Conformity, Uniqueness and Social Class Mobility: Consumer Self Identity in the Yard

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Using depth interviews with consumers about their yards, we identify several social uses to which home landscaping is applied. In particular, motives of establishing conformity to neighborhood standards, upward mobility and personal uniqueness are discussed.

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Conformity, Uniqueness and Social Class Mobility

Consumer Self Identity in the Yard

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines the conceptual and empirical links between two psychological traits – social conformity and the need for uniqueness – and the sociological constructs of social class and social mobility. Using depth interviews with consumers drawn from the working, lower middle, middle, upper middle and lower upper social classes about their yards, we learned that the need for uniqueness is not necessarily limited to persons having higher social status and that the motive of social conformity extends across the social class spectrum. Theoretical discussion invokes Veblen’s historical notions of conspicuous consumption and status display to link the psychological and sociological aspects of symbolic consumption

INTRODUCTION

One of the most fervently investigated aspects of consumer behavior is product symbolism. As early as 1959, Levy noted that people purchased products not only for what they do, but also for what they mean. In contemporary American culture, the products and services one chooses to consume form the basis of both private self-identity and one’s public image (Aaker, Martina and Garoloa 2001;Belk 1988; Dennis 2002; Hirschman 1985; McCracken 1988; Schor 1999). As a result, researchers have subjected a remarkably wide array of products and services to scrutiny, attempting to determine the meanings they hold for consumers. Among these are apparel (Jolson, Anderson and Leber 1981; Solomon and Anand 1985; Newell, Claiborne and Sirgy 1991; Phaum and Prendergast 2000), automobiles (Munson and Spivey 1981), motorcycles (Schouten and McAlexander 1996), home furnishings (McCracken 1988; Ulver-Sniestrup 2008), artwork and musical preferences (Halle 1993; Holbrook and Huber 1979), hairstyles (McAlexander and Schouten 1989), make-up usage (Miller and Cox 1982), and foods (Levy 1959).

In virtually all of these consumption areas, both psychological and social structural characteristics are found to guide consumer choices and usage patterns (Belk 1988; Frank 1999; McCracken 1986; Simmel 1957). For instance, psychological traits such as conformity, approval seeking, materialism, innovativeness, desire for uniqueness, and risk aversion have all been linked to symbolic product preferences (Aaker et al. 2001; Simmonson and Nowlis 2000; Nunes 2009; Bagwell 1996; Lynn and Harris 1997; Tian, Bearden and Hunter 2001; Frank 1999; Richins 1995). Concurrently, social structural variables such as social class, upward mobility, status striving, and social, economic and cultural capital have also been determined to underlie possession meaning and acquisition (Frank 1999; Holt 1998; Veblen 1899).

Our present purpose is to discuss the relationship between two of these psychological traits – conformity and the desire for uniqueness – and the sociological constructs of social class and social mobility. As will be discussed in the theoretical section below, there is some evidence that consumer conformity may be more common among the working and lower middle classes; while, conversely, the desire for uniqueness has been identified as a trait found more often among those in the upper social classes who possess high levels of cultural capital (see e.g., DiMaggio and Useem 1978; Fussell; Peterson and DiMaggio 1975; Wilensky 1964).

To examine this potential relationship, we conducted depth interviews with a cross-section of American homeowners about the meanings of their yards. We chose yards as our focal consumption area, because they seemed a priori to be a site where social class membership, public self-consciousness and the desire to differentiate oneself from others could all be displayed. Remarkably, the yard -- a very socially conspicuous aspect of symbolic consumption -- remains unexplored by consumer behavior researchers (except as a peripheral cue, see e.g., Holt 1998), despite the fact that maintaining a lawn requires vast amounts of time, effort and money on the part of consumers. Lawn care is a $30 billion annual business in the United States (www.yardsandlandscapes.com), with homeowners expending 150 hours per year, on average, mowing, trimming, weeding, fertilizing and seeding their yards. There are presently 24,000,000 acres of residential lawn in the U.S. – an area the size of the state of Indiana (www.lawnsandlandscapes.com). Approximately 7 billion gallons of fresh water are used every year to irrigate American lawns; and lawn mowing machines consume 580,000,000 gallons of gasoline annually. Obviously, the household yard represents a substantial financial investment for the American family. Our study delves into the nature of consumers’ psychological and sociological investments, as well.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SYMBOLISM

From their inception in Europe, especially France and Britain, during the eighteenth century, formal gardens and lawns were used to announce the elevated social status and cultivated tastes of their owners. They are prominent among the examples of conspicuous consumption cited by Veblen (1899, p. 133) who concluded that the turn-of-the-century Victorian yard was a public display “requiring constant tending by gardeners employed by the affluent in England and the Eastern Seaboard of the U.S. in order to announce their rank in society.” In other words, yards were, and are, examples of symbolic consumption.

