This research explores consumer agency in the context of ‘urban exploration,’ which refers to the consumption of abandoned and contested urban ruins. Drawing on netnographic data, we introduce the concepts of calculated agency and transient appropriation, and demonstrate the importance of temporality and virtuality in the creation of place meaning.
“See that Door with a No Entry Sign? Open It”:
Exploring Consumer Agency in Contested Place
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ABSTRACT

This research explores consumer agency in the context of ‘urban exploration,’ which refers to the consumption of abandoned and contested urban ruins. Drawing on ethnographic data, we introduce the concept of calculated agency and transient appropriation, and demonstrate the importance of temporality and virtuality in the creation of place meaning.

INTRODUCTION

This research sheds new light upon consumer agency by examining ‘urban exploration’ – the consumption of abandoned and decaying urban ruins. Consumer agency has been well documented within consumer research literature in terms of consumers’ ability to create their own meanings in commercial environments (Kozinets et al., 2004; Pechaloz, 2000), and as a means of exploring the conflicting ideologies at play in the appropriation of public place (Visconti et al., 2010). Yet there remains little understanding of the varieties of consumer agency that exist (Wijland, 2011). This paper builds on this body of work by exploring consumer agency in contested place. We suggest that places are contested whenever there is tension and ambiguity over their access, use and ownership. In particular, we address the following research questions: How is consumer agency expressed in contested place? And how do consumers appropriate contested places to make them meaningful?

The contributions of this paper are twofold. Firstly, we contribute to a greater understanding of the varieties of consumer agency by theorising its manifestation in non-commercialised and non-public environments. We build upon Kozinets et al.’s (2004) concept of interagency and demonstrate that consumer agency involves a dynamic tension between play and personal responsibility. We introduce the concept of calculated agency and argue that individuals take control away from the structure of society through conducting illegal acts whilst mediating risk. Secondly, we enrich understandings of place appropriation by demonstrating how transient appropriation in urban exploration develops within contested place, where ownership, access and use are ambiguous due to abandonment.

Consumer Agency in Place

Consumer agency has been described across disciplines as an expression of autonomy, freedom of choice, self-expression (Bhattacharjee, Berger and Menon, 2014) and the ability to act (Borgerson, 2012) or influence structures of power (Earley, 2013). Importantly, this capacity to act is socio-culturally mediated (Adhearn, 2001) as culture shapes actors and actions (Valtonen, 2013). Extensive research has examined the importance of consumer agency in identity expression (Bhattacharjee, Berger and Menon, 2014), body image (Valtonen, 2013), fashion discourses (Thompson and Haytco, 1997), globalization (Eckhardt and Mahi, 2004), gender (Witkowski, 2004), and object-subject relations (Borgerson, 2005). Much of this literature interprets consumer agents as “loosely structured”, neither wholly free agents nor socially constituted products (Eckhardt and Mahi, 2004). As reviewed in the following sections, understandings of consumer agency in place have developed from research on both commercial and public places.

Consumer agency in commercial place

Commercial environments have been found to stimulate expressions of consumer agency by enabling consumers to create their own meanings and experiences within consumption (Kozinets et al., 2004). Pehaloz (2000) terms this as joint cultural production where-by consumers can actively engage, manipulate and become agents of (re)invention within consumption experiences. Similarly, Campbell (1987) identifies consumers’ ability to shape and (re)invent experiences as autonomous imaginative hedonism where the consumption experience centres on imagination, rather than selection, purchase or use. In their ethnography of Chicago’s ESPN Zone, Kozinets et al. (2004) found spectacular retail environments to be sites of ludic play where consumers can actively engage and perform. Reflecting Ger and Belk’s (1996) definition of consumer agency as the ability to transform and play with meaning, Kozinets et al. (2004) suggest this consumption play liberated consumers “who use their freedom to work within the rules of play, to break other rules, and to create new rules as they become, in effect, props for other consumers engaged in their own construction projects” (p. 668). Drawing on Holt’s (1995) notion of consuming as play as a type of autotelic inter-consumer interaction, Kozinets et al. (2004) found consumers both enjoyed spectating and becoming a spectacle for other consumers to watch, creating a form of ‘screen-play’ where consumers would occupy a mediated position between interacting and performing within the environment. Kozinets et al. (2004) term this position interagency whereby the consumer negotiates between being powerful and manipulated, passive and active, subject and object. This position allows for liminoid real estate, where daily life can be escaped through the liminal retail space, and obverse panopticon, where consumers want to observe and be socially visible as a libidinous form of surveillance that enables participation in the spectacle (Kozinets et al., 2004).

