Revisiting Emulation: an Empirical Illustration of Status Aspirational Approaches

Sofia Ulver Sneistrup, Lund University, Sweden
Jacob Ostberg, Stockholm University, Sweden

We illustrate that the theory of emulation is neither outdated, nor exploited—yet misunderstood, and identify nuances of emulative approaches on the level of social relations and show how they are structured according to dimensions of orientation and imitated authorities. By distinguishing between material style diffusion and emulative motives we show that material objects may move any direction whilst emulative motives always are directed upwards. Hence, consumers’ different emulative approaches may move material style from one unexpected group to another, but the meta motive is bound to the quest for a comfortable position in the universe of over-lapping status games.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13965/eacr/vol8/E-08

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Revisiting Emulation: An Empirical Illustration of Status Aspirational Approaches
Sofia Ulver, Lund University, Sweden
Jacob Ostberg, Stockholm University, Sweden

ABSTRACT

We illustrate that the theory of emulation is neither outdated, nor exploited—yet misunderstood, and identify nuances of emulative approaches on the level of social relations and show how they are structured according to dimensions of orientation and imitated authorities. By distinguishing between material style diffusion and emulative motives we show that material objects may move any direction whilst emulative motives always are directed upwards. Hence, consumers’ different emulative approaches may move material style from one unexpected group to another, but the meta motive is bound to the quest for a comfortable position in the universe of over-lapping status games.

“Oh if my uncle could see me know
If he could see how many rappers wanna be me now
Straight emulating my style”
(Nelly, “#1” 2002)

It must in practice seem somewhat bizarre that many social and cultural theorists claim that status aspirational imitation no longer exists. Especially in the light of today’s “bling-bling” culture, the embodiment of the same through TV shows like “MTV Cribs” and the proliferation of luxurious brands such as Gucci and Louis Vuitton. Still, the last forty years of consumer research have been characterized by an increasing celebration of the individual, seeing her as a self-made “project” with an emancipatory sovereignty to pick and choose what she desires- maybe even more importantly reject what she doesn’t desire- from the perpetual offerings of styles and goods around her (Baudrillard [1970]1998; Brown 1993; Featherstone 1991; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Hassan 1985; Jameson 1991; Sherry 1991). Alas, this celebration of individual power has fuelled the rejection of style diffusion explanations leaning on status aspirational imitation, despite constant everyday evidence of exactly that.

The most renowned theory on style diffusion as a result of status aspirations, in consumer research, is the classical emulation theory. Since Veblen presented his theory on conspicuous consumption as conspicuous waste in 1899—and did so by explaining it with the emulative motive— emulation has attracted innumerable connotations followed by increased criticism along the way. Today the emulation theory owns the unflattering capability of generating, relatively speaking, academic consensus, namely on it’s relative inaccuracy. However, much of the criticism directed at the emulation theory is based upon historically accumulated connotations that in turn rest upon dubious and even erroneous assumptions. For any scholar who freshly joins the field of consumer research today, the multi-layered critique against emulation will be conceptually confusing. Due to the accumulated connotations and assumptions behind this critique, the theory of emulation is therefore many times rejected all too hastily. Recently scholars within marketing and consumer research (Chaudhuri and Majumdar 2006) have tried to recapitulate Veblen’s consumption theory according to contemporary ideological structures, but the focus has been, as often is the case, on the output concept ‘conspicuous consumption’ instead of on the motives behind emulation.

Our analysis of the theoretical foundations of emulation theory shows that the concept has been discharged too hastily and without proper argumentation. We therefore propose that the concept be dusted off and again brought into the warmth of contemporary consumer research. In support of this argument, we show results from a multi-sited empirical investigation into the field of home aesthetics where emulation theory indeed provides ample explanatory value.

REVISITING CLASSICAL EMULATION THEORY

We will start this section by briskly going through the central theses behind the emulation theory. We then thematize and critically discuss the critique and assumptions made in central consumer research literature regarding emulation and thereby approach the theory more in detail. The next section contains an empirical illustration of status aspiration approaches explained by emulation theory.

