

Goffmanian Analysis of Consumerism (With Veblen/Bourdieu Synthesis)

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In this paper, I will attempt to analyse consumerism using the sociological perspective of Erving Goffman. However, I intend to go further than this, and to show that the sociology of consumerism of both Veblen and Bourdieu are instances of Goffmanian macrosociology, that is, the mechanics at play in what Veblen and Bourdieu detail can be explained in Goffmanian terms.

Goffman's greatest contribution is his dramaturgical framework of social interaction. His big idea is that human interaction is performative rather than authentic. Interaction, therefore, is akin to a drama wherein there is a constant attempt to present oneself in the best light possible. In the introduction of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman 2008, p. 2-4) Goffman states that social actors either consciously or otherwise act in such a way as to manifest a feeling of impressiveness in others. In the work, he introduces two fundamental concepts: regions and impression management. The idea is that there is a front and a back region to the social performance; the front region is the physical space in which the performance happens, and the back region is where we prepare for performances and recharge, taking part in what Goffman terms staging talk. This is all roughly governed by the idea of impression management in which we actively or passively attempt to manage the impression people get of us by controlling or modifying certain aspects of ourselves in order to manipulate the information we give off, and thus by extension, how others interpret us.

Bringing this back to consumerism, Farrell (1998 p. 156) argues that our owned consumer commodities allow us, in the Goffmanian sense, to control the information we give off to others and thus the very impression they form of us. Consumerism allows us to frame ourselves in a certain way to others. Consider: a young surgical resident is invited to an exclusive convention of the best doctors in the country. A co-worker tells the resident to buy an expensive suit in order to impress the people there who could advance their career. But why does the co-worker suggest this? In Goffmanian terms, it is because the suit is a sign-vehicle, an object that will display a certain impression to others. The co-worker, by suggesting this sign-vehicle be used for the sake of impression management, is taking part in what Goffman calls a defensive practice; she is trying to make sure the performance of the team (in this case a group of surgical residents going to a convention) is not spoiled. The consumer item, in this case, a suit, displays something within the social world that the person who owns it wants to display.

We see something strikingly similar to this in the work of Thorstein Veblen. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* Veblen argued that consumerism becomes a way to display one's social class and economic power (Veblen 1899, p. 53) which explains why people buy goods of a higher price and or quality than practically necessary; it is done because the value of the

commodity is not its use value but rather its value as a class positional signaller. A particularly important result of this is that people in the lower classes will consume in ways of those in higher classes in order to differentiate themselves from other members of their own class, and signal to others that they are part of a higher social class than they actually are (Trigg 2001, p. 99). This occurrence is entirely Goffmanian in nature and in this sense Veblen could be said to be a proto-Goffmanian. If consumption is done as a way to signal an idea of social class to others, then this is necessarily an instance of impression management, the consumer item being a sign vehicle of economic capital, which sends out a certain impression that we desire to project. Further, Marx developed the concept of commodity fetishism (Marx 1981 p. 163-164), the idea that commodities are valuable beyond their use value, and rather have some kind of metaphysical character to them that makes us value them far more than their use value would suggest. In the sense of Goffman, the existence of commodity fetishism can be explained by the fact their very value is in what they can say about us within the social world. Their value therefore is in direct relation to other people, and as such, is an entirely interactive use value. The point: Marx and Veblen both show us that the utility of commodities (and thus consumerism) is a symbolically interactive utility.

In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Bourdieu argues that the formation of consumer preference (taste) does not happen within a rational vacuum, but is instead a symbolic form of capital used to create a distinction between social groupings (Allen and Anderson, 1994). Taste enforces a hierarchy of cultural capital that is dominated by the ruling class; the entire idea of consumer taste, therefore, helps reinforce hierarchies (Arsel and Bean 2013, p. 899), which means that the act of consumerism is one in which a form of control is being imposed upon the social groupings who do not have the hegemony of taste; consumption is something that expresses a social position to social actors external to ourselves (Neilson and Paxton 2010, p. 6). Bourdieu developed the idea of *Habitus*, which is the socially ingrained set of actions, ideals, habits, etc of social actors subject to constant change (Allen and Anderson, 1994 p. 71). In Goffmanian terms, the habitus represents the form a performance will take: if the habitus is the totality of one's actions, habits, etc then it must be the case that within the habitus the very nature of the Goffmanian performance can be found. We can see how the habitus' operational form can change from the backstage to the frontstage. In the frontstage the habitus is more formal, well kept and clean, but in the backstage our habits and actions are not something we worry about as much. The performative nature of social interaction constantly influences the nature of habitus, thus we could term this the dramaturgical habitus. In the context of consumption, then, we can see that within the habitus is the normalisation of certain consumer ideals, often that of a Veblenian nature, which then results in a Goffmanian performance, in which people engage in these consumer ideas to demonstrate their social status to others, via the process of impression management. Goffman (2008, p. 75) points out, critically, that social positions are not mere material things but rather a totality of a particular socially defined conduct. Social positions are something that have to be acted out rather than merely had. In Goffmanian-Bourdieuian terms, consumption is the process in which the desire to perform a certain social class eventually leads to the development of a habitus predicated entirely on performing that social class, which therefore results in consumerism becoming a major part of our society, with people trying to one up each other all the time (Heath and Potter 2006, p. 116). This also results in a particular type of taste forming, one that is made up of the collective habitus and social interactions that underpin it.

Banuri and Nguyen (2020) concluded that consumption is being used to signal class positions and that it increases relative to how conspicuous it is, that the use of loans was higher relative to conspicuous consumption and that it was the poorer people who felt compelled to take out a loan in order to signal a higher status to others. This leads us to a depressing realisation: Goffman and Veblen are likely right about the nature of social interaction and consumption. Even at their own expense, people feel compelled to try and perform in the front stage a higher social status than they truly possess through the use of conspicuous consumerism and loan-taking. It is also possible that this loan taking could be an effort to fit into the hierarchies of cultural capital as described by Bourdieu, or in other words an attempt to mimic the habitus of the middle and upper classes.

In conclusion Goffman is profoundly insightful in the analysis of consumerism, and can help us understand the sociology of consumption developed by Veblen, giving us a deeper insight into why conspicuous consumption happens using the dramaturgical framework, illustrating how consumption is an interactive utility. Goffman's framework can also assist us in trying to understand the nature of habitus and symbolic taste hierarchies as detailed by Bourdieu, showing us that the nature of habitus changes relative to the social performance being given, and that its nature is not absolute, but rather it is entirely malleable to the social context that it is concurrently part of. Lastly, we show that empirical evidence suggests the Veblenian-Goffmanian account of consumption is accurate, and that sadly those in lower classes attempt to signal their position on the class ladder as being higher than it really is as part of a social performance.

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