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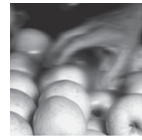
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The good life as accountable: Moralities of dress consumption in China and Romania

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Abstract

Practice theoretical approaches in consumption studies centre practices over practitioners, the material and mundane over the symbolic and embodied skill over individual choice. Pointing to practice theory's neglect of the role of intersubjectivity and the deeply interactional character of performances in practice formation, this article relies on interviews with young urban consumers in China and Romania to explore dress practices in the two postsocialist locales in consumers' pursuit of 'the good life'. We reflect on the intertwining of consumption with this moral project grounded in both the materiality and sociality of dress. By centring performances, we rearticulate the relationship between normativity and accountability in materialising the everyday consumption norms. We tease out the meaningful role of interaction in maintaining and altering the boundaries of dress practices, and subjecting postsocialist consumers to processes of self- and mutual-monitoring on the way to attaining 'the good life'. This comprehensive approach fruitfully complements the oft-criticised epistemological monism and theoretical imprecision of practice theory.

Keywords

Accountability, China, good life, moral consumption, normativity, practice theory, Romania, fashion, clothing consumption, postsocialism

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Introduction

The growing influence of practice theory in the sociology of consumption has enabled concerted theoretical and empirical efforts to investigate the practical, material, habitual and inconspicuous dimensions of consumption (e.g. Halkier et al., 2011; Martens, 2018; Pellandini-Simányi, 2016; Tse and Tsang, 2021; Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016; Volonte, 2019; Warde, 2017). It has shifted the field's focus away from culturalist interpretations centring individual choice, symbolic codes and processes of identity construction (Zukin and Smith Maguire, 2004). Critical of more 'social' versions of social theory that underscore ontological divides such as micro-macro, agency-structure and subject-object, practice theories position practices as an ontological level of reality that can explain everyday consumption without needing to side with either or bridge them. While such a reorientation seems sensible, critics have pointed to its disentanglement from broader sociological concerns and its inability to achieve 'epistemological pluralism' (Joseph and Kurki, 2018: 73). Practice theory's 'theoretical imprecision, methodological eclecticism, potential political conservatism and the difficulties with application to policy' (Warde, 2014: 289) have also been emphasised.

This article acknowledges critiques made upon practice theoretical approaches. We build on the treatment of *both* the material and symbolic facets of consumption as addressed in recent contributions to practice theory (e.g. Shove et al., 2012). These conceptualise the essential links between three elements (materials, competences and meanings) in constituting or dissolving any practice (Shove and Pantzar, 2005), illustrate consumers' different understandings, skills and goals and the varying relationships between these three components (Warde, 2015: 139). Additionally, we point to another theoretical gap in practice theory – its neglect of the role of intersubjectivity and the deeply interactional character of performances in practice formation. Centring clothing and dress in consumers' practical engagements with ideas of the 'good life', we reflect on the intertwining of a specific category of consumption with this moral project, grounded in both the materiality and sociality of dress. Our analytic lens illuminates how these moral dimensions transcend structural constraints and individual wills, orient everyday pursuits of the good life through dress while enrolling accountable performances (intersubjective, self- and mutual-monitoring in interaction), practical mastery (competences and skills), materiality, as well as normative, socially sanctioned notions of selfhood (understandings, meanings, goals), altogether regulating the boundaries of consumption practices.

This article centres dress practices of Chinese and Romanian young urban adults in two postsocialist settings, relying on data collected separately by the authors. We first analyse findings in two studies guided by attempts to understand dress consumption practices enrolled in the pursuit of the good life in two rather distinct postsocialist settings, with diverging cultural, economic, political, sociohistorical structures and trajectories. Secondly, by rearticulating the relationship between two practice theoretical concepts, normativity and accountability (Rouse, 2007; Schatzki, 1996), we discern the socially conditioned, interactionally enacted understandings, meanings and goals of dress practices among urban youth in China and Romania. We demonstrate how they 'hang together' with other everyday practices as an instance of integrative practices (Schatzki,

1996, 2002) associated with living a good life – doing being a professional, a young (wo) man or a worthy self (Sacks, 1984). With this comprehensive approach, we fruitfully complement the oft-criticised epistemological monism and theoretical imprecision of practice theory.

This article first reexamines two versions of practice theory (Rouse, 2007; Schatzki, 1996), with a particular focus on how the neglected connections of these theorisations help understand the important role of social interaction within practices. We evaluate the contribution and limitations of a recent version of practice theory (Shove et al., 2012) to the study of consumption. Next, we further explain how the differing moralised understandings of ‘good life’ shape consumption practices, and reflect on how the framing power of moral regimes (Halkier et al., 2011; Thompson, 2011), the ‘personal practical ethics’ (Pelladini-Simanyi, 2014) and the ‘socially-sanctioned selfhood’ (Karademir-Hazir, 2017) can constitute or dissolve consumption practices in postsocialist societies. Finally, we analyse dress consumption practices in Romania and China across layered moral regimes and the selfhoods they engender, their material translation into everyday routines and boundaries, and the negotiation and accomplishment of normative and accountable performance in interaction.