Early emulation theory: Veblen and Simmel. The theory of emulation dates back to the end of the 19th century and Thorstein Veblen’s seminal work The theory of the leisure class (Veblen [1899]1994). In this critical work Veblen introduced the central notions of conspicuous consumption, the law of conspicuous waste, and the emulative motive. Veblen ironically bantered the new capitalist classes for their conspicuous lifestyles in terms of pecuniary wealth shown through consumer goods, and compared them to the Victorian upper classes whose pecuniary wealth would be manifested through conspicuous leisure time. All as a result of the emulative process which is characterized by the fact that a class, lower in relation to another, will always emulate its superiors. As an explanation for the law of conspicuous waste, and for emulation per se, Veblen brought forward the emulative motive and presented it not only as the motor of all consumption increase, but also as the creator of social structure of which itself is encouraged. Campbell (1995) concludes Veblens emulative motives as: (1) the protection and enhancement of self-esteem, which is accorded by others, (2) the satisfaction and gratification coming from possessing something more than others, and (3) the desire to gain envy from one’s fellow-men.

Veblen actually saw the emulative motive as the strongest motive of all apart from self-preservation, and thereby underlined its structural significance. He meant that any surplus of goods which the community’s produces would be absorbed by the need for conspicuous waste as soon as provision for the most elementory physical wants had been secured. That is; social status would, through the emulative motive, be the major structure behind consumption:

The motive that lies at the root of ownership is emulation; and the same motive of emulation continues active in the further development of the institution to which it has given rise and in the development of all those features of the social structure which this institution of ownership touches. (Veblen [1899]1994:17)

If Veblen was the first to focus on conceptualizing emulation, Georg Simmel went further in trying to explain the socio-psychological forces behind the emulative imitation described by Veblen. Simmel ([1904] 1957) explained the social processes of emulation in general and fashion in particular. He claimed that two antagonistic forces, which mutually limit each other, influence the individual and the public minds: the tendencies of generalization and special-
Revisiting Emulation: An Empirical Illustration of Status Aspirational Approaches

zation, or in other terms of expression: adaptation and differentiation. The former “gives rest to the soul” (p.542) whereas the latter permits a freedom to “move from example to example” (p.542). This dualism is according to Simmel represented socially through social adaptation and differentiation where fashion satisfies both those needs through imitation and demarcation. Imitation works in favour of social adaptation, transfers responsibility of choice onto others, and is therefore in a sense passive. The tendency of demarcation on the other hand is satisfied both through a constant change of content, and not the least through the division between social classes.

Simmel argued that fashion always differs between the social classes, and that the upper stratum abandons its fashions as soon as the lower stratum prepares to appropriate them. The reason for why the lower classes strive upwards is according to Simmel due to the social struggle for resources and privileges society hands the upper classes but deny the lower. Thus, the reason why the lower classes imitate the upper-classes is because envy creates, according to Simmel, a relationship between the one who envies and the person being envied. A relationship assuming some kind of unification, although in this case asymmetrical in its appropriation.

Because style and fashion are aspects of the external life, they are according to Simmel what the lower classes can imitate, as opposed to more subtle consumer practises which are impossible or very hard to imitate (compare Bourdieu, ([1979] 1984)). Therefore, according to Simmel, as wealth increases in the world, the process of change in styles and fashions will speed up further- and hence, emulation too:

Changes in fashion reflect the dullness of nervous impulses: the more nervous the age, the more rapidly its fashion change, simply because the desire for differentiation, one of the most important elements of fashion, goes hand in hand with the weakening of nervous energy. This fact in itself is one of the reasons why the real seat of fashion is found among the upper classes” (Simmel, 1904[1957]; p.547)

CRITIQUE OF EMULATION

Most of the critique against Veblen’s and Simmel’s emulation theories include rejections based on their historical bias. We have, based on a literature review, thematized this critique based on the erroneous assumptions behind these rejections and discuss them under the headings assumed stratification and erroneous materialization.

