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Identity Work and Consumption in Consultancy Firms

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Abstract

This thesis takes the role of consumption as a lens to study how employees of a consultancy firm engage in identity work. It argues that the existing literature explaining the relationship between organizational identity and identity work is limited. This study suggests that consumption as a construct enables an explanation of the aforementioned relationship. Particularly findings from this study suggest that consumption: (i) fosters homology between consultants and clients (ii), consultants use consumption as a resource to construct a sense of identity as well as to do work, (iii) suggest that consultants' consumption practices are influenced by the organizational identity, and, (iv) organizational identity is refined through employee consumption practices. This thesis concludes by discussing the importance of consumption to organizational identity and identity work, as well as areas for future research.

Keywords Consumption, Identity work, Organizational Identity, Homology

Introduction

Identity has been a topic of much debate across social sciences and especially within organization studies. There are different definitions to what identity means, however in this study Identity is acknowledged as a subjective meaning, making sense of and providing a temporary answer to questions "Who am I (are we) and – and consequently – what do I (we) stand for?" (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Curelo 1997). In work life, and especially in knowledge intensive work, members of organizations are in constant battle and cope with uncertainty outcomes and ambiguities resulting from daily work routines. To do so, members of an organization both at the individual level as well as the collective one, continuously engage in identity work, aiming to achieve a feeling of positively valued identity as well as basis for social relations, necessary for coping with work tasks and social interaction. Identity work relates to individual's set of active processes such as forming, strengthening, and revising a sense of identity (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

Previous research related to identity work, has looked at how individuals identify with an organization (Dutton et al, 1994), the role of possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986), and provisional selves (Ibarra 1999) in the process of identity development. Thorrborrow and Brown (2009) explored how United Kingdom's elite military paratroopers' preferred self's act as mechanism of engaging in identity work. Alvesson (2010) explored how identity work becomes foregrounded in consultant/client credit and blame dialectic. Furthermore, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) explored how identity becomes a tool of regulating and managing employees' identification with the organization. Alvesson and Willmott (2002 p. 619) suggest that employees are enjoined implicitly or explicitly to develop self- images and work orientations that are deemed congruent with managerially defined objectives.

Despite the large number of papers related to identity work, the concept of consumption and its relation to identity has somehow been neglected. Knights and Morgan already in 1993 made the call for study of consumption with the organization, and its role in understanding organizational theory – particularly identity. A more recent call to study the role of consumption in revealing identity is put forward by Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas (2008). They suggest that the individual as well as the collective identity can be revealed through artifacts such as offices, dress and the use of other consumer objects. Moreover, (Ibid) an interpretive inquiry, namely interviews and observations are necessary means that enable us to reveal the meaning and identity aspects for those being studies. The calls made by Knights and Morgan (1993), as well as by Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas (2008), surprisingly have received few follow up inquiries.

What has been neglected, however, is the role of organizational members' as not only employees, but also as consumers. Indeed, when people enter organizations, they also bring with them a whole variety of experiences, beliefs, habits, patterns, practices and meanings of consumption (Holt 1997; 1998). It is suggested that it is through consumption that people are empowered to "make-up" their identity who they want to be (Arnold and Thompson, 2005; Shankar et al. 2009).

Based on the study of a sales management-consulting firm, this thesis introduces the importance of the consumption its role, practices, and flow of identity work mediated through consumption. Through this study of how members of a sales management consultancy firm engage in identity work, I show that consumption practices and particularly consumption skill (recourses) becomes directly intertwined with Identity work. Price, Arnould and Malshe (2006) drawing on Service Dominant Logic (See: Vargo and Lusch, 2004), argue that consumers use operant and operand recourses in their life projects and goals. Operand recourses are tangible recourses such as income, inherited wealth, food stamps, vouchers, credit, and other goods or raw material over which consumers have a degree of agency in pursuing their social roles and life projects. On the other hand, operant recourses relate to consumers knowledge, skills or competences. Operant resources are those resources that act upon other resources to create benefit for the consumer. They are drawn from social, cultural and physical aspects of the consumer. To this end, in this context, consultants use operant recourses not only in their identity quests, but also to benefit their work.

This study acknowledges the importance of the organizational identity and the presentation of the employees *vis-a-vis* clients, as well as the stakeholders' role as an important element in consultants' identity work. However, in this study the emphasis are put on the intra-organizational effects of identity and its relationship to consumption by the members of the organization.

This study is structured as follows. First, I introduce theoretical foundation informing this study. Specifically I introduce theoretical issues underpinning identity work in organizations. Then I introduce theoretical issues concerning consumption and its relation to identity. The consumption part is informed from the consumer culture theory literature. I then advocate the utility of a recently established sales management consultancy firm as a context that enables me to explore identity work *vis-à-vis* consumption. Before moving to the analysis part, I briefly outline the methodology. In the end, I conclude with a discussion, trustworthiness of this study, implications and future research.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Identity Work in organizations

Historically the concept of identity has been conceptualized as something fixed, solid and stable, deemed unproblematic and not worth of any scrutiny (Kellner, 1992). However with the advancement of industrialized societies, identity as a concept became foregrounded and received a lot of attention especially within social sciences. Within the organizational studies, identity as a concept has been scrutinized and used in an endless number of ways (Alvesson, 2010). Contributing to this end, a study by Stuart Albert and David Whetten in 1985 sparked the discussion related to organizational identity. Organizational Identity, according to (Albert and Whetten 1985, see: Whetten 2006) refers to organization's member's collective understanding of organization's enduring, coherent and distinctive idiosyncrasies which are assumed to play a crucial role in distinguishing the organization from other organizations. However, this view is somewhat essentialist in nature as it does not take into account that identities are dynamic and have to be assembled and reassembled, produced and reproduced (Shankar et al. 2009). Thus, consumer culture can be represented as an avenue of symbolic recourse in which people interact with deliberately or not, to produce and reproduce their identities (Ibid).

