



# THE CORRELATION OF CONSUMPTION-SYMBOL AND IDENTITY-CONSTRUCTION: CULTURAL-CAPITAL HINDERING THE IDENTITY-TRANSFORMATION THROUGH THE CONSUMPTION-SYMBOL OF SHANZHAI MOBILE PHONE

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## **Abstract**

*The author of this text argues that, over-pursuing consumption-symbol and neglecting the role of cultural-capital is a biased study on the theoretical framework of the correlation among consumption-symbol, cultural-capital and identity-construction. Based upon the Field-Theory (Bourdieu, 1984) on consuming behavior and the theory of 'Consumption-Symbol' (Baudrillard, 1998) on consumers' identity-construction, this study adopts the method of questionnaire-based interview to collect data. Interview samples were randomly selected, 500 rural migrant workers in Beijing, and 500 Beijing native youth, and both groups were at the same age. Three hypotheses were established, examined and confirmed. The results supported the correlation of three variables, leading to the conclusion that, without factoring the consumers' cultural-capital, the relationship between consumption-symbol and identity-construction (or transformation) is too subjective to reflect fact. Another conclusion is that, by purchasing the cheaply-priced Shanzhai mobile phone, migrant workers tried to show off their equal consumption of mobile phone, and to prove their equal identity as urbanities, however, their cultural-capital hindered their psychological desire of identity-transformation from peasants to urbanities. Sampling weakness is pointed out. Complex statistics is omitted, because the data collected itself is sufficient to answer*

*the research question of this study (Table 1 and Table 2). The author predicts that, the upcoming trend of De-Shanzhaization will dilute the correlation of the three variables in question.*

*Keywords: Consumption-Symbol, Cultural-Capital, Identity-Construction, Consumer, Correlation, Shanzhai, De-Shanzhaization*

## INTRODUCTION

Driven by the reform and opening up policy-led rapid development of industrialization and urbanization, there has emerged a large demographic group constituted by rural migrant workers in China urban society, hoping to obtain identity-recognition and achieve identity-change by their consuming behavior of purchasing the stylish Shanzhai mobile phones. Such an emerging social phenomenon reflects the imminent psychological need of rural migrant workers to melt into urban life, to gain urban identify, and most importantly, to avoid being discriminated. However, the process of identity-recognition and identity-change correlate with multiple factors of rural and urban differences, of which, culture is one of the most critical factors. By taking the purchase of Shanzhai mobile phone as a symbol, by employing the methods of interview and in-depth desk analysis, this text establishes three hypotheses, this study attempts to provide empirical evidence to rationalize the correlation of the three variables (consumption-symbol, cultural-capital and identity-construction). The results show that, the cultural-capital plays an important media-role in explaining an emerging Shanzhai phenomenon, namely, migrant workers want to achieve their identity-change.

### **Over-pursuing Consumption-Symbol vs. Neglecting the Role of Cultural-Capital**

In the process of China social transformation especially its urbanization, the living and working conditions of migrant workers has been drawing an increased research attention among social-economic researchers. A commonly observed phenomenon is that, in the face of the sharply contrasted and constantly distanced cultural differences between urban and rural areas, the young migrant workers have become more receptive to urban life style and culture atmosphere, and more willing to take initiative to change and adapt than the aged (over 40s on average). Such a social phenomenon has been anecdotally termed as an economy-led cultural baptism, representing the psychological desire of those young migrant workers in pursuing their urban identity-construction. In observing this emerging social phenomenon, the author of this text found an issue that, migrant workers overly pursued symbolic consumption while neglected the role of cultural-capital in pursuing their identity-transformation.

Pursuing equal status has been increasingly becoming a prominent phenomenon of China urban society, especially in the developed coastal areas wherein the migrant workers are densely crowded. The study on this phenomenon is conducive to analyzing and interpreting the impact of reform and opening up policy on civilian life change in general, and the impact on the disparity between urban and suburban life styles in specific. Such a study will provide at least hints to explain how the rural migrant workers have been fighting for equal status by showing off their sharply enhanced affordability, now commonly expressed as 'No Short in Money (不差钱)'. However, missing or neglecting the factor (variable) of cultural capital, such a study would be severely biased.