Assumed stratification. Modernity is commonly seen as a condition where the traditional social order, characterized by a purely economic organization, has loosened up and introduced new cultural, social and political patterns, in which individual achievement has replaced the “cosmological”, social order where status was ascribed at birth (Giddens 1990; Slater and Tonkiss 2001). The most common assumption among emulation critics is that emulation must rest upon such traditional rigid structures (Douglas 1996; Douglas and Isherwood 1980; McCracken 1988b). When these structures no longer exist, neither does emulation. However, the terms used by Simmel and Veblen to distinguish between dominant and dominated groups in society, can easily be seen as metaphors for relative positions in any experienced hierarchy, fluid or static. As the term hierarchy, like emulation, is burdened by ‘social class’ connotations, it is a strenuous task to use it in an argument meant to clean emulation from its static associations. However, a hierarchy has generically nothing to do with social classes and says nothing about the criteria for why someone is above, next to, or under someone else. The units of the hierarchy can be anything from individuals, tribes, groups, communities, families, households, couples, to social or cultural strata such as ‘classes’. A hierarchy only suggests that according to one or another criteria, stable or not, at one specific moment, there is one unit in a more dominant position relative another. That’s how static a hierarchy must be to be a hierarchy; hence, not static at all.

Erroneous Materialization. A recurrent assumption regarding emulation theory is that one can study a material style and reject emulation if this style has not followed a “top-down” direction in terms of the specific status hierarchy at hand. Typically, the few studies that empirically have been able to show examples of higher status groups adopting styles from lower status groups, and not the other way around, have also mistaken this as a falsification of the emulation theory. Jensen (1999) argues that Lipovetsky’s (1994) ‘marginal differentiation’ has become ‘absolute differentiation’ so that linear diffusion processes no longer are at work; grassroots styles don’t imitate anything but are created to oppose the dominant styles. Therefore processes of “trickle-up” and “trickle-across” instead of “trickle-down” direction are said to be more adherent in today’s un-linear fashion system. In support of this, there are a few studies by Postrel (2003), Rocamora (2002), Jensen (1999), Lipovetsky (1994), McCracken’s (1988b), and Hebdige (1979), who all cross-reference each other in support of their argument and essentially rest on King’s (1963) in order to get support for the trickle-across process. But besides these few studies, none or little empirical work has been brought out to further explore consumer motives behind style adoption.

What these critics argue, is that simultaneously with the dissolution of social classes, society has gone through a dematerialization, which has led to, and itself is a product of, the arbitrary diffusion of styles. In other words, dematerialization has emerged in favour for consumption of taste where one no longer can detect on a person’s material style (i.e. in dress or home decoration style) what social class that person belongs to (Pakulski and Waters 1996; Shipman 2004). This is of course a tricky argument as the mere fact of social classes having more or less dissolved would theoretically be enough for the non-existence of differences in styles. But more importantly does this critique confuse its object of critique with its own unit of analysis. If dematerialization is what has happened then why study material styles? Even if the material styles seem arbitrarily diffused, there may very well be a pattern of underlying motive which is much more stratification-depending than it looks on the surface. Alas, what should be studied, and this was already acclaimed by Veblen, is the motive behind the imitative “choices”, rather than the actual style imitated. By studying the emulative motive, instead of the material style, one can see that people often imitate styles from one group in order to enhance their status in another group. Thus, they have imitated an external source to impress someone in their internal status game. Is this not emulation? In fact, status has been competed for by means of imitation of style- if so vicariously.