Symbolic meanings have been invested in objects on a personal and social level within human populations since at least the foundation of city-states around 5,000 BCE; yet the systematic investigation of these meanings can probably be dated to Thorstein Veblen’s (1899) sociological observations of the American upper class during the Gilded Age. Veblen’s, and later Bourdieus (1984), theories of consumption symbolism are premised upon the linked social motives of status competition and imitation of the successful. More recently, evolutionary psychologists, such as Richerson and Boyd (2005), have proposed the same paired set of motivations as underlying human social behaviors. Analogously, Fussell (1992), a social class theorist, notes that “one of the unique anxieties [of the American consumer] is the constant struggle for individual self-respect based on social approval… Despite our public embrace of political… equality,…we arrange things vertically and insist on crucial differences in personal and social value” (www.pbs.org/peopledlikess/resources/essays6.html, p.4., accessed on 8/18/2011). Other observers have proposed that the upper class Victorian conformity noted by Veblen has now given way to a search for ways to publicly display individuality. For example,
Peterson (1997, p.1), writing in Poetics, argues that ‘highbrow snobbery’ as a status marker has now been replaced by a “system of cosmopolitan omnivorousness.” Under this new system, one’s exposure to the exotic, the rare, and the unusual represents the apex of social status. This would seem consistent with Holt’s (1998) proposal that persons having high levels of cultural capital will expend greater effort on self-expression and creative pursuits in order to differentiate themselves from others.

Within the consumer behavior literature, social stratification has been consistently linked to the symbolic meanings attributed to products and services, with persons located along the social class continuum varying systematically in taste preferences. For instance, using depth interviews with respondents possessing high and low levels of cultural capital (see e.g., Bourdieu 1984), Holt (1998, p. 3) reports that “consumption continues to serve as a consequential site for class reproduction in the United States.”

Conformity and Uniqueness
Consumer psychologists have investigated two personality characteristics that are relevant to the present study: the need for approval that may undergird social conformity behaviors and the need for uniqueness that may motivate efforts at personal deviation from social norms (Tian, Bearden and Hunter 2001). Thus far, research in this area has focused on personality traits such as susceptibility to interpersonal influence (Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel 1989) and attention to social comparison information (Bearden and Rose 1990). Findings from these studies suggest that both the need for social conformity and the need for uniqueness may play important roles in consumer use of product symbolism. For example, the kinds of clothing or makeup worn (Jolsson, Anderson and Leber 1981; Solomon and Schapler 1982), reference group judgments as to product and style appropriateness (Miniard and Cohen 1983), the potential for social approval or disapproval by relevant reference groups (Allen 1965), and expectations about how significant others might respond to particular consumer behaviors (Calder and Burnkrant 1977) have all been found linked to motivations for conformity or uniqueness. Thus, we anticipate that consumers’ lawn care practices will be influenced by concerns about the opinions of others, especially neighbors, who are publicly able to view the lawn.

Conversely, others’ expectations and social norms may also serve as a point of differentiation for those consumers who desire to create a distinct image for themselves. Tian, Bearden and Hunter (2001, p.1) report that “consumers acquire and display material possessions for the purpose of feeling differentiated from other people... Consumers’ need for uniqueness is defined as an individual’s pursuit of differentiation relative to others... achieved through the acquisition, utilization and disposition of consumer goods [in order to] develop and enhance one’s personal and social identity.”

Because household yards are publicly displayed possessions, we anticipate that some homeowners will be motivated to use their yards to differentiate themselves from others in the neighborhood, while others will use their yards to display conformity to community standards. Following Holt’s (1998) propositions, we further anticipate that persons lower in social class status will display a higher level of conformity, while those higher in status will exhibit greater efforts to differentiate themselves from their neighbors.

METHOD
Depth interviews were conducted with 26 homeowners in two states in the northeastern U.S. The socioeconomic status of the homeowners ranged from working class to lower upper class using standard categorization procedures (see e.g., Coleman 1983). Interviews were conducted on-site by trained graduate students. Each homeowner consented to the interview and also to photographs being taken of his/her yard. A semi-structured set of questions was used to guide the dialogue [Exhibit One], but interviewers were instructed to permit the respondents to diverge from the format to enable flexibility in responses.

