Networked Styles and Normalizing Taste Narratives
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Through our analysis of the home design blog Apartment Therapy, we explore how a taste narrative —collectively shaped discourses of taste— functions as a distributed form of cultural authority. The taste narrative simultaneously serves as point of reference, incitement, and justification for participants in creating a coherent sense of place.

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Special Session
Making and Consuming Places: From Discrete Things to the Big Picture
Zeynep Arsel, Concordia University, Canada
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

“Interiority in Consumer Culture”
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This presentation considers an issue that lies close to sense of place (Sherry 2000), but has a more abstract dimension that manifests itself across physical spaces, social circles and symbolic structures: the relation between inside and outside, or interiority and exteriority.

Interiority is strongly exemplified by the experience of homeliness (McCracken 1989). It will be illustrated here by the Danish concept of hygge, on which I have done ethnographic research among families in Copenhagen. Hygge is a form of atmosphere (Pennartz 1999), which to most Danes denotes the essence of having a pleasant, good time with other people in an informal spirit (Hansen 1980). In ways that resemble the anti-market normativity around home and family life, the families I have researched appreciate the experience of ‘warm’ sociality in contrast to the ‘harder’ and ‘colder’ interaction forms that characterize their professional life, the market economy, and public urban life. Yet this atmosphere is not limited to home or family life. The feeling of being in a well known, secluded space or even shelter, where intrusion from the outside world is experienced as a disturbance, also arises in commercial settings (Lugosi 2009) such as retailers and cafés. These ‘3rd places’ are experienced as homey and authentic, often through the presence of close social ties among neighborhood, guests and staff.

Considering this phenomenon on a higher level of abstraction, symbolic and/or virtual structures without any material enclosure or social company to envelop the consumer can deliver this experience too. This is where the concept of interiority is worth exploring, as it concerns the experience of “inner space” as a form of identification and placement rather than a relation to spatial form (McCarthy 2005). Interiority is constructed through repetition, e.g. acts of routine behavior, cyclical changes in the environment, or the way humans create a sense of differentiation through symbolic or material structures. Branding is mentioned by McCarthy as one such practice, which through the repetition of stories, designs and other symbolic elements creates a sense of something well known, a bounded space that consumers step into through everyday acts of consumption. Technologies also interact with the human faculties of memory and imagination to create new forms of interiority, e.g. when the mobile phone “transport(s) its user to the memory of an interior” (McCarthy 2005: 122), effecting the form of public, semi-private behavior that has become a ubiquitous phenomenon in much of the world. If seen as a case of interiority, this might be a form of coziness on the go.

The concept of interiority is worth exploring because it suggests an analytical level where certain phenomena that otherwise seem separate become comparable. This might create a more holistic understanding of consumer culture. What can be learned about symbolic domains such as brands by thinking about their similarities to physical homes or a circle of friends, and vice versa? New product categories and brands offer forms of symbolic, material and social enclosure that are qualitatively new forms of community.

In terms of charting the historical development of consumer culture, interiority can alert us to the emergence and disappearance of spaces such as the gendered social spaces where either men or women would encounter only their own gender in equality-oriented Scandinavia (Frykman and Löfgren 1987). The concept of interiority can inspire one to consider whether the emergence of one form of space (or interior) is related to the disappearance of another.

In terms of consumers’ desire to try something new, e.g. to become part of a brand community, the concept of interiority is one way of considering the beckoning force of mystery that many closed structures possess, the seductive desire to enter (as distinct from the actuality of entering) a ‘space one might occupy’. Can a brand be managed on the basis of recognizing that humans are drawn to inner spaces, but also that they can only feel themselves located in an interior by speculating or fantasizing about the outer world? When seen through the lens of interiority, a boundary is a two-way membrane for the imaging of the exterior from the interior, and vice-versa—and thus for the presence of each in the other.

“Networked Styles and Normalizing Taste Narratives”
Zeynep Arsel, Concordia University, Canada
Jonathan Bean, University of California-Berkeley, USA

Taste, the ability to identify and choose the legitimate, has been a fundamental modus of establishing and signifying social class distinctions (Bourdieu 1984). Yet, contemporary social theorists suggest that tastemaking no longer serves to maintain a social hierarchy that differentiates highbrow from lowbrow. Rather, tastes are fragmented (Featherstone 1991) subculturally bounded (Thornton 1996), or established through contextualized negotiation of meanings (Holt 1997). As a result, the power of traditional highbrow authorities has diminished (Johnston and Baumann 2007). Furthermore, individuals with higher cultural capital resources tend to break conventions and normative combinations of conventional styles and utilize a pastiche of high and low (Holt 1998). Within the concept of place, how do the material manifestations of taste such as styles referred to as “modern” or “traditional” as well as their sub-genres and hybrids (i.e. “shabby chic”) emerge and become crystallized?

