

The Discreet Charm of the Children of the Bourgeoisie
Economic Capital and its Symbolic Expressions at an Elite Business School

Abstract

We address a largely neglected issue in contemporary research on cultural class divisions: economic capital and its associated lifestyles and symbolic expressions. Using qualitative interviews, we explore how adolescents from wealthy elite backgrounds, namely students at Oslo Commerce School (OCS), traditionally one of the most prestigious upper-secondary schools in Norway, demarcate themselves symbolically from others. They draw symbolic boundaries against students at other elite schools in Oslo, more characterized by backgrounds with high cultural capital, accusing them of mimicking a ‘hipster’ style. Within the OCS student body, we describe identity work centring on styles of material consumption and bodily distinctions. The most salient dividing line is between those who manage to master a ‘natural’ style, where expensive clothes and the desired bodily attributes are displayed discreetly, and those who are ‘trying too hard’ and thus marked by the stigma of effort. We also show some interesting intersections between class and gender: girls aspiring to the economic elite obey the ‘rules of the game’ by exercising extensive control over their bodies and adhering to demanding bodily norms for their weight and slimness. Such rules are less evident among the boys, where a lack of discipline, unruliness, hard partying and even fighting constitute parts of the lifestyle valued. This article contributes to the field of cultural stratification, highlighting the importance of the ‘hows’ of material consumption when expressing elite distinction. It also adds new insight to the research field of elite education by showing how a mastery of ‘high-end’ consumer culture is involved in fostering favourable dispositions at elite schools.

Keywords: class, egalitarianism, elite schools, gender, lifestyle, taste, status, symbolic boundaries

Introduction

Contemporary research on social class has taken a distinct ‘cultural turn’ (Crompton and Scott 2005; Devine and Savage 2005). A central question in this field of research is whether and how cultural factors – lifestyles, identities and outlooks – shape and perpetuate social inequalities (Bennett, et al. 2009; Lamont 1992; Reay 2011; Reeves and de Vries 2018; Savage, et al. 2015). Much research has focused on Bourdieu’s notion of how the class structure is mirrored in symbolic expressions of various forms of capital. Although the model of the social space is explicitly defined in terms of the social distribution of both cultural and economic capital, and Bourdieu’s seminal work, *Distinction* (1984), encompasses analyses of symbolic expressions of capitals of both kinds, later assessments of Bourdieu’s model of the class-culture nexus has been predominantly concerned with cultural capital and cultural consumption. There has thus been a paucity of studies focusing on *economic* capital and the symbolic expressions thereof. With the rise in economic inequality (Piketty 2014), there is reason to suspect that the symbolic expressions of wealth play an increasingly important role in contemporary lifestyle differentiation and status hierarchization.

We respond to this by exploring symbolic expressions of economic capital among students at a renowned upper-secondary school in Norway, the Oslo Commerce School (OCS). This school has by far Oslo’s highest proportion of students with class backgrounds from the economic elite (Author). There is strong direct reproduction of the economic elite in Norwegian society, meaning that people with parents from this elite also tend to end up in economic-elite positions themselves (Author). This reproduction is not only secured through children’s educational achievements but also through inheritance and other family transactions (Hansen 2014). There is thus reason to believe that a significant proportion of the students at OCS will

constitute the Norwegian economic elite of tomorrow. This case study thus represents a rare opportunity to map the lifestyle of an economic elite of the future.

OCS is located in a comparatively egalitarian society where egalitarian sentiments are particularly strong (Gullestad 1992: Author). Unlike many other countries, Norwegian elite education usually takes place within the ordinary comprehensive school system and not at expensive private schools. There is only a small private school sector, reflecting the legacy of an education policy based on the model of the ‘unified school’ (Aarseth 2016). Most education, even at university level, is more or less free of charge. Nevertheless, students’ education choices and achievements reflect parental class background (Andersen and Hansen 2012; Strømme and Hansen 2017). Moreover, like in other advanced societies, lifestyles in Norway are stratified according to the class structure: the lifestyles of those lacking cultural and economic capital are clearly different from those of the well-to-do, even among adolescents (Author).

We ask: (i) how are lifestyle differences expressed at OCS and how do these relate to the possession of economic capital; and (ii) how do OCS students demarcate themselves symbolically from others perceived as different from themselves, both within and outside the borders of the school?

Economic capital and its symbolic expressions

In Weber’s (1978) pioneering account of status honour, he saw it as primarily expressed in the realm of consumption, from which different constellations of lifestyles emerged. In his discussions of the ways in which status differences are expressed in everyday life, he emphasized items of material consumption and bodily distinctions: ‘Differences in the styles of beard and hairdo, clothes, food and eating habits, division of labour between the sexes, and all kinds of

visible differences can, in a given case, give rise to repulsion and contempt' (1978: 387). Similarly, in Veblen's (1967) account of 'conspicuous consumption', he emphasized the connection between money and status: the wealthy exhibited a tendency to display economic power in public by spending money and acquiring luxury goods and services.