The rest of this paper is devoted to the results of an empirical study of consumer discourses on home aesthetics. The aim is to identify nuances of consumers’ emulative practices, and investigate their relation to structural considerations, in order to illustrate how emulation theory still provides ample explanatory power in understanding consumers’ motivations.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study takes its methodological departure in the field of Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005) in which the existential phenomenological view (Thompson 1997; Thomp-
son et al. 1989) is often used as a philosophical departure. The existential phenomenological approach is presented as “a paradigm for studying consumer experience” (Thompson et al. 1989, p.133) and carries both philosophical meanings and methodological implications. Furthermore, its conception of understanding refers to the “hermeneutical circle” (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1994) and the iterative process in which meanings are derived from first persons’ descriptions of experiences.

An essential part of the methodology is to structure consumers’ consumption stories in relation to their particular life-themes and life-projects (Mick and Buhl 1992). This contextualization of the participants’ consumption provides more interpretive depth than merely asking for a list of social facts such as gender, age, income, and occupation. To arrive at a consumer near discourse of actual consumption practices, the interviews were characterized by a conversational style in which the participants talked freely. This research approach requires long relatively un-structured interviews in which the respondents are encouraged to tell stories from their past and present. The focus of the interviews was to gain an understanding of the participant’s consumption practices within home aesthetics, and thereby to seek insights into particular motives and choices concerning possible emulation. To structure the dialogue, and make sure that the same overriding themes were covered during the different interviews, a template was used with different topics (such as childhood home, home-styling, status, taste) around which the conversation during the interview revolved, although in as unobtrusive a manner as possible (McCracken 1988a).

Interviews were conducted in two different locations in order to capture the global flow of authoritative cultural meanings and how they co-exist with different local variations. This type of multi-sited ethnographic approach is conceptually introduced and described by Marcus as an alternative research mode to the traditional, single-sited, ethnographic approach. In this globalized view, the world is seen as a complex system, in which global flows instead of local situations must be the sites for investigation. Kjeldgaard et al. (forthcoming 2007) further sees this approach as an alternative to the modernistic “cross-cultural” approach in which static views on nation states and their inhabitants have dominated decisions on research scopes and sites. In the multi-sited approach one must follow cultural phenomena, metaphors, things, conflicts, people or biographies as were they flows of globalization in line with Arjun Appadurai’s (1990) seminal definition of globalization.

An underlying assumption during the interviews is that discourses of modernity are one dominant theme guiding consumers in their consumption of home aesthetics. In order to capture the global flows of such discourses, two urban settings were chosen on basis of their highly different socio-historical and cultural contexts. Philadelphia—in the neo-liberal, hyper modern, and Western United States with its relatively short history—as one, and Istanbul—In the Muslim, albeit officially secular, country of Turkey with its long dynamic history of Byzantines fighting the Muslims, the Ottoman Empire, and Ataturk’s creation of the “Western” Turkish republic in the 1920’s—as the other.

The sample of respondents in both Philadelphia and Istanbul was generated a couple of months beforehand by asking local contacts to look for consumers willing to do a long interview about home aesthetics in the relative privacy of their home. Among the 20 proposed respondents in Philadelphia and 22 proposed in Istanbul, we strategically chose 11 respondents in Philadelphia and 14 respondents in Istanbul for final interviews. The choice was based on an objective to come home with at least 7-9 “good” interviews from each site, as suggested by McCracken (1988a).

for choice of respondents was that they should vary in the typical social categories of living-area, background, age, gender, income and profession, but still belong to a larger, global “middle class” (see i.e. Woodward 2003). This refers to an approximate average of symbolic capital in general and cultural capital in particular as operationalized by Bourdieu ([1979] 1984) and Holt (1998).

EMULATIVE APPROACHES

In this section we give empirical examples of how emulation theory pertinently explains consumers’ discursive representations of their consumption practices in the domain of home aesthetics.