## **THE FRAMEWORK OF CONSUMPTION-SYMBOL, CULTURAL-CAPITAL AND IDENTITY-CONSTRUCTION**

It is an indisputable common sense that, the symbolic expression or indication disclosed from the style of consuming behavior can reflect the social status of consumers. The increasingly polarized urban and rural disparity has been developed so rapidly that, rural migrant workers have been struggling to change their status quo of being a discriminated group, motivating them psychologically to benchmark with urban people, and practically to shorten the gap. Must be noted is that, the cause of that gap cannot be fully explained by the respective consuming behaviors of urban and rural groups. Most likely, it is the cultural gap of the two groups that has been inducing the urban discrimination against rural migrant workers. Therefore, the author argues that, if without adding cultural factors, the measure of urban identity-construction of rural migrant workers would be either incomplete or misleading.

### **From the 'Field-Theory' to the Argument on Consumption-Symbol**

The 'Field Theory' proposed by Pierre Bourdieu explains that, a group's consumption behavior is influenced not only by the externally structured social environment (field), but also by the unignorable role of subjectively or intrinsically inherited cultural background of consumers, especially in terms of their consuming habits and choices (Bourdieu, 1984). The underlined meaning of this subjective and objective theoretical fusion is to reveal the processes of consumption choice and decision-making, highlight that, the process of selecting and deciding what to purchase is more of a subjective internal rather than an objective external process. Guided by this theoretical framework, the author assumes that, urban people buying brand mobile phones as a fashion, which in turn stimulates the purchasing desire of rural migrant workers to buy the 'look-like-brand' Shanzhai mobile phones (due to their limited affordability).

Mobile phones become a consumption-symbol of equivalent urban fashion, and an expression of rural migrant workers to prove their identity change.

### **From the Theory of Consumption-Symbol to the Argument on the Value of Cultural Capital**

In an age of consumer goods scarcity (such as China in pre-80s), consumption meant nothing more than to feed or survive. However, in an age of rich-product choices (such as China in post-2000), consumers are solicited by a wide range of consumer goods designed and produced to satisfy not only the choices, tastes or standards of consumers of different purchasing power or affordability, but also consumers of different cultural capital constituted by individuals' family and educational backgrounds, playing a critical role in the process of their product selection and decision-making. According to Jean Baudrillard, in an age of rich-product market, consumers' cultural capital reflects the increasingly diversified forms of cultural contents embedded in the prominent content of life quality which constitutes a series of value symbols commonly recognized and pursued by people in the process of purchasing and consuming products, and very likely, the perceived symbolic value of consuming products may be subjectively presumed to have exceeded the material value of consuming goods, acting as a consumption-symbol, and contributing to the identity-construction of the consumers (Baudrillard, 1998).

Also argued by Baudrillard is that, the social identity constructed by consumption-symbol can dilute class divisions or differences in modern consumer society; therefore, the consumption-symbol, purchasing power and the embedded cultural-capital through the process of consumption should be recognized as critical factors (variables), affecting consumers' identity-construction, constituted by the synthesis of their values, aesthetic orientations, standards, tastes, as well as their style of product selection and decision-making (Baudrillard, 1998). To this end, the author of this text partially disagrees with Baudrillard's argument, because the consumption-symbol only represents the subjective desire of consumers in constructing their social identity, missing the influential role of the externally structured social environment on the subjective cultural inclination.