However, research on the link between economic resources and status displays through material consumption waned with the interest in Bourdieu's (1984) work on cultural capital and its symbolic expressions. Although Bourdieu emphasized economic capital and material consumption to some extent, his contributions lay primarily in his disenchanting view of the subjection of cultural consumption to 'games' of distinction and status hierarchization. In his work on the cultural field, he famously depicted its internal logic of the distribution of recognition as 'the economic world reversed' (Bourdieu 1983), meaning that negations of economic capital and its symbolic expressions functioned as markers of distinction (e.g. material asceticism and 'pure' aesthetics). As argued by Coulangeon, et al. (2015: 119), Bourdieu's primary interest in cultural consumption was guided by a belief that due to economic expansion and decreasing inequalities in post-war France, status differentiation had moved from the realm of material goods to the realm of symbolic ones. However, in the contemporary phase of rapidly rising economic inequalities, it is remarkable that research on lifestyles and their role in stratification processes still focuses almost exclusively on *cultural* consumption.

There are, however, exceptions. Comparing levels of engagement in both cultural and material consumption in The Netherlands, Van Eijck and Van Oosterhout (2005) have found that those who like legitimate cultural goods have also become more likely over time to display high levels of material consumption; however, those richest in material resources have become less likely to be seriously involved in legitimate culture. Prieur, et al. (2008) have recorded marked lifestyle differences along the capital-composition dimension of the social space in Denmark:

those possessing large amounts of economic capital are distinct in their preferences for material consumption, particularly designer furniture and luxurious home furnishings. Using a similar approach based on Serbian data, Cvetičanin and Popescu (2011) have found a similar orientation in the regions of social space of those richest in economic capital: they are distinctive in their expensive tastes (e.g., holidays abroad and luxurious home furnishings and gadgets) and also exhibit a physically active lifestyle. In the case of Norway, Author has also found a distinct, expensive and ‘sporty’ lifestyle among upper-class fractions possessing large amounts of economic capital. Coulangeon, et al. (2015) have also elucidated how tastes in cars are unequally distributed in social space: those rich in economic capital are marked by an interest in attributes such as exclusivity, foreign makes and powerful motors. Focusing on the body, Vandebroek (2017) has shown that the ideal body mass and the bodily ideals of those rich in economic capital are distinct from those rich in cultural capital and those with low volumes of both types. Mears (2015) has documented how men appropriate the attractiveness and physical attributes of female companions at parties, nightclubs and in other social settings as a symbolic resource to generate profit, status and social ties in an exclusive world of businessmen. In our analysis, we follow these scholars by focusing explicitly on economic capital and its symbolic expressions, particularly the way in which an embodied symbolic mastery of ‘high-end’ consumer culture is fostered among a group of economically privileged young people.

Our study thus sheds light on a paucity in much research on elites and elite education: the way in which such symbolic mastery is embodied through interaction with elite peers and by attending elite schools in formative years. Although this is an assumed link in much contemporary Bourdieusian sociology – that is, the process through which class inequalities are reproduced through the formation of a certain type of habitus that facilitates the perpetuation of privileges and elite positions – the specifics of this process are rarely demonstrated empirically.

As most accounts have been geared towards exploring manifestations of cultural capital, very few accounts have mapped how mastering of ‘high-end’ consumer culture is involved in cultivating a particular type of economic elite habitus.

A notable exception here is Khan’s (2011) study of symbolic expressions of privilege at an elite boarding school in the United States, including investigations of aesthetical, material and bodily dimensions. Largely corroborating Bourdieu’s (1984; 1996) theory of elite distinction, Khan finds that a key characteristic of successful displays of social superiority is an apparent ‘ease and naturalness’ linked to both curricular and extracurricular activities. Crucially, this style not only signals social superiority but also masks social differences through a process of naturalizing, and thereby misrecognizing, socially constituted distinctions.

In our study, we follow Khan in investigating whether and how Bourdieu’s notion of elite distinction applies to a context far removed from its empirical origin. We do however focus less on the ways in which students adapt to and negotiate formal and informal rules dictated by the school institution. As opposed to countries such as the US, France and the UK, there are very few boarding schools in Norway, and those that exist are not elite schools. Moreover, at schools within the ordinary comprehensive school system, there are no formal rules linked to bodily and sartorial appearance. There are however reasons to suspect that there are norms and status hierarchies working more informally at schools. We thus focus on the ways in which students at OCS produce and reproduce symbolic boundaries among themselves, in particular with regards to sartorial and bodily distinctions.

Data and method

We use qualitative interview data from the research project ‘Adolescent Elites’, a larger study of elite schools and youth cultures in Oslo. OCS is a state-funded, business-oriented school that provides three years of schooling at upper-secondary level (students aged 15-19 years). The school charges no tuition fees. Admittance to the school is formally based entirely on grades. In accordance with Gaztambide-Fernandez’s (2009: 1100-1111) definition of elite schools, OCS meets key criteria. Historically, it was established as a response to the urgent need for a national mercantile education in the late nineteenth century (Hestmann 2000: 20-43). Scholastically, the school has been recognized for decades for its high-level courses in economics, business administration, law, foreign languages and mathematics. However, somewhat surprisingly, the grade requirements for access to OCS started to drop a decade ago: in 2005, the school still ranked as number two in Oslo; by 2016, it had dropped to an average level (OCE 2016). In socioeconomic demographics, however, the student body remains highly exclusive: the school has Oslo’s highest proportion of students with class backgrounds from the economic elite and the second-lowest proportion of students with working-class backgrounds (Author). Geographically, it is situated in the West End of Oslo, a part of city that has the highest levels of income and living standards (Toft and Ljunggren 2016).

