



# ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

---

Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

## **Flying With Feathers on Bubbles: Reclaiming Public Space Through the Sharing of Ludic Experiences**

Yesim Ozalp, York University, Canada

Daiane Scaraboto, York University, Canada

Mei-Ling Wei, Saint Mary's University, Canada

In this paper, we investigate how public spaces are realized (stabilized, qualified and destabilized) in part by playful acts of consumer resistance. Drawing from an ethnographic study, we show how the sharing of ludic experiences becomes instrumental in mobilizing publics.

### **[to cite]:**

Yesim Ozalp, Daiane Scaraboto, and Mei-Ling Wei (2011), "Flying With Feathers on Bubbles: Reclaiming Public Space Through the Sharing of Ludic Experiences", in E - European Advances in Consumer Research Volume 9, eds. Alan Bradshaw, Chris Hackley, and Pauline Maclaran, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 56-57.

### **[url]:**

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1006946/eacr/vol9/E-09>

### **[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/>.

within the market. The visibility progressively assumed by street art and its ideological power are able to infuse new meanings into brand narratives (Cayla and Arnould 2008). Especially when brand narratives are constructed around a complex and partially conflictual system of parts (“brand gestalt,” Diamond et al. 2009), companies may appreciate the potentialities hidden in the incorporation of the multifaceted street art’s values, communication codes, and/or aesthetic style-marks. The complexity and variety of meanings accompanying street art makes it a multivalent storyteller, which marketers can learn to accommodate, respect or even endorse.

Thus, our work reveals the connections between the social world and the market (Peñaloza and Venkatesh 2006). On the one hand, ongoing social debate—in our case about public space consumption via street art—may inspire marketing strategies by updating market conversations, refreshing companies’ communication style or rejuvenating products and stores (Borghini et al. forthcoming). On the other hand, the social debate can be also fuelled with the expansion of the market. Street art is a vivid example of market contestation—as such, a counterculture—since it openly attacks the overwhelming presence of commercial ads in the streets (what world famous street artist Banksy defines “brandalism,” 2006), the constant incitement to materialism, and the celebration of individualism against joint possessions (Belk 2010).

Even more peculiarly, our work also unpacks the connections between privately owned and collective goods. The counterculture of sharing as framed in the context of public space consumption assumes its proper features only in sharp confrontation with the dominating culture of materialism rooted in private consumption. Similarly, the literature on consumer resistance (Murray and Ozanne 1991) and social movements (Kozinets and Handelman 2004) assume additional depth when we locate such anti-consumeristic countercultures of privately owned goods in close propinquity with the collectivistic appraisal of public goods, and public space here in detail. We argue that some of the argumentations developed around public space mirror, overthrow or endorse the traits sustaining individual materialism as well as consumer resistance.

While interpreting our ethnographic data, as researchers we had to move back and forth the private and the public, as well as the market and the social. Critics of marketing and consumption in contemporary life are realizing that indictments of countercultural selling out and corporate co-optation of dissent are increasingly misplaced. There is a dawning recognition that “marketing has simply become so diffuse as to be a social activity,” and that both counterculture and corporation seek common goals: “wider appreciation of...good art...enough compensation for creators...and the elimination of tacky and dumb advertising...” (Moore 2007, p.86).

#### **“Flying with Feathers on Bubbles: Reclaiming Public Space through the Sharing of Ludic Experiences”**

*Yesim Ozalp, York University, Canada*

*Daiane Scaraboto, York University, Canada*

*Mei-Ling Wei, Saint Mary’s University, Canada.*

Public spaces represent spheres of deliberation and action, and are open to all citizens independent of identity politics (Arendt 1998; Habermas 1991). However, according to Habermas (1991) these spaces have lost their character with the rise of industrialization, mass media, and popular culture. Today, most citizens frequent these spaces without much thinking of what makes these spaces public. Using ethnographic research and actor network theory (Latour 2005; Brembeck, Ekström, and Mörck 2007), we investigate how the “publicness” of such spaces is realized when citizens actively attempt to reclaim these spaces by engaging in playful forms of consumer resistance. We investigate the events promoted by a

group of citizens in Toronto, Canada, who engage in temporary, yet highly visible forms of resistance, such as large-scale pillow fights, communal bubble blowing parties, giant light sabre battles, as well as massive versions of human chess and capture the flag. Our analysis suggests that these ludic experiences become instrumental in mobilizing publics, which we argue is central in understanding how public spaces are stabilized (Foster 2007), qualified (Callon 1998), and shared (Belk 2010) in post-industrial societies.