### **Development of Research Hypothesis**

Based upon the postmodern consumer theoretical platform established by both Bourdieu (1984) and Baudrillard (1998), it can be logically presumed that, the differences between cultural-capital and purchasing-power of consumption-symbol constitute and reflect the differences of consumers' identity-construction in their consuming process of product selection and decision-

making. Therefore, taking Shanzhai mobile phone as the consumption-symbol, the author establishes the following three hypotheses:

*H1:* Consumption-Symbol, Cultural-Capital and Identify-Construction are correlated;

*H2:* Young migrant workers use Shanzhai mobile phones as a consumption-symbol to realize the recognition of their identity-transformation (from peasants to urbanites);

*H3:* Urban youth of the same age hold a negative attitude towards migrant workers' identity-transformation by the consumption-symbol of Shanzhai mobile phones.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY**

The author analyzes and rationalizes the symbolic significance of Shanzhai mobile phone from the sociological point of view, and explores the social and psychological motivations of consumers to buy and use Shanzhai mobile phone as their choice of consumption-symbol. Data collection was carried out through user interviews. The object of this study was consisted of two groups of people. One group is made up of young migrant workers aged 18-25 years old, from rural family background and with no university education, coming to the city of Beijing to engage in manual labor job. By mining their attitude towards Shanzhai mobile phone, preference of choice, usage, the author aims to explore their motivations of Shanzhai mobile phone consumption, and the role or influence of their motivation on the construction of their urban identity. The other group is composed of urban youth, also aged 18-25 years old from average urban family background with high cultural capital (education), pursuing branded mobile phones. The author aims to investigate the urban group's views, opinions and attitudes towards migrant workers' motivation of urban identity construction through the consumption of look-like but imitated Shanzhai mobile phones.

Must be noted is that, the price-to-performance advantage especially the diversified design of novel appearances and functions, makes the cheaply-priced Shanzhai mobile phone sharply contrasted with those expensively-priced international brands; makes Shanzhai mobile phone the hot pursuit of consumption fashion of the so-called 'Made-in-China' low-cost brand; and therefore, makes Shanzhai mobile phone the choice of migrant workers (low-end consumer group) to show off their urban fashion of consumption. Another reason of choosing Shanzhai mobile phone as the research object is because it has become a popular low-end but rapidly becoming a look-like replacement of those high-end branded mobile phones, reflecting the psychological desire of migrant workers to pursue their identity change, and therefore, to show off their 'equal urban identity'. It is believed in this text that, the results of interview, although with a few minor sampling bias, can provide a reasonable confidence to explain the objective validity of rural migrant workers' urban identity construction in question.

## ANALYSES AND RESULTS FROM INTERVIEWS

A 20-day survey was conducted in July 2007. Ten students from Beijing Capital University of Finance and Commerce were trained to familiarize with a list of prepared questionnaire and then, hired to conduct the survey. By randomly picking and interviewing with 500 migrant workers aged 18-25 in Beijing and 500 native Beijing youth of the same age, this study collected the results from oral questionnaire interviews. Both groups were mobile phone owners and gender half of each. Of the migrant workers, male interviewees were engaged in physical labors (construction, decoration, security, couriers, etc.); female interviewees were engaged in service industry (cleaners, family nannies, hospital careers, etc.). With regard to Beijing native youth, career information was omitted.

Two questionnaire forms were designed and prepared for the two groups separately, 10 questions for each group. The contents of the first-five questions of the two questionnaires are overlapped, doing so is for the purpose of checking the overall group opinion on selecting, purchasing and using mobile phones (consumption-symbols of either Shanzhai or non-Shanzhai). The results of the first-five questions from the two groups confirm with the Hypothesis 1 that, the selection of consumption-symbol (either Shanzhai or non-Shanzhai handset) is correlated with consumers' cultural-capital and their personal identities (suburban or urban, family and education background).