Data collection took place as follows. First, a group of OCS students were recruited as a focus group. They then recruited fellow students at the school from different areas of residence and varying degrees of centrality in social networks. We conducted 34 semi-structured interviews with students (aged 18-19 years, 18 girls and 16 boys). Classified by their parents’ occupations, all the interviewees are located in the upper regions of the class structure as depicted in the XXX class scheme (Author) (see Appendix). This class scheme also differentiates horizontally between

class fractions in whether their capital portfolio is characterized by a preponderance of either economic or cultural capital. A majority of the interviewees come from families particularly rich in economic capital (for further details, see Appendix), thus reflecting the homogenous class characteristics of the student body as a whole (Author). A majority of the interviewees were from the prosperous parts of West Oslo, but we also included a number of interviewees from East Oslo, a part of the city where levels of income, education and life chances are lower (Author). All names used in the analysis are pseudonyms.

We used a semi-structured interview guide covering several themes: material consumption in lifestyle, style of clothing, the body and physical activities and vacations and holidays; extracurricular activities at school; thoughts about social networks and hierarchies at school; thoughts about the social milieux and styles at other schools in Oslo. The interviews lasted 90-150 minutes. They were then audio-recorded, transcribed and coded using HyperResearch. All interviews took place at the school.

In our analysis, we emphasize the interviewees' modes of consumption (Bourdieu 1984) by mapping their categorization and evaluation of styles, cultural consumption and different youth groups at the school and in different parts of the city. We focus on *what* (e.g. particular brands or consumer items) the students report liking or disliking, as well as *how* these items and brands are appreciated and appropriated as part of the OCS lifestyle. We also detail what Lamont (1992) has dubbed symbolic boundary work – the ways in which people demarcate 'us' from 'them' in discursively evaluating, classifying and judging others' way of life. We analyse the interviewee's expressions of symbolic boundaries, as well as how they report everyday-life experiences of being judged and frowned upon by others, as indicative of status hierarchies, both internally at the school and externally (vis-à-vis other schools in Oslo). We thus follow Lamont in seeing the mapping of symbolic boundaries through qualitative interviews as a way of

empirically assessing whether and how lifestyle differences are linked to the formation of real or imagined symbolic communities.

Findings

Boundaries against students at schools rich in cultural capital

Norwegian students do not wear school uniforms. This may suggest that schools are suitable arenas for exhibiting differences in clothing vis-à-vis other students. However, what struck us most upon entering the OCS schoolyard was quite the opposite: how *similar* everybody looked; their hairstyles, jackets, trousers, shoes and bags looked essentially the same, even down to the colours and brands. The girls' purses and make-up were also strikingly similar. Interestingly, this stylistic conformity was also emphasized by the interviewees. As Malin told us:

A lot of times I catch myself just sitting there gaping because... [...] You know, they sit there in line, all looking the same. [...] No one does anything different here. Everybody is just the same.

In a similar account, Helene exemplified this stylistic unity by mentioning the expensive purses popular at the school, in particular the brands Louis Vuitton and Mulberry, estimating that '80 per cent of the girls have them'. Although joked about repeatedly, the perceived conformity of sartorial style was, however, not seen as problematic by the interviewees. On the contrary, the stylistic conformity was positively framed, a badge of distinction that separated them from others who were 'trying too hard to stand out from the crowd'.

'Fitting in' by conforming to the dominant style was thus a desired goal and regarded as a sign of success and social superiority. Any attempts at stylistic dissent were seen as the reverse,

as signs of failure and inferiority. The stylistic heterogeneity of students at other schools was viewed with suspicion, as epitomized in this quote from our interview with Linnea:

It's become so incredibly negative that people look the same. I don't have a problem with being like others. I mean, I don't have to wear an incredibly special shirt because I'm doing just fine in this grey sweater. [...] As long as you're an authentic person on the inside, I don't care whether you wear dungarees. [...] At other schools... [...] where people are hipsters, things have gone so far that they end up caring even more [about how they look]. [...] They are so incredibly concerned with being different and stuff like that.

The interviewees drew strong symbolic boundaries against other prestigious upper-secondary schools, particularly those where a 'hipster style' was perceived as prevalent, such as at *Schola Osloensis*, Foss and Hartvig Nissen – the last of these is portrayed in the Norwegian television series, *Skam*, now remade in the US and several European countries.

This resonates with research highlighting the typical mockery of the hipster as a stereotypically trend-conscious person, familiar with current trends and rather conspicuously trying to stay ahead of the next ones (Le Grand 2018; Michael 2015). The lack of identification with the hipster may imply a claim of *genuine* authenticity, a quality that the hipster is seen as lacking. Our interviewees attacked the visual expressions of the hipster style, as well as the perceived attitude that accompanies it. As Anne told us:

Honestly, people like us, going to [schools like this one], we look down on them a bit. They are a bit more alternative. Those people in the *Skam* series, I see them as very alternative. I see them as

a bit weird. [...] A bunch of people wearing Fjällräven backpacks, old Levi's jeans in naff, weird sizes and, you know, playing the piano. [...] I find them very weird.

In demarcating themselves clearly from such efforts to 'stand out', the interviewees described their own style using terms like 'neutral', 'natural', 'classic', 'clean', 'simple' and, perhaps somewhat humorously, 'grown-up' and 'boring'. Set against their self-perceived stylistic 'neutrality', the perceived 'weirdness' of and 'attempts at dissent' by other groups constitute a major symbolic boundary demarcating the OCS students from those they view as inferior at other upper-secondary schools in Oslo. In particular, overt *efforts* to appear distinctive and special are understood as the ultimate sign of the undistinguished.