Exhibit One: Yard Questionnaire
1. How long have you lived at this house?
2. What did the yard look like when you arrived here?
3. What changes have you made?
4. Are there things you would still like to do?
5. What is your favorite part of the yard?
6. What part of the yard do you like least?
7. If you could change your yard in any way, what would you do?
8. How are the seasons different in your yard?
9. What do you do during each season?

Interviews were either audio-taped or recorded in field notes. The transcripts were then examined by the two primary researchers, independently. After initial content categories had been identified by each researcher, a joint discussion followed during which further interpretation was used to compare the data set with pre-existing theorization on consumption symbolism, generally, and social class, conformity and desire for uniqueness, specifically.

FINDINGS
The interview transcripts provide a much more intricate and nuanced view of social class status, conformity and uniqueness than is presently theorized. Indeed, the three phenomena appear to be intimately connected in many ways. First, we learned that social conformity and status competitiveness are often behavioral correlates. Frequently, homeowners would carefully observe what others in the area were doing in terms of landscaping their yards, and then mimic the accepted "look", while at the same time trying to “outdo” the neighbors by adding more expensive plants and trees and installing architectural details such as stone walkways, elaborate decks, swimming pools, ponds, waterfalls and gazebos. Significantly, this conformity-and-competition pattern was present throughout the social class spectrum.

Working to Lower Middle Class
We first discuss how this conformity/competitiveness pattern was enacted among working to lower middle class consumers. Ben, for example, is a Filipino registered nurse who lives in a lower-middle class housing development with his wife and three children. Because their house is governed by association rules regarding yard appearance, Ben feels pressure to conform to the neighborhood norms, which include having tidy, mulched flower beds and mulched trees surrounded by stone or brick borders. Ben states that although they live in a “cookie cutter” neighborhood, he strives to have “the best lawn” on his street.

The family is upwardly mobile, having recently moved to their present residence from an older, working class neighborhood. Ben has recently acquired a set of “good to excellent quality” lawn tools that he stores in a new shed. In order to make the shed “visually attractive” and conform to association rules, Ben planted evergreen shrubs around it. The family has not yet reached an income level that permits it to hire a professional lawn care service, so Ben and his wife mow and trim the yard themselves.
Upon arriving at their new home, Ben and his wife, Jess, purchased a “trophy” tree, a weeping Alaskan cedar, they had desired to own for several years. Both Ben and Jess also exhibit some signs of ‘status anxiety’ about the appearance of their yard. Ben is especially bothered by a “sink hole that does not drain properly” and he feels is “unattractive”. He tried planting a tree near the sink hole, but that effort was unsuccessful – the tree died. Jess states that she “feels bad” about a rock wall and area of red gravel at the front of their house which she believes are “ugly” and she is “embarrassed” for neighbors to “have to look at.” In these instances, we see concern about inadequate conformity being present, especially in the couple’s concerns that their yard is not “up to par” with the rest of the neighborhood, because of some unattractive features. The concern is strong enough to cause them to feel pressure to remedy the ‘unsightly’ aspects of the yard. Yet at the same time, they have prominently planted a rare and expensive tree in the front yard as a statement of their aesthetic taste and likely a gesture of cultural superiority. Notably, this action on their part is counter to Holt’s (1998) proposition that such gestures of individuation and uniqueness would be confined to the upper classes and/or those with high levels of cultural capital.

Another example is provided by Bhuban and her family, who immigrated to the U.S. from India, and now live in a lower middle class development which they also describe as “cookie cutter,” because “all the houses look so much the same.” They reported experiencing conformity pressure regarding the appearance of their lawn: “there are many expectations to uphold. What you do to your yard affects your neighbors who have adjoining yards. If you let weeds infest your lawn, then they can spread to your neighbor’s lawn, no matter how hard they might try to prevent it.”

Both a sense of community belongingness and competition were present in Bhuban’s transcript. She reported that she felt “a part of” the community and enjoyed that. But she also felt pressure to conform to her neighbors’ expectations. “What other lawns look like can set a standard that you strive to reach for your own lawn.” She also noted that “competition can arise between different families and households.”

Bhuban notes that she is “confident in the appearance” of her yard, however, because she “is the only one with a rose garden; often neighbors will knock on my door asking for a rose or two.” She does, however, feel some unhappiness and insecurity about the tree in their front yard. “Our tree was planted really late…in the winter time. So while the other trees on our street bloom a lot and are very voluminous, our tree is little and wimpy by comparison.” In this example, the tree represents an inadequacy in their efforts to conform to community standards, while the rose garden serves as both a point of uniqueness and a marker of superiority. Importantly, this consumer is at the lower end of the socio-economic continuum, a place where such strivings were previously believed to be absent.