To this end, a more antiessentialist stance is put forward by Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000). Building on Albert and Whetten (1985), they argue that identity is not coherent *per se*, but rather is better understood as temporary coherent, context dependent, fluctuating, fragile or even denoting conflicted formations of individuals or collectives of 'who am I (we)' are or 'who are They'. Moreover, identity, regardless whether we look at it from the individual or collective levels, is best understood as constructed, multiple, and varying, rather as something of a fixed essence (Kärreman and Rylander, 2009).

Organizational management practices and specifically in the context of knowledge based firms, are quite much geared towards identity control. The "mechanisms" of identity control are put in place by organizations not to measure behavioral outcomes of employees, but rather to make sure that employees define themselves according to the desired organizational identity and image of the organization (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Subsequently, Scott and Lane (2000) suggest that there is a pervasive belief among many scholars that the organizational identity rests in the hand of management and the stakeholder perception about the organization is predominantly disseminated through managerial actions.

Although, in the context of knowledge intensive firms, and especially in terms of consultancy organizations, employee obedience to prescribed organizational rules and preferred identity construction may be problematic, some sort integration, coherence and stability around identity are quite necessary. Wenger (2000) argues that an organizational identity is essential that members are able to identify with as well as use to build their own personal identity. The organization creates basis of competence, learning, meaning, and direction of work. Seldom, within these constellations, artifacts play a major role through which individual as well as collectives foster their sense of identity and consequently their identification with the organization. Accordingly, Wenger (2000) is arguing that there needs to be a match or at least coherence between organizational identity and employee identity.

This necessity of coherence also suggests that there is back-and-forth process between organization identity and personal identity, and particularly members' personal identities quests (Holt, 2004) will almost necessarily be reflected in how organizational identity shapes up or emerges.

Members of organizations, whether individually or collectively, regularly engage in identity work, pursuing a coherent and rewarding sense of self. This in turn enables the members of an organization to create a basis for social relations, which is necessary for coping with work tasks and social interactions (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Identity work used in this study follows the conceptualization from (Watson, 2008b: p129) and is defined as "the mutually constitutive process by which people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self identity and struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social identities which pertain to them in the various milieux in which they live their lives." This definition, to my understanding, recognizes that there is an interplay between how members of an organization seek distinction and carve their own identity, and how that in turn influences their identity work. In this study, I suggest that consultants represent themselves in different settings based on consumption practices and this in turn enables them to express the self-concept in light of organizational identity. In order to gain a better understating of the process of identity work engaged by members of the consultancy firm, in the next section I introduce consumption as an inseparable element of studying identity.

Identity and Consumption in Organizations

In marketing and consumer research literature consumption is seen as a mediator through which people are empowered to "make up" their identity or who they want to be (Shankar et al. 2009; Arnould and Thompson, 2005). In this study Consumption is understood as a process through which individuals engage in appropriation and appreciation of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, around which the individuals have some degree of agency (Warde, 2005, p: 137). It is through appropriation and appreciation of possessions that individuals categorize themselves, others, and the environment, making sense of the world around them and creating their identity (Kleine et al. 1995).

As already mentioned, in contemporary culture, traditional and historical forms of identity are not stable. Identity, therefore, should not be seen as something that is fixed, but rather should be considered as a project, a process and a practice. It has to be worked on, organized and managed (Giddens 1991). The use of symbolic meaning of brands, leisure, and lifestyle pursuits has been recognized to play an important role in the process of identity construction. Having said that, consumption has always been important to identity. In Weber terms (Cf. Knights and Morgan, 1993, p 226), consumption historically has been a major mechanism of demonstrating its one's class or membership of a status group - specifically consumption defined status groups in terms of shared patterns of consumption. These groups discover their identities through sharing of certain consumption products such as clothes, housing, entertainment, leisure pursuits to name a few. Often times these kinds of consumption patterns created boundaries, which were made clear to both insiders and outsiders.

Bourdieu's (1984) seminal studies of the French elite is worth mentioning here as well. Bourdieu shows that the impenetrability of this elite structure is predominantly due to the way the elite foster a sense of homology that has been fostered via years of interaction and grooming social practices at higher learning institutions, similar leisure interests and other similar social circles. The complexities of these different nexuses of practices were indeed the reason why they were so pervasive and hard to penetrate, as any outsider of this elite would be immediately exposed and shunned for the clear lack of a lifetime of engaging with these practices. Bourdieu's studies have been criticized for both its French centricity and the 1960s setting of these studies.

However, Holt (1998) showed that within the US, which he saw as not being a traditional class based society like France, the differences in consumption practices between those with high or low cultural capital were found to be highly structuring and stratifying between consuming populations (see also: Holt, 1997). Cultural capital is a set of generic compatible characteristics such as dispositions, skills, sensibilities, embodied knowledge concerning the body, beauty, creativity, individuality, achievement and so on-that together compose the habitus of cultural elites (Holt, 1997, p: 96). Holt (1998) shows that within the US, one's education (as well as parents' education) was the predominant predictor of one's level of cultural capital. This again underlines that higher education is not only an arena for individuals to acquire work skills but also, higher education is about more than just acquiring a "competence" for work life; it is a period of coming to one's own and learning to know yourself. Going through higher education imbue people with a whole plethora of practices that are then performed in and outside the work life. And again, these practices resist immediate discovery and identification. And precisely because of this they are so strong in creating differences between those who "get" the practices and those who "don't" – particularly in matters of tastes (Bourdieu 1984).