Internal boundaries against those who 'try too hard'

Crucially, however, the stylistic unity within the student body does not imply the absence of internal stylistic hierarchies or the absence of intragroup symbolic boundaries. On the contrary, deviance from the school dress-code was harshly sanctioned, especially among female students. Dina painted, quite critically, a picture of the stereotypical girl at the school:

You look like you're walking on a catwalk, every day. [...] Only expensive clothes. [...] And you should always look well-groomed. [...] You shouldn't look like you actually go to school, are struggling and feeling like shit because you're being assessed twice today.

A select range of expensive consumer goods was emphasized as 'in vogue': Woolrich jackets, Made in Heaven trousers and Louis Vuitton, Prada and Celine handbags. For instance, the price

of a particular Louis Vuitton handbag popular at the school was reckoned by Helene to cost between 15,000 and 20,000 kroner (about £1400–1900).

Although the interview data indicate markedly more relaxed norms of dress among male students, several interviewees also referred to the stereotypical OCS boy. However, conscious of the disdain of and stereotyping by outsiders, some male interviewees emphasized that the distinctive sartorial style at the school was beginning to ‘fade out’, gradually moving towards a more ‘casual’ appearance. Espen problematized what he saw as the hackneyed stereotype of the ‘daddy’s boy’ that no longer described contemporary OCS students:

Of course, you’ll find some of them here, but I don’t know. In fact, it’s like... If you wear a Polo shirt at school, it’s a bit embarrassing. Now you’re supposed to be a bit more relaxed. It might just be that it’s the latest trend, but I don’t know.

Although a more relaxed dress code may be replacing the old stereotype of the ‘daddy’s boy’, subtle norms still influenced clothing choices and the shops preferred. As with the girls, the cost of the consumer items seemed to be an important measure of their distinctiveness. Although Klaus wore what he termed ‘casual’ clothes for the interview (baggy track-pants and basketball shoes), he reported a rather expensive taste for jackets. He had ‘a nice collection of jackets and blazers, different jackets for different occasions’. He also told us that he usually bought his jackets at Ferner Jacobsen, Gunnar Øye and Follestad, the most expensive men’s stores in Oslo. He was usually accompanied by his grandmother who paid for him.

Although most of the student body hails from wealthy backgrounds, several students, particularly many of those from the eastern part of Oslo, had grown up in homes with considerably fewer economic resources. For some, this was quite a disadvantage in conforming to

the OCS style. Just as importantly, however, they did not seem to have a ‘feel for the game’ – the practical sense of understanding not only *what* to buy, but crucially, *when* to buy it, thus avoiding becoming a ‘Johnny-come-lately’ to the group of people possessing goods in vogue at the school.

Malin, from the East End of Oslo, told us that the first couple of months at OCS involved a fear of failing to conform to the dress code: ‘Here, you judge by looks, the shoes you wear, the jacket you wear. [...] And if you don’t have that jacket, you don’t get to show how you are on the inside.’ Luckily for Malin, however, she had a particular jacket that functioned as a door-opener to a clique of ‘cool’ people at the school:

I had just got this cool, new jacket. And then I got to say ‘Hey, my name is such and such...’ and they realized ‘Wow, she’s fucking cool!’ And that’s how I got to join the others. But many others haven’t had that opportunity. [...] And if you didn’t get to do that in the first year, it’s like... you’ve blown it for the two next years.

Others reported more stressful experiences linked to a perceived ‘buying pressure’ at the school. Helene, for instance, told us that she regretted attending OCS because of the harsh sanctioning of deviance from the norm of acquiring expensive goods: ‘If you suddenly come in wearing something completely different... You know, a punk rocker would be looked down on. You would be dead socially. No friends.’

There are also examples of explicit judgements made by the interviewees. For instance, when asked about people *not* in command of current trends at school, Laura expressed disdain for ‘tacky’ types of students at school who were ‘trying too hard’ by showing off particular brands too conspicuously:

It's not supposed to be that visible. [...] It's that way with Michael Kors. The logo is so distinctive and it's very visible. [...] It's showing off a bit. [...] And if that's all you're wearing, all these clothes that are so visible... It gets tacky very quickly. [...] However, if you spend a lot of money on stuff that's not too visible, it's accepted. [...] I mean, you have to pay attention.

Again, *not* making efforts to 'stand out' is emphasized. Implicitly, the opposite – an ease in appearing natural and effortless in social hierarchies and their symbolic expression – seems to be considered the true hallmark of social superiority. The key to appearing distinctive, it seems, is to exhibit signs of distinction without betraying any attempt to do so.

Moreover, it seems that one cannot ascend the *social* hierarchy simply by acquiring goods currently atop the *symbolic* hierarchy of goods and other visual signs of social superiority. Elite distinction is not just about *what* one exhibits (i.e. particular consumer goods) but also about *how* one appropriates them. Merely exhibiting expensive items is not enough to fit in at OCS; this can even lead to disdain, for instance if brands are flaunted too conspicuously.

Another social faux pas seems to be wearing brands that have reached critical mass outside the circle of 'cool' students. Certain items are repeatedly mentioned as signs of the undistinguished, such as Michael Kors handbags, Uggs boots and Canada Goose jackets. Although once popular at OCS and fairly expensive, these brands seem to have lost their sign value and are depicted by the interviewees as 'wannabe upper-crust'. These signs seem to signify efforts of wanting – and thus failing – to belong to the in-groups. Discussing Michael Kors handbags, Olivia told us:

That's completely out of the question at OCS. This friend of mine from Stovner [a working-class district in Oslo's East End] had a Michael Kors handbag when she first started here, and she got lots of stares and bitching. It's regarded as East-End style, kind of ghetto style.