Consumer agency in public place

In their ethnography of urban street art, Visconti et al. (2010) explore how consumer agency operates in public places. They conceptualise public place as a form of public good that is characterised by the shared ownership by a collective of citizens that transforms desolate urban voids into meaningful places. This shared ownership of space causes the uses, appropriation and meanings of public space to be negotiated and contested amongst different stakeholders as dwellers and artists have conflicting opinions about the appropriateness and permanency of artwork.

Drawing upon Lefebvre’s (2004) account of rhythmanalysis, McEachern, Warnaby and Cheetham (2012) argue shared social spaces are polyrhythmic, consisting of multiple rhythms between place, time and practice. During conflict, places can experience arrhythmias where irregularities in rhythm cause disorder and unrest (Lefebvre, 2004). In their case of the public park, McEachern et al. (2012) found these arrhythmias occurred between park users who disagreed over the use of the space. Both Visconti et al. (2010) and
McEachern et al. (2012) highlight the continual conflict and negotiation that occurs in public places regarding the use and ownership of these shared spaces. Public places emerge as particularly precarious sites of shared consumption where the boundaries of ownership and consumer agency are often ambiguous and indeterminable. We build on this work by exploring the context of urban exploration, where individuals trespass in contested places that have no clear use, access or ownership due to abandonment and dereliction.

**Urban Exploration**

Urban exploration is the discovery and exploration of restricted, derelict and decaying places in the built environment (Garrett, 2011). Also known as ‘UrbEx’, urban exploration involves complex practices of researching place histories, discovering access to sites and the physical exploration of urban relics. It exists in two forms: exploring obsoleto locations, such as abandoned asylums and derelict factories; and infiltrating ‘live’ sites, such as transportation networks and sewer systems. Urban explorers also act as archivists by textually and photographically documenting the history and decay of these often forgotten urban places which they share with online community forums. These online forums have a large following with the most active UK forum, ‘28dayslater.co.uk,’ obtaining over 10,000 registered members. Urban exploration is generally committed illegally as explorers rarely gain permission to access sites. According to Garrett (2013), urban exploration is form of recreational trespass that allows individuals to act against the constricting nature of society. Some privately and publicly owned sites are closed to the public due to health and safety concerns, whilst many other sites have no clear ownership as they are abandoned and left to ruin. As such, these sites are contested places in terms of their use, ownership and access. UrbEx is a highly dangerous activity that often requires explorers to scale buildings without ropes, descend into disused tunnels or carefully avoid electrical train-lines. A small number of explorers have been accidently killed during explorations, and many more report serious injury. As such, urban exploration shares many commonalities with Celsi, Rose and Leigh’s (1993) examination of sky-diving as a voluntary high-risk consumption activity that requires risk negotiation and edgework.

**METHODOLOGY**

Findings from this paper are part of a larger project concerning the consumption of urban exploration. Due to the importance of online storytelling to urban exploration (Garrett, 2013) we conducted a netnography of the most active UrbEx forum ‘28dayslater’ and thirty explorers’ personal websites. Discussion threads on the forum range from “Asylums and Hospitals”, “Industrial Sites” to “Draining” and “Rooftopping”. The forum is highly active with many members posting material daily. For example, 28dayslater attained 12,431 active users within a single day in August 2007 (28dayslater.co.uk, 2015). Each topic thread will have between 1,500 and 5,000 threads, with 3,500 to 10,500 accompanying posts. From this forum we followed thirty members who promoted their personal UrbEx websites within discussion posts. We included these personal websites within our netnography as these pages often detailed a greater depth of personal reflection about their urban pursuits. Conducted over six months, our netnography included weekly observations of the forum and personal websites, allowing the researchers to become immersed within the virtual context of study (Kozinets, 2002). Specifically, data was collected regarding ‘exploration reports’, reply comments, photographs, active and non-active threads, and individuals’ reflections of their experiences. This generated over 176 pages of screenshot data from forums, websites and researcher reflective field notes, used to aid contextualisation (Kozinets, 2002). Data analysis was conducted by moving between individual postings, entire discussion threads and the emergent understanding of the complete data set (de Valck, 2007). Interpretation of the forum and personal websites followed the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965). This allowed for an intertextual analysis between participants’ short posts and their deeper personal reflections.