### Results of Hypothesis 2 (Table 1)

Of the 500 migrant workers surveyed, all is the owner of mobile phone. The vast majority of them (83%) purchased Shanzhai mobile phones, mainly because of Shanzhai cheap-price, and their work and living needs in the urban area (Beijing city). Also confirmed is that, one of their motivations of purchasing mobile phones is to avoid being discriminated by urban people. Overall, migrant workers bare a low-level of brand awareness, indifferent to and no strong desire of pursuing the quality, appearance and function, indicating indirectly that, cultural capital, purchasing power and consumption-symbol are correlated with consumers' social identity. When asked about the overall view on Shanzhai products (question 4), the female interviewees were more interested in Shanzhai clothing, cosmetics and household goods than men; while, the male interviewees were more attracted to Shanzhai electronic appliances and cars than women; indicating that, lacking cultural capital makes migrant workers sensitive to price but insensitive to product value, quality and brand. Obviously, migrant workers were psychologically yearning for identity transformation (question 8, 9, 10). In short, Hypothesis 2 is confirmed (see Table 1):

Table 1: Results of 10 Questions Collected from the Group of Migrant Workers

Questions	Agree (%)	Others* (%)
1. Is your handset a Shanzhai product?	89%	11%
2. Do you think Shanzhai handset is a cheap-but-good-enough product?	71%	29%
3. Except cheap, do you think there are any other advantages of Shanzhai handset (such as appearance and function)?	27%	73%
4. Do you agree with the rating of 'too cheap to be good' as a general evaluation of Shanzhai Products?	11%	89%
5. Did you buy your handset because your work and life need it?	66%	34%
6. Did you buy a Shanzhai handset because it looks like a brand phone?	14%	86%
7. Did you buy Shanzhai handset because of advertise all over the streets?	64%	36%
8. Did you buy your handset because you don't want to be looked down upon you by urbanites?	79%	21%
9. Do you like the functions of taking photos, video games, MP music provided by your Shanzhai handset?	87%	13%
10. If possible, do you want a Beijing Hukou (Beijing identity)?	92%	8%

Note: The others\* refers to Respondents' answer either 'never-thought about it' or 'don't know'.

### Results of Hypothesis 3 (Table 2)

Of the 500 Beijing native youth surveyed, all is the owner of mobile phone. Few numbers of them (16%) purchased Shanzhai handset. Cheap-but-good-enough is commonly consented as one of the characteristics of Shanzhai products, indicating that, Shanzhai mobile phone, as a consumption-symbol, has been deeply rooted in the public awareness. The two groups were sharply contrasted on question 4 (too cheap to be good), indicating their sharply contrasted cultural-capital oriented social identity, in terms of their sharply contrasted attitude towards Shanzhai products. It can be inferred from the results of questions (4, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10) that, urban youth generally holds a negative attitude towards migrant workers' efforts of identity-change through purchasing a specific consumption-symbol (i.e. Shanzhai mobile phones). In short, Hypothesis 3 is confirmed (see Table 2):

Table 2: Results of 10 Questions Collected from the Group of Urban Youth (Beijing Native)

Questions	Agree (%)	Others*
1. Is your handset a Shanzhai product?	16%	84%
2. Do you think Shanzhai handset is a cheap-but-good-enough product?	65%	35%
3. Except cheap, do you think there are any other advantages of Shanzhai handset (such as appearance and function)?	11%	89%
4. Do you agree with the rating of 'too cheap to be good' as a general evaluation of Shanzhai Products?	81%	19%
5. Did you buy your handset because your work and life need it?	100%	0%
6. Do you have a feeling that using a handset makes migrant workers look like urbanities, or the same identity as yours?	0%	100%
7. Do you think 'migrant workers using mobile phone' is to 'pretend or show off'?	63%	37%
8. Do you think 'migrant workers using mobile phone' can more or less reflect their degree of urbanization?	17%	83%
9. Do you think 'migrant workers using Shanzhai handset' because of the cheap-price?	72%	28%
10. Do you think 'migrant workers using Shanzhai handset' because of their low level of education?	69%	31%

Note: The others\* refers to Respondents' answer either 'never-thought about it' or 'don't know'.

