or artworks, but by the competence of accessing, appreciating and having ‘conversation’ with them (Holt, 1997), hence the *incorporated* or *embodied* state discussed above. The last form of cultural capital is the *institutionalised* state, which takes the form of educational and vocational qualifications awarded by institutions or organisations. These qualifications, usually represented by certificates, titles and degrees, are proofs of competence in respective fields (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu, 2005). Obviously, in many professional areas such as medical, accounting and finance, architecture, engineering, etc., the institutionalised capital is a crucial pre-requisite for career development.

With the three basic capitals combined, according to Bourdieu, what an agent possesses is the fourth type of capital – symbolic capital – the socially legitimate resources with which individuals manipulate power to assume their positions in the field (Bourdieu, 1986). It reflects the capital’s values that the external and internal recognition conferred by the structure and its actors (Doherty & Dickmann, 2009). It is only when a capital is ‘acknowledged’ in the respective field does it become symbolic (Chudzikowski & Mayrhofer, 2011). For instance, though an MBA certificate (an institutionalised cultural capital) is valuable in a management career field, it has little value when it comes to the professional field of performing art. Therefore, symbolic capital carries meanings that are prescribed and conditioned by the field rules and structural norms.

2.3.2.2.1 The inter-relationship between capitals

Although different forms of capital have their own discrete nature, they are inter-related in the course of producing social behaviour and positions that demarcate people’s social class. Bourdieu stresses the *convertibility* among the various forms of capital. He particularly quotes the relationship between the economic and cultural capital, which he believes is the root of perpetual disproportional distribution of resources that constitutes social hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1984). His social observation reflects that middle class parents can use their economic capital to ‘buy’ their children more cultural capital through, for example, enrolment in linguistic courses, art classes, remedial tutorials and prestige schools, as well as attending museums, concerts and art-shows, etc. These cultural exposures enhance their chances of success in higher education, which in turn

leads to better job advancement and higher income. The cycle then repeats but hardly exists in lower-class families, resulting in class divisions. Bourdieu purports that cultural capital:

“... made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success, i.e., the specific profits which children from the different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions.” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243)

Research such as those documented by Lareau (2011) and Lawler (2000) also agree with Bourdieu’s emphasis on the disproportionate weight of childhood experiences in the formation of habitus, which is structured by the capital possession as well as the socialisation practices of the parents (Atkinson, 2010). Bourdieu (1984) therefore stresses primary socialisation or social origin as a main source of acquiring cultural capitals which depends heavily on the “total, early, imperceptible learning, performed within the family from the earliest days of life” (p.66), and fundamentally leads to “social and economic capital” (p.177).

While the above may find its empirical grounds in advanced economies like where Bourdieu’s theories originate, it may not be equally observed in markets where economic opportunities and education systems are under substantial growth. Governments of emerging markets like BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and the four small dragons in Asian (Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore) urge to push the literacy rate for social development by introducing educational and welfare reforms that feature free education and subsidised welfare (Behrman, Gaviria, Székely, Birdsall, & Galiani, 2001). These policies open up opportunities for the talented despite their family background, allowing higher rates of inter-generational mobility (Wong, 2017). Such societal development necessitates more cultural reviews on Bourdieu’s assumption regarding the discrete relationship between the forms of capitals especially when he sees social origin as a potent determinant for social classification. Apart from inter-capital conversion, other sources of socialisation and influence may also play vital roles for capital acquisition, such as learning in school and the workplace or other social arenas. A research by Pret et al. (2016) also shows that entrepreneurs’ success can be attributed to the interactive conversion among different capitals, which are not necessarily a one-

way relationship. For instance, they find that social networks and institutionalised recognitions may generate financial support for businesses. Therefore, more research in specific *fields* – different cultures, economies or professions – would help provide a better picture on the versatile nature and conversion dynamics among different capitals.

2.3.2.2.2 *Cultural capital, tastes and class distinction*

Among the few basic types of capital, cultural capital is mostly referred to and emphasised by Bourdieu as the source of social distinction. In his influential writing *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979), Bourdieu asserts that people are not primarily classified by their economic capitals, but their cultural capitals. He states that “the differences in cultural capital” rather than other forms of capital “mark the differences between the classes” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 69). The cultural capital furnishes people with *aesthetic* dispositions that build their *habitus* with two related capacities – “the *capacity* to produce *classifiable* practices and works, and the *capacity* to *differentiate* and *appreciate* these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world, i.e. the space of lifestyles, is constituted” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170, emphasis added). In other words, cultural capital is an asset that equips people with the ability to judge tastes and lifestyles which determines one’s class, status or position in the field rather than the mere affordability (economic capacity).

To some extent, Bourdieu’s notion of class distinction resonates with Simmel and Veblen’s conceptualisation of the leisure class (the *nouveau riche*), which reveals that class hierarchy is reflected by conspicuous consumption of opulent material pleurables (Levy, 1959; Simmel, 1971; Veblen, 1899). Sumptuous and lavish possessions, including those of the wives and children, were manipulated to emulate the nobility. Due to the rising popularity and possibilities of consumption, Bourdieu claims that class distinction is not necessarily marked by luxury consumption, but is “most marked in the ordinary choices of everyday existence, such as furniture, clothing or cooking, which are particularly revealing of deep-rooted and long-standing dispositions” (Bourdieu, 1984, p.77). It is the way people use language, express lifestyle, and their choice of practices, such as consumption of food, fashion, properties, sports, leisure activities and places, etc. that demarcate them from the ‘*elite dominant*’ to the ‘*mass dominated*’ class (Walther, 2014). Bourdieu particularly demonstrates dining habits as a marker of social distinction.

He explicates that meals of lower-class children are characterised by “taste of necessity” and “convivial indulgence”, contrasting with the “taste of luxury” and “original and exotic” of that of the elite dominant class (Bourdieu, 1984, p.79, 177, 179). Instead of the mere affordability (the economic capital), it is the cultural capital reflected in the etiquette manner and the choice of dining that set people into different classes.

Based on the premises of Bourdieu (1984) and Bonnewitz (2005), Walther (2014) visually illustrated the class-based practices of lifestyles and tastes in relation to people’s occupational positions. The following matrix (Figure 1) demonstrates the integrated relationship between the volume (vertical axis) and combination of economic and cultural capitals (horizontal axis). Based on these intersections, different people are identified in respective positions (shown with titles in capital letters, such as engineers and unskilled workers) as well as their associated consumption practices (choice of beverages and activities such as soda, sailing, ordinary red wine). The elite dominants, such as high-level managers, seldom consume drinks commonly associated with the dominated class (the majority working class), who tend to drink ordinary red wine or beer. People, especially those in the upper classes, will practice anti-consumption (Hogg, Banister, & Stephenson, 2009) to avoid consumables and practices that may contaminate or be deemed incongruent with their class image. Apart from the ‘volume’ of capital (high vs low), the ‘structure’ of capital also determines people’s position and their corresponding lifestyle preferences (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 99), as illustrated in Figure 1 by the diverse consumption pattern and sports habits of university professors (high in cultural capital) and high level managers (high in economic capital).

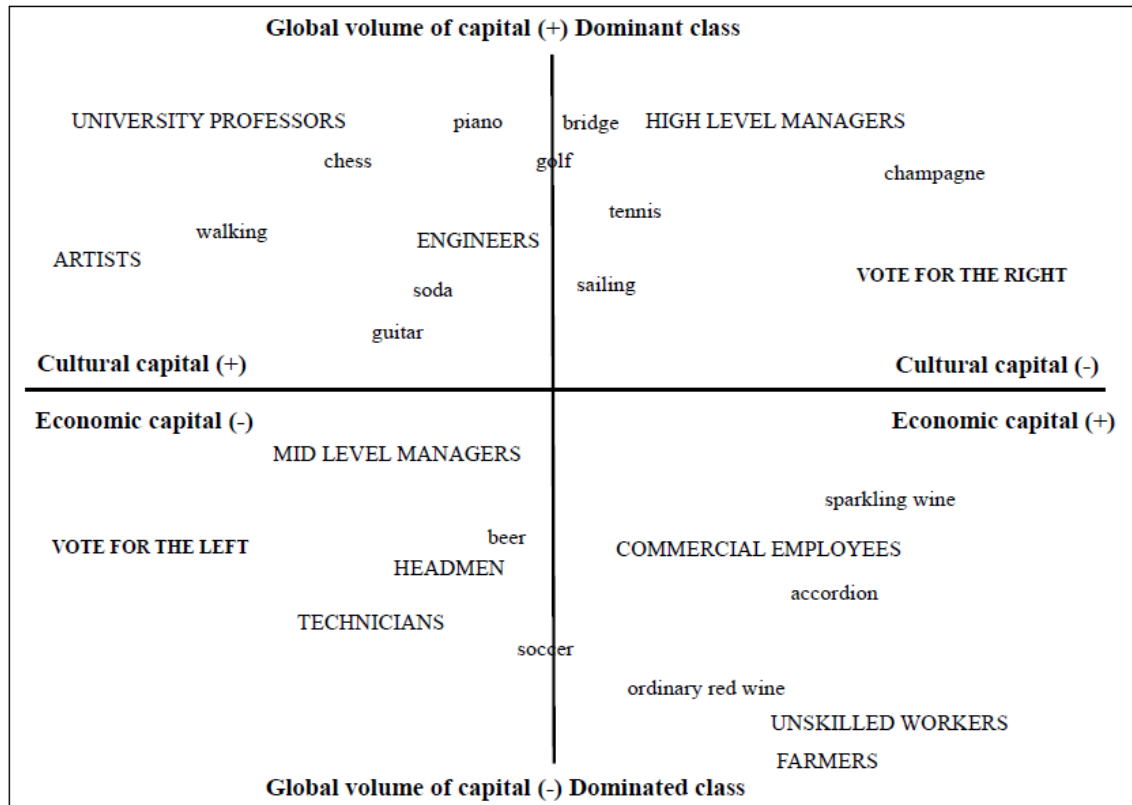


Figure 1. Bourdieu's field structure (on the basis of Bourdieu, 1984; Bonnewitz 2005).
 Source: Walther, 2014, p.12.

In summary, the various types of capitals impart an agent with resources and practices that determine their relative positions in the respective *fields*. However, the positions attained do not only attribute to whether an agent possesses a particular capital or not, but also depend on a few natures or dimensions of capital (Atkinson, 2010; Bourdieu, 1984, p. 114; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 98-99). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) claim that apart from the overall volume of the capital (or cards), it also depends on the relative hierarchy of the different species of cards (the economic, social, cultural capital and the sub-divisions of cultural capital) in different fields. As discussed before, structural rules are ‘field-specific’ and so does the corresponding capital for upward movement and positioning. The relative weights or values of the capital therefore vary across fields. Following the same logic, the structure or the composition of the capital also dictates field positions despite the same volume of capital. In other words, the ‘portfolio’ and ‘relevance’ of capital that an agent possesses become more crucial than the mere quantitative volume. It is one’s competence to judge and to perform field-specific practices (cultural capital) rather than the ability to afford (economic capital) that

distinguishes people (Bourdieu, 1986; Navarro, 2006). While this could be the case in mundane social interaction and material consumption, it appears particularly applicable to the working field, as one's economic well-being comes essentially from his occupational income, which in fact attributes very much to one's professional competencies, occupational qualifications, as well as working experience and exposures. These are the embodied and institutionalised cultural capital for field survival and social existence. As mentioned earlier, Bourdieu also asserts that class distinction is mostly expressed through ordinary daily life and practices, studying how cultural capital is expressed through consumption and therefore should not be confined only to leisure or home-based context like most existing literatures do.

2.3.2.2.3 Cultural capital as resources and practices for impression management

Like props, scripts and gestures proposed by Goffman (1959) for self-performance in daily life, the different forms of capital identified by Bourdieu represent various resources and practices for impression management. Different compositions of capitals together form the 'symbolic project of self' (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998b) in different social spaces and life stages. Various forms of capital, in different combination and magnitude, symbolically represent a person to whom the audience makes inferences and forms impressions about him or her. While most research on leisure and home consumption focuses primarily on *objectified* capital as well as *incorporated or embodied* cultural capital (e.g. Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013; Üstüner & Holt, 2007; Üstüner & Holt, 2010), studies for workplace consumption should take a more open perspective to capture other forms of capitals which are at stake, especially when professional qualifications – a form of institutionalised capital – could play an important role in job eligibility and career advancement. To study how impression management is manipulated for upward mobility in the workplace, Bourdieu's notion on different forms, structure and relative importance of capital, especially cultural capital, can be a constructive framework to apply. It would add to our understanding of the current consumer studies which mainly attend to aesthetic practices in home and leisure context, including dining, drinking and entertainment (e.g. Beckert et al., 2017; e.g. Daenekindt & Roose, 2011; Maciel & Wallendorf, 2016; Üstüner & Holt, 2007; Üstüner & Holt, 2010). Comparatively, very few studies attempt to explore what cultural capital related resources and practices are at stake for establishing work identities.

As discussed earlier, cultural capital is “field-specific” with its importance being accorded by distinct structural rules, so it could also be insightful to find out whether changes of working *fields*, such as changing jobs, professions, work departments, etc., may imply the need of an alternate sets of cultural capital. For instance, while originality and innovations are highly appreciated in an arts and design career, such *cultural capital* is very much denounced in professions which demand consistency and standardisation, such as accountancy and logistics. In addition, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) stress that the strength of capital should not be a function of a game just “at the moment under consideration” (p.98) but should take into consideration the trajectories of capital evolution. This calls for the need to investigate how the ‘portfolio’ and relative importance of different types of capitals may change over people’s career, and particularly during their rites of passage. This idea will be further explored in the next section when I discuss the continual and processual nature of ‘habitus’ – the third pillar of Bourdieu’s trilogy.

2.3.2.3 Habitus

As reviewed in the last section, most consumer research attributes consumption decision and practices to its symbolic function (e.g. Belk, 1988; Bellezza, 2015; Dittmar, 1992; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998b; Ferraro et al., 2011; Han et al., 2010; Kleine et al., 2006). Though there is a call to go beyond the notion of ‘*we are what we have*’ and to consider *we are what we access, appreciate or share* (both offline and online), consumer research continues to focus on the ‘objects’ (the ‘what’) being consumed and seldom attends to the judgement, competence, skills and experience that consumers accumulate, adjust and practice over time to make sense of their everyday life. To fill this gap, the notion of ‘habitus’ – the embodied dispositions of manifesting judgement of taste – could offer a useful perspective.

As discussed in the early part of this chapter, the power of Bourdieu’s practice theory lies in his provision of a midway explanation on the structure-agency relationship. This reconciliation is especially evident in his idea of the *habitus*, which was inspired by Marcel Mauss's notion of body techniques and hexis. It is regarded as a powerful proposition in linking *structure to agency*, as well as *practices to positions* (e.g. Bohman, 1999; Taylor, 1999). By internalising structural rules and values, the *habitus* emerges as

an embodied history of durable, transposable dispositions essentially constituted by accrued cultural capital to become an active presence of the whole past of an agent (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170; Bourdieu, 1990b, p.56). Incorporated like a *second nature*, the embodied schema guides a person's behaviour to ensure he can act in conformity, with little conscious subjectivity to explicit rules in mind (Bourdieu, 1977; Shusterman, 1999, p.5; Taylor, 1999, p.42). The habitus is *not programmed* but is rather guided by a "*feel for the game*" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.128) like sportsmen's performance, enabling people to respond "intentionally without intention" (Bourdieu, 1990a, p.12). The ingrained competence allows people to behave and respond to social structure properly in a subconscious manner. The resulting practices of *habitus* in turn reproduce the rules of games that further consolidate the structure of the field.

Perhaps the following is one of the most referred definitions of habitus by Bourdieu, as it reflects not only the sub-conscious nature of *habitus* but also its dialectic, interwoven relationship with its context – the structural field a person engages in, where *habitus* is both a source of production (structuring structures) and a product (structured structures):

"The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends..." (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 53).

The *generated* and *organised practices* of the habitus are manifested through the entirety of a person's existence, including one's "schemata of perception, thinking, feeling, evaluating, speaking and acting that structures all expressive, verbal and practical manifestations and utterances of a person" (Krais, 1993, p.169). In other words, objective conditions of the field configure the cognitive, affective and conative aspects of the habitus, as it is an appropriated system of "generative schemas" that engenders "all the thoughts, all the perceptions, and all the actions" that are consistent with those conditions that it is generated and constituted (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 95).

2.3.2.3.1 *Judgement of tastes*

Incorporated as a second nature, the habitus directs how a person thinks about and responds to their social space. The habitus is where different forms of cultural capital “are naturalised and mystified” to engender classified “tastes and consumption practices” that reveal social distinction (Holt, 1998, p. 4). The resulting practices hence demonstrate the position a person occupies in the relevant field. Such social demarcation is mediated and manifested by the habitus, which embeds a natural instinct to identify and act on what is right and wrong. The sense towards illegitimate behaviour urges people to practice “refusal of tastes” that are *unnatural* to them, resulting in “disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance (‘feeling sick’) of the tastes of others” (Bourdieu, 1984, p.56, bracket in original). Bearing the sense of ‘guilt by association’ (Bourdieu, 1984), the *habitus* enables people not only to embrace good tastes and right practices but also refuse unrecognised lifestyles to minimise *embarrassment* (Goffman, 1956; Goffman, 1967) and to avoid *shame* (Elias, 1978; Kuzmics, 1991) or being *stigmatised* (Goffman, 1963) otherwise may contaminate the desirable self. Consumer studies regarded these ‘distastes’ as negative (Banister & Hogg, 2004) in which people perceive consumption choices or practices that are incongruent with their desirable self as *taboos* and would avoid using or associating with them. In this regard, the sensing of structural norms and the practicing of negative consumption can be as important as positive consumption in successful impression management. As Stone (1962) avows, to be associated with a social class or identity, people simultaneously adopt referent practices or consumption while discarding other irrelevant ones, operating the two processes of “apposition and opposition” at the same time (1962, p.94). The class a person belongs to or the position that he or she occupies therefore depends on how much cultural capital is loaded for identifying both proper and improper tastes. Bourdieu advocates that embodied in the *habitus*, taste:

“functions as a sort of social orientation, a ‘sense of one’s place’, guiding the occupants of a given... social space towards the social positions adjusted to their properties, and towards the practices or goods which befit the occupants that position.” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 466).

The ability to judge tastes through the *sensing* and *knowing* calibre of the embodied habitus is therefore itself a social marker.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) claim that to consolidate their positions, players in a field, such as high fashion designers, economic firms or novelists, consistently differentiate themselves from their competitors in order to maintain their monopoly over a particular subsector of the field. As the trickle-down theory suggests (Veblen, 1899), their production of competence is a search for and a production of differences so as to keep themselves distinctive from those belonging to lower levels. Players who do not possess the distinct properties would be “eliminated at the entrance of the field” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.100). To avoid being an outcast, people strive for lifestyles and practices to establish association with the referent others in the field. At the same time, the habitus enables them to sense and avoid inappropriate practices that would run counter to their positions. Some consumer studies in domestic, school, dining and leisure settings also explore the role of habitus in differentiating class tastes for social distinction (Daenekindt & Roose, 2011; Hill & Lai, 2016; Maciel & Wallendorf, 2016; Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013; Üstüner & Holt, 2010). However, how such ingrained judgement of tastes enables people to achieve impression management in the work hierarchy is seldom explored.

2.3.2.3.2 The processual nature of habitus

In his later writings such as *The Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu (1990) explains the particular conditions that constitute habitus. He claims that the dispositions, schemes of perception and subjective aspirations of the habitus are transformed from the objective probabilities of “access to goods, services, and powers” inscribed in social conditions of the field (Atkinson, 2010; Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 60). The habitus, being an “open system of disposition”, is “endlessly transformed” through an interaction with the objective condition of its environment (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 116; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133). This concept of ‘transformation’ suggests a progressing, dynamic nature of the habitus.

Through his ethnographic studies, for example, on the matrimonial rituals of Kabylia and Bearn, Bourdieu observes the continuity nature of the *habitus*, which can be perceived as “a mastery *acquired through experience* of the game, and one that works outside conscious control and discourse” (Bourdieu, 1990a, p.61, emphasis added). The habitus is neither static nor inborn but is an abstracted system of schema which structures people’s actions through a *process* of creative typification to particular situations

(Bourdieu, 1977; Holt, 1998). The cultural capital that builds up the habitus is also not innately pre-disposed but *culminated* like “history” and “past experience” through a process of learning and socialisation (Bourdieu, 1977. p.26; Bourdieu, 1984, p.139; Bourdieu, 1990a, p.54). In reviewing Bourdieu’s idea of habitus, Bouveresse (1999) interprets “practical sense” (*le sens pratique*) or a ‘feel for the game’ (*le sens du jeu*) as something that is added on later to a person’s knowledge of rules, which can only be acquired through on-going practice of the game. Like sportsmen’s training, the process of trial-and-error and adjustment for appropriateness gradually build up the sub-conscious skills and competence. This innate sense then allows practices to be delivered without conscious and explicit submission or obedience to rules (Bouveresse, 1999).

Giddens (1984) also emphasises the ongoing connections between structure and agency, in which he refers as the ‘processual’ nature of structures – the belief with which he constructs his ‘theory of structuration’. In the previous section on ‘the processual nature of self’, Giddens’s similar concept is also discussed. He defines agents as a ‘structurally reproductive agency’, who keep reproducing with concerted effort the rules of the social structure they engage in. In a similar vein, Skeggs (2004a, 2004b) also proposes that the idea of habitus, which is premised on the accrual of properties and values that a person gains and stores, should be seen as a ‘self-accrual process’. Such a process “conceives of culture as an exchangeable-value in which some activities, practices and dispositions can enhance the overall value of personhood” (Skeggs, 2004b, p. 75). She claims that even if the habitus is not a conscious or rational self, “it still works with an accumulative sense” (Skeggs, 2004c, p.146), entailing a kind of ‘investment’ on the accrued values relevant to one’s social structure. While most consumer studies on habitus take a cross-sectional approach, studying habitus over career therefore does not only enrich our contextual understanding on *habitus*, but also provide a temporal, processual perspective to understanding how *habitus* actually evolves when people progress along their professional path.

2.3.2.3.3 The formation and socialisation of habitus

Bourdieu attributes the cultivation process of the habitus to mainly two main forms or sources of socialisation: the primary and the secondary socialisation (Bourdieu, 1990b). The primary socialisation, which is highly emphasized by Bourdieu, refers to the learning and inculcation of social rules that comes from social origin, usually the family during

childhood. Secondary socialisation comes from education training and other social experiences that accumulated over time (Trigg, 2001). As discussed in the section on 'conversion' between economic and cultural capital, Bourdieu views the primary socialisation as a predominant source of cultural capital, as the acquisition of it depends strongly on "total, early, imperceptible learning, performed within the family from the earliest days of life" (1984, p.66). People inherit values and modes of life from what the elders define and demonstrate to them through verbal teachings and day-to-day role models (p.477). Such cultivation forms the basis of habitus, on which secondary socialisation – post-childhood education and life experience in different arenas – is further developed. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) further purport that it is the acquisition of cultural capital outside education that accounts for the outstanding performance of children with privileged backgrounds. Nurtured with higher cultural tastes, children from upper class families perform better in school and college and thus continue to secure positions of status in social fields.

Other scholars devote more discussion on secondary socialisation as a source of acquiring cultural capital for the construction of habitus. Skeggs (2004a) explains that educational activities and cultural exposures such as joining concerts or visiting museums are resources embedded with exchangeable-value for people to accumulate cultural capital. In studying the relative class status and interdependency between service providers (the subordinate group) and receivers (the dominant group), Üstüner and Thompson (2012) observe that the ability to understand the status game is not endowed but developed over time, involving a "symbolic dominant process". People actively socialise themselves with ideological meanings and values that legitimise and thus symbolise status hierarchy (the process of *status-legitimising*). They also naturalise the class privilege of those who occupy the dominant positions (the process of *status-naturalising*). Üstüner and Holt (2010) for example explore how the Turkish middle class emulates tastes and lifestyles of the local upper class through residential adjacency, as well as those of the Western middle class through leisure engagement at skiing resorts to learn about their consumption and interaction styles. In the commercial world, Ericksen & Sirgy (1985) also discover that the ability to dress properly in the workplace – a kind of cultural capital for sensing of field rules – is also acquired through the process of "organisational socialisation" (1985). It follows that entering a new position or context at work also engenders a corresponding internalisation and learning process for

survival, recognition and success in the particular field (Hill, 1992; Ibarra, 1999; Mead, 1934). These findings suggest that the formation of habitus takes time to accrue through some learning processes.

Despite the processual view on the nature of habitus, the actual process of ‘acquiring’ cultural capital is scantily explored, except a rare few such as Aguilar (2008). Although many of the studies mentioned above acknowledge that cultural capital is not naturally endowed but requires learning and socialisation, they mainly take a snapshot view on how people acquire and practice their habitus. For a similar reason, Margolis (1999) also challenges Bourdieu for not providing specific and direct account of the cognitive process through which the habitus performs its logic of practice. In fact, Bourdieu has conceded the evolving nature of capital in powering players, but only that he has not clearly illustrated how this process actually takes place. He asserts that what defines the power and position of a player does not only depend on what and how much capital he or she possesses in a particular moment, but the prolonged history of how the capital is accumulated to constitute the habitus. He claims that the strategies of a game player:

“are a function not only of the volume and structure of his capital *at the moment* under consideration..., but also of the *evolution over time* of the volume and structure of this capital, that is, of his social trajectory and of the dispositions (habitus) constituted in the prolonged relation to a definite distribution of objective chances” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992. p. 99, emphasis in original).

These observations suggest that a processual perspective should be taken to trace the ‘trajectory’ of players in order to identify not only their capitals ‘*at the moment*’ but their ‘*evolution over time*’ that has built up a ‘prolonged relation’ with its surroundings. Though Bourdieu points out that changes might occur gradually through transformation of the habitus, Sewell (1992) criticises that he does not explain where the changes might come from and how they would occur. Thereby, in exploring the evolution process of the self, taking a retrospective approach to capture temporal dynamics would help uncover the pattern of changes. Existing literature has not made clear how the actual process of acquiring and internalising cultural capital takes place, including where the sources of acquisition are and whether the relative importance of these sources change over people’s life in specific fields. Studying professional trajectories in the workplace can provide a temporal platform to reveal how tastes and capitals for impression management are learnt and appropriated through various sources of socialisation.

Moreover, existing research also seldom explores whether the interaction between the field (the objective, macro structure) and the habitus (the subjective, micro agent) would retain a similar pattern throughout people's life project. Since individuals' experiences in life and engagement in different fields are heterogeneous, the acquisition process of cultural capital for the formation of habitus would also vary. Such variation in terms of time and space is also denoted by Bourdieu:

"I am talking about dispositions which are *acquired through experience*, thus variable according from place to place and time to time." (Bourdieu, 1990a, p.9, emphasis in original).

This assertion also engenders the need of empirical research in specific contexts. The appropriation of cultural capital and the evolution processes of the habitus display their uniqueness in different cultures, professions and corporate environments or specific work situations. Impression management may imply different learning modes when people are exposed to unfamiliar work environments. All these considerations necessitate a research design that can appreciate contextual differences and allow in-depth understanding of an individual's interpretation of his or her field-specific contextual rules. I will further illustrate this need in my methodology chapter by justifying the use of interpretive approach with a temporal perspective, which allows an understanding of the *situational* and *processual* nature of impression management in the workplace from the participant's point of view.

2.3.2.4 Putting them together: the intertwined relationship of field, capital and habitus

As reflected in the literature review above, it is not meaningful to explain each of the three ‘thinking tools’ proposed by Bourdieu separately without considering the others in consort. The concepts of field, capital and habitus are closely intertwined, as expressed by Bourdieu (1984, p. 101) in the following equation:

$$[(\text{habitus}) (\text{capital}) + \text{field}] = \text{practice.}$$

The trilogic relationship denotes that people’s practices are a function of the habitus so developed from the acquired capitals which are deemed legitimate in terms of the field-specific rules. These orchestrate to guide the ‘proper’ practices in the mundane life of a person, including what is proper to think, to feel, to understand, to say and to do. Based on the integrated discussion in the last few sections on the key ‘thinking tools’ of Bourdieu, Figure 2 shows a constructed diagram attempting to put all the concerned ideas in a relational manner:

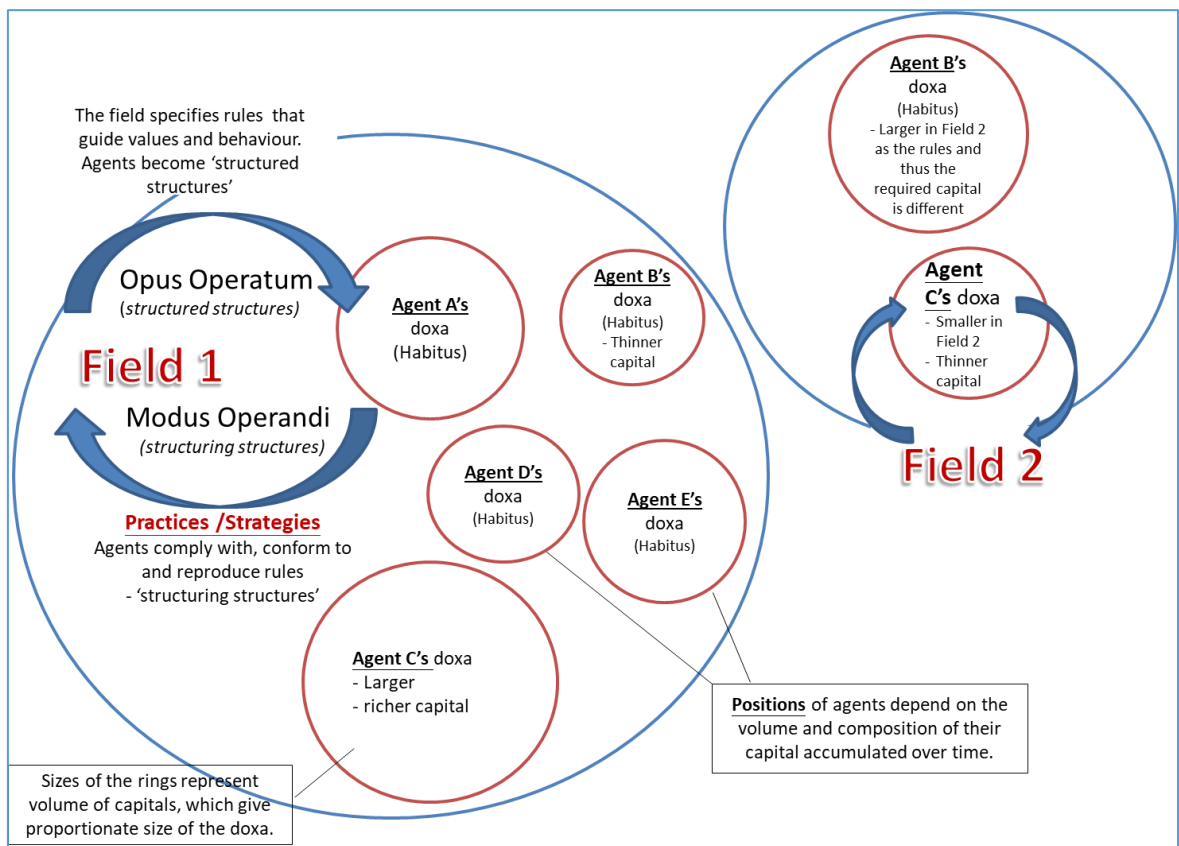


Figure 2. The Interplay of Bourdieu's key ideas in explaining social structure.

The diagram denotes that each agent can belong to one or more social fields in which they occupy different positions (*doxa*) depending on the volume and structure of the cultural capital they accumulate and possess. An agent can simultaneously belong to different fields (e.g. Agent B and C). For instance, an accounting manager could also be a trained tennis player or frequent soccer player. At the same time, he may also pursue art painting as a hobby. Due to different levels of expertise – the accumulated cultural capital, his relative positions – the *doxa* – in those different fields also differ. Once engaged in a field, an agent learns and incorporates the commonly practiced norms and rules for the sake of survival and positions by acquiring and internalising field-specific capital. She senses, feels and practises the rules to gradually build a habitus embodied with the legitimated manners like a ‘second nature’. Being moulded by the structural rules, the self becomes a ‘structured structure’ (*opus operatum*). At the same time, the ‘guided’ behaviour of the agent practises and reproduces the rules in daily life. Believing and acting collectively (the *illusio*), agents play the role of ‘structuring structures’ (*modus operandi*) by reinforcing and sustaining the structural rules.

The reconciling power of Bourdieu’s ideas falls on the interactive reinforcement between the structure and the agents. When applying Bourdieu’s idea on organisational studies, Fligstein asserts that the field is being *constituted by* as well as *constituting* symbolic capital (Fligstein 1990, 2001; cited by Dobbin 2004). While the structure and rules of the field determine the relative legitimate power of capitals, the deployment of capitals through the everyday practices of habitus also reinforces the value of those capitals in the respective fields. In the case of workplace consumption, for instance, grooming styles (e.g. formal vs smart casual) deemed proper and acceptable by field members will recurrently and collectively manifest in daily work life (Piamphongsant & Mandhachitara, 2008). Following Bourdieu’s logic, these commonly acknowledged dress codes will engender conformity which will further set the continuous standards for the field. Similar intertwined relationship also applies to other workplace practices (e.g. formality of correspondences; mediums of seeking approvals; degrees of autonomy, etc.) which in consort constitute the work norms (De Clercq & Voronov, 2009).

Bourdieu’s theory of practice and distinction is credited as a Grand Theory as it provides a framework for understanding the inter-relationship between individual behaviour and their social contexts (Walther, 2014). His theories have been widely applied in various arenas, such as in organisational research (Dobbin, 2008; Kerr & Robinson, 2009), career

research (Andresen & Walther, 2013; Chudzikowski & Mayrhofer, 2011; De Clercq & Voronov, 2009; Walther, 2014), migrants acculturation (Aguilar, 2008; Üstüner & Holt, 2007) and class consumption in less industrialised countries (Üstüner & Holt, 2010). In some studies, his ideas are extended to incorporate other forms of habitus, such as moral habitus in the study of working class consumption (Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013) and eco-habitus in environmental behaviour (Carfagna et al., 2014).

Drawing on both the ideas of Bourdieu and Goffman can bring us a more enriched picture of how people manage self-presentation. Goffman's impression management theory posits that an individual in social interactions needs a portfolio of suitable *sign-vehicles* to exert influence on the perception of the self. However, it tells us little about how social settings are perceived, and correspondingly, how the suitable or 'right' vehicles are identified and selected by performers to enact their situational self. Bourdieu's tripartite concepts of *field*, *cultural capital* and *habitus* offer a complementary framework to fill these gaps. As discussed earlier, this study takes the stance that 'habitus shapes and enables impression management'. Through socialisation within a given '*field*', also referred as '*frame*' by Goffman (1986), the *cultural capital* is built up to constitute the *habitus*, which equips people with the skills and competence to *feel* and incorporate structural rules. The embodied sense of habitus then gives people the discernment or affordance to identify legitimate lifestyles and tastes - the sign-vehicles referred by Goffman, for performing successful impression management in given social settings (*fields*). In other words, the habitus guides individuals through the ingrained competence to *choose* the right props, costumes, utterance and gestures, etc. from the "*identity kit*" for the management of his "personal front" (Goffman, 1961, p. 119), with which they can self-present and manoeuvre appropriately in social interaction. In this sense, Bourdieu's practiced approach provides insights into the structural shaping of Goffman's agentic perspective, suggesting a possible bridging of structure-agency dialectics. In addition, Bourdieu's ideas also suggest the continual nature of self-construction as the cultural capital accumulates over time and that the habitus is thus an 'evolving' entity.

The tenets of Bourdieu and Goffman as well as theories on consumer studies, especially those related to symbolic consumption, will form an integrated framework to underpin my study on impression management in the workplace – a very mundane social field yet rather under-explored in consumer studies. Having said that, a thorough review on the recent development of practice theory seem to alert that Bourdieu's triad concepts and

related beliefs have in fact undergone empirical challenges. To further furnish my theoretical framework, the following section will attempt to appreciate the contemporary development or even revisions of Bourdieu's ideas. The critiques will point out potential limitations of Bourdieu's notion and the nuanced implications that he may have overlooked but suggest new lens for looking at social behaviour. Incorporating these latest and alternate perspectives will warrant a more encompassing analysis of my study.

2.3.3 Contemporary Development of Practice Theories

Despite the broad application of Bourdieu's theories in different disciplines and his contribution to reconcile the dichotomy of structure and agency, his theories are not without challenges. Critique claims that the pre-discursiveness of habitus has understated the reflexive nature of the habitus and the possibility of conscious participation (e.g. Atkinson, 2010, Giddens, 1991; Bohman, 1999). Studies on the practice theory of mundane consumption (e.g. Shove, 2004; Warde, 2005; Watson & Shove, 2008) also emphasise personal experiences of doing and interacting with objects, raising the possibility of subtle customization within the broader boundaries of structural norms. The following sub-sections will further discuss how a critical re-reading of Bourdieu may enrich our understanding on social existence and my investigation of impression management.

2.3.3.1 The pre-reflexive versus reflexive habitus

One idea of Bourdieu which receives controversial critique is the rather nonconscious or pre-reflexive nature of the habitus that acts under the level of consciousness. According to him, the habitus allows people to act in social space through a '*feel for the game*' like trained sportsmen, who can play 'intentionally without intention' or with a sense of "unintentional intentionality" (Bourdieu, 1990a, p.12). For Bourdieu, the habitus is not a conscious and rational apparatus like what structuralists uphold. Instead, it functions "below the level of consciousness and language beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny by the will" (Bourdieu, 1984, p.466, cited by Atkinson, 2010, p. 4). The habitus implies "an overall relation of identification" with the conventions of the field, and does not "presuppose a conscious effort to reproduce a gesture, an utterance" or any practices (Bourdieu, 1990b, p.73). The 'rules of games' of the fields become an incorporated *second nature* of the habitus which give rise to a prevailing *doxa* (Butler, 1999, p.116)

that prescribes the cruising radius of the agent. In his later writings with Wacquant, Bourdieu continues to emphasise the subconscious operation of the habitus, which: "... in a sense, without knowing how or why... the agent does what he or she "has to do" without posing it explicitly as a goal, below the level of calculation and even consciousness, beneath discourse and representation" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 128). In other words, people's behaviour and practices are not strategized but are orchestrated from 'within', attributed mainly to our *prediscursive familiarity* with the social settings we reside (Paulle, van Heerikhuizen, & Emirbayer, 2012; Tatli, Ozbilgin, & Karatas-Ozkan, 2015).

Despite Bourdieu's attempt to reconcile the structure-agency debate, scholars are particularly critical of his "overly nonconscious depiction of the agency" (Atkinson, 2010, p. 1), as he tends to "understate the extent to which some learning can involve or indeed require varying levels of conscious participation" (Atkinson, 2010, p.15). This implies the possibility of conscious learning for social survival. In addition, Bourdieu also appears to contradict himself when he acknowledges pedagogy and inculcation as dominant methods in forming the habitus, since these methods by their very nature entail a conscious or cognitive level of acquiring knowledge (Atkinson, 2010). When applying *habitus* in relation to struggles against race and gender oppression, Butler (1999) also criticises Bourdieu for privileging the social field as the dominating reality that shapes the habitus, while failing to recognise "how change of discursive practice (of the habitus) might in turn modify that social field itself" (Butler, 1999, p.6). She challenges Bourdieu for overlooking the freedom of choice available to the agent and the influence that an agent can in turn exert on the structure. Similarly, Bohman (1999) also rejects Bourdieu's assumption on the unreflective nature of an agent – ignoring that the agent can critique, reinterpret and redefine the rules of the games. He proposes an alternate account of cultural constrained agency, which allows a greater role for "reflection and innovation by which actors are able to transform the conditions of social action themselves" (Bohman, 1999, p. 131). It appears that Bourdieu has overplayed the unconscious impulses of the habitus which can only react and reproduce the structural rules (Reay, 2004; Sayer, 2005). He is challenged for being too deterministic as he ignores the generative role of habitus and downplays the reflexive and innovative practices of agents (Crossley, 2001).

As discussed in an earlier section, Giddens also views the self as “a reflexive project” engaging in continuous “reconstructive endeavours” (1991, p. 75), involving a rewarding process of self-understanding for the aim of building and rebuilding a sense of identity. One dominant idea of Giddens’ structuration theory is the freedom of agents to reinterpret rules and create refined practices that constitute changes to the structure. In his ‘dilemmas of the self’, Giddens (1991) depicts how individuals, even the most oppressed ones, can “react creatively and interpretatively to processes of commodification which impinge on their lives” (p. 175). He also asserts that in a fractured world, the ‘reflexive project’ of self enables individuals to produce some sense of coherence for existence. Similarly, Skeggs posits that although an agent may not be able to avoid structural forces, she still “can decide on which forces to act and which to ignore”, and such a process “creates individuals who live out, biographically, the complexity and diversity of the social relations which surround them.” (2004b, p. 81). The notion of ‘reflection’ in fact can be traced back to the renowned pragmatists and functional psychologist John Dewey, who argues that although our society is characterised by routines, habitual norms and practices, there are always possibilities for individual reflection and alteration on those normative practices (Cohen, 1996). If agents only unconsciously reproduce the same rules of the social fields, then why do we continue to witness social changes in norms and practices? What is deemed legitimate and proper at the moment can in fact undergo evolution. Standards and norms are changing. In the workplace, for instance, when technologies are ever advancing, the perceived ‘proper’ ways of social interaction may also change. Discourse in commercial correspondence, for example, is now more casual and acceptable to be made through electronically mediated communications, such as emails or even short cell phone messages (Gimenez, 2000). The linguistic manner such as the use of words is moving towards a more ‘flexible’ register. Similarly, executive grooming styles are also undergoing transformation in terms of the degree of formality. Smart casual or ‘dressing down’ has been a trend particularly with the rise of the information technology industry, tracing probably back to the sartorial style favoured by the Silicon Valley (Kiddie, 2009). In a recent media report, some global traditional brands like Virgin Atlantic and Goldman Sachs even officially released their dress codes in favour of a more casual work environment (Blain, 2019). Trends, which infiltrate the consciousness and reflexivity of agents, can redefine the usual symbolism of goods and practices or even revise their social meanings. Structural rules having been disapproved in the past might gradually become acceptable and normalised. This implies that

structural rules are not only ‘reinforced’ as Bourdieu claims but are under evolution over time.

2.3.3.2 *Consciousness in life transitions*

While the above literatures introduce consciousness to agents, the conscious self is found more prevalent in special life events. Giddens (1991), for instance, identifies ‘*fateful moments*’ in life which signal to individuals a need to intentionally create changes in response to disrupted circumstances. *Fateful moments* are events that confront an individual as if they are at the “crossroads in his existence”, of which the decisions on the next step could be consequential. These include the “decision to get married” or “to separate”, “taking examinations, deciding to opt for a particular apprenticeship or course of study, going on strike, giving up one job in favour of another, hearing the result of a medical test, losing a large amount in a gamble, or winning a large sum in a lottery” (Giddens, 1991, p. 112-113). In career research and expatriate studies, Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer (2011) also discover that some conscious moments exist when the structure “is grossly disrupted” (p.25), most notably in times of crises, at when rational choices may call in. Social psychologists also discover that perturbations such as psychosocial transitions, turning points and interruptions imposes challenges to professional identity (Daniels, 2011; Marsico, 2012). When exploring the issues of reducing social inequalities, Abel and Frohlich (2012) also find that Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is insufficient in terms of the ‘role of agency’ for ‘structural change’ and thus fail to offer sociological explanation to public health action. Fundamentally, ‘psychosocial transitions’ require reorganisation of occupational practices, abandonment of previously valid identities and redefinition of an individual’s schema of identity (Marsico, 2012). Transitional events happened in a career path also create disturbances and challenges to people’s identity (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), which would prompt redefinition of identities to accommodate the new working contexts through the provisional self (Ibarra, 1999). Applying to the *specificity* of the field (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1999) as discussed earlier, people perceive the need to purposefully learn and comply with a new set of rules when they are, for instance, expatriated to a new working socio-cultural community (Andresen & Walther, 2013; Berry & Sabatier, 2010; Mayrhofer et al., 2004; Üstüner & Holt, 2007), changing their job or industry (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Ibarra et al., 2010), or even transferring to a new department (with micro-culture). As the above studies reveal, people’s reactions to contextual change or

disruptions would entail conscious and rational decisions rather than solely relying on operations at the sub-conscious level.

In the workplace, Bourdieu's 'intentionally unintentional' would also be dubious given that it is a milieu where career advancement, income increment and recognition are at stake. Do executives just perform prediscursively and rely totally on their sense or feel for the game in the workplace? Would there be conscious responses to structural rules especially when young professionals possess limited work and social experience? Instead, will the 'intentionally unintentional' sense mature over time when executives acquire more embodied competence so that they may retrieve from their habitus 'the stock in knowledge' (Schutz, 1972, cited by Atkinson, 2010) for impression management? In terms of consumption such as executive grooming, people may still need to call on rational intention to dress up properly for different work situations, which necessitate different degrees of formality (for instance, performing daily office work, seeing new versus existing clients, doing presentations, attending annual dinners, etc.).