Our research demonstrates a process through which styles are normatively constructed through social networks. We argue that consumers are not nomadic postmodern mix-and-match artists who layer and imitate styles, but rather that they contribute to and help create coherent taste narratives that circulate in popular culture and serve as a distributed form of cultural authority. These narratives help consumers establish a sense of place by serving as a normative model for the right way of ordering objects in space, legitimizing preferences for particular arrangements and types, and, most significantly, by inviting, even requiring, consumers to create visual and textual representations of place in order to perpetuate the taste narrative.

Our empirical site, the popular home design blog Apartment Therapy [AT], started in 2004 and quickly grew to establish itself first as a web phenomenon and then as a serious competitor to now-defunct magazines such as Martha Stewart’s Blueprint and Conde Nast’s Domino (Green 2004). The effect of AT is like that of shelter or lifestyle magazines: it establishes a regime of visual and material order (Hand and Shove 2004). But unlike magazines, readers of the website participate in the creation of a taste narrative that prescribes a distinct way of creating place through organizing material objects and configuring practices within the home.
To show how consumers use the taste narrative for creating a sense of place in the home, we utilize longitudinal multi-method analysis. First, we analyze the blog content with special emphasis on normative discussions, advice seeking and contests. Second, we also include the spinoff book Apartment Therapy: The Eight-Step Home Cure (Gillingham-Ryan 2006) in this narrative analysis. We use the book to engage in an auto-ethnographic process of following the “cure” and transforming our homes. Third, we conduct interviews with participant-creators of the blog and individuals whose homes are featured in exemplary tours and competitions. We also incorporate participant observation in the production of the blog.

Our first finding highlights how tastemaking works in an increasingly fluid social hierarchy transformed by the adoption of new social technologies. We demonstrate that the participatory nature of new media enables a dialogical and collective process of tastemaking that sharply contrasts with the traditional models of cultural authority. While magazines have long used write-in features or visits to “actual homes” to relate ideas to readers (Keeble 2007), their core content is under direct editorial control and relies on the editors’ position of authority. In contrast, the content of many of AT’s popular post types — contests, “good questions,” and house tours — comes from what would typically be thought of as the audience. We argue that these normative discourses crystallize the boundaries of styles and instill a sense of normalcy in the participants while appearing ostensibly democratic. Our findings also show how the agency of cultural authority shifts between the collective and individual. Apartment Therapy engages with a corporate identity of “we,” creating a master narrative which functions as a principle actor itself, again blurring the line between author and audience. Readers of the blog become a part of this “we” identity, commenting on posts, sending questions and content, and adapting similar narrative strategies to those employed by the “official” (i.e., paid) contributors. This “we” identity shifts the agency and authority to determine what is legitimate to the taste narrative instead of a specific individual or group. In this process we highlight the normative and exclusionary action of creating the AT archive (Derrida 1996). We argue that this taste narrative takes on jussive force (Bowker 2008).

With our presentation, we aim to highlight the changing dynamics of taste making in an increasingly participatory culture and show how homes are made through a collaborative process. Our contributions are twofold. First, we illustrate a relatively new mode of taste formation through participatory media. Second, we show how closely bound the relationship between individual action and collective meaning can be, recapitulating the classic debate on structure and agency.

“Materializing and Valorizing Cultural Capital: An Investigation of the “Cafe-scape” of a Gentrifying Neighbourhood”

Yesim Ozalp, York University, Canada

Cultural Capital of the artists is rubbed off the walls of neighborhood and is appropriated by the middle classes who are eager to accumulate both cultural and also economical capital. (Ley 2009)

Gentrification, investigated as a residential phenomenon for almost four decades, can also provide a social “lab” to study the “distinction” game played by retailers (Zukin and Kosta 2004). By investigating this distinction game, this study provides not only a context to provide a more dynamic account of cultural capital, one that goes beyond categorizing consumers into two levels (Low Cultural Capital and High Cultural Capital, e.g. Holt 1998; Henry 2005); but also a more comprehensive method of accounting for consumption spaces that goes beyond narrative- or semiotics-based accounts of studying consumption spaces (cf. Sherry Jr. 1998).