The material, the social and the normative in practice theory

Practice theory identifies practice as the primary unit of analysis, rejecting the conceptualisation of social order along scales, theorising the social as flat (Schatzki, 1996, 2002; Shove and Pantzar, 2005; Welch and Warde, 2017). Theodore Schatzki centres practices and rejects subjectivist and objectivist entities’ bearing on the constitution of social order. Individuals are conceptualised as ‘carriers of practices’ who master appropriate courses of action in the performance of practice (Reckwitz, 2002), in which neither supra-individual entities (macro) nor intersubjective levels of reality and experience (micro) are central (Schatzki, 2017: 130).

While Schatzki’s practice theoretical approach is criticised as ‘flat’ in shunning scalar explanatory models (Evans, 2019), it does acknowledge practitioners’ role in the notion of ‘teleoaffective structures’, describing ends, projects, tasks, purposes, beliefs, emotions and moods as components of practices (Schatzki, 1996). Schatzki argues that the relationship between doings and sayings is established by *four* types of properties: practical understandings, rules, teleoaffective structures and general understandings¹ (Welch and Warde, 2017). In this model, practices can be either dispersed or integrative, each governed by particular features (Schatzki 1996, 2002). Dispersed practices are bodily and discursive performances linked by the ability to carry out, identify, bring about and react to a practice at hand in different instances. Integrative practices are more complex and specialised ‘temporally unfolding nexuses of action’ (Schatzki, 2001: 72), discursive and non-discursive acts. Dispersed practices might be part of integrative ones; attuned and normatively meaningful to their organisation.

Crucial for our analysis is Schatzki’s (2002) discussion of normativity, defined as ‘oughtness’ and ‘rightness’: how actions should be carried out, elicited, and organised by ends and tasks and the affective engagements they enjoy. Rules encompass principles

that shape and define courses of action, while teleoaffectivities comprise normatively ordered ends, activities and emotions (Schatzki, 1996, 2001, 2017). We highlight that normativity is essential to *make sense of the importance of interaction* in the doings and sayings composing practices. Engendered by normativity, the correctness and acceptability of actions is subject to processes of self- and mutual-monitoring by practitioners. Connecting normativity to Rouse's (2007) discussion of accountability in the performance of practice completes our understanding of their interconnection. This underlines the relationships forged between various performances formalised into practices and the formations of the boundaries of practices and their performance. Accountability, then, amounts to mutual-monitoring of oughtness or acceptability of actions as they pertain to the entity identified as practice, and is enacted by practitioners through performance.

Elizabeth Shove's analysis points to the dynamic character of practices further advancing the practice theoretical approach (Shove and Pantzar, 2005; Shove et al., 2012). She distinguishes between practices-as-entities and practices-as-performances to emphasise *three* elements of practice – *materials, competence and meaning*, their endurance in time, and the processes of change they undergo and drive. Unlike Schatzki, who posits teleoaffective structures as an element organising practice, Shove et al. compress the elements of teleoaffective structures (goals, ends, projects, tasks) within the concept of 'meaning' as a constitutive feature of practice, *not* external to it. 'Practices-as-performances involve the *active* integration of elements (materials, meanings, competences). Practices-as-entities are constituted through such integrations' (Shove et al., 2012: 119).

While practices-as-entities is privileged by Shove et al. to explain the formalisation of performances into recognisable entities linked together in the enactment of everyday life, we argue that, instead, focusing on practices-as-performances and self- and mutual-monitoring grants access to the *processes* through which the boundaries of practice are formulated, reinforced and undermined. Rather than regulated by explicit rules, it can reveal *how* the various components of practice are routinely integrated in the pursuit and material enactment of the good life through dress practices. Such practices change when these components evolve. While the performance of practice is grounded in embodied, routinised competence and skills, the image of practitioners as mere carriers of practice neglects the importance of accountability as routine monitoring of one's own and other practitioners' performances, judgements, skilful evaluation of requirements of situations, and living up to its expectations, revealing the interactional dimension of performance.

Practice theory in consumption studies

Proponents of practice theory advance a research programme that centres practices and renders secondary the communicative function of consumption. Warde's work (2014, 2017) focuses on the routine, inconspicuous, pre-reflective and embodied aspects of consumption and highlights the shortcomings of overemphasis on choice, meaning and identity construction. It privileges materiality and routinised performance over agent reflexivity, treating consumption as a mere moment in the performance of other practices (Warde, 2017). Warde identifies practices as social constructs, emphasising the collective

learning processes involved in the acquisition of competence. Acknowledging the normativity of conventions, [Warde \(2017\)](#) argues there is also room for innovation as they are not fully obeyed, but agents insert degrees of improvisation in their performance of practice.

How understanding, procedures and valuations of engagement are acquired and adjusted to practices-as-performances are empirical questions; various scholars have highlighted similar gaps and offered solutions through combining practice theory with other theoretical tools² (e.g. [Martens, 2018](#); [Pellandini-Simányi, 2014](#); [Thompson, 2011](#); [Truninger, 2011](#)). Among these theorists, [Pellandini-Simányi's \(2014\)](#) approach guides our theoretical framing of how consumption norms (or normative consumption values) actually shape and are reinforced by dress practices in everyday life. Pellandini-Simányi defines social practices as 'materialised, practical cultural repertoires that people can selectively draw on in devising their personal practical ethics... carry normative elements of how to live, whom to be and justice...' (2014: 89). Studying consumption in socialist Hungary as achievement of a 'cultured way of living', Pellandini-Simányi introduces morality as a source of order among normative versions of 'the good life', arguing that consumption norms are informed by ethical visions, which may stem from not only official discourse and political agendas but also pragmatic beliefs, altogether defined as everyday understandings of 'objective conditions' (2014: 51). Rather than abstract normative ideas, everyday consumption norms are equated with 'practical ethics' – mundane, embodied and objectified in practices. In Pellandini-Simányi's account, practical ethics are unreflected until they are challenged and revealed as untenable in practice.