The above discussion on current literatures reflects that the overly "unconscious" habitus of Bourdieu requires continuous review through empirical studies especially during rites of passage. In the next section, I will explore how individual consciousness and deliberate innovations may be introduced at micro-levels while subjected to the macro social norms.

2.3.3.3 Possible individualism in social structuring

In recent decades, sociological research on ordinary consumption calls our attention to the everyday practical experience of consumers in their cause of self-establishment within social structures (Arsel & Bean, 2013; Halkier et al., 2011; Hennion, 2007; Magaudda, 2011; Shove, 2004; Shove, Trentmann, & Wilk, 2009; Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012; Warde, 2005; Watson & Shove, 2008). This expanding school of practice theory attempts to go beyond the social class conditioning of Bourdieusian theories and suggests that while tastes are still class-determinants, individuals in fact engage in daily routines to manipulate freedom within their class boundaries.

Arsel and Bean (2013) argue that "a practice theoretical approach thus aims to theorise consumers as neither purely instrumentalists and rational (*homo economicus*) nor purely structure dependent and unconscious (*homo sociologicus*) but rather as agents bounded

by socioculturally constituted nexuses” (p.901). In other words, instead of just internalising the prescribed rules into their habitus, people in fact deploy individual innovation in daily practices to seek *subtle distinctions*. Goffman (1961) also advocates individual freedom amidst the compliance with moral rules. He posits that behind each individual’s “homely little histories”, we can find “each in its way a movement of liberty” (Goffman, 1961, p.305). From time to time, people employ “secondary adjustment” (a distancing practice) to stand apart from others’ expectations of their role and self (Goffman, 1961, p.189). Similarly, institutional theory suggests that consumers do look for modifications in institutional practices while subjecting to the preservations within organisation fields (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Some consumers or actors in the field, both discontented and contented ones, will make an attempt to or unintentionally introduce market dynamics through micro-level practices (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015). Performativity theory also concerns how contextual assemblages (including people, materials, technical provisions and statements, etc.) affect the intertwining relationship between people’s utterances and their doings in social performance (Scaraboto, 2015). Extending this notion, MacKenzie (2004) proposes the concept of *generic performativity* which denotes that different non-exclusive ideas can actually partake to mould social reality. In other words, practices of ideas by multiple actors could contribute to shape or modify the context in which they occur (Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2006). This further supports the possibility of customisation and modification under the general structural rules through some degrees of individual and collective efforts.

Reflective competence for distinction

To understand how idiosyncratic taste or subtle distinction is pursued, Shove draws our attention to the relationship between the use of objects and the *competence* of the users. Along with other practice theorists, Shove and her colleagues emphasise the know-how, ideas and bodily capabilities of users in creating their life meanings out of material objects (e.g. Shove & Pantzar, 2005; Shove & Walker, 2010; Watson & Shove, 2008). The perspective goes beyond the mere owning and assessing of properties but the ‘competence’ in using and interconnecting with products in the holistic context or configurations that involved in daily life practices. They stress that:

“One is the importance of attending to all requisite elements of practice, to forms of practical know-how, bodily activities, meanings, ideas and understandings, as

well as to materials, infrastructures and sociotechnical configurations. A second is the question of how patterns and practices of daily life interrelate, erode and reinforce each other...” (Shove & Walker, 2010, p. 476)

Such emphasis on ‘competence’ and ‘know-how’ to a good extent is similar to Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital which equips a person with the dispositions to perform class-aligned legitimate tastes. Shove, however, emphasises the continuous, non-static and reflexive practices in object-person relations (Shove, 2003, cited by Arsel and Bean 2013). Individuals are not only using products or materials, but are imparting their skills in manipulating them in daily practices that create specific meanings and competence relevant to their everyday life. People acquire knowledge of practices and habitualise them “through continuous and reflexive engagement with objects, doings and meanings” (Arsel & Bean, 2013, p. 913). Holt (1997) also purports that it is not the cultural contents of consumption that classify people but their actual participation and the “conversation competence” in practicing and appreciating “specialised, esoteric and dynamic aesthetics” (p.104). In other words, what enacts class distinction is the capacity of an individual to make “conversation” or interaction with the cultural objects, and the way he or she manipulates them to make sense of their everyday life.

Similar ideas are also shared in recent studies on conspicuous consumption. Chaudhuri & Mazumdar (2006) find that class distinction may not be necessarily expressed through expensive material possessions, which is highly relied on economic capital, but through "adopting abstract interpretations and ascribing complex cultural meaning to products" (p.5). They explain that people with ‘higher’ tastes (named as cultural ‘elites’) have the ability to impart cultural tastes and practices to mundane, affordable products for expression of their exclusive tastes, which allow them to compete with those with economic capital but no matching taste. They also evidence that such taste-based consumption can be seen in working class fashion (also Trigg, 2001) and art appreciation (e.g. Chen, 2009) instead of economic affordability. Their findings imply that effective impression management necessitates cultural capital and competence not only to distinguish legitimate taste-bearing resources and practices, but also the embodied skills to introduce idiosyncratic taste for tacit distinction in the micro-level. As most of these studies focus on home and leisure settings, there is a need to explore wider if cultural capital for enacting subtle distinction through consumption choices (like grooming,

dining, arts or other work-related practices) would also be important in other mundane contexts like the workplace.

Contemporary practice theories also show that people's daily practices are not only developed or nurtured through their own experience. When virtual communities and interactions are made more possible nowadays through technology, consumers actively exchange and share experience of maneuvering objects for manifesting tastes and lifestyles (Arsel & Bean, 2013; Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006). Arsel and Bean (2013) find that "practical knowledge can be acquired and habitualised through engagement with mass mediated regimes" (p.913). This socially interactive experience of gaining practical knowledge thereby furnishes people with cultural capital, implying that it is not just picked up and acquired as if they are structurally conditioned. They are embedded with inventive elements instilled by the practicing individuals and mediated through social communications with other referent members. Using institutional theory to study individuals' impacts on market dynamics, Dolbec & Fischer (2015) also find that fashion consumers fervently exchange ideas online and embed their personal views as well as practices which interactively establish new institutional works. The virtual community acts as a source of acquiring cultural capital (Belk, 2013; Belk, 2014; Siddiqui & Turley, 2006) and provides guidance on legitimate tastes and lifestyles. People's discussion and responses (no matter for or against) towards a consumption practice (e.g. a new handbag design, a restaurant patronage, a family activity, a new venue of gathering, a trendy collection, a mix-and-match style) would shape the appropriateness and popularity of that practice. Such influences could be more intense and relevant because people in the same acquaintance circle (e.g. Facebook friends, Wechat groups) are very likely belonging to the same class or same field, such as colleagues, church members, alumni, relatives, etc.

The decline of hierarchical consumption

As reviewed in various empirical works above, practical theorists find that people belonging to the same class can possess or produce different degrees of distinctions and taste regimes. These findings challenge Bourdieu's rather rigid hierarchy of classes and consumption congruity, which overlooks the nuanced possibility of implicit distinction. In the face of structural rules, consumers use their consumption competence to negotiate for loopholes of novelty in order to enact desirable impressions and sometimes

uniqueness. Variations in ways and forms of product consumption are in fact found within class boundaries which reflect individualism. In addition, rapid economic advancement in emerging markets could have weakened the relationship between status hierarchy and consumption. In a recent research done in India, Vikas, Varman and Belk (2015) discovered that drastic economic change and marketisation has destabilised the once rigid boundaries of status hierarchy. A mix of new socioeconomic contexts produces new obligations, contests and solidarity, which reshape the pattern of symbolic power and pose challenges to existing notions of top-down class emulations (Vikas, Varman, & Belk, 2015). Some consumption studies also reveal that cultural omnivorousness has blurred class symbolism especially among the prestige group and the middle class. For instance, Warde, Martens and Olsen (1999) and Smith Maguire (2018) find that people engage in a variety of dining experiences across class-based hierarchical boundaries. Nowadays, it appears that taste clusters can only be fluidly defined. People's consumption profiles therefore can comprise of both highbrow or lowbrow tastes, including cultural activities that stretch across different kinds of drama, films and movies (Warde, Wright, & Gayo-Cal, 2007). The same person can appreciate classical music while also enjoying folk and pop songs, which are used to be regarded as class markers (Atkinson, 2011; Van Eijck, 2001). However, a conclusion is yet to be made about whether cultural omnivorousness really comes into play or whether it exists only in the nuanced forms of distinction, within which by and large, Bourdieu's class distinction is still valid. Based on a large-scale study on cultural consumption in Europe, Prieur and Savage (2011) also attempt to update Bourdieu's tenet by identifying an emerging form of 'cosmopolitan cultural capital'. They assert that an "objectified form of cultural capital loses efficacy as a mechanism for exclusionary class boundaries" (p.257); instead, it is people's 'knowing' mode of appreciating and discerning a wide range of cultural practices beyond their own class and their own national culture that becomes a contemporary form of cultural capital for class distinction (Smith Maguire, 2018). These recent studies on cultural choices and practices reflect that Bourdieu's hierarchical consumption for class distinction necessitates further empirical reviews.

In fact, Bourdieu's assertion on an agent's compliance with structural rules may not be as rigid as we assume. In his illustration of the 'field' concept along with Wacquant, Bourdieu also ascribes the transformation ability of agents on structural rules and value constitution of capitals:

“...players can play to increase or to conserve their capital, their number of tokens, in conformity with the tacit rules of the game and the prerequisites of the reproduction of the game and its stakes; but they can also get in it to transform, partially or completely, the immanent rules of the game. They can, for instance, work to change the relative value of tokens of different colours, the exchange rate between various species of capital, through strategies aimed at discrediting the form of capital upon which the force of their opponents rests (e.g. economic capital) and to valorise the species of capital they preferentially possess (e.g. juridical capital).” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.99)

According to the above explanation, the magnitude of compliance may not be the same among all agents in the same structural field. Agents who have accumulated richer, field-relevant capital can be armed with greater power to occupy more advanced positions and thus greater negotiation power to introduce changes to the games, such as redefining relative values of different forms of capital. In other words, in the process of structuring structures – reproducing rules of games, senior players in higher positions may deploy their greater competencies – cultural capital - to redefine rules and precipitate changes. As illustrated above, most of the contemporary development of practice theories, as well as institutional theory and performativity theory mainly focus on home (interior décor, cleaning and recycling) and leisure settings (such as music, movies, walking) or specific consumption such as fashion and dining. Comparatively, the workplace arena, though undoubtedly a quotidian social space dominantly occupying people’s daily life, has been under-researched. This is surprising as the workplace is institutionalised with rules and structures that govern people’s proficiency and organisational effectiveness. Applying practice theory to the working environment would help reveal how executives struggle against compliance and conformity so as to negotiate for micro-level liberty and subtle distinction. It follows that, over time, people’s negotiation power for ways of innovations may grow or vary as they accumulate more cultural capital in the professional fields, allowing them to *know* and *sense* borders and possibilities. Using institutional theory then, perhaps we can also ask how executives may become “institutional entrepreneurs” (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013, p.1237) to propose challenges to institutional fields and how successful they can become.

Summary on Literature Review and Research Questions

Impression management proposed by Goffman has been widely adopted in consumer research to understand how people use consumption choices and lifestyle practices to establish the desirable self. Different sign-vehicles are manipulated by people to establish personal fronts that transmit information to influence the responses of other people in social interactions.

As the self is not static but malleable, reflexive and situationally enacted, the self should be contextually understood in specific social settings. However, most consumer studies exploring impression management are limited to home and leisure settings, leaving the mundane working environment surprisingly under-explored. The workplace has been overlooked as a site of consumption due to its prevailing association with production. Comparatively we have very little understanding on how different consumption resources and practices are employed for impression management in the workplace context.

Current literature also shows that the self is a processual life project that involves on-going (re)construction to make sense of changing roles and environments in life. Consumption resources are found to play an important part in facilitating self-transition especially during rites of passage. Nonetheless, most current research adopts a cross-sectional approach which fails to reveal the dynamics of impression management. There is a need for a processual perspective to understand how consumption practices may change and evolve to support the continuous *reflexive project* of the self.

While the self is getting more dynamic, contemporary consumer research also reveals that choices for self-projection or self-extension are also proliferating, going beyond material possessions and comprising also things, services, information and aesthetics that we can access, share and post in the real world or in the virtual space. Resources for self-presentation have been expanding from 'we are what we have' to 'we are what we share' and 'access' or even what we are able to 'appreciate'.

Facing the increasing supply of self-construction choices, consumers need prudence to sense and choose what can help their impression management in different social contexts. However, Goffman's dramaturgical framework does not clearly show us *how* people appropriate the ability to comprehend situations in life and correspondingly make

discerning choices among the repertoire of sign-vehicles to form desirable impressions. His concepts also focus on the symbolic meanings carried by possessions and gestures in social interaction, paying little attention to individuals' embodied know-how and practices in manipulating those resources for self-construction. Drawing on Bourdieu's practice theory, this thesis argues that executives are akin to 'performative player-actors' in a dramaturgical as well as an embodied manner, where impression management is shaped by and attuned to one's workplace habitus through an intuitive 'feel for the game'

Bourdieu's tripartite concepts, namely, *field*, *cultural capital* and *habitus*, have reconciled the dialectic debates between social structure and agency. People incorporate structural rules prescribed by the social *field* they engage in, such as an industry, a profession or a corporation. For social mobility and position advancement in the field, through primary and secondary socialisation, people acquire relevant *cultural capital* which constitutes the embodied *habitus* that endows people with the dispositions or competence to *feel* the game at a pre-discursive level. The *habitus*, enacted like an embodied *second nature*, in turn enables people to produce class-marking tastes and lifestyles for *social distinction*, which also collectively reinforce the structural rules. In such sense, executives orient by the habitus – the incorporated dispositions – to cast desirable impressions for self-performance.

Despite Bourdieu's contribution to structure-agency relationships, his ideas are regarded as being too deterministic, downplaying the creative and generative role of agents. Recent trends in practice theories also purport that contemporary consumers in fact use their accumulated skills in daily practices to negotiate subtle distinctions under the broader structural norms, to which they contribute the reinforcement, reconstruction and redefinition of the field structure and rules of games. The self therefore should be understood and studied as an *on-going* and *reflexive project*. Nonetheless, consumers studies drawing on Bourdieu and Goffman's frameworks mainly adopt a snapshot view, ignoring the likely dynamics in people's choice of using different cultural capitals over time.

In light of the above limits and unexplored areas of the current literatures for impression management, my study leverages the professional trajectories of executives and adopts a

processual view with the aim to reveal *changes* in the use of cultural capital. The first research question is set to make theoretical, empirical and contextual contributions:

1. ***What*** cultural capital and practices do senior executives employ as resources for impression management over the course of their career?

This thesis sets itself apart from other studies by not confining to any particular consumption aspects such as appearance, dining, language, management know-how or other commercial traits and tactics. Instead, it adopts a more inductive, open-ended approach to allow themes to emerge out of the lived experiences of people in the workplace. While certain cultural resources may be found to be important for self-enactment at a particular time, they may recede in importance at other life stages. The research question traces people's professional paths to compare how different forms of cultural capital are used and un-used, and how their relative importance, their structure and portfolio for impression management would evolve over time to reveal the processual self at work.

Furthermore, regarding *field-specificity* of social structures and cultural capital, Bourdieu usually discusses examples in a rather discreet manner, in which different agents are separately engaged in different field structures. Such analysis limits our understanding on how *specificity* of fields actually influences a person as a social agent. By capitalising on the work history of executives, my research question attempts to unveil the impact of field-specificity on the same individuals when they shift among occupational fields and sub-fields, such as industries, corporations or departments. Their engagement and adaptation issues in different fields over time can give insights to advance Bourdieu's theory.

Although Bourdieu and Skeggs emphasise that cultural capital and the formation of habitus is an accrual process entailing an accumulative history of a person, little research reflects how the acquisition process actually happens in specific empirical contexts. While Bourdieu puts emphasis on primary socialisation in the enactment of the habitus, we also lack empirical studies regarding how such socialisation is carried over in later life stages and how it is actually utilised to produce legitimate manners when people become working adults. This study therefore aims to ask: Does the influence of primary socialisation sustain in the workplace? And how does it help impression management at work? As the workplace is where people encounter the world daily, what role does

secondary socialisation play in the acquisition process of work-related cultural capital? What are the possible sources from which executives appropriate further senses of ‘feeling’ and knowing the structural rules, which then enable them to distinguish the cultural capital that are field-relevant? Will the sources of learning and their relative influence also change over time and suggest a processual pattern? In view of these under-explored queries, the second research question seeks to understand:

2. *How* do senior executives learn and acquire cultural capital and practices for impression management over the course of their career?

By asking the above two research questions, the study attempts to re-position the workplace as a site of consumption. Specifically, this thesis seeks to explore how impression management and workplace habitus are produced through on-going consumption practices.

In the next Chapter on Methodology, I will explain and justify the philosophical assumptions and the corresponding methodological designs that address the nature of the above two questions.

Chapter 3. Methodology

In this chapter, I am going to explain and justify the methodological design of my study based on the philosophical relations that underlie my research questions. The interest of this thesis lies in understanding the socially-constructed *contextual meanings* of resources and embodied practices for impression management, as well as the *process* of acquiring and evaluating them in light of the structural fields people engage in. I need a research design that can facilitate me to understand what different consumption resources and practices mean to my participants in their specific structural fields, and how they choose, evaluate, find effective, like and dislike, and use and stop using them to make sense of themselves. The philosophical assumptions of *constructionism* and the theoretical perspective of *interpretivism* are therefore chosen to frame my research questions since they emphasises empathetic understanding (*verstehen*) of contextual and socially-constituted meanings (Gill & Johnson, 2010; Duberley, Johnson, & Cassell, 2012) from the ‘native’s point of views’ (Geertz, 1974).

Following these epistemological considerations, *biographic narrative inquiries* and *walking-with interviews* with ten senior executives from Hong Kong were conducted. As Giddens (1991) asserts, “the self-identity... presumes a narrative” because people form their coherent life projects that span over time (p.76). Narrative inquiries through the means of biography or autobiography therefore facilitates the revelation of the self-identity as an ongoing construction (Giddens, 1991). To provide additional perspectives, this study also introduced the *walking-with* interviews for consumer study. By accompanying my participants to and from work (as well as to and from lunch) as a kind of participant observation, the walking-with approach capitalised the physical prompts of the surrounding cityscape and captured the embodied perception of my participants towards their daily work vicinity.

This chapter will begin with a brief introduction on philosophical paradigms and their related methodological designs, among which interpretive approach emerges as a suitable perspective that underpins my study. To substantiate my choice of the interpretive approach, and in turn the use of the two methods, I will reiterate the nature and fundamental needs of my two research questions. These set a base for justifying the ontological and epistemological assumptions I make regarding the workplace

phenomenon I study. I will then explicate the theoretical and operational details on the dual methods used, including the source of data and the way of collecting and analysing them. The respective roles of the two methods in addressing my research questions will also be discussed.

3.1 Philosophical paradigms and methodological designs

Philosophical assumptions pertaining to how the world and knowledge exist inform the way in which knowledge should be acquired (Creswell, 2012; Crotty, 1998; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2008). As Bacon asserts, ‘authority of knowledge’ lies in the method adopted to acquire that knowledge instead of the content of the knowledge itself (Bacon, 1620; Bacon, 2000). This implies that the choice of methods and approaches to acquiring knowledge becomes fundamental to produce robust investigations. To arrive at a prudent choice, a researcher then needs to reflect on her worldview (Creswell, 2012) regarding how knowledge exists and evolves. Such attachment to particular philosophical commitments and assumptions about reality then constitutes the implied research design (Crotty, 1998; Duberley et al., 2012), including our focus of study, how we view our data, which in turn affect the way we collect and interpret them (Cunliffe, 2010; Easterby-Smith et al., 2008, p.56). Thus, there is a need for researchers to differentiate and substantiate their research approach (Cunliffe, 2010, p. 651). Therefore, to answer the first order question of *what to study*, we should first deal with the second order question of *how we should study what we want to study*.

Our set of beliefs and assumptions about the world was first introduced by Kuhn (1962) as “*paradigm*” in his seminal book *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*. Paradigm encompasses a distinct worldview and rationality about knowledge that determines research strategies, methods (Cunliffe, 2010) and techniques for applying theoretical assumptions (Chalmers, 1982). In short, paradigm is “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” of the investigators (Guba, 1990, p. 17), including the questions they ask and the interpretation they bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Paradigm therefore sets directions for a chain of design issues in the cause of knowledge inquisition. Guba and Lincoln (1994) purport that paradigm leads to three related sub-questions: questions of ontology, epistemology and methodology. Ontology refers to philosophical assumptions about the form and nature of reality (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008), which poses the question of “what are out there that can be known about” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108).

Epistemology refers to the general set of assumptions about the best ‘ways’ of inquiring, which is attributable to how the researcher perceives the nature of reality (Crotty, 1998; Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). It is therefore informed by the researcher’s ontological stance and deals with the question of “how might one begin to understand the world and communicate this as knowledge to fellow human beings” (Burrell and Morgan 1979, p. 1). Guba and Lincoln (1994) believe that the way of inquiry thereby involves the question on the nature of relationship between the knower or would-be knower (the researcher) and what can be known (the reality). The third level of methodology refers to the combination of techniques used to enquire into a specific situation (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008) and, therefore, depends on the first two levels of belief made about the ‘situation’. The three fundamental questions therefore must be consistent and “interconnected” so that answers to each of these levels “constrained” each other (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.108). In other words, ontological assumptions about the nature of social reality dictate our epistemological stance, which then informs the goals and the specific methods we adopt to acquire the relevant knowledge (Gill & Johnson, 2010; Bryman & Bell, 2011; Silverman, 2011). Although the terms used or the exact classifications may vary slightly among authors (Creswell, 2012; Crotty, 1998; Easterby-Smith et al., 2008), their respective categorisations all emphasize the inter-connected principles in research designs.

In Table 1 below, Crotty (1998) maps out the intertwined relationship between epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods of different research approaches in a scaffolding structure. Although he stresses that the list is not exhaustive and the chained relationships are not absolute nor discrete, the broad categorisation demonstrates some degrees of correspondences and exclusivities between levels of philosophical assumptions and methodological approaches.

While positivists or realists advocate *objectivity* and assume that the social world exists ‘out there’ independently from external stimuli, *constructionism* rejects such assumptions but recognises the interpretive divergence on *meanings and values* due to cultural and contextual variations (Crotty, 1998). The variations are also attributed to the social (re)construction and constant revision of meanings that constitute social objects (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.22). The implied epistemological approach thus shifts from objective testing to ‘*verstehen*’, a notion pioneered by Max Weber (Tucker, 1965), which proposes “sympathetic understanding” of social behavior from the perspective of the subjects

under study, rather than from that of the observers (Gill & Johnson, 2010, p.43, 62). Critical social scientists even go beyond ‘understanding’ and advocate ‘emancipating’ the deprived and exploited from power struggles. Such interpretive perspective supports the use of more reflexive, open-ended and engaging methodological approaches such as ethnography, narrative and participatory methods. These methods help comprehend the subjects’ world from their frame of references.

Epistemology	Theoretical perspective	Methodology	Methods
Objectivism Constructionism Subjectivism (and their variants)	Positivism (and post-positivism) Interpretivism • Symbolic Interactionism • Phenomenology • Hermeneutics Critical inquiry Feminism Post-modernism <i>etc.</i>	Experimental research Survey research Ethnography Phenomenological research Grounded theory Heuristic inquiry Action research Discourse analysis Feminist standpoint research <i>etc.</i>	Sampling Measurement and scaling questionnaire Observation • participant • non-participant Interview Focus group Case study Life history Narrative Visual ethnographic methods Statistical analysis Data reduction Theme identification Comparative analysis Cognitive mapping Interpretation methods Document analysis Content analysis Conversation analysis <i>etc.</i>

Table 1: Taxonomy of Research Framework. (Source: Crotty 1998, p.5)

3.2 Nature and needs of my research questions

Following the above brief discussion above on philosophical considerations that underpin research approaches, I will now turn to explain and justify my methodological design, including the choice of an interpretivist approach and the use of biographic narrative inquires and walking-with interviews. To substantiate my design, I will first analyse the nature and fundamental needs of my two research questions. I will discuss why my research questions, which aim at understanding the process of sensing, acquiring

and using cultural capital for impression management, would be more suited to the philosophical underpinnings of constructionism and interpretivism. The argument is very much due to my focus on comprehending the structural norms which impart symbolic meanings to resources and practices used for impression management in the workplace, and the way senior executives learn and appropriate these meanings to make sense of their professional self.

To reiterate, my study has investigated the following two research questions:

- 1) What cultural capital and practices do senior executives employ as resources for impression management over the course of their career?
- 2) How do senior executives learn and acquire cultural capital and practices for impression management over the course of their career?

In essence, as discussed in the previous chapter, these two questions put emphasis on exploring the *process*, *meanings*, especially *contextual* meanings and *people-object* interactions in the real setting of the workplace environment. I am going to elucidate each of their natures and respective methodological needs below. It will be followed by an explanation on how constructionism and interpretive approach can address the needs of my study.

3.2.1 Process

Unlike most consumer research, which usually takes a snap-shot view of investigation, my study aims to understand the *process* of how people acquire, evaluate, use and unuse different forms of cultural capital for self-construction over the career. As Skeggs (2004a) and Bourdieu (1990a) claim, the enactment of the habitus is an accrued and accumulative embodiment, which takes time to construct. Giddens (1984) also purports that the structure-agency interaction is an on-going, *processual* relationship, which shapes the practices and behaviour of the agent over time. These notions suggest a research approach that allows me to trace how resources and practices used for impression management are appropriated by the work self at different career stages. The approach should allow a retrospective collection of people's memories so that the process of how they ascended the career ladder can emerge. As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) emphasise, a person's field positions and power is a function of "the *evolution over time* of the volume and structure of (her) capital" which constitutes his trajectories of habitus

over a prolonged relation with the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 99, emphasis in original). The respective methods should therefore facilitate my participants to give an *oral history* of their life course (Elliott & Davies, 2007; Janesick, 2010), comprising stages, transitions, ups and downs, etc. in pursuing their careers and social relations. It is also important that the methods used enable my participants to give an account of those changes regarding *why* they use (and unuse) the resources and practices for impression management, and *how* the work self enacted transits through various stages.

Pertaining to my second research question, I also want to investigate whether sources for acquiring cultural capital may *change* while people are entering different stages of their careers as they accumulate more work experience and social exposure. These evolutionary aspects again require a paradigm and corresponding methodological designs that appreciate changes and dynamics over time instead of discovering static, generalisable rules.

3.2.2 Contextual meanings

Another feature my research questions emphasise is the *meanings* of the resources and practices that working people perceive based on their structural rules. My research aims to find out how these ‘sign vehicles’ (Goffman, 1959) signal differentiated tastes and are used by executives to project a distinct self at work (Bourdieu, 1984). Thereby, my study calls for a philosophical perspective that assumes the reality and its meanings as being constructed and ascribed through social interactions but not innately given like the cause-and-effect relations in natural science.

The meanings accorded to resources and practices should also be *contextually* understood, since structural rules and norms are field-specific, which determine the meanings and values of different capitals (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu, 1999). Since agents are *structured structures* while also *structuring structures* (Bourdieu, 1977; Walther, 2014), they play the role in both perceiving and co-constructing structural rules. My study therefore needs to understand how executives perceive, interpret, feel and sense their structural norms and rules in the working fields they engage in, as well as how they respond to them through a ‘*feel for the game*’ (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 66; Elias, 1978, p.447). I also aim to see whether such social behaviour operates under the pre-reflexive and pre-

discursive levels as Bourdieu claims (Bourdieu, 1990a). This involves how much executives comply with structural rules while finding loopholes or liberty for subtle distinction as practice theorists propose (e.g. Arsel & Bean, 2013; Shove & Pantzar, 2005). My methodological approach must therefore enable me to capture and appreciate the contextual diversity, different frames of reference and the past history of individual participants. As there are no objective, standard rules and meanings ‘out there’, structural norms and their respective contextual meanings must be studied under the particular social contexts people find themselves in. It therefore entails a method that allows me to look at context and structural values from the ‘*native’s point of view*’ (Geertz, 1974). In other words, the methodological approach should allow me to view through the lens of my participants and look at ‘their world’ through their eyes, and feel ‘their world’ and social meanings through their skin and sense, and to see how they embody cultural practices like *second nature* (Bourdieu, 1977). In addition, I also look for a theoretical perspective that recognises the nuances of not only *what* kinds of capital are employed for impression management but also the *volume* and *structure* of the capital, as it would be these details that determine a person’s positions in the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). The methodology therefore must accommodate nuances, multiplicity and their interactions.

3.2.3 People-object interaction

Apart from understanding the *processes* and *contextual meanings*, my study is also inspired by the *people-object interactions* suggested by contemporary practice theories (e.g. Shove & Walker, 2010; Watson & Shove, 2008) and institutional theory (e.g. Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Their observations reveal that agents of the same field in fact do not collectively respond to structural rules in a standardised way. Individuals have their own nuanced way of perceiving, sensing, liaising and negotiating with their structural rules and turning them into actual practices in daily life. Practice theorists also alert that consumer studies should not only focus on the symbolic meanings of possessions alone, but the interplay between people’s competence and life experience with which they act upon the objects (e.g. Magaudda, 2011). My study therefore also attempts to investigate how professionals apply their skills and life knowledge to use and consume objects or resources available in order to make sense of their daily life, and how the people-object interplay provides them with uniqueness and becomes new forms of cultural capital and habitus, and thus class markers (Holt, 1997a; Prieur & Savage, 2011).

In view of these focuses, I therefore need an investigation approach that allows a holistic view of social behaviour which that can cut across the dimensions of people, objects, or even time and space, so as to can capture how they interact.

In light of the nature and needs of my research questions discussed above, the ontological position of ‘constructionism’ is more suitable to underpin my study since it regards the reality as continuously (re)constructed through social interactions rather than objectively existing (Duberley *et al.*, 2012). It follows that ‘interpretivism’ becomes my epistemological stance as it emphasises empathetic understanding to gain knowledge about the *constructed* social reality from the viewpoint of the subjects under researched. To complement the interpretive perspective, I have used the dual methodological tools to collect my data, including the traditional ‘*biographic narrative inquiry*’ and the rather new ‘*walking-with method*’ which conducted en-route interviews with executives while accompanying them to and from work or to and from lunch. In the following sections, I will further discuss these inter-related choices in my methodological design.

3.3 The philosophical stance of *constructionism*

In essence, my two research questions centre around a few key investigation focuses: *process and changes, contextual meanings of resources and practices and people-object relations*. The central goal of my study is to empathetically *understand* these ideas from the perspectives of my subjects instead of objectively explaining and predicting as a value-free outsider.

My research therefore finds its ontological root in ‘constructionism’, which believes in the ‘constructive’ and non-objective nature of social reality and human behaviour. Constructionists believe that the social “meaning is not discovered, but constructed” (Crotty 1998, p.9), being made as an “ongoing accomplishment” (Crotty, 1998, p.47) through human interactions over time and across contexts.

Such belief about the social nature opposes the positivist idea of viewing the social world as the one in natural science, where constant conjunctures (Hume, 1777) and generalisable causal rules can be independently observed. Constructionism, instead, regards social existence and meanings as contextual, being *constructed, reconstructed* and most of the time *co-constructed* to arrive at ‘shared’ meanings through human

interactions and lived experience rather than being innately endowed (Crotty, 1998, p.8; Hammersley, 2012). This echoes Guba and Lincoln, who allude that constructionists see their primary interest in the “subjective and intersubjective social knowledge” which is actively constructed and co-created by human agents (2005, p. 203). Easterby-Smith *et al.* also believe that “reality is determined by people rather than by objective and external factors”, and that social scientists should thus realise the constructed meanings people derive from their experiences (2008, p.59).

With regard to my research, constructionism becomes a relevant view about how knowledge exists as I aim to explore and position the *self* as a reflexive project that entails on-going construction (Giddens, 1992) instead of being intrinsically ingrained (Hammersley 2012, p.36). Further, impression management and congruity between the self and behaviour (Gollwitzer, 1986; Oyserman, 2009), as well as between the self and possessions involve the interpretation of meanings that keep on being re-constructed through social interactions (e.g. Elliott, 1994; Elliott and Wattansunawan 1998). The notion of *constructionism* thus informs my study as it assumes that meanings are (co)created in social reality and thus cannot be impartially measured or assessed through positivist observation. This entails a kind of ‘respect’ to social reality and those involved, instead of ‘manipulation’ or ‘control’, as what realists and positivists might propose. Applying such philosophical assumption to my study, the same resources or practices that executive people acquire and employ at work (such as the way of grooming or dining choices for commercial encounters) may have different meanings in the different contexts (the *fields*) they belong to. Over time, the meanings may also be gradually re-interpreted and re-constructed when people alter or add in new perspectives to the structural rules. As exemplified in the literature review, the casual trends of sartorial styles at work has redefined ‘formality’ in executive grooming. (Kiddie, 2009). The temporal approach of this study can help recognise possible changes as these.

To summarise, this study assumes that knowledge is socially constructed, which draws on the tenet of *constructionism* and as such necessitates a research approach that can inductively investigate “meanings, ideas and practices” from the viewpoint of the subjects (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p.1). Under such an assumption, I decided to choose the interpretive approach as the epistemological position that guides my ways of seeking knowledge in my study.

3.4 Interpretivism for social inquiries

As philosophical assumptions determine the way of knowledge inquiry, I am going to illuminate why the interpretive approach is desirable to address the research nature and objectives of this study.

Interpretivism upholds the essence of ‘*verstehen*’ – the *understanding of meanings* of social phenomena from the perspectives of subjects rather than the explanation and prediction of them, as what positivism may proclaim (Gill & Johnson, 2010; Duberley et al., 2012). Interpretivism therefore enables me to appreciate contextual meanings and interrelationships of things, people and behaviour from the “native’s point of view” (Geertz, 1974). In addition, because the ‘*self*’ is complex and highly sensitive to social and situational contexts, the study of its daily presentation in the workplace arena requires a method that can understand the intrinsic thoughts and feelings of the subjects (Schouten, 1991).

Subsuming a few related approaches to qualitative inquiries such as social constructionism, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology phenomenology and hermeneutics (Farquhar, 2012; Prasad, 2005; Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.19; Duberley et al., 2012; Hammersley, 2012), *interpretivism* is an umbrella term given to a contrasting philosophical canon to the long-standing ontology of *positivism*. Kuhn (1970) challenges the positivist ideas that the two worlds of sciences – the natural and the social - are incommensurable. Interpretivists thus reject the transplantation of natural sciences approaches to the study of social reality (Bryman & Bell, 2011), as well as the empiricist focus of testing, explaining and predicting social behaviour (Duberley *et al.*, 2012). As mentioned, they share the important commitment to *verstehen*, lending “fidelity to the phenomena under study” and respecting the subjective views of those under investigation. (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 7). Hence, interpretive researchers focus a lot on “detailed description of the experience and perspectives of diverse groups of people” (Hammersley 2012, p. 28), providing the backdrop for researchers and readers to appreciate the subjects’ ways of thinking and acting.

Farquhar (2012) summarises some essential features of interpretivism as opposed to those of positivism. These are terms like ‘*why*’, ‘*how*’ and ‘*meanings*’, which also directly inform my two research questions. Interpretivism permits me to “understand fellow human beings from the inside – through empathy, shared experience and culture,

etc.” (Hammersley, 2012, p.25) of the specific working fields my participants engage in. Such approach allows deep understanding of meanings and “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) of how my participants make sense of their social self in their career. The approach of ‘*induction*’ also complements my research design since it does not aim at testing theories, but adopts an open-ended and holistic view to develop conceptual understanding on under-researched areas (Gill & Johnson, 2010; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). As my study also involves unexplored areas, including the actual processes of acquiring embodied cultural capital over the course of one’s career, the negotiation for ways of innovation under broad structural rules, and in the mundane setting of the workplace, etc., an ‘*induction*’ approach is also pertinent to this research.

As discussed in Chapter 2 - Literature Review, contemporary practice theorists (e.g. Shove & Pantzar, 2005; Shove & Walker, 2010; Watson & Shove, 2008) also draw on an interpretive approach, which maps out in-depth patterns on how their participants apply skills to interact with objects in their daily routines. As discussed, the *competence* of sensing and knowing social rules and practising them for legitimate impression management is one of my main focuses, and the interpretive approach can therefore benefit my study like previous research. Moreover, consumer research using Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital and habitus also find the interpretive approach effective in their studies (Hill & Lai, 2016; Maciel & Wallendorf, 2016; Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013; Üstüner & Holt, 2010). Prasad (2002) further inspires me on how the interpretive approach helps understand the expanded ‘texts’ supplied by participants (senior executives), which include not only documents in a conventional sense but also practices, structures, activities, artefacts, etc. These texts or vehicles help reveal a holistic understanding on the inherent meanings and motivation of people’s behaviour (Prasad, 2002; Prasad & Mir, 2002), which further inform my study on people-object relations as emphasised by contemporary practice theories.

Interpretivism also addresses the contextual variation that exists in my research when participants are exposed to different working fields such as industries, corporations or departments throughout different career stages. Interpretivists believe that knowledge inquiry should not rely on one single reality since “multiple realities exist” and they keep evolving (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). As reviewed before, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) also claim that as *fields* are specific, so are their structural rules and values of capitals. Meanings of cultural capital related resources and practices and the acquisition process

of them therefore should therefore be studied contextually and culturally in my study. As Hammersley (2012) avers, interpretation processes of the empirical world should be socio-cultural in nature, from which people generate divergent experiences and knowledge. Based on these notions, the way executives learn about cultural capital and interpret its meanings for class distinction can be very much governed by the primary and secondary socialisation they are exposed to. The latter can also be attributed to the different cultural contexts at work including the fields of industries, professions or corporations people engage in over their career. Interpretive perspective is therefore a desirable approach to studying *field-specificity* in my study because it emphasises an empathetic understanding of cultural and contextual variations (Brinkmann, 2012; Hammersley, 2012). The same skill set, competencies or work practices may imply different values in distinct corporate and professional cultures. My study therefore sees the interpretive approach as an appropriate direction to investigate the specificity of fields – whether impression management in different work structures necessitates different sets of dispositions or habitus.

3.5 The methodology and methods: ‘biographical narrative inquiry’ and ‘walking-with interviews’

Although it would be desirable to align my choice of data collection methods with the anthropological approach adopted by Bourdieu and Goffman, such an approach is not practical due to difficulties in securing access to my participants’ workplaces. Additionally, the commitment involved in carrying out immersive long-term participant observations in the field was not viable during my study as I am in full-time employment at a teaching-intensive university. In view of these constraints, I have instead opted for the dual methods of *biographic narrative inquiry* and *walking-with interviews*. These methods are chosen because of their potential to unveil participant’s rich life stories over their career paths. The second method served as a kind of quasi-participant observation as I partially immersed in the daily work routines of my participants as they commute to and from work, or to and from lunch. It also allowed me to capture embodied practices along their work routes in real life.

As the interpretive approach believes in multiple realities which are socially constructed, the relationships involved are also simultaneously shaped by multiple influences (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). Adopting two methods on the same group of executives

allowed a broader insight that captured different angles and perspectives. The two methods did not only provide complementary platforms for diverse data to emerge, but they also permitted different data collection settings to give different stimulations to participants. Identifying patterns of similarities and disagreements between the data also enhanced the quality of my analysis.

Narrative inquiry is a typical and widely used data collection method that supports interpretivism, which aims to empathetically understand people in their given culture (Creswell, 2012; Crotty, 1998; Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). As Giddens (1992) purports, the self is a continual project and is itself a narrative. This method therefore plays the role of providing the emic perspective (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994) in unveiling the professional trajectories of my participants over their years of career pursuance.

Apart from the traditional narrative interviews, my study was complemented by the comparatively new *walking-with method* in consumer studies. By accompanying my participants to and from work, and to and from their lunch or dinner, the walking-with approach obtains additional perspectives through observing and participating in the daily routines of working people. These routes are relevant to impression management in their work life as they walk past them daily and are in the vicinity of their workplaces. En-route conversations and inquiries were conducted to capture the resonant effect offered by the physical cityscapes that were familiar to my participants. Besides talking, the walking-with approach served as a partial participant observation, since I engaged in parts in the executives' daily work routines while observing their corporeal behaviour. These embodied manifestations include bodily movement, gestures, facial expressions, rhythms and the pace of their walk and talk, as well as the changes involve. In this way, I was able to observe how dynamic interactions unfold in the naturalistic setting of the participants, it also enables me to observe the emergence of embodied data, which are co-created between my participants and me as the researcher. The walking-with approach allows me to move beyond representational data (Hill, Granniford and Mol, 2014), in which I prioritise embodied narratives over retrospection. In other words, the walking-with method enables me to capture what Thrift (2008) has called non-representational data, which emphasises the *onflow of everyday life*. The idea is predicated on a researcher's sensitivities to the "on-going movement of bodies, spaces and objects together" (Hill et al., 2014, p.385), while observing "consumers' habits, routines and embodied rhythmic attunements to the environment" (p.386). Non-representational

theory also advocates expanding research to explore “subconscious embodied knowledge” (p.386). Such an approach encourages higher level of collaboration between the subjects and the investigators. As a researcher, I could also feel and interpret the bodily resonance of my participants. This was most evident when my participants and I engaged in a shared experience of the en-route surroundings when we walked by the cityscape, exposing to the patterns and styles of shops and their décor, product displays, staff gestures, shopping conversations, etc. Such co-creation of data generated valuable themes in this study which are easily overlooked in sedentary interviews.

Depending on the time availability of the participants, the two methods were conducted before or after each other on the same day or different days. On top of probing new questions, the method conducted subsequently would play the role of follow-up interviews to confirm, clarify or add details to previously analysed data.

In the following sections, I will first explain the methodological design relating the choices of *settings, sampling, participants and access*. Thereafter, I will explicate each of the above two inquisitive methods and the corresponding operational designs in details.

3.5.1 Settings: The workplace in Hong Kong

According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), a *setting* is a named context in which phenomena occur that might be studied from any number of angles. Using the theatrical term of Goffman (1959), it is the physical and human conditions of a theatre within which an actor performs.

The working environment: an under-researched area in consumer research

As reiterated in the Chapter 2 (Literature Review), the working environment is an everyday setting which occupies people’s daily life and yet a rather under-researched area in consumer studies. My research chooses to fill the gap by studying how the self is enacted through strategic impression management in professional settings. The working environment also suggests a typically non-personal, audience-oriented milieu (Wright 1996) suitable for studying the social nature of self-presentation. Bourdieu’s analogy also supports such a study.

Emphasising capability, skills and competition, the professional field is a typical ‘*battlefield*’ suitable for studying the dynamics of fields and cultural capitals (Andresen

& Walther, 2013; Chudzikowski & Mayrhofer, 2011; Walther, 2014). The career trajectories also offer a temporal dimension to reveal *how* field rules are incorporated, how the use of different cultural capital changes over time (research question 1), as well as how it is acquired and embodied in the habitus for advancement in positions (research question 2). For instance, one particular symbolic resource that consumer studies have investigated is power-dressing in the workplace (e.g. Lauer & Lauer, 1981; Tsaousi, 2019) where a professional dress code is found to be a resilient symbolic system (Tseñlon, 1995). As reviewed in Chapter 2, most of these studies focus on appearance management as a main source of symbolic construction only. By contrast, my data on workplace grooming do not only review the role of power-dressing in contemporary consumer studies, but also explore it in juxtaposition with other forms of resources and practices over time. The relative and changing significance of appearance at different stages of one's career and how sartorial meanings are formed by structural rules are revealed in the study (Chapter 4 and 5). This example of findings shows that using the workplace milieu with a temporal perspective can extend our understanding on the triad concepts of Bourdieu in light of Goffman's impression management.

The city of Hong Kong

The city of Hong Kong, known for its workaholic culture, was chosen as the contextual setting for this study. Hong Kong people are found to define their self and class-status highly by their occupations, to which much of their time is devoted and their major life goals are pledged (Wong & Ko, 2009). Executives from Hong Kong, especially those in senior positions or those with more working experience, are considered to be information-rich as they have many stories to tell regarding how they manage impressions in their working life.

Hong Kong is also viewed as a fertile ground to study materialism and symbolic consumption, given its high degree of materialism, hedonism (Duruz, 2010; Tse, Belk, & Zhou, 1989) and enthusiastic pursuit of lifestyles and luxury brands (Ahuvia & Wong, 1995; Lo, Stalcup, & Lee, 2010; Tai & Tam, 1996). As Bourdieu (1984) explains, class distinction is very much manifested through mundane daily consumption and lifestyle choices. The post-colonial market of Hong Kong, where Western and Eastern cultures converge, offers a wide array of resources and consumption practices that act as class markers, in which people can pick and choose for the purpose of impression management.

In Goffman's (1959) term, the market of Hong Kong, being known as a shopping paradise for decades (Yeung, Wong, & Ko, 2004), provides a broad range of 'sign vehicles' for people to select and project their 'personal front', ranging from branded material possessions to taste-expressive enjoyment and status-laden activities (Joy et al., 2012; Phau & Prendergast, 2000). It is believed for Hong Kong people, the construction of the self, at least a part of it, is enacted through the consumption lifestyles, which denote as class markers in society (Chan, 2002). The cultural setting of Hong Kong therefore presents a desirable ground for investigating how consumption contributes to impression management when people advance in their career. Hong Kong is also the place where I as the researcher was born and brought up. Some participants were my schoolmates in the high school or university, while a few others are my past colleagues in the commercial sector. I share the similar socialisation background as them and we grew up in the same consumption market and culture. This commonality does not only provide access efficiency as rapports have already existed between us (Brewis, 2014), but also enables me to perform better reflexivity to make empathetic understanding on my participants' expressions and viewpoints. Our shared background also allowed more precise and deeper interpretation of the cultural meanings that my participants attach to the resources and practices used in impression management.

