

The "Ivy" elements that have been elevated to a pedestal: Insights into identity and class transcendence behind the old money style's backs

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Abstract As a fashion style, the old money style itself has a clear aristocratic class attribute, but with the re-division of social classes, class stratification tends to be obvious, the old money style is actually characterized by a dual quality of "distinguishing and blurring" among its followers. Therefore, this study focuses on the typical element of the old money style: "ivy", and aims to explore how ivy elements serve as cultural symbols of identity and class mobility, providing explicit identifiers for new and old class identities. Through the study of Bourdieu theory, leisure class theory, rites of passage theory analysis. The research results show that both the old and the new money classes have a belief in "noble spirit" and attach importance to "elite education institute and degree awarding ceremony", while the Ivy element is defined as the typical expression of cultural capital and a powerful visualize tool for realizing "identity" and "class transcendence": As class travelers, the new money class has the shame of birth and the psychology of upward worship. They first accumulate the cultural capital of their descendants through economic capital, and then exchange the cultural capital with economic and social capital to integrate into the old money class. The offspring of the old money class have a youthful and energetic expression of fashion and life, and are more rebellious and eager to break away from the family and realize real personality independence and freedom. They are eager to exchange cultural capital for the rationalization of economic and social capital acquired by nature, and promote the aspirational class.

keywords: ivy elements, capital, class mobility, status identify.

1. Introduction

The role of cultural markers in social stratification—the extent to which class boundaries are drawn and maintained with the weapons of culture—is a long-standing topic at the heart of sociology. The old money aesthetic is one of these archetypes, and remains an enduring signifier of wealth, prestige and class rooted in the traditions of the Ivy League. Traditionally, Ivy League schools like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton have functioned as little more than academic institutions; rather, they functioned as arbiters of cultural capital, dictating the avenue through which power and influence were achieved. The style and symbols of the institution-crested blazers, collegiate sweaters, understated luxury-have come to denote academic credentials and a lifestyle of exclusivity and refinement.

In this sense, the Ivy elements, with the development and changes of social structures, come to be used in dual ways in contemporary society: first, they have been signs of the status held by the established elites; second, they are also adopted by new money that is involved in upward social mobility. This raises important questions about how cultural capital is changing and how these symbols balance inherited and acquired status. Digital media and globalization have made these symbols more accessible, possibly weakening their exclusivity, while still linking them to elite status.

This paper aims to answer the following questions: How does the Ivy element construct identity between the old money and new money classes? How do these elements influence social mobility in contemporary society? Using Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of cultural capital, which indicates the ways that education, taste, and style are put forth to solidify and question social hierarchies, the study investigates how these signs function in embodied, objectified, and institutionalized forms of capital. A theory from Thorstein Veblen about the leisure class further contextualizes subtle display as a marker for tradition and restraint in the name of social status. Second, rites of passage theory

helps explain how symbolic educational rituals, such as elite university graduations, are an entry into high-status social networks.

Despite considerable research into the transmission of cultural capital within and from elite institutions, less thought has been given to the ways in which such symbols of elite education are being reinterpreted through the digital age. Instagram and TikTok have democratized access to the aesthetics of the Ivy League, enabling wider social groups to use the symbols of the Ivy League, but little scholarship investigates how globalization and digital culture might reshape Ivy elements in ways that raise critical questions about what elite status might be in a networked world.

This paper contributes to a broadened understanding of how cultural symbols-Ivy elements in this case-are instrumental in navigating complex social dynamics. By tracing continuities in their deployed role regarding maintaining social boundaries, as well as their functionality in aspirational mobility, this research shows that such markers do indeed remain salient in shaping social mobility and identity within both local and global contexts.

2. The Evolution of Ivy Elements as Cultural Symbols

2.1. Historical Overview

In the early 20th century, the connection between Ivy League style and those of upper society arose from the fact that after all, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton were those institutes which drew large numbers of the upper class, who soon brought their cultural habits with them. Such clothing as khakis, blazers, and loafers born the "preppy" style, besides representing academic performance itself meant a life of luxury and ease. A degree from an Ivy League college was originally supposed to be a ticket into the upper class, giving the student the skills and credentials for a variety of leadership roles in industry, in politics, or in the cultural field. These graduates of Ivy League colleges distributed unequally among the members of cultural elites explain a way in which these institutions are shaping routes to influence and authority, thereby cementing the linkage between Ivy components and cultural capital.

The Ivy aesthetic included social rituals. It showed that people belonged to certain circles of society and participated in traditional sports as an expression of their elite status. They reinforced and renewed social boundaries, drawing the line between insiders and outsiders. After World War II, though more people had the opportunity for an elite education, Ivy League universities kept their exclusive character through inheritance and high fees, thereby sustaining social exclusion. Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction holds that this kind of cultural capital allows people to maintain their position in society over generations[1].