The good life and its moralities in (post)socialist consumption

In this article, we attempt to show how normative understandings of the 'good life' are materialised and translated into divergent moral boundaries guiding everyday dress practices. Synonymous with a 'life well-lived', the 'good life' encompasses a normative vision of *how lives should be lived*. Here, we use the term 'moral consumption' to 'denote specific, institutionalised answers to how one should live in the form of "law-like obligations"' ([Laidlaw, 2002](#): 137; cited in [Pellandini-Simányi, 2014](#): 97). The embodied practices the good life regiments range from home life to work life, from private to public, and hinge on individuals' positions as members of families, communities, networks, states or as global citizens. Consumption is constitutive to and dispersed across the accomplishment of the good life ([Soper, 2007](#)). Self-monitoring of consumption routines ensures that one is living the good life the right way as it is framed by individuals' various institutional, social, moral and political engagements and embeddedness: An increase in living standards and consumption power can drive up consumerism and prompt the proliferation of morally questionable and environmentally harmful practices ([Soper, 2007](#); [Thompson, 2011](#)). Alternatively, the good life enabled by high spending may fail to live up to cultural and social expectations of taste and distinction, resulting in ostentatious consumption, the purview of the *nouveau riche* (individuals who have acquired wealth within their own generation rather than by familial inheritance, typically perceived as

flashy, superficial and lacking good taste), lacking the cultural capital necessary to attain a properly good life (Bourdieu, 1984; Daloz, 2010). Importantly, our analytical emphasis on both the normativity and accountability of practical performances points to the accomplishment of the good life not simply as a personal project or an end in itself, but as a *situated, intersubjective, ongoing accomplishment* and a source of moral capital (Barendregt and Jaffe, 2014), ratifying competence in the performance of practice.

Moral regimes ground everyday notions of the good life, contextualising ethics and their embeddedness into broader societal, political and public definitions of morality (Fourcade and Healey, 2007; Lowe, 2006; Wheeler, 2017), forging subjectivities in the emergence of the moral consumer (Martens, 2018; Thompson, 2011; Soper 2007), ultimately organising and orienting consumption practices (Pellandini-Simányi, 2014). In socialist regimes, the good life was a moral project materialised through state-enacted policies that defined its parameters and its excesses, the needs and wants of socialist subject-citizens as well as the extent of legitimate desires (Crăciun and Lipan, 2020; Davis, 2005; Fehérváry, 2009; Patico, 2018; Zhang, 2019). Consumer subjectivities and practices were informed by a vision of the good life that ushered in the triumph of industrial innovation over the vagaries of nature, and of virtuous socialist subjectivities against the corrupt moralities of the capitalist West (Fehérváry, 2012; Finnane, 2008; Zhang 2017, 2019). The postsocialist good life, by contrast, arguably emerged as an individual project of the entrepreneurial self (Patico, 2018; Ren, 2013) who took on the moral labour of fashioning a life that was worth living, that was well-lived. It thus fell on individuals to manage competing and often conflicting cultural and material resources in newly minted postsocialist societies (Fehérváry, 2009; Patico, 2018). The ‘Other’ of the socialist self was the presocialist subject and the Western consumer; we show that the ‘Other’ in postsocialism is the *nouveau riche*, the conspicuous consumer displaying her wealth and status (Veblen, 1994), a subjectivity prompted by the rapid economic, social, cultural and political transformations brought along by the transition to market economy and the proliferation of global consumer culture. These transformations upended social hierarchies and created avenues for upward social mobility, openly articulating the ambiguous understandings of what a good life is. Scholarship identifies generational clashes in understanding the good life (Pellandini-Simányi, 2016) and contradictions related to uneven distribution of cultural and economic resources in postsocialist economies (Gurova, 2012; Patico, 2018). The mismatch between availability of financial resources and mastery of the cultural codes encoded in the good life still engenders anxieties as to the meaning of a life well-lived and to one’s legitimate claims to that life (Daloz, 2010; Karademir-Hazir, 2017). In our case studies, we demonstrate how the different notions of good life manifest in different postsocialist regimes along divergent spatio-temporal axes.

There seem to be a clear difference between China and Romania. In pursuit of a purer form of communism, the 10 years of the Cultural Revolution campaign (1966–1976) in China drove the Chinese economy to near collapse. The campaign brought about distinctive consumption practices imbued with ‘cultural values and ideologies, which were egalitarian, frugal, and strongly opposed to bourgeois lifestyles’ (Zhang, 2017: 643). During the socialist era, honourable consumption emphasised ‘building the country with