3.5.2 Sampling, participants, and access

3.5.2.1 Sampling size

The essence of an interpretive study lies in an in-depth understanding and thick descriptions of how people behave and what they think (Geertz, 1994). My study therefore is premised on the spirit to '*start small and stay real*' as proposed by Wells (1993). He encourages the forsaking of "high-level abstract representations" and the seeking of ground-level generalisations that actually work in *real events*. The sample size was therefore kept small since the focus of an interpretive approach is on credibility, richness and truthfulness, rather than generalisability and exhaustiveness (Francis et al., 2010; Mason, 2010). With its inductive and exploratory nature, this study recruited a sample of 10 participants through judgement sampling. The ten participants include six female and four male executives who have around 20 years of working experience and occupy senior positions in their corporations. They come from different professional backgrounds and have diverse experience in organisations that belong to different

industries and nations (details will be discussed in the subsequent sub-section ‘participants’). Their retrospective accounts of their long career trajectories serve to provide a temporal perspective to the study.

The recruitment of participants was guided by the combined principals of *theoretical saturation* and *data saturation* proposed by Saunders et al. (2018). This study has generated data that allowed adequate development of rich theoretical categories. The similarities and contrasts found between and within categories have amassed rich emerging themes that have the potential to be inductively developed into theories (Dey, 1999). In Appendix 3, I demonstrate the coding and interpretation process I went through by showing how my three stages of coding – *preliminary*, *interim* and *final* coding structures – evolve. Some codes were merged and re-arranged, while others were further segregated until coherent themes were developed in a way that revealed original theoretical insights (Saunders et al., 2018). As the table shows, the new codes are less exhaustive than the preliminary ones, but they are more focused with each comprising richer and ‘*thicker*’ data. The table also comprises a second column showing which *preliminary* codes are constituting the respective *interim* codes, from which further analysis was made to derive the *final* codes that signal theoretical contributions. In most cases, the development of the interim and final codes is supported by my reflective memos. These reflections denote my interpretation of data within and across codes, and how they relate to each other that may evidence or challenge existing theories.

In Table 2 below, I demonstrate how one set of my coding structure evolved and how I arrived at data saturation. Drawn from the data collected from my 1st to 4th participants, the *preliminary code* list revealed a diverse range of cultural resources adopted by junior and senior executives. More notably, as my data analysis in section 4.1 and 4.2 will show, junior executives rely more on ‘appearance’ (code 3.2) while senior executives emphasise ‘utterance’ for self-performance (code 3.3). As shown in my reflective memos in the second column, when the 5th to 7th participants were interviewed, the meanings of the two codes become more sophisticated upon merging with other related ones. New *interim codes* were then developed accordingly to show how ‘conspicuous appearance’ is regarded in earlier career as ‘uniforms’ to align with the perceived dress codes and constitutes a ‘taste of necessity’ (code /1.2). In contrast, ‘utterance’ emerges a subtle capital with which more senior executives manifest distinct competence as a ‘taste of liberty’ (/2.1). As more data were collected, the code ‘appearance’ also reflected layers

of complex meanings. As will be discussed in section 4.2.2, while senior executives treat appearance as a pre-requisite for impression management, they also enact a ‘feel for possible liberty’ to express personalized tastes through skilful orchestration of resources (code /2.2), such as mixing and matching of accessories. While the above three *interim codes* (/1.2, /2.1 and /2.2) reflect Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of ‘*taste*’ from necessity to freedom/liberty, his works and consumer studies that follow his works usually explore such divergence through studies of social class. My *final code* #01, however, unfolds the embodied transformation of the same individuals from *taste of necessity* to *taste of liberty* over stages of their career. Here, the shift in taste regime was observed on an embodied level instead of material acquisition only. This final code #01, as will be elucidated in section 6.1 in the conclusion chapter, implies a potential contribution to advance Goffman’s and Bourdieu’s theories as it introduces a temporal element to see how consumption evolves with workplace identities and habitus. Thereafter, data collected from the 8th to 10th participants continued to reinforce this new code and other final codes (#02 - #04) as shown in Appendix 3. As no new codes arose to develop new theoretical narratives, the data were found to be sufficiently saturated, and thus no more participants were recruited.

Table 2. An illustration on how codes evolve and data reach saturation when no new codes emerge.

Preliminary codes	Converted and merged from:	Interim codes (adding /)	Final codes (adding #) – theoretical contributions
<p>3.3 appearance- junior executives</p> <p>3.4 utterance and language – senior executives</p>	<p>3.3 appearance-junior 5.2 feel for Games –“sense” the dress code</p> <p>3.4 utterance and language – senior executives</p> <p>8.3 feel for the Games – mix and match fashion style 9 self-brand relationship 10 brand use-actual practices 12 individualistic differentiation within broader norms</p>	<p>/1.2 Appearance – uniform for conformity (taste of necessity)</p> <p>/2.1 Utterance – subtle capital (taste of liberty)</p> <p>/2.2 Appearance – orchestrating resources (taste of liberty)</p>	<p>#01 Shifting taste regime in the workplace from conspicuous taste of necessity to subtle taste of liberty</p> <p>p.s. the code was developed later into a core contribution which reveal “<i>the processual evolution of cultural capital</i>”</p>
Reflective memos at different coding stages			
<p>In the 1st to 4th participants, the initial code list became long but stable. Diverse use of cultural capital for establishing workplace identity between junior and senior executive is getting obvious. One conspicuous pair of opposing resources mentioned by almost all initial participants is the shifting of their reliance from ‘appearance’ to ‘utterance’.</p>	<p>When more participants (5th to 7th) were interviewed, the data increasingly show that junior executives treat grooming as <i>conspicuous ‘uniform’</i> as a safe option to achieve conformity to structural dress code – a kind of ‘taste of necessity’.</p> <p><i>Utterance</i> is regarded as a more subtle capital that has a higher signalling power in reflecting one’s workplace competence. Prudent utterance can only be earned through work exposures that contribute to structural affordance for enacting personal distinction – ‘taste of liberty’.</p> <p>At the same time, the code ‘appearance’ becomes more sophisticated and shows layers of observations when other codes accumulate more data and were (re)read together. These include those related to feel for the game, and changing sartorial sense towards brands, styles and the self (code 8.3, 9, 10, 12). Senior executives incorporate structural rules that enable them to sense the possible boundaries for idiosyncratic tastes in workplace grooming. While appearance is treated as a pre-requisite, senior executives also see successful grooming lies on one’s <i>liberal competence of orchestrating different resources</i>, reflecting a ‘taste of liberty’ enabled by corporeal capitals. A new set of Interim codes reflecting the above /1.2, /2.1 and /2.2 are thus developed (next column).</p>	<p>Novel to theory: While the three Interim codes reflect Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of taste from necessity to freedom/liberty, Bourdieu’s work and marketers who follow his work usually reflect the above through study of social class. My data however highlights the embodied transformation (from conspicuous appearance to subtle utterance and orchestrated tastes). Here, the shift in taste regime were observed on a corporeal level not just material acquisition.</p> <p>A new code #01- Shifting taste regime in the workplace from conspicuous taste of necessity to subtle taste of liberty is formed for theoretical development in later stage of analysis.</p> <p>Data collected from the 8th to 10th participants continue to contribute to the new Final code.</p>	

In addition, ‘stabilisation’ and copiousness are another two considerations I used to judge data saturation in this study. Through the iterative process of interviewing and coding, I realized that my coding was ‘*stabilised*’ (Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2017) compared with its rapid expansion and development in previous stages, and that more participants would not contribute to further ‘*meanings*’ pertaining to the study. At this stage, the *interim* and *final codes* shown in the Appendix 3 have not undergone further changes from the 8th participants onward, implying that subsequent data collected from both methods come to be coded within the same structure. Moreover, my participants were interviewed more than once, and they participated the walking-with study on multiple occasions. If more than 10 participants were recruited, the corpus of data collected would become too large for a thesis to handle.

In addition, saturation of data was deemed to be reached at the 10th participant because most categories or codes were *adequately supported* (Saunders et al., 2018). I have at least 4 cases to support each emerging category or code. Using the same coding structure depicted in Table 2 as an example, the first 4 participants expressed heavy reliance on ‘appearance’ for self-presentation in the early career. At the same time, all of them (and later all 10 participants) find that its importance gradually declined with the rising prominence of linguistic capital/utterance. The *interim codes* also observe evidence of nuanced findings. For example, despite the receding significance of appearance in self-enactment over time, half of the participants regard professional grooming as a basic requirement and they find it crucial in first encounter when other subtle performances are yet to be projected. As they matured in their career, 8 of my participants also find themselves gaining an aesthetic sense to synchronize diverse resources for impression formation instead of relying on independent consumption items. The rich number of cases in each supporting code together have established the overall theme of ‘processual evolution of cultural resources’ used in the workplace. These analyses demonstrate that my classified categories “have sufficient data to illustrate” the emerged theories (Saunders et al., 2018, p. 1895) and they are adequate “in each category to identify characteristics of concepts” for theory building (Morse, 2015, p.588). As suggested by Power et al. (2015), I can see *repetition* of stories and responses, as well as *shared themes* and *consensus* across my participants (Saunders et al., 2018; Turner, Barlow, & Ilbery, 2002). These recurrences signal that my sample of ten and the data generated have adequately reached the point of theoretical and data saturation.

3.5.2.2 Participants

Since my attempt is to build a biographical study on people's career, the participants were recruited based on a few criteria. Firstly, all of the ten participants possessed around twenty years of working experience. The extensive year of work is crucial so as to make sure they had experienced greater variety in their career path and life cycles, comprising diverse stages and milestones such as being promoted, changing departments, shifting corporations or industries, taking further studies, having their own families and children, or any benchmarking events that were particularly memorable and deemed impactful to their career or personal development. These dynamics can help shed light on my processual design and help reveal how consumption and work-related practices evolved with their career progression. As revealed in later chapters, all these mature executives had rich and appealing stories to tell, which allowed me to analyse on how they have constructed their self and created desirable impressions at different phases, especially at rites of passages (Gennep, 1960; Ibarra, 1999; Tansley & Tietze, 2013). Their pursuits for professional success revealed no short-cut, but comprised ups and downs, rewards and lessons, laughs and tears, as well as pride and shame. These episodes together have given insights into how different 'volume' and 'structure' of cultural capital affected their impression management over their work life.

As I aim to trace patterns of *changes* in the use of cultural capital in different occupational stages, the second criterion was that my participants were occupying senior positions in their corporation or their industries. 'Senior' means they were in supervisory positions with a group of sub-ordinates being under their recruitment and management. They also possessed influential decision-making authority which had impacts on the well-being of their corporations and subordinates. Through their narratives on how they climbed the career ladder, executives in senior positions helped me map out a 'hierarchy of positions' in the work fields. Such trajectory ladder of my participants set an important backdrop to understand how cultural capital and its changes played a role in position advancement and 'symbolic project of self' (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998b) over their career.

The third criterion regards my participants' professional or industrial backgrounds. The participants came from a broad range of industrial occupations, including auditors, sales directors, bankers, marketers, business developers or general managers. The origins of their

present and past corporations also vary, ranging from being locally-owned to China-invested, international and even governmental. This spectrum of background permitted my study to cross-compare differences in structural norms, which could be field-specific and results in different values of cultural capital and even ways of acquiring them. Some practices, competencies or mentality deemed appropriate or even highly regarded in one field or corporate culture may not be equally welcomed or valued in another. The professional diversity in my samples hence has facilitated the exploration of contextual differences. As I will discuss in the next chapter, even for participants with similar professions, the specific background of their companies (e.g. Western-based versus Chinese-based) could result in very different field cultures.

Apart from the above criteria, balance of views from both genders is also warranted with six females and four male executives being recruited. This is to ensure that gender differences in impression management are moderately accommodated (e.g. McCracken & Roth, 1989). Besides, personal backgrounds such as possessing post-graduate degrees, having overseas exposures due to study or work, having families and children, etc., also ensure greater dynamism in the sample set. These backgrounds might influence their values and viewpoints regarding structural rules and work identity.

The respective profiles of the ten participants with their career and personal background are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Career and personal background of the ten participants of this study.

Participants (in nicknames)	Work positions	Type of companies	Year of working Experience	Other background (e.g. overseas studies, with families)	Career history
Ada	senior brand manager	international fashion brand	20	overseas study	Ada joined the fashion industry as a marketing trainee of a famous Italian fashion brand. After a few years of training in Italy, Ida continued to work with a few other luxury brands in European countries and Hong Kong and is promoted to senior brand manager of a well-known franchisee of global fashion brands.
Alisa	senior partner	international audit firm	20	married, with two children	Alisa pursues her entire career in the audit industry and worked for the same global company throughout. She has served different types of clients in Hong Kong and in Asia. She becomes the senior partner for years. She also serves as the chairlady of a well-regarded accounting association which gains pride for her company.
Anna	senior finance manager	mass transport corporation	20	married, with two children	Anna pursues her treasury and financial career in the same conglomerate throughout her career. She started as a trainee and has gone through different promotions in various departments until she becomes the senior financial manager in recent years.
Elise	director of compliance	investment firm	20	married, with two children	Elise started her career as an audit trainee in a big4 audit firm before she entered the compliance industry. She served a few European firms and was promoted to regional deputy director in her early 30s. Recently, she turns to work as a compliance director of a Chinese-owned investment firm. By the time of this study, she is planning to embark her own small business in education.
Fion	senior finance manager	governmental department	20	married, with two children	Fion worked as a finance trainee and then an assistant manager in a listed transportation company. She later joined the civil service as a senior manager overseeing public funds and their investment portfolio.

Jenny	financial controller	regional household brand and retailer	20	overseas study, married, with one child	Jenny joined a big4 audit firm in Hong Kong after graduated from Canada and United States. She later worked for a regionally reputable retail brand as a finance manager, during which she obtained the professional accounting license. She shifted to other corporations briefly but returned to the retail brand as financial controller for years upon invitation from her previous employer. She is one of the few senior management who worked for many years in the company.
Cyrus	sales director	software solution house	20	married, with two children	Cyrus studied statistics and joined the finance solution industry as a sales executive. His career developed steadily in the same company. He experienced incremental promotions over the past 20 years and is at present the sales director overseeing the sales and IT teams that serve medium to large clients.
Tim	local head	investment firm	19	overseas study, married, with two children	Tim worked in the accounting industry as a junior executive and obtained the professional license before he studied MBA in the UK. He then pursued his dream career in the investment industry. After joining Western firms for more than 10 years, he worked in a Chinese-owned investment firms in recent years and is now the regional director heading the Hong Kong office.
Peter	vice-president	a regulatory body	20	overseas study	Peter joined the accounting industry in his early career. After obtaining the professional license, he pursued his MBA in the US. Turning down a sought-after offer from a reputable investment bank, he chose to work as a manager and then as a vice-president of a regulatory body in Hong Kong.
Ricky	senior director of business development	an American hardware solution firm	19	overseas work experience, married, with two children	Ricky joined a US blue-chip machine-maker upon his graduation as an industrial engineer. He gradually picked up vendor-relation and sales- training duties as a six sigma blackbelt professional. He was seconded to work in the US, Beijing, Shanghai and Singapore over 12 years during which he experienced fast-track promotions. He was relocated back to Hong Kong and worked for an American robotics company as deputy director of business development.

3.5.2.3 Access

As mentioned, the participants of this study were recruited mainly through my own acquaintance. A few participants were my schoolmates in the high school or university, while a few others are my past colleagues in the commercial sector. Some of them were from the same group of executives with whom I conducted ethnographic interviews for my master thesis. Many are still in contact for annual gatherings or other special events. As life narrative takes a long time to conduct while senior executives are busy, being acquainted with the participants would encourage cooperation. The established relationship between us also eased the need for rapport building (Brewis, 2014). Compared to talking to strangers, my participants would also find it more comfortable and confident to share with me their genuine feelings and emotions, including shames and lessons at work.

When I contacted my participants, I explained my research objectives which aimed to understand how they built their self-identity over their career through different means, resources and behaviour. I seldom used the term ‘impression management’, ‘cultural capital’ or ‘practices’ at the time of initial contact or at the early period of interviews as they sounded too academic and technical which might distort the natural atmosphere of conversation. Instead, I used phrases like ‘establish your self-image’, ‘create desirable impressions’, ‘build capabilities and competencies’, etc. To manage their expectations and their commitment as my participants, I also made it clear to them that the sit-down interviews could take as long as two hours, which would also be preceded by or followed by walking-with interviews at times and places they found convenient.

After illustrating the *setting* and *sampling design* of this study, I will now explain the details of the two inquisitive methods used: biographic narrative inquiry and walking-with method.

3.5.3 Biographic narrative inquiry

The biographic narrative inquiry was employed to understand changes in self-presentation in the workplace among my ten participants. This method mainly draws on the essence of life story interviews (Atkinson, 1998) and the oral history method (Davies, 2011; Elliott & Davies, 2007; Janesick, 2010). It has been widely used for research related to the *self* since they allow the history and experience of individuals to be recollected and constructed in ways that enable people to make sense of their life (Davies, 2011; Elliott & Davies, 2007; Shankar, Elliott, & Fitchett, 2009).

As Davies (2011) points out, a host of similar terms regarding ways of inquiries have been used to “locate oral-based historical inquiry” (p. 471). These range from life history to retrospective personal narrative, life story (Hering, 2007), experience narrative (Schrager, 1983) and so on. The ubiquitous emergence of diverse but similar methodological approaches also demonstrates the usefulness and proficiency of soliciting biographical accounts of people’s stories, events and memories. The method is found effective especially in investigating memories, understanding historical events (Davies, 2011) and studying how people construct their reflexive *self* over their lifetime through consumption (Shanker 2009). Story-telling techniques about one’s life or a life course yields high efficacy in understanding the ‘self’ in the socio-cultural frame of reference. McAdam (1997) acknowledges that when a ‘story’ comprising a person’s identity is constructed by that person, it will have its constitutive meanings within culture. Similarly, career studies also find the biographical narrative inquiry very effective in studying work identities and leadership, especially during transitions (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Ibarra et al., 2010). This approach also benefits the study of how objects are incorporated and integrated in the life of people (e.g. Lunt and Livingstone, 1992), and thus can help investigate ‘people-object’ relationships which is one of the focuses of my study.

Compared to quantitative methods, verbal reports find their strength in providing an emic perspective of action by letting participants *explain* and *account* for their own and others’ behaviour (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994). In other words, narrative inquiries allow researchers to collect data regarding the reasons, motives and meanings behind their behaviours. In this study, for instance, my participants’ narratives helped explicate *why* they used or unused certain resources or practices for self-construction (e.g. *being silent* or *asking good questions* under Chapter 4 on ‘language competence’), so that I could know the

meanings implied by those sign-vehicles in the working fields of my participants (e.g. their industry or corporate culture). According to Squire's (2013) review, narrative inquiry also finds its *constructive power* in building life stories through experience-centred and socio-culturally centred approach. This also echoes the 'contextual' and 'field-specificity' needs of my research. With reference to my own experience, my previous master study also proved that the biographical narrative approach has successfully identified five distinctive stages of self-construction through appearance management among fresh graduates even within their short career (Mak, 1999).

In this study, biographic narratives have allowed me to capture important events, milestones or experiences of the executives through which they make sense of their past and more significantly, frame their present actions and future anticipation (Elliott & Davies, 2007). Their memories, as well as their feelings and reflections of those memories, became the means by which I could view the transitional use of cultural capital over the career of my participants. The oral pathways obtained have facilitated my ability to trace my participants' patterns of consumption and work practices alongside the development of their career (research question 1). Their retrospective account and interpretation of what they saw, what they did and how they felt about their workplace and the people there enabled me to understand the *sources* and *processes* from which they learn the *meanings* of different resources and practices used for self-presentation (research question 2). Through the depth and breadth of the biographic narratives, I came to know more precisely which kinds of socialisation were more at stake, and whether their relative influence varied over time.

3.5.3.1 Contents

As I was using an inductive and interpretive approach, participants were positioned as the main speakers while I, as the interviewer, monitored the broad story development with relevant "hunches" and probes (Schouten, 1991; Silverman, 2013). Flexibility was deliberately built into the interview guide to allow new, interesting, and *never-thought-of* insights to emerge from the free expression of the informants.

A "funnel" approach was adopted to start the interviews with rough, foreshadowed problems and progressively tune into focuses that are of interest and importance to emerge from the real ground (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Hammersley, 2012). In order to build rapport with interviewees, qualitative researchers such as Spradley (1979) and McCracken (1988)

suggest that long interviews should start with “grand-tour” questions which are less sensitive to the inner psyche and can help start dialogues. My participants were thus asked to give a brief introduction on their ‘career journey’ which comprised of key stages in their career path. It was then followed by a section aimed to understand their working context such as what departments or branches they were working in and how they perceived and felt about their industrial and corporate culture. These backdrops are important as people’s behaviours should not be treated as an isolated instance, but are culturally contextualised (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994).

To address the first research question, participants were asked to share whether they found impression management and image-building important in their career pursuits. This helped rationalise the effort they paid to establish the self as part of their work life, which is the essential focus of this study. They were then invited, with probes when needed, to narrate their career “life stories” in detail, particularly pertaining to the changes in their “self” at different stages of their career, as well as the corresponding resources and practices they employed to project desirable impressions, such as consumption styles, work practices or any other strategies and tactics. Above all, changes in cultural capital for self-presentation that reflected rites of passage (Gennep, 1960; Schouten, 1991) and milestones in their career were the focus. This part of the interview also covered the audiences or stakeholders who were implicated, as well as their related influence on how executives perceive themselves. This helped explore the roles of ‘others’ in self-presentation.

To address the second research question, participants were encouraged to share their socialisation process and identify different sources from which they learnt about the meanings of different consumption choices or activities relevant for image-building at work. Probes relating to some primary and secondary socialisation were used when needed. Participants were also asked to share any successful cases and lessons learnt in their course of creating desirable impressions. These were not limited to their own experience but also included how they perceived other colleagues’ impression management, including their behaviour at work and in their private life (if they knew) as well as their successful stories and lessons. These exemplars also became my participants’ own archive of knowledge and competence.

Overall, the style of interviews was kept as open-ended as possible. Since the study aims to inductively explore the under-researched area of impression management in the workplace,

the data collection strategy is designed to let unprecedented themes emerge as natural as possible. Therefore, only guided questions were introduced and participants were encouraged to broach topics in their own way (Schouten, 1991; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). The main spirit was to let participants take the lead to talk about any people, events and feelings that made up their memories and trajectories in their career.

3.5.3.2 Interview guide: the technical and practical versions

The development of the interview guide for the biographic narrative inquiry involved two stages. The first stage is more *technical* in the sense that questions were drafted based on theoretical substantiation (Appendix 1 for Version 1 of interview guide). The research purposes behind each question were also stipulated with some key words informed by my recurrent reflection during and after each interview (the right column of Appendix 1). This stage was designed to make sure that data required to address my two core research questions were decently and fully covered. Theoretical terms like impression management, self-presentation and capitals could therefore be found. However, while such a version is appropriate to ensure theoretical coverage, the questions would appear too formal, too scholarly or even incomprehensible to my participants. It would also create a distance between the researched and the researcher, and hence might undermine the quality of data collection especially when an interpretive approach treasures naturalistic settings and spontaneous responses in the real world.

Drawing on the first technical stage, therefore, a more practical or ‘down-to-earth’ version of interview guide was then developed for actual use during the face-to-face interviews. Appendix 2 shows the actual questions that I used in the interviews and they were adjusted and improved based on the first two to three interviews. The questions were converted from the technical and theoretical manner into a more down-to-earth tone using day-to-day wordings. This practical version did not only expedite communication with participants and avoid misunderstanding, but also helped build rapport with the participants in a more natural and colloquial atmosphere. The right column of the table notes down again the purposes behind and possible probes for each question. This was to allow me as the interviewer to bear in mind the core objective and function of each question so that I could be reflexive and more flexible in making necessary adjustments to the wording and order of questions at actual interviews without losing the main focus.

3.5.3.3 *Venues, recording and fieldnotes*

Participants were interviewed face to face in venues that they found comfortable and private, which ranged from their offices to their homes, private corners of club houses and restaurants where we have had lunch, tea or dinner. These sedentary interviews were sometimes preceded by or followed by walking-with interviews when opportunistically it involved routes to and from their office and to and from the dining venues.

As my participants have had rich working experiences, most interviews were extensive and lasted for at least 1.5 hours to 2 hours. The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed and translated mainly by myself so that first hand understanding could be captured, and memories on the tones and manners of my participants (such as hesitation vs a speedy response; being delighted vs annoyed) could also be noted for analysis. Reflective journals or field notes were written up shortly by me, followed by a full transcription of the recordings later. This process had three purposes: firstly, writing quick journals right after interviews could help draw out worth-attended insights while memories of the narrative conversations were still fresh; secondly, to facilitate theoretical sampling, the initial insights could map out possible theory development that gives guidance on the subsequent choices of the informants; thirdly, preliminary insights could help form an investigation focus for subsequent “walking-with” interviews.

3.5.4 Walking-with interviews

To complement the emic perspectives collected through biographic narrative interviews, this study also introduced the “walking-with” method to allow me to participate in the routines of my participants while capturing their embodied behaviour which was not easily achieved through sedentary interviews. By accompanying the same group of participants to and from work or to and from lunch or dinner, the “walking-with” method has achieved at least two purposes: 1) it allowed immediate access to the environment my participants immerse in as they engage with their everyday work life. This has stimulated lively conversations regarding their quotidian life, especially on issues that one might omit, fail to speak about or that do not simply pop up in people’s ‘memory’ during the long sit-down interviews (Vannini, 2016). 2) The walking process also provided an *observable* and *moving* context that resonated with bodily rhythms, moving paces, facial expression, use of limbs and other gestures of

participants to generate data complementary to verbal accounts. The observations included how my participants and other working people on-the-go dressed up for work, patronised shops, walked the pavements and malls, used their mobile phones, etc. Additionally, the walking-with also enabled me to capture my participants' embodied sense, resonance and feelings that went along with what they narrated about their career. These bodily responses emitted affective signs such as comfort or discomfort, hesitation or certainty, being at ease or excited, being annoyed or feeling indifferent to, etc. Observations on these embodied gestures help unveil an "*etic perspective in action*" that manifests the internalised cultural norms, values and beliefs (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994). Contextual observations not only give a more naturalistic and real-time account than interview dialogues, but also address the inability of respondents to report fully the complexity of their lives (Elliott & Jankel-Elliott, 2003).

3.5.4.1 The use of walking methods in social sciences

In recent years, a small but increasing number of studies in social sciences, health studies, geography and in particular psychogeography, have used walking methods to understand how people resonate and make sense of their physical surroundings (Carpiano, 2009; Evans & Jones, 2011; Richardson, 2015; Shortell & Brown, 2016). The method has been termed in different ways including 'walking interviews' (Ingold & Lee, 2008; Jones, Bunce, Evans, Gibbs, & Hein, 2008), 'mobile methods' (Fincham, McGuinness, & Murray, 2010; Hein, Evans, & Jones, 2008), 'go-along approach' (Carpiano, 2009; Kusenbach, 2003), etc. to refer to the technique with which participants are invited to walk around the physical environment while their views, memories and feelings are being explored through conversations with and observations of the researchers.

Compared to sedentary narrative methods, walking with interviews have proven to be effective in generating richer data through providing contextual prompts and probes triggered by the physical surroundings (Evans & Jones, 2011; Kusenbach, 2003). The method gives greater access to people's attitudes and knowledge about the environment as both the researcher and the participant are more exposed to multi-sensory stimulations (Adams & Guy, 2007). It has been proved to be proficient into bringing participants back to their life histories through the physical communities they have 'walked' by before (Capstick, 2015; Carpiano, 2009; Miaux et al., 2010). Other social research like psychology on urban studies also benefit from the method in remapping the historical evolution of the cityscape so as to unveil socio-

cultural changes (Bonnett, 2015; Degen & Rose, 2012). The method also largely facilitates the understanding of how people make sense of and build socio-spatial connections with the neighbourhood (Clark & Emmel, 2010).

3.5.4.2 The use of physical environment in consumer studies

In consumer research, the physical landscape has also been invoked to stimulate insights and consumer narratives. These studies range from accompanied shopping (King & Dennis, 2006; Lowrey, Otnes, & McGrath, 2005; Otnes, McGrath, & Lowrey, 1995), to retail ethnographies (Healy, Beverland, Oppewal, & Sands, 2007; Joy, Wang, Chan, Sherry, & Cui, 2014; Peñaloza, 1998) and home-based ethnographies (Coupland, 2005; Elliott & Jankel-Elliott, 2003; Venkatesh, Stolzoff, Shih, & Mazumdar, 2001). However, as Shortell and Brown (2014) assert, “everyday mobility on the streets and public spaces of neighbourhoods is such a ubiquitous part of urban life and culture that it is often overlooked” (p.1). Encouraging walking ethnography, Cheng (2014) also believes that the ‘ordinariness’ of everyday urban life should be understood through street-level walking and submergence into its material surroundings. Indeed, except very few studies such as Hansson (2015) who explores family purchases in mobile, not many consumer researchers try to walk the pavements and routes to the stores or to work. Instead, they reserve their attention and focuses on the places of retail or home consumption only. Perhaps this is understandable given how research studies are constructed and the need to subscribe to neat study designs where the consumer-participant is the pivotal focus. Yet, it is surprising that routes to sites of consumption as an essential part of people’s quotidian routines have been ignored given that tastes, distinctions and consumption practices are omnipresent on the street, on route to home, to retail store and to places of work. In modern cities, mobility in fact reflects a lifestyle choice that allows people to temporarily “take possession” of urban spaces according to their heart’s desire (Shortell & Brown, 2016, p.3). The choice can be expressed through the pathways people pick to walk, as well as consumption choices they patronise along the way. In short, ‘walking’ is a way of living, forming a genuine and mundane part of life which should have been drawing more attention in consumer research.

3.5.4.3 Using the walking-with method to explore the work self in this study

Pertaining to my study which focuses on self-construction at work over time, the streets and malls, with shops, restaurants, boutiques, clubs, cafes and services that the executives pass by and consume every day, acted as ‘catalysts for speech’ (Miaux et al. 2010, p. 1168). They

helped recall memories that would “otherwise ignored, forgotten, missed or marginalised” (Vannini, 2016, p. 1) in the desk-based narration. The “go-along” approach (Kusenbach, 2003) has provided a reflexive platform for my participants to account for their “life history” in relation to their quotidian working surroundings (Miaux et al., 2010) and stimulated ‘critical nostalgia’ (Bonnett, 2015). In this sense, the walking-with became another platform of narrative inquiries, but it was conducted in a mobile form. In addition, in my study, the walking environment was not only a physical probe to elicit rich discussion, but was itself the core element of investigation since the consumption choices available en-route are also the sign-vehicles and resources for impression management (research question 1). Furthermore, the cityscape also supplies plentiful learning sources for distinguishing tastes and lifestyles (research question 2). Through observation and practical consumption experiences at boutiques and restaurants, executives acquire the way people dress, dine, pose and interact with others. As discussed, the accompanied walk itself was also a kind of participant observation, allowing me to observe the embodied responses of my participants towards their familiar vicinity. Their body gestures, facial expressions, walking paces, etc. also provided me cues on the extent of their sentiment associated with what they said (e.g. like or dislike, hesitated or being certain, pleased or frustrated, feeling serious or at ease).

3.5.4.4 Designing the walking-with method for this study

Making appointments and opportunistic approach

The walking-with appointments with my participants were sometimes leveraged by opportunistic approach (Buchanan, Boddy, & McCalman, 2014). Some of these interviews were not formally pre-set but by capturing the short routes to and from lunch at which the narrative interviews were conducted. A few other similar opportunities also came up during the back-home routes or dinner routes after the sedentary interviews were conducted at the participants’ offices. A few more other en-route interviews were purposefully arranged as follow-up interviews after the narrative inquiries were done for a few days or weeks. Such arrangements provided gaps for me to refresh and reflect on what was said and perhaps omitted in the preceding narrative interviews.

Regarding the question of ‘access’, unlike the rather lengthy narrative interviews, the walking-with invitations were more efficient in seeking cooperation as they are in fact part of people’s daily routines. Compared with participant observation in the sites of work, which

necessitates workplace endorsement or even temporary employment, the walking-with method is apparently easier to arrange since the to and from work/meal routes are only private routines of participants.

I also purposefully initiated to wait for participants at their office lobbies before our lunch interviews or back-home walking interviews rather than meeting them elsewhere. I also initiated to walk them back to their offices after lunch interviews instead of departing from the dining place. Such intentional arrangement allowed me to create extra routes or lengthen the routes and time for walking-with interviews. In addition, this often turned into invitations to pay short visits to my participants' offices, as a few of them would say over the phone: "Hey, as you are near my office now, why not come up for a while and take a look at my workplace or have a coffee before we go?" These spontaneous initiations let me gain access and conduct brief observation of their workplaces, including their office structures, interior designs, as well as their own office displays which might reflect their work self (Tian & Belk, 2005). These cues often became probes of broaching topics in subsequent interviews. For instance, I observed that the office of my participant, Ada, was quite empty even before 6pm, and I asked why most colleagues could go home so early given the workaholic culture of Hong Kong. She was then prompted to talk about the changing culture of her corporation which stressed the norm on work-life balance in recent year. Unlike before, 'working late' no longer meant diligence but gradually became a social *stigma* (Goffman, 1963) of being 'inefficient' and 'incompetent'. Similar opportunities arose in other interview appointments and become an extra, valuable data source to broaden my scope of investigation.

[Questions in the walking-with interviews](#)

During the en-route conversations, some follow-up questions subsequent to previous narrative interviews would be raised to seek further clarifications or deeper explanations. This also helped check whether additional data – extra memories and feelings about their career and work self might spring up due to the bodily engagement in the physical surroundings nearby their workplaces. Other than the follow-up purposes, the walking-with interview itself was also designed with a series of questions that were route-based or environment-driven. To quote a few, I asked the following questions to let my participants speak about their experiences with the environment around their workplaces. These questions include:

- *“How do you feel when you are walking around here?”*
- *“Do you alter your routes, or do you take the same route every day? What makes the changes?”*
- *“As you pass by these areas almost every day, what do you see and feel and do along the way? Any differences between the to-work and from-work routes? Why?”*
- *“Do you visit any of these shops? Have you change your choices over the years? Why?”*
- *“Does the vicinity look the same throughout the years? Do you notice any changes around here? Do they remind you of any part of your career? Do they remind you of any people?”*
- *“Does this route and its surrounding differ much from those of your last job? Why is it so?”*

Whenever suitable, I also sought immediate evidence from the ‘field’ – ‘right here’ along the routes and vicinity where the walking was taking place. For instance, I have asked:

- *“I briefly understand what you mean but I need imagination. Can you find some examples (of shops, of grooming styles, etc.) now around us that reflect what you said?”*
- *“When you say you seldom visit the local café with your colleagues, do you mean ‘this’ type of restaurants? (pointing to a certain café in a close distance to us)”*

The instant exemplars available en-route have largely facilitated my participants’ explanations and my understanding. These visual cues also helped provoke richer conversations. The walking-with experience demonstrates that the streets and routes are indeed themselves a potent source of acquiring cultural sense of consumption.

[Recording the walking-with interviews and post-walking journals](#)

The conversations during the walking-with were audio-taped by either a smartphone or an audio-recorder as much as possible. By using these devices, I have been cautious of my way of holding them so as not to disturb the natural *walking while talking* gestures between the participants and myself. As one might imagine, considering the noise and other disturbances of the cityscape and the movement made by both the participants and the interviewer, the recording quality was not as good as in the quiet room-based interviews. Post-walking journals therefore becomes important in helping me recall on some ‘lost’ or ‘unclear’

conversations. To avoid the issues further, transcriptions of almost all walking-with interviews were also done in less than two days so as to capture most of the verbatim before my memories on some ‘blurred’ conversations drifted away.

In most cases, the two methods of biographic narrative and walking-with interviews have complemented each other in building rapport between my participants and me. As a matter of fact, my own feeling is that rapport was even easier to achieve in the walking-with interviews than in room-based ones, as the tangible surroundings with shops and pedestrians in mobile were in fact providing ice-breaking probes. Tactical questions I used and found helpful to warm-up the naturalistic interviews include:

- *“Do you usually take this route to and from office?”*
- *“Wow, it appears that there are quite a range of good food around here. How often do you pick this mall for lunch? Do you come with colleagues?”*
- *“There seems to be quite a few nice shops around. Do you usually stop by and buy things here? What kind of things do you buy usually? Why and why not?”*

Despite its potential values in consumer research, the approach is not without challenges. Environmental factors such as noise level, busyness of the street and weather conditions have inevitably generated sensory issues and distractions, not to mention issues with audio-recording. Prolonged walking might also cause fatigue especially amidst the busy city routes during rush hours. In addition, recording the interviews might have disturbed the naturalistic setting and made my participants feel awkward and embarrassed. To overcome these disturbances, I used audio-recorders rather than smartphones which yielded better results, as they were slim enough to be discreetly held in my palms while its recording power and quality were stronger. To compensate for the imperfect recording quality, I took post-walking reflexive journals or fieldnotes to help me put back together pieces of lost or blurred data. Despite these potential challenges, the walking-with interview is a promising method as it has brought insightful data to this study and emerged as a desirable and complementary approach to traditional methods.

Although the walking-with method is receiving increasing attention in social studies, it is still not popularly used in consumer research. In Chapter 6.2, I will share my reflections about using this method, including its theoretical and operational potentials, as well as inspirations I have drawn from it as a growing researcher, practical obstacles I have encountered and how some of them might be overcome.

3.5.5 Analysis: cross-comparison among methods and data

To further exploit the strengths of using multi-methods, the biographic narrative and the walking-with interviews were conducted not sequentially but alternately as some successful qualitative research has done (e.g. Arnould & Price, 1993). Continuous improvement could then be made by simultaneous data collection and interpretations. Priori themes emerged were used not to restrict but to guide and improve future data collection (Schouten, 1991).

Data analysis was mainly grounded in the iterative processes of scripts transcription, coding, categorising and abstraction of data, so as to access mutuality and uniqueness of findings (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry Jr, 1989). Data generated from both the narrative inquiry and the walking-with method were compiled and triangulated, both within the same informants and across them. Constant comparison and contrasting data was done to look for patterns of similarities and ‘disjuncture’ (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991). This is particularly important to this study as it needs to identify patterns of using and disusing different cultural resources and practices, as well as the reasons for the change at various stages of self-transitions (research question 1). For example, some highly recognised *competence* or *sign-vehicles* in early career stages, such as appearance and diligence, are found to become less salient when a person gets more senior. Apart from addressing my first research question, constant comparison of codes, categories and themes also benefitted my discovery of the dynamics in the *learning processes* (research question 2), from which different ‘sources’ of socialisation were found.

3.5.5.1 *The coding process*

As this study is committed to inductive analysis informed by its interpretive approach, the process goes from the particular, detailed data (e.g. the transcripts with verbatim contributed by participants) to the general layer i.e. codes and themes (Creswell, 2012). All the transcripts were coded in detail by hand with the assistance of the *headings* function of Microsoft word for categorisation and retrieval purposes. Empty columns were spared on the right to insert codes or any thinking notes adjacent to the raw data. Softwares like NVivo or Leximencer were tried but were found not very helpful as quotes from interviews that suggested similar potential themes did not always use similar words or phrases. Human reading and interpretation by myself as the interviewer were found more reliable and indeed

more effective in this study since I was the one who made direct contact and interactions with the participants.

The coding process has taken references from Maxwell (2005) who recommends that data should be organised into both 'theoretical' and 'organisational' categories. As he points out, theoretical categories refer to those that connect to concepts and ideas informed by literature reviews and the theoretical frameworks used in the study, whereas organisational categories refer to those that reflect themes arising from data. Having said that, Maxwell (2005) also stresses both categorisation directions should aim at developing theories that can make contributions to existing knowledge. My coding process was also inspired by the *open coding* and *axial coding* concepts of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 2017). The codes developed in the earlier phases were more like *open coding* as they comprised of mainly independent ideas, people, activities or events. In my subsequent re-reading of the transcripts alongside the first set of codes, the idea of *axial coding* helped me make connections and linkages between categories based on which codes were merged or re-organised into related layers. This process became important for bigger coherent themes to arise for theory building while they were substantiated by related sub-themes and empirical data.

As this is an inductive study, my initial coding includes both categories mentioned by Maxwell (2005). They are comprised of organisational codes that emerged from scratch from the data (e.g. *dining, networking, appearance, leveraging space, diligent, etc.*), as well as theoretical codes that were inspired from the literature review, covering codes such as: *resources used by junior/senior executives for forming impressions, sources of secondary socialisation, structural rules, social capital, etc.* The initial codes were then further separated into different codes, or re-categorised into major- and sub-codes as more data came in. Appendix 3 shows the extensive list of codes created towards the last stage of data analysis. For example, resources used respectively by junior and senior executives were later separated. Similarly, the code of '*resources for impression management*' were broken into 14 different types of resources. Same coding development also happened to '*sources for acquiring cultural capital*'. A total of 12 broad codes were identified while each usually have sub-codes. For instance, code 3.0 'Resources for impression management' was split into sub-codes 3.1 to 3.14, including for example 3.3 – *Resources: Appearance* and 3.4 - *Resources: Utterance and Language*. Some sub-codes were enriched later with more data from which

further thematic categories were generated, e.g. *3.4 Resources: Utterance and Language* were having sub-codes like *3.42: asking the right questions* and *3.44: keeping quiet*.

Sometimes, the same verbatim were double-coded as they bore the potential of reflecting more than one theme. This happened especially in the early and middle stage of data analysis when the final themes were yet to be decided. After repeated rounds of reading and re-reading the transcripts under each coding category, themes which were deemed more important to my participants, and those that were more insightful or more ‘unexpected’ in an inductive study were identified for further theory development. It was through this on-going process of breaking down and merging of codes and prior themes that the study has come up with its main findings and theories. The corresponding themes chosen will be presented and discussed in extensive details in Chapter 4 and 5 which address the two research questions respectively.

3.5.6 Reflection

This last section of methodology reviews three areas that affect the robustness and trustworthiness of the design of this study. I will first review my role as an interpretive researcher, followed by the ethical considerations introduced in this study, as well as the validity and reliability issues addressed in the design.

3.5.6.1 The role of an interpretive researcher

As the interpretive approach values cooperation and interaction between researchers and the subjects or people under research, it would inevitably involve the issue of subjectivity. However, I understand such subjectivity should rest on the view of the *subjects* I study – the senior executives, rather than that of myself as the researcher. Their native’s point of view should be honoured when I interpret what they say and feel. As Geertz (1973) puts it, researchers should see social phenomena from the viewpoints of the cultural subjects, so as to identify their subjective experience in specific social contexts. My main task as a researcher therefore is to get an understanding on what things, people and events meant to my participants within their frame of reference – which can be very much constituted by the fields they engaged in and their ‘feel for the game’ about it. I should also be reminded that impartiality of social researchers is not easy to be totally eliminated since the researchers and the researched are not discretely separated but should be cooperative and interactive to co-create a research process. Researchers should instead suspend their presuppositions and learn

“the ways of thinking and feeling, and modes of action, characteristics of the culture they are investigating” (Hammersley, 2012, p. 27, 29). So, instead of trying to reduce subjectivity totally, I attempted to recognise its potential weaknesses and avoided letting my presumptions - especially those that stemmed from my own career trajectories and theoretical understanding - to override my participants’ experiences and influence my interpretation of the data. I tried my best to comprehend my subjects’ world with their lens and minds while reflecting on my own career trajectory. Recruiting acquaintances as participants therefore could help me see their world easier as I understand their background. In fact, the essence of narrative inquiry, which involves two-way exchange of views, also lies on the co-construction of narratives between the researched and the researchers (Frisch, 1990; Squire, 2013). In addition, introducing dual methods to my methodological design also helped reduce prejudiced views as data collected from different settings are compared and contrasted.

3.5.6.2 Ethical consideration

Ethical issues can arise at different stages in the course of research (Bryman & Bell, 2011) and it is my duty to ensure I have paid all efforts to uphold ethical integrity in my study. Bryman and Bell (2011) and Easterby-smith et al. (2008) have pointed out some ethical principles for conducting social and management research. I will discuss how I have addressed those principles that are more relevant to the nature of my study, namely, bringing no harm to participants, protecting privacy of participants and confidentiality of data, obtaining fully informed consent of participants, avoiding deception about research aims and affiliation, honesty and transparency in communicating non-misleading findings.