Our examination of the urban playground movement is an ongoing multi-method study initiated in May 2008. We have employed ethnographic techniques such as participant observation and interviewing; and recorded data through field notes, photography and video. All three authors were active in the field. We each transitioned between the roles of observer and participant thereby enriching our perspectives of the phenomena. In addition, we have amassed online archival data (e.g., digital pictures, videos, and media texts) from a range of websites and profile pages on social networking websites.

Our observations suggest that these playful acts initially mobilize a loosely connected network of participants. Such mobilization starts as the events are announced on Facebook pages, blogs and websites. The announcements typically invite citizens to participate in events by wearing distinct costumes, such as dressing up like Santa Claus, or bringing interesting objects, such as glow sticks. Participants who adhere to these self-proclaimed “weird” requests are often the ones who bring high visibility to the events. It is through these “weird” objects, costumes, and performances that the movement can “translate” public space (Latour 2005), forging new links between participants and uninformed bystanders who are then invited to take part in the event impromptu, through playing and/or partying. As such, the translation and the mobilization of publics become possible by sharing ludic experiences. It is important to emphasize, this translation is stabilized temporarily and destabilized right after the event (Foster 2007).

The sharing of ludic experiences is one among many organized or loosely organized events that can qualify (Callon 1998) a space as public. In the process of playing and partying on a street, participants reclaim a piece of public space, however temporarily, and in doing so they ascertain to one other as well as anyone passing by that the space actually belongs to all citizens. One particularly illustrative event was the Blackout party, celebrated in Toronto on every anniversary of the 2003 power outage which spread across both Canada and the United States. During this event, the crowd comprised of both participants adorned with costumes and banners, and carrying musical instruments and even splash pads and benches; and the regular frequenters of the city center, grew so intensely that they physically stopped the flow of automobile traffic at one of the most central intersections in the city, reclaiming it to all pedestrians under the motto “Streets are for People.”

Interestingly, as sharing (Belk 2010) of ludic experiences among participants at these events intensifies, the potential for further and wider degrees of sharing emerge. One particular event was in effect “unsuccessful” precisely because sharing was limited if not nonexistent. The small number of participants to this specific event made the act of reclaiming public space non visible if not nonexistent and moreover the participants most of the time stood still, showing nearly no signs of play.

It is important to note that not all participants nor bystanders arrive with the same degree of awareness and understanding of why these events occur and what they accomplish in terms of reclaiming public space. Interestingly, even without awareness, their participation helps the movement mobilize publics like themselves, which may not necessarily produce political participation or change. Following Foster’s (2007) argument that creating and

mobilizing publics around objects has become central in creating value as well as in destabilizing the very same value, we conclude that the public spaces also represent the same characteristics as many of the other objects of the post-industrial society: they do not exist hence are not shared outside the actions assembling and qualifying them as public.

**“Consuming Invisible Cities: Desires, Imagination, and Utopia in Urban Transformation”**

*Luca M. Visconti, ESCP Europe, France*

*Pauline Maclaran, Royal Holloway University of London, UK*

*Yuko Minowa, Long Island University—Brooklyn Campus, USA*

Throughout history, observing and describing consumers, markets, and cities known and unknown were the source of inspiration, fantasy and imagination for explorers, merchants, and scholars, including consumer researchers (Cook 2008). Contemporary cities constitute fast moving, dynamic, and multi-semantic texts for consumption, since market exchanges, consumption experiences and consumer socialization are increasingly incorporated into city life (e.g., confront Anjaria’s analysis of the market and city life in Mumbai, 2008).

At the same time, the multi-textuality of the city goes hand in hand with a long list of pressing questions, among others safety (Bauman 2005), lost space (Trancik 1986), anonymity and conformity (Sennett 1977), or glocality (Featherstone 1990). It is no wonder, then, that cities are dynamic scenarios, constantly reshaped in search of transient answers to similar and additional problems. New jails or surveillance cameras cope with the quest of security, new green areas reduce the grayness and unhealthiness of urban life, taller or additional buildings increase the number of beds, landmarks attract tourists and commercial exchanges, and so forth.

From this perspective, as dwellers we daily consume public space in our cities and we react—consciously or not—to the ongoing transformations of the urban text. Arguably, “The city is, rather, a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions, ... The city is not, in other words, merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it; it is a product of nature, and particularly of human nature.” (Park and Burgess 1984: 1) Said differently, a dweller and his/her cityscape are mutually connected to the point that individual and city identities become imbricated (Simmel 1903).