However, during the past decades, new form of consumption has created new opportunities for a more diversified or pluralistic range of consumption patterns. This new form of consumption has created an arena where people constantly vie for a degree of distinctiveness, where the search for distinctiveness results in a multiplicity of identities and displays of difference through a set of market generated materials (Knights and Morgan, 1993; Arnold and Thompson, 2005).

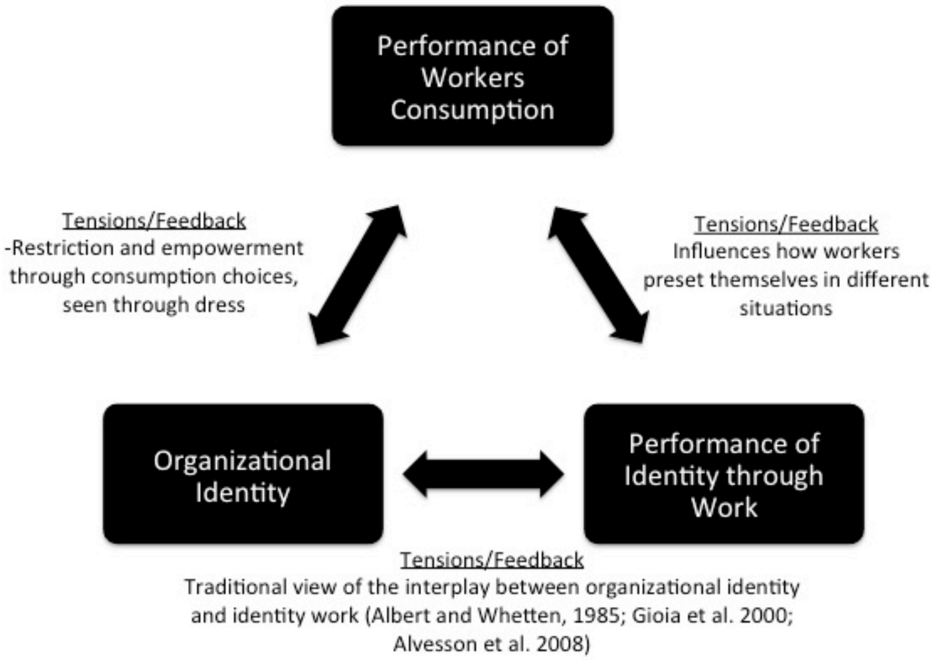
In consultancy work, the aforementioned is apparent too. As already seen, consultant/client interactions are fused with uncertainty. None of them will know for sure how the meeting for example might unfold. During the interaction process a lot of sensing from both sides takes place, however not sensing in a cognitive way. It's more like a habitus (the unifying, generative principle of all practices, Bourdieu, 1984, p. 169) based sense that creates gravitation towards these people. Consumption in these interactions helps identify homology thus it becomes an inseparable aspect of consultants identity work.

Previous studies within the consumer research suggest that consumption and displays of taste are a part of work life as any other life context. Tian and Belk (2005) show that workplace is very much an arena of consumption and identity building where the other employees work as the audience. Moreover, according to them, consumption not only serves as a mean to maintain a stable self, but also enable or facilitates identity work in response to work related events.

Despite the abundant research in organizational studies related to organizational identity, an important question arises in terms of how does the organizational identity become enacted through multiple opportunities of consumption within and outside the organization? Having said that, even within consumer research, we still know relatively little of these 'constellations' of symbolic objects, meaning that how different brands and other consumption artifacts, find their relations within a social context (cf. Arsel and Thompson, 2011). Following calls on further studies related empirical work on consumption and identity (Knights & Morgan, 1993, Alvesson et al. 2008) and identity work in general (Alvesson et al, 2008), the aim of this study is to gain an understanding of how members of an organization at the individual level as well as the collective level enact the organizational identity through consumption practices. In other words, *how do does consumption become intertwined with the daily identity work of members of an organization*? I recognize that the organizational identity as well as the individual one, is influenced through interaction and shaped by multiple stakeholders inside and outside the organization, but still wish to focus exclusively on intra-organizational practices of identity work in this study.

My understanding of the interplay between consumption, organizational identity and identity work is summarized in Figure 1. There I indicate how the performance of workers consumption influences and is influences by both, organizational identity and the performance of workers identity through work.

Figure 1. Performance of Workers Consumption, Performance of Identity through Work and Organizational Identity



Referring to the figure, the two boxes in the bottom part portray the traditional view of the relationship between organizational identity and identity work. With the introducing of the upper box i.e. the employees' consumption practices, a plethora of tensions and feedback loops within this triangular relationship emerges. The consumption and organizational identity relationship shows that the organizational identity restricts and at the same time empowers employees in their consumption choices. Another look at this relationship suggests that employee consumption practices refine the organizational identity. This approach is in line with Gioa et al. (2000) suggesting that organizational identity is temporally coherent. To this end, it is through employees' consumption practices that clients form their opinions about what the organization stands for.

As to identity work, consumption practices influence how workers present themselves in different situations. Consultants meet different clients from different industries in different settings. Consultants predominantly categorize their clients depending on the industry they come from. Engaging them with a uniform approach often times results in a dead end. In order to convey the "right" image, consultants talk about how one out to present themselves depending on the client. As the empirical part suggests, according to the consultants, one dresses for a meeting in accordance with a client type. To this end, in client meetings, consultants either dress one level up, or one level down. Dressing one level up is more often done when meeting clients from the banking or technical industry. Whereas, meeting people from IT industry, consultants dress ether casual or one level down. This is done to promote a more relaxed atmosphere in the latter example, whereas on the former one, to communicate the seriousness and importance of the client.