Since the social prestige associated with consumer goods inevitably fluctuates, the game of distinction at the school requires an embodied skill to follow carefully subtle yet crucial developments in the school style. Not following these developments – manifested for instance in buying expensive but outmoded items – can lead to ridicule and mockery.

There are, however, some examples of deviance from the school norms that nuance the general picture of stylistic conformity. One particular student – a boy known for wearing a thermal boiler-suit throughout the winter – was discussed enthusiastically by several interviewees. According to them, he was poking fun at the typical 'West-End style' prevalent at the school by wearing a type of clothing they associated with farmers or kindergarten teachers. Crucially, however, this type of strategy of stylistic deviance seems to be reserved for those already at the top of the prestige hierarchy at the school. As Johanna, a classmate of the boy, told us:

I think people find him a bit weird. But they don't really mind because he's accepted anyway. [...]

I guess if you were already a bit unpopular, you'd never do that. People would look down on you for doing that. [...] There are different rules for what's accepted.

The question of *who* you are thus seems to be crucial in the sartorial game of distinction at the school: deviating from the norms requires nous, or a practical sense, linked to knowing whether you are in a legitimate position to do so.

The question of who is also crucial in that some goods are restricted to certain ‘cool’ and well-off subgroups within the school, making their consumption a risky business for outsiders. Several interviewees smirked at a particular clique from the wealthy residential area of Holmenkollen. The names of two secondary schools in the area begin with the letters M and R and the students from this area are often referred to as the ‘MR group’. A French rosé wine called Montrose – selling at £50 a bottle and playing on the letters M and R – is popular among students from this area. As Olivia told us: ‘It’s kind of stupid if you drink Montrose if you’re not MR. That’s their wine, kind of. If you still drink that wine, you’re kind of trying too hard.’

Sometimes such rules were described with a degree of ironic distance or humour. Nonetheless, students from other less prestigious residential areas had to understand the hidden rules of the school, which urged them to find their place in the pecking order to avoid being seen as a ‘wannabe’ or ‘a social climber’. Indeed, Silje harshly and succinctly expressed disdain for what she deemed strategies for status mobility at the school:

I’ve never liked social climbers. It’s not cool when people are trying so insanely hard to be friends with someone who is obviously not interested. Then I just say, like: ‘Sorry, it’s over, we’re finished’.

Bodily distinctions

Students at OCS take part in sports, usually football, tennis, golf, cross-country skiing, snowboarding, alpine skiing, bandy and gyms. Anne, for instance, was planning to take a degree in business administration but first she wanted to take a gap-year to go skiing in the Alps: ‘My family is very interested in alpine skiing, and we usually go there [...] for the holidays.’ Another student, Gustav, had been a member of the athletic club Heming, located in Holmenkollen, the

richest area in Oslo. He told us what was needed to become a really good snowboarder: ‘You have to go to training camps all year, the Alps, glaciers... [...] We went all around Europe... Saas-Fee, Hintertux, Austria, France, Italy [...] all year round.’ Such activities are, of course, reserved for those with considerable economic resources.

Being good at sport is also considered an important part of succeeding at the school. Several interviewees told us that their school was more demanding than others in terms of getting good grades in gym classes. Qualities like physical strength and endurance were also emphasized in their future educational careers. Several boys intended to train for the military,¹ such as the paratrooper corps, which has tough, physical criteria for admission. Esben told us that he was aiming to join the Second Battalion: ‘I’ve been training pretty effectively, strength, running. They will test max chest and leg strength.’

Although both male and female students emphasized the body in our conversations, the latter reported greater pressure to conform to the bodily ideals of the school. Johanna described the stereotypical body of the OCS girl: ‘[We] work out a lot. [...] You’re [supposed to be] natural and thin; typically medium-long, blonde hair, tanned all the time, all year around.’ Not conforming to these bodily ideals can come at a great social price and one’s bodily appearance seems to be decisive in allowing access to the most prestigious groups. Malin had accessed just such a group but was told by one of its leaders not to bring two of her classmates because of their bodily appearance: ‘She [a female friend] said “Don’t bring them along [...] because they’re not pretty enough.” [...] You know, they’re a bit on the bigger side. Not big but, you know, a bit bigger.’ Malin herself was satisfied with her current body shape but this had not always been the case:

Honestly, when I first started here, I thought I was the second-largest girl at school. Because everyone was so slim. [...] Everybody was a 25 [inch in trousers]. And I was like a 29 or 30. And I felt really big. [...] But then I started working out and eating healthily. [...] And I'm very glad I did. [...] But I felt it strongly... You know, at school, because everybody was so slim.

Although accounts of the students' physical activities primarily emphasize the 'fun' and social side, they are often accompanied by accounts of the 'dark side' involving demanding eating and work-out regimes for the girls. Hanna was doing jazz ballet, saying 'because I love to dance' as her motivation; but she admitted that other motivations lay behind it too:

It's this pressure, or not the physical pressure, but you are aware that everybody wants to be thin. Everybody has a certain image of what looks good. So you work out because you want to look like the pretty, attractive ones, kind of.