Cultural capital, coupled with other forms of capital, is central to the position a subject occupies in a society (Bourdieu [1979] 1984). Its role in consciously or unconsciously shaping consumer preferences and processes has been investigated in Consumer Culture Theory (Holt 1998; Henry 2005). These studies, however, treat cultural capital as a “characteristic” or “trait” held by an individual. Even though this approach towards cultural capital clearly reproduces Bourdieu’s lengthy analysis in Distinction, partially; it ignores the reconversion strategies mentioned in the same work. Bourdieu ([1979] 1984: 131-132) identifies two reconversion strategies in social space: vertical (movements within the same field) and transverse (a shift to another field). While vertical movements do not alter the composition of the assets (different capitals), transverse movements, such as those from the field of economic capital to the field of cultural capital, involve a transformation in the composition of assets. Although Bourdieu was more interested in the role of education and educational capital as well as structural transformations, the concept of transverse movements is critical in understanding consumption as a process of reconversion. In the microcosm of retail gentrification, retailers, through their use of space, provide knowledge of “authentic” tastes, “cool” places and “trendy” places to be, in exchange for the economic capital of their patrons. In constructing these ideals of authentic, cool, hip or trendy, retailers not only use their own sources of cultural capital (as identified by Bourdieu himself in the transformation of retail sector, [1978] 1984: 141) but also resources from the neighborhood’s identity (Zukin and Kosta 2004). Naturally, this cycle of conversion also aims to produce more economic capital for the retailers themselves. Retail spaces mediate the transverse reconversion process between economic and cultural capital, providing a rich context that demonstrates how cultural capital is materialized and valorized.

In order to investigate how the transverse transformation is played out in the retail distinction game, it is essential to reframe the understanding of the concept of space in the CCT field. According to Lefebvre (1974/1991), social space is represented by a triad composed of the enactment of visions of planners and the businesses, the appropriation and representation of users, and the spatial practices through which the prior two are negotiated. In much CCT work, it is the social as well as the symbolic facets of consumption spaces that have attracted scholars’ attention, and these concerns are frequently addressed separately (cf. Sherry Jr. 1998; Kozinets et al. 2004). These studies prioritize the agency and stories of consumers over those of producers and retailers, and specifically of a subset of consumers over the “mainstream” consumer. Nor has much attention been given to material objects and the space itself. However, as Lefebvre argues, space can be reduced neither to the symbolic and material work of any of the actors, nor to discourses or to institutions. Similarly, from an Actor-Network Theory perspective, space is constructed within a network of relationships between actants (Latour 2005). The social — e.g. interactions among residents of a neighbourhood — cannot create or define space — e.g. the neighbourhood — unless it is stabilized and woven with material such as houses, the retailscape, urban furniture, etc. (Murdoch 1998). Therefore, the complexity of how consumption spaces are constituted, embodied, enacted and represented can only be understood by looking beyond a group of consumers’ representations or acts, to the space, the objects, the producers’ symbolic strategies, and to other groups’ representations and strategies.

1From 2007-2008, one of the authors of this paper (Bean) was a paid contributor to Re-nest, a website focused on green design which is affiliated with Apartment Therapy.
Employing ethnographic research techniques supported by visual and textual archival material, I investigated the “cafe-scape” of a gentrifying neighbourhood in Toronto. Looking at the aesthetics of space, objects, arrangements of objects, spoken and unspoken strategies and also consumers’ interpretations, I will provide the details of four distinctive types of spaces, which I label hybrid, retro, simple, and traditional. For example, while the hybrid cafe-scape houses spatial practices of other retailers (e.g., displays with an appearance akin to those of jewelry stores), the retro cafe-scape stages objects which appeal to and to contribute to “bohemian” taste, characterizing the neighbourhood according to the promotional materials of condo developers. While some products (such as desserts) are sold as designed objects (artistic creations of a chef), other products enjoy being the object of a taste quest for “simple, not fancy”, such as the case in the simple cafe-scape. Customers also play an important role in embodying the taste narratives of these consumption spaces. While knowing how to order a personalized coffee in a Starbucks may be valuable cultural capital for some, in many of the other cafes such capital is made inaccessible by restrictively limiting the menu to “pre-chosen” or “curated” ingredients, such as the case in simple or traditional cafe-scapes. While unpacking the network of relationships that construct these spaces, I will also show how these spaces utilize, produce, embody and categorize different sources of capital (e.g., cosmopolitan vs. local) and embody different movements of transverse reconversion (e.g., economic>cultural>economic vs. economic>cultural+social>economic).

“Shangri-La, a Journey From an Imaginary Place to a Non-place”
Rosa Llamas, University of León, Spain
Russell Belk, York University, Canada

James Hilton’s (1933) Lost Horizon is set in Shangri-La, a fictional paradise on Earth somewhere in the Himalayas. The myth of Shangri-La, a multi-ethnic community living a perfect life in an unblemished and wondrous natural enclave, enjoying harmony, longevity and supernatural powers, grew with the Lost Horizon screen version by Frank Capra (1937). Since then this imaginary paradise has been the object of Westerners’ desires, sparking countless expeditions in the hope of finding it. Such a demand for utopian enclaves has yielded a number of pseudo-Shangri-Las blooming in the Himalayas. These Shangri-Las suffer from placelessness, the “casual eradication of distinctive places and the making of standardized landscapes that results from an insensitivity to the significance of place” (Relph 1976, ii) and are fostered by McDonaldized forms of tourism (Ritzer, 1998). In a bid to gain differentiation from this serial production of synthetic Shangri-Las, the PRC State Council announced a contest to assign Shangri-La’s brand name to the “real” one. So, after decades of being a fantasy imaginarycape, Shangri-La finally got some coordinates on Google Earth, which coincide with Zhongdian, a humble town in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province (China).