Method and Research Process

The empirical foundation for this study draws on a study of a start up sales management consulting firm. This work started in early October 2012 and the last interview was conducted in January 2013. The empirical material consists of transcripts of 6 interviews (McCracken, 1988). The interviews lasted between one hour to an hour and fifteen minutes and around of 80 single space text pages have been transcribed verbatim. Prior to the interviews I had informal multiyear engagements with the many members of the organization whom I had a chance of knowing through working at Aalto. The informal discussions related to company's work in general, as well as time spent at their company premises as an observer have been utilized in data analysis as well.

Members from all parts of the organization have been interviewed: the Managing Director, the co-founder, a consultant and three sales specialists. The interview focus was on experienced members of the organization as well as junior ones. The idea was that by interviewing dispersed number of people in terms of work experience would result in relevant and insightful material. A more detail list of interviewees can be found in Table 1. See below.

Table 1 List of Interviewees

Name	Age	Education	Title	Time with the firm
John	34	PhD, Technology	Managing director	Since 2009
Nillo	30	M.Sc, Technology	Project Lead	Since 2009
Elena	n/a	M.Sc, Technology	Sales Specialist	1 year
Jimmy	n/a	M.Sc, Technology	Sales Specialist	1 year
Jack	n/a	M.Sc, Economics	Sales Specialist	1.5 years
Mike	n/a	M.Sc, Technology	Consultant	2.5 years

The aim of the interviews was to allow for a discovery-oriented exploration of the participant's consumption practices and their relation to identity work and organizational identity. To a considerable extent, the interview technique that I used in this study resembles the phenomenological interview technique (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio, 1989), which seeks the evaluative criteria that participants use to talk about consumption. In the same fashion, I sought to encourage participants to describe these criteria through rich descriptive details such as: stories, recountings, and hypotheticals. This methodological approach derives from a principal axiom of post-structuralist social thought. It suggests that human actions are organized through the various discourses that we use to understand and talk about the world and our experiences within. (Holt, 1997, p 329).

The interviews covered a range of topics related to organizational identity, individual identity and consumption. In terms of organizational identity, questions revolved around organizational identity attributes (Whetten 2006; Gioia, 2000). Questions such as what does organization stand for? What are the coherent, distinctive features of the organization and organizational attributes? How do clients see you as an organization? And the match between the individual and organizational identities were explored. In terms of individual identity questions revolved predominantly around occasions when consultant engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of individual's coherence and distinctiveness (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). As to consumption, topics were pursued as they emerged during the interview process. Throughout all interviewed the most prevalent topics revolved around: clothes, events, sports, cars, music, and hobbies. The aforementioned questions were conceptualized as consumption using Warde (2005) definition of consumption. Furthermore, consumption related questions asked participants about the role of consumption across different situations such as the role of dress in meetings with either existing or potential clients, the attention to details when dressing up for a meeting with clients from different industries. Discussion of consumption activities in talk with clients, the role of consumption after the rapport has been established with the client, the importance of hobbies in generating new leads for the organization, the role of dress in fostering homology between clients and the consultants.

The emic terms used by participants were explored and analyzed. Before moving to the analysis part, a brief introduction about the organization as a context of study is put forward. Last but not least, the analyses section is put forward in three parts, namely: (i) consumption as a relationship lubricant, (ii) performing organizational identity through consumption, and (iii) the role of the consumption within MyytiCon firm.

The company

MyyntiCon is a sales management consulting company based in Helsinki, Finland. MyyntiCon is established in late 2009 as a spinoff from Aalto University. MyyntiCon is small sales management consultancy consisting of 12 employees: the managing director, chairman of the board, two partners, four consultants, and four sales specialists. All the members are male except one female sales specialist. Despite its recent establishment, the firm has demonstrated sustained capacity for growth and profitability and has developed long-term and lasting business relationships with several big companies in Finland. Since it's beginning, MyyntiCon's identity has revolved around the academic background of its owner and the partners, but has never had clear "central, distinctive and temporally enduring characteristic (Gioa et al. 2000)". There are two reasons, among others, why MyyntiCon's identity relies predominantly in the academic background. In one hand, MyyntiCon lacks seniority (crucial for credibility), despite their latest recruits with extensive industry experience. On the other, MyyntiCon has not grown into a strong brand yet *ala* Ernst &Young type. To cope with such "deficits" MyyntiCon's employees utilize consumption as a skill and recourse to build, establish and maintain relationships with the existing and potential clients.

Analysis

Three analytical levels have been put forward to explain how consumption relates to identity work of the consultants. The first one, named "consumption as a relationship lubricant" looks at how consultants use consumption related talk to build rapport with clients. The second "performing organizational identity through consumption" looks at how consultants enact organizational identity through consumption, specifically, the role of consumption related to identity work. The third "the role of consumption within the firm" looks at how members of the organization within the firm utilize consumption in order to differentiate themselves from other peers and at the same time comply with the organizational work practices.

Consumption as Relationship Lubricant

In this part of the analysis I explore the role of consumption as relationship lubricant. The emphasis pertains to the role of consumption in initiating the meetings and as a way of "breaking the ice". Furthermore, an account of how meetings can go wrong when going with a pre-planed agenda is also provided.