Many Beijing youth expressed during interview that: "We did not choose to buy Shanzhai mobile phone, not only because it does not have a well-recognized brand name, making us losing face, but also because it does not have a decent quality assurance, nor does it have a decent fashion connotation and cultural content, which requires consumers to have a certain level of cultural-capital in order to appreciate the aesthetic value embedded, and this is precisely what migrant workers lacked of." In the witness of migrant workers yelling at their mobile phones, scolding to their mobile phone video games, playing their high-volume mobile phone music in public (subway, shopping malls, hospitals, etc.), it is impossible for us not to connect their 'tasteless' behaviors with their uneducated background. Again, a strong and inherent correlation among consumption-symbol, cultural-capital and consumer-identity, can be deduced (H1). Such an inherent correlation is fundamentally determined by the differentiated consumers' cultural capital that is difficult to change or make up by imitating others' consuming behaviors. This is actually an implicit confirmation of H2 and H3.



## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The results of H1, H2 and H3 provide the author of this text with a primary confidence to conclude that, although there is a perceived inherent correlation between consumption-symbol and identity-construction, however, without the premise of taking into account of consumers cultural-capital, the relationship between symbolic consumption and identity construction seems divorced from reality, or too subjectively one-sided to be objectively reliable. Migrant workers subjectively tried to pursue their identity-transformation through the purchase of Shanzhai mobile phone (consumption-symbol), however, lacking cultural-capital support made their subjective desire objectively counterproductive, and rejected by urban people.

Must be admitted is that, from the perspective of consumption concept, the symbolic presentation of consumption-symbol has been increasingly becoming a symbol to represent consumers' cultural-capital, rather than the presentation of consumers' capacity or affordability as represented in the past, this phenomenon of conceptual transformation is especially the case in developing economies like China, in which, the low-end market is saturated with the mass consumers with extremely low affordability, dominating the mainstream of China consumer market. Such a market structure not only explains the hot-selling of Shanzhai mobile phones, but also explains that, the brand pursuit of urban consumers, as their show-off symbol, or their subconsciously ostentatious symbol of identity, leading rural people to be psychologically motivated to imitate the fashion of consumption, and to purchase the cheaply-priced Shanzhai ones, only look-alike, but after all a replacement of the expensively-priced brands. Such a consumption-fashion of pursuing consumption-symbol has been creating a huge market demand for Shanzhai products, and consequently, driving the rapid development of China mobile phone industry, stimulating the imitation-led rampant profanity of both brand and logo (trademark), such as 'Nokla' for 'Nokia', 'Sumsung' for 'Samsung', and 'hi-Phone' for 'i-Phone' and so forth. In other words, the mass pursuit of symbolic consumption may explain the market base of Shanzhai industry in a broad sense.

Also must be pointed out is that, through the author's continued findings on the research of Shanzhai, especially after 2010, the rapid growth of China economy, the increasingly matured manufacturing industry, and the gradually enhanced technological capability, should be attributed to the effects of two forces. One is government policy support for the imitation-based Shanzhai industrial development (Zhao, 2013; 2014; 2016; 2017); the other force is the huge market-demand for 'cheap-but-good-enough' Shanzhai products. However, the sharply increased national income level has been leading to the gradually precipitated market demand and the cooled-down of consumers' Shanzhai enthusiasm, has been forcing more and more Shanzhai firms to have abandoned their long-relied Shanzhai Model, starting to pursue quality

improvement, and consequently, resulting in consumers, especially urban consumers, to have established and enhanced their awareness of consumer right, inducing an irreversible and inevitable trend of De-Shanzhaization (Zhao, 2019; 2019a; 2019b).

Lastly, although having an issue of sampling bias, such as detailed data collection and evaluation on interviewees' family and education background, further divided age-group and income level and so on, so that the variable of cultural-capital can be more effective than the existing one in use to explain the correlation in question, however, the research design of this study is reasonably valid and reliable to support the research findings of this study.

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