Resonating with the earlier point about the importance of demonstrating ease while not making overt efforts to appear distinctive, clearly visible forms of bodily modification were ruled out. Several interviewees denied that 'drastic' modifications, like plastic surgery and Botox injections, were common at the school, highlighting the ideal of the 'natural' body. However, more 'discreet' modifications, like teeth-whitening, hair-colouring and moderate tanning were reported as more widespread.

As some of the most highly esteemed bodily status signals can be acquired relatively easily by most of the students, the means of their acquisition were emphasized by the interviewees. For instance, maintaining the 'right' kind of tan throughout the year can be a challenge, considering the climate in Oslo as well as the pale skin of many Norwegians. Some

kind of ‘investment’ is thus required. A few female interviewees reported frequenting tanning salons. Others, opting for a more ‘natural’ (and expensive) way of tanning, often went to family cabins in sunny parts of Norway or warmer climes abroad. Several students had family holiday homes in Southern France and Italy. Helene described her family typically going to their grandparents’ residence in France in the summer:

I have several friends living in France. [The family of] one of them has a chateau [laughs]. Our family are friends with her family and she invites us down for a week or so. Or I invite good friends [to our place].

Such holidays often result in a glowing tan. Another option is to ‘fake it’ by going to tanning salons. Although the differences between the white students’ tanned skin tones may not be visible, the different ways to obtain that skin tone can offer tremendously varying degrees of symbolic value: going to the Alps or the family cabin in the Norwegian mountains signalizes a ‘natural’, highly valued mode of acquisition, whereas spray tanning is a mode of acquisition marked by the stigma of low status, commercialism or effort.

Although conforming to peer pressure in bodily distinction were less pronounced among male interviewees, some glimpses appeared in conversations, such as the shape of one’s muscles and other visible signs of a ‘well-trained body’. The ideal seems to be quite muscular while not ‘overdoing it’ by ‘looking like a bodybuilder’. Like the female interviewees, modifying the body in ‘unnatural’ ways, e.g. by taking anabolic steroids and ending up ‘looking like a body builder’, is shunned. Emil told us that he often went to a gym and wanted to ‘build not a large body, but building strength [...], to get a nice body. That’s the important thing.’

There are also several indications of a symbolic market for ‘fit’ male bodies at the school, resulting in deference to those matching the ideal. Nikolai told us that he was getting positive attention from other boys at school because of his body and knowledge about training: ‘It’s like this thing. People are talking to me and looking me up, you know, to get help with their training or get some advice.’ Interviews with female students suggest that a ‘muscular’ body shape is also recognized as an asset in receiving sexual and/or romantic attention. Silje said that ‘fitness junkies’ were ‘highly annoying’ but she reported liking boys that are ‘broad-shouldered’ and ‘muscular’, citing the example of a particular boy she esteemed highly:

He’s not like steroid-big, not fat but, you know, very broad shouldered. His physique is just very big. And I find that very enjoyable because when I get a hug, it’s almost like I vanish into him. [...]. I like that, when they’re broad shouldered, and they sort of have muscles, but not like ripped. [...]. As long as they are sort of big [...] and not these tiny, skinny guys. Because that’s... Well...

Silje’s account not only highlights the stigma of trying too hard to maintain a respectable bodily appearance (‘annoying fitness junkies’) but also the stigma of not trying enough (‘tiny, skinny guys’). Displaying ease and naturalness in markers of distinction should thus not be confused with a *genuine* lack of interest in the game of bodily distinction.

Whereas ‘naturalness’ and ‘control’ are key aspects of the feminine roles at OCS, we found indications of more unruly modes of conduct among the boys. Resonating well with previous studies showing that youth from upper-class backgrounds and residential areas have the highest alcohol consumption in Norway (Author), several male interviewees reported rather excessive drinking. Some of them even reported taking part in punch-ups when partying. Brage had witnessed a fight the day before the interview:

I was like standing with these boys [friends from OCS] and then they say, like: ‘There he is. Let’s go fuck with him’. They were going to thrash him. And I go: ‘Seriously, you’re 20 people. Are you going 20 on one? That’s completely douche.’

Although a majority of the interviewees expressed scepticism of such fighting, male students regarded as atop the status hierarchy at the school were referred to as ‘fighters’. As Dina, who reported having several friends who fought regularly, told us, fighting is a way to ‘build a cool image’ at school. Thus, in terms of gender roles at OCS, it seems the boys are not only allowed to be rowdier and unrulier but some are even highly esteemed for displaying such traits.

Concluding discussion

The enforcement of social hierarchies and symbolic boundaries at OCS divides those who are in command of the OCS style from those who are not. The most salient dividing line runs between those who effortlessly and ‘naturally’ display a command of this style and those who are seen as ‘trying too hard’ and thus marked by the stigma of effort. This resonates well with the notion that elite distinction is primarily expressed through a mode of conduct characterized by ‘ease and naturalness’ (Bourdieu 1984: 65-74; 1996: 19-23; see also Khan 2011). The fact that Bourdieu’s theory of elite distinction applies in a context far removed from its empirical origin also corroborates the point that although there can be quite large contextual differences between empirical cases, for instance in terms of national particularities, the theory is applicable far beyond Bourdieu’s ‘particular case of the possible’ – France in the 1970s (Bourdieu 1991: 638).