In social settings such as client meetings, there is an important period between arriving to the meeting and actually getting the meeting under way as per the pre-agreed agenda. During this time, the two parties exchange pleasantries, greetings, and depending on the nature of the relationship gossip and even make jokes. Malinowski (1923) originally defined this kind of interaction as *phatic communion*, the creation of union by mere exchange of words. As Laver (1975, p221) notes, "phatic communion has an initiatory function, in that it allows the participants to cooperate in getting the interaction comfortably under way, using emotionally uncontroversial communicative material, and demonstrating by signals of cordiality and tentative social solidarity their mutual acceptance of the possibility of an interaction taking place". In more general terms such interactions are often referred to as "breaking the ice" or engaging in small talk. As the following excerpts shows, using topics of consumption within phatic communion can play a surprisingly important role in managing client relations especially in sales consultancy work:

> […] for building rapport its absolutely necessary to not just start with: 'OK this is the agenda' and CHANG, CHANG, CHANG but actually have kind of human to human relationship and discuss about things that are of interest to both of us … as an example, well I think in the last meeting I started discussing something about our coffee consumption and caffeine and how it relates to your performance and so forth and recited some studies made about it, and so forth. In other cases, it could be about golf or tennis or volleyball. For example a company sport … Yeah lets see… There are not many examples that now come into my mind, but its kind of matter of improvisation there as well…yeah. (Nillo, Partner)

In the same vein, another consultant shares almost identical thoughts with the previous one in regards of how one ought to interact with the client and the role of consumption in the interactive process:

> Definitely, but everything boils down into what we call actually its kind of sales tactic. Sales tactic is a wrong word but its kind of one of these approaches is finding common ground meaning that you want to present your self as, in a such manner that, that you, the customer and you as persons are able to find something in common being somebody some person who you both know or maybe a work place where you have worked before or same university, or same hobby like wines or golf or anything or tennis. But that's a tactic which is kind

of has been identified as one key thing to really get closer to the client really quickly… And there I believe you can actually… You can use the sense of style very much: selecting the right clothing, selecting the right words and these kind of restaurant these kinds of things definitely would be in the right direction in doing that. (Managing director)

Consultancy work is characterized by contingencies upon which the client's opinion about the consultant is formed. Going to a meeting with a standardized framework can result in an undesired outcome for the consultants. Despite the "home work" done by the consultants regarding the client's background, meetings can also go wrong. This kind of unpredictability according to Deetz (1998) can prove to be difficult for the consultants to accomplish and sustain a stable, steady feeling of competence and respect:

()…there was this one [meeting] that's almost like two years ago. It was with a bank person… Well, yeah, yeah, and um … And, it was also our mistake we tried to approach certain amount of people coming from the banking industry with sort of standardized campaign where we had already tried to invent ourselves a certain offering. And than we went into those meetings like way, way, way to much, just going ahead with the offering, just explaining what we do and what we offer and not concentrating on the client so much. That was really good learning experience for our team or for that team that did this. But there (an example), I participated in several meetings but in one of the meetings there was this guy who, just nothing really matched. He was really, really… I don't know if he was having a bad day or something but he was not receptive at all and than it was almost like, like… Feeling was like really awkward because no body had, you know, the discussion didn't go forward with this kind of fluency but it was just you know somebody said something and everything again

> stopped and than somebody tried to say something again it wasn't… That was probably the worst experience of all, we got nothing out of the meeting, probably he got nothing out of the meeting, nothing followed and everybody was like pissed off. (Managing director)

Talking to people at the sports clubs, hobby centers, music clubs, and not just in the boardrooms and meetings, is considered important for consultancy work. These types of fluid boundaries offer opportunities for consultants to interact with the existing clients as well as potential ones and as such are an arena for rapport building and striking new deals.

> […] but than these interpersonal relationships like from golf and from like Pörsi Klubi and other places like that, are really important. The most important reference, even - even like reference companies that you can put on the website sometimes the feedback is; yeah, yeah, yeah, we know. Every consultancy has the same references than you. That doesn't differentiate [you from the competitors], so what do you actually do? So even though they are important [putting a company reference in the webpages] they still don't make the deal at the end of the day. Bu than again, what can make a deal, is a personal trusted relationship and reference. If somebody at the golf course says to his buddy hey: I use these guys, they did this amazingly good job and we are really satisfied. That can be a really powerful signal for the other guy that: hmmm OK! And, and that's why these kind of fellowship networks operate because that's the strongest form of reference you can get in such a setting. You know, I mean, if you look at the website references you know, you can have done one half days coaching and than you put that as a public reference it really doesn't tell anything about you […]

Doing consultancy work entails that sales management consultants work with different clients in different settings or do work at the client's premises. In Wenger's (2000) terms with is known as boundary work. Consumption here can act as boundary objects (Wenger, 2000) not only lubricating the relationship between the consultant and clients but also fostering homology. As the following two excerpts show, client/consultant homology can be mediated when consultants and clients share same consumption interests and do similar hobbies:

> But actually I saw a month a go, I saw one guy from… He is kind of with the Product Data Management team. So I saw him at Adams [night club], there was this DJ Hell playing there. It vas very interesting to meet him there. He is somewhere around thirty-thirty four, thirty-five something like that. Also that affected a lot kind of how he, the way he kind of is having conversations with me nowadays. Its much more relaxed and he is much more bluntly telling what he thinks and what…it made a big change to our relationship.

As Barley and Kunda (2006) have recognized, client organizations usually have a number of formal and informal policies which are designed to set contracted consultants apart from the employees of the host organization. Firstly, the easiest way to draw a line between them is to provide consultants with body artifact type of things such as identification tags or badges that clip onto clothing. Secondly, this can be achieved by depriving consultants from accessing IT related systems. And thirdly, individual client employees intentionally seek to maintain the space between him/her and the consultant. However, as the following excerpt shows, these boundaries seem to blur when consultant/client interactions revolve around consumption.