To structure our analysis we use the figure below, where we structure different nuances of consumers’ emulative approaches. The concept of emulative approaches differs from what Veblen and Campbell call “emulative motives”. The latter refers to motives for the existence of emulation per se. Our starting point is that this overall motive for emulation is valid; that consumers are always trying to consume in a manner that enhances their status, consciously or unconsciously. But it is not enough to say that consumers are trying to achieve higher status, as this is too vague a description, and on the highest abstraction level valid for all. In addition, in contemporary consumer society there are simply too many multiple status hierarchies simultaneously influencing consumers to allow for such a univocal description of all extant complexities. Hence, what we aim to add to the emulation theory is a social relational level with nuances of emulative approaches.

That is, particular approaches consumers use in terms of social relations when they emulate. Hence, we look at how participants approach their consumption universe, by looking at what force that predominantly governs their social worldview, in relation to their choice of material style authorities. These dimensions emerged during the analysis of the data and are used to place the individuals’ discursive representations along a continuum according to the axes in the figure. The labels on the axes are not mutually exclusive dichotomies but merely continuums used in mapping consumers in relation to each other.

The vertical dimension, avoidance oriented versus unification oriented, refers to the two antagonistic forces which Simmel ([1904] 1957), in his theory on emulation, claims that we are continuously drawn and pulled between. According to Simmel both these traits are always simultaneously present in an individual but one or the other might have a stronger presence either permanently or at a particular point of time. The horizontal dimension, proximal authorities versus distant authorities, refers to whom the respondent chooses to imitate in order to consume in a manner that allows for either avoidance or unification. The horizontal dimension is thus subordinate to the vertical dimension. First and foremost, a consumer has a general direction towards being avoidance oriented or unification oriented. In order to turn this general direction into practice, some type of style authorities are always used and these might be distant or proximal. The distant authorities might include representations from film, literature or popular culture and the proximal authorities include individuals or groups in ones’ direct physical environment that one thereby comes in actual contact with like kin, neighbors or other acquaintances.

It became apparent during the analysis that the above distinction between forces of avoidance and unification on one hand, and proximal and distant authorities on the other, had to be made. The former is a whole orientation in how a consumer classifies the world and henceforth her taste (not much different from Bourdieu’s habitus), in terms of whether she foremost defines that universe in terms of what she is or what she is not. In contrast, the dimension of authorities refers to the actual materialized imitation. That is, a
distinction is made between unification, which takes place on a level of classification, and imitation, which takes place on an embodied style level. Alas, one can be predominantly avoidance-oriented when classifying the universe, and still identify with and imitate certain style authorities. With this said, we see that there is always imitation, and demarcation is merely a result from avoidance-oriented imitation. Hence, an emulative approach:

In the following we will describe four ideal-types of emulative approaches on a level of social relations. The different ideal-types have been described in the figure by the general orientation towards emulation expressed by the participating consumers. While the analysis is inspired by the entire data set, the ideal-types are each exemplified by one consumer that we have chosen to represent the particular approach.

**Union by communitarianism.** Consumers who are unification oriented in their classification of the world and who ultimately imitate proximal authorities are directed towards communitarianism. By this we mean that they let the community they are in determine what style to imitate. They also express a strong bond with this community and through language make it clear that their main approach is to stay within a union of communitarian character. On a stratification level these consumers see themselves as part of a "gemeinschaft"-like formation and a more traditional sociality of inner-direction where people are drawn into roles “that make a socially acceptable contribution” (Riesman [1961] 2001). Due to this experience of a very traditional social order these consumers’ emulative approach is the one, relative the others in our study, that most strictly resembles the emulation advocated by Simmel and Veblen. In the example with Olcay, a 52-year-old Turkish woman in Istanbul, we see how there is an experienced, concrete pressure to live up to some ideal standard defined by others in social situations in general:

Oclay: There is the society. You’d be humiliated in your community. Your friends, your circle wouldn’t tolerate it [living with a partner you are not married to].

I: Does it mean they would treat you differently because your daughter lives with her boyfriend?

Oclay: Well, sure, they would mention it. You’d be bothered by their talking. They’d do everything with talks.