An important point here is that the display of distinction concerns not only *what* is displayed (e.g. particular garments or brands) but also *who* is displaying them and, crucially, *how*

one displays them. As we have seen, there are informal norms linked to discreet displays of consumer brands, when to acquire or dispose of them, as well as whether one is in fact in a position to deviate from the group norms. The ‘effortless’ mastery of these norms not only requires the economic means to maintain an expensive lifestyle but also the embodiment of a practical sense, i.e. a habitus finely attuned to the school rules of the game of distinction (Bourdieu 1984). To convert one’s economic capital into effective symbols of status and prestige, this game of distinction clearly requires nous as well.

Our results testify to the importance of the *hows* of symbolic expressions of economic capital, a crucial aspect of lifestyle differentiation and symbolic hierarchization that has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. As our analysis has shown, displaying the ‘right’ goods and brands in the ‘wrong’ way can lead to rather harsh status judgments. In this regard, we also highlight Bourdieu’s (1983) notion of field. The school can be seen as one of the stomping grounds of the economic field, preparing students for the world of business and commerce. Here, unlike in the cultural field, material asceticism does not seem to be a virtue; on the contrary, displaying symbols requiring considerable economic resources is one of the defining features of the game of distinction at the school. Unfortunately, many studies of lifestyles are skewed towards items typically recognized within the cultural field, while those typically recognized within the economic field are poorly represented. Thus, we would urge future researchers mapping cultural stratification to include questions tapping into symbolic expressions of economic capital too.

In our previous study of a highly prestigious upper-secondary school with students hailing mostly from homes rich in cultural capital, Schola Osloensis, we found a diametrical opposite pattern: these students explicitly rejected symbolic expressions of economic capital, deeming such styles ‘too commercial’ and ‘conformist’. Instead, they embraced a ‘nerdy’ position as

compatible with a materially ascetic quest for knowledge and insight (Author).² In other words, OCS and Schola Osloensis – two of Oslo’s most reknowned upper-secondary schools – seem to differ significantly not only terms of formally preparing their students for promising prospects in two very different social fields (the economic field and the cultural field, respectively), but also informally, in and through the socialization into two very different symbolic spheres. What is seen as a ‘natural’ and ‘authentic’ style is clearly defined differently at the two schools. Our findings thus support the notion that there are qualitatively different cultural logics linked to symbolic expressions of distinction within these fields.

Our analysis also points to interesting intersections between class and gender. Although the typical OCS style is highly classed in that it requires considerable resources, it takes different forms among male and female students. Most notably, female students reported more pressure to conform to the sartorial and bodily norms at the school. This chimes well with Collins’ (1992) point that women are more prone to performing ‘Goffmanian labour’ in front-stage performances of status displays. A similar point has been made in later work on cultural consumption, showing that women are more culturally engaged and less likely to reject legitimate culture than men (Christin 2012; Lizardo 2006). Our findings suggest that Collins’ point can be extended to the realms of both material consumption and bodily distinctions. They also suggest that experiences of peer pressure and status anxiety are highly gendered, echoing Skeggs (1997) study of how working-class women seek to disidentify themselves with derogatory class labels emanating from above, emphasizing instead a claim of respectability. Peer pressure and status anxiety are not, of course, exclusive to women in the *lower* echelons of the social space; arguably, women in the *upper* echelons may be even more prone to embodying – quite literally – the pressure to conform to the legitimate ideals of looks and physical beauty. Indeed, as shown by Vandebroek (2017), BMI decreases, while the prevalence of eating disorders increases, as one moves upwards in the

class structure, a pattern that is stronger among women than among men. Thus, it seems as though elite women are caught in a kind of double-bind between tension and control on the one hand, and, on the other, relaxation and ease. To appear distinctive, they must obey the rules of the game by exercising strict control over their bodies in displaying ‘slimness’ and other valorized physical characteristics. At the same time, however, there are the seemingly conflicting ideals of ease and naturalness and of not displaying efforts to appear distinguished – as we have seen, this is considered the hallmark of the undistinguished. Small wonder, then, that female interviewees in particular reported some ambivalence about attending this highly prestigious school.

These points also resonate with Khan’s (2011) study of bodily performances of privilege among adolescent elites in the US. However, as opposed to the private boarding school in Khan’s study, there are no formal dress codes dictated by the staff at OCS. In Khan’s study, the girls often used sexualized behaviour to subvert authority, for instance by bending the school rule about not showing too much skin at formal dinners (Khan 2011: 121-125). In this regard, he points to a contradiction linked to dressing norms at the school: one is supposed to wear formal clothing with ease, clothing that for women is often quite revealing; at the same time, however, one is made to feel that there is something inappropriate about wearing such clothing. In this sense, the school itself contributes to reinforce the gendered double-bind discussed above. This is not the case at OCS, since there are no formal rules regarding clothing and physical appearance at the school (although, as we have seen, such contradictions are at work informally among the students, in and through judgements and boundary drawing). However, despite such differences linked to the institutional context, the ideal of ease and naturalness, as well as the contradictory process of exercising strict control over one’s body to exhibit a distinguished physical appearance, is remarkably similar in both cases.