The Shangri-La appellation allowed the town to ascend the status ladder, leaving behind its “life” as a modest village to become a paradisal tourist destination with world renown. Appearance was a key aspect in this transformation. The exotic, ethnic and sacred traits of Shangri-La (Kolás, 2004) were re-created in order to build a place to be consumed. These features combine material, spiritual and social place-making, an interwoven set of aspects that according to Sherry (2000) should be a focus of consumer researchers. Drawing on our observations and interviews with insiders (local and non-local players), we explore how paradise builders have enhanced or created these material, spiritual and social aspects in the making of Shangri-La as a placeless paradise.

The material issues in the still-under-construction Shangri-la include an international airport, museums, a temple with the biggest prayer wheel in the world, a renovated monastery, a reconstructed Old Town, and paved roads leading to natural attractions which are integral to marketing this tourist paradise. Fancy shops (offering a wide range of souvenirs ranging from fake yak skulls to local and imported crafts), restaurants (with hybridized menus offering yak burgers, Tibetan monos and pizza), soulless mega-hotels (like the Hotel Paradise), homestays at villagers’ places, stupas and some stylized “local” constructions in the Old Town merge together in a superficially seductive appeal to exotic otherness. This combination, resembling a theme park or a “museumized” place, has led to one journalist to describe Shangri-La as a “Tibetan toy town” (MacGregor, 2002: quoted in Kolás, 2008).

During the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) the Government erased every religious sign, but nowadays efforts are addressed to restoring and promoting Buddhist symbols whether in sacred or profane buildings. Buddhist iconography is present in the airport décor (Tibetan thangkas, bass prayer wheels and stupas) as well as in the mega-hotels (Tibetan Wheels of Life, thangkas and mandalas). Indeed, the main investments in Shangri-La are the new temple and the renovated Monastery, cardinal touristic attractions and integral to the town’s Buddhist aestheticization. Captivated by the exotic allure of these photogenic symbols, tourists take pictures and spin the prayer wheels. Whether their function is sacred or aesthetic, Buddhist signs are a key contribution to the Disneyfication of Shangri-La.

The Shangri-La brand name has changed the ethnic distribution of the place. Indigenous people in their traditional clothing mix with laid-back Caucasians who have settled down in Shangri-La looking for a hip atmosphere, ambitious Han Chinese who have increased their numbers in town, and busloads of tourists armed with cameras. Tibetans are the main ethnic group but the region is very rich in terms of ethnic diversity. In this vein, the quaint ethnic villagers are part of the exotic capture of Shangri-La, offering a more plural and colorful experience to suit Western Orientalist demands (Yan and Santos, 2009) by amusing the tourists and emphasizing fabled harmony.

Ancient craft techniques, shepherding and mushroom harvesting coexist with Internet cafes, shopping centers and tour groups. Old Buddhist rituals such as circumambulation of temples while whispering holy mantras mesh up with modern ones like following the touristic guide umbrella and dancing to recorded folk music in the town square each evening — a metaphor of harmony and solidarity. According to Relph (1976:141) “place is a fusion of human and natural order and any significant spatial center of a person or group’s lived experience.” Experiencing Shangri-La as an insider or outsider shapes different identities and meanings for different individuals and groups (Relph, 1976). We find a plurality of Shangri-Las: it is still Zhongdian for the natives, the “Lost Horizon” for Western travelers, “El Dorado” for Han Chinese businessmen, “just another tourist spot” for Chinese tourists and “Shangri-La” for Westerners living there.

Material, social and spiritual aspects guide Shangri-La’s journey from a fictional place in the collective imagination to a placeless paradise in Yunnan Province. One of the manifestations of placelessness embodied by Shangri-La is “other-directedness”, i.e., “places made up of a surrealistic combination of history, myth, reality and fantasy that have little relationship with a particular geographical setting” (Relph, 1976: 95). Shangri-La also suffers from “lack of human scale” or “gigantism” since it hosts the biggest prayer wheel.
in the world (“Fortunate Victory Prayer Wheel”), the largest white
terrace in China (Baishui Terrace), the largest Tibetan monastery
in Yunnan (Ganden Sumtseling Monastery) and the deepest gorge
in the world (Tiger Leaping Gorge). Uniformity and standardization
are also being adopted in Shangri-La with the construction of
new roads, concrete squares and shopping centers and the cable
cars and escalators that will likely dominate the future of the once
pristine Paradise Lost.

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