### Middle to Upper Middle Class

Consumers in the middle to upper middle class exhibited the same intertwining of social class status, conformity, and competition as we found with the classes below them, but gave much stronger voice to aspirational possessions. Anne-Marie is a middle class homeowner who seeks to move upward to the upper middle class. She seems to have studied the landscaping norms prevailing in the upper middle class and desires to add them to her yard. When asked “How would you change your yard?”, she responded, “I would tear up the entire deck and replace it with the new [non degradable] material. I would put in a huge hot tub and completely new backyard furniture… I would add an outdoor kitchen against the back wall… That would be so convenient when I’m serving people outside… I’ve always wanted one of those outdoor fireplaces with couches, as well, and definitely a huge bar… perhaps connected to a built-in barbecue over there.” In this example, Anne-Marie sees one route to signaling her upward mobility to be the adding of higher cultural capital assets to her yard. But in naming the accoutrements she wishes to acquire, she is also displaying social conformity – that is, she is conforming to the norms she believes are present in the class above her present one.

A second middle class homeowner, Jeff, is also young and aspiring to become a member of the upper middle class. His list of desired yard acquisitions is in many respects similar to that of Anne-Marie and includes “a fancy brick barbecue area that is contoured and terraced with Italian block,... an in-ground pool, cabana, tennis courts and a stone-paved area ….” In both these cases, the upwardly mobile middle class consumers seem to have a relatively consistent set of yard acquisitions they feel are necessary to announce upper middle class status. We would argue that this, also, is a sign of implicit social conformity, even though it may be seen by the consumer as displaying individuality and uniqueness.

Thus, the interviews suggest that social class conformity norms may apply to one’s aspirational social class, as well as present social class. Those who see themselves as “on the way up” have a fairly consistent “shopping list” of the things they want to purchase for their yards when they arrive.

### Upper-Middle to Lower-Upper Class

The interviewed homeowners who were in the upper middle to lower upper class exhibited another aspect of conformity not found in the interviews with those in the classes below them. Specifically, they consistently described the use of professional lawn care and landscaping services. These services were usually initially hired when they moved into the neighborhood to “update” the yard with the “plantings” then in style. In no instance did we encounter an upper middle class or lower upper class homeowner who performed all of his/her yard work, especially the routine chores of mowing the grass or fertilizing the lawn. These repetitive and labor intensive tasks consistently were “hired out” to “a service”.

The homeowners at the highest end of the social class continuum were also much more active in restructuring the appearance of their yards. Instead of purchasing sapling trees, which required several years to grow to an appreciable size, medium and full size trees would be placed in the yard. Often the yard, itself, would be re-graded to smooth out overly sharp slopes or add curves and rises to a “too flat” yard. Robert, for example, “hired a professional landscaper within the first year of moving in to set-up his yard in an aesthetically pleasing manner.”

As evidenced above, within this social stratum a different vocabulary was used to describe the yard and its maintenance. Grass, flowers, and shrubs are no longer referred to as “trimmed” or “cut”, but rather as “manicured” or “designed.” Homeowners in these social classes also seem to be keenly aware of shifts in the fashionableness of various plant species and décor elements such as swimming pool shapes and materials, lawn furniture brands, and the desirability of various types of stones used for walkways and patios. One homeowner had created a “courtyard area [which] mimics one in Greenwich Village in New York.” This and other aesthetic references reflected a cosmopolitan sensibility among these homeowners, much as Holt (1998) proposes. The reference groups used were not only the neighbors, but what the homeowners considered to be “tasteful” or “elegant” in other cultures, for example, Provencal France, the English Cotswolds, or even more exotic locales, such as Thailand.
What Happened to Uniqueness?

As we have documented across all social strata studied, there are examples of social conformity, and concurrently, reports of efforts at being unique, of consumers desiring to differentiate themselves from others through their yards. Several families reported having a “special” tree, flower bed or item of decor that they felt “set them apart” from others in the neighborhood. But as we propose, usually these were implicitly intended as efforts to set oneself “above” others; that is, they were intended as socially competitive gestures, not as personal statements of distinctiveness, *per se*. Most consistently, the theme conveyed in the interviews was an implicit or occasionally explicit acknowledgment that there was a social code governing what yards in “their neighborhood” *should* look like and a corresponding behavioral effort on the part of the homeowner to adhere to – or surpass – the basic requirements of that code. Indeed, many respondents expressed a fear of negative feedback from neighbors, if they failed to maintain the minimum standards of the code.