> […] within this customer organization, that I have been part of for one and a half year, their hobbies have got me to know their people better and kind of, created a relaxed atmosphere and got to know them better. Now I can get much more easily information

> from them regarding any subject and they can just point out who knows about that or start chatting to me just more often and asking me for lunch, and that kind of things. So for example, just the other week I was talking with one guy called Mikko who is head of Document Management System tool. So he is kind of the “owner” of that tool, or system. It came out that he also plays basketball too, for quite a long time and, and… He was very interested in hearing that I have played at a quite a good level here in Finland and just wanted to know where I have played and where am I playing know, and that king of things. And it just takes kind of friendship to a new level, and the relationship too. It just gives a softer touch to this kind of professional relationship that you might have at work. So, that’s just one example, but in several other cases also. Kind of giving the personal touch to the relationship at work is very important also when you work at the client’s company. Its actually very important. I guess they also start telling more personal things and issues and then they kind of start thinking about you not as a consultant per se but about me as Mike, a person. Then it makes harder for them to kick me out the organization, because they are not buying kind of these consultancy services anymore from MyyntiCon, they are buying. ()

Dress is also a mean through which consultants engage in identity work. The consultants learn the situational aspects of their work. It is the situational factors, such as the client categories discussed before in this study that have prompted consultants to present themselves accordingly:

> …I have been always interested in brands and fashion. It’s a way for me to express who I am. So I try to tell something about my self through the way I dress and then depending on the situation or depending on where I am going or situation, I try to do it differently kind of ways. I am very aware that it affects, kind of, how people take me.

(Interviewer): You mentioned during the interview the movies, and other activities. Have you ever gotten to discuss about movies with clients and stuff like that?

> […] not movies. Its usually not movies and not that much even music. Sports its easier. I have… Its kind of more safe. If I start talking about techno and disco music, to conservative heavy industry companies, there aren't that many people to discuss the topic about.

Here the interview is also suggesting that e certain types of consumption practices should be discussed depending on the context. Moreover, what the interviewee is suggesting is that one ought to be careful when talking to clients regarding consumption practices. And talking about sports seems to be the safest strategy when interacting with clients.

Performing Organizational Identity Through Consumption

As already noted, consultancy work entails that consultants engage with their clients in multiple meetings and quite often on daily basis. Strategizing between different client meetings is of utmost importance for the consultants. Appearance, and specifically dress, plays an important role in these kinds of interactions. Dress can be useful vehicle for representing and negotiating a complex web of identity-related issues that together identify a member of an organization (Rafaelly and Pratt, 1997). It is through dress that consultants seek to identify with the client. In other terms, dress code is not so much anymore a normative structure (Kunda, 1992), but rather an implied one, based on social-ideological expectations of how to 'be' at work (Alvesson and Kärreman 2004) that both enables and subjugates (Thompson and Haytko, 1997; Murray, 2002). As the following excerpt shows, clients are seldom categorized based on the industry they come from. Matching the "right" dress with the "right" client is a skill that consultants have to take into account whenever meeting clients from different industries:

> […] for me well always a jacket. Usually just one part of the suit that's on and then depending on the clients I think whether I should wear also suit pants or not. Also if it's the first time I meet a client I always dress a bit more up. I never wear a tie. So I have never worn a tie. Although if I would go to sell at to a financial industry I would probably do that but I haven't done that so, so I never worn a tie. And I thinks that's kind of also … even if I know that for example where there was this one client I knew that the CEO will be wearing a tie and its like something like I first learnt when being a trainee that in a consulting company you need to kind be one up or at least equal [in terms of dress], because you can remove something that's a…I think tie is something that I don't doesn't feel like me so I am more comfortable just being without it but

otherwise having everything very well though out. And then, then, so nobody can really kind of see that he was or he prepared badly, or he doesn’t take this meeting seriously. For some clients, its jeans and a jacket but, but then you already know what they are going to wear and how they are going to behave they think. And and. You can also dress little bit for certain occasions and that’s um…as an example! I go to Mikkeli sometimes at (Pieniyrityskeskus) its kind of specialized education for a sales managers and sales directors from that area and going there and wearing a suit will just, it would break the rapport… But also kind of wearing as casual clothes as they are when they are kind of just having a nice little education they would also be too, at least that’s my belief, it would be too little to kind of build the authority […] (Nillo, Project Lead and Partner).

A similar account regarding the categorization of clients based on industry and therefore consultants’ presentation of the self accordingly, is recognized by the managing director of the firm. For him it is important that consultants adjust the dress depending on who they meet, however, maintaining their authenticity is also an important imperative. To him, this has to do with the individual authenticity. Being authentic in how one presents him/her self, for the managing director, is on of the paramount values that he is looking for in an individual. According to him, clients have the ability to see through whether one is being true to him self.

Well. I try to do it as well as possible. So if I know I need to go to a bank, I usually put up a suit in the morning and than at least have a tie with me. Sometimes I really cannot do it fully. Because if I have several meetings on a day than, you know, they get mixed up and than you have limited capability in changing the colors in between. But aaah… I try to do it aaah… Some other people, I am probably, to that end of the scale that really thinks about the clothing than there are some other people who don’t so much. But we didn’t have any big group control at least so far on that. Because I

> really believe that if you think of authenticity and kind of trust aaaa… people should behave like they really are in reality, not trying to act about anything. So that applies to clothing as well. So I believe that, you know, if you are not comfortable with a suit and tie than don't ware it because otherwise you are not yourself and not convincing and authentic, you are something different from who you really are and that always shows through so, so in that sense I even I am not even sure if I want to have any group policy on dressing so I really believe that, that people make the best, than its more like matching right people with right clients […] (John, Managing Director).

Established consultancy organizations usually don't have to work too much to tell the client who they are. In most cases the corporate brand will tell the client more or less what he or she can expect from the consultants (Kärreman and Rylander, 2009). However, in the context of MyyntiCon this was not the case. They are aware that they are in the business of selling acts, not artifacts. Also, they know that the success of selling a specific project depends on the interaction with the client and the clients will to cooperate (Clark 1995). Being a start up, and predominantly comprised of fairly young workforce, MyyntiCon consultants used different consumption skills to overcome the tensions arising from the interaction. This is explained by the excerpt bellow:

> … I guess we lean a lot on having seniority. Its just crucial for us to lean to the academic background there. We need to lean to well John, we have recruited Saku to our company who is kind of a very experienced sales … Kind of a general executive. He has been working as a CEO of a couple million-euro company and so forth. And than of course, how we also show ourselves is that we just need to kind of fake until

you can make it style so. So just kind of need to take the authority and yeah. (Nillo, Partner)

Can you give an example of how you have done this?