Particular ethical issues were considered whilst collecting netnographic data by following recent guidelines from Kozinets (2014). The netnography was observational and collected only archive data on publicly accessible websites. Data was fully anonymised as all explorers remain anonymous on forums and websites by creating nicknames. We have retained explorers own choice of nicknames (e.g. The Test Chamber, Beyond the Boundary) as these are revealing in terms of the nature of urban exploration. To further ensure anonymity any identifiable information has been pseudo-anonymised.

**FINDINGS**

Our findings begin by examining urban explorers’ use of urban spaces and go on to discuss enactments of consumer agency and play involved in urban exploration.

**Transient Appropriation of Contested Place.** Explorers’ websites often discuss the preparatory practices conducted prior to an exploration. Researching access and planning entry is a central part of exploration, which seasoned explorers refer to as “reconnaissance” (Transient Places). Whilst some trips may be spontaneous, more serious urban explorers will spend a couple of weeks (The Test Chamber) gathering information, or going to the site between 5 and 20 times to find an entrance point (Transient Places).

Stray off the path: *Sometimes you will find yourself attempting the same place multiple times before succeeding. [...]Having patience is key to success. A lot of time is spent doing research, scoping out access points, the security situation...*

Despite the depth of research necessary for a successful explore, the longevity of the trip is often very transient, lasting only a few hours or a few minutes. Often trips are cut short if explorers are interrupted by security guards, police or members of the public. Along with the short temporal duration of the trip, explorers ensure they leave no trace of their presence, expressed by the popular maxim “take only photographs, leave only footprints” (Vehicular).

Urban Degeneration: *There are no rules set in stone, aside from the rather clichéd term of ‘Take Nothing But Photos, Leave Nothing But Footprints’, [...]they should not take anything from a site, other than the memories (both mental and photographic) and should leave nothing permanent which may cause further unnatural damage to the site. *

It is important for these explorers that locations remain undamaged and unchanged by their explorations. This is reflected in Stray off the path’s call for others to have “respect for the locations”. As such, the urban explorer undertakes a transient appropriation of these contested places by their physical exploration. Yet, they also preserve these urban relics through textual and photographic storytelling. This desire to preserve forgotten city spaces appeared a common discussion amongst explorers:

Urban Degeneration: *Without ‘Urban Explorers’ who are willing to risk life and limb to document these places, in 20-30 years time all that will remain will be the memories of people...*
who grew up around these imposing buildings, but what happens when these people are no longer here?

Whilst the physical exploration is fleeting and impermanent, their online storytelling of these sites are virtually enduring. Unlike the semi-permanent appropriation by street artists who inscribe meaning onto desolate urban spaces, urban explorers leave no physical trace of their place appropriation. Instead their appropriation is virtually enduring through their photographic and textual (re)presentations archived online.

**Play and Adrenaline Thrills.** We recognize that the thrill of adventure and danger plays a large part of the allure of urban exploration. Most explorer websites dedicate a distinct section on the dangers of exploration and the associated “adrenaline rush” (Beyond the boundary) that exploring provides. The Test Chamber, writing in the third person, illustrates the adrenaline high explorers feel. In the following extract from his website he describes his infiltration of the Paris Metro to reach the abandoned platform of Champs de Mars:

The Test Chamber: Pulse racing, he dodges cameras and abseils down a vent into the pitch black. He has no idea if he’s been seen and is going to end up on the no-fly list, has no idea if the rails are on, if there is a service train coming down the zero-clearance tunnels. [...] The intentions that put you there become irrelevant and you’re now in the moment and at that primal sense of heightened awareness, moving forward to whatever arbitrary goal you might have set yourself. [...] Creeps quietly, totally on edge for half a mile until he reaches his goal of the abandoned platform. Takes a few pictures and leaves, heart still in mouth all the way out.