diligence and frugality' (Zhang, 2017: 644). Based on their shared, practical understanding of how to fully achieve a virtuous life, socialist Chinese consumers strived to dress cheaply, shabbily and inconspicuously (e.g. green army clothes, 'jiefang' [liberation] shoes), while at the same time monitored, criticised, reported, humiliated or even attacked those who embraced bourgeois lifestyles and tastes (Finnane, 2008). Rather than expressions of individual taste and agency, such practices were negative acts conducted to avoid moral accusation, ridicule and violence (Zhang, 2019: 7–8). In the postsocialist era, China has undergone radical political, economic and cultural change (Tse and Tsang, 2021). Chairman Deng Xiaoping's idea to 'emancipate people's mind' was widely propagandised (Wu, 2009), leading to 'transition from a rigid uniformity in dress to the adoption of novel styles by young Chinese' (Tse, 2015). Yet in recent years, new political, legislative, economic and cultural factors, vigorous anti-corruption campaigns, have again led to new consumption norms, which discourage conspicuous consumption, consumption for maintaining *guanxi*,³ and domestic luxury consumption (Chen and Chen, 2004: 36; Zhang, 2017: 653). Romanian consumers' relationship to capitalism and socialism echoes extensive scholarship both on Romania (Verdery, 1996) and elsewhere showing that socialism was experienced as an alien, external imposition on European societies (Bukowski, 1994; Halkier et al., 2011). Socialism was experienced as an interruption from their European path, being forcefully isolated from what was their 'natural' cultural, economic and political growth into Western European nations. Upon the fall of the Iron Curtain, the transition to market economy, consumer society and liberal democracy were hailed as the 'return to Europe'.

Methodology

The study focuses on dress practices of Chinese and Romanian young urban adults in the two postsocialist settings. The data sets were obtained from two separate studies conducted by the authors. The Romanian project investigated the relationship between dress practices and ideas of morality, whereas the Chinese study was driven by interest in the changing relationships between fashion and clothing production, distribution and consumption in East Asia.⁴ Our effort is guided by attempts to understand the practices enrolled in the pursuit of the good life in the two postsocialist locales. Their socialist past engendered similarities not only of political organisation but also with market experiences of socialist citizens: cultural containment within national borders, consumption goods either domestically produced or imported from fellow socialist republics, the flourishing of informal market exchanges for goods that were hard to acquire through official channels (Ledeneva, 2008; Verdery, 1996; Zhang, 2019).

Meanwhile, the two locales' experiences in postsocialism have taken rather different trajectories and there is value to look into their different constitution of everyday consumption practices that help us make sense of global economic, political and moral processes (Rogers, 2010). From our larger response samples, we selected accounts from both data sets from interviewees of similar ages, who moved from small province towns to large university centres. The Romanian respondents are young professionals who settled

in Bucharest, the Romanian capital city, after completing their studies, whereas the Chinese respondents were students who moved from other provincial areas to urban Shanghai when the data were collected. Due to the limited scope of this article, we select illustrative accounts in which respondents related their dress practices to their visions of the good life.

In the following sections, we discuss how the ongoing interactions and interconnections through moments of dress consumption in the two postsocialist locales produce differing moralised notions of 'the good life'. These necessitate the emergence, normalisation and change of dress practices, which cannot be adequately addressed through the most recent versions of practice theory's focus on social practices as a singular, segregated entity. Three key themes discussing the good life as general understandings, dress practices as socially sanctioned performances and policing the boundaries of practice, organise our discussion of the interviews.

Data Analysis

Dressing the good life as general understanding

In the first section, we deal with general understandings of the good life as a property that forges connections between personal practical ethics (Pellandini-Simányi, 2016) and discourses vehiculated in everyday life and public settings that engender particular forms of moral subjectivity and orient the performance of dress practices in postsocialist China and Romania. Our analysis showed how postsocialist consumers search for their own legitimate places within the social and work on the definition of the good life. Striving to live the good life, consumers' daily interactions regulate its boundaries and prevent them from dressing and living the wrong way.

For Chinese respondents, cultural norms and proper social etiquette come into place in interactions within their various situated engagements. 'Simply put, [clothing] allows you to make yourself beautiful. Not only do you think you have become beautiful, but *others all agree* that you have become beautiful'. (Sun, 20, female, student). The sartorial etiquettes that fit personality and convey sincerity and beauty are personal dimensions of selfhood as individuals knowingly negotiate and pursue their 'true selves', though they are also subject to social ratification and constant monitoring by self and others.

There are also respondents who speak of broader concepts and values (Welch and Warde, 2017) in *dressing-as-living* that help strengthen the coherent, 'authentic' self they seek to establish, both for themselves and in interaction. Such understandings enjoin the normative goal of 'living a good life' and avoid the experience of moral failing (Thompson, 2011). Practices and accounts of practices at once constitute and relay self-worth. Leon, 21, a business management major in Shanghai, accounted for his normative vision of clothing's *raison d'être*:

I think that ‘who’ or ‘what’ is creating clothing trends...is everyone, is life itself...*we live our lives through dress*...it shows the intricacies of and *above* life...what we have seen, where we have travelled to, what we have thought of...anyone who has his own thoughts and gets a good grasp of his own path of life.

Leon’s account reflects the accountability of the good life as rooted in cultured understandings of a meaningful life above everydayness. While emphasising authorship in clothing style, he does not suggest consumers are ‘style surfers’. Instead, he simultaneously regards clothing as a means, an ongoing process, an end and proof of living an authentic and distinct life across the public (i.e. in interaction) and private spheres (i.e. inner processes). For Leon, dressing the authentic self is a project of self-discovery, grasping one’s ‘own path of life’. It is all about subtlety, immersion and material experience, rather than conspicuousness and pretence. Importantly, this paradoxical form of ‘conspicuous authenticity’ in dress could not be enacted *without* a perceived oughtness: consumers as interactionally accountable for the vision, trajectory, control and worth of one’s life through dress performances.