Most the above principles are pertaining to protecting the well-being of the participants, who sacrificed their time and effort to supply me with information and revealed their history, their thinking, as well as their views on other people (like colleagues or supervisors), corporations or institutes they worked for or had come into contact with, as well as their social values and visions. While these views, comments and the described inter-personal relationships were important data to address my research questions, exposures of these information to any stakeholders of my participants at work may cause potential ‘harm’ and risks to their well-being at work. Though this study did not involve institutional coordination, inquiries into workplace issues inevitably required my participants to reveal their experiences of power struggles. My main duty to achieve most of the above ethical principles, especially ‘*no harm*’, ‘*privacy*’ and ‘*confidentiality*’, is to ensure the actual identity of my participants would not

be disclosed directly or be easily speculated. To conceal their identities, only pseudonyms are used. As some participants are occupying very senior positions in well-known entities, the organisations they worked or are working for are also made anonymous. Only the industry types were mentioned in my reporting.

To ensure that my participants were fully informed of my study, the aims of the research, the project's nature (a PhD thesis without funding involved), the intended use of the data (for academic purposes) and how they would be kept confidential (anonymity for participants and organisations mentioned) were explained to them clearly, after which their consent to contribute were obtained. In the consent form, their rights to discontinue participation at any time, or to refuse portions of the data from being presented were also made clear.

Regarding *honesty* and *transparency* in reporting non-misleading information, I have shared most of my summarised themes with my participants to enable them to cross-check and validate if my interpretations of their narratives and views were fairly and genuinely presented.

3.5.6.3 Data quality: a matter of Validity and Reliability

To ensure robustness of my research design and the quality of my data, it is important for me to attend to the issues of validity and reliability. Unlike positivistic studies, which emphasizes causality, representativeness and replicability of research, interpretive researchers view validity as “more closely associated with meaningful analysis” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p.27) that can bring convincing stories about the reality (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993). As Bryman and Bell (2011) review, one type of validity that most constructionist research fares well is *ecological validity*. It refers to whether the research is relevant and applicable to the real everyday life of people, which is usually achieved through data collection carried out in naturalistic settings, as opposed to artificial ones (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

In most cases, qualitative researchers seldom demarcate validity from reliability clearly like what the positivists do. Rather, they usually focus on discussing ‘reliability’ and believe that the soundness of interpretive research should rest on the overall *believability* of its data and their interpretations (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). Similarly, Webster and Mertova (2007) also attribute the quality of a narrative research to the ‘trustworthiness’ of transcriptions, which is also referred to as ‘credibility’ by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Despite different terms

used, these notions all point at making the research *convincing* to readers (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993), so that they believe interpretive studies can authentically reflect the social reality. Other interpretivists also emphasise rich and thick description of data so that the genuine phenomenon can be presented and readers can be drawn into the world of the people under research (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013).

To achieve ‘believability’, Easter-Smith et al. (2008) suggest it can only be reached through ‘*transparency*’ of the method. This demands researchers to explicate in detail all the steps and decisions involved in their methodological designs. These details range from the choice of participants to gaining access of them, and all the way to the presentation of the interpreted data. In this chapter, especially in section 3.5, the transparency of my research design is largely demonstrated through the detailed illumination of why and how I designed and implemented the two methods – biographic narrative interviews and walking-with respectively. In section 3.5.1, I have elucidated why the workplace in Hong Kong is a suitable setting for temporal exploration of impression management, as well as why and how the group of senior executives are selected (section 3.5.2). I have also detailed the access issues and why sharing common socio-cultural background and being acquainted with my participants help enrich my data and interpretation of their meanings. The operational details of the two methods, including how the questions were set to address research objectives and how they were audio-recorded were also demonstrated (section 3.5.3 and 3.5.4). The naturalistic settings of the walking-with method are also designed to attain ecological validity and to allow participant observation on embodied data. It follows that the analysis approach, including sorting, coding, categorising and reading the transcripts back and forth for cross-comparison, was also explained and substantiated (section 3.5.5). The detailed explanation of my methodology is intended to demonstrate the transparency and the reliability of my research design, which guided me towards addressing my two research questions. In the subsequent chapters on Findings and Discussion, I will continue to use thick descriptions and in-depth analyses to further achieve the ‘trustworthiness’ and ‘believability’ of my data and interpretation.

3.6 Summary on methodology

By considering the nature of my two research questions, which emphasise *process*, *contextual meanings* and *people-object relationship*, my study finds its philosophical root in *constructionism*. It is believed that the social reality, including the workplace environment

and its related cultural meanings, is constructed and co-constructed through social interactions and reinforcement. The meanings associated with consumption resources and practices will affect the way working people use them for impression management. This research therefore aims at using the theoretical perspective of *interpretivism* to inform its methodological design so that inquiry of knowledge about self-performance in the workplace impression management can focus on empathetic *understanding* of the *field-specific meanings* of different cultural capital. As it will be shown in the coming chapters, the approach has helped unveil the contextual meanings of resources and practices being felt and sensed by executives with references to their distinct working fields. Corresponding to *interpretivism*, the dual methods of *biographical narrative inquiry* and *walking-with interviews* were adopted to elicit oral history and stimulate nostalgic account of my participants. The triangulated use of the two methods has enabled me to map out the retrospective changes and patterns on how people use, un-use and acquire cultural capital for habitus formation at different stages of their career. These methods offer a trajectory approach to understand the consumption of cultural capital over an individual's career. In particular, the walking-with method does not only provoke retrospective stimulation through physical surroundings, but it also allows participant observation of embodied data like bodily rhythms and facial expressions, which can reveal the affective side of my participants. Moreover, the sampling design has recruited a group of senior executives who possess diverse backgrounds and dynamic career paths. Their rich stories with changing career patterns have provided temporal data to add to our understanding of the field-specificity of cultural capital, as well as the evolving use of it in impression management.

As interpretive research entails an interactive relationship between the researchers and the participants, every decision in the methodological designs of this study has been carefully considered and explained in detail so as to achieve reliability in terms of transparency and trustworthiness. At the same time, ethical measures have been taken to ensure that the rights, privacy and well-being of my participants in this study are protected, and that their consents to contribute were warranted.

Chapter 4. Findings and Discussion - Cultural Resources and Practices for Impression Management

In order to address the two research questions on ‘what’ cultural capitals and practices are used and ‘how’ they are acquired over people’s career for impression management, both biographic sedentary interviews and the walking-with method were used to understand the professional trajectories of ten participants. Due to the different nature of the two research questions, findings and themes generated will be discussed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 respectively.

Addressing the first research question, which is set with a more inductive approach to allow different possible capitals to emerge, my participants’ retrospective accounts show that resources and practices used for impression management go through changes over the career of executives. People’s tastes, lifestyles and ways of consumption evolve in different patterns as they advance their career ladder. When little work experience is evident, and the accumulated cultural capital is still thin, junior executives tend to rely on ‘socially conspicuous’ resources and practices that are more apparently observable and readily available. Respectively, these practices include *‘cultivating confidence and conformity through appearance’*, *‘displaying social gestures learnt from primary socialisation’* and *‘mobilising institutionalised capital’*.

When executives accumulate more working experience and advanced cultural capital, they progressively distinguish themselves through a range of *‘subtle embodied’* resources and practices. The study shows that the cultural capital of *‘prudent use of language and utterance’* is prominent for impression management among senior executives. It is regarded as a clear class marker at work as it takes time to build and thus become less easy for junior executives to imitate. The senior professionals are also found to employ their accumulated *knowing* and *sensing* to synchronise available resources and competences to produce distinctive lifestyles for constructing work-identity. These cultural practices include *‘gestalt performance of the self’*, *‘capitalising on dining for networking’* and *‘sensing and adjusting for field-specificity of cultural capital’*. Lastly, a more ‘superior’ cultural capital found is *‘sensing oneself for cultural fit’*, which enables executives to excel across professional and corporate fields. To sustainably survive and perform efficaciously in their career, experienced executives do not only adapt to structural rules in their given fields, but they integrate their cultural capital of *‘self-knowing’* and *‘field-sensing’* to identify optimal *fields* where their habitus constitutes a

cultural fit with the structural norms and rules of games. The above findings and insights will be thoroughly discussed in the subsequent sections.

4.1 Junior executives rely on socially conspicuous cultural capitals

A career trajectory can be a long one, and it forms the basis from which people make inferences about their own identity (Blair, 2000; Christiansen, 1999; Laliberte-Rudman, 2002). Arguably, our occupation forms a dominant part of our self narrative, as we find it common that people introduce themselves as “I am a teacher”, or “I am an engineer”. This study finds that while the construction of a desirable work self is a predominant exercise throughout people’s professional path, the ways and means of doing so keep changing as they progress. The in-depth trajectory accounts of my participants, who have 20 or more years of work experience, reveal the changing pattern of resources and practices used for impression management over the course of their career. When they are young, executives possess little work experience and limited sense or knowledge about cultural norms and rules in their work environment. With thin cultural capital, they can only rely on socially conspicuous resources and practices to construct their work identity, since they are more ostensible and perceivable by the audience. However, as will be shown in the next section, the external *personal front* will become less salient when people advance in their career. This section will discuss three types of resources and practices that are more prevalently used when executives are in their early years of work.

4.1.1 Cultivating confidence and conformity through appearance

In their early years of work, Jenny and Tim both started their career as trainee accountants who found themselves having to establish a work identity that could distinguish them from the image of a ‘college student’. They wanted others to treat them as working adults who were mature and capable. Among the different resources they used, appearance and accessories were heavily and intentionally relied on to establish an impression that they could perform well and contribute to their corporations. However, with little work exposure, they were not very sure how flexible the dress code was. In other words, their knowledge about the scope of acceptable or legitimate sartorial styles was limited. To play it safe, they resorted to the grooming styles that were conventional and standardized but clearly signified a professional image. What they went for were the typical working “gears” that they termed

'uniforms', which allowed them to conform to perceived structural rules in their profession while signifying maturity and confidence:

"When I was a fresh graduate, I just wore the safest 'gear', such as full suits, dark jackets with A-shape skirts. I would not try other things like long dresses. I must try to look as mature as I could. I wore a gold colour watch and carried mature black handbags. I bought them pretty purposefully as they made me look more mature. So, it's a matter of image." (Jenny, financial controller – biographic narrative interview)

"I wore suits when I just came out to work as an auditor. It's a standard. A uniform, basically. Everyone wore suits and ties." (Tim, the local head of an investment corporation – walking-with interview)

Clothing and adornment, like a second skin and visible self (Eicher & Evenson, 2014; Entwistle, 2015), form a potent resource for Jenny and Tim to project a desirable image as if they are the extension of their professional self (Belk, 1988; Buse & Twigg, 2015). Langlois et al. (2000) also find that proper appearance can elicit positive treatment from others in the workplace, and hence plays a crucial role in forming positive impressions. When most literature on appearance management takes a snapshot view and focuses on this resource only (Entwistle, 2017; Howlett et al., 2013; Solomon & Anand, 1985), the temporal approach of this study reveals that the symbolic function of appearance is found to be particularly prominent among young rather than mature executives. The finding echoes the studies of appearance management among adolescents (Badaoui, Lebrun, Su, & Bouchet, 2018). From graduation to joining the workforce, people undergo rites of passage and transition into adulthood and maturity. As Jenny and Peter explain, a lack of solid track records to support their new working identity means that fresh graduates would attempt to use socially conspicuous resources such as full suits, gold colour watches, and black handbags to bridge the discrepancy between their undesirable self (college students) and the new desirable self (working adults) (Higgins et al., 1985; Markus & Nurius, 1986).

While existing literature of appearance management focuses on how power dressing help project self-image in general (Entwistle, 2017; Howlett et al., 2013; Solomon & Anand, 1985), my retrospective data provide the *reason* why appearance is particularly needed for impression management in the early stage of my participant's career. What other studies seldom touch on is what is lacking in the course of building the self for young executives,

and how outlook, clothing and accessories have helped to address their inadequacy. Peter's narrative explains the role of appearance when he was young at work:

“When I was a junior, I did not have much money, so, I just wore standard suits of the accounting field. They were like uniforms as everybody wore them. Later when I had more savings, I invested a lot on clothes, accessories, luxury watches, etc. I think it's because I lacked confidence and self-recognition, and naturally I would tend to rely on something explicit and hopefully these would generate recognitions from others.” (Peter, vice-president of a finance regulatory body – biographic narrative interview)

Peter clearly states that his cravings for material possessions in his younger days were attributed to his lack of “confidence” and “self-recognition”. With the absence of concrete job performance, along with being young in appearance, Peter strongly felt the need to conceal his lack of cultural capital by bolstering his bodily repertoire. Such a dissonance drove him to look for other more readily obtainable resources for distinction, which could help him mark a departure from the image of a fresh graduate to that of a capable executive. Both Jenny and Peter choose to “invest” heavily on grooming resources as they are more readily available from the marketplace. To them, these socially conspicuous resources are more easily accessible since it relies mainly on exercising economic capital rather than cultural know-how, which takes time and experience to accumulate.

Quoting Peter, the explicit outlook has once played a crucial role in helping him “generate recognitions from others”, which in turn boosted his self-perception (Peluchette et al., 2006; Peluchette & Karl, 2007). Progressively, however, the centrality of appearance for those in junior positions would later become less prominent as a resource for impression management. As Peter explicates below, while the need for confidence and recognition persists, the sources to fulfil them have changed and evolved from cultivating socially conspicuous appearance to mobilising other forms of cultural capital, which emerge later in his career:

“When my status becomes more well-established and when I have greater confidence in my job, I do not need to rely on external things or lavish brands to build my image. I can go back to Apple watch or such. Rather, my image rests on my work performance, my track record, etc... I do not need to gain further recognitions through material stuffs. So, I think appearance or accessories do relate to self-image

and self-recognition, but they are only more important at early stages.” (Peter, vice-president of a finance regulatory body – biographic narrative interview)

Peter’s explanation on the receding importance of appearance is also shared by Alisa, the senior partner of a Big4 (by then was Big6) audit firm. However, Alisa explains that while appearance or accessories are no longer significant for impression management in the later stages of one’s career due to the emergence of other resources, she considers appearance management as a “*pre-requisite*” to the enactment of fundamental executive image. In other words, proper grooming should by no means be ignored, as this “*will cause embarrassment if it is done wrong*” (Alisa, senior audit partner – walking-with interview). She expects senior professionals to have sufficiently accrued an aptitude to *feel* the needs of different work situations (such as normal workdays compared to attending high-level meetings) and to be able to dress accordingly. Another participant, Ricky, a senior business development director, also comments that despite the declining importance of appearance for self-performance over his career, he would not let himself dress in an undesirable manner, “*as it is basic, especially for forming the first impression when meeting new people*”, since he stresses that “*we have no chance to form another ‘first’ impression*” (Ricky, business development director – walking-with interview). Appearance therefore is influential for first social encounters (Gillath et al., 2012; Howlett et al., 2013) and remains as a basic expectation even for mature executives.

The above findings add to our nuanced understanding on the power of dress in three ways: first, the retrospective approach reveals the changing and receding role of appearance as people ascend the career ladder. They are important to young professionals for concealing a lack of confidence and recognition, but later become a basic pre-requisite when the need for bolstering confidence can be satisfied by other resources and acquired competencies.

Second, for junior executives, variations in grooming style are found limited due to their strong adherence to structural rules so as to ensure legitimate behaviour. As their embodied knowledge and ability to sense the magnitude and scope of structural norms are yet to be established, they resort to relying consciously on standardised and widely accepted styles, which they call ‘*uniforms*’. In fact, they use this term in a rather sarcastic manner to tease themselves as having been too junior and naïve to fully understand the dress norms, and hence dared not to challenge the sartorial boundary at work (Mak, 1998). While current literature on workplace appearance management relates to different functions such as power, attractiveness, etc., the role of treating attires as if they are *uniforms* for conformity with

implicit cultural norm is seldom explored. For my participants, the rather standardised ways of grooming include ties for men and blouses for women, dark colour trousers (or skirts) and blazers, etc. - all these are deemed *safe* options. They serve an indicative function (Jones & Davis, 1965) which guarantees the wearer a perceived membership in the professional fields. These legitimate sartorial choices enable young executives to show compliance with the broader rules of executive grooming. However, like the function of boosting confidence and recognition, the role of showing conformity through appearance will soon fade in later years and the term ‘uniform’ is no longer relevant in describing their daily work wear. As will be discussed in later sections, working people gradually learn and sense the wider boundary of sartorial rules. They soon find loopholes to negotiate their sense of individualism (Arsel & Bean, 2013; Mak, 1999).

Third, unlike existing studies which concentrate on appearance and fashion, this study provides broader insights into the juxtaposition of appearance as a resource with other forms of cultural capital in terms of its evolving importance for projecting a desirable self-presentation. This unveils not the absolute, but the relative role of appearance management in building work identity over time.

4.1.2 Displaying social gestures learnt from primary socialisation

Apart from tangible resources such as grooming style, junior executives also rely on daily *practices* to impress senior colleagues as they attempt to build a trustworthy image. These practices are largely acquired through primary socialisation in one’s family and in school. These social gestures, which are rather easily perceived on the surface, include socially conspicuous practices like *punctuality*, *diligence* and *obedience*. These practices are more intuitively enacted since they are incorporated through education and/or familial routines even before the executives enter the working world. As illustrated below, Fion and Tim utilised *punctuality* and ‘*staying behind*’ to create an impression of diligence and commitment in the early stages of their career:

“One thing I purposefully did to maintain my image was that I never left office earlier than others. I wanted to give a good impression especially to the boss. I wanted to show that I was capable and ‘please consider me if opportunities arise’.”
(Fion, senior finance manager – biographic narrative interview)

“When I just came out to work, my motto is: “Every day, I must arrive office earlier than my boss and leave office later than him.” I wanted to project a good image of being diligent and a staff who ‘can deliver’.” (Tim, the local head of an investment corporation – biographic narrative interview)

Fion and Tim describe themselves as ‘fresh’ and ‘green’ at work, signifying their lack of cultural capital for upward advancement in the commercial field. They resorted to more overt “predictive devices” (Goffman, 1959, p.249) of *hard-work*, such as spending longer hours in the office. They also adhered to the principal of punctuality to show obedience and commitment to their employers. They regard these industrious practices as good differentiators from less-committed peers, since these gestures are more palpable. As being diligent, punctual and obedient are ingrained pre-dispositions acquired at a young age, they are also more readily available for consumption by junior executives to project appropriate self-performance.

However, as Tim remarks later, executives recede from using ‘*diligence*’ as a sign-vehicle (Goffman, 1959) to impress their seniors as their job performance and competence were gradually recognised:

“As I was ‘green’ [very young with little experience], the bosses could only rely on something observable or external to build up their trust on me. But after a few years, once the trust can be built on my actual working ability, the superficial practices were not needed anymore.” (Tim, the local head of an investment corporation – walking-with interviews)

It shows that *socially conspicuous* practices for impression management would progressively be replaced by other *subtle embodied* capital and abilities acquired later at work. Tim believes that the willingness to spend time in the office not only fails to add values to his self-performance, it would, on the contrary, project an impression of being inefficient and ineffective. Tim in fact prefers himself and his staff to strike a good work-life balance as this can generate healthier contributions to the company:

“Sometimes I may regard a staff as inefficient if he keeps staying late every night in office. Rather, a person should have work-life balance so that he can perform better.” (Tim, the local head of an investment corporation – biographic narrative interview)

When we were leaving Ada's office to start the walking-to-home interview at around 7pm, I saw quite a few young executives making coffee in the office pantry, implying they might plan to continue working. I therefore asked Ada whether it was a norm to stay late in her corporation. She then explained her preferences for individuals to have a balanced life, which could in fact bring benefits to corporations:

“If a person's life is only work, work and work, then how can they bring in new ideas to their job? In the dynamic world nowadays, people need to develop different facets of life. These will bring in a healthier, happier and more creative staff force to the company. Frankly, senior management does not appreciate 'late stay' as it means a person is not efficient or not well-organised.” (Ada, senior fashion brand manager – walking-with interview)

As Ada explains, different life pursuits can help individuals accommodate pressures at work, recharge their energies and provide fresh ideas in the ever-changing society. The narratives of Tim and Ada show that while being punctual and staying late in the office are useful for self-presentation in the early stages of one's career, senior executives possess an embodied knowing to sense another rule of the game. Over time, they realise that explicit diligence can become a 'negative capital' – a sign of being '*disorganised*' and/or being '*incapable*' to balance the dynamism in one's life.

Although Bourdieu emphasises the role of primary socialisation in the enactment of habitus, his studies seldom explain what the cultivated cultural capital is and how it is actually deployed in different social contexts. The findings in this section empirically extend his notions by showing how cultural senses and know-how learnt at a young age, such as being punctual, diligent and obedient, are strategically consumed and converted into practices that facilitate people's impression formation when they make a transition into the working life. They are more ready for use in the early years of work because they are *at stock* within one's habitus even before entering the workforce. Nonetheless, the retrospective data also unveil that some gestures cultivated from primary socialisation, such as staying late in office to signify diligence, would become redundant or even accrue negative capital when senior executives become more attuned to the rule of the game. Invoked by 'guilt by association' (Bourdieu, 1984), experienced executives would purposefully resist these extrinsic 'negative' lifestyles (Banister & Hogg, 2004) that create an incompatible self when they advance to

higher positions. The findings again show that cultural practices for impression management are shifting in their importance over time.

4.1.3 Mobilising institutionalised capital

According to Bourdieu, there are three states of cultural capital, namely, the incorporated or embodied state, the objectified state and the institutionalised state (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu, 2005). Institutionalised capital refers to educational and vocational qualifications awarded by institutions that are relevant and recognised by respective fields. In their early career, several participants including Jenny, the financial controller of a renowned household brand, considers professional qualifications to be of paramount importance, as they can produce great impacts on their career prospects. Jenny views the accounting license as a must-have “*entry ticket*” to her profession, without which her career could have been very different. She bitterly recalls memories of her “*dark years*” when she had yet to obtain her professional qualification. Her ‘unqualified’ status created great stress for Jenny as it constrained her job choices and resulted in unpromising career prospects. She found herself ‘imprisoned’ in a disappointing work environment because she lacked the auditing qualifications to pursue preferred positions in more desirable corporations. In order to “*liberate*” herself from the ‘dark years’, Jenny chose to sacrifice her health and time with family for over two years to acquire the relevant institutionalised capital for upward mobility in her professional field of accounting. Being qualified became an obvious cultural capital to advance her positions in the field. Not only has she managed to change her job, she has also successfully asked for an attractive remuneration package when her old company persuaded her to return:

“Well, when I returned to my old company and accounting department, the first thing I felt was: Ah, I am a CPA! But none of them are!! That makes me different from them. My CEO also credited me and let me be the financial controller and then promoted me to department head within just a few years’ time.” (Jenny, financial controller – biographic narrative interview)

The institutionalised capital emerged as a potent resource for Jenny’s impression management when she was a young professional. It has played a vital transformational role in her career path. For Jenny, the CPA qualification does not only provide her with economic capital and promising prospects, but also self-esteem. Such pride and respect are gained from her prestigious status conferred by the rare qualification she possesses.

Apart from profession-specific qualifications like the CPA, the comparatively more generic MBA degree also facilitated the early career development of Peter (the vice-president of a regulatory authority), as it helped him fulfil his dream of securing a position in the esteemed field of investment banking:

“My salary package at M corporation by then was not bad at all. So, it’s quite a struggle for me to leave the job for the MBA study in the US. But, as I wanted to get into the sector of investment bank, which was my dream field of profession, I must get an MBA. They only hire people with MBA or those with very broad experience.”
(Peter, vice-president of a finance regulatory body – biographic narrative interview)

Like Jenny, the MBA degree was an *entry ticket* to join the i-bank and promising industries for Peter. His MBA (from the United States) attracted head-hunters from the financial industry, paving the way for his promising career development thereafter. The same impacts happened to Tim, the head of a regional finance house, whose MBA degree (obtained from the UK) enabled him to pursue his career in a few leading Western firms. While most consumer studies on cultural capital focus on domestic and leisure settings, the narratives above reveal the determining role of institutionalised capital in the workplace as a crucial resource for impression management. As professional examinations and qualifications, which are typical forms of institutionalised capital, signify a knowledgeable and competent self, they differentiate individuals as more capable in early career and raise their positions in their respective fields. Supported by concrete certificates and titles, such explicit capital is also easier to be perceived and recognised, especially when compared to other embodied working capabilities discussed in later sections such as language skills and networking sense. As shown in the case of Jenny and Peter, the institutional qualifications brought about a metamorphic effect to them by opening up more desirable career opportunities and warranting faster promotional paths.

Apart from formal qualifications generated from systemised assessments or examinations, institutionalised capital can also exist as a form of affiliation with reputable corporations of the respective professional fields. Jenny explains that in accounting, being employed by one of the six global audit firms (called Big6 in the industry by then) upon graduation has made a big difference to her career prospect:

“In fact, I felt blessed and lucky when I could get into one of the big six audit firms. It is indeed a critical path to accounting graduates! It's a must. If one cannot get into one of the Big6, one's career path will be totally another thing. She can only stay in the lower tier.” (Jenny, financial controller – biographic narrative interview)

Jenny's view is broadly shared by most of my other participants who engaged in accounting or finance industries, such as Tim and Alisa. Upon graduation, they all strived to get into the Big6 – the highly recognised worldwide ‘noble’ firms in their industry where only elites were hired. Such a fundamental step helped pave their career paths in accumulating not only local but also regional experience in which they were well-trained to handle large clients and projects. Similarly, although Ada (the senior fashion brand manager) works in a different industry (in which accredited professional examinations or licenses are not available), she also shared a similar view when we walked past some boutiques in her from-work route:

“My first job with the F.G. brand as a global marketing trainee was indeed a key springboard to my career path. The work placement in Italy and Europe was really an eye-opening experience in the fashion field. This significantly laid the cornerstone of my dream career... One of my later jobs and some business connections were in fact referred by people I know in F.G.” (Ada, the senior fashion brand manager – walking-with interview)

Being affiliated with international organisations do not only provide my participants with broad exposures and professional experience, it also offers them valuable industrial networks. Many industrial connections (social capital) made possible in their senior years are in fact attributed to colleagues they knew in the elite firms in their early career. It shows that being engaged in renowned organisations, though without systemised assessment, is an informal and crucial form of institutionalised capital for impression management.

The findings in this section extend our knowledge on the forms of capital proposed by Bourdieu (1986), especially in the under-researched setting of workplaces. The analysis shows how institutionalised capital empirically creates impacts on advancing social positions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) of young executives in their professional structures. Its prominent role in impression management in one's early career can be understood in three ways: First, institutionalised capital can generate or be converted into other types of capitals, most prominently the economic capital, since it signifies a more knowledgeable and capable

self, which leads to better remunerations, job choices and career prospects. As depicted in Jenny's narrative, not all junior executives are capable of getting through demanding examinations, and hence the qualifications obtained become a rare marker of distinction. Besides economic capital, institutional capital can also generate social capital, since getting into reputable firms or institutes can create social networks with valuable stakeholders in the industry. These connections can be leveraged for further career advancement.

Second, the positive impact brought about by institutional capital on career is not only limited to a short period during the early years. As commercial positions exist like a hierarchical pyramid, the number of positions is getting smaller towards the top of the structure (e.g. there are usually fewer *managers* than assistant *managers*). Hence, it is becoming increasingly more competitive climbing the professional ladder. If executives can capitalise on their institutional qualifications to distinguish themselves from others and occupy higher ranks earlier than their peers, they have a higher chance of enjoying a more progressive career thereafter. In this sense, institutionalised capital can impart a long-lasting influence by enabling eventful boosts to those in the early stages of their career.

Third, the findings also contribute to our knowledge on the possible forms of institutionalised capital, which can go beyond examination-oriented qualifications. Institutional affiliation (usually through employment) with renowned organisations in early years of work is found to be an informal but important institutionalised capital. This can be understood in at least three aspects: As reputable and successful corporations are usually more demanding, and the positions they offer are more competitive, being employed by these corporations can indicate the competencies of the candidates. Moreover, the work experience gained through daily practices, professional training and industrial exposures in high-performing institutes also equip a person with better professional skills. Apart from work-related calibre, as discussed, social capital could also be acquired since elites in professional fields are concentrated in renowned organisations. These demonstrate that corporate affiliation can also be a form of institutionalised capital to enhance a person's professional profile, and thus becomes a prominent resource for impression management at work.

Despite its importance in one's early career, institutionalised capital, like appearance and diligence, will gradually recede in importance as executives advance their career. This is because those who manage to ascend to similar higher levels in the field also share the same qualifications, be it through assessment exams or association with reputable institutes in the

industry. For instance, to my participants' knowledge, almost all financial controllers and chief financial officers have obtained CPA or equivalent qualifications, and most were trained in international firms. It is the same for senior executives in the marketing field, in which most of them have experience working for renowned brands and global agencies. In short, at senior levels, most occupants possess similar institutionalised capital, which can therefore no longer be relied on as a sustainable resource for distinction in one's later career. As I will discuss in later sections, other cultural capital will become more prominent for mature executives.

4.1.4 Key insights

This section reveals that when people are in their junior stages of their career, they mainly rely on socially conspicuous and more tangible forms of resources or practices for impression management, namely '*cultivating confidence and conformity through appearance*', '*social gestures learnt from primary socialisation*' and '*institutionalised capital*'.

While current literature on appearance management focuses on the power of dressing in the workplace, this study reveals the underlying *rules of games* for the cultivation of appearance for self-presentation particularly in the early career. Investment in appearance is strongly exercised by young executives to project maturity so as to conceal their lack of *confidence* and *recognition* due to limited cultural capital. Furthermore, as they lack the cultural sense of assessing the scopes of group norms, young executives can only adhere to the safe options of *uniform-like* sartorial styles. This reveals another reason for relying on appearance as a way to show *conformity* to structural rules, through which young executives obtain recognition as being a member 'in' the field. The trajectories and the rather open approach of this study also provide a comparative platform to explain why appearance is gradually replaced by other embodied cultural capital acquired in one's later career. Rather than being a means for distinction, appearance recedes as a pre-requisite for senior executives, who gradually accumulate other subtle yet salient forms of cultural capital that can better support confidence and recognition.

'*Social gestures learnt from primary socialisation*' are also readily drawn on by young executives. By staying long hours in the office and being punctual at work, young professionals demonstrate their commitment and diligence in an attempt to create positive impressions. However, when executives accumulate more working exposure, some of these

socially conspicuous gestures are found to be redundant and in some instances can become liabilities (e.g. being perceived as inefficient) to their impression.

Lastly, institutionalised capital in the form of examination-based qualifications is found to be very important for occupational advancement in one's early career. Since the titles signify a capable and knowledgeable self, institutionalised capital creates a long-term impact and serves as a head-start for young executives to occupy higher positions earlier than their peers. Besides, this study also discovers that institutionalised capital can also exist in the form of *institutional affiliation*, which can be converted into economic and social capitals through better job remunerations, career progress and acquaintance with industrial elites.

As discussed, despite their importance in the earlier career, as people acquire more skills and know-how through secondary socialisation, the above *socially conspicuous* resources and practices will gradually be substituted by other forms of *subtle embodied* capital for self-performance. In the next section, I will discuss in detail the types of subtle resources and incorporated practices employed by senior executives.

4.2 Senior executives rely on subtle embodied cultural capitals

As demonstrated in the last section, when individuals ascend the career ladder, the socially conspicuous resources and practices that were once valuable resources for impression management would progressively decrease in importance as social differentiators or class markers. As participant Ada claims, external traits will gradually become less useful for impression management:

“When one gets senior, I would say appearance accounts for only 20% at most in terms of one’s image at work. It’s the attitude that counts, it’s the way of getting along with others that counts, it’s the presentation, the personality, the team leadership ... but not how to groom. When it comes to successful leadership, it’s not about appearance or external image, which is very minor when one gets senior.”
(Ada, senior fashion brand manager – walking-with interview)

This section reveals how senior executives build their cultural capitals, which over time become extensively accrued as habitus that pre-dispose them to more subtle embodied types of resources and practices (Bourdieu, 1977; Skeggs, 2004). Such cultural capitals are not readily imitable and are thus regarded by my participants as pivotal in helping them to differentiate themselves from their junior colleagues. These include ‘*prudent use of language and utterance*’, ‘*gestalt performance of self*’, ‘*capitalising on dining for networking*’ and ‘*sensing and adjusting for field-specificity*’ (section 4.2.1 - 4.2.4). Lastly, the study discovers an overarching theme which advances Bourdieu’s theories by discovering a rather ‘superior’ and sustainable cultural capital that goes beyond the confinement of individual fields – ‘*sensing oneself for cultural fit*’ (section 4.2.5). The discussion that follows will add to our understanding of how workplace consumption for self-performance is facilitated by the changing use of embodied cultural capital.

4.2.1 Prudent Use of Language and Utterance

One prevalent practice and ability mentioned by *all* my participants for impression management as they become more senior at work is the ‘use of language’. They assert that the way one speaks and presents oneself determines largely how people perceive one’s work competence and traits. At the same time, through perceiving the way other people use language, individuals also gauge the personalities, abilities and thinking of others in the

mundane work environment. As Goffman purports, apart from appearance and outlook, the use of language forms an important ‘personal front’ that creates impressions (1959, p.24; 1961). In a stage performance, the way a conversation is carried out, the wordings used, as well as the tone and manner of each actor can form impressions about their personality, class, mood or even their inter-relationship with each other. While the dramaturgical analogy of Goffman may help us imagine the vital role of language, empirical application of his notion in specific social settings is under explored in consumer studies. The narratives from senior executives below will contribute to our understanding on how language is empirically used at work as a symbolic and corporeal manifestation of the *performative self*. In his book *Language and Symbolic Power*, Bourdieu (1991) also discusses ‘performative utterance’, which stresses the authority reside in the language of the speakers and the social legitimacy they are endowed for the pronouncement of the discourse (e.g. p. 110-113). Utterance is identified by my participants as an important source of power and influence, but it must be employed with a good sense of discernment. It can create impacts on professional interaction in various nuanced manners, which will be presented in the sub-themes of this section, namely, ‘*utterance as a source of power and influence*’, ‘*tone and manner*’, ‘*asking the right questions*’ and ‘*knowing when not to speak*’. These themes are grounded in the dynamic role of utterance as a resource for impression management as well as the tactical skills of employing it.

4.2.1.1 Utterance as a source of power and influence

Impressions created through the use of language, voice and other linguistic means can carry power that dictates social relationship (Foucault, 1980). This study does not only investigate particular form of cultural capital in an absolute sense, but rather, I explore the relational aspect of cultural capital available to my participants as they negotiate the transition in their career trajectory. The competent and prudent use of language is commonly cited as a main resource for impression management as it signals one’s ability to exert power and influence. For Peter, Tim and Fion, unlike appearance, the way they talk and present themselves are much more pertinent in establishing a professional image. For them, good presentation generates authority, trust and respect from audiences. Peter, the vice president of a finance regulatory body, who has working experiences with various international firms, remarks that presentation is particularly important when a person becomes more senior:

“How you dress doesn’t really matter, but how you ‘talk’ is very important. You must be very confident when you talk and make yourself look really smart. The field of corporate finance stresses very much on a person’s presentation. You need to make people feel you have the authority by presenting things clearly so that people can feel your confidence. This is more important than outlook, especially when one is getting senior.” (Peter, vice-president of a finance regulatory body – biographic narrative interview)

Peter emphasises that in lieu of outlook or appearance, it is the verbal presentation skills that project his confidence when he becomes more senior. Tim, the local head of a finance investment house, upholds a similar view. However, instead of comparing utterance with appearance as resources for distinction, Tim juxtaposes the importance of verbal presentation with that of written outputs. Although the financial and auditing field he engages in emphasises analysis and reports, his experience makes him believe that the creation of a professional impression lies with how an executive verbally presents in person. Comparatively, the written document has a much lower influence:

“People in the audit field in fact seldom read the written outputs in detail. How they perceive an individual depends on how he presents the reports or analysis in person. So, all in all, one’s presentation must be persuasive and convincing. As a matter of fact, one’s actual ability may not be easily known to others quickly, but the way how he presents affect very much on how people perceive about him.” (Tim, local head of an investment corporation – biographic narrative interview)

Peter and Tim deploy language skills to project their confidence in what they know and what they want to tell their audience, so as to convince them and solicit recognition. In other words, through discursive performance, the embodied agent commands the audience and affects their responses. Such symbolic power of language also holds true from the audience’s point of view. For Fion, the senior finance manager of a government department, utterance and presentation skills have helped her make reliable inferences on the ability of her service providers – the fund managers and delegated investors:

“Through board meetings held in each quarter, I can observe which fund managers perform better in their presentation. Some can obviously speak more convincingly than others and carry weight in what they say. The board members

would then feel more satisfied to entrust our fund to them and this will ease my job. Whereas, some others would make you feel more fluid in their presentation, and they lack concrete substance when answering queries. In this way, I can differentiate which fund houses and their managers are more capable.” (Fion, senior financial manager – biographic narrative interview)

Fion’s main duty is to ensure that only high calibre investment personnel are assigned to take care of her corporate funds and deliver impressive presentations at board meetings. Among different competencies, she finds that linguistic skills and competent verbal responses of fund managers are reliable indicators of a trustworthy personnel. Utterances that carry ‘weight’ with an affirmative sense render a more convincing impression than those that give a ‘fluid’, loose and hesitant perception.

From both the perspectives of the speakers and the audience, prudent utterance is shown to be a potent source of establishing capable and professional image in the workplace. Existing linguistic studies also find that language itself is a social differentiator as it stereotypes and classifies people in the way that those in higher ranks are “reflected by a different way of speaking”, and people “purposefully change words to accentuate their distinction from other people” (Chassy, 2015, p.49). This attributes to the “language properties” (e.g. accent) associated with perceived “concepts” about the speaker (e.g. “nice” vs “smart”), which affect how we judge and classify people (Chassy, 2015). While Goffman’s theory upholds language as an important part of the ‘personal front’ in impression management, its actual manipulation and changing importance over the life course of people lack empirical insights in consumer research. The analysis here reveals that, compared to other forms of socially conspicuous capital like appearance or written deliveries, verbal utterances are essentially used in the workplace for both self-presentation and comprehension of others, especially when people progress along their career path.

More importantly, the analysis reflects the underlying needs which make utterance important for impression management at work. When executives become more senior, the need for *confidence* and *recognitions* continue to prevail, but the way of attaining it is replaced by language competencies that are attuned to habitus through secondary socialisation at work (see Chapter 5). As discussed, in later career stages, appearance is gradually substituted and becomes a pre-requisite only for impression management.

Senior executives regard utterance as a valuable cultural practice since it does not only concern words and sentences, but is an embodied skill acting like a window through which we can see the entirety of the speaker's calibre. As Bourdieu posits, a person's physical demeanour can be mirrored in the way that such "embodiment – *hexis* – is linked with *habitus* and *cultural capital*, especially *linguistic capital*" (italics in original text, Grenfell, 2011, p. 44). Linguistic capital hence enables the habitus to express a host of qualities of a person like a second nature of her. It thus becomes a reliable inference for executives like Fion to read and assess the personal background of her potential fund managers, including their education, exposures, knowledge, ability, ranks, affiliated organisations, etc. As Bourdieu asserts, language is symptomatic of cultural lifestyles, structures and dispositional attitudes, and is therefore indicative of people's "social identification" (Grenfell, 2011, p. 37, 44). While Bourdieu's view here focuses on the power of language only and Goffman also seldom compares language directly to other *sign-vehicles* for impression management, my data extend their theories to show that instead of being just one of the sign-vehicles in the *identity kit* for self-performance, language is found to be a rather encompassing disposition that manifests the holistic repertoire of a working person. This explains why most of my participants identify language and utterance as their main resources for self-performance at work and find themselves increasingly relying on verbal competencies rather than other extrinsic or conspicuous practices for impression management. As linguistic competence involves continuous practices and time to accrue, it also explains why people in the early stage of their career are unable to rely much on their linguistic capital. In short then, discursive performance is a class marker in the workplace to distinguish people's positions as they progress in their professional fields.

In subsequent sub-sections, I will discuss how participants employ various tactics to help them perform prudent utterance, including *tone and manner*, *asking the right questions* and *knowing when not to speak*. The findings, which are rarely discussed in existing literatures, add nuanced understanding on how linguistic capital is empirically used for impression management at work.

4.2.1.2 *Tone and manner*

In terms of presentation skills, apart from the content and choices of words which help denote the calibre of the speakers, the *'tone and manner'* of utterance is also found to create impactful impressions. Anna, the senior financial manager of a listed company, has been facing a few tough department heads for years, especially in cross-departmental meetings. Over time, she has learnt the skills of answering and handling challenges using tones and manners that are firm and unwavering. Such affirmative style helps her establish an impression of being confident and gain trust from her fellow audience, leaving them with little room to cast doubts or pose challenges. This language gesture consolidates Anna's standpoint and hence her standing in meetings and in her corporation at large:

"In cross-departmental meetings, my department is always under challenge as we hold the purse strings and oversee the overall financial well-beings. So, if people drill in more and ask questions, I must be very firm and confident when answering. I would keep my responses short and concrete: "Yes is yes" and "no is no". Short, solid and be very sure. So, the tone is important. In this way, they have no choice but shut up and trust me. Though I may only be 90% sure about the answer, I've got to present as if I am 100% sure. If a colleague shows a slight hesitation, the sceptical guys will quickly chip in and give him or her a hard time. So, I train myself to give only short and firm answers. This is the skill set." (Anna, senior financial manager – biographic narrative interview)

We see that Anna's language skill in the workplace emphasises *tone and manner*, which she capitalises on instead of relying solely on the verbal content. Though linguistic studies tend to focus on language content, some research finds that *tone of voice* is highly informative and effective in channelling information about the feelings, internal states and attitudes of the speakers (DePaulo & Friedman, 1998) or even their abilities and personalities (Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000). A right use of tone can also shift people's positive perception towards speakers' attitude (Laplante & Ambady, 2003). While these bodies of literature discuss the functions of *tone of voice* in communications, Anna's experience gives us in-depth insights on how such a skill is acquired and how it is incorporated as a competent source for impression management. Her narrative demonstrates that her proficient use of tones is in fact cultivated through an incessant learning process. Through self-experience and observation of others at work – a kind of secondary socialisation – she realises the harshness

of being interrogated if she fails to use firm and discrete tones to portray her confidence. Over time, such tactful use of language proves to be successful and is reinforced in her embodied competence for fending off challenges in the workplace. On top of utterance content, prudent use of tone and manner is therefore shown here as a valuable cultural capital for impressing others and distinguishing oneself at work.

On the other hand, improper use of utterance, such as unprofessional tones and immature speaking styles, could also undermine a person's authority. Elise, the director of compliance, was annoyed by one of her staff members who failed to establish a strong enough image to challenge other parties even though her work title was not of a low rank (assistant compliance manager) and her actual work performance was decent:

“My assistant manager’s problem was that even though she had got promoted, her outlook and her way of speaking still appeared childish like a college girl. She used casual tones which failed to support her rank. Our colleagues or partners thus didn’t respect her much because she seldom cared about how she talked. You know, in the finance and compliance field, English is a common language. But she kept using Cantonese. Though fund managers might still understand, this did not show decent respect to our business norm and she was just ‘downgrading’ herself. As a compliance administrator, her job was to tell people what they should do or what they have done wrong. So, what she said should carry weight and impact. But unfortunately, her failed.” (Elise, director of compliance – biographic narrative interview)

Elise's assistant embodied what Elise deems to be a failure in 'performative utterance'. Her use of language jarred with her intended role and thus became unsuccessful in engendering the expected responses from the audience (such as receiving due respect, cooperation and 'compliance' from other working partners). Though she might be able to perform her work duties in written forms, when it came to interpersonal verbal communications, her childish voice signified immaturity and undermined her image, creating an incongruent impression.

While Elise found that the casual and incompatible use of language can be detrimental to one's image, she also witnessed how some executives can master impressive utterance to compensate for deficiencies resulting from their seemingly 'illegitimate' appearance. When

we passed by a high-class salon in the central business district during the walking-with interview, Elise shared:

“Well, some people in our field (finance) might dye their hair or have exotic looks, but once they speak, they are strong and firm and show their competence. Their English is fluent, and they are very analytical. So, although their external look may appear strange, as long as their intrinsic traits are great, people will still respect them. Their internal quality is kind of ‘saving’ them.” (Elise, director of compliance – walking-with interview)

It shows that utterance skill is an embodied competence that can ‘reinstate’ a person’s desired image which might otherwise be misperceived by inconsistent appearance. This demonstrates the prevailing power of language and presentation capability over tangible outlooks.

The two opposite examples that Elise quoted, namely her assistant manager with a childish tone and the fluent business partner with an exotic look, seem to suggest counter evidences to Bourdieu’s notion on the ‘source’ of language power. He posits that “authority comes to language from outside”, depending on the social position of the speaker assigned by the institution (the ‘field’) he belongs to (1991, p.109). In other words, the weight of influence and the compelling power of one’s *performative utterance* is attributable to the “license” and “appropriateness” incorporated in his roles and titles the structure endows to him as the “*authorised representative*” to speak (p.110, p.111 and p.113). Bourdieu’s (1991) assertion gives much focus on the ‘positions’ a speaker is occupying, downplaying the effect of linguistic elements as he purports “authority does not reside ... in the intrinsic properties of discourse itself” (e.g. prosodic and articulatory variations, complexity of syntax, richness of vocabulary) but rather “in the social conditions ...and recognition of the legitimate language” (p.113). In other words, he believes it is the conferred titles that impart a person with speaking power, regardless of his/her other linguistic components such as the content, the tone and the structure. To apply his assertion, a promoted manager’s speech and instruction therefore would carry more weight than when he was in a lower rank. This is in line with a traditional Chinese saying which poses “the words of the lowly carry little weight”.