2.2. The Reinvention of Ivy Elements in the Digital Age

In the digital age, the elements of Ivy has undergone change yet again, via social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok where the "old money aesthetic" is newly popular. These platforms make fashion one man show which allows those outside traditional elite circles to wear Ivy elements, and blurring the lines between old and new money styles. This modern customer makeover is often traditional Ivy look with wild money-oriented touches.

However, problems of authenticity arise when Ivy elements are adopted without the elite social networks or educational background that usually accompany them. As Brint et al. point out, the legitimacy of cultural capital depends upon the institutions and social contexts which provide it[2]. The more general public accepts Ivy Style, the more it loses traditional links with privilege--and its role as a stable mark of elite status is challenged.

Social media has also helped spread the Ivy tendrils around the globe, this is reflected in the data on shopping websites as the host-selling items of old money brands differ in different regions. Through its worldwide influence, these hybrid styles combine Ivy aesthetics with local culture and keep the spirit of that style but reflect regional characteristics. Ivy items are reinvented in a dynamic process where elements easily adjust to social shifts or technological advancements, and hence

complicate the common understanding of what 'cultural capital' is visually expressed by traditional displays. Ivy League components development, the transition from cultural symbol to worldwide fashion. Several changes of meaning are now attached to them where there was originally only one (the changeable elite) and increasingly they are influenced by a digital media and global interconnection.

3. Cultural Tension Between New and Old Money

3.1. New Money: Adoption and Aspiration

The new money class often seeks to be accepted among the traditional elite circles by acquiring markers of cultural capital associated with the old money class. In addition to enrolling their children in top-bracket schools and colleges, they also invest in residences located prestigious neighborhoods plus wear Ivy League fashion. By doing these things, they are not only showing off their wealth—it's an attempt to establish social standing. To get some cultural status, this is a signal that they hope to integrate into established elite networks.

Using Bourdieu's theory of conversion economic into cultural capital, it becomes clear that new money families are drawn particularly to 'Ivy' elements. They try and bridge the gap between their newfound wealth and the cultural status that is needed for acceptance into upper-class society by gaining symbols associated with elite education, refinement, and cultural sophistication. This transformation process is more than merely a case of high-income individuals giving money to low-status ones. People must also adopt the lifestyle, look, and indeed “feel” of elite schools to assure their acceptance within traditional elite values. Klugman[3] explains how disparities in educational opportunities can affect college admissions, emphasizing that cultural capital—exemplified by the Ivy aesthetic—plays a crucial role in navigating social mobility.

This is an essential part of the journey for these children in new money families, who know that they must develop culturally to navigate the highest ranks of society. In addition to providing academic credentials, Ivy League institutions also serve as an arena or stage where cultural and social capital can be accumulated. This is why new money families invest so heavily in these places, arguing that without them it is impossible to get a foot on all the rungs of success for their descendants. According to Verhoeven et al.[4], it reflects broader social reproduction patterns where access to cultural capital via education perpetuates class advantage across generations and in doing so helps maintain elite privilege over time. For example, the research by Brint and Yoshikawa [5] about status transmission theory when applied to the educational backgrounds of U.S. business and political leaders. Their research undertaken entailed an examination of approximately 4,000 senior executives in 15 industries (including the government domain) showed that attaining a degree from a prestigious institution is approximately four to fivefold more probable to secure a high-caliber professional position in the corporate environment compared to graduates from standard undergraduate programs.

However, the adoption of Ivy elements by new money families is not without its challenges. Even though families of this sort can purchase cultural capital symbols in the outside world, they may still face barriers to full integration into elite social networks, where social connections, family heritage, and cultural authenticity are valued as much as, if not more than, wealth. Bathmaker et al. contend that while economic resources can provide access to certain forms of cultural capital, true social acceptance requires deeper socialization into elite cultural norms, which may be difficult for new money families to achieve despite their efforts.

3.2. Old Money: Preservation and Resistance

While new money may use Ivy elements as a softer way of appropriating cultural legitimacy, the old money adopts these symbols to mark out firm boundaries and distinctions between them and those with newly acquired wealth. The old money often perceives the widespread adoption of Ivy aesthetics by outsiders as a dilution of the cultural capital that traditionally signified their status.

Old money families usually perform cultural values such as discretion, humility and "good taste", unlike the more obnoxious forms of new money. The purpose of this strategy is to draw a distinction between old money elites and any new kinds who might be copying their way. According to Bunnell and Gardner-McTaggart [6], elite educational institutions often cultivate a form of "leadership nobility" that reinforces Anglo-European cultural values, thereby promoting traditional markers of elite status while resisting the democratization of cultural symbols.