For young, urban Romanian consumers, dress practices read as individual choices, while simultaneously situating practitioners within a broader practical logic fitting self and selfhood into society and enacting socially sanctioned notions of the good life, propriety, comfort and functionality, not typically discerned among our Chinese interviewees. These index a different moral consumption: apparel’s quality and functionality reach beyond physical properties and their effect on the body and extend into the self’s moral worth. Careful dressing illustrates ongoing endeavours of creating distance between self and lavishness, and finding well-being in simple things. Moral consumption enjoins ‘practical intelligibility’, placing consumption within broader moral and social constraints, approved practices (Schatzki, 1996) and interactional accomplishments. Insights into Romanian consumers’ divestment from conspicuous consumption echo Van der Laan and Velthuis (2016) findings in their Dutch study. However, Laan and Velthuis hold inconspicuousness in dress practices (understated and unostentatious clothing style; unconcerned about showing one’s fashionability, wealth or social status through dress; only concerns about the practicality and functionality of clothes) as ultimate proof that meaning-making and identity-building are not the stake of consumption. We argue that this very inconspicuousness needs to be problematised. Functionality and durability, seeking out socialised versions of the ‘natural’, in the form of fabrics, trying to ‘be oneself’, avoiding to stand out through clothing point to complex processes of negotiation of identity and interactional ratification of morally and socially sanctioned selfhood, objectified in this peculiar form of consumption morality.

Marina’s discussion reveals the role of clothing in social interaction while also accounting for what a good life might entail:

I take good care of my clothes...I wash them manually...I starch my shirts, I iron them, I don’t like to see people with wrinkled clothes. I even iron my bed linen...People say I only care about clothes or my appearance. It’s not true, but this is where you get the first impression

from. You look at someone's clothes, what they're wearing; if they're raggedy, you don't really put much stock in them, no matter how smart they may be. It's the first impression... And in my field, you really cannot look like the last human on earth. Because I sell services, I am selling myself—what is in my head and how I look. If I look deplorable, that person won't come to me for consultancy, they'd go somewhere else.

Marina is 28 and a firm's manager. For her, maintaining one's clothes not only speaks to pursuing comfort but also to the moral and social worth of the wearer: they offer clues into one's personal and professional worth, absent other information. Clothes should be eye-catching, but must also reflect good taste (Dalož, 2010), presenting one as a worthy interactant. The performative nature of moral worth emerges in this account: caring for one's clothes amounts to caring for oneself. Proper clothing maintenance offers a glimpse into the nexus of home life, work ethic and personal worth. The outer appearance of well-maintained dress, readily available to the naked eye, does not stop at picking an item or a combination of items from one's wardrobe. It presents the good life as a constant and continuous accomplishment that spans from maintaining bed linen all the way through to professional encounters.

Dress practices as performance

Shove et al. (2012) privilege the analysis of practices-as-entities as formalised in the interlinking of the three elements of practice – materials, competence and meanings. In this section, we argue that focusing on practices-as-performances clarifies how self- and mutual-monitoring occur in the process of weaving the three elements together in the routine pursuit and enactment of the good life through dress. It also illuminates how normativity and accountability converge in daily dress practices.

Li is a 24-year-old student, born and raised in a northern village in China. She recently completed her postgraduate education in Shanghai and is currently a brand marketing executive there. Mother to an infant daughter, Li reflected on what constituted her conception of appropriate dress practices for women:

...simplicity, that is, it is to fit the wearer's own temperament, whether it is clothing or jewellery or other items...but we think that if fashion is fused with culture, such fashion will be more enduring, *people will remember it*...has a stronger sense of depth in it.

Li's account reflects that self-fashioning practices embed China's broader moral, cultural, social, economic and political transitions inscribed in the neoliberal imaginary of a late-modern, aspirational self. Li prefers sartorial styles that fit personality, character, and convey sincerity and beauty. These apparently personal dimensions of selfhood and womanhood which individuals negotiate and pursue are in fact embedded in wider class-cultural processes (Karademir-Hazir, 2017, 2020) oriented by the socially sanctioned boundaries of the good life.

Situated in a cosmopolitan city like Shanghai, where global and local cultures and lifestyles increasingly interfuse, Li's definition of cultured clothing is not simply bounded

by traditional Chinese styles (qipao, embroidered dress), but encompasses standards of what she regards as ‘EuroAmerican, Japanese, or Korean chic’, popular in China and sported in various social settings. As an educated, career-driven woman, Li’s style aims to combine modern, minimalist, and subtle taste, avoiding the shallow, conspicuous and morally questionable style of the *nouveau riche*, and in the end embracing an enduring, understated yet sophisticated style, an expectation within her professional and social circles. Aspirational selfhood, along with other intelligible understandings of new moral categories other Chinese interviewees described, such as ‘coherent personality’, ‘holistic beauty’, ‘modernity’ and ‘understatement’, are in fact materialised normativities in contemporary China and socially ratified goals to be interactionally accomplished through dress.

Daniela, a 26-year-old attorney in Bucharest, speaks of clothes in terms of choices and constraints. The following points to the everyday prerequisite of displaying the ability to appreciate natural fabrics and the comfort they entail:

...I am young and clothes are my strategy to appear more mature, more credible...I look for silk shirts because they are easy to clean and iron....if you dry them properly, you don’t even need to iron them. Cotton is comfortable, but it doesn’t really look good, and it deteriorates quickly, it needs ironing, and I don’t really want that...