…I mean yeah its…I think its just about how you conduct the interaction with customers so that you don't present your self as being too junior. I have like well three years experience now in MyyntiCon and than I have kind of done different things during my studies so being par of CapMac consulting. For example, that's of course an experience that I can lean on, but I feel that I need to kind of present my self as even more experienced than I actually am, because I know I can deliver the results. But its just a matter of perception to our clients and that's probably it's the interaction it's the aaa aaa I don't know everything; communication body language all kinds of things. (Nillo, Partner)

The Role of Consumption within the Firm

Consumption skills among MyyntiCon's employees are used as recourse in various encounters and interactions within and outside the organization. In this section, I explore the role of consumption within the firm itself. More than in other cases, this is evident when new members join the organization. The new members tend to come with an idea regarding the MyyntiCon's identity, culture and image. During their very first days at work, they tend to dress stereotypically consultant like in thinking that that's the right way to dress as well as seeking to overcompensate for their junior status. What actually happens is that the newcomers fairly fast "pick-up" what the organization stands for and slowly adhere to its norms. As first days at work go by, MyyntiCon employees not only adopt and adhere to the organizations culture and norms, but also use consumption to differentiate themselves as professionals and stand out positively (Mehta and Belk, 1991). This sort of behavior is not only desired by the MyyntiCon, but also encouraged because it brings value to the organizations and create diversity. Moreover, this diversified pool of consultants' identities in turn is tacitly understood by MyyntiCon as a way or a mean to allocate the "right" kind of consultants for the "right" kind of client projects.

> […] the actual team really quickly infuses you to the right level of… I think its really fast. And than each of the persons are unique characters so as much as they kind of, kind of fit themselves into the team and follow the same culture, they also bring something new to the team, something new in terms of even dressing. Like, so, so um… And I would highly encourage if somebody has their unique style to, you know, bring it in and, you know, increase diversity in that sense…(John, Managing Director)

Myynticon's is comprised of fairly young employees. All of them share a common understanding in how the organizational identity should be like, as well as they have a common understanding of how they ought to presents themselves within and outside organization. However a senior member of the organization, acting as well as a board member, has in few occasions lamented regarding the MyytniCon's employees appearances at work. According to him, a stricter policy should be in place regarding some management practices and especially dress code. These kinds of tensions can perhaps be understood by taking into account this members career background. The board member (Piro) comes from a fairly centralized industry where organizational identity is prearranged (Scott and Lane, 2000) and as such according to him, MyyntiCon's identity ought to be coherently enacted by all members of the organizations. As the following excerpt shows, despite the critique made by the chair of the board, all the interviewees think that perhaps his remarks about the dress code are a bit too much for a "cool" organization such as MyyntiCon:

> I would think so that when you are doing back office work you don't have to be so dressed up. But um… Basically that has been, you know… There is no strict line how you should dress for work. But then again, we have talked about it. Um… You know our chairman, Piro said that should he bring any of his friends here and we are not presentable, you know (laughing)… We should be presentable here… (J)

Another account by a female consultant brings in the foreground the importance of consumption related to her identity work. Working in a male dominant environment, in most of the occasions she wears dark suits and a white male shirt. In order to stand out from her colleagues and not look "like a waitress", she puts attention to details such as wearing more vivid scarfs, earrings and jewelry. She is aware of male dominant practices within this industry and the firm she works for as well. Even though she has to wear male like clothes, she uses consumption to differentiate her self from the rest of the organizational members. Such expression of her identity especially within gender studies has been recognized. Male dominant occupations are recognized by homosocial reproduction. It is much harder for a female to be taken seriously by her colleagues and clients than is for men. Within the gender studies perspective, females during their career paths have to constantly engage in identity work. However their identity work does not necessarily follow similar practices to that of male consultants (see: Lupu, 2011). A desired presentation of self in daily work is much more challenging for women than it is for man. The consultant female, in this case, has to maneuver within the dominant male work practices in order to appeal credible within this industry.

> Yeah, yeah! Now that I think about it. I always add… Lets say I don't want to look like a waitress. I always add something, like a bit of a color or jewelry or some little details, even though it should be… I mean even though the dress code would be like black suit and white shirt […] Its my feeling that I would look way too much as someone who has told me to dress that way. So I want to add those little things […] (Elena, sales specialist).

Discussion

The relationship between organizational identity and identity work has received a lot of attention within the organizational studies (Alvesson et al. 2008). However, the role of consumption within these studies has somehow gone unnoticed despite calls made to study consumption and its relation to identity (Knights and Morgan, 1993; and Alvesson et at. 2008). To this end, studies that look into the relationship between consumption and identity indirectly emphasize the theory of materiality and the role of objects in subject formation (Cf. Shankar et al. 2009; see Borgerson, 2005). In this study I have shown that consumption as a construct can bring new insights in explaining back-and-forth process between organization identity and personal identity. To explicate the role of consumption in consultancy organizations, the interplay between consumption and organizational identity in one hand, and identity work in the other were explored. By focusing on the aforementioned, consumption is shown to influence consumers' identity work in one hand, and, organizational identity at the other. It also shown that organizational identity in this case implicitly restricts employee consumption choices in one hand, but at the same time, employee consumption practices and choices shape the organizational identity.