The old money elite are also less likely to make cultural assimilation, due to the way they maintain their exclusiveness through social networks and institutional affiliations. Verhoeven et al. point that elite educational institutions do not only issue academic credentials but are also spaces where cultural boundaries are defined. The creation of unique social networks within these institutions further serves to keep cultural capital in the hands of established elites and prevents any meaningful integration into these circles for new money families, even if they share the same educational background.

4. Ivy Elements in the Context of Globalization

4.1. Global Dissemination of Ivy Symbols

Ivy League—the symbols as signifiers of elite cultural capital—now extend far beyond their original American and British context, providing aesthetically charged material to signal possession by wealthy individuals and anxious-to-aspirational groups all over the world. Ivy elements have ignited passion from Asia to the Middle East. The use of Western cultural markers to represent universal symbols modernity and sophistication in a global discourse is nothing unique, but part of larger patterns.

The "Chinese Ivy League", or C9 League in China, reflects to how western elite education models and habits are accepted around the world. The core purpose of these top universities is to transplant the Ivy League tradition and its aura of honor back to China, to gild China's stated wish for global prestige. Allen points that China's focus on improving its highest level of universities to world-class status shows its ambition for joining the global elite. However, these universities still symbolize exclusivity and reinforce social hierarchies due to unequal access to elite education.

In the Middle East, more and more Ivy signs are catching on with rich families who want to tout themselves as having Western standards of luxury and education. International schools for the elite, which often follow the British or American system of teaching, have played a crucial role in their success, because they spread the aesthetics of Ivy by promoting Anglo-European cultural values. Bunnell and Gardner-McTaggart describe how the educational system cultivates a particular kind of "leadership quality," creating a cultural capital which emphasizes all the traditional Western signs of social standing while at the same time trying to make its way through globalized local context. In such circumstances, Ivy elements are used not only to reflect style and taste, but also indicate one's social positioning and access to global networks.

4.2. Reinventing the Ivy Legacy

As Ivy adaptations go global, they take on new forms. Local cultural capital, merging elements of the West with indigenous cultural practices, emerges from these hybrid new ways of living and economy. In non-Western contexts, Ivy elements are reinterpreted to fit the social values, aesthetics and traditions of the region. In this way unique blends are created. While the symbolic power of Ivy is retained, they also serve outward so that international audiences can perceive their own cultural identities reflected in such ways.

The present global transition of Ivy elements mirrors more general trends in cultural capital, whereby the meanings of elite signs become increasingly fluid. As noted by Van Zanten [7], with the increased accessibility and availability of Western cultural signs - thus including Ivy-related markers - there is perhaps a challenge to their role as exclusive indicators of inherited privilege.

Thanks to social media and global consumer culture, the democratization of cultural symbols is gathering pace. Ivy-style props are becoming more and more common, and they have also become

more accessible than ever. Digital platforms like Instagram and TikTok facilitate the dissemination of Ivy style, allowing diverse groups to engage with and adopt these symbols. While this makes it an opportunity to democratize the composition, transportation and reception of high culture among ever larger numbers of people, it also blurs social distinctions. If Ivy elements are no longer exclusive and do not have such a monolithic link to status as before finally become mainstream, they may lose some of their original exclusivity and stable association with elite status.

5. Invisible Cultural Capital and the Transmission of Elite Values

In fact, Ivy elements is not just fashion statements but gatekeeping, too. Gaining entry opens doors to exclusive social networks otherwise off-limits—you can link up with high standing graduates associations there. In this respect, the jobs and networks established in these social hierarchies have played an important role. To this end, they offer career advancement opportunities for people who possess that educational background—and keep moving up by eliminating all competition before it starts. Lee [8] points that elite colleges play a key role in the reproduction of socioeconomic status by acting as gateways to networks that transmit cultural capital. Such institutions do not merely provide education but also grant social recognition, marking individuals as members of elite circles and sustaining social privilege across generations.

Ivy elements act as gatekeepers by granting access to important networks, like Ivy League alumni associations. These networks allow individuals to use cultural capital to gain resources that protect or improve their social status. Klugman illustrates that inequalities in educational resources—such as access to advanced courses—affect college admissions outcomes, thereby influencing how cultural capital is distributed within these elite networks. The symbols of Ivy elements not only reflect individual choices but also influence one's ability to navigate and succeed in exclusive social circles.

Elite education plays a significant role in social reproduction across societies. It functions to transmit social, economic and cultural capital from one generation to the next. According to Bourdieu's theory, by means of education system social hierarchies are justified and formed. In this view it is a process that turns inherited capital into academic qualifications. This process can also be seen as a form of social closure. Access to prestigious institutions is blocked not only by economic and cultural barriers but also those of costliness. In this way, it helps to keep social inequality perpetuated.