However, the incongruent language tone of Elise’s assistant manager seems to pose a challenge to Bourdieu’s notion on the structural source of linguistic power. Due to her inappropriate, non-compatible girlish tone and style, the assistant manager failed to

command respect and cooperation from her colleagues, even though her institutional rankings conferred her an entitled authority. The findings show that, contrary to Bourdieu's assertion, the ultimate impression made about oneself relies not only on the 'legitimate language' conferred to the position in a structure, but also on one's own cultural capital on speaking and uttering. If skilfully expressed, the *tone of voice* can impose an overriding power over a person's 'entitled' authority, appearance impression and the use of other linguistic components like words and structures. Over time, it emerges as an incorporated skill in the habitus that becomes a 'second nature' to strengthen the overall *performance utterance* for self-presentation in the workplace.

4.2.1.3 *Asking the right questions*

Another area of language skill my participants find important at work but is scarcely investigated in consumer or even linguistic studies is '*asking the right questions*'. Asking sensible questions is regarded by senior executives as another way to project a person's ability and self-image at work, since it signals the speakers' intelligence in terms of their ability to analyse issues and identify structural points that reflect the essence of discussion. Maxwell (2014) also finds that successful leaders tend to master the art of asking questions to influence their staff and colleagues to ultimately build strong teams. Similarly, Fadem avows that "managers do not need answers to operate a successful business. They need questions." (2008, p.8). Ricky, the senior director, explains how raising good questions can demonstrate confidence, competence and participation during executive meetings:

"One way I do to demonstrate my competence at work is to raise sound questions in corporate meetings, especially when the global bosses are around. Well, asking one or two questions are important as this can show that I am 'actively participating', and that I am involving in the discussion, and I am processing and analysing information. I would say, asking good and sound questions helps demonstrate one's competence. Somehow, asking questions may not mean I am looking for an answer, but I want to show that I am 'in' the discussion, and that I am smart enough to spot something important and worth the attention. At the end, it's a matter of image." (Ricky, senior director of business development – biographic narrative interview)

Ricky explicitly admits that instead of looking for answers, the function of ‘questioning’ is an image-building exercise for him. He intentionally uses this tactic to demonstrate his ability in picking key points and in analysing issues from a corpus of information. Such a gesture draws attention to his physical presence as well as his intellectual engagement.

In many industries, professionals could be engaging in both the roles of clients or consultants. Interestingly, participants of both types find that the ability to *ask the right questions* is a critical resource for building a confident and knowledgeable image that yields reciprocal respect from other parties. Tim, the local head of an investment house who used to be a senior accountant and auditor, explains that as consultants or service suppliers, being able to ask smart questions and keep the conversation going with clients is a demonstration of capability and expertise:

“One could tell how capable a person is once he or she speaks or asks questions. In our field, if you do not want the clients to regard you as ignorant or incapable, then you should pay effort to ask sensible questions about the clients’ companies and their industries. We’ve also got to predict what might the clients answer and then broach follow-up questions and keep the conversation going. The clients will then find us competent. I’ve seen some juniors who didn’t even know what they were asking, and this annoyed the clients, who eventually ignored them. You see, this would stop the conversations and affect the impression, and ultimately one cannot complete the audit job.” (Tim, local head of an investment corporation – biographic narrative interview)

Tim believes that the ability to look for the right information is crucial for some professionals such as auditors, lawyers or marketing consultants, as their main job is to provide analytical advice for clients. In this respect, asking reasonable and relevant questions is a way to probe for and screen relevant data. He also stresses *continuous conversation*, since it ensures familiarity with the client’s background so as to keep the cooperative relationship. It reveals that the success for consultancy or supplier-based work depends highly on a person’s language skills of probing tactful and discerning questions. Similar to the competencies of using *tone and manner*, Tim’s narrative also highlights that the know-how of ‘asking’ requires time and experience to accrue and cannot be as readily mastered as embodied dispositions by junior executives.

In the opposite role, to project the impression of being a knowledgeable client, asking the right questions is also considered to be an influential tool for impression management when senior executives face their consultants or service providers. Fion, who hires and monitors fund managers for the government's money, stresses the importance of 'asking' intelligently to scrutinise investment agencies:

“As I have to make sure our funds are properly invested by our fund managers, every day I read world news and collect information about the financial market, so that in meetings with them I can ask sensible questions. This shows that I keep abreast with the trend, and I make them know I am indeed scrutinising them with the state-of-the-art knowledge. So, my job is to monitor the fund houses through raising questions, so that they can ‘explain’ for any investment decisions or sub-performance.” (Fion, senior financial manager – biographic narrative interview)

Fion's narrative typically shows how senior executives use their linguistic capital of asking the right questions to signify their intellectual competence in order to influence the responses of business partners. Apart from her own daily monitoring duties over the investment houses, to uphold her governmental department's image as “a capable and competent client”, Fion also makes an effort to ensure her board of directors master the linguistic technique of 'asking' questions. When I planned to schedule a follow-up interview with her, she could only afford an en-route interview on her way home as she was busy preparing for an upcoming quarterly board meeting. In the walking-with interview, she explained her tight schedule and her seasonal important role:

“I also need to furnish our board members with sound questions so that they can use my pre-set questions to challenge the fund managers in quarterly meetings. If our board members can only ask low-end and straightforward questions, the fund managers will not respect us much. In contrast, if we can probe high-end and impactful questions that demonstrate our knowledge on funds and investment, the consultants will regard us as a strong client. In return, they will pay greater respect to us, handle our account more seriously and also send more senior people to our meetings, no matter it's due to respect or due to the need to answer our tough questions.” (Fion, senior finance manager – walking-with interview)

Fion's narrative reveals how consultants would assess the calibre and proficiency of their clients through how smart and updated the clients could ask questions. Such specific

utterance skill signifies the clients' competencies, which establish impressions that can directly affect the degree of respect and service levels received.

Regrettably receiving little attention from linguistics research, the skill of '*asking questions*' is found to be a pivotal resource for impression management as it influences others' treatment towards the speakers. It is equally overlooked by consumer studies as a kind of cultural practice for distinction. Even though Bourdieu and Grenfell believe in the power of performance utterance as a cultural capital, and Goffman also stresses verbal communications for impression management, their studies focus mainly on 'speech' and 'presentation' and rarely consider the nuances of 'asking'. This study reveals that 'asking the right questions' serves a few important purposes in the workplace as a resource for self-performance. First, being able to ask discerning questions can demarcate the intellectual competence and knowledgeability of an individual and even an organisation as a concerted entity (as per Fion's board of directors). Ricky explains that, in most cases, the intellectual requirement on 'asking' questions is higher than 'answering' them, since the latter is more passive, and the scope of issues are identified by the questions. On the other hand, probing a sensible and relevant question requires greater discerning ability on the part of the speaker, who must locate the focal point of interest from the "given materials on the spot" that are "usually important but overlooked" (Ricky, *senior director of business development – walking-with interview*). Second, probing the right questions is a crucial skill relevant to different roles at work. It offers consultants or service providers an effective way to seek pertinent information from clients and build relationship for better job performance. Maxwell (2014) also finds that leaders tend to ask good questions to connect with people and to "pick their brains" for more ideas and perspectives when making decisions (p.7). On the other side of the working relations, raising prudent questions to service providers and consultants is also a sign-vehicle for showcasing the capabilities of a client, which can help solicit a higher degree of respect and service level. As questions beget 'answers', good inquiries also enhance the efficacy of monitoring performance of other co-workers. These nuances in recognising the power of 'asking' appropriate questions can in fact find traces in a long-time saying of the renowned philosopher Voltaire (1694 – 1778), who asserts that one should "judge a man by his questions rather than by his answers". Contemporary research on social interaction, however, has not given his wisdom due regards, despite its enlightening importance to senior professionals nowadays as shown in this study. Competence in "asking the right question of

the right person at right time” (Maxwell 2014, p.7) is in fact a valuable cultural practice to announce one’s judgmental ability in the professional field.

4.2.1.4 *Knowing when not to speak*

So far, my analyses mainly centre on the *active* use of *language* for impression formation. Nonetheless, some participants also denote a *latent* mode of linguistic capital. In some work settings, choosing not to speak and ‘keeping silent’ is regarded as a vital survival tactic. With years of trial-and-error and observation of how other people talk and speak, senior executives learn to discern when is the appropriate time to talk and when to stay silent. When they come across situations they are not confident with, they will choose to keep quiet and resort to heedful observation only. Although engaging in different industries and work culture, Ada and Tim both agree that veteran executives should always avoid ‘talking stupid’, as it would risk an irrevocable and adverse impression. When we walked past some conference rooms in Ada’s office as we were leaving for dinner, she recalled how she used ‘silence’ to protect herself:

“In any meetings or conferences, there might be people who talk stupid. So, my strategy is to first expose myself to everything but keep observing and keep silent also. I will not talk too early until I am sure about the situations and the people around.”
(Ada, senior brand manager – walking-with interview)

In a similar vein, Tim explains in greater details on why ‘*not to speak*’ is more prudent on some occasions. He views utterance as a trustful cue that reflects a person’s ‘real’ thinking and professional calibre. He therefore takes an English saying as his motto to remind him not to speak unless he is confident enough:

“I would say one’s intrinsic traits are much more important than one’s extrinsic ones when it comes to forming impressions to others. I believe in the saying “no one is dumb until he speaks”. I think this is very true. I soon find that the way a person speaks can add or deduct impression marks a lot. So, I remind myself: if I feel I am incapable or not ready, or when I am not confident enough, or when I am not familiar with the topics or issues, I’d better keep silent. Because, you know, once you speak in these situations, people will quickly know you are an idiot. Many people talk stupid in social situations, and this creates embarrassment and dead air. It’s a very bad

impression.” (Tim, local head of an investment corporation – biographic narrative interview)

Ada and Tim demonstrate that utterance can both create and destroy the desirable self. Such assertion lies in their belief that *speaking* can unveil who a person truly is compared to other signifiers like physical appearance and body gestures, which can conceal a person. Once an individual speaks, her ignorance or inadequacy will be easily ‘uncovered’ and exposed. Like the skill of ‘*asking questions*’, linguistic studies seldom investigate ‘*silence*’ with the exception of a study by Gal (1991), who regards ‘silence’ as a linguistic form which carries different meanings and material effect in specific institutes or cultural settings. In many contexts, silence does not necessarily imply passivity or powerlessness, and sometimes, it is the silent listeners who exert power over the speakers (Gal, 1991, quoting Foucault 1979). My data here enhance our nuanced understanding on specific tactics of utterance, which consumer studies using Bourdieu’s concepts seldom investigate. As my participants further explain, people hardly remember an individual who stays quiet in a meeting or work conference, but they seldom forget how another person ‘talks stupid’ and creates ‘shame’ for oneself. This implies significant impact on impression formation. In the workplace context, prudent use of ‘silence’ emerges as another form of discerning cultural capital (and linguistic capital) to *safeguard* one’s self-image as it helps to avoid jeopardising one’s professional impressions when one “is not ready” in some situations. However, as discussed in the previous sections, we must note that a successful professional cannot always keep silent at work as utterance is a performative gesture to manifest knowledge and intelligence. Keeping silence is therefore a *contextual* disposition which requires a person’s ability to sense the rules of the game and the situational needs.

4.2.1.5 Key insights

This section reveals the nuances of linguistic tactics and dynamics as a subtle embodied cultural capital for senior executives. The retrospective approach reveals that, compared with appearance and material possession, *performative utterance* (Bourdieu 1992) is more pertinent in projecting competencies as executives progress in their career. Such capital in turn confers them with influential power at work. The richness of a person’s *linguistic capital* can be observed through different tactics and language proficiency. The *tone and manner* of utterance projects confidence of the speaker and commands a degree of respect from the audience. Contrary to Bourdieu’s assertion on the power source of utterance (1992),

incongruent use of tones can undermine impressions despite a person's position and entitled authority. While most studies on verbal power, including that of Bourdieu (1992) and Goffman (1959), focus on how language is actively used in speech and presentations, this study unveils two overlooked competencies in utterance. It is found that '*asking the right questions*' and '*knowing when not to speak*' are common embodied practices of senior professionals as they attempt to *project* and *protect* their desirable image. Asking sensible and relevant questions can manifest a knowledgeable and intellectual impression, which in turn solicits trust and respect in the workplace. When executives sense that the situations are unfamiliar to them, or when they are not well-prepared, their habitus will signal them to stay quiet and to strategically sit back to avoid *talking stupid*, or else risk undermining their image. This competence hence requires a contextual ability to sense the *game* for performative utterance.

This section has analysed a range of 'literate practices' and reveals that their concerted use can signify a person as belonging to a 'high' or 'low' social distinction (Grenfell, 2011, p. 37) in the workplace. In criticising the Saussurian's linguistic structuralism, which regards language as a 'common' symbol with shared meanings, Bourdieu views language as 'differential' and 'differentiated', in which linguistic practices can be idiosyncratic and such *individual praxis* demarcates social classes (Grenfell, 2011). The linguistic capital and all its dynamics and nuances emerged from my data are unveiled as conspicuous resources for distinction and impression management in the workplace. Given the time and experience needed for such linguistic capitals to become incorporated habitus, they are not easily imitated by junior professionals. The retrospective perspective thus reveals the increasing importance of linguistic capital as a cultural differentiator over one's career. The literate tactics found in this study also enrich our current understanding on how language power is empirically manipulated to create impressions in the workplace.

4.2.2 Gestalt Performance of Self

As discussed in section 4.1.1, young executives regard appearance management and sartorial tastes as important capitals to bolster their confidence and conformity. Although the role of appearance recedes in importance in later career stages, senior executives also place high

regard on proper grooming as a pre-requisite for constructing their work identity, especially for forming early impressions. In the walking-with interviews, branded shops, service outlets and other lifestyle consumption encountered on the streets do not only enhance participants' recall on their use of socially conspicuous resources but further reveal the unified meanings and complementarity among individual possessions. It is insightful to find out from this particular method that to perform successful impression management, socially conspicuous resources cannot be employed independently. The analysis below will reveal how my participants manipulate different sign-vehicles (Goffman, 1959) in their everyday practice by deploying specific skills and tastes (Magaudda, 2011; Shove, 2009; Warde, 2005) whilst appropriating compatible belongings so as to bring out the entirety and the 'gestalt performance of self'. I am going to show how Tim, Ricky and Ada understand and use their symbolic possessions such as fountain pens, cufflinks, branded fashion, make-up, etc. in a holistic way.

4.2.2.1 Fountain Pens, Notebook and Calligraphy

While clothing acts like an outer or second skin to a person (Cash, 1985) and confers the wearer with social identity (Entwistle, 2015), accessories and their design, qualities and styles are also crucial 'props' to help people 'act out' their desirable image at work (Goffman 1959). For Ricky, aside from his 'costumes' - suits, ties and leather shoes, his fountain pens also play a key role in projecting his image as a corporate leader.

In a shopping mall during the walking-with interview, I asked Ricky if he visited any of the shops whilst passing by the mall almost every day for work. As we walked past the shop Montblanc (a luxury brand for male accessories), he was prompted to take out his Montblanc fountain pen (not ball pens, as he emphasised) from his suit pocket and talked about it. He said he had bought two on the respective birth dates of his two sons. While the pens celebrated important family events and his role as a father, Ricky reflects in detail the professional symbolism of the fountain pens. He perceives them to be a symbol of high-taste, exclusive only to successful executives or the upper class. He therefore carries the pens to work and uses them whenever he meets clients as they constitute a kind of symbolically-loaded resource for him to create prestigious impressions during business encounters:

"In fact, my pen also matters (seeing the Mont Blanc shop and taking out his fountain pen to show me). It's pretty, isn't it? It definitely shows a kind of upper-taste

and professionalism. I use it at work especially when I see clients. It means something different. Well, you seldom see a junior guy taking out a Montblanc to write, right? Only high rank executives will do so. What's more, mine is not a regular expensive ball pen. You see, it's a fountain pen! It's another level up. In fact, many senior executives, the very senior ones such as MDs or CEOs, like to use fountain pens. My business partners are impressed when I write with my Mont Blanc." (Ricky, senior director of business development – walking-with interview)

Unlike ball pens, fountain pens of recognised brands are viewed by Ricky as 'status goods', being more expensive, more sophisticated to use and are associated with the cultural skills of calligraphy. Compared to an ordinary ball pen, a fountain pen has traditionally been an iconic accessory for the upper literacy class. Imbued with such rich meanings, the dainty pen complements Ricky's linguistic capital and leadership charisma at work (as discussed in earlier sections). For Ricky, the fountain pen is a non-verbal 'facilitator' to convey his desirable image as a respectable and intellectual high-rank professional. It is a social symbol for class distinction as it has seldom been associated with junior executives or those who are less discerning in managerial decisions.

Despite the important functions of the fountain pen in his daily impression work, Ricky also remarks that his Montblanc must also go hand-in-hand with an exquisite writing notebook, without which the intended presentation would falter. He explains that a college style notebook would never appear in his suitcase as it would 'distort' or even 'contaminate' the image of prestige he intends to deliver through his fountain pen. He emphasises that a person's calligraphy skills also determine his capacity to master the fountain pen and leverage its symbolic power as a class-marker. Ricky suggests that a person should give up using fountain pens if he or she lacks the aesthetic skills of hand-writing, since the incongruence between impoverished competence and the calligraphic requisites to fountain pens would only lead to embarrassment:

"Fountain pens traditionally link to calligraphy. Only people with pretty nice hand-writing, ah ah, like me, would dare to use it. Well, I am not a secretary and just to jot down what I hear. Using a fountain pen means I am not going to write fast but noting down only key decisional points in meetings. I think carefully while I write. So, it's more an intellectual thing." (Ricky, senior director of business development – walking-with interview)

Ricky's description on the intertwining relationship between possessions (the fountain pen and dainty notebook) and a person's embodied competencies (hand-writing and decision-making skills) indicates that symbolic self-presentation and bodily performance must be complementary if it is to be convincing. He draws a distinction between the direct note-taking style of secretaries and his slow yet precise writing, which implies an embodied engagement with in-depth thinking and intellectual processing that his role as a senior executive involves. His skilful calligraphy associated with fountain pens and exquisite notebooks at the same time expresses his intellectual capacity.

The use of fountain pens denotes the embodied nature of habitus which implies accrued skills (Bourdieu 1977; Skeggs 2004), which enable a person to make sense of object-person practices in his daily life (Shove, 2003; Watson & Shove, 2008). The workplace consumption here evidences what practice theories suggest (e.g. Arsel & Bean, 2013; Halkier et al., 2011; Shove & Pantzar, 2005) : manifestation of cultural meanings necessitates the cultural competence of the user in consuming possessions. An elaborated object like a branded fountain pen would easily lose its symbolic function as a class-marker if the user is not proficient in the respective cultural skills. This also resonates with Bourdieu's (1984) claim that it is the cultural capital instead of the economic capital that defines a person's social class. Even though economic capital enables a person to afford a possession, his/her legitimacy as a user is predicated on his/her cultural competence in engaging with the object.

Another participant, Ada (the fashion brand manager), also comments that a secretary with a rich husband might have the economic capital to adorn herself with full Ferragamo (a luxury brand) items, from hair bands to leather shoes. However, people might not recognise her as having a high-brow taste – the cultural capital of the upper class – as she might lack the demeanour and mix-and-match practical sense to 'dress' with tastes and styles:

“It's the total perception... it's definitely the matching, the total look. I mean, you need not to be in total Ferragamo from hair bands all the way down to shoes. Dressing like this doesn't mean you have tastes or occupy a high rank, as an ordinary secretary who have rich husband can look like that.” (Ada, the senior fashion brand manager – walking-with interview)

According to Ada, although a secretary might be able to economically afford luxury brands, other people continue to not identify her as a high-rank executive, as she only 'puts on' the

brands but cannot really ‘carry’ them with the relevant poise and elegance. She lacks the congruent demeanours that manifest a holistic fashion sense for forming an impression of being a capable executive. This finding suggests that meanings (or the full meanings) of symbolic goods can only be expressed (or fully expressed) through relevant embodied dispositions and practices. In other words, ‘consumption’ for self-presentation should be viewed as a ‘gestalt’ performance, which implies that a structure or an experience, if skilfully organised, can turn out qualities that are more than the summation of its parts¹. Impression management therefore necessitates the users’ tastes and know-how so as to make the components become in consonance with each other, entailing a compatibility and complementarity between the object and the user.

4.2.2.2 Cufflinks and dress shirts

Like Ricky’s fountain pen, Tim highlights another male accessory – the cufflinks, which is also highly symbolic but dependent on sartorial context. As we walked past a few boutiques on the way back to Tim’s house, he alerted me to a few cufflinks on display at a shop’s window:

“You see those windows? For me, cufflinks are another example of nice grooming: it means something very high-end and prestigious” (Tim, local head of an investment corporation – walking-with interview)

Commonly regarded as a premium adornment, cufflinks are a symbolic representation that help ‘upgrade’ a man’s shirt and suit. A recent cross-country study also shows that consumers regard cufflinks as luxury accessories, rating them higher than handbags or wallets (Kapferer & Laurent, 2016). It has also been regarded as a kind of men’s jewellery (Rebmann, 2015). Adorning one’s suit with cufflinks makes the entire appearance more formal or even ceremonial, showing that the wearer is serious and respectful of the occasions he attends. Although male executives can effectively establish a more high-class impression by adding cufflinks, Tim stresses that they must not be worn or treated separately from other apparels, especially the shirts. The material and tailor ship of the shirts and the matching use of cufflinks can ‘break or make’ the entire presentation, as explained in detail by Tim below:

¹ “Gestalt”, *Cambridge Dictionary*, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/gestalt; *Dictionary.com*, www.dictionary.com/browse/gestalt.

“But they must come with the whole set of garments. Because cufflinks are heavy, especially those nice ones, and that means one’s dress shirt must have got very stiff and firm cuffs to hold them, or else the whole thing doesn’t work. As the cufflinks are heavy, they will pull down and deform the sleeves of the shirt. If the shirt is not made from good and firm materials, or in other words, more expensive fabrics, I’d rather not to wear cufflinks. Also, men usually use cufflinks only when they wear double-cuff or French-cuff dress shirts, which are more formal than normal ones.”
(Tim, local head of an investment corporation – walking-with interview)

As emphasised by Tim, the material heaviness of cufflinks signals the seriousness of grooming as a professional ritual. This in turn necessitates the shirts be tailored in such a way that it can bear the weight of cufflinks. An appropriately tailored shirt with a heavy cufflink can give an overall firm-looking effect to a man’s physique. As such, a double-cuff or French-cuff shirt becomes a ‘default’ companion of cufflinks, given the thickness of its sleeves and high-quality tailor ship that it usually associates with. The complementarity of the two forms of apparels demonstrates the need of sartorial sense and practical experiences of the wearers. As a senior professional, Tim has accumulated the cultural capital of identifying not only the individual meanings and materiality of the cufflinks or shirts, but the assemblage and interconnected relationship between them. Such sense and ‘taste’ in synergising possessions or resources is essential for putting together a holistic set aimed at creating an ideal impression. In other words, sartorial style is a unified delivery and discernment of how one can integrate different items together to bring out a ‘gestalt’ presentation of self (Eicher & Roch-Higgins 1992). It requires the embodied knowledge and skills in a person’s habitus to sense the appropriate contextual orchestration of different objects. As Ash explains, “the co-existing meanings which reside in any one worn artefact at any one time shift according to the ‘manner’ in which it is worn or assembled with other garments (i.e. the suit, shirt, collar)” (1996, p.167). The practice of dressing therefore relies on the ‘context’ – other attires that go with them, the occasions they are worn for, as well as the wearer who carries them and the wearer’s body movement, postures and demeanours.

Ada, the senior fashion marketer, also explains that ‘make-up’, ‘hairstyle’ and ‘accessorising’ could also modify the entire perception of a person’s total look in business grooming. When we walked by some boutiques in a shopping mall near Ada’s office, she showed me what she

deemed to be a sensible mix-and-match of different body apparels and belongings, and how this can engender desirable impression:

“But the suit itself isn’t enough. A proper make-up, even a light one, plus a smart suit, can make a woman look very professional...plus stockings and clean heel-shoes. A suit without make-up simply doesn’t match. Men need no make-up though, but clean, non-greasy hair is essential. The accessories are important too, as they can alter the degree of casualness. If one puts on smart casual garbs, but picks leather shoes and not trainers, she can look more formal. So, it’s a matter of accessorising (exact English word used).” (Ada, senior brand manager – walking-with interview)

Grooming for work is a more frequent and intensive exercise than that for other occasions. Ada and Tim demonstrate the techniques of dressing which necessitate embodied experience culminated from daily object-person practices and refinement (Watson & Shove, 2008). Entwistle (2015) claims that grooming experience is culturally mediated and fundamental to our daily existence. Culture endows the concerted and synergistic symbolic meanings to possessions, as well as the everyday practices applied on them. In turn, people’s embodied cultural capital reproduces practices that reinforce the structural culture and norms of their professions. By synchronising embodied skills and symbolic objects, executives’ *gestalt performance of self* set examples for other agents in the field to follow and imitate. Together, we see how they co-create and sustain the rules of games in the process of *modus operandi* – structuring structures (Bourdieu, 1977; Walther, 2014).

4.2.2.3 Key insights

In this section, my walking-with interviews unveil that symbolic meanings are contextually expressed and constructed. The fountain pen, notebook and calligraphy skills of Ricky, the cufflinks and dress shirts of Tim, the make-up and suits of Ada, etc. all carry meanings in their given contexts. The theme of ‘gestalt performance of self’ emerges as an important discourse in senior executives, who emphasise not only the meanings of individual resources but also the synergy and inter-dependency of them. More importantly, they assert that successful impression management relies very much on the users’ embodied skills of manipulating and synergising the related resources in daily practices. This is a demonstration of cultural capital not commonly found among junior executives, yet important for self-perceived holistic self-construction. The nuanced analysis of my participants’ object-object

(e.g. fountain pens and notebooks) and object-person (pens and calligraphy skills) interactions suggests that relations among sign-vehicles must be well-comprehended and prudently articulated by the users. This resonates with the contemporary practice theories (e.g. Arsel & Bean, 2013; Shove & Pantzar, 2005; Warde, 2005) in the way that consumers apply their skills in using mundane possessions to make sense of their daily life. The symbolism will falter if the contextual others are not attuned to it. We see that Ricky's fountain pen will fail to perform if there is no exquisite notebook or competent hand-writing to go with it. The same holds true for Tim's cufflinks without a quality shirt and Ada's woman's suits without make-up. Therefore, to produce 'gestalt performance of self', symbolic entities must be carefully employed in conjunction with the relevant others through the lifestyle dispositions of the users.

As we see, over time, the accumulated cultural capital will constitute the habitus of senior executives in integrating objects with their earned tastes and skills. My analysis shows that simply owning a possession or putting on apparels does not warrant the successful expression of the symbolic meanings attached to the things. The analysis here calls for the need to refine the notion of "we are what we have" (Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 1992; Wattanasuwan, 2005), as symbolic meanings of possessions cannot be delivered without the cultural sense of the users in orchestrating possessions in a complimentary way. It also advances 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, 1997b), but also through the know-how to synchronize related cultural objects through the ingrained consumption skills of the users. Here we also witness how the two processes of production and consumption constitute habitus. While *consumption* practices are shaped by workplace habitus, the *consumption* process *produces* not only desirable impressions, but also *shapes* and *imparts* habitus with the associated skills to be enacted in future performance.

As illustrated in Figure 3 and 4 below, although possessions or resources like fountain pens and cufflinks (shown as dotted circle) are found to have some specific social meanings to male executives, such conspicuous consumption can only be realised through the users' cultural capital – knowledge, sense and skills associated with the possessions (shown as arrows of manipulations). The light and thin dotted lines are used to show that the meanings of objects or possessions are not fixed but depend on the dispositions of the users applied on them. The walking-with analyses evidence the importance of 'contextuality' and 'inter-

dependency' of different resources and practices. Their relations are depicted in the overlapping pattern among dotted circles in the Figure 3 to 4). These interactions can only be made possible within the ingrained habitus, which is denoted as outer and thicker dotted line. It is not fixed and is not shown with a concrete line because cultural competence constituting the habitus is an on-going and dynamic development over time.

The findings here 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 performance of self', the embodied cultural capital must be employed to cultivate the habitus with the respective competence. This showcases that, by drawing on both the theories of Goffman and Bourdieu and taking habitus as embodied dispositions that shape and enable impression management, our understanding on symbolic consumption for impression management is advanced. It is the way 'how' people consume, instead of 'what' they consume, that manifests tastes for class distinction.



Figure 3. Gestalt performance of self - fountain pens, notebooks and calligraphy skills.

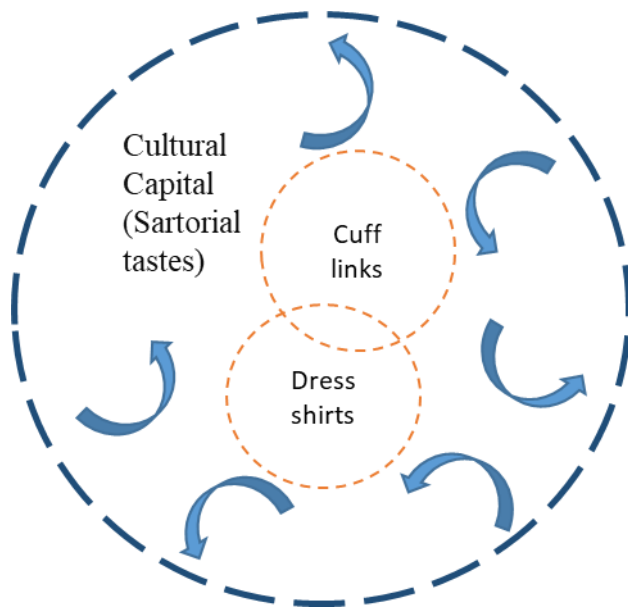


Figure 4. Gestalt performance of self - cufflinks, dress shirts, sartorial tastes.

4.2.3 Capitalising on dining for networking

As the walking-with interviews brought my participants away from their offices, the vicinity of the workplace prompted them to reflect on significant work-related practices that took place outside of work. One of these practices is ‘networking’, which helps create resources such as social capital for upward movement within professional fields. According to Burt (1992), social capital is individuals’ relationships with other players in any competitive arena. It can leverage other resources such as financial (cash, bank reserves, etc.) and human capital (health, abilities, personality, etc.), yielding opportunities like job promotion, project participation and influential access. Many of my participants consider social networks to be an important resource for accessing job and business opportunities or soliciting assistance for work projects. Research also finds that people with more social ties spanning across cliques have a higher chance of excelling in their work (Mehra et al., 2001).

What I discover in this study, however, is not why networking is important, but ‘how’ networking with different stakeholders in one’s career is established, especially through skilful consumption decisions such as dining. In the following sections, I will discuss the diverse networking channels my participants employed at different career stages, as well as their nuanced *sensing* and *knowing* of an array of dining and meeting choices for ‘networking’ purposes.

4.2.3.1 Diverse networking channels between junior and senior executives

During the walking-with interview near Tim’s office in the late afternoon, we passed by a series of restaurants and pubs. Seeing some young executives enjoying their drinks with peers at happy hours, Tim was reminded of the early days of his career when after-work drinks and similar mingling functions were popular in his accounting and audit profession. It is still a common practice among his younger staff, who have greater needs to build networks at the early stages of their career. He claims that many of these occasions are not spontaneous but purposefully planned in his professional field, in which businesses rely very much on client relationships. It is therefore the field’s norm to hold early evening drinks and mini parties to provide a platform for networking and to accumulate social capital. People buy drinks for each other to ‘give face’ and to do so reciprocally in similar occasions. Such gift-giving gestures and rounds of chats over glasses enable them to build relationships with people in

their profession. Tim explains that, from time to time, businesses and promotional opportunities come from social acquaintances.

Although the drinking culture is a part of the work life among young professionals, the importance of such networking “channels” declined when Tim progressed to higher ranks. Over the years, his name and track records have gained reputation in the field, and potential business partners usually search personnel information or business links through websites, business social media (like LinkedIn), financial news and forums or even through relevant journalists and head-hunters. Having said that, it does not mean networking is no longer necessary among senior professionals. Senior executives prefer small-circle networking that happens in meeting rooms or over dining tables pre-arranged through referrals or by invitations. On the contrary, mass occasions attended by different groups like early evening drinks are only reserved for younger executives. The channels used by different ranks of executives for networking are therefore very different. Senior executives opt for more ‘relevant’ and ‘concentrated’ channels of socialising, as they have possessed established reputations and acquaintances in their professions.

As Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass (2001) quote Burt (1992), forming a wide network may be less important than occupying a structurally advantageous position within a network. What matters is relevancy. Burt (1992) also purports that the achievements of senior managers in terms of early promotion is found related to the non-redundant contacts (not broad contacts) they possess with diverse clusters of others. In other words, the forms and modes of networking are principally different between junior and senior professionals. This suggests that resources and practices leveraged by different classes are also diversely situated.

4.2.3.2 Embodied sensing of networking consumption

When we walked by a few restaurants at a renowned commercial centre near Tim’s office, I asked him whether and how often he would patronise them. Tim responded rather swiftly by explaining how different restaurants serve different socialising purposes in relation to different stakeholders, including clients, business vendors, staff, etc. In turn, he reflects how various work-related needs determine his choice of dining venues:

“I do come to these bars and pubs... for tea mainly, but not with clients. Clients won’t have tea with us but we will usually have lunch with them instead, and then we

may have meetings before or after in office. Well, who pay the bill depends on who is playing the 'sales' side.

(Interviewer: So, in what types of restaurants do you dine with clients?)

Oh, they must be those that are good for chatting, while food quality is not the main point. Business interaction is the key... of course we can't go to local cafes or fast food chains like those (pointing at some shops across the footbridge). It's a matter of status and face-giving. It's simply not respectful, and it would show how low we rate our clients. So, the environment and the aura must be comfortable and can ease conversations. Say, the steak house where we just passed by are our common choices (slowing down his pace, turning around and pointing at it). The environment is fine and it won't be too cheap and this gives face to business partners. The prices for lunch are around HKD100 (£10) for each set. So, that's reasonable in terms of business expenses. But, mind you, the taste may not be the best. Frankly, in terms of taste, they are similar to ordinary local cafes only, but it's the environment that counts. I won't choose the same restaurant for my ordinary lunch with my staff. You know, it's simply not value-for-money to smart customers like us, right?" (Tim, local head of an investment corporation – walking-with interview)

This finding reveals how different types of restaurants carry different consumption meanings, which reflect Tim's interpersonal relations at work. The immediate references in our walking interview prompted him to explain how the criteria of venue choices for business partners are different from those for socialising with staff on ordinary days. The atmosphere and ease for interaction outweigh food quality when it comes to the time that 'faces' and respects are to be delivered through the choice of dining venues. In other words, the symbolic function is more at stake for networking meals with business partners, whereas utilitarian needs determine the choice for regular lunches with colleagues. Tim's detailed account on the distinct dining choices demonstrate his in-depth knowledge embodied in his habitus, reflecting what Warde et al. regarded as "aesthetically equivalent cultural genres" (1999, p.105). His prudent understanding shows that very few dining options or restaurants are all-time favourites for specific classes of people or work occasions. Dining choices are not necessarily class-determined in the workplace. It all depends on the situational needs that spring up on a particular working day or even a particular moment.

The findings show that unlike traditional understanding, dining styles should not be statically perceived as class-markers to project distinctive lifestyles (Bourdieu, 1984). Notions related to dining stereotype such as “you are what you eat” (Vartanian et al., 2007) should also be reviewed. Senior executives instead patronise different restaurants and choose various dining modes when different contextual needs arise. Similar to the dining study of Warde et al. (1999) and the wine study of Smith Maguire (2018), cultural omnivorousness is also found in workplace consumption. Executives do not stick to narrow and specific meal options but a broader array of them. They also seek updated knowledge of a wider variety of dining aesthetics to demonstrate their discernment as gourmet genres. For senior professionals, different styles and classes of restaurants are resources serving different networking purposes. The types of stakeholders and the need of face-giving direct their choice on eating venues and become pivotal to impression performance. The knowledge on how to dine and wine legitimately emerges as a kind of cultural capital that intertwine with the need of ‘networking’ and socialising for work performance.

On top of choosing different meal types and venues for different stakeholders, Tim shares that even for the same group of audience like employees, different purposes also give rise to diverse dining preferences. As a regional head, Tim makes use of various meal types to achieve distinct socialising intentions with his staff:

“But we are willing to spend more for special staff gatherings or team lunches and dinners. It doesn’t matter to spend a bit more like HKD300 (£30) per person as the staff are important to us, but we would choose places which are more special with better food quality. It’s a way to reward the staff and to make them happy. But for daily lunch with my team, I prefer buying takeaways from fast food restaurant as they are value-for-money. But rather than eating in, we would bring the lunch back to our office coz you know there are always crowds of construction workers clustered around. I don’t want to... you know... eat with them. Our office’s pantry is cleaner, more quiet and more private.” (Tim, local head of an investment corporation–walking-with interview)

Tim has a portfolio of networking platforms when building relationships with his staff. The ordinary team lunch would be economical takeaways to be eaten in the office pantry. However, to show how much he treasures his colleagues, Tim is willing to invest by turning the seasonal team gatherings into incentives and a token of appreciation. As a tool for

boosting staff morale, special dining venues with quality food become ideal choices to give 'face' to staff and to make them feel respected and acknowledged. In this connection, the types and classes of dining venues, as well as the ordered menus, represent symbolically the level of recognitions given to his employees.

Similarly, Ricky, the senior director, explains how he identifies different modes of lunch for him to network with different colleagues, especially with the lower-rank staff. He finds that talks over meals are much less formal and can involve topics outside of work, allowing a soft and approachable way for him to understand the thinking and culture of his staff from different angles:

"I sometimes deliberately do not to join the regular lunch with my CEO, as I want to make use of the time to mingle around with the staff of lower ranks. I find that chatting over lunch boxes in the office pantry is a good way to understand them more and to build rapport with them. Of course, dining with my CEO and other senior peers are also important, but I just don't feel like I need to do so every day. A few times a week is enough for casual chit-chat and exchanges of personal views." (Ricky, senior director of business development – walking-with interview)

Ricky explains that for both professional and image-building reasons, networking with junior staff members is just as important as networking with the senior ones. Maintaining a good relationship with sub-ordinates does not only help secure their support in daily work, but also projects an image as an approachable and respectable supervisor. Tim and Ricky's ability to distinguish dining choices for different networking purposes reflects their social dispositions that manifest cultural distinction. Olsen et al. (2000) also find that compared with junior executives, senior executives exhibit a stronger capability in distinguishing classes of restaurants and dining symbolism. Their choice of dining becomes a tool or sign-vehicle for projecting their desirable self. The narratives above also reflect that such discernment requires on-going practices and trial experiences, which accumulate the sense or feel for the game on what is socially and contextually appropriate.

4.2.3.3 Key insights

The omnivorous dining strategies of Tim and Ricky reflect that an individual's social class is not only manifested through a static hierarchy of consumption choices. Rather, it is their ability to judge the situational appropriateness of daily practices that forms their habitus to express social distinction. In this study, dining consumption is not only a symbolic self-presentation of "we are what we eat" (Bisogni et al., 2002; Vartanian et al., 2007) but is also a performative vehicle for workplace networking, sensed through an embodied appreciation of atmosphere and match between venues, diners and their relationship. Senior executives demonstrate strong sensibilities towards the symbolic practices of a diverse array of meeting and dining choices. As Warde et. al. (1999) purport, it is through "some specific component practices" that people's social class is projected and being recognised. Senior executives know how to weigh various criteria – ranging from food quality, food presentation, atmospheres, décor and hospitality when they choose places for dining with different stakeholders and for different purposes.

The acquisition of such cultural capital, as argued further by Warde et. al. (1999), is made "through breadth of experience and awareness" (p.120). Therefore, it is a person's knowledge and experience acting together that constitute 'cultural sophistication' for class distinction. Although such competencies go beyond direct work-related ability, 'networking' opens up important opportunities and social capital for work performance and career advancement (Burt, 1992; Mehra et al., 2001). As illustrated in Figure 5, mastering a portfolio of dining knowledge and making discerning choices for networking purposes forms a unique habitus for impression management (shown as outer circle) among senior executives. They deploy cultural capital (the arrows) by picking optimal dining choices (dotted inner circles) to achieve situational needs for networking. Their embodied knowledge of a repertoire of attributes in food and in dining therefore constitutes the habitus (the outer thicker circle), which expresses their performative self by ways of socialising.

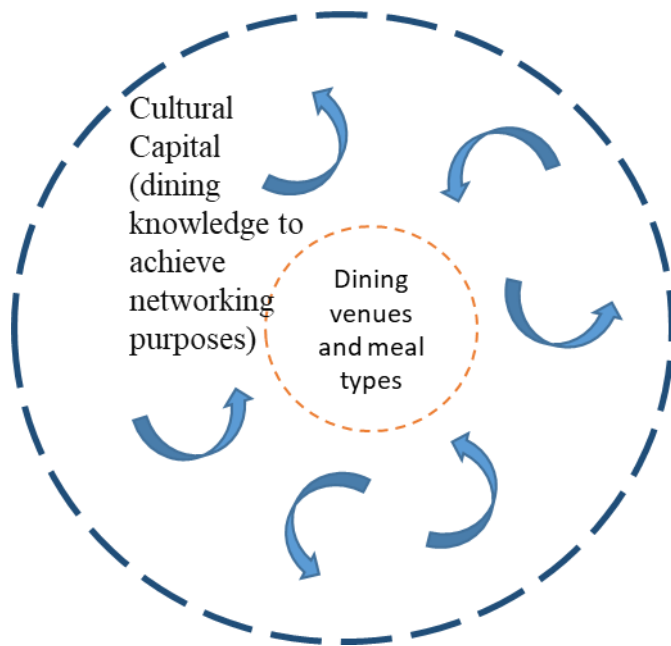


Figure 5. Cultural capital and dining choices for networking purposes.

The findings in the last two themes – ‘*gestalt performance of self*’ and ‘*capitalising on dining for networking*’ – direct us to a common understanding that while possessions and *consumption resources* are objectively available in the marketplace, their symbolic use for social purposes (including impression management) can only be brought about by drawing on the *embodied habitus* – the sensing and knowing competencies – of the users. It is only through daily *practices* of synergising personal dispositions and resources that the overall performative self can be enacted successfully. This understanding is illustrated in the integrated model below (Figure 6). The objective resources are presented with dotted circles instead of solid ones because their intended use and meanings are subject to and can only be realised through the habitus (the outer circle) formed by accumulated cultural capital (the arrows). Unlike our traditional understanding of symbolic consumption, it is not ‘*what*’ resources are used that projects the self or distinguishes social classes, but ‘*how*’ the available resources are used. The ‘*how*’ here requires the relevant cultural skills that are accrued over time. By using both the concepts of Goffman and Bourdieu to interpret my data, the findings demonstrate how the incorporated workplace *habitus* enables *impression management*. By applying their embodied dispositions – the knowledge and tastes – in specified consumption areas (such as writing, grooming and dining as reflected in my data), senior professionals

sense the situational needs and synchronize available resources to turn out desirable impressions.

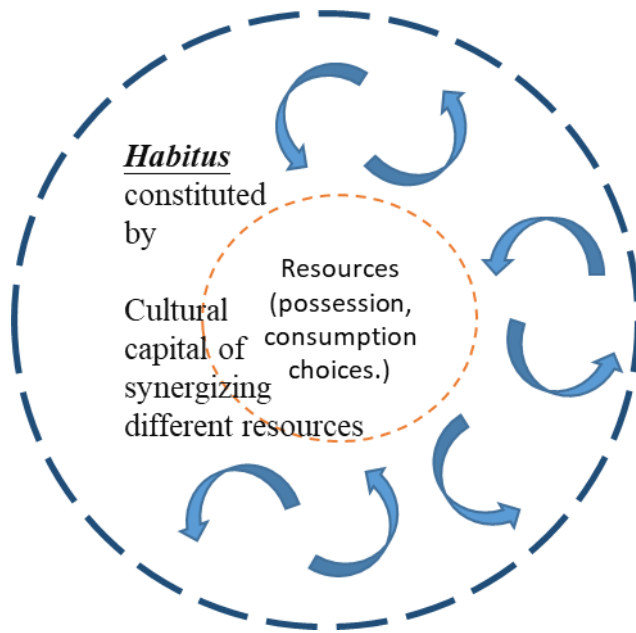


Figure 6. An integrated model showing the interdependency between habitus, cultural capital and resources.