I: Well, OK, they’d talk et cetera but would they also exclude you from the community? Like punishing: “Oh no, your daughter does this, does that, let’s not meet her.”

Oclay: Well, not as much in a group of our class. But in a, let’s say, of lower income or a more low social level… I mean, we are a family of a good level in Turkey and Istanbul… Indeed, they would exclude.

Despite Olcay’s statement that social sanctions mostly take place in “lower social levels” than her own, she still admits to the social pressure created by the talk and gossip of her community. The same social pressure is present in Olcay’s community in terms of home furnishing. She refers to the explicitly lived pressure from
“the environment” and how that forces her and her family to consume in a manner expected of them by these proximal authorities in order to not be excluded from the community:

Olcay: For two or three years we have just that sofa in our salon, and nothing else, not this table etc, we were going to buy new furniture but we didn’t, I don’t know why, uh, we didn’t find anything to buy. We didn’t find anything good enough, we didn’t like anything so much to buy. Because when you buy furniture it will last 10 years or something, we don’t change the furniture so much, so we stayed like that for two or three years. And uh, after, uh, after that period, or in that period we had the pressure from the environment: “Why is it like that?” “Why don’t you buy?”, “What is this?”. And so, things like that. And then we, uh, are forced to, and then we were forced to go and buy the furniture.

Olcay exhibits a unification oriented organization of taste. This implies that she predominantly describes her taste preferences in terms of what she wants to be, or what she has to be, instead of what she does not want to be like on a general level, but also on an aesthetic level as exemplified by the quote below:

Olcay: When I, when I were younger my uh, my friends, people around me would not be interested in my house they say “oh, okay, it’s a very, uh, comfortable sofa, and they won’t even realize that I have only one sofa in my salon but, uh, but people around me, around my age now, uh, when they come to my house and see a single sofa, or maybe other decorative items like this in the floor, and etcetera, it might be comfortable but they would say “what kind of a house is that, is it only a sofa, what is it?” (M, 52, Turkey)

Here it is obvious that other cultural motives, such as comfort, are subordinate to the emotive motive.

Demarcation by localism. Consumers who are predominantly avoidance oriented and use proximal authorities to satisfy this orientation, express the most contradictive type of emotive approach in our investigation. It is contradictive in the sense that these consumers express a crystal clear wish to demarcate from what is familiar, but they are not independent or motivated enough to do this on their own. Instead, they find a local authority in their physical surrounding who can take the ultimate responsibility for the symbolic qualities of the style chosen:

Paul: John is always an influence on those things because he is always pushing those ideas on me...older items like the dish-ware being white...it was a specific demand he had...
I: Where do you think he gets his influence from?
Paul: Uhm...friends in England, I guess...but I’m not the one to talk about European things...but I think the white dish-ware is a classic French thing...and...I don’t know...I said England for some reason for the darker wood...I don’t even know if that is true at all...
I: But how come you associate the white with French?
Paul: That was because of John...he said that outright...the white plates were a French thing...like elegant plates and cups and things like that...the classic French thing... (M, 28, USA)

Still, consumers like Paul describe their tastes predominantly in opposition to “others” despite their identification with proximal authorities. How can this contradiction take place? An explanation for Paul’s approach could be Douglas Holt’s (1998) interpretation of Bourdieu’s theory on cultural capital. Paul is clearly driven by the provocation of the “anonymous mass”, but he does not possess sufficient cultural resources to materialize the wished demarcation on his own. He needs outside confirmation in terms of a role-model whom he finds in a present and concrete cultural authority. This way he can be sure he imitates the “correct” style, while simultaneously guaranteeing singularity in relation to the one’s he calls “everyone else”:

Paul: I am definitely going away from a modern look. The only exceptions are the two electronic appliances...it is truly deviating from that idea. I am definitely going away from a more typical home-look...not in a modern way just the opposite...more in an antique way [...] I am trying to associate with a more specific time period where they will be more commonly seen...because you do not run into these items in most people’s houses...these days...which is part of the reason I got them in the first place...I did not want the same items everyone else had purchased at the same store...” (M, 28, USA)

The moral connotations we draw from Paul seeing himself as different from “typical” people, indicate that Paul experiences himself in some status hierarchy that he otherwise does not readily specify.