**DISCUSSION**

We now turn to an effort to merge the perspectives on consumption symbolism in psychology and sociology using the findings from the present study. A foundational premise of this effort is that the construction of *self identity* is inherently and inescapably a *social project*. We become individuals through a lifelong process of interacting with others and receiving feedback from those with whom we have relationships (Solomon 1983). Thus, individual lives may be singularly lived, but they are socially enacted.

In considering the material from the present study, it becomes clear that consumers’ perceptions of their yards have simultaneously personal and social elements. The consumer may view his/her home and yard as being part of a “cookie cutter community” and himself/herself as immersed in a conformity demanding culture. It is hard to differentiate the self in such a place. So, a special, rare tree may be purchased or a rose garden constructed in order to announce an identity separate from one’s neighbors.

Yet the consumer’s judgment of what is appropriate to set oneself “apart” is intimately connected to the surrounding social context; how can I establish the *appropriate level of differentiation* (Snyder and Fromkin 1980), one not so distinct as to appear to be a radical or misfit, yet not so similar as to go unnoticed by my neighbors? The countervailing motives of social conformity and individual uniqueness are calculated and satisfied by carefully gauging the possible responses of one’s social peers: what will they think of me? How do I appear to them? How will my behaviors be interpreted (Fromkin and Snyder 1985)? The psychology of self-identity is never free from the social context in which it is enacted.

In our view, it would seem very fruitful to consider whether status competition and the need for uniqueness may, *in practice*, be the same phenomenon. This provides a clue to a key interpretive conundrum of the present study: how are we to conceptually classify the behavioral descriptions of those respondents who used aspects of their yards to differentiate themselves from neighbors in ways that they believed established their yards as “better” or “superior”?

From Holts’ (1998) sociological perspective, such actions would be classified as evidence of possessing high cultural capital. As he states (p. 3), “Cultural capital consists of a set of socially rare and distinctive tastes, skills, knowledges, and practices…. ” High cultural capital is also consistently associated with membership in the upper classes, because only members of these classes have the necessary prerequisites of a challenging education, childhood exposure to a variety of intellectually stimulating experiences, an occupation requiring novel and analytical thought, and the financial capital enabling the pursuit of specific interests and creative ventures (Holt 1998; Bourdieu 1984).

This same proposal is made earlier by Kohn (1969; Kohn and Schooler 1983). Kohn’s (1969) study, for example, found that, “Men of higher class position, who have the opportunity to be self-directed in their work, want to be self-directed off the job, too, and come to think self direction [is] possible. Men of lower class position, who do not have the opportunity for self direction in their work, come to regard it as a matter of necessity to conform to authority, both on and off the job. (p. 12).” In their later study, Kohn and Schooler (1983, p. 167) found that “job conditions [related] not only to values and orientations, but also with cognitive functioning as evidenced in…the intellectuality of leisure time activities”. Consistent with this reasoning, Holt (1998, p. 4) states that “cultural capital is expressed through consuming via aesthetic interactional styles that fit with cultural elite sensibilities and that are socially scarce.”

Within this conceptualization, the individual consumer expresses his/her personal, distinctive taste to the fullest only within the upper social classes where economic capital coincides with social and cultural capital. For example, Holt (1998, p. 8) described his High Cultural Capital homeowner respondents as “[viewing] their homes as canvases upon which they express their aesthetic sensibilities…Decorating is a highly personalized activity.” The same group is described as “[emphasizing] cosmopolitanism, individuality and self-actualization.” (p. 12).

However, Holt (1998, p. 14, 16) then continues his description by stating, “They seek to avoid consumer behaviors that are perceived to be common, homogeneous or widely-accepted….HCC consumers explicitly disavow following a style that is widely adhered to and, instead, talk about how they mix and match to create their own personal look.”. By contrast, low cultural capital consumers are said to possess a “subjectivity [that] depends upon community acknowledgment of particular taste and practices (Holt 1998, p. 16).”