4.2.4 Sensing and adjusting for field-specificity

In this section, the trajectories of my participants, who have undergone various job changes over 20 years of their work life, deepen our understanding of Bourdieu's assertion on the field-specific nature of cultural capital. Depending on the norms, values and culture of different fields, the same professional competence, work experience or personality could be both an asset and a liability. As Bourdieu and Wacquant assert, cultural capital is field-specific in which possession of power "commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field" (1992, p.97). My conversations with Peter, Cyrus, Elise and Ada reveal that some cultural capital deemed valuable in one field (e.g. professional integrity, outspoken character, western working style, lawful practices, etc.,) could become liabilities or even stumbling blocks in another. The strengths and capabilities they used to be proud of receive little credit in the new working 'field' when they encounter incompatible structures and rules of game. My participants' experiences provide additional insights into how they 'feel for the game' and pave **the way towards survival and/or success in the workplace.**

4.2.4.1 *Cultural capital or cultural liability?*

Though coming from different industries, both Peter (the vice-president of a finance regulatory body) and Cyrus (the sales director of an IT solution house) identified cases of failure among their colleagues who were unable to adapt to non-complementary mind-sets and practices, which used to work well in other institutional structures.

As I walked with Peter after lunch to his office, I was prompted by the high-rise financial premises to ask him how he adapted to the new corporate environment when he shifted between jobs. In the early years of his career, Peter engaged in a few financial corporations and later joined his current financial 'regulatory body'. Relative to other colleagues, he claims that his adaptation was not too challenging, as he made the move quite early and was young enough to become acculturated. Rather, he chose to talk about the cultural shock that he witnessed among his peers who joined the firm in their senior years after working for the practitioners' financial market:

"Among my peers of VPs, a few of them join our company (a semi-governmental regulatory body) as senior managers from the private financial market. They of course have good corporate finance experience, such as IPO, soliciting

capitals, etc. and have strong market sense. But these people experience quite a high failure rate with us, as they fail to tune and adapt to our 'regulatory' culture. Their competence becomes less favourable as they do not know much about 'rules' and lack the judicial mind-set that they need in their work here. So, colleagues who fail are usually those who fail to tune in the culture and fit in." (Peter, vice-president of a finance regulatory body – walking-with interview)

Peter's current corporation is characterised by a 'rule-based' culture with which it regulates and enforces finance-related laws and acts in Hong Kong. Colleagues who fail to adapt mainly come from the fast-pace and cut-throat finance market. Their established work-speed and market sense used to work well in the dynamic market, but unfortunately it is unsuited to the systematic, rule-oriented mechanism of the work structure of Peter's corporation. Their embodied knowledge and skills not only receive little recognition but also inhibit their ability to cope with the rules of game in the new 'field'.

Similar to Peter's observation, Cyrus's sales and IT industry also involves different types of corporate cultures within the same professional arena. People with personalities and career ambitions that are in disjuncture with the corporate norms would find it difficult to adapt:

*"The founder of my company proposes a pretty free or so-called *laisse faire* style. He does not control or push the staff too much but let us set our own targets, and we can attain them by our own ways. Most of my colleagues including me love this style. But frankly, guys who are more aggressive tend to find such so-called fluid culture too loose to give them the drive to chase targets. They think our norm would slow down their progress as they can't see specific goals to pursue. After some days, they would find themselves hard to fit in and leave for some other bigger but pushy firms." (Cyrus, sales director of a solution house – biographic narrative interview)*

Senior executives who shift from one field to another may experience cultural incongruity. The resulting collision between their incorporated habitus and the field's structural rules undermines their performance and upward mobility. This disharmony prompts these frustrated professionals to leave the field as it engenders a mismatch with their habitus. This reflects the field-specific nature of cultural capital suggested by Bourdieu. Senior executives may fail to 'learn' or 'assimilate' the new games and show inertia in picking up another set of 'relevant' cultural capital for survival in the new field.

While Peter and Cyrus offer a second-hand view as they observe their colleagues' failure to integrate into new corporate cultures, Elisa and Ada personally experienced the unpleasant discordance between their inherent habitus and the new corporate norms. During the walk-with interviews, both participants felt more at ease and 'secured' to share their embarrassing failures as they were away from their current workplaces. They recounted their stressful experience of having to assimilate themselves into the new games and corporate culture. Both participants had come to the realisation that the cultural capital considered valuable in their previous corporate structure (e.g. western-based corporations) becomes a liability or even capital shock in another (e.g. China-based corporations):

“But the era has changed. In the past, financing was rather “Western” in Hong Kong, and I was promoted pretty fast in my previous French and German firms. But now, many investment firms are linked to China and ‘become red’ [a jargon symbolising the picking up of the Chinese culture]. When I adopted the same ‘rule-of-law’ mentality to do my compliance jobs in the China-based corporations, I found it really difficult to fit in. Colleagues treated me as an outsider or even an obstacle to them as they prefer the culture of “rule-of-man”. We were simply coming from different worlds. In short, I had no more ‘niche’ under such corporate culture.” (Elise, director of compliance – biographic narrative interview)

“Traits that I perceive as good, such as being outspoken and expressive, could be offensive to others in my current corporation. It’s a local franchisee of a few global fashion brands. My education in the west and my earlier career with European firms teach me to ‘think out of the box’, be creative and should not be afraid to speak out. But this kind of personality does not fit in Chinese companies. My current colleagues do not welcome my impulsive and western approach. So, it’s really a cultural shock to me.” (Ada, senior brand manager – walking-with interview)

The personal stories of Elise and Ada and the witnessed cases of Peter and Cyrus echo the specificity of fields, as Bourdieu observes: “the hierarchy of the different species of capital varies across the various fields.” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.98). While some game “cards”, analogous to species of different capitals, are valid and efficacious in all fields, their relative values are governed by each field and even by the successive states of the same field. As the excerpts illustrate, even within the same industry, “every subfield has its own logic, rules and regularities” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.104) which necessitate adjustment

and adaptation, or else one may have to give up and shift to other endeavours. Senior professionals who find their usual practices and priorities being in contrast with those of a new corporate or industrial culture would soon choose to leave.

Triggered by the incompatible rules in the new fields, executives will face the problem of inadaptability, which Bourdieu terms ‘hysteresis effect’ (1977). McDonough & Polzer (2012) attribute the embodied expression of hysteresis in the workplace to the rupture between the changing field conditions and habitus. As Bourdieu and Wacquant believe, the habitus is ‘durable, but not eternal’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133), embracing a kind of inertia that resists changes and dynamics (Chudzikowski & Mayrhofer, 2011). Such inertia, as shared by my participant Peter, is stronger among colleagues who change fields only at the senior stages of their career. It is because their cultural capital has been cumulated for years and become very well-rooted. When the cultural mismatch resulting from field-specificity persists, the intensified dissonance will urge the agent to exit the field rather than adapting to it.

4.2.4.2 Field-specificity revisited - A new leader comes with a new field

While field-specificity is usually studied by comparing discrete professional and cultural arenas (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1999), my data discovers that changes in structural rules can happen without the agents shifting between fields. Fion, for instance, has not changed her job, but new games and cultural hysteresis emerge when new leaders take office and impose unprecedented norms and practices that prevail in the field. Similarly, Tim replaces not only the position of a previous director but also his entire ways of managing the regional branch. In other words, according to the Bourdieusian definition of ‘field’, which is characterized by distinguished structural rules and a corresponding set of cultural capital for upward mobility, a new leader could instigate new rules, leading to the emergence of a new field.

Fion claims that her work life has become busier upon the arrival of a new boss. New requirements, practices and norms permeate and replace the old ones, which necessitate a better use of her time during the to-and-from work routes. She further explains that her finance department (the ‘field’ she belonged to) has undergone substantial changes, from the dress code to the working mode:

“Well, it really depends on how your senior madam is like. My previous department head was a woman and she loves luxuries very much. She dressed nicely in European brands every day and was lavish... wearing big jewellerys, etc. You can infer easily such a boss also likes her staff – her team – to look like her and be ‘presentable’ and pretty. So, we just followed her will.

Later, another female boss came. She was more casual and less fussy. She might still wear a diamond ring, but a small, humble one only. So, would you dare to wear a ring that’s bigger than hers? Of course not!

Then it comes the most recent boss. It’s not about grooming but work practices. In the past few months, our whole team has been devoting in doing some tedious ‘formatting’ jobs – the line-spacing and footnote numbering, etc. It is because the new boss is a very picky person and has sharp eyes on trivial stuff! Such trend is now kind of ‘trickling’ down to all lower levels and everybody is just doing ‘formatting’!! My God. What a waste of time!” (Fion, senior financial manager – biographic narrative interview)

Fion’s experience reflects that a change in leadership can alter practices in the ‘field’, as rules of games are re-defined, along with new norms and priorities developed accordingly. The personalities, frame of references and experiences of the new head of a field or sub-field will dictate the values he or she upholds. For instance, some leaders prefer aggressive and task-oriented approaches while others opt for more compromising and human-oriented tactics; some managers emphasize external charisma and presentation while others prioritise pragmatism over outlook (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002; Mumford, 2006). With the new leadership, what was treasured and deemed important in the past therefore could also change, implying that the types of cultural capital and their relative importance for upward movement in a field can shift.

Similarly, Tim, as the regional head, also changed the squandering practice of his Hong Kong office created by the previous director. This is attributed very much to Tim’s humble family background and economical habitus. He also notes that he has not changed his preferred fashion brands in the past 5 to 7 years even though his income increased a few folds. Once he was on board in his present corporation, Tim upset the culture and changed the rules of games to instil a more pragmatic style into his regional branch:

“I am quite an economical person, and I also try to save money for my company. Say, we will soon move our office to Wanchai (pointing the direction to me while we are walking). The place is smaller but has nicer views and the rent is lower. So, this can save my company’s expenses and the whole account will look better. But the previous director wouldn’t think like this. He’s kind of mainland management and tends to use ‘public money’ recklessly. He’s a typical squanderer and always visited 6-star celebrities’ restaurants and spent a fortune for business dinner or lunch. His total entertainment expenses allow us to hire a few more people. It’s totally unacceptable to me. I am very different from him. My logic is that unnecessary expenses will only happen at the expense of the staff’s salary and bonus. At the end, who will suffer?” (Tim, local head of an investment corporation – walking-with interview)

When Tim replaced his predecessor, he set out to change the lavish culture espoused by the previous director. Though Bourdieu claims that agents are capable of reinforcing and restructuring the field, the stories of Fion and Tim advance our understanding that not all members of a field have equal influence or reinforcement power on structural rules. Agents in senior places have greater authority to introduce changes or even transform structural rules. The ability to impose ‘structuring structures’ therefore varies in accordance to people’s positions and their relative power in the field.

Most participants claim that the upper level bosses have the capacity to largely determine the culture of their corporation or department. My data show that firms with similar company goals and industrial nature may not share similar structural norms. They would be characterised by very different rules of games due to the personal values and preferences of different leaders. While both the organisations of Jenny (the finance controller) and Cyrus’(the sales director) focus on product sales, their leaders exhibit very different characteristics, which respectively create diverse systems of rules and work practices:

“Well, my present company is quite patriarchal - a typical Singapore company. You can always find signs of conservative style here. Most mid to lower ranks non-front line staff members need to wear uniforms, which is quite absurd in Hong Kong, right? My CEO, the founder, commands absolute control... He even puts up CCTV everywhere and sets punch card system to check our attendance. No one dares to

afford one minute late. All in all, the key issue lies in the upper most boss.” (Jenny, financial controller – biographic narrative interview)

“My company’s culture is rather free-style. Most department heads or team heads are working on their own area and my boss gives enough autonomy. It’s my boss (the firm’s founder and owner) who shapes up such an atmosphere[...] Many of us stay for over 10 or 20 years. Why? Because unlike the sales world outside, my company does not focus on numbers only, but treats us like humans... Say, if we can’t reach the target this month, the company will give us time to chase back. But other aggressive companies may have kicked us out already.” (Cyrus, sales director of a solution house – walking-with interview)

Although the founders of both Jenny’s and Cyrus’s companies share similar entrepreneur history and established successful enterprises, they establish very different leadership styles. With reference to Goleman et. al. (2002), Jenny’s boss is more ‘authoritative’ while Cyrus’s adopts a ‘laissez faire’ approach. Their leadership styles inspire the ‘rules of games’ of their respective fields (or sub-fields), while being reinforced and structured by collective recognition – the *doxa* (Bourdieu, 1977 and 1990a) among the staff members. For the sake of survival, members or agents in the field can only follow and entertain the prescribed requirements. This indicates that agents do not influence or structure their field rules to the same extent. This variation in influence has not been clearly discussed by Bourdieu before. Though institutional theory (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) suggests that individual agents will introduce incremental and subtle changes, my data show that members of higher ranks have greater discretion to ‘re-define’ the rules of games and may radically do so to an extent that they simply replace the old ‘fields’ with new structures.

Correspondingly, the vigorous change in rules imposed by new leaders also re-define or re-specify the kind of cultural capital (or liability) for upward mobility in the field. The emphasis and preferences on different capabilities and work approaches would change. Junior agents who struggle to survive need to acquire the new cultural capital and, at the same time, may need to tone down or even discard old forms of cultural capital that have become liabilities. In light of the new leadership, Fion and her colleagues need to adjust their grooming style and work practices, as the old ways were disapproved by new leaders. Those who fail to cope may choose to leave the field like the colleagues of Peter and Cyrus. This finding on the powerful influence of senior agents advances Bourdieu’s concept on how field structures are

being (re)-structured, in which the magnitude of influence varies by agents' relative positions and their conferred power. New leaders will bring in new rules or even institutionalise new fields. The changes also generate new sets of field-specific cultural capital.

4.2.4.3 Key insights

The findings in this section regarding the field-specificity of cultural capital give crucial insights to my first research question: “What cultural capital and practices do senior executives employ as resources for impression management over the course of their career?”. Although the question does not explicitly show the term ‘field’, the concept of cultural capital is field-dependent and will lose its relevance if it is interpreted alone (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The analysis demonstrates that the use and acquisition of field-specific cultural capital is highly evident in the workplace, especially when executives shift from one field to another, be it a job, a corporation or an industry. We can empathise with the frustration experienced by Elise, Ada and the colleagues of Peter and Cyrus, whose previous dispositions or cultural capitals were no longer considered to be valued assets when they changed fields. Their capital become a ‘liability’ under the new corporate culture and rules of games. The disjuncture or incongruity between their habitus and new structural rules render the agents seemingly under-performed. To adapt, an agent needs to acquire and accumulate another set of cultural capital that corresponds to the new field. As in the case of Elise and Ada, to mitigate the dissonance and to ensure performance, they find the need to adjust their Western style of working and out-spoken personality in order to ‘fit into’ the culture.

As depicted in Figure 7 below, different fields (shown as circles) induce different sets of cultural capital for upward movement. Executives who change fields may experience cultural shock or hysteresis that hamper their impression management and impede their upward mobility. Moreover, the cultural shock is found to be more intensive among senior executives who shift their field of work at a later stage of their career, since the cultural capital is well-embodied and deeply-internalised. Their inertia to adjust therefore becomes stronger.

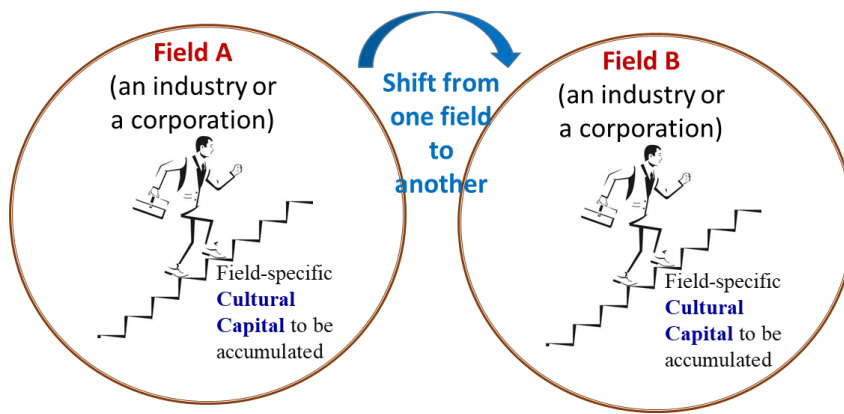


Figure 7. A change of the 'field' entails a new set of cultural capital.

The study also introduces additional nuances to Bourdieu's notion on how fields are being structured by agents of different classes. Fion and Tim's narratives on the change in leadership reflect how structural rules can change even when an agent stays in the same field or position. Referring to my first research question, types of resources and practices relevant for impression management also change when new leaders are on board. The ability to capitalise on field-specific cultural capital also lies with an agent's ability to sense the magnitude and nature of the change and to respond accordingly.

The founding leaders of Jenny's and Cyrus's companies further deepen our knowledge that while all agents are involved in structuring the structures of their field (Bourdieu, 1990a), their relative extent of influence varies according to their field positions. Those who occupy a high-ranking position are found to enjoy greater discretion to set rules, initiate changes and impose new games.

Last but not least, unlike Bourdieu's notion on field-specificity (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 98) which discusses separate fields in a rather discrete manner, the findings here contribute a temporal perspective to reveal how field-specificity empirically happens to the *same* individuals over their course of career. The impacts of how cultural shock and the needs of adaptation actually act on a person emerged from my data when participants recalled how they shifted among fields over time. Such findings could be hardly discovered when fields are only separately studied but not compared within individual experience using a trajectory perspective.

4.2.5 Sensing oneself for cultural fit

In the previous sections, we discuss how different forms of cultural capital and practices evolve and become at stake at different career stages. Their relative roles and degree of prominence are also changing over time. Despite these dynamics in which cultural practices are mainly pertinent to defined fields, this study discovers a more ‘superior’ and sustainable competence incorporated by mature professionals. Such cultural capital goes beyond specific fields and resides not only in a person’s adaptability to a given field or workplace structure, but more on his/her very understanding of whom s/he ‘truly is’ and what his/her dispositions and competences are. This awareness prompts these executives to seek a complimentary field to settle in.

The narratives in this section will show that in the course of one’s career advancement, people are in fact undergoing a self-searching experience. When they are shifting from one industry or corporation to another, swapping across departments or working under different supervisors and bosses, they undergo *fateful moments* suggested by Giddens (1991), which could be consequential for their ambition in their career. These particular life moments or events give rise to the reflexive self as my participants go through a recurring process of *self-knowing* and *self-understanding*. As one accumulates more work experience, one also engages in an on-going self-reflection. Some senior executives find that their ideal career ambitions from the past change as they come to know more about themselves. At the same time, they evaluate how much their perceived self is *compatible with* different work fields. As time goes by, their accumulated cultural capital lies in not only the capacity of attuning to a given context or field, but whether they can search and locate the ‘right’ field that is compatible with what they call their ‘true self’.

4.2.5.1 *Searching for industrial cultural fit*

After trying out different industries and observing others’ career paths, Peter reflects on how the monotonous nature of auditing in the early stages of his career did not match his character. Nonetheless, when he became more mature, he also realised that the cut-throat culture in the field of investment banking, once his dream career, was no longer his cup of tea. He had even turned down a sought-after offer when he decided to turn away from high-brow industries and focused on self-realisation. He has come to recognise his own value dispositions, which

orient him towards other priorities, such as kinship and health, which are deemed more precious to him than money and pride:

“I didn’t stay in the audit field as I found audit very boring. It just keeps checking companies’ account and dealing with history. Instead, corporate finance is more interesting to me as it’s more forward-looking and I can create something novel instead of being backward-looking like what auditing is. I’ve once thought of getting into the I-bank (investment banking) as most of my peers regard it as a very prestige field. But I later turned down such a precious job offer and ended up staying in my present organisation for many years (a finance regulatory body). Well, of course, I-bank is appealing, as it gives you very good monetary offering ... but then I would think: is pride and money so important? Are there any other things which should be in higher priority? And very importantly, I asked myself: could I fit into those environments? Such a cut-throat culture! I treasure my relationship with my family and my girlfriend, and my health as well... I’d rather opt for work-life balance...above all I am quite content with my status in my current company.” (Peter, vice-president, a finance regulatory body – biographic narrative interview)

Understanding his own values and preferences have become an accumulated cultural capital to Peter. Through engaging in different industries within the fields of finance and accounting, he has cultivated a sense of ‘*self-knowing*’. He understands what is more valuable to him and what is worth sacrificing for. Simultaneously, his narrative also reflects his cumulated ability of ‘*field-sensing*’, which allows him to comprehend the respective requirements, structural norms and ‘rules of games’ of different fields. The two competencies of *self-knowing* and *field-sensing* work together to guide Peter’s career choice. They become his cultural capital or competence for locating a desirable work field to engage in. He gave up many dream jobs and chose to stay in the present regulatory body where there is a congruence between his habitus and the working culture.

A similar self-discovery process also happened to Elise, who gave up auditing for the compliance industry after devoting some years to testing her compatibility with the two fields:

“Audit in fact suited me quite well, both in terms of my personality and my skill set. I am a very detailed person and the “checking” nature of audit requires attention on even a single cent. But to me, it’s really too tedious and labour-intensive.

I felt that it wouldn't suit me in the long run. Also, my desire on the finance field was quite strong. So, later I joined an European investment firm to work in the compliance field. I was promoted to deputy regional head very soon. This proves that I do have the talents and competence in the industry. It is my right field indeed.” (Elise, director of compliance – biographic narrative interview)

Elise uses her career success in the compliance field to inform her judgement in ‘matching’ her embodied competence to the chosen profession. This affirms her choice of giving up auditing for another industrial discipline, where she finds compatibility with her inherent dispositions. Tim, the local head of an investment house, uses another measuring rod to decide whether a professional field matches or corresponds with his habitus and competence. As an experienced finance investor who delivers outstanding fund performance, Tim shares why he regards himself as having engaged in the ‘right’ professional field. In a walking-with interview over the to-home route, Tim proudly explained to me why he could often leave his office earlier than others. It is because the amount of time he spends on his daily work is much lower than the yielded output. On average, it takes him only a few hours a day to accomplish all his basic duties – making key investment and buying decisions for his financial fund house:

“Well, be frank to you, one of the reasons why I like to stay in this job for a few years is because I can find my edge here. I can easily perform well in fund investment. On average, I just spend around five hours each day in my work, and I can go to the gym or deal with other private issues for myself and my family. At the end, my field focuses on performance. That's why I like investment. I don't need to spend too much time, but it yields good, and I can enjoy flexible work hours.” (Tim, local head of an investment corporation – walking-with interview)

Tim's differentiated competence in his field is signalled by the relative time he spends on his work. He enjoys the positive, high-yield reward and the associated sense of achievement gained from his job. The source of such work gratification is found attributable to the congruity found between the self and his career. Nonetheless he also remarks that while his working mode suits him particularly, it might not favour other types of people whose capacity is more suited to other job styles or industrial fields:

“Of course, my working mode applies to only those who have similar traits or competence. If one does not have the similar ability, then other job types such as hour-based or unit-based ones may be more suitable. However, if a person has the capacity, in my view, one should choose a career that can ‘differentiate’ one’s ability. This can be testified by observing whether his percentage of time contribution is smaller than his output or performance. My job is an example. I spend the least time in office, but I am the country head and produce the best performance. Since I was on board, the company was turned from loss to profit. So, this proves my ability in the investment industry. That’s why I stay for years.” (Tim, local head of an investment corporation – walking-with interview)

In terms of self-career complementarity, Tim seems to suggest a principal for evaluating whether a professional field suits a person or not. He benchmarks the relative time and effort paid against the working output. It proves that one is capable and has competitive edge in a profession if his sacrifices are proportionately small. This could be a self-evaluating measure in career development as he stresses that different jobs suit different people. While others may apply their talents in hourly-based or unit-based jobs, Tim finds himself more motivated in performance-based provisions.

The analysis here suggests that, at senior years, executives are not only adapting themselves to given fields, complying with the field-specific rules and accumulating relevant cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). The more *superior* cultural capital and competence for career well-being is the ability to recognise one’s own capabilities and relative strengths. From these, one identifies and settles with the industrial field that fits one’s habitus. Such *cultural fit* should allow executives to be ‘*more true to themselves*’ and enable their strengths to excel, and this in turn becomes an indispensable ‘capital’ for career advancement and stability.

As illustrated in the previous chapter, people have to go through a process of trial-and-error working for different corporations or even industries, as well as continuous self-reflection (McNay, 1999) so as to recognise what kind of persons they are, their traits and their relative proficiencies. Based on such a realisation, they need to identify the industrial field they find “comfortable” and compatible to settle in. The ‘comfort’ comes from the way that these fields allow them to be faithful to their own embodied competence and do not require great

adjustment of their character and mentality. In other words, they can still ‘be themselves’ while manoeuvring in the field through a “feel for the game” instead of intense consciousness.

4.2.5.2 *Searching for corporate cultural fit*

Apart from identifying a suitable industry or profession to develop their career, different corporations signify different ‘*sub-fields*’ as they are characterised by distinct sets of rules and structural norms, which in turn determine the forms of cultural capital essential for competition and upward mobility. Although Jenny finds her company ‘imperfect’, she returned after working for other corporations, gaining an understanding of which environment she feels more capable of ‘attuning to’:

“I do not like joining big companies but prefer small and medium firms. They suit me more as I don’t want to be too harsh. But every company has its own issues and problems. Say, the last one I worked for even had integrity issues and the incumbents of financial controller kept changing. So, I did not want to stay in those companies. I could feel that the corporate culture didn’t fit me, and there’s no point to stay and stick to it... I chose to come back to my present company after I’ve tried and compared the ‘world’ outside. I eventually realise that my company was not that worse, and I feel more at ease.” (Jenny, finance controller – walking-with interview)

While Jenny admits that the company she returns to has its own problems, she feels more confident working there as she could “feel for the game” more effectively. She regards this to be a sensible move as it enables her to be in a ‘comfort zone’ where she could be more at ease in fulfilling her job requirements and beyond. In other words, she has located a ‘cultural fit’ between her habitus and the identified sub-field (her present company), where she gains job promotions and promising career prospects.

Cyrus, the head of sales and IT department of a high-end financial solution house, also illustrates the importance of *self-knowing* which enable him to find a desirable consonance in his career. Cyrus’s company prioritises reciprocal relationships that are built on trust and self-discipline. Such non-directive atmosphere corresponds with Cyrus’s values and preferences as he treasures liberty and self-actualisation:

“In fact, my company is quite freehand. The owner gives us a lot of leeway. I could do my sales job and lead my sales team quite independently. So, it’s a matter of

work pattern. Some people need others to lead and expect hierarchy of orders, but what I need is “autonomy”. This is what this company can give me. I can use my own way to manage my team and our CEO, the founder, let us use our ways as long as we attain reasonable outputs.” (Cyrus, sales director of a solution house – biographic narrative interview)

Apart from the culture of autonomy, Cyrus also considers the company to be more suited to his non-sociable but practical habitus:

“I am not a very active and talkative person, but so happens that my company’s BtoB (business-to-business) nature fits my personality. As what we sell are high-dollar finance software systems, my clients are financial controllers, CFO or senior accountants. So, my role is more like a consultant rather than a salesperson. My clients do not need a social guy to serve them but expect someone who is concrete and rational. So, even though I am not that talkative, my clients still find me acceptable, and in fact reliable. So, to certain extent, I can just ‘be myself’ and act as who I actually am. I do not need to pretend or create a sociable image on purpose.” (Cyrus, sales director of a solution house – biographic narrative interview)

The reason for Cyrus to stay loyal to the same corporation for almost two decades is the compatibility or harmony he finds between his preference for autonomy and the *laisse-faire* culture of his corporation. In addition, his pragmatic dispositions also match well with the expectations of his clients, who prefer a professional consultant rather than a sociable salesperson. Cyrus therefore believes that a successful career in client-oriented professions relies on an individual’s ability to understand their own ‘self’, and the competence to look for ‘complimentary’ clients – those who share similar working styles and values. This facilitates communications and eases cooperation. People who are less successful in sales-oriented jobs are those who lack an understanding of themselves and the kinds of clients whom they can get along with. He also agrees with his CEO who believes in the idiom “*birds of a feather flock together*”. In order to attract different clients, his CEO therefore opts for recruiting a good mix of sales staff with a diverse range of character and background. It demonstrates again that the appropriate *fit* between the *self* and the *work* – the field – is important for career success.

Passing by the boutiques and retail shops of the Central district, Ada recalled her uneasy days working with a fashion brand, which thrived on harsh rules and inter-personal dynamics, such as its rigid punctuality policy, internal politics, an open office with little privacy, etc. Feeling restricted and frustrated, she gave up the good remuneration package and left the corporation for her present one. Working currently with a French luxury brand, Ada is the only key incumbent in the Hong Kong. She earns the discretion to choose a well-furnished shared office near her home. The open-office atmosphere and remoteness from the headquarter provides her with a high degree of liberty. As her colleagues and business partners live in different time zones, she also enjoys the flexible working hours:

“Now being the only one to work on Asia issues, I can choose my own office, my mode and time of work and more importantly, I do not need to encounter a bunch of sophisticated colleagues and face-to-face politics. I feel more at ease to be myself now. Unlike before, I needed to wear ‘masks’ to work every day.” (Ada, the senior fashion brand manager – walking-with interview)

Ada’s current working pattern allows her to be *‘more true to herself’* without having to disguise herself in face of office politics and direct human interaction. She also feels content that the time difference with her colleagues also allows her to start work late in the morning, and this fits well her ‘nocturnal’ rhythm. Her current working mode enables her to be more productive while having a more enjoyable time. The complementarity between her work structure and her lifestyle pattern has created a comfort zone in which she can realize her incorporated self.

The analysis above shows that Jenny, Cyrus and Ada have accumulated the ability to *‘feel for the game’* and *‘sense’* the extent to which the corporate cultures suit their habitus, and how likely they could fit in. This *‘sensing oneself for cultural fit’* emerges as a distinct cultural capital that helps people look for alternate pathways, especially when they experience *culture shocks* or coping *hysteresis* as discussed in the previous section. The cultural capital of *self-knowing* and *field-sensing* expressed by the participants here appears to be more ‘advanced’ than other field-specific resources, as it is applicable not only to certain field structures, but allows people to work *across* social settings until they identify the optimal environment for them.

4.2.5.3 Key insights

The findings presented in this chapter shed light on a more “superior” cultural capital for impression management in the workplace, as it goes beyond field boundaries. The career trajectories of my participants consistently suggest that a more sustainable resource for distinction, applicable across different fields, rests on their ability to sense the rule of game that resonates with their habitus and competence. It is with this *feeling* and *sensing* about the social structure that one identifies a ‘*field*’ or ‘*sub-field*’ that suggests a “*cultural fit*”. Bourdieu also asserts that one may become more reflexive when one finds a disjuncture between one’s habitus and one’s field (Bourdieu 1990; Mouzelis 2008). He claims that the “intra-habitus tensions, by more general incongruences between dispositions, positions, and interactive/figurational structures ...” (Bourdieu 1990, p.63), can provoke reflection and instigate a person to look for different options. In this study, mature executives choose to either stay in or move to fields where their habitus finds “coincidence between dispositions and position” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 128). This *complementarity* allows a person to work with a ‘*feel for the game*’ and be faithful to oneself instead of being forced to adjust, conform, or comply with cultures that do not fit them.

The sources of ‘field-sensing’ are subtle but manifested in daily practices and interactions with others. Instead of explicit or codified rules, the “regularities” of a field are tacitly agreed upon (*doxa*) as the agent participates in the game rather than by “contract” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 98). The inter-relationship between the understanding about the *self* and the potential *field* is also explicated by Bourdieu and Wacquant:

“They (agents) have “internalised”, through a protracted and multisided process of conditioning, the objective chance they face. They know how to read the future that fits them, which is made for them and for which they are made” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 130).

Such ‘*self-knowing*’ of one’s dispositions against the ‘*field-sensing*’ of the objective structural norms constitutes the intertwined cultural capital of ‘*self-field symbiosis*’. Such relationship is depicted in Figure 8 below:

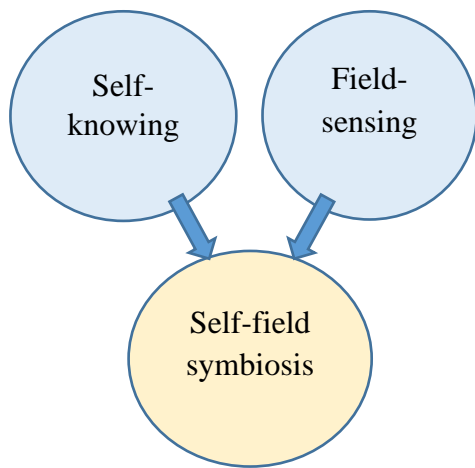


Figure 8. ‘Self-field symbiosis’ enabled by the intertwined cultural capital of self-knowing and field-sensing.

Based on a clear comprehension of what types of cultural capital they possess (self-knowing), experienced executives search for and identify compatible fields (field-sensing) to settle down in, which includes their choice of professions, industries or corporations. They are fields where the ingrained cultural capital of an agent is more valued and empowered for advancement. This implies a “cultural fit” to the habitus. The field’s norm can ‘flow’ in sync with one’s traits and pursuits, allowing the person to be more ‘faithful to oneself’ and feel more at ease while advancing one’s positions in the field. In this regard, finding the *synergy* or *symbiosis* between one’s personality, mentality and the working ‘field’ emerges as a potent cultural capital that may lead to career success. Only under such a congruent condition can one capitalise on one’s potentials and express his or her strengths. This capacity is considered more ‘superior’ for effective workplace impression management, since it transcends ‘field-specificity’ and enables a higher level of self-fulfilment through the search of the *right* fields.

This finding demonstrates the intertwining processes of consumption and production in the workplace. Senior executives consume and capitalise on their resourceful dispositions and knowledge of different fields of work. With this, executives are oriented to seek compatible fields that culturally benefit their dispositions. The resulting *‘habitus’* that traverses beyond field boundaries is shown to be co-created and shaped by both the processes of consumption and production in the workplace.

4.3 Summary of Chapter 4 - Cultural Resources and Practices for Impression Management

This chapter addresses the first research question, which aims to find out *what* cultural resources and practices for impression management in the workplace are used, discarded and changed over people’s career. Unlike most consumer studies on cultural capital, which take a cross-sectional approach, this study applies a retrospective, temporal perspective to analyse the work life histories of executives. Adopting a more open approach by not confining the study to particular cultural resources, the study reveals interesting dynamics and changes in cultural practices for self-performance over time.

As depicted in Figure 9 below, the findings provide a processual view showing that few resources and practices are sustainable cultural capital for impression management. Instead, they undergo changes throughout the professional trajectories of an executive, and their importance to self-construction also varies at different stages. Mutability and agency are key to understanding the biographical evolution of cultural capital for impression management.

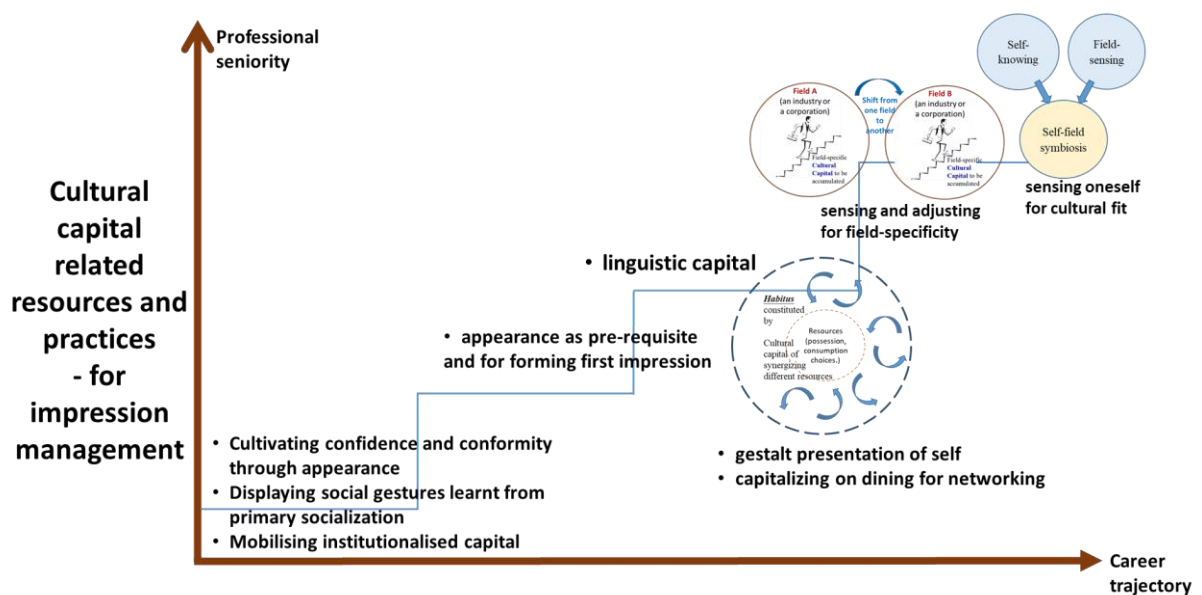


Figure 9. Cultural capital related resources and practices for impression management over people's career trajectory.

The *socially conspicuous* cues, which were once important in the early stages of one’s career, including ‘*cultivating confidence and conformity through appearance*’, ‘*social gestures learnt from primary socialisation*’ and ‘*institutionalised capital*’, become less salient as

markers for differentiation as an executive progresses in his/her career. These resources and practices are more observable and perceivable by others to form early impressions. They are also more accessible for junior executives to appropriate since they are either 'in stock' through primary socialisation or relatively easy to emulate. In later years, when other embodied practices and competencies progressively take the roles in projecting confidence and professionalism, these *socially conspicuous* resources gradually recede in importance. For senior executives, they would become pre-requisites only (as in the case with appearance) or become obsolete (as in the case of diligence and punctuality).

Over time, as cultural capital is accumulated and matured through accrued learning and socialisation (Bourdieu, 1977; Skeggs 2004), senior executives build an embodied habitus that sets them apart. At this stage, senior executives are more likely to differentiate themselves through *subtle and embodied* competence and practices, including '*prudent use of language and utterance*', '*gestalt presentation of self*', '*capitalising dining for networking*' and '*sensing and adjusting for field-specificity*'. Notably, senior executives regard the prudent use of linguistic capital as a potent vehicle to project professional confidence. The findings also reveal a host of nuanced linguistic tactics, which are regarded as important for performance utterance by senior professionals but has received little attention in linguistic or consumer studies. Mature executives attribute their effective utterance to the affirmative use of '*tone and manners*' to denote their confidence and fend off potential interrogation and challenges. Incongruent use of tones can undermine a person's authority conferred on him or her by institutional titles, as opposed to Bourdieu's assertion. They also utilise the know-how of '*asking the right questions*' in an attempt to project an intellectual and knowledgeable self while '*keeping silent*' to protect their image when they sense that the situation is not familiar to them - a disposition of *feeling for the game*.

The theme *gestalt performance of self* suggests a reconsideration of the notion – 'we are what we have' in consumer research. It is found that in the workplace, successful impression management is attributed to users' embodied skills in harmonising and orchestrating resources. Sign-vehicles or material goods like fountain pens, cufflinks and branded suits must be prudently utilised by users in a way that they complement each other to bring out an organised and unified whole – a *gestalt self-performance* – which is more than the summation of them.

The ability to identify proper dining choices for work lunches and dinners is in itself a performative form of cultural practice, which requires a networking know-how of the executives who cultivate social connections with consideration to different stakeholders. The capacity to sense nuances in dining choices and the acquisition of social capital entails extensive work exposures and experiences. This constitutes a form of cultural capital for impression management which go beyond ‘we are what we eat’.

The above themes in grooming and dining advance our understanding that the symbolic use of *resources or practices* for impression management can only be realised through the synergising competencies incorporated in the habitus. As such enactment requires devoted time, work experience and on-going practices, the know-how of orchestrating resources for gestalt impression is only found among experienced and senior professionals, thus becoming their cultural capital for social distinction. Through the concept of habitus, the findings advance our understanding of symbolic consumption, which suggests that effective self-presentation cannot be attained solely through material ownership or access. Instead, symbolic consumption entails cultural tastes and skilful synchronisation. My participants’ narratives demonstrate that impression management is an embodied self-performance enabled by cumulated dispositions. It is only through their workplace habitus that professionals can mobilize their affordances to distinguish and orchestrate consumption tastes for casting impressions.

In addition, cultural capital is also particularly ‘field-specific’ in the context of the workplace. Advancing our current understanding, the temporal approach reveals the impacts of the cultural shock that results from field-specificity on individuals. The retrospective data show that a crucial capital or effective practice in one professional field can lose its efficacy in another. In some cases, they can even become liabilities due to diverse ‘rules of games’. The finding also enhances Bourdieu’s structure-agency theory in the way that not all agents in a field have the same capacity to reinforce structural rules. The more senior an individual is in a structural field - in particular the leader of it - the more impact he or she can impose in shaping the structural rules. To survive cultural shocks or hysteresis at work, individuals must be competent in sensing and internalising field-specific cultures, which are usually diffused through the norms and shared practices of agents.

The above dynamics suggest that cultural resources and practices for impression management are constantly evolving throughout people’s career. Nonetheless, this study extends

Bourdieu's theory and discovers a more 'superior' and sustainable cultural capital in senior professionals. Their ability to survive and 'play the game' resides not only in their adaptability in a given work field, but also in the self-understanding of their own competencies and habitus. Such cultural capital of '*self-knowing*' against '*field-sensing*' entails an embodied pursuit for '*self-field symbiosis*'. The optimal field is experienced as a 'cultural fit' in a sense that the executives feel 'true to themselves' as they seek for career survival and advancement. This advanced form of disposition at work transcends specific fields and social structures, manifesting a more transferrable and adaptable cultural capital for impression management.

Chapter 5. Findings and Discussion - Sources of Acquiring Cultural Capital for Impression Management

This chapter aims to address the second research question - “*how* do senior executives learn and acquire cultural capital and practices for impression management over the course of their career?”. Existing literature reveals that primary and secondary socialisation are the main sources for acquiring cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977; Skeggs, 2004). As Bourdieu claims, the enactment of a habitus, such as in the profession of the scientific field, is a “complex practice, which can only be mastered through a long apprenticeship” (2004, p.5). While family constitutes the main source of primary socialisation, other social influences such as education and work experience continue to shape an individual’s habitus, though they are seldom the focus of discussion to Bourdieu.

As reviewed in Chapter 2, Bourdieu and other scholars have not given us much insight regarding the empirical process and sources from which people learn and acquire social rules for legitimate behaviour (Margolis, 1999). The process of how related cultural capital is appropriated is also unclear, not to mention those related to specific fields like the workplace. As field rules are contextual, this section fills this gap by exploring the different sources and process of socialisation at work through which executives acquire relevant cultural capital.

This section reveals that the quotidian setting of the workplace itself provides people with rich life experiences for acquiring work-related cultural capital. It is a fertile ground from which executives find multiple sources of socialisation, namely ‘*multifocal observation and imitation of the referent others*’, ‘*self-reflection through trial-and-error*’, ‘*en-route socialisation*’ and ‘*negative referencing – the borrowed trial-and-error*’. They are channels for learning legitimate practices of specific fields at different career stages. It is worth noting that the process of secondary socialisation displays an incremental pattern, with different sources emerging and subsiding in importance as one progresses through the career path. Once specific ways of learning are exploited and the cultural capital is incorporated like a ‘*second nature*’, executives will gradually extend their scope of learning to other sources beyond their immediate fields of work. They would also perform self-evaluation in the course of pursuing a reflexive project of the self.

5.1 Multifocal observation and imitation of the referent others

The data below show that the ways in which other people behave and interact in the workplace become exemplars for executives to learn and accumulate cultural know-how. Through observation and imitation, one gradually complies with and internalises the structural rules which are usually unwritten, subtle but crucial in the working world. The rules are manifested and diffused through the practices and habitus of the ‘referent others’ (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005; Shah, 1998), who could range from colleagues of different ranks in the immediate workplace to external experts and the collective majorities. In other words, the acquisition of cultural capital is *multi-focal* and encompasses multiple channels. It is interesting to note that that these sources for learning are not equally prominent at the same time but tend to start and expand from micro fields and immediate others to the macro and outer scope. They play varying roles over the socialisation process, and the types of cultural resources appropriated also differ, beginning with socially conspicuous know-how to more subtle embodied competencies.

5.1.1 Peers

To ensure she was accepted as a legitimate member of her profession and corporation (the field she belongs to) in her early career, Fion strategically imitated the dress codes of those on the same professional level as her. She explains that sartorial styles are more readily observable and to be emulated. In doing so, she could easily attune her embodied disposition to that of her peers and achieve synchronicity with them. Imitating her peers’ dressing styles enabled her to maintain a benchmark, which she used to keep pace and to ensure that she would not feel uneasy in the event of being over- or under-dressed:

“I was quite ignorant when I first came out to work, not knowing much or caring much. But basically, I did observe. I observed how my colleagues and peers around me wore to work. I would take references from them. I started from observing the peers first. Once I was on par with this tier, I could observe others like the senior ones, and even the junior ones like those clerical staff who were not degree graduates. I had to know what styles to pick as well as what to avoid.” (Fion, senior finance manager – biographic narrative interview)

Fion’s trajectory demonstrates that to consolidate one’s position in the working hierarchy, young executives usually start by ‘referencing’ those on the same hierarchical levels. They

presume that their peers have set the standard expectations that define the organisation's dress code. Being on par with those of similar ranks ensures that one can at least meet the minimum requirement for appropriate dressing. Once she had aligned herself with her immediate peers, Fion continued to take references from others to consolidate her position in the hierarchy. At this stage, she distanced herself from the lifestyle choices of those from the upper and lower ranks (Bourdieu, 1984; Hogg et al., 2009). Fion kept herself apart from the dressing mode of the juniors since this would contravene her image as an executive of a higher rank. At the same time, she also avoided the sartorial styles of colleagues who were senior to her. Another participant, Peter, shares Fion's sentiment, claiming that as an audit trainee, he "*felt offensive*" and "*improper*" using his graduation gifts – a luxury Montblanc pen and a blazer of the high-end brand Cerrutti – as "*they were supposed to be status symbols of senior male managers*" (Peter, vice-president of a finance regulatory body – walking-with interview). He only felt comfortable using them when he progressed to higher ranks later in his career. This shows that executives learn to adopt a 'dualistic' (Simmel, 1957) impression practice, which is characterised by a simultaneous pursuit for imitation and differentiation. To establish a recognised identity, professionals ascribe lifestyles and practices of the significant others who signify a proper "collective self" while distancing themselves from the "undesirable self" (Markus & Nurius, 1986; McCall, 2003; Sullivan, 1954).