What about synthetics?

They can trick you into thinking they are good quality even though they aren’t, and they get the job done.

What’s their job?

Their job is to dress you and look as if you are wearing a silk shirt when you are not. It’s a trick, but I think it’s a generally-accepted one, because everyone knows it’s polyester, not silk, but nobody will say ‘what a nice polyester shirt you are wearing. Aaah, silky, nice’. Silky is to me a.k.a. synthetic, but...nobody says silk, because they realise it’s not, they say silky.

While emphasising the materiality of dress, Daniela reflects on the intersection of a nexus of practices as she accounts for her work life. At work, she finds herself doing being a young woman, a credible professional and a worthy self by means of dress. She invokes appreciation for natural fabrics as a must, conveying the performative labour involved in the pursuit of moral consumption, proper womanhood and professional personhood. Failing to show such appreciation is charitably sanctioned, ‘silky’, but overlooked as acceptable. This illustrates the boundary work performed by practitioners in daily interactions in various settings. It reflects normativity as oughtness or acceptability (Schatzki, 1996) and the interplay between meaning, competence and materials (Shove et al., 2012) – good looking synthetics function as acceptable proxies in professional settings, ratifying the practitioner as living a socially sanctioned good life. Daniela speaks of the social expectation to repudiate the synthetic, the fabricated and to embrace natural fabrics, while also emphasising their

shortcomings: quick decay as part of the natural life-course of dress (Fehérvári, 2012; Schneider, 1994). The materiality of dress, its fabric and quality also index its sociality, its ability to reflect a way of life, a life well-lived and, thus, consumers' moral worth mirroring, at the same time, the integration of meaning, materials and competence in the routine performance of practice.

The shifting boundaries of practice

General understandings and material conditions shape moral values and bound consumption attitudes and behaviour in daily life (Schatzki, 1996). In this last section, we analyse how interactional considerations constitute and maintain specific boundaries leading to change and (dis)continuity in consumers' performance of practices: how they regularly alter, act out and reinforce moralised dress practices to achieve the good life. When consumers describe purchasing or wearing clothing that constitute deviations from their perceived 'authentic' selves, those accounts show how their embodied dress (and other integrative) practices are not about autonomous symbolic identity construction, but co-constituted by the (un)availability of certain material elements and conditions, the presence (or absence) of required competences, and the (in)comprehension of interactionally sanctioned meanings, simultaneously 'subject[ing] to individual appropriation and constrained by collective discursive and practical conventions' (Pellandini-Simányi, 2016: 699).

Liu, 22, born in Beijing and majoring in Marketing in Shanghai, repeatedly described herself as having a sturdy 'northern' bone structure and body size when compared to the typical southern Chinese women's:

I like to reflect an image of my character in my clothing...how an outfit suits me. I am [from northern China]...I might just like the pretty mature style, but they match my own image, which is very important to me...northerners' clothing styles are very fettered...that kind of tight-waist dress, or fur. You know it makes you look sturdy and extravagant.

Can't you wear this in Shanghai now?

No, it's OK, but because of the difference in body size between northerners and southerners...so I think the local culture and people around you also have a great influence on your clothing choices.

Shove and Pantzar (2005) argue that due to cultural, legislative and social differences, a practice prevailing in one context and geographical location might not necessarily be translatable elsewhere. Echoing Liu's accounts, in enormous China, clothing practices are influenced by the intersections of divergent integrative practices of one's own and others' within their own social circles (e.g. doing being a decent, dignified person even just doing grocery shopping; doing being a proper woman while attending social activities); by the physical environment (e.g. weather, urban structure, cityscape) and cultures of the city they live in (e.g. varying social expectations for clothing styles in different occasions); and to some extent even place of

origin. In other words, the practical ethics of dress consumption interact with China's intricate within-country diversities along the cultural, economic, geographical and sociodemographic axes (Xu, 2018). Above, Liu constantly evaluated 'good' embodiment according to the wearer's body size, place of origin, occasion, clothing culture, all constantly monitored by self and others. Meanwhile, her judgement that Northerners look bad or feel uncomfortable in 'Southern clothes' reflect her self-monitoring of her 'Northern character' in interaction: the mutual-monitoring of differently moralised body types (sturdy-versus-slender) and regional stereotypes (mature, fettered, extravagant, 'Northern') hold her accountable to her membership to the category of Northerner as she attempts to adopt prevailing local dress practices.

Similarly, Meng, 21, born in Hangzhou (adjacent to Shanghai) and a Human Resource Management major in Shanghai, spoke of her lack of confidence in carrying out new dress practices in a city in which she still perceived herself as an outsider:

The city I came from...is just the opposite of both Shanghai...In wintertime everyone [in my home town] just puts on the same kind of pyjamas and goes out and strides along the street...But in Shanghai, even when people just go a few blocks away to buy some groceries, they will dress very fashionably. I still dare not try some of those fashionable elements. I just think that there is still a big difference across different Chinese provinces and cities.