An additional contribution here is methodological in using qualitative interviews to map different modes of consumption. Our method of teasing out what Lamont (1992) has termed symbolic boundaries – the ways in which people discursively evaluate, classify and judge others’ way of life – has resulted in data that render possible assessments of the social consequences of how goods and objects are appropriated as part of a wider lifestyle. Such differences are far from trivial: the interviewees judge people seen as ‘doing it the wrong way’, suggesting formations of real or imagined communities of ‘people like us’ who are endowed with sufficient symbolic competence. Our analysis thus goes beyond the mere mapping of differences in the ‘hows’ of consumption (see e.g. Daenekindt and Roose 2014; Hanquinet, et al. 2014; Author) to investigate whether and how such differences are consequential in being recognized and effective as markers of distinction. In particular, our technique of probing personal experiences with others’ boundary drawing (e.g., feelings of being judged and frowned upon by others) seems fruitful in this regard. This may also be a promising methodical avenue to avoid the what Jerolmack and Khan (2014) has dubbed an ‘attitudinal fallacy’: the tendency to believe that interview data directly reflect how interviewees *actually* feel and act in real-life social encounters outside of the interview setting, instead of acknowledging that such data often reflect interviewees’ normative stances and how feel they *ought to* feel and act. Although using interviews to tease out people’s own boundary drawing may be particularly challenging because of the problem self-presentation (see the discussion in Author), using interviews to map boundary drawing indirectly, by probing how boundaries are experienced from the other end of the relationship, is arguably considerably less prone to such problems.

Our analysis also highlights the significance of mapping what we may call short-distance boundary drawing, discursive demarcations against people in close proximity in social and symbolic space. As most cultural-stratification research has been geared towards interclass

lifestyle differentiation, more knowledge is needed to understand how intraclass symbolic struggles unfold within elite circles. This, we believe, is crucial in order to understand the (re)production of social and symbolic hierarchies at elite schools, where both class background and lifestyles are typically rather homogenous. As pointed out by Bourdieu (1984: 479), ‘Social identity lies in difference, and difference is asserted against what is closest, which represents the greatest threat’.

Our final point is more tentative and pertains to how the processes mapped out here may play out in these students’ future prospects. As a commerce school, OCS prepares students for future careers in the field of business and commerce. The students acquire formal skills and know-how through their curricular activities. Additionally, we would argue, the school functions as a training ground for informal social skills enabling them to acquire invisible ‘tricks of the trade’ in symbolic mastery, symbolic communication, understanding informal hierarchies, gaining access to desired networks, knowing one’s place once inside these networks, as well as obtaining a sense of whether one is in the position to break with the internal group norms and, if so, when and how to do so. These skills are crucial in accessing elite jobs and prospering once on the inside. As elucidated by Rivera (2012) in the US, certain cultural styles are valued by elite professional service firms during hiring, resulting in a process of cultural matching that favours jobseekers whose lifestyles and modes of self-presentation match those of the employers. In focusing particularly on the significance of bodily distinctions in the Norwegian upper class, Author has shown how men in key business positions see body shapes as indicative of job performance and work ethics. Kay and Laberge (2002) have even argued that we are witnessing the rise of a ‘new corporate habitus’, increasingly oriented towards physically demanding sports, as qualities like strength and endurance are thought to be transferable to the workplace. Thus, mastering the typical OCS lifestyle might not only foster distinction among one’s peers at school,

but the literal embodiment of distinction may also benefit these students' future careers. Although we cannot, of course, ascertain whether these invisible 'tricks of the trade' are also acquired at other, less prestigious schools, it is plausible that a closer proximity to the economic elite – and thereby a first-hand experience of how relevant symbolic hierarchies are practiced and enforced in everyday life – facilitates the embodiment of a 'feel for the game' necessary to thrive in such social milieux.

Appendix

To situate these students in the local class structure, we used the XXX class scheme (Author; see Figure A1). This class scheme is inspired by Bourdieu's (1984) model of the social space and distinguishes classes and class fractions along two dimensions. It has an initial, hierarchical dimension of the total amount of capital and differentiates between four main classes: the upper, the upper middle, the lower middle and the working class. A second dimension of capital composition crosscuts these classes: the three highest classes are divided into cultural and economic fractions, as well as balanced fractions, conceptualized as possessing roughly similar amounts of economic and cultural capital. XXX is principally based on occupational classification.

[Figure A1: The XXX class scheme – about here]

We recorded details about the parents' occupations, as well as about what they do at work, enabling us to categorize the interviewees according to the ORDC class scheme. We coded this information into ISCO codes and sorted both parents into their designated class category,

providing individual classifications of the father and mother. To arrive at class of origin, we opted for a ‘dominance approach’, using parents’ highest class position, in terms of volume of capital. If both parents were on the same hierarchical level, we prioritized economic capital – the class position furthest to the right in the scheme – as the highest or ‘dominant’ position, since this is clearly a school in which economic capital is the most highly valued form of capital.

Table A1 depicts the class background of the whole sample, in terms of the number of parents in each category. There is a column for both fathers and mothers, as well as the dominant class position. As can be seen from the column for dominant class position, all students who reported their parents’ occupation are located in the upper and upper-middle classes. Within this segment of the sample, there is a clear overweight of interviewees with parents from the class fractions richest in economic capital (41.9 per cent), compared to those with parents from the class fractions richest in cultural capital (3.2 per cent). Thus, the sample reflects the sociodemographic characteristics of the overall student body at OCS: high volumes of capital, primarily of the economic kind (Andersen, et al. 2017).

[Table A1: Class background – about here]

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¹ It is formally mandatory to serve in the military for all Norwegians. However, in practice, the military does not need more than around 10 per cent of the cohorts, and the competition for being admitted can be hard. At OCS certain units, such as the paratroopers, with demanding admission criteria, were popular among male and female students alike.

² For a similar account of a Swedish elite school, see Törnqvist (2018).