5.1.2 Bosses as role-models

Fion's account also reveals that once people have attained the basic benchmarks with the same class of people and have incorporated the perceived norms into their habitus as if it is a *second nature*, executives will gradually emulate the taste of those on an upper level as they advance in their career path (Bourdieu, 1984; Veblen, 1899). This is particularly evident when they proceed to the pre-promotional stage in preparation for middle management positions. As Ada has witnessed, most of her colleagues and friends gradually imitate the conspicuous practices of their upper class at work by "*changing their wardrobes*" shortly before and after they are promoted, and "*shift upward the levels of brands they used by picking those fashion and adornment consumed by their bosses*" (Ada, senior brand manager – walking-with interviews).

Later, to further consolidate their work identity, executives turn to emulate more *subtle and embodied* cultural practices such as disciplinary knowledge and managerial skills. With more working experience under their belt, they realise that managerial styles and know-how are

more salient as class demarcators, since they signify concrete work abilities and leadership. Most participants treat their bosses as role models and the main sources for acquiring such cultural capital in the workplace. Carmeli and Schaubroeck (2007) also find that leaders have significant influence on a person when he or she looks for references. Successful emulation is not attributed to direct coaching or instructing but is done through observation of daily practices and practical application in one's own circumstances. This is reflected by Jenny as she pragmatically adopts the managerial styles of her CEO:

“Particularly, I have picked up the style of my CEO, who finds using ‘forces’ pretty effective in getting things done through people. That’s what management is all about. I gradually agree when I use the same tactics myself over the years. I tell my staff clearly what I expect from them. I set clear goals and also my bottom line. So, they are willing to ‘run’ for our department. It’s indeed effective. I’m kind of inheriting it from my CEO.” (Jenny, financial controller – biographic narrative interview)

In a similar vein, Fion also changed her attitude towards her once most-hated new department head and later acquired her management style through on-the-job experience. In the beginning, she felt disrespected and distressed, since her boss denounced her past achievements and her ‘conservative’ management style. However, as time went by, she gradually felt increasingly grateful to her boss and now regards her as a role-model. As she explains, without her assertive style, Fion would not have been able to walk out of her comfort zone, be open to new perspectives and become bold enough to overcome challenges with a new working style:

“The new boss by then always denied our usual ways of work. So, I felt bitterly offended and hated her attitude at the very beginning. But later, her disapproval indeed has woken me up and I started to question myself – why couldn’t I consider some other approaches or perspectives in the past? There could be better ways of handling the same issues. I was then alerted that I had been in my comfort zone for too long. So, looking back, there is something good with the new boss.” (Fion, senior financial manager – biographic narrative interview)

Both Jenny and Fion have undergone discouraging stages with their upper management. In the beginning, they found it hard to agree with the seemingly aggressive managerial styles of

their bosses. Reluctantly, as middle managers, they felt obliged to pick up the same styles and implement them in their own daily work. Over time, through pragmatic applications, they practised and attested the inherited ways of management. Both participants later realize that the appalling approaches of their bosses in fact embed the essence of leadership and efficacy. Their experience shows that learning embodied cultural know-how from senior colleagues is not as direct as imitating socially conspicuous practices like appearance. It takes time to invest and engage in. The role models are a kind of *emerging* source from which ingrained cultural capital can only be acquired through a self-practising and self-reflective process of experiencing and attuning into the habitus.

5.1.3 Experts

Apart from taking references from colleagues in the workplace, executives also ‘consult’ *experts* external to their working fields. As sources of acquiring cultural capital, external experts appear to be particularly at stake when people are in the middle management. To further equip themselves with greater competence to solve issues that their ‘internal’ sources are unable to help with, executives would seek cultural know-how beyond their work vicinities. In other words, when ‘internal’ sources are exhausted, they turn to external ones for learning opportunities, especially when the knowledge and skills are no longer disciplinary-related but pertinent to general managerial traits or leadership quality.

Ricky regards that his ‘mentors’ are not merely confined to leaders he encounters at work but include also ‘experts’ he read about in books related to management skills and philosophies. These *quiet* mentors and their collective wisdoms, lessons and stories have equipped Ricky with discerning capabilities to become a potential leader in his profession:

“I read widely, and this affects me much. Well, one important book I read was “How to win friends and influence people” by Dale Carnegie... and then later I also read Jack Welch’s, such as “Straight from the gut” and Jim Colin’s “Good to great”... so, when things are related to daily work, I would pay more effort to study. I really put effort to learn. So, all in all, most skills are related to problem-solving and how companies operate, how teams should be run...about leadership you know. I put a lot of effort to understand these topics. (Ricky, deputy director of business development – biographic narrative interview)

According to Ricky, the judgemental sense that one can learn from inspirational readings might not be industrial-specific knowledge, but rather, a more generic, transferable capital that is pertinent to senior leaders. He treasures such know-how as they are important in motivating people and in setting institutional goals. Ricky is eager to acquire various management tactics from these experts throughout his career since the cultural capital acquired has indeed enhanced his leadership.

Like Ricky, Alisa also learns from sartorial specialists in her search for the optimal grooming styles that fit her physical figures as well as her role as a rising executive. Those she seeks advice from are not well-known fashion designers but experienced front-line salespersons of high-end brands. Their expertise comes from accumulated experience in serving customers of middle to upper social classes who possess different bodily figures and deportment. The sales persons from whom Alisa takes advice work for branded boutiques located in the business districts. They therefore possess rich experience and fashion sense particularly on work wears catered to professionals and senior executives.

Having a low opinion of her body shape and height, Alisa claims that a few acquainted sales ladies have helped her tremendously, saving her time in finding her ‘style’ through ‘trial and error’. She treats these salespersons as *consultants* or *fashion mentors*, from whom she learns to gradually build her own grooming strategies:

“Oh, the sales-persons are also very important. Why I tend to buy from certain brands but not others? First of all, the sales persons must be able to understand my shape, and what fit me well, what I can carry better and then suggest accordingly.

By then, the Element Mall was still not popular and all luxury boutiques there were not busy. So, the salespersons served each customer like VIP. They were patient in sharing their fashion know-how to me, say, the cuttings, the fabrics, the trend... We also contact via whatsapp (showing me the phone messages and pictures) and they update me whenever there are new arrivals ... but not all arrivals, only those that fit my body and taste, as they know me! That’s the key! They screen for me and save my effort and time.” (Alisa, senior audit partner – biographic narrative interview)

Alisa’s narrative illustrates that each *field* has its own sets of cultural capital. Though Alisa is a successful high-ranking auditor in the accounting field, she possesses little expertise in fashion. The grooming know-how of Alisa’s mentors – the salespersons of boutiques – has

effectively helped Alisa to come up with desirable styles that fit her needs. These needs relate to both the limitations of her body figure and the image expected of her as a partner of a leading firm and the chairperson of an industrial association. Learning from the suggestions of fashion sales ‘consultants’, Alisa also gradually builds up her own grooming *system* and sartorial *philosophy* that could hide her weaknesses while expressing her appealing side:

“When time goes by, I start to get the sense and when I try them on, I would immediately know what I can carry and what I can’t, and what fabric is good. So, over the years, I gradually learn from the boutique salesladies and understand more about myself. Say, I will make the best out of a wardrobe while I must have a few basic stuffs to mix and match.” (Alisa, senior audit partner – biographic narrative interview)

The learning strategies espoused by both Ricky and Alisa show that seeking references from external experts entails time and effort. Executives need the judgemental sense to locate and to identify appropriate ‘advisors’ who can serve their needs. Similar to the way they acquire know-hows from bosses, executives also need to practise the advice they gain from suitable ‘experts’. Over time, they soon incorporate the expertise into their habitus and develop their own set of idiosyncratic dispositions.

5.1.4 The collective majority – corporate and industrial culture

Apart from immediate colleagues and bosses, people in the wider scopes, such as those engaging in the same corporations or industries, also act as reliable references for perceiving structural rules and standards at different career stages. Together, the norms established by the ‘collective majority’ constitute broader referent groups. As they act and speak in the workplace, they in fact create subtle codes of practices and invisible boundaries for structural conformity. My participants refer these norms manifested by concerted practices as “*rules of games*” or “*unwritten rules*” (using the exact English terms):

“I observe others. Yes, I look around and follow what people do. They all behave similarly. It is the corporate culture or my industry's culture. There are ‘rules of games’ (the exact English term). For instance, I was from those big audit firms and was trained to dress in specific standard. Industry really matters.” (Jenny, financial controller – biographic narrative interview)

“Of course, we can find black and white rules in the staff handbooks. However, for real survival in the working world, one must manage all the ‘unwritten rules’ (exact English term). In order to live with and cope with your colleagues, you can’t just follow written rules but must rely on daily observations. Say, for example, when all colleagues want to go to McDonald’s but you prefer Café De coral, then you are the one who becomes awkward. Or in a meeting, everybody tries to be quiet, but you speak out, then you become weird as well. So, these are hidden rules which are in fact set by the majority.” (Ada, senior brand manager – biographic narrative interview)

Jenny and Ada clearly demonstrate that despite the written codes of practices stipulated for members to note and comply, what is more crucial are the hidden rules that prevail in their given *fields*, which are subtle, industrial-specific, or even corporate-specific. These unwritten rules need to be *observed, followed and managed* in everyday workplace interactions. As Ada explains, such acculturation process involves successes and lessons, embarrassment, giving up one’s own will, etc., through which a person progressively senses, screens and attunes to the subtle rules as a part of their incorporated disposition.

As Bourdieu and Wacquant claim, while *fields* (e.g. accounting in Jenny’s case) have their particular norms and rules, sub-fields within them (e.g. the Big4 international accounting firms vs smaller local ones) also exert their own rules for members of the inner circles to follow (1992, p.97). According to Jenny and Elise, their grooming style, their ways of handling jobs and approaching projects are considered to be of the ‘upper culture’ by virtue of working for international firms. They consider themselves to be ‘*well-trained*’ professionals who have internalised embodied predispositions on a more advanced level:

“Besides the broad industry's culture, there are further rules of games within corporations. I started my career with a multi-national firm and was trained to dress in a particular standard. I must be very presentable. Say, full suit, no trouser suits but only A-shape skirt and leggings. Even it's cold in winter, we still put on skirts... I think the training from global firms indeed has helped me set my standard and baseline... including all the working modes and attitudes. Say, I know what is important and what is not. Maybe I've got the sense, the sense of knowing what should and should not present and how...” (Jenny, financial controller – biographic narrative interview)

Upon graduation, Elise joined the Big4 audit firm, which is a sub-field within the broader audit industry. She recalls how she recognised the nuanced differences in her firm relative to other less prestigious corporations in the same industry. Daily working exposures and interactions with colleagues of the same sub-field led her to *internalise* the more ‘high-end’ international culture set by the ‘collective majority’. This informs her grooming standard thereafter:

“Because I’ve joined an audit firm which is renowned for its good-looking culture. Everybody dresses well, and the whole industry knows about it... All my trainee peers cared about their appearance very much. Some had better family background and they could afford some brands. Disregarding what brands we put on, we all have got the sense to mix and match well. This did affect me. Since then, I have requested myself to dress decently and properly throughout my career. For example, I put on jackets almost every day. It’s a matter of image” (Edith, director of compliance – biographic narrative interview)

The narratives of my female participants denote that the implicit rules and their legitimate scopes – the *doxa* – can hardly be ‘read’ fully, but can only be ‘observed’, ‘felt’, ‘followed’ and ‘experienced’ through time and lessons learnt. When most members pledge loyalty to the shared practices – the *illusio*, their recognition is further reinforced and upheld as benchmarks for others to conform to (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1990a). Individuals, in order to maintain their well-being and advance at work, must “kowtow” to the ‘big current’ (a Chinese saying to mean ‘comply to the main trend’) set by the collective majority and become ‘*structured structures*’. The data show that the process of sensing, knowing, complying, internalising and reinforcing structural rules, as well as the more nuanced rules in sub-fields (such as the specific brand levels of formal suits and skirts and ways to do mix and match), are also noticeably applied to the workplace context. Moreover, it is found that the structured norms are reinforced as a result of the *collective* practices of agents, who act harmoniously to manifest and perpetuate the unwritten rules and norms through collegial bodily dispositions.

The above sections reveal that executives engage in an ongoing process of comprehending rules and norms, and they acquire cultural resources from different referent others. They take an all-encompassing, multi-focal approach in terms of seeking suitable role models for acquiring cultural know-how. The acculturation process is *incremental* in which different

sources become salient at different stages of one's career. In their early career, junior executives emulate and benchmark against the immediate referent others, predominantly their peers from the same departments or teams. They also ensure their positions are clearly distinguished from those in the lower and upper strata. When they reach middle management, their bosses and upper management become the main sources of socialisation, followed by external experts as well as the collective majorities that constitute the common practices in their respective professional field. These sources do not only become focal points of learning at different times, but they also account for different forms of cultural resources and practices (from *socially conspicuous* ones like appearance to more *subtle embodied* practices like work attitudes and leadership style). Overall, the process of emulation and socialisation suggests an *outward* manner over the course of a career, expanding progressively from the close referent others within the micro sub-fields (e.g. departments or corporations) to the macro milieu beyond (e.g. industries or general management know-how).

5.1.5 Self-adjustment to turn out proprietary styles

Instead of direct imitation as practiced by junior executives, and apart from observing others from different sources, senior professionals are found to adopt a sophisticated way of learning. They tend to blend in self-oriented elements and appropriate the virtues of others into their own style. The more successful acquisition of capital is found to involve individual inputs and self-adjustment. With prolonged exposures to public speaking and professional presentations, Ada illustrates how proficient executives transform the modes of the referent others into one's proprietary styles:

“I know I should learn how to talk smart in the workplace. For example, when I find a person keep talking for 15 minutes but is still very engaging, he must be very smart, right? So, I will pay attention and learn from him. And then, very importantly, I will turn what I've learnt from others into my own style. To be successful, I believe one must blend in one's own style and personality. It's where the real skills and competence are. If you just copy entirely from others, that's ugly and you will look stupid, because it's not your 'own' thing, and it's not your own language. Say, if it's not your own original joke or humour but you just pick up from others and retell it, and then you want to get the same 'wow' effect? No way! It's totally wrong. That joke is not going to work because it's not 'yours'.” (Ada, senior brand manager – walking-with interview)

Ada's narrative depicts a more advanced level of *'learning'*, in which existing theories relating to *'imitation of upper tastes'* and *'trickle-down of taste'* (such as Bourdieu, 1984; Veblen, 1899) have not paid much attention to. For experienced executives like Ada, simply copying others without blending in personalised style could still be regarded as *'low-taste'*. Such surface imitation therefore could not be a resource for social distinction. This is in line with the Chinese saying: *"picking others' toothpicks"*, which is usually used to tease people for direct parrot-copying without individual inputs or self-judgement. Ada adds that the real *"kungfu"* (martial arts in Chinese) of learning could only be attained through *"digesting"* and *"processing"* what one observes. Senior executives do not just copy but adjust, incorporate and then re-produce the practice in their own proprietary style without showing *traces* of the original references. More importantly, the findings reveal that more mature agents in a given social field do not exist simply as passive *structured structures*, nor do they simply reinforce the same set of rules like what younger executives tend to do. When executives become more experienced, the pre-discursive nature of habitus will be less conspicuous. Rather, senior executives use their accumulated cultural capital to *sense* the tacit boundary and *feel* for possible affordances in order to introduce individual tastes. By tracing the changing pattern of how cultural resources are acquired over time, this study shows that not all agents in the field can negotiate subtle distinctions (Arsel & Bean, 2013) or produce micro-level practices (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015) in the same manner. Only more senior agents in the field with richer cultural capital can sense and judge how far they should produce idiosyncratic tastes while making sure not to transgress structural norms. They therefore do not only consolidate the field rules by reproducing the practices in a broad sense, but also redefine and *re-structure the structures* through nuances of self-adjustment.

5.2 Self-reflection through trial-and-error

As Bourdieu asserts, the attainment of knowledge is made through two senses: the practical sense (as stipulated in his *'logic of practice'*) and a kind of conscious comprehension he terms *'reflexivity'* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Similarly, Giddens (1991) argues that the self is an ongoing reflexive project. Many participants in this study also build up their cultural capital and habitus through continuous *'self-reflection'* in the course of *'trial-and-error'*. Having gone through bitter moments and recurrent failures, they learn lessons and fine-tune their strategies and tactics at work. Such socialisation process is found to be more acute when

executives progress to middle management and thereafter. At this stage, they attempt to go beyond their comfort zone of simply emulating others and rely on their own experience and internal learning.

Ada has faced challenges in inter-personal relationships when she was at the junior and middle management stage. She used to attribute problems to other people or external factors but seldom looked at herself. Such attitude soon hindered her career prospects, which made her turn to review and evaluate herself in recent years. The self-reflection has rendered improvement in Ada's relationships at work and has gradually become internalised as a regular reflective exercise to her:

“A few years ago, I gradually realized that my personality could be a stumbling block in my career. In the past, I was quite self-centred. I just blamed my boss, blamed my job or colleagues but seldom tried to look at myself. Later, when I went through more ups and downs... well, people seldom reflect when life is smooth... Gradually, I learn to reflect and self-evaluate. Say, I will take a step back and analyse: what have I done today? Have I done something wrong or something not welcomed that offend others? Then I will avoid doing the same.” (Ada, senior brand manager – walking-with interview)

Alisa's learning path for grooming is also a typical example of trial-and-error reflection. She gave up her personal preference for work clothes of sharper and lighter colours and gradually followed the norm of the majority for the sake of practicality. She soon surrendered to the reality that clothing management, especially for daily work, involved not only the 'frontstage' presentation, but also 'backstage' efficiency. Unlike grooming for special occasions like banquet or parties, day-to-day work wear, which is worn and washed frequently, require an additional level of manipulation at the backend so as to allow wardrobe efficiency:

“When I just came out to work, I quite disliked the grey-blue-black tone of dress code in my industry. I wanted something sharper and less common. But when time goes by, I found that some colours or fibres could get dirty easily, and they would turn greyish and look soil-ish in colour. So, reluctantly, I gradually reset my criteria and consider economical and durability issues rather. And then, I start to realise why the seniors would choose the grey-blue-black style. They may have walked through the same lessons as me. I then understand the “truth” of grooming... I also seldom wear blouses, as they can get dirty and wrinkled very easily, and that would be very troublesome especially for business trip. Now, to me, clothes must be comfortable,

durable and easy to manage. So, when time goes by, a person will have her own thinking.” (Alisa, senior audit partner – biographic narrative interview)

In the early years of her career, Alisa felt tired and frustrated maintaining the nice-looking but troublesome attires. Amidst her busy working life, she has gradually learned and resort to the more pragmatic choices. She soon came to understand that washing and ironing light-coloured apparels are difficult to manage, while dark-coloured and wrinkle-free clothing does not only save her the troubles and efforts but can also keep her looking smart and tidy. Her experience gradually forced her to re-prioritise her clothing choices from *‘what I like’* to *‘what is practical’*.

Making revisions to practices applies not only to the maintenance of workwear but also inspires Alisa’s other workplace practices that can enhance her well-being at work. For example, Alisa re-considered her unwise ways of handling inter-party negotiations when she was young. She recalled the naïve lessons and embarrassment she and her peers have gone through, which alerted her of the need to adjust their negotiation strategies:

“When we serve auditing clients, we must hold our temper and stay calm. Don’t argue or fight, even though people are unreasonable or nasty. But, in the past when I was young, we would dare to pinpoint certain business partners and condemn them for failing to do their part properly. I did voice it out straight the way in front of all parties! Can you imagine how naïve I was? Although I pointed out the truth, I had obviously embarrassed and offended some people, right?” (Alisa, senior audit partner – biographic narrative interview)

Through trial-and-error, Alisa kept adjusting her interpersonal skills until she figured out the strategy of getting messages across in a more effective manner:

“... But now, I am smarter, if something goes wrong because of any third parties, I won’t speak it out by myself, I will rather warn or hint our clients and let them be the one to voice out, as their words carry more weight. I would avoid playing such ‘judging’ or ‘accusing’ role. It’s better to use other people’s ‘faces’ and ‘mouths’ to get things done. So, that’s the skills I have gradually earned. So, after all, I am smarter now than I was young.” (Alisa, senior audit partner – biographic narrative interview)

With recurrent self-reflection, Alisa now masters the tactics of negotiation by privately communicating with parties that have the ‘authority’. She would also ‘pass the messages through other people’s mouth’ (a Chinese proverb) so that she would not risk offending others. This reflects Bourdieu’s assertion that performance utterance sometimes depends not on the content, but on the authority conferred to the speaker who are “legitimately licensed to do so” by the concerned institutes (Bourdieu 1991, p. 113). From bitter lessons, mature executives learnt that persuasive negotiation does not only rest on the substance of arguments but also on the social recognition attached to the speaker.

Besides, holding up one’s true temper and keeping calm was also Alisa’s way of dealing with any unpleasant interpersonal communications. She repeatedly emphasises that she is smarter now, having learned that some issues can in fact be dealt with better in other informal occasions rather than intuitively at meetings. The ‘wait and see’ tactics can also allow her to calm down and buy time so that she can seek better justifications and solutions. It is through such incessant ‘trial-and-error’, as well as continuous reflection that senior professionals acquire the cultural predisposition as proficient executives.

5.3 En-routes socialisation

In my walking-with interviews, it emerges that the daily to-and-from work routes are as well vital sources for learning, imitating and distinguishing cultural capital for tastes and lifestyle. When they stroll along the cityscapes every day, my participants use their senses to see, hear and feel what is appearing and moving around them, including people and things. They absorb and incorporate all these stimuli to accumulate cultural capital for the enactment of proper social behaviour. Such en-route sources of socialisation are seldom explored in existing literatures, and has been overshadowed by other sources like family, school and workplaces due to the high proportion of time they spend in these arenas and the social roles they play there. However, the walking-with interviews revealed that executives’ daily practices, including grooming, handling of possessions, dining etiquette, posing and gestures, and ‘manners’ in general (Elias, 1978), are conspicuously on display in public spaces for observation and learning, if a person choose to attend to them.

District-oriented cultural capital

During an en-route interview in Tim's work district, he expressed his perception about the distinct lifestyle and culture of different commercial districts even though they are geographically very close to each other. His intimate and detailed knowledge of the difference between proximal geographical spaces is mainly acquired through his lived experience in the vicinity, where he commutes and walks to and from work every day. When I asked Tim how he felt about the environment around the Wanchai district (where his office presently located) when compared to the Central district (the A-grade office district) of his previous office, he looked around, pondered for a while and concluded he felt more comfortable with the rather "down-to-earth" commercial district of Wanchai rather than the finance and banking hub of Central. Tim has spent his audit and finance career in both districts at different periods of his career. Daily travelling in similar commercial districts for meetings, exchanges or conventions is also common. Through years of *walking through* and *watching* the cityscape, Tim has learned to read people and infer their occupations, lifestyles and classes. With such daily exposures, he possesses the ability to identify the different subcultures and sartorial styles in these commercial districts. He discovers that grooming for work reflects the geographic 'personality' and is obviously district-oriented. While he regards Central as more high-brow and aggressive, he personally favours the more pragmatic, approachable culture of Wanchai, which might very much be due to his own humble family background. Though he climbed the career ladder to become a regional head of a lucrative investment house, his embodied history predisposes him to the casual 'aura' of Wanchai over the high-end lifestyle of the Central:

"I indeed quite like this Wanchai district. You know where I was from right? I was just a public housing lad but so happens that I climb up to the current position. But all in all, I like the aura of Wanchai as it's not as aggressive or arrogant as Central. You know, in Central, people, no matter whom, usually wear full suits and look elegantly formal, even in hot summer day. But if you take a look at here (pointing at the passers-by in the Wanchai), people usually wear shirts and trousers only. Some may wear ties and jackets but not everyone. Also, the kind of ties, shirts and jackets are coming from levels different from those worn in Central". (Tim, local head of an investment corporation – walking-with interview)

Tim observes how the grooming lifestyle of working professionals corresponds to the rhythms of the various commercial *districts*. Executives groom themselves in typical styles conditioned by the respective rules and norms that govern a specific district. In this sense,

‘districts’ could be regarded as a kind of ‘field’ in Bourdieusian’s term. Tim’s perception of the two districts is not formed instantly but stemmed from his prolonged immersion and observation of these places. People working in different districts learn how to incorporate the ‘style of grooming’ of their districts, and in time, such a practice becomes their *second nature* (Bourdieu, 1977).

In my back-home route interview with Ada (the fashion brand manager), she explains that it is not merely the types of apparels (tie or no-tie, suits or no-suits) which set people apart but the subtle distinctions like fibre, tailor-ship and implied brand levels that characterise certain districts. It therefore is the overall gestalt delivery which enables those in the know to tell the differences between districts:

“There are some differences in terms of districts even for the same company. Those colleagues who work in our office in Whampao (a second-tier commercial district in Hong Kong where Ada’s office locates) would be very different from those who work at the headquarters in Central. The district does matter. It is very much different. Say, if you are working at Whampao but dress as formal as if you are working in Central, then people would exclaim: “What’s wrong with you? Don’t be kidding!” You can also find that just now in my office, people all go for smart casual and jeans, kind of Mongkok-look (a lower-end commercial district) even though we are a franchisee of a few high-end brands.” (Ada, senior brand manager – walking-with interview)

Tim and Ada’s experiences show how districts act as fields to *structure* the culture and norms which frame people’s practices of appearance management. As Entwistle (2015) notes, contemporary fashion analysis has highlighted the importance of place and locality to the meanings around fashion and dress. She quotes Sennett (1997) that a city’s landscape has informed particular temporal and spatial fashion sensibilities. People’s fashion knowledge could be ‘sticky’ or ‘viscous’ knowledge adhering to particular cities or parts of cities (Entwistle 2015, quoting Weller 2007). Such knowledge and sense on fashion, and in turn the resulting ‘practices’, constitute the cultural capital for presenting oneself through location-directed grooming.

The specific sartorial styles identified by Tim and Ada among different business districts in Hong Kong also show that fashion styles and sartorial symbolism are perceived as

geographically-oriented, especially among senior professionals who are more capable of distinguishing district-specific tastes and lifestyles. Such cultural know-how has informed Tim's routine in the way that he shifted from being sumptuously professional (Central-look) to more pragmatically professional (Wanchai-look), as his work moves between the two districts. The same happened to Ada when she was relocated from the headquarter in Central to the branch office in Whampao. She will also alertly dress up on the day she needs to attend meetings in her headquarter, as she needs to align with the Central style. Executives dress according to the expected styles and tastes of the corresponding districts so as to be socially acceptable and to avoid being stigmatised (Goffman, 1963; Kuzmics, 1991). This ability to alter implies that one's habitus is flexible and adjustable to adapt to contextual needs.

Routes as a platform for socialisation

In terms of socialisation and learning, Tim's capability to make geographic differentiation is mainly attributed to his daily observation of passers-by in the commercial districts. Incrementally, the short yet intensive, routinized exposures to people and shops have furnished him with the ability to distinguish apparel details, such as fibre, stitches, tailor-ship, design and patterns. His nuanced perception helps him identify the brands people choose for work, which further indicate the wearers' professional status:

“(Interviewer: How do you know the brand levels people are wearing? And how can you even distinguish the districts they go for work?)

Well, it is by years of observation. You can see the cutting, the way they fit the body, the craftsmanship, the fabric, etc. (pointing at the mannequins of the boutique windows and a few passers-by). You can easily tell that suits and shirts from better brands are more stiff and firm, while those of cheaper ones like G2000 are so 'deformed' and out of shape when we wear them. It's a waste of money. Even though I do not care much about and indeed not good at grooming, when I find it not presentable in the mirror, I can imagine other people will see the same.

(Interviewer: How do you know the suits and shirts people wear are from high-end brands while others are not? We can't check the labels of what people are wearing, right?)

You will know when you walk by those shops almost every day. Those brands from IFC mall cost almost HK\$10,000 (approx.£1000) each, such as those from Amani, Hugo Boss, etc. Their suits are more formal and are stiff enough. The cuttings and their collars and cuffs in particular can us tell the brand level, though they may not be the exact brands.” (Tim, local head of an investment corporation – walking-with interview)

Even though Tim repeatedly claims that he is not sensitive to grooming and luxuries, his daily exposures to the routes to and from work have provided him a platform for learning and acquiring cultural capital. Over time, without being consciously aware, Tim has acquired the cultural capital of understanding ‘self-district congruity’ which governs people’s appearance management. Working people dress and project the occupational self in accordance to the district norms acquired and incorporated in their habitus.

Another participant, Edith, the director of compliance, further reflects that location orientation goes beyond grooming and sartorial symbols; it also incorporates other cultural behaviour such as language, demeanour and ways of interaction. When we walked along the bank of the Victoria Harbour that separated two main zones of the city, Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, I asked Edith how she felt about the two areas where she has previously worked. Edith looked across the harbour and then turned her head back as if she wanted to take a panorama view of both sides. She thought for a while and told me that she felt more comfortable and ‘compatible’ on the side of Hong Kong Island rather than the other two main territories. Such a feeling of hers has been nurtured progressively over time through daily interactions with the cityscape:

“It is true that I am more acquainted and feel more comfortable with the Hong Kong Island side (a southern zone of Hong Kong with more global business centres, luxury shopping malls and high-end residential). It’s so much difference. I don’t know why but it gradually becomes natural to me. I think it’s a kind of mutual attraction. I find the people on the Hong Kong Island more efficient, effective and simply more civilized. People there can talk in the same language as mine and have the same mind set. It’s easier to communicate.” (Edith, director of compliance – walking-with interview)

With years of acquaintance with certain districts, Edith has gradually attuned herself to the culture and living mode of those localities over the others. She socialises and associates

herself with the Hong Kong Island, where she feels more at ease, as she can find the referent others there and regards herself as ‘*belonging*’ to those places instead of the others. ‘*Similarity*’ is found to be an important criterion in referent selection (Shah, 1998). Since firms and industries of similar nature and levels tend to cluster in the same districts, the distinct commercial cityscape becomes a highly relevant platform for socialisation. They are where the ‘similar others’ are concentrated who mutually share comparable professions and corporate realms.

In addition, infrastructures and shops in corresponding styles and levels are also in place to provide more lived references on consumption practices. As depicted in Pictures 1 to 4 below, we can see how lifestyles and classes differ in terms of available consumption choices such as dining and shopping between the high-end district of Central (Picture 1 and 3) and the mid-range district of Wanchai (Picture 2 and 4). Through daily exposures to locality-driven tastes and practices, executives can acquire district-based cultural capital to enact habitus incorporated with geographic dispositions. Their embodied practices and distinct consumption choices in turn reinforce and ‘*structure*’ the field norms in the district.



Picture 1. Sumptuous dining venue in Central, Hong Kong



Picture 2. More down-to-earth dining venues in Wanchai, Hong Kong



Picture 3. High-end shopping malls in Central, Hong Kong



Picture 4. Mid-range shopping streets in Wanchai, Hong Kong

5.4 Negative referencing – the ‘borrowed’ trial and error

As discussed in section 5.2, data from narrative interviews suggest that the ‘trial-and-error’ approach by taking in lessons from one’s own failure is a common path of developing cultural capital. The Chinese proverb also says, “failure is the mother of success”. While this holds true for most participants, through different ubiquitous references on the streets, my walking-with interviews have uncovered another source of socialisation, which I term ‘negative referencing’ or ‘negative learning’. My participants share that problematic frame of references, such as illegitimate tastes and embarrassing practices, can be equally valuable for one to acquire cultural know-how. Such ‘negative referencing’ is mainly generated from observing other people’s failures and avoiding them through a sense of ‘guilt by association’ (Bourdieu, 1984). In this section, I will show how Tim and Ada learn from the undesirable or stigmatised behaviour (Goffman, 1963) of others.

As I observed the choice of shirts worn by the pedestrians during the walk-with interview, I was prompted to ask Tim about his views on men’s shirts. Tim quickly explained in detail the stereotypical styles that characterised men’s shirts, some of which he is determined to distant himself from lest he may come associated with the ‘undesirable’ working classes:

“There are always stereotypes. Say, you see most males working in this district would wear long-sleeve shirts (pointing slightly at a few men standing in front of us), or even jackets in hot summer days, especially those in Central. I am quite sure that those who wear short sleeves are mid-age tourists coming from the Mainland China, or some of them may be civil servants of the older generations, and for sure they are not the high-rank people. There are always stereotyping you know. Even though I do not care much about appearance and grooming, I still have my bottom line. So, even though it’s very hot in summer, I would only wear shirts with long sleeves. It’s a matter of professionalism and commercial modernity. Short-sleeve means very old school and very humble jobs. For example, I cannot except people like this (pointing at two men who wear checker-patterned and short sleeve shirts). It means very unprofessional to me, or they signal people who may work as lower-rank clerks only.” (Tim, local head of an investment corporation – walking-with interview)

Repeating the term *stereotyping* in English a few times, Tim's description shows that specific garment styles and designs, such as short versus long sleeves, or plain versus checker-patterned shirts, are traces for detailed distinction in terms of one's origin, occupations and ranks at work. From his perspective, short-sleeve shirts are class-markers heavily linked to the denigrated image associated with those from Mainland China – i.e. deemed to be the less developed society, or those of low-rank in the civil service sector with fair abilities. Tim does not only reject certain 'types' of garments, but also specific styles and details. For instance, he refrains from putting on colourful ties, as they denote unprofessionalism. He also avoids suits from low-end brands such as G2000 as he has seen how *loose* and *deformed* the wearers could look. It shows that detailed class distinction is reflected not by kinds of apparels but by the nuances of lifestyle choices.

While symbolic meanings of particular apparels, such as ties, suits, shoes, etc. are explored in the literatures (Ash, 1996; Belk, 2003; Gillath et al., 2012; Guéguen, 2015; Wright, 1996), owning and putting on these possessions can only provide a broad scope of superficial distinction only. For instance, a working male wearing shirts and trousers may be inferred as a white-collar worker, while we associate construction workers with T-shirts and jeans. Tim's narrative reveals that among the broad spectrum of white-collar people, we can tell the minute occupational identities from the subtleties of possessions. The nuances on designs and cuttings signify more specific information such as types of professions, work ranks, nature of their employing companies or even districts of work as discussed in previous section. For senior executives, "refusal of tastes" for distinction (Bourdieu, 1984, p.56) is therefore not only realised by simply rejecting certain forms of attires but also the distasteful sartorial details. Executives tend to take those styles that are incongruent with their desired impressions as negative references. Such socialisation further consolidates their ability to judge social tastes.

During an after-lunch route walking back to Ada's workplace, we passed by a series of function rooms in her office, which prompted her memories of attending fashion conferences. Ada likes to attend international meetings as she regards them as fruitful platforms to learn from others, not only in a positive sense but also sarcastically in negative ways. While impactful presentations are good exemplars to imitate, Ada also takes advantage of learning from others' lessons, such as unpopular presentations and embarrassing linguistic skills. Such tactics of 'negative referencing' becomes an important source of equipping herself with linguistic capital in the workplace:

“I do not need to experience everything personally. I can observe how others fail and succeed and take them as my own lessons. In meetings or conferences, there might be people who talk stupid...even if I have to attend a very rubbish seminar or talk which is time wasting, it doesn't matter, because others' stupid behaviour could also teach me lessons! And I would say to myself: “Alright, so, that's something I should not do!” This is also a kind of learning. Next time, when it's my turn to do presentation, I will try to avoid doing the same stupid thing, or using the same rubbish style.” (Ada, senior brand manager – walking-with interview)

To improve herself, Ada does not only learn from her own lessons or take in only good examples of others. She also treats other people's unpleasant experiences and failures as her own. Similar to Tim's sartorial principals which include negative cases as stigmatized sign-vehicles (Goffman, 1959; Goffman, 1963), Ada also seriously incorporates unwelcomed and discrediting practices of others into her habitus as 'taboos' or 'stigmas'. In this way, she accumulates the cultural capital to avoid committing the same faults that would contaminate her desirable professional image. Her habitus enables her to sense the “disgust provoked by horror” resulting from unnatural practices of others (Bourdieu, 1984, p.56), allowing her to make distinction between the tastes and the distastes. Senior executives take in “dissimilar models” (Schwartz & Ames, 1977) as illegitimate cases, which are as valuable as positive ones in their overall socialization for the performative self.

5.5 Summary of Chapter 5 – Sources of Acquiring Cultural Capital for Impression Management

In this chapter, the second research question on “**How** do senior executives learn and acquire cultural capitals and practices for impression management over the course of their career?” is addressed. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) assert that cultural capital is not innately endowed but is incorporated and becomes sedimented into habitus “through a protracted and multisided process of conditioning” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.130). Nonetheless, as Margolis (1999) criticises, Bourdieu has not vividly illustrated how such a process actually takes place and how different sources of socialisation interplay to constitute social habitus in particular social settings. Through the retrospective inquiries, I used a temporal perspective to move beyond an understanding of ‘what’ is acquired to an understanding of ‘how’ cultural capital is learnt and appropriated at different stages at work. It is found that the main source of secondary socialisation lies in the workplace itself, which offers fertile sources of incorporating relevant embodiment. The findings in this section unveil a progressive pattern of socialisation in the context of the workplace. The sources from which working people acquire cultural capital are multifaceted and expand incrementally from micro to macro levels. Cultural practices appropriated also show a tendency of developing from relatively *socially conspicuous* to *subtle embodied* capitals.

As illustrated in Figure 10 below, the incremental process of capital acquisition starts with one’s immediate peers, who serve as a benchmarking reference for socially conspicuous resources and practices such as appearance and basic work practices. When such benchmarking is secured and the norms are well-incorporated in the habitus like *second nature*, executives then consolidate their legitimate positions by setting themselves apart from both the upper- and lower-class tastes and practices. As they edge towards middle management, colleagues from the upper management become important role models to emulate cultural tastes (e.g. appearance) and disciplinary know-how. When competencies acquired from internal sources are well-embodied, or when the references are exhausted, mature executives will also seek non-disciplinary knowledge and management tactics from experts external to their corporations or even industries. All in all, the ‘*collective majority*’ on different levels of fields and sub-fields remain a source for sensing the macro and micro norms, through which professionals appropriate departmental, corporate and industrial culture and at the same time reinforce it through their daily practices and self-adjustment.

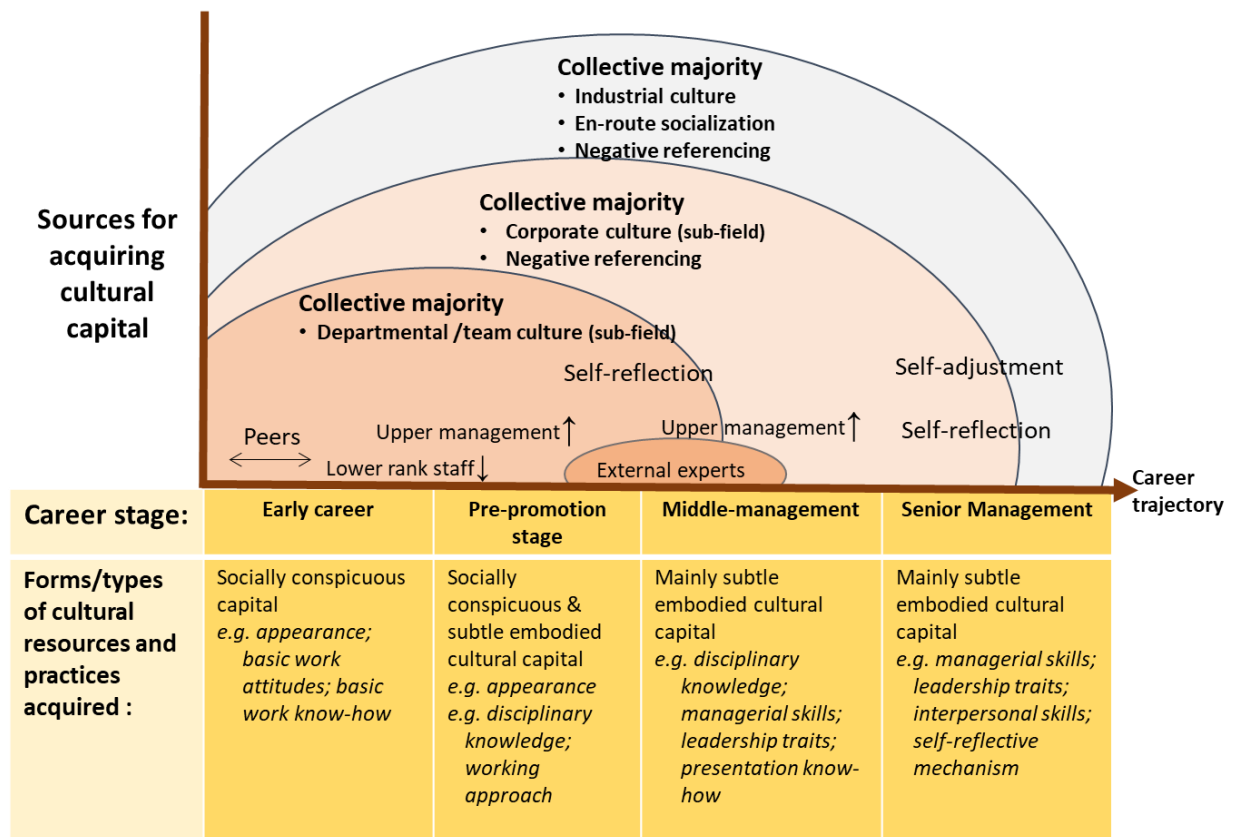


Figure 10. Sources and process of acquiring cultural capital in career.

The walking-with interviews also reveal ‘*en-route socialisation*’ as a mundane and immersive source of learning, since the working vicinities are suffused with real life practices. With daily en-route exposures, professionals gradually acquire the discernment of making social class inferences from implicit details that are district-oriented. Learning from the ‘undesirable’ practices of others is also a major way of archiving ‘*negative references*’, with which senior executives can avoid similar stigma (Goffman, 1963) or shame (Elias, 1978). As identity is constructed through the dual processes of “apposition and opposition, a bringing together and setting apart” (Stone, 1962, p.94), mastering the subconscious sense of what is illegitimate (Bourdieu, 1984) is just as important as imitating the desirable others in the socialization process.

Regardless of the types and efficacy of the sources, self-awareness emerges to be a determining factor for effective socialisation, which also suggests a higher-level mode of appropriating capitals found mainly among middle to senior executives. Unlike junior executives who tend to directly emulate others, senior professionals possess greater calibre in *feeling for the game* and *sensing* structural boundaries to introduce allowable idiosyncratic tastes. They are more likely to blend in their own judgement of tastes with what they observe

from others, through which they make *'self-adjustment'* to generate *'proprietary styles'* for effective impression management.

Their progressive improvement is also attributable to incessant *'self-reflection'* through *'trial-and-error'*, which entails greater initiative, perseverance and wisdom. Such on-going reflexive project of the self (Giddens, 1991) incurs considerable time-investment and sacrifices, relying on a person's willingness to risk failures, reflect inward and self-adjust. Unlike observing the others, the *'self-reflection'* approach involves hands-on involvement to undergo actual triumphs and defeats, so that one can discern legitimate and illegitimate practices at work.

As Bourdieu claims, "the habitus, like every 'art of inventing' is what makes it possible to produce an infinite number of practices that are relatively unpredictable..." (1990b, p.63). My data on the four types of socialisation sources concur with Bourdieu's observation that acquiring resources for impression management is a process of creating and *'inventing'*, in which new practices can be instigated and accrued as cultural capital. By acquiring and consuming resources for socialisation, professionals constantly invent and reinvent their malleable habitus through the process of trial-and-error and self-adjustment. This also demonstrates the co-existence of consumption and production processes in the workplace. Senior executives find themselves more distinguished than their juniors or their 'younger me' because they have walked through the learning curve and are continuing to do so in the path of searching for distinction. The trajectory approach has filled the gaps of current literature, which stresses socialisation of cultural capital but has not provided empirical nuances on how the process actually happens. Bourdieu also put little emphasis on secondary socialization. As Figure 10 above has depicted, the workplace and the career pursuance itself accounts for a prominent process of secondary socialization, in which diverse ways of acquisition are incrementally at stake at different stages.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

This last chapter comprises three conclusive sections. In section 6.1, I will highlight four areas of contributions this thesis made to current theories and literatures. Section 6.2 will be a reflection on my research journey in constituting my academic habitus. Lastly, in section 6.3, the potential limitations of this study and future agenda will be discussed.