Meng's account reflects her feeling out of place wearing the clothes of a 'real urbanite' (Shanghainese) that neither belong on her nor is she supposed to wear. This, again, points to not only normativity as oughtness and acceptability (Schatzki, 1996), but also the accountability of practical performances (Rouse, 2007). In China, the intersections of an array of integrative practices become the arena where a common culture and social relations are constantly reproduced and renegotiated. Importantly, the meaning of 'good life' is neither unified nor static: it varies regionally and among sociodemographic segments within the nation, as the boundaries of dress practices are routinely maintained and reinforced. Clearly distinct from the Romanian case, in both Meng's and Liu's cases, there is a mismatch among the three elements of dress practices (Shove et al., 2012), such as the material (casualwear) and meaning (womanhood); meaning (youthful, cute, sweet) and competence (sturdy body size); or material (fashionable elements) and competence (knowledge and technique in mixing and matching fashionable clothing items). Since sporting an inauthentic, ingenuine look contradicts their vision of how life should be lived (to stick with their own comfortable 'northern style' or 'casual/country look') and may trigger social disapproval and unflattering judgement, such dress practices will not be enacted.

Roxana is a 27-year-old NGO executive in Bucharest, marked by her dress as an outsider at an upscale gathering:

My former boss took me to a fancy event with celebrities and important people....very high-class. Everyone was wearing expensive, elegant clothes. And I was only wearing a simple dress and a leather jacket. I felt very out of place. I felt like everyone was looking at me. I had

this sensation...like I was not supposed to be there, like I was supposed to get out of there as soon as possible....

Was it about the clothes?

It was first of all about the clothes.

What were they missing?

Class...I don't know, I admit that maybe I would've wanted a better-quality dress...those people projected a standard I couldn't live up to, I felt I didn't belong and had to go...a standard of quality, expensive clothes, a certain social status; you can't buy expensive clothes if you can't afford.

Emphasis on practice-as-performance and on the links between materials, competence and meaning (Shove et al., 2012) underlines the role of accountability (Rouse, 2007) as self- and mutual-monitoring in the performance of practice, and of the interactional labour involved in policing its boundaries. Roxana's everyday attire risked exposing her failure to meet the expectations of the situation – a high-end event requiring elegance and class. Her fear (an instance of self-monitoring): it would be read as failure to understand its expectations (an instance of monitoring of and by others), thus unmasking her as out of place, as not belonging. It reveals the accountable nature of performance of practice and the ongoing processes of policing of membership involved. Her unease translates into the monitoring of practitioners' ability to properly link materials, meaning and competence in accomplishing the good life as required by the situation, thus exposing her as accountable and, overall, an incompetent participant to the event. The materiality of her clothes presumably failed to meaningfully meet the occasion – the standard of quality (a rhetorical proxy for price tag), thus undermining the legitimacy of her presence. The problem she names is her shame that her clothes were, on the one hand, not fashionable enough and, on the other hand, not quality enough. Rather than proper quality, her clothes were missing the right price tag, the signature of a famous designer, to match those of the other attendants to the event. Importantly, Roxana was reluctant to name logo as what was missing from her clothes for her to fit in. This relates to normative accountability as oughtness and the teleoaffectivities it enjoins (Schatzki, 2002) – the emotional engagements of belonging or feeling out of place. Roxana's account of shame and self-censorship reflects on the self not merely as an entity, but as an ongoing interactional project ratified or undermined in its various situational and institutional engagements.

Salient throughout these interviews is the worth of the self in interaction. Clothes that fit and fit in point to a constantly monitoring (virtual) other and, ultimately, to accountable performances. Dress operates as a proxy for wearers' worth and their success on their way to living the good life. The accounts evoke images of practitioners deeply invested in their own comfort and their ability to lead a good life, by insisting on the properties of dress. But insistence on the materiality of dress conceals its sociality, wrapping into moral vocabularies (Lowe, 2006) of functionality, comfort and quality, the socialised pursuit of the good life. Thus, consumers reiterate the performativity of public discourse (Wheeler, 2018), submitting to a morality that shuns materialism and cherishes materiality. Moral

worth is not a fixed category but an interactional accomplishment that envelops dress in the enactment of categories like functionality, quality, fit or work ethic.

Conclusion

The two case studies of Chinese and Romanian consumers shed light on varying postsocialist consumer cultures and practices embedded in transitions from state socialism to market economy. Through extending the analytic lens of the sociology of consumption to its intertwining with the moral project grounded in both the materiality and sociality of dress, the findings offer significant insights into the usefulness of various practice theoretical approaches in comprehending the dissonance of dress practices across different sociocultural spaces. It illustrates how focusing on dispersed dress practices and the mutual accountability of their performance brings to the fore the intersubjectivity engendered in the social construction of identities: not merely voluntaristic acts of choice, not plainly and strictly determined by moral regimes of governance; rather, they are organised by the latter and ratified in the former. Such an approach does not oversimplify lived experiences, nor does it reinforce any individual-society divide (Schatzki, 1996). It guides appropriate social inquiry and shows how dress practices become the arena where culture and social relations are constantly negotiated and reproduced. We acknowledge the analytical limits of the two case studies with different objectives and methodological approaches. Future research of postsocialist consumption practices should look both into consumers' accounts (via interviews) and their daily practices through other research methods (e.g. observation of how consumers actually dress for various interactional settings and their subsequent reflections on the self- and mutual-monitoring processes), or wardrobe studies (how the materiality of dress relates to their moralised visions of the good life). But we emphasise the contribution this article makes to a better understanding of the normativities that organise the pursuit of a good life through dress practices in China and Romania.