Therefore, the purpose of our paper is to investigate how we relate to our cities and, more specifically, how we project ourselves in the future of cities that undergo urban transformations. By invisible cities we thus indicate the areas of cities that are subject to architectural modification. We mostly focus on projects of major urban renewal as those implying urban requalification, urban redesign, landmark buildings, and the extension of cities through the creation of brand new neighborhoods. As such, these changes in the urban architecture may be due to the natural development of a town but also to specific external shocks, like international expos or funding. Empirically, our ongoing research is multi-sited (New York, Leicester, Barcelona, and Milan), multi-method (ethnography, researcher introspection, guided introspection, netnography), bi-gender. Currently, our dataset includes around 60 pages written introspective essays, more than 20 depth-interviews in the four contexts of inquiry, web data, and an impressive amount of secondary data (photographs of the sites, urban projects and renderings, articles, documents, etc.).

Emergent interpretations first document the variety of ways dwellers use to define public space. Depending on how this space is consumed, it can be an agora, a forum, a locus for creativity but also a hideaway, a transit place, a room for memory. Second, ur-

ban transformation is understandable in the light of three different though related concepts: i) imagination; ii) desire; and, iii) utopia. *Imagination* relates to people’s capability of calling up things that are not present but exist elsewhere or to anticipate things that do not exist. Urban transformation implies high rates of anticipation, since it requires consumers of cityscapes to construct alternative consumption realities close to Belk’s and Costa’s (1998) idea of “fantastic consumption enclaves”. *Desire* identifies the motivating force behind consumption, “a hot, passionate emotion quite different from the dispassionate discourse of fulfilling wants and needs” (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003: 327). Thus, desire leads to the representation of the wishful, long awaited state of being. Interestingly, our study investigates consumer desire in front of goods not already at the disposal of consumer being projected in the future. *Utopia* differs from desire since what a consumer may wish for him/herself can be detached from the idea of utopian perfection, which can be boring for some, unrealizable for others, or even undesirable (Brown, Maclaran, and Stevens 1996). Third and last, we observe four typologies of urban renewal strategies according to the maintenance or alteration of the visual and the identity of the cityscape: i) subversion; ii) re-generation; iii) re-destination; and, iv) preservation.

In so doing, we extend our understanding of the architectural skeleton of urban consumption and we appreciate the way consuming desire can be connected to consumer imagination and utopia as stimulated by the future town.

**“Heterotopia and the City: A Guerilla Garden in Athens”**

*Andreas Chatzidakis, Royal Holloway University of London, UK*

*Pauline Maclaran, Royal Holloway University of London, UK*

*Alan Bradshaw, Royal Holloway University of London, UK*

*Shona Bettany, University of Bradford, UK*

Heterotopias, according to Foucault (1986), are spaces of “otherness” where alternative forms of social organisation take place, forms that stand in stark contrast to their surrounding environment. Whereas the concept of utopia envisages a future state of perfection, heterotopia is in the here and now, facilitating what Marin (1984) terms “utopic spatial play,” the function or process of utopian thinking rather than its ultimate realisation (Maclaran and Brown 2005). In this paper we use the concept of heterotopia to better understand tensions simmering beneath city skylines in relation to citizens and uses of public spaces. Our interpretive case study is a guerrilla garden in Athens where we have used an ethnographic approach that includes interviews, documentary and website analysis, participant observation and netnography.

Guerilla gardening is a countercultural movement currently sweeping across Europe. Similar in many ways to street art, its participants seek to reclaim and beautify the non-places within cities (Auge 1995). Instead of graffiti art, however, guerrilla gardeners plant vegetables, fruit, herbs, trees and flowers in order to breathe life into drab, dilapidated and derelict spaces that abound in the city. Primarily rooted in environmentalism, guerilla gardening’s political aim is to force a reconsideration of land ownership in the city (Pudup 2008; Tracey 2007). As such, it can be seen as part of a larger trend towards citizens reclaiming “economised public space,” e.g., urban playscapes (Belk et al.), graffiti artists (Borghini et al. forthcoming) and squatter communities (Üstüner and Holt 2007).

In this paper we focus on an extreme instance of guerrilla gardening when residents in a bohemian neighbourhood of Athens (Exarchia) created a park overnight in a deserted parking lot, in defiance of the mayor and town planners and in the aftermath of the Athens riots. Using Hetherington’s three categories of difference by which he identifies the Palais Royal as a heterotopia—materiality,