Elite educational institutions reinforce social boundaries not only by means of academics but also via the development of social capital and cultural socialization. High-status positions are overrepresented by those with privilege because of the edge elite educational opportunities give, such as specialized training and valuable networks —Friedman and Laurison[10] define as class ceiling effect. Those networks are often a key element in career advancement, making even more difficult for social mobility for those outside elite circles. Since income stratification of this kind is carried into a school, then those families who possess large economic resources and can invest massive amounts in additional educational inputs provided by private tuition, special programs or study abroad. Their children stand a much better chance of gaining admission to prestigious universities. This process ensures that those already possessing privilege can continue to accumulate additional capital, thereby reinforcing social boundaries within elite institutions.

6. Ivy Elements and the Future of Class Transcendence

Social media has changed how we see Ivy elements as symbols of privilege. Instagram and TikTok have made fashion trends and cultural symbols more accessible, allowing more people to engage with Ivy aesthetics. However, this wider access doesn't necessarily mean that cultural capital has become more equal. In Bourdieu's conceptualization, cultural capital is associated with forms of social network and educational pathway which provide legitimacy and status. At the same time, social media could magnify old forms of unequal visibility by drawing attention to elite lifestyles and modes of

consumption which would also provide a means for Ivy components to stand out as surrogates of distinction.

Whilst the visibility of Ivy-inspired content on social media can foster an illusion inclusivity, if anything it only serves to further cling onto these barriers that have inhibited those for so long. Institutional affiliations, such as legacy admissions and coopted alumni networks remain tools in old-money families' hands to blossoming their cultural capital over generations. This fits with Friedman and Laurison argument that class advantage persists through more traditional networks and qualifications, despite the changing cultural capital symbols of contemporary times. While Ivy style has been taken up more widely, its sectarianism will never wane because a good deal of the actual cultural capital that is closely associated with it lies beneath the surface.

While the digital age has changed how cultural capital is signaled, the underlying dynamics endure. Old money associates Ivy attributes with aristocratic affiliations, whereas newly rich gents employ social media to signify taste and elegance. While the curation of a digital self may become an important function in accruing symbolic capital, this is merely superficial and shallow compared to more authentic cumulative forms tied to longstanding cultural practices associated with old money wealth.

The globalization of Ivy elements demonstrates how cultural markers can retain their prestige while being adapted to different social contexts. Because as Cookson and Persell [11] contend, elite schools are one of the primary mechanisms for “social reproduction” — and their symbols can be used to signify cultural capital across borders. Though the meanings of Ivy elements may vary with region, they remain as tools for navigating global elite networks. The globalization of Ivy symbols to other geographies is not necessarily a simple story about the erosion of exclusivity but rather the evolution in how cultural capital is expressed and identified on a global stage.

7. Conclusion

This paper has investigated the meanings, via theories of cultural capital, social reproduction and conspicuous consumption, ways in which Ivy elements contribute to identity as performance/spectacle on class mobility trajectory. Elements of Ivy, developed within the US's top educational institutions, have long been markers not just academic elitism but exclusive social networks and privilege-laden lifestyles. Ivy elements have become signifiers of continuity, and authenticity for the old money class, and the boundaries between different classes and their respective cultures are clearly defined. Ivy ingredients work as instruments of social promotion for the new money class to convert economic capital into cultural capital.

Finally, the mass uptake of Ivy elements has been indicative of tensions between traditional and novel cultural capital. Though these symbols are now generally more accessible with the help of digital culture and through democratized access, this surplus has further complicated questions concerning authenticity and the preservation of social distinction. The members of these groups are utilizing Ivy elements as their own, undermining the ability to point to stable and exclusionary social status inherent in having Ivy or not — and thus changing what cultural capital is recognized.

The changing role of Ivy components in building social strata also raises many key avenues for future research. A key issue in this context concerns the role of digital media in facilitating cultural capital, as social media can change how we value and understand symbolic contents while changing mechanisms that reproduce social position. With the proliferation of digital culture opening new access routes to cultural markers, it's worth asking: does this democratization bring about real changes in social mobility, or just a different way of entrenched social inequality?

We also need to consider the role that non-Western elites play in redefining what Ivy elements really mean. The Ivy components were adopted to various degrees by global elites, and their meanings may diverge with local cultural values and hierarchy systems. An important area of research across different cultures may provide insight into how global icons of cultural capital are translated through local traditions, and subsequently impact social stratification and mobility.

We need to go deeper into examining the role of universities in sidestepping or creating social boundaries. While elite universities remains important gatekeepers of cultural capital, the growing focus on meritocracy, internationalization and diverse student bodies may introduce new processes in how social status is acquired and maintained. Understanding these changes will be key in assessing the prospects for mobilising beyond class and the trajectory of cultural capital in an undulating world. In particular, future research should look into the influence of educational policies and institutional practices on pathways related with cultural symbols such as Ivy elements, especially how these cultural symbols might shape its value to affect social mobility trajectories at national and global levels.

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