Yet the data collected for the present study suggest a different interpretation. What we found was a conscious awareness of social norms operating *across the class structure* ranging from working class to lower upper class. Though the specific requirements of these norms varied from class to class, they were still consciously invoked by consumers at all levels in deciding how to decorate their yards. Further, a sense of competitiveness was also found at every social class level such that some individual homeowners would seek to ‘outperform’ their neighbors by not only meeting, but surpassing, the prevailing decorative code within their community. In short, we found evidence supporting the *simultaneous* presence of conformity and differentiation across all social strata studied. These strata ranged from working class to lower upper class, with only the lower class (whose members usually are not homeowners) and upper-upper stratum being omitted from our sample.

Finally, Holt’s (1998, p. 18) high cultural capital informants draw a distinction between the routine maintenance of the yard and the opportunity to be creative and differentiate themselves from others: “I like working in the yard. I find it creative…. [but] I don’t cut the grass. We have some guys that come and do that.” However, in our view, this practice is also an exhibition of conformity, because all of the higher social class consumers we interviewed reported *the same pattern*: that is, routine maintenance was assigned to hired workers, while decorative choices and activities were performed by the homeowner. However, a comparison of photos of the upper class yard landscapes suggests a striking level of consistency across these yards, just as we see conformity within the other classes [see photos...]

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above]. Thus, even though the upper classes may claim a high level of individual creativity in yard décor, the results obtained look remarkably alike. We suggest, therefore, that implicit conformity levels are as high among upper status consumers as they are among the rest of the social strata, although these consumers do seem to make a higher number of explicit claims of uniqueness and differentiation.

Writing in 1899, Veblen observed, “Wherever the institution of private property is found….the economic process bears the character of a struggle between men for the possession of goods (p. 24)…The motive that lies at the root of ownership is emulation…and the possession of wealth conveys honour; it is an invidious distinction (pp. 25 – 26)”. As noted at the outset to this study, notions of possession symbolism grounded in social status pervade virtually every category of good yet examined. Cogently, Veblen also detected the intertwining of the pressures of social conformity and social striving, which he identified as the source of the conspicuous consumption codes existing among the social strata of his day.

As he notes (p. 30), even among the working classes social standing requires at least a minimum display of public conformity: “A certain standard of wealth…is a necessary condition of reputability. Those members of the community who fall short of this…suffer in the esteem of their fellow men, and consequently they suffer also in their own self esteem, since the usual basis for self respect is the respect accorded by one’s neighbors”. This we witnessed among our working class homeowners who were overtly concerned with maintaining at least the minimum standard of conformity to neighborhood norms in the landscaping of their yards.

As one ascends the social strata, Veblen proposes that the requirements of ‘maintaining the code’ become more complex and demanding, “In our time there is [expected to be] knowledge of the dead languages…of syntax and prosody; of the various forms of domestic music and other household art; of the latest proprieties of dress, furniture and equipage; of games, sports and fancy-bred animals, such as dogs and race horses (p. 45)”. This is what Bourdieu (1984) and Holt (1998) refer to as High Cultural Capital. But as we argue, consistent with Veblen’s interpretation, it is also a potent form of conformity pressure. Consumers in the upper middle class and the lower upper class must display competence in their mastery of this code in order to gain the approval of their neighbors and also to achieve an internal sense of self esteem. Competitiveness for social acclaim (and self-worth) in this realm requires becoming the most distinctive in ways that are viewed as enviable by one’s peers.

Because of this code and competitiveness, the landscaping we found in these homes is not ‘randomly’ distinctive; rather it is conformitively distinctive. There are shared rules of appearance for the yard in upper middle class and lower upper class neighborhoods which are adhered to with great consistency. As Veblen (p. 84) states: “The members of each stratum accept as their ideal of decency the scheme in vogue…They must conform to the accepted code”. Thus, as Snyder and Fromkin (1980) and others (see e.g., Lynn and Harris 1997a,b) propose, the desire for uniqueness, for distinctiveness, for differentiation, even among those with high cultural capital, is socially bounded. Indeed, efforts at differentiation would seem to be part and parcel of the conformity code of the upper social classes. One is expected to display individuality – but always within reason.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study is intended to stimulate a greater degree of rapprochement between sociological and psychological theories relevant to consumer behavior and marketing. Perhaps too often research is cast within the confines of a specific personality trait, social psychology construct or sociological perspective. While the findings resulting from such studies can be – and often have been – very useful, they also may not provide the field with the larger context in which phenomena are embedded. One of the benefits of studying marketing and consumer behavior is that the objects of research within these fields are inherently personal and social, taking place in the mind of the consumer and the social structure simultaneously. This provides us with a great opportunity for building theories that reside at multiple levels of abstraction and incorporate varied foci of interest.

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