6.1 Contributions to theories

Workplace consumption and practices for impression management have been under-researched in consumer studies (except a few such as Tian & Belk, 2005) despite its mundane role in daily life and in defining the self. By drawing on Goffman and Bourdieu to reveal how habitus shapes and enables impression management through the ‘act of consumption’, this study draws on the trajectories of ten senior executives in Hong Kong to explore two research questions below:

- 1) **What** cultural capital and practices do senior executives employ as resources for impression management over the course of their career?
- 2) **How** do senior executives learn and acquire cultural capital and practices for impression management over the course of their career?

The findings discussed in Chapter 4 and 5 have brought about four main areas of contributions to knowledge and they respectively address my two research questions: the first question is largely addressed by the themes “*the processual evolution of cultural capital*”, “*we are ‘how’ we consume*” and “*understanding cultural capital beyond field boundaries*”. The last theme “*the workplace as a rich ground for socialisation*” as well as the dynamics found in the first theme give insights into my second research question. I am now going to illustrate the four areas of contributions in detail.

The processual evolution of cultural capital

Through the study of impression management in the workplace, this thesis has not only repositioned such social setting as a site of consumption, it also sheds light on the temporal processes underlying the career trajectories of senior executives. As such, the thesis advances existing theory of impression management by unveiling evolving patterns of consumption choices and cultural practices. As shown in the integrated model in Figure 11, different

forms of cultural resources and practices for impression management keep changing over time. Their relative prominences as sign-vehicles rise and subside as the executives move along their professional trajectories. At different career stages, emerging cultural resources and practices replace those that become ‘obsolete’, which in turn are replaced when other forms of cultural capital are acquired. The process is characterised by a shift from a ‘taste of necessity’ (including achieving conformity through ‘uniforms’ and mandatory institutionalised qualifications) to a ‘taste of liberty’ (when senior executives gain a greater sense of affordances to introduce idiosyncratic tastes and workstyles). The *process* of acquiring cultural capital also depicts an incremental and changing pattern, involving multifaceted sources of socialisation with varying degrees of importance at different times. The processual approach thus revealed the dynamic and interchanging patterns of impression management, which otherwise would not have been captured if a cross-sectional approach was adopted.

The findings have advanced the concepts of Goffman and Bourdieu in terms of how impression management evolves over time. Although their studies emphasize the need for a repertoire of sign-vehicles for self-presentation (Goffman, 1959) and that field power relies on different forms, volume and composition of species of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), they have yet to juxtapose different cultural resources and practices to explore their relative importance from a temporal perspective. While most consumer studies tend to focus on particular forms of consumption practices only, such as appearance, dining, utterance, home décor, music, art, etc. (e.g. Beckert, Rössel, & Schenk, 2017; Chassy, 2015; Entwistle, 2017; Maciel & Wallendorf, 2016; Neeley, 2013; Peluchette, Karl, & Rust, 2006; Van Eijck, 2001; Watson & Shove, 2008), this thesis shows that at different life stages, forms of cultural capital for social presentation are in fact not equally at stake and their importance also varies over time. The domain-specific approach adopted by existing research limits our understanding on how various practices comparatively contribute to self-presentation at different moments or stages in life. By adopting a temporal and open-ended approach, this study provides inductive insights into emerging forms of cultural capital that are unique to individual habitus and career biographies. The trajectory approach extends the theories of Goffman and Bourdieu as well as consumer studies by comparing and contrasting the distinctive use and appropriation of diverse cultural resources on a processual basis. These different consumption practices evolve as *class markers* to facilitate self-performance as people proceed to different positions in their work hierarchy. By reconceptualising the

workplace as a site of consumption, this study expands and revises our existing understanding of the workplace as production centric. My findings show that, through consumption of cultural resources and embodied dispositions, habitus and structural rules are being (re)produced and reinforced. The intertwining shaping of consumption and production practices are evident in the workplace, and this has, to a large extent contributed to the on-going formation of professional identities and impressions.

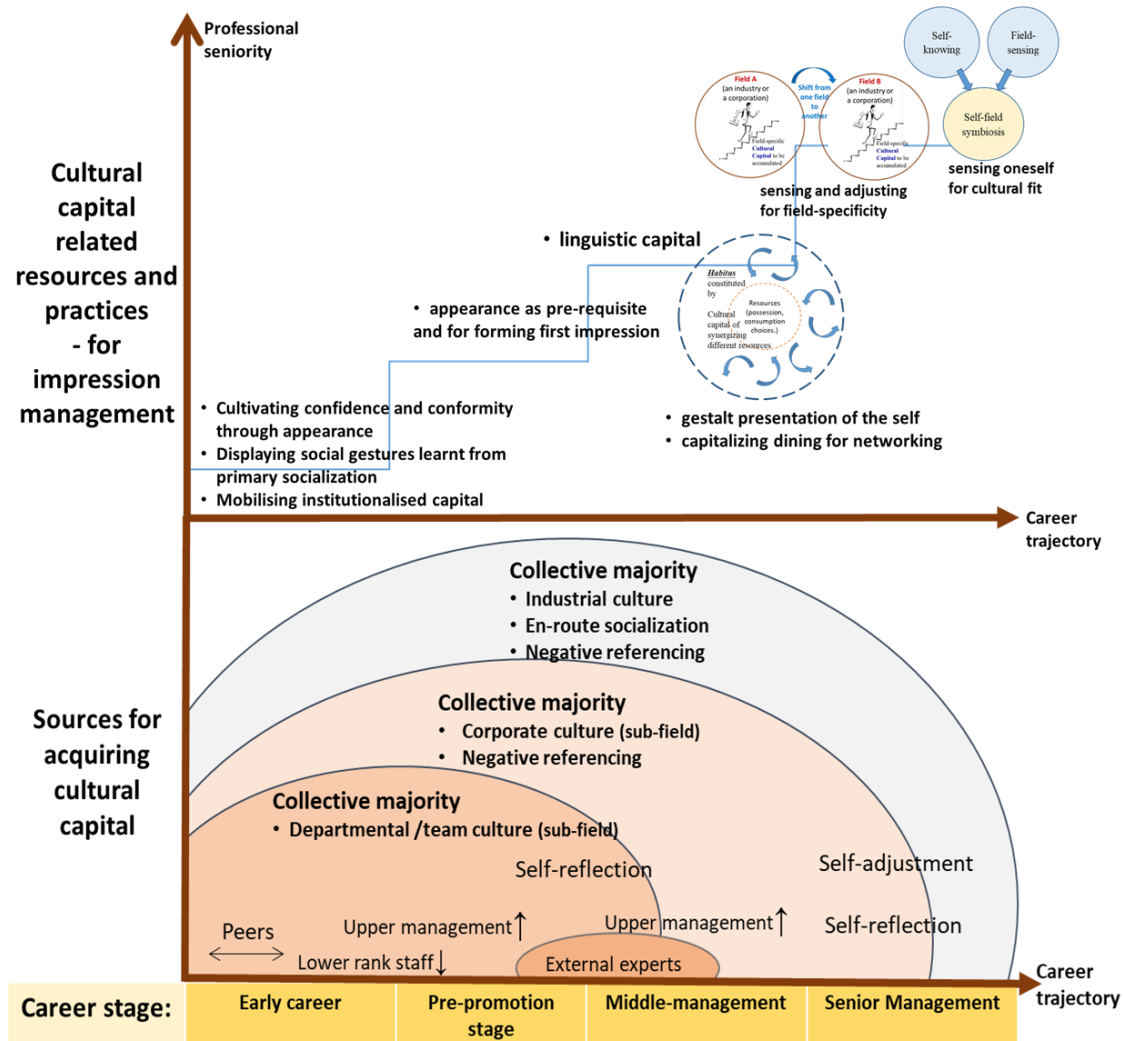


Figure 11. Cultural capital employed and acquired over people's career trajectory.

Integrating Goffman and Bourdieu: we are 'how' we consume

Bringing together theories of Goffman and Bourdieu also inspires us to understand symbolic consumption beyond the notion of 'we are what we have' (Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 1992; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Wattanasuwan, 2005). Symbolism for signifying class distinction

is found to not only reside in meanings carried by objective possessions, but also on ‘*how*’ users (agents) apply their cultural competence – the aesthetic sense and taste – to *synergize* different available resources. For instance, the high-brow and intellectual meanings carried by a fountain pen and a delicate notebook cannot be fully delivered without the calligraphic skills and intellectual aptitude of the user. Similarly, cufflinks necessitate sartorial sense to be worn with branded shirts; networking purposes also need nuanced know-how on dining choices. Such findings contribute to our understanding of consumption, which has tended to focus on the discrete symbolism of particular possessions rather than their integrated or gestalt presentation. The classified tastes and lifestyles therefore cannot be brought out solely through owning or accessing the resources, but by embodied cultural skills that sense the contextual needs and guide the orchestration of appropriate resources and practices (e.g. district-oriented grooming and picking proper dining choices for different networking needs). The accumulated competence through mundane practices (e.g. Warde, 2005; Watson & Shove, 2008) constitute the habitus that enables people to form distinct impressions through *gestalt performance of self*. By employing a position that conceptualises the ‘*habitus shaping and enabling impression management*’, these findings show that effective impression management entails a synergy of symbolic resources that can only be ‘made sense of’ through corporeal dispositions. Executives are ‘actor-players’ who are oriented by their habitus to stage a ‘performance’ to impress while competing in a competitive workplace game. Bringing in the perspectives of the two theoretical frameworks has advanced our knowledge that it is not ‘*what*’ we consume that signifies who we are, but ‘*how*’ we consume by applying cultural know-how to contextualize resources.

Understanding cultural capital beyond field boundaries

Although Bourdieu has emphasised the *specificity* of fields, related literature (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1999) mainly discusses different fields separately to demonstrate how they are defined by specific rules and forms of capital in a rather discrete manner. Capitalising on the dynamic career trajectories of senior professionals, this study offers a cross-field perspective by revealing how field-specificity is empirically realised and creates a ‘felt’ impact on the *same* persons over time. The findings show that the workplace is particularly ‘field-specific’ and executives encounter different sets of cultural rules and structural games as they change *fields* – be their professions, industries, corporations,

departments, teams or even a change of company leadership. Professional competencies and practices valued in one field can lose their value or become incompatible with the new fields, or even become a liability and *capital shock* that causes hysteresis and career setbacks. This implies that very few forms of cultural capital or habitus are indeed versatile enough to span across all fields. More competent executives are found to mobilise their habitus to *learn, sense, adjust* and *internalise* the structural rules of the new fields so as to narrow down the discrepancies between the self and the field. Those who cannot or choose not to adjust would gradually leave the fields in search of alternatives. Unlike existing research, this study does not investigate different agents in discrete social structures but reveals the nuanced impacts of the *same* individuals when they experience specificity of the fields over their career trajectories. This advances our understanding that cultural resources and practices for impression management are not static but vary when executives (agents) traverse different social structures, so do the social meanings and the relative significance of sign-vehicles for self-presentation.

The cross-field perspective further extends Bourdieu's structure-agency theory by uncovering a more 'superior' cultural capital that transcends field boundaries. Senior executives are found to acquire the competence in attaining '*self-field symbiosis*', in which the intertwined dispositions of *self-knowing* and *field-sensing* work together beyond specific fields and guide them to locate compatible social structures to engage in. With years of experiencing and observing how different fields perform and operate, and how colleagues survive and fail, the habitus of mature professionals does not only incorporate the rules of the field they belong to at the moment, but also the prescribed norms of other field structures. At the same time, having gone through big and small 'lessons', as well as achievements over the career, senior executives also gain an intuitive understanding about their self competence – its nature, know-how, limitations, uniqueness, comfort zone, values, etc. My findings advance Bourdieu's theory that the superior cultural capital or competence to survive involves not only the knowing and sensing of certain field structure but also the resonant understanding of oneself. While agents generally acquire relevant resources to adapt to given fields, senior executives search for optimal fields to engage based on their self-recognised habitus. The '*cultural fit*' between their habitus and field culture allows them to be more '*true to themselves*' as they navigate in *compatible* fields. This synchronicity implies a higher level of self-attainment as it overrides and accommodates cultural hysteresis resulting from field-specificity. This finding extends Bourdieu's structure-agency theory by demonstrating

how the more ‘superior’, and perhaps more sustainable, cultural capital incorporated by senior agents is not necessarily structurally constrained. Instead, the advanced disposition of *self-field symbiosis* embodied by senior executives emerges as a more transferrable and resilient cultural capital for impression management.

The workplace as a rich ground for socialisation and reflexive project of the self

Although Bourdieu (1977) and Skeggs (2004) claim that cultural capital is not naturally endowed but entails acquisition and accumulation, they offer limited insight into particular socialisation sources and the process of ‘*how*’ these are empirically acquired. Even less is understood about the process of accumulating workplace competencies for survival and advancement. Bourdieu also focuses on primary socialisation as the main source of cultural capital, giving relatively little attention to secondary socialisation. Although this study shows that cultural capital acquired from families and earlier education does play a role in impression management by presenting conspicuous gestures (such as diligence and punctuality), they are important only in the early years of one’s career. Their prominence subsides when more advanced and embodied forms of capital are later acquired at work through secondary socialisation. As illustrated in Figure 11 above, the study fills the above gaps by revealing how the workplace constitutes a resourceful ground for secondary socialisation. It provides multiple sources for executives to acquire work-related cultural practices and know-how. Nonetheless, they do not come into play at the same time but emerge in an incremental manner. The temporal approach of this study portrays a processual learning pattern which is multifaceted and diffusive. The types of cultural resources and practices thus acquired by different means also vary over time.

Among various sources identified, *external expertise* is seldom attended to in existing literature, but is found to be crucial for senior executives to acquire non-disciplinary know-how. Some unexplored sources for socialisation were also discovered in the walking-with interviews. The findings show that consumption lifestyles encountered on *daily work routes* are as important sources for socialisation as those available in regular work environment. The undesirable impression management of other people at work, such as ‘talking stupid’ or improper adornment, also forms valuable *negative references* to executives, from which they embody a sense of shame and ‘guilt by association’ (Bourdieu, 1984).

More importantly, while Bourdieu (1977) claims that the habitus is an ever-inventive “structuring structure” (p.53) resulting from incessant reflection, this study provides empirical and contextual evidence to understand how the *reflexive self* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) is accrued (Skeggs, 2004) and ‘adjusted’ rather than simply being reproduced in the workplace. As Shilling noted, for Bourdieu, the durable nature of habitus “are overwhelmingly focused on continuity rather than change” (2004, p.478). This study reveals the process of structuring in which the senior professionals distinguish themselves from the junior rests on their *self-adjustment* competence, which enables them to create idiosyncratic and proprietary tastes. As they accumulate greater ability to sense possibilities within the legitimate field boundaries, senior executives implement incremental changes to structures by mobilising their “liberty” to make “secondary adjustment” (Goffman, 1961, p.189, 305). The ‘outside-in’ *reflective* perspective is found to be an important transformative mechanism in the workplace for converting ‘lessons’ learnt into cultural capital. These self-reflective know-hows provide empirical insights as to how the habitus is in fact malleable, and the self, or at least the work self, is continuously being re-constructed as an on-going reflexive project of the self (Giddens (1991). By focusing on the act of consumption in the workplace, this thesis reveals how the workplace habitus is both shaped by and shapes the hybridity of production and consumption. Through mundane consumption practices and incessant adjustment, the habitus is not only (re)constructed in an on-going manner, but its resulting performative self also (re)produces and (re)structures field rules. This recursive cycle of consumption and production co-creates the workplace ‘habitus’, which helps bridge the modernistic duality between the two processes on top of the dichotomy of the structure-agency relation.

The contributions discussed above show that bringing together the theories of impression management and practice theories, and taking a processual, inductive approach can advance our current understanding of symbolic consumption, as well as evolution of cultural capital and habitus, which may go beyond field structures.

6.2 Reflection on my research journey

In the past few years, I have gone through a steep learning curve in constructing my academic habitus. As can be expected in any PhD study, the journey is full of bitter lessons as well as rewarding experiences.

One kind of cultural capital I have gradually internalized is the principal of ‘less is more’, which I find particularly crucial in shaping core themes of research studies. While I enjoy listening to the stories and transcribing the verbal sharing of my participants, I tended to be over-ambitious and have exhausted the data by generating a wide range of themes. My initial drafts of ‘findings’ ended up being too long and somewhat repetitive, making my study not precise and cohesive enough to address the research questions. With my supervisors’ guidance, I re-oriented my attitude in approaching my research project. I gave deeper thoughts into my research questions and focused on teasing out data and prioritising themes that related tightly to my research questions, as well as those that could make notable contributions to existing knowledge. Trimming away themes was not only time-consuming but was also painful as they were where I have devoted efforts. Nonetheless, the arduous editing work taught me the valuable lesson that research work needs to be focused, related and cohesive so that the main themes and contributions can be made more explicit and powerful. *Seeking less for more* will definitely become a core practice in my future research.

The PhD process has also paved a rewarding journey for me to put into practice the walking-with method. Though I have used it in my previous master’s degrees’ dissertation, I did not realise it was not yet popularly adopted in consumer research until my supervisors inspired me. The positive responses and ‘curiosity’ towards the method among participants in a few conferences also gave me immense motivation to employ the walking-with approach. Its contribution in this research has been paramount in terms of uncovering data and important themes that may have been “otherwise ignored, forgotten, missed or marginalised” (Vannini 2016, p.1) using traditional inquisitive methods alone. While most themes in this study are developed from both methods, there are also inspiring themes generated solely from the walking-with method, including ‘*gestalt presentation of self*’, ‘*capitalising on dining for networking*’, ‘*en-route socialisation*’ and ‘*negative referencing*’.

Very soon after I started the first few walking-with interviews, I found in this method both theoretical and practical values for exploring mundane consumption and self-identity. Pervaded with consumer practices, lifestyles, desires and brands, the cityscape, where people

pass by every day, provides copious resources for impression management and socialisation of cultural capital. As the vicinities encountered by participants on a daily basis undergo constant changes, the historical traces emerged from the subways, footbridges and hallways introduced a ‘time-travel effect’, bringing my participants back to their past while letting them reflect on their present-self, and even their possible future-self. It appeared to me that they *extended* their *self* to the naturalistic settings familiar to them, which brought in retrospective richness and resonant validity. The physical movement and tempo experienced during the walk also inspired bodily knowing for my participants, stimulating their sensing and thinking. It also deepened my observation of their ‘bodily movements’ and ‘embodied emotions’ which would have otherwise been neglected in sit-down interviews. For instance, participants would slow down or even stop and raise their arms a bit when they shared a point that they found serious and wanted my attention; they also stood up straight when narrating on episodes they were proud of at work. From time to time, they also drew attention to immediate references, looked around for examples, looked back to reminisce or showed annoying or exciting faces to give me data and insights in addition to their verbal explication. Essentially my findings resonate with Bourdieu’s (1984, 1986) observation of cultural capital as practiced and embodied; embodied in styles of walking, modes of wearing, ways of speaking and gesturing, as well as routes and final destinations. When the interviews took place outside of the workplace, I also realised that my participants feel more at ease, less embarrassed and more ‘secured’ when reflecting on sensitive topics they come across at work, especially when compared to the time when they were interviewed in their office. Another practical value I discovered in this method is the minimal disturbances it created in the daily itineraries of my participants. By embedding my fieldworks into the mundane rhythm of their daily life, the time required for interviews was more ‘affordable’ for my participants, thus easing the issue of ‘access’ especially for follow-up inquiries.

Although this approach is not without challenges, such as noise distraction and weather constraints, its potential benefits to consumer research is promising. The data generated not only gave me positive surprises but even inspired me on time-space management as a part-time postgraduate. I even imitated my participants in turning the to-work and to-home routes into another workspace by making use of the advanced technology and mobile devices. I practised en-route listening to the audio records of the interviews and jotted down quick memos on potential themes emerged. This helped me figure out a holistic picture of my participants’ career stories before I sat down to do the transcription. Such practice was not

only time-effective, but also allowed me to immerse myself better into their working world and emotional being.

Despite different settings in terms of the interview environment and time, the dual methods used in this study not only enabled comparison and validity check across the two sets of data, but also provided me with constructive trainings and inspirations as a researcher. I went through trial-and-error to alternately use these methods on the same participants and attempted to change the context of using them so as to bring dynamics and richness to data collection. I also learnt to simultaneously integrate and demarcate the coding of the two sets of data, so that I could identify and appreciate findings that were emerged from both methods, as well as those from discrete approaches. Given this rewarding experience, I will further capitalise on the complementarity of the two interpretive methods in my future research projects. For instance, apart from narrative inquiries, in studies relating to family consumption and identity, I can conduct walking-with interviews in the to-and-from home routes of participants so as to let them resonate with the domestic neighbourhood. Similar walks in the cityscape may also be employed to elicit narratives among immigrants to explore how they may use consumption for cultural assimilation. Nonetheless, as discussed, I should also be aware of being exhaustive in theme generation when multiple methods tend to generate a rich corpus of data.

6.3 Limitations and future research agenda

While my research questions and methodological design have made encouraging contributions, the study has some limitations which may suggest directions for future studies.

This research relies mainly on the retrospective accounts of people who are in their senior career stage with more than 20 years of work experience. The differences found in their consumption and use of different cultural capital at different career phases rely heavily on the memories recalled. Retrospective accounts on what have happened in the early days of their career might be less elaborated due to memory loss. To address the issue and to generate greater nuances, I will further advocate longitudinal study to track the career development of young executives alongside their acquisition and employment of embodied cultural capital. Future research could also see recruiting participants who are at different stages in their career trajectory. Comparing and contrasting their narratives could yield promising insights into how people's portfolio of resources and practices evolve at diverse stages of career.

As this study focuses on Hong Kong as the research context, participants and the workplace they engage in are largely affected by the Chinese and Confucian values (Lin & Ho, 2009; Warner, 2010). Past studies found that even within the same corporations, diverse sub-cultures can be found in different regional branches (Hofstede, 1980). When I presented this study in a few international conferences, some of the audience argued that due to cultural divergence, they would envisage different findings if the same research were conducted in their countries. Future research therefore can extend to other ethnic and cultural settings where 'power distance' and other interpersonal relationships, work-life balance etc., are differently negotiated (Hofstede, 1980).

The work trajectories informing this research seem to suggest a rather linear career path and participants are also mainly from the corporate fields. This was due to the sampling requirement to recruit executives who are in senior positions as their rich work experience could help generate richer storytelling. Their high ranks also implied a relatively smooth promotional path in career. Nonetheless, it is true that the pursuit for career may not be necessarily linear. Some people may choose not to progress further at certain stages, while others may prefer setting up their own businesses or pursue social advocacy or religious devotion. Others may choose to take a career break, or alter their work commitment, which is common among females as they enter motherhood (Garey, 1995; Hattery, 2001; Johnston

& Swanson, 2006). A more recent trend among the new generation is to pursue multiple expertise instead of confining to only one particular profession, the so-called 'slash' generation (Roychowdhury & Choudhury, 2011). Future research therefore may investigate alternate career paths beyond corporate fields, such as academia, culture industries, entrepreneurship, etc. to see how people adapt to diverse working modes and fields through the use of different forms of cultural capital.

The concept of habitus appears to be explored mainly in a class-based manner in this study. This may attribute to the hierarchical nature that predominates the corporate professions of my participants. Other social factors, such as gendered difference, may also be at play to influence how executives perceive the structural rules as well as the way they acquire and consume cultural know-how. As Hong Kong is a diverse and international city, the distinct background of executives in terms of their educational and cultural exposures may also constitute different habitus, with which people may exhibit different dispositions in observing and complying to rules of games in the workplace. Future studies may also look into these social dynamics on top of class consideration.

As explained in my introductory chapter, the idea of this thesis stemmed from my reflection on my own work trajectory. Changing my career from the marketing field to the academia, I saw the need to acquire another distinct set of know-hows. The PhD study is not only an institutionalised form of cultural capital for me but is also a socialisation process of appropriating academic dispositions. Like my participants, I have also undergone both bitter lessons and rewarding moments through which I keep reflecting and gradually equip myself with greater field-specific competence. My socialisation also attributes to different 'referent others' – my supervisors, established scholars, conference audience, senior colleagues – from whom I learn by reading their writings, analysing their methods, pondering on their comments, attending their presentations, listening to their stories, etc. These evolving processes, which are very rewarding, have constituted my academic habitus, which I believe will continue to be reflexive and malleable as I continue to advance my career in academia.

Appendix

Appendix 1. Interview guide for narrative interviews with 10 executives in Hong Kong

(Version 1 – The technical version with theoretical terms)

Research Questions set for the study:

- **What** cultural capital and practices do senior executives employ as resources for impression management over the course of their career?
- **How** do senior executives learn and acquire cultural capital and practices for impression management over the course of their career?

Introduction to participants:	
This narrative interview looks for your views towards how you manage your self-image in the workplace in order to establish desirable impressions and attain career goals. This may involve things you do, things you use, things you say, and more. You will also be invited to have some nostalgic recall on these related practices over your career. Apart, I am also interested in understanding your perceptions on how others around you practice their impression management.	
Questions/ Probes	The relevant research objectives/ theories
Grand tour questions	(RQ: research question and concepts involved)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you share your career journey? • What are some of the key stages in your career? What companies have you been working for? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To build <i>rapport</i> through grand tour questions. ▪ To let the researcher have a broad picture on the <i>career path</i> of the participants so as to facilitate later probing needs. ▪ To bring out the <i>main topic</i> of the interview which relates to impression management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think ‘self-image’ is important at work? • Why and why not? 	
How do participants construct the ideal self through impression management?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looking back at your career, do you think you have made successful impression management in your career? In other words, do you think you have good self-presentation in your workplace? Why? Is it congruent with your expected image? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To understand ‘<i>what</i>’ resources and practices are employed for impression management? (RQ 1) ▪ To understand whether the ‘<i>others</i>’ are playing a role in shaping the perceived self. ▪ To explore if <i>negative consumption</i> is as important as positive ones in impression management. ▪ Particular attention will be paid to more <i>contemporary</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would your colleagues describe you? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you do something to achieve impression management/self-presentation in the workplace? • (<i>Probe: including what you do, what you use, what you buy, what you consume, what you patronize (service providers like hotels, restaurant), what you say, how you act or pose, what you share, what they post esp. on social media, etc.)</i> 	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you particularly avoid doing or practicing something as well? Such as avoiding certain brands or associations? 	<p><i>self-presentation modes</i> especially on social media, including ‘I am what I share; I am what I access’.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let’s rewind the clock a bit and start from your first day or first week of going to work...Do you remember how you wore? What bags or wallets or accessories did you carry? Were these important resources and practices you have mastered to create desirable images at work? • Who did you want to impress by then? What reactions/ response did you expect or look for? How about now? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To understand <i>changes</i> over the career (RQ2): ▪ To explore the <i>importance</i> of different forms of cultural capital, namely, the incorporated forms, the objectified forms and institutional forms, over people’s career.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you made any mistakes regarding your self-image over these years? Can you share some experience/ embarrassment? What happened and how did you find out that something was wrong? Who told you? Are these lessons important? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the resources and practices for impression management different at different career stages of yours? Have any changes happened at different career stages? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How conscious do you think you are in delivering those practices? Have they become a kind of ‘second nature’ of you already? Do you think, over the years, and through different experience, you (and others) have incorporated the proper ways of doing and saying, and thus can behave quite naturally? Or you still need to pay specific consciousness to ensure what you practice is right? • How much do you care about investing time and effort in impression management? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To understand the extent of <i>consciousness</i> in complying with structural rules and deliver legitimate practices with the “feel for the game”.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let’s turn to the topic of social media as it’s in the trend now. How often do you use social media? What are you ‘sharing’ usually in the social media? Such as what you are posting, writing or displaying in the virtual world? Do you think they are important or getting more important in projecting your self-image? esp. regarding your image at work? • Do you deliberately pay effort to managing these sharing? Or how cautious and conscious you are when you are sharing in the virtual world? • How do you comment about the ways other people use the social media in creating impressions? What can you tell from what they share and post? Anything related to their working or life status? Do you think they deliberately manage their ‘sharing’ for some purposes, e.g. projecting their 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To explore the rising notion of ‘I am what I share’ or ‘I am what I can access’ in contemporary self-presentation.

<p>status or image or values? Do you think they can achieve their purposes?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you find the role of these virtual sharing in workplace impression management when compared with the more traditional tangible ways (such as what you use and what you own)? • Do you think some people in the social media, including yourself and those you know or do not know, are leading the trends or fashion? In other words, are they setting or re-setting some rules? Are there some change-agents in the social media? Who? How they become so? 	
<p>How other people in the workplace conduct impression management?</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In your career, or in your workplace, do you think some people are very successful in impression management (or self-presentation)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To let participants <i>define what is 'successful'</i> impression management.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you mean when you say a person's impression management in their career is good or successful? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are they? Can you quote one or two examples? Do they do something to make you think they are successful? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Probe:</i> including what they do, what they use, what they buy, what they consume, what they patronize (service providers like hotels, restaurant), what they say, how they act or pose, what they share, what they post esp. on social media, etc. e.g. <i>They could be things brought to work or displayed at their work stations, as well as less intangible practices.</i> • Do they particularly avoid doing or practicing something as well? Such as avoiding certain brands or associations? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To understand '<i>what</i>' resources and practices are employed for impression management (RQ 1). ▪ Particular attention will be paid to the more <i>contemporary self-presentation modes</i> especially on social media, including 'I am what I share; I am what I access'. ▪ To explore if <i>negative consumption</i> is as important as positive ones in impression management.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think having a good or successful impression management (or self-presentation) is important in the workplace or career? Why? What's the impact? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To understand '<i>why</i>' people would invest effort and resources in impression management – e.g. to strive for better positions in the respective fields? ▪ To understand <i>how important</i> these forms of cultural capital are in the field (esp. for career advancement)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on your perception above, do you think people in your workplace or industry are following certain norms or subtle rules when they are 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To explore the nature of <i>structural rules</i> in working fields and the impact on

<p>choosing different means and ways (i.e. resources and practices) to achieve impression management?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are they specific to your organization or industry only? 	<p>people's impression management.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To explore '<i>field-specificity</i>' - how structural rules vary among fields (industries or organizations)
<p>Acquiring cultural capital for impression management</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • So, you have told me a lot of ways and means that you and others use to create desirable images and impressions. Then, can you tell me how do you learn about the meanings of different means and ways (or, we can call them resources and practices) of achieving desirable impressions? What are the sources of learning? (primary or secondary?) • Probe: Who teach you? Family? Media? Colleagues? Which types of colleagues? Any role models? Or through trial and errors? Mistakes and lessons? What / who do you observe? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To understand '<i>how</i>' people learn about the cultural capital related resources and practices (RQ2). ▪ To understand the socialisation process and sources of such process.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you agree that knowing about those meanings, (i.e. how to distinguish and use different resources and practices to achieve desirable impression management) involve certain kinds of skills or competences? • Do you think these are assets to a person in the workplace? • Do you think some people possess more than the others? Or they can master these competences better than others? • Do you think possessing these assets or competences can help a person in his career? How? Are they a source of power? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To understand whether executives agree that the ability to distinguish meanings of different resources is a kind of capital (or cultural capitals) to them. ▪ To understand the importance of cultural capital in career advancement or endeavours.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do these assets or sets of competence need to be learnt and accumulated? If yes, how? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the sources of learning about them also different at different life stages? Or vary in importance? <i>E.g. family influence or guidance might have played a heavier role when you first came out to work, but have other reference colleagues or industry counterparts become more influential later?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To understand the changes in the way and means of acquiring cultural over career (RQ2): ▪ Sources of socialisation
<p>Complying with structural rules vs individualism</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If there are norms and rules to follow in your respective fields (organization, industry or profession), how much do you think individuals may have rooms for individual uniqueness or discretion when one is practicing impression management? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To explore the extent of <i>conscious individual innovations</i> under prescribed structural rules. (based on contemporary practice theories)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>e.g. Do you try to introduce some individual tastes or unique experience or customization when you are using any products or services?</i> • Why do you tend to do so? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To explore whether people intend to <i>challenge structural rules</i> in self-presentation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over your career, do you think these loopholes of individualism change over time? E.g. were you more complying than now when you were a young executive? Will you find more freedom (or power or competence) when you are progressing to higher ranks? Any examples? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To understand <i>changes</i> over career (RQ2): ▪ the extent of <i>individual innovations</i> amidst structural rules

Appendix 2. Interview guide for narrative interviews with 10 executives in Hong Kong

(Version 2 – The practical version with theoretical terms)

Questions	Some key points to note
Grand tour questions	(RQ: research question and concepts involved)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you share with me some general background and nature of your work? Pls try to tell me about your job today. What are your main responsibilities? • Every morning when you get up for work, how do you get prepared for the day? • Can you share your career journey? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To build <i>rapport</i> through the grand tour questions regarding participants' typical working day. ▪ To let the researcher have a broad picture on the <i>career path</i> of participants so as to facilitate later probing needs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think 'self-image' is important at work? • Why and why not? • How would your colleagues describe you? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To bring out the <i>main topic</i> of the interview which relates to self-construction ▪ To understand whether the 'others' are playing a role in shaping the perceived self.
Impression Management at work – Resources (Research Question 1)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Now I would like to know more about your personal image at work. ▪ In the eyes of your colleagues, what image do you think you have? How do they feel about you? ▪ Can you share any incidents or stories that reflect what you say? Any other examples? ▪ Do you think all your colleagues think the same? How about your boss? Your subordinates? Your clients or other business partners? ▪ How do you feel about the impression that your colleagues have on you? Are you happy with what they think? Why? ▪ If you are not that happy, have you done anything to change or influence them? ▪ Do you think they have similar impressions as other colleagues who are in similar ranks as you? ▪ How do they feel about the other colleagues of your rank? Any examples or stories to share? Any successful examples? Any failure cases? ▪ Overall, do you think you are more competent than your junior ones in "knowing" how to behave. Can you quote some examples? ▪ Then, do you think these are making you different from the junior ones? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To explore the <i>possible resources</i> for impression management: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Qualifications (cultural capitals in institutional forms) - Management styles - Leadership styles - Personality - Networks - associations - Resourcefulness - Gestures - Discourse - Job achievements - Consumption behaviour: appearance-related, services used (restaurants, salons, clubs, how they spend vacations, schools the kids goes to, etc.) - Social media – what people share

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What particular things or acts do you rely on to create some particular impressions you want to have at work? ○ e.g. <i>They could be things brought to work or displayed at your work station, as well as some less intangible practices. When you put on a cloth or choose a bag to carry to work, would you think of the response of your colleagues or working partners towards you?</i> 	
Changes in Impression Management over the career	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ You've mentioned some changes in your image over your career just now. So, do you think your old and new colleagues think the same about you? If not, in what ways do they differ? Are you happy to see these differences? ▪ What have made your image changed over your career? Why different impressions have been made? ▪ With today's experience, what would you have done to make a difference in terms of the impressions you've made at work? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To explore the <i>changing pattern</i> of impression management (changes in resources and practices used over time)
Fields and Rules of Games; practice theories – subtle differentiation; change agent	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Are there any norms or practices in your company or your profession that colleagues usually follow? How do you find these norms and practices? How much do they shape your own behaviour at work? ▪ Have you introduced any new styles to your work practices or brought changes to the rules of your company or profession? Even subtle ones? Any examples? Were you successful? ▪ Did these initiatives influence the impression that you give out to your colleagues? ▪ Do you think this is (introduce changes) more possible when you are getting more senior? ▪ Have you ever broken or deviated from those norms or rules of games? What have happened? Have you learnt any lessons? ▪ How about the experience of your colleagues? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To understand how participants view about the <i>rules of games</i> in their fields; <i>structure-agency</i> relationship; respective strength of structural rules vs agency power; ▪ To explore the implications of <i>subtle differentiations in practice theories</i>; who are the change agents; emerging forms of cultural capitals.
The notion on “you are what you share”	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Do you join any social media? What do you think is your image in social media? Why do you think so? ▪ Do you give a second of thoughts before you share or post anything? What are those thoughts in your mind? Why do you consider them? ▪ What kind of people can see you in the social media? Include your colleagues? Do you find it challenging to balance your image among different groups of people (say, your family, friends who 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To explore how people <i>project themselves</i> and simultaneously <i>read others</i> via <i>social media</i>. ▪ To explore if people will <i>exert control</i> on how their colleagues and others view them on <i>social media</i>.

<p>know you for a long time, people you know at your work, etc.)? what do you do then?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Do you think what you see in the social media can help you understand what your friends are about now? e.g. anything about their career development? ▪ Do you think some people are having deliberate purposes when they are posting? Such as? Any examples? Do you think its effective? 	
<p>Competence as a cultural capital for differentiation; socialisation (Research Question 2)</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ So far, do you think you are skilful in building up your image at work? Why? ▪ Do you think you have these skills right from the beginning? How do you build them up? ▪ What people or means have influenced you? ▪ Do you deliberately learn and accumulate these skills/ sense of behaviour at work? ▪ Are there any moments that you think you are not competent? Or fail to appear competent? ▪ For the same token, then, do you think your seniors are more competent than you in knowing what to do to project their image at work? ▪ Among those you know at work, are there any people whom you think they are successful in building up their image? Or any failure examples? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To explore the embodied form of <i>cultural capital</i> as a way of <i>differentiation</i>. ▪ Possible sources of socialisation; ‘Sources’ from which people ‘learn’ about the resources and practices: (<i>families, friends of different sources, different types of colleagues, mass media, social media, trial and errors/ lessons... </i>)
<p>The importance of impression management in a career – power struggle in fields</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Overall, do you think projecting a desirable self-image at work is important? Why? In what way does it matter? Does it help your career development? How? ▪ Any major challenges you foresee in your career? ▪ What’s the next endeavour or goal in your career? What will you do to attain it? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To understand how executives see their <i>career prospects</i> and what impression management related strategies would they employ to achieve their future career goals.

Appendix 3. Thematic codes developed from this study

Preliminary codes	Converted from:	Interim code (/)	Final codes (#) - theoretical contributions
Code 01 – Brand levels between senior and junior executives Code 02 – Resources mainly used by young executives Code 03 – Resources of Impression Mgt 3.1 institutional state of cultural capital 3.2 diverse identity resources between junior and senior 3.3 appearance- junior executives 3.4 utterance and language – senior executives 3.41 Language gives authorities 3.42 Asking the right questions 3.43 Mastering western language 3.44 Keeping quiet 3.5 managing boss’s impression and the senior peers 3.51 Recognizing and demonstrating one’s rare value: capability and job performance 3.52 Trust from the Boss: with mentality and mindset that is close to the boss – ability to read the boss’ mind 3.53 Be sympathetic to bosses’ situations/ corporations’ situation/ smart to take extra step to help the corporations 3.54 Reciprocal relationship 3.55 Avoid to be a threat to seniors 3.56 Understand one’s limitation and find ways to overcome 3.57 Found interest in one’s work – motivation to embrace challenges 3.6 managing staff/ attract & retain talents 3.61 His/her own performance and judgement ability to gain staff respect 3.62 Build a clear supervisory image and set clear requirements 3.63 A fair and distinguishable reward system	- 3.1, 3.12 - 3.3, 5.2 - 3.9, 4.7, 7 - 3.41-3.44 - 8.3, 9,10,12 3.10, 3.11 - 3.65, 3.73, 3.75, 11 - 4.4, 5.1, 5.4, 5.6, 6.4, 8.4 - 3.51, 3.7, 6.1 - 4.3, 8.1 - 4.2, 5.1, 8.2 - 4.5, 4.6, 8.3 - 4.4, 3.12, 8.4 - 4.3 - 4.6, 4.7 - 5.5	/01 – Resources used by Junior Executives /1.1 Institutionalized capital (taste of necessity) /1.2 Appearance–uniform for conformity (taste of necessity) /1.3 Social gestures learnt from primary socialisation (taste of necessity) /02 – Resources used by Senior Executives /2.1 Utterance - subtle capital (taste of liberty) /2.2 Appearance – orchestrating resources (taste of liberty) /2.3 Dining for networking (taste of liberty) /2.4 Sensing and adapting to field-specific norms /2.5 Cultural fit between self and field /03 – Sources for acquiring cultural capital /3.1 multiple sources for imitation /3.1.1 peers /3.1.2 boss /3.1.3 expert – mentors; external exposures; grooming expert /3.1.4 collective culture /3.1.5 self-adjustment (adapt own style) /3.2 self-reflection/ trial-and-error /3.3 en-route socialisation	#01 Shifting taste regime in the workplace from ‘conspicuous taste of necessity’ to ‘subtle taste of liberty’ – the processual evolution of cultural capital (based mainly on /1.1-/1.3 vs /2.1-2.5) #02 Identity lies on ‘how’ we consume and orchestrate resources - gestalt performance (based on Interim codes of /2.2 & /2.3) #03 Cultural capital that transcends field boundaries across career trajectories. (based on Interim codes of /2.4 & /2.5) #04 habitus being a reflexive malleable self resulting from on-going acquisition of cultural capital in the workplace. (based on code /3.1 to /3.4)

<p>3.64 Delegation</p> <p>3.65 Introduce close relatives into the team as subtle monitoring channel</p> <p>3.66 For difficult staff – devalue their importance in the co. before negating them; reduce reliance on them.</p> <p>3.67 Attract and retain talents (a capital of a senior management)</p> <p>3.68 Forming strong teams</p> <p>3.69 Create sense of achievement/productivity</p> <p>3.610 Give support to staff</p> <p>3.7 managing and retaining clients</p> <p>3.71 Match/align with client’s personality and style</p> <p>3.72 Understand & be sensitive to clients’ needs</p> <p>3.73 Share hobbies and interests with clients</p> <p>3.74 Be proactive to help</p> <p>3.75 clients / client base are assets to a sales person</p> <p>3.8 Resources of Impression Mgt – social media</p> <p>3.81 Show that one has a lot of friends</p> <p>3.82 To gain recognition/ to be distinctive</p> <p>3.83 Monitoring staff</p> <p>3.84 Show off status/status indicators</p> <p>3.85 Express one’s values/value indicators/ one’s taste and styles</p> <p>3.86 As a more personal bridge with working partners/clients</p> <p>3.87 Risking privacy/ risk avoidance approach</p> <p>3.88 A source to understand a person</p> <p>3.9 Resources of Impression Mgt – primary socialisation; family background, family social capitals</p> <p>3.10 Resources of Impression Mgt – Dining choices</p> <p>3.11 Resources of Impression Mgt – Activities / hobbies/ talking points</p> <p>3.12 Resources of Impression Mgt – Industrial association/ social network</p> <p>3.13 Resources of Impression Mgt – Work station appearance</p>	<p>- 3.14</p>	<p>/3.4 negative examples</p> <p>Other less developed themes - Adding ^ to original codes:</p> <p>^3.5 cultural capital relates to managing bosses; reciprocal trust</p> <p>^6.2 & ^6.3 Corporate-self congruity</p> <p>^3.6 resources of impression mgt – managing staff/ attract & retain talents</p> <p>^3.7 resources of impression mgt – managing and retaining clients</p> <p>^3.8 resources of impression mgt – social media</p> <p>^3.13 Work station appearance</p>	
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<p>3.14 Resources of Impression Mgt – Avoid Anti-image non-legitimate behavior ; anti-consumption</p> <p>Code 04. Sources of learning and acquiring cultural capital</p> <p>4.1 Mentors</p> <p>4.2 The boss : Management style</p> <p>4.3 Other peer reference / by observation (*but adapt with your own style)</p> <p>4.4 Industrial culture</p> <p>4.5 Institutional qualification / hardworking</p> <p>4.6 By experience, trial and error, lessons learnt</p> <p>4.7 Self-reflection and self-evaluation</p> <p>4.4 Education – Secondary socialisation- Western Edu</p> <p>4.5 Sources of learning – Job experience and exposure</p> <p>4.6 Sources of learning – for grooming</p> <p>4.7 Sources of learning –Primary socialisation – family</p> <p>Code 05. Rules of Games</p> <p>5.1 Rules of Games-set by whom-boss/ era/ macro culture</p> <p>5.2 Feel of/ Rule of Games –can “sense” the dress code</p> <p>5.3 Rules of Games–seniors (transgress the rules) vs juniors (only follow rules for safety)</p> <p>5.4 (also 8.4) Feel of/Rules of the Games – Adaptability & adaption skills to corp cult./ rules</p> <p>5.5 Rules of Games – working district matters</p> <p>5.6 Rules of Games – influenced by Co’s national origin</p> <p>Code 06. Competence for performance</p> <p>6.1 Competence - find the cultural fit to one’s personality/ ability - (Cultural Capital)</p> <p>6.2 Competence - cultural fit – transfer co’s image to one’s own/ image congruity between co’s and a senior staff’s image – You are what you work for</p> <p>6.3 Competence - cultural fit – constructing co’s image means constructing one’s own. (Cultural Capital)</p> <p>6.4 Competence - picking up new skills when the field changes (Cultural Capital)</p> <p>Code 07. Private/social life vs Work life</p> <p>Code 08. Feel for the Games</p> <p>8.1 Feel for the Games – sensing one’s popularity among work peers</p>			
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<p>8.2 Feel for the Games – sensing one’s popularity among bosses/seniors</p> <p>8.3 Feel for the Games – mix and match fashion style</p> <p>8.4 (+5.4) Feel for the Games – industrial / corporate cultural norm</p> <p>Code 09 Self-brand relationship</p> <p>Code 010 Brand use – actual practices</p> <p>Code 011 Social capital/ networking</p> <p>Code 012 Individualistic differentiation within broader norms</p>			
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