The Test Chamber’s discussion of the physical danger and thrills associated with exploring reflects Celsi et al. (1993) account of sky-divers thrill seeking through corporal risk-taking. However, due to the often illegality of explorations there is another thrill of escaping unseen and undetected that is demonstrated by Stray off the path’s account:

Stray off the path: Live sites are the most adrenaline thrilled as the risk of being spotted is much greater but the rewards are often incredible; the feeling once you have made your way out undetected is incredible.

As a seasoned explorer, Stray off the path often refers to his explorations as a “game of patience” that requires skill in order to out-smart security guards or negotiate the concrete fortresses surrounding these places. The enjoyment of these illegal activities can be understood as illicit pleasure, where pleasure is taken from crossing social and legal boundaries (Goulding et al., 2009). It is the challenge to explore undetected that allows explorers to experience play. The playful nature of urban exploration is also explicitly mentioned in terms of a return to childhood:

Stray off the path: That’s the magic of Urban Exploration. I think it’s a childhood feeling, something like the great adventure, when you was a kid riding your bike to explore the world. I think that most of the urban explorers are the last romantics. In a society that has abolished all the adventures, the only adventure left is the urban exploration...

For Stray off the Path urban exploration is a magical return to a childhood past where there was the perception of adventure and discovery. Through their online reflections many explorers trace their fascination with abandonment to childhood exploration and freedom. Identified by Kozinets et al. (2004) ludic play can allow consumers to “work within the rules of play” in commercial settings (p. 668). However, for urban explorers play comes from navigating the risks and dangers of the urban assault-course that are far removed from the safety and security of commercialised experiences of play.

**Owning your own risk.** A common theme discussed on 28day-slater and explorers’ websites is the ownership of responsibility and risk as a way of counteracting society’s controls.

Stray off the path: Unfortunately, in this modern age, health and safety regulations censor and govern our lives through blind compliance and fear. When I go to these closed off places I prefer to accept personal responsibility for my own actions.

Part of taking responsibility for their own actions involves preparing for explorations through using the appropriate equipment, clothing and tools. For example, experienced explorers will always be found with a DSLR camera, LED Lenser P7 torches, a fully charged phone, water, food supplies and first aid kits. Along with equipment, explorers mentally prepare for making calculated risks. This reflects Lang’s (1990) concept of ‘edgework’, where an individual explores personal limits and ability to control situations. Whilst some explorations are spontaneous, most explorers follow a set of salient rules and safety judgements. For example, explorers who practice “draining”, the entry and exploration of subterranean drain or sewer systems, use the motto “if it’s raining, don’t go draining” (Beyond the Boundary). The most common safeguard discussed on websites is personal awareness of ability.

Beyond the boundary: Some areas of exploration are more dangerous than others obviously. [...] We are all responsible for our own actions, and should always make sure we know our limits.

For explorers using reliable equipment and the ability to know your own limits acts as a defence against the unregulated risk of urban exploration. Stray off the path warns others to “Know your own limits and always stay fully aware. [...] You need to assess every situation. [...] At all times I have only ever taken calculated risks.” Beyond taking physical control many explorers perceive this freedom as an expression of maturity:

Transient Places: It’s also a statement of adulthood. [...] In everyday life, we give away a lot of responsibility over our lives. We are treated as children, incapable of making decisions about our lives. By exploring, we are retaking control – walk past the warning signs, and you take responsibility for your actions, for your life. You become an adult, unable to blame anyone else if something goes wrong.