Unification by globalization. Those who are unification oriented and draw inspiration from distant authorities seek a unification on a level which we describe as globalization. The notion of globalization works on two levels. On the authority level, the contemporary mass-medial world is represented by globally broadcasted home furnishing shows, interior style magazines, etcetera. On the level of unification, it represents an imagined mass of global citizens. In literature on contemporary society, the anonymization of “the Other” is said to be a central theme in the globalization of late modernity or postmodernity (Giddens 1990). In this view, more and more contact and identification is made with secondary, instead of with primary, groups. Such “global identification” should be prevalent amongst all consumers of our times according to the postmodern literature (Baudrillard 1995; Featherstone 1991). This is not necessarily always the case as we have seen in previous sections where consumers compare themselves with concrete and proximal cultural authorities. Many respondents, however, reveal a strong identification with what is going on outside their primary environment. Primarily by drawing inspiration from the mediascapes described by Appadurai (1990):

Karolyn: HDTV is a cable station here that does a lot of home remodeling. I started watching HDTV over the Christmas holiday, since the Christmas holidays I’ve painted my living room, my dining room, had my hard-wood floors re-finished, painted my, uh, bedroom … and, uh, I think that’s pretty much it. Oh (!), and the living room set, I moved my living room set to the basement, in what (?) the last three months.
I: Because of something they said there?
Karolyn: Just seeing, getting new ideas and flavor, I had the guidance to different paint colors, and contrasting
Karolyn is very actively trying to emulate the style proposed by the style authorities of the HDTV. She thereby does not partake in the interpretive acts of “naturalizing, problematizing, juxtaposing, and transforming” countervailing cultural meanings described by Thompson and Haytko (Thompson: 37). Instead she is willing, in a rather unreflective manner, to buy into the style dictated by these authorities. The driving force behind Karolyn’s emulation—unification—is directed towards an imagined global standard of “contemporary” [her own term] living. The potential stigma of unifying with the pop cultural massification of society proposed already by Theodor Adorno (Adorno) does not seem to worry these consumers. Rather, there is a pride in being a “global citizen” (Holt 2004) where being “up-to-date” according to the standards is the same as being ahead in a status hierarchy defined by mass fashion.

Demarcation by Escapism. The last type of emulation is when a consumer is avoidance oriented and imitates distant authorities. Many of these consumers exhibited a strong urge to escape the homogeneous standardization effects conned by modernity. These consumers instead identified with fictive cultural authorities of taste, hand picked to contrast with the masses. In this way the avoidance force is strongly at work simultaneously with the imitation of an imagined authority. In the case with Brenda below, the contrast to “modern times” takes its expression in nostalgia (Brown 1999), in home-styling often associated with the sturdiness of traditional aristocracy and colonialism (Rybczynski 1987). This could be seen as both a strategy, in terms of the upper-class aspiration, and a status corrector, in terms of its “homey” (McCracken 1989):

Brenda: Oh... I really like early poverty, I like that expression, I would like to say early Victorian poverty. I feel as though every house in which I have ever lived has always appeared to be clearly a British man’s club. Because being married I always thought it was grossly unfair to force the man to live with floral everything [...] I: What kind of inspiration did you have then, what images and books or magazines or... history books, what inspired you to create that certain style? Where have you gotten that certain inspiration from?
Brenda: I’m going straight back to that movie Mary Poppins, because palm trees, zebra skins on the floor, to me and... Books! Overall books! (F, 43, USA)

Brenda receives inspiration from the style of “early Victorian poverty” that she sees as a quaint marker of a connection with the past. Even further away from the harsh, and perhaps boring, reality of everyday domestic life, she draws inspiration from Mary Poppins, a fictional character living in a fantasy world. Judging by the fact that her and her family live on incomes under poverty level, it is clear that she in no ways truly embodies a voluntary simplistic lifestyle. Despite her scarce economy, she refuses to give up her standards of “good taste”:

I: What about your own home? Have you spent a lot of money on your furniture?
Brenda: No, I haven’t and that’s only because I, I’ve always thought that was only because I’ve never had a lot of money for furniture, however: my philosophy for life is that poverty is no excuse for bad taste.