The study has shown how Chinese political ideologies and cultural traditions materialise moral regimes of governance and translate into practical knowledge, creating new, hybrid moral meanings which shape Chinese consumption practices and reproduce themselves. By drawing on the values of frugality and modesty to achieve a harmonious existence (Zhang, 2020), Chinese consumers are guided by and act on differing meanings of the 'good life' across the nation and among sociodemographic segments. The Romanian accounts emphasised quality, comfort and functionality as indicators of the good life, seemingly implying the edge of the good life lies close to consumption which communicates social standing. They shunned conspicuous consumption as a postsocialist aberration, with its reliance on excessive display and unjustified social mobility. The good life comes off as an ideal organised by its pursuit for its own sake rather than a game of show-and-tell. And yet, the accounts presented reveal the anxieties engrained in the performance of the good life and the constant self-monitoring to ensure that the elements of practice (meanings, materials and competence) all work together to ratify the consumer as legitimately occupying their place in social space.

The narratives presented downplayed the sociality of dress and focused instead on its ordinary features. Comfort and functionality, not conspicuous display or individualisation through clothing (Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016), were salient themes. However, our study has shown that, rather than seeking comfort for its own sake, the ability to appreciate it belongs to the good life, a moral and social obligation (Fehérváry, 2012; Martens, 2018). Inconspicuous consumption is, for postsocialist consumers, crucial to their shifting understandings of the good life. Early postsocialist societies were marked by high social mobility and wide gaps between economic resources (necessary to procure the good life) and mastery of cultural codes (necessary to understand and live it). The cultural codes themselves were a matter of negotiation as the normativities of the good life in socialist regimes were displaced (i.e. Romania) or evolved (i.e. China) and new moral regimes had to grapple with the cultural anxieties brought about by uncertainties regarding the social standing and moral worth of postsocialist consumers. The interactional maintenance of the boundaries of practice posits conspicuous consumers as the ‘Other’ of postsocialist consumer culture, engendering near-constant performative efforts of distancing self from Other, of claiming for oneself legitimate entitlement to the good life. More than instruments of the good life, clothes are proof of its pursuit, validating worth to self and others. Dress practices are constitutive to the performance of more complex practices and the memberships they entail. Research in the two locales shows that moral consumption is neither forced upon nor created anew by consumers through sequential acts of buying and wearing or through fragmented interactions. It is embedded in everyday routine, enabled by the practical mastery of propriety and divergent socially acceptable concepts of right and wrong.

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Notes

1. Practical understandings aid in carrying out actions specified as reasonable, consisting of the competence to identify, act and respond in given situations. Rules encompass principles that shape and define courses of action. Teleoaffective structures comprise normatively ordered ends,

activities and emotions. Finally, general understandings refer to broader concepts, values and categories (Welch and Warde, 2017) that inform and orient the execution and expression of practices by ordering their teleoaffective structure and agents' practical understandings. They constitute widely shared, prereflexive cosmologies that enable and constrain practices, can reach beyond local practices and make sense of large-scale phenomena, bridging situated activity and discursive formations.

2. Thompson (2011) addresses the intricate interlinkages among consumption practices, cultural and political ideologies and moralised narratives, which lead consumers to engage in 'ethical' consumption or 'boycott' to 'express political dissent', achieve 'self-empowerment', 'avoid experiences of moral failing' in practical rather than symbolic ways (Thompson, 2011: 140-142). Combining Shove's practice theory with conventions theory, Truninger's (2011) discussion of innovations in cooking practices deals with moral concerns prompted by technological innovations in the kitchen (i.e. deskilling). Martens (2018) employs Schatzki's teleoaffective structures to explore how childcare practices are framed and shaped by moral discourses of parenting, safety, cleanliness, which are co-opted by markets and deployed in production, marketing and advertising.
3. Guanxi is an indigenous Chinese construct. It is defined as an informal, particularistic personal connection between two individuals who are bounded by an implicit psychological contract following social norms such as maintaining a long-term relationship, mutual commitment, loyalty, and obligation.
4. Regarding the detailed data collection process: the Chinese study involved individual interviews with fashion producers (25 respondents), focus group consumer interviews (50 respondents) and 18 months of non-participant observation in 2014–2015. Data analysed in this article were obtained through focus group interviews with Chinese university students or recent graduates. The respondents were recruited through snowball sampling based on the investigators' institutional and personal networks. Two universities were approached between December 2014 and June 2016 to recruit 25 respondents. All were aged 19 to 28; 13 were female and 12 male. The snowball sampling required that many were previously acquainted. Two male and two female focus groups were formed. That gender division was intended to minimise participants' unwillingness to discuss certain sensitive apparel issues with people of the opposite sex. Enabling them to speak more comfortably was assumed to have enhanced the depth of the data collected (Yelland and Gifford, 1995: 258). Two of the focus group interviews (one female and one male group) were conducted in Lanzhou and the others in Shanghai (again one female and one male group). Each lasted between one to two-and-a-half hours. The discussions were carried out in Mandarin and then transcribed and translated into English. The Romanian study involved 80 in-depth interviews and 11 months of non-participant observation in 2013–2014. The interview extracts presented were selected from among a sample of young, urban professionals, aged 25–35 living and working in Bucharest. The interviews were conducted in Romanian, integrally transcribed and translated into English. Of these interviews, forty-five were conducted in Bucharest, the Romanian capital city and the others in another city and two small towns in Romania. Forty interviewees were male and forty female, each lasted on average for 1-1.5 hours. The interviews were analysed following an interpretive approach that granted insight into the connections between dress and morality.

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