In terms of identity work, this study has shown that employees depending on the situation and client type, use consumption related topics to either lubricate their relationships or foster a sense of homology. How well consultants fare in interactions with clients, to an extent depends on the client's and the employee's consumption taste. If taste, according to Bourdieu (1984) is an individual's personal and cultural patterns of choice and preference, than taste is also about depicting distinctions between things such as styles, manners, consumer goods to name a few. As seen in this study, whenever mutual tastes about a specific consumption practice arose during the consultant/client interaction, homology was fostered and hence, identification between the client and consultant emerged. It is worth noting too, that consultants not always use consumption consciously as recourse in their daily work routines, but rather consumption emerges tacitly in daily work. Consultants at times know when and how to talk about a specific consumption practice but at times topics related to consumption serendipitously emerge. An example from the empirical part depicts an account when two consultants go to meet with a potential client at his premises. The client was waiting for them at the parking lot in front of an 80's Toyota car. As to client's surprise, one of the consultants happened to have a similar car. The discussion between the consultants and the client continued from the there and according to the consultant, the car was the key element in fostering the relationship with the client - and now that client is one of his most loyal customer. It can be argued, therefore, that consultants endorse consumption as a resource and as a part of their identity work. Consultants, therefore, through consumption practices engage in identity work, actively forming, strengthening, and revising their sense of identity of "Who they are" (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003).

As per to organizational identity and its role to consumption, it can be argued that organizational identity to some degree restricts how employees present themselves, but at the same time organizational identity is refined through consumption practices of the employees. This sort of a feedback loop can be related to the concept of identity regulation as organizational control (Willmott and Alvesson, 2000). In this case the mechanisms of identity control are not explicitly put in place by the firm at hand, but are tacitly understood by the members of the organization. An account emerging from the empirical part provides a good example of this. Identity regulation takes place when newcomers join the firm. During their first days they come to work by dressing stereotypically consultant like in thinking that is the right way to behave in a consultancy firm. However, as the managing director pointed, the team will infuse the newcomers with the right dose of ideas about how one ought to do consultancy work as well as dress in the work place.

Another account helps us understand how the organizational identity is shaped by the employees' consumption practices. This sort of agency from the employees' side is best understood through another account. An account where one of the consultants has been working for a client at their premises for some time now. According to him, first of all, the client will always by "Me" as Mike as a person. What makes him attractive to the client company is not only his expertise, but also the way he present him self, talks and behaves. Ultimately, according to this interviewee, client's opinion about MyyntiCon as an organization to a considerable extent depends on the clients impressions about Mike as a contracted consultant.

The findings from this study show that consumption as a concept can bring new insights how members of an organization engage in identity work as well as show how organizational identity restricts employees in their consumption choices in one hand, and on the other, how organizational identity is shaped by employees' consumption choices. Theoretically, then, consumption as argued in this study, influences both the organizational identity and the identity work of employees. To this end, the traditional view pertaining to organizational identity and identity work is limited. Therefore, by brining the concept of consumption into this relationship, this study modestly compliments and contributes to the academic discussion related to organizational identity and identity work.

Trustworthiness of the Study

The aims to develop objective evaluative criteria within the consumer research have not passed without criticism. Specifically within the naturalistic inquiry, attempts by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Wallendorf and Belk (1989) to overcome positivist and post-positivist judgment criteria, such as through triangulation techniques, have shown to be short lived. The techniques utilized to control for the accuracy of the data, techniques to verify “facts” after they have been recorded, have led to a belief that auditing plays an important role in evaluating naturalistic research (Holt, 1991). According to Holt (1991, p. 61), an interpretive technique of the aforementioned inquiry is somewhat similar to the reading of text, where the reader or observer interacts with the observed to form an idiographic, negotiated reality. Therefore, following the techniques suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), Wallendorf, and Belk (1989), in which they seek to overcome the positivist concerns, does not essentially lead to more trustworthy research. Despite the aforementioned authors’ explanation and consistency with the general interpretivist world-view of ontological and epistemological assumptions. Their evaluative criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability closely parallel the positivist criteria of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Smith and Heshusius, 1985).

In the same line with Holt (1991) and Denzin (2001), I believe too that interpretations should be judged based on insightfulness. As interpretation in this case is empirically grounded, the reader can challenge the interpretation based on her/his own academic experiences revolving around this particular world-view. Having said that, I recognize that subjective judgments of a peer reviewed process may converge sufficiently to permit for some interpretation to be favored by others. Based on the aforementioned, I advocate that the research method I have chosen is relevant to the judgment process, but does not act as an objective criterion. Like other fundamentals of interpretation, I seek that the reader judges the research method I have utilized based on his subjective judgment. Therefore, paraphrasing Holt (1991), I suppose that it is only through interaction with the reader that the interpretation can acquire favored status as a credible and insightful work, and not by some sort of objective evaluative criteria stemming from positivist and postpositivist paradigms.

Conclusion

Through this study my aim was to introduce the concept of consumption as an important variable in gaining an understanding of how individuals as well as collectives engage in identity work, and specifically within the knowledge based organizations such as consultancy firms. Firstly, I have shown that consumption related topics are a good way of creating rapport with clients. Secondly, consumption has been shown to foster a sense of homology between consultants and clients thus leading to a firmer consultant/client relationship. And thirdly, consumption has been shown to play an important role in how members play their roles within the and outside confines of the firm. Having said that, through analysis, I have argued that consumption as a construct plays an important role in consultants' interpretative activities in reproducing and transforming self-identity (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

This study is not without limitations. The role of consumption in identity work should be expanded to include other contexts such as established consultancy firms in which a larger number of employees are employed. The established, or branded organizations are prone to more structuring therefore looking at different organizational levels in terms interplay between organizational identity, identity work and consumption might be beneficial. By juxtaposing the existing results from this study with the insights gained from another context, novel insights related to the identity work and identity theory in particular might emerge.

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