The below quote further shows how Brenda shies away from what she sees as common. It is clear that the significance of this commonness is not in the consumption objects per se but in how different style authorities use the objects and how they are thereby disseminated to the masses:

Brenda: [L.L. Bean is] an elitist, very preppy, let’s just call it “Kennedy family”-as-a-way-to-describe-it-uhm-catalogue. [L.L. Bean] branched out, they were not only selling clothes, they were also selling furniture and home décor. This fabric [the one we are sitting on] was all over the catalogue like a bad rash! You could order sofas, foot stools, chairs... little things for the bed room, pillows, and it was all in this fabric, so now of course it’s time for me to change my fabric

I: So now it’s famous?
Brenda: Yes, and now, even though I still like it, I certainly don’t want what everyone else has! (F, 43, USA)

Brenda’s use of the strong expressions “like a bad rash” to describe how her fabric was vulgarized by L.L. Bean shows how strong her inclination towards avoidance is. In Brenda’s case, this inclination is so strong that she turns to purely fictional authorities, like Mary Poppins, to escape being connected to the vulgarities of mass taste. More importantly, with this avoidance approach she manages to emotionally escape from today’s reality and emulate style authorities from a distant time and place that holds a safe position in the upper parts of a rigid status hierarchy. Thereby she remains, in her imagination, untouched by “reality’s” economically driven status hierarchies within which she cannot compete.

DISCUSSION

In this paper we have illustrated that the theory of emulation is neither outdated, nor exploited—yet misunderstood. We have identified nuances of emulative approaches on the level of social relations and show how they are structured according to dimensions of orientation and imitation authorities. These findings suggest that emulation is a valid concept in explaining consumers’ consumption choices. A potential explanation for the previous rejection of emulation can be found in the controversy around the notion of “trickle down”, which is many times conceptually confused with emulation. In the “trickle down” conceptualization there has been a conflation between material style movement on one hand and emulative motives on the other. If a distinction instead is made between these dimensions, as we have done in this paper, it becomes apparent that material objects may move any direction whilst emulative motives always are directed upwards along subjectively experienced status ladders. Hence, consumers’ different emulative approaches may move material style from one unexpected group or strata of people to another, but the meta motive is eternally bound to the quest for a comfortable position in the universe of overlapping status games.

Furthermore, these findings challenge the strands within consumer culture research that predominantly focus on consumer agency and individualist power (e.g. Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Thompson and Haytko 1997). The empirical examples given in the present paper suggest that consumers, despite a more fragmented and less rigidly structured society, contribute to reproducing more or less set status hierarchies through emulative practices. Although experienced subjectively, our participants clearly speak of assumed hierarchies as objectively structural and inevitable.
Finally, the multi-sited nature of the empirical study allowed us to see how global discourses of styles are disseminated to and interpreted in different locations. Especially wide-spread styles like “modernism” come to serve different roles as abstract distant style authorities depending on the local context. The previously localized status hierarchies are thereby challenged by increasing global influences for consumers where it is entirely possible to emulate styles that are both unusual and perhaps incomprehensible for the local crowd. Nevertheless, emulation it is.

REFERENCES
Jameson, Fredric (1991), Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
McCacken, Grant (1988a), The long interview, California: Sage.
McCacken, Grant David (1988b), Culture and consumption : new approaches to the symbolic character of consumer goods and activities, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Revisiting Emulation: An Empirical Illustration of Status Aspirational Approaches