Transient Places’ account demonstrates that by ignoring hazard-warning signs explorers are able to take control of their own actions and destinies. We interpret this ownership of risk as an expression of adulthood within the restrictions of society. Whilst explorers’ recreational trespass (Garrett, 2013) enables playful resistance to society’s laws, it also is an important expression of agency that allows individuals to take greater accountability of their own risk.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Despite the growing debate surrounding the importance of consumer agency in consumer research (Askegaard and Linnett, 2011; Moisander et al., 2009), there remains little understanding of the
varieties of consumer agency that exist (Wijland, 2011). Kozinets et al. (2004) suggest that in commercial environments consumption is a dialogical negotiation between the producer and consumer, resulting in interagency. However, our findings suggest consumers seek interactions with non-commercial places as they allow greater agency, freedom and unregulated risk-taking. Even in the context of sky-diving (Celsi et al., 1993), river-rafting (Arnould and Price, 1993) and extreme mountain climbing (Belk and Tumbat, 2010) market representatives are always partially present to facilitate the experience and provide security measures. With specific focus on illegal practices, Goulding et al., (2009) show how illicit pleasure of raving has become a site of ‘contained illegality’ where previously ungoverned practices have been made safer and sanitised through marketization. In contrast, UrbEx occurs without service providers, meaning responsibility falls upon consumers to manage their own risk-taking actions. We interpret this as a form of calculated agency, whereby the individual takes control away from the structure of society through conducting illegal acts whilst mediating personal risk. In UrbEx this is evident using research, equipment, individual skill and mindfulness of personal limits. This advances current understandings of consumer agency beyond the controlled consumer agency permitted in commercial settings.

Furthermore, while previous research examines consumer agency in semi-permanent place appropriation (Visconti et al., 2010), we contribute to a richer understanding of the varieties of place appropriation undertaken by demonstrating how transient appropriation develops within contested place. In their examination of rave cultures, Goulding et al., (2009: p. 768) identify unregulated spaces of illicit pleasure as ‘temporary autonomous zones’ (Bey, 1991), “where people gather together, temporarily occupy a space, and then move on, only to reappear again elsewhere.” Whilst this conceptualisation captures the transitory occupation of places, it focuses upon illicit practices in place and fails to capture the contested nature of place. Instead we explore the consumption of ‘of contested place’, where ownership, access and use are ambiguous due to abandonment and dereliction. Urban explorers infiltrate abandoned buildings for short periods of time to photographically capture these places, explore their hidden spaces and exit without a trace as a community rule, often referred to as “the code”. Agency is expressed as a personal and community level deviance to larger societal rules of trespass that offers both child-like play and adult nonconformity to societal control. Yet, within the UrbEx community, agency is confined by community codes that dictate the amount of play accepted by the group, evident in the ethos of “take nothing but photographs, leave nothing but footprints”. As such, agency continually negotiates between the flexibility and constraints at the micro-personal, meso-community and macro-societal levels. The physical appropriation is fleeting, yet their online storytelling is virtually enduring. Unlike the more permanent appropriation of public place by street art (Visconti et al., 2010), explorers’ transient appropriation acts as a distinctive form of place appropriation that preserves its character and makes places meaningful through online storytelling. This provides a richer understanding of place appropriation and demonstrates the importance of temporality and virtuality in the creation of place meaning.

The discussion above highlights the importance of our findins to those interested in both consumer agency and the consumption of place. However, in terms of limitations, the pre-anonymised nature of our netnographic data denied us access to any demographic information about our sample, Future research could build on this study by utilising face-to-face interactions with urban explorers which may add further insight to the characteristics and motivations of those engaged in this hidden and secretive practice.


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**TABLE OF FINDINGS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example of Participant Data</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transient Appropriation</td>
<td>Explorers undertake a transient appropriation of urban ruins. This acts as a distinctive form of place appropriation that preserves its character and makes a place meaningful through online storytelling.</td>
<td>An <em>absolute point of principle for Urban Explorers is that we don’t break into sites and always use open access routes (even if they may require some inventive climbing or squeezing through gaps); yet we profit from the vandals who do smash open buildings since they create open access routes for us to use! We’d like to see better care and security shown to important sites; yet the security guard is often our exploring nemesis! (Stray off the path)</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Play and Adrenaline Thrills</td>
<td>Explorers desire the adrenaline rush associated with physical dangers and illegality of exploring. This allows a return to childhood whereby individuals experience the feeling of greater freedom and adventure.</td>
<td><em>[T]here <em>really is</em> a beautiful moment of calm and stillness after dropping down onto a set of subway tracks. You wait, you listen, wary of any track workers or trains that might be hurting your way, then with baited breaths, take that first step out onto the line. Takes a few pictures and leaves, heart still in mouth all the way out. (The Test Chamber)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ownership of Risk and Calculated Agency</td>
<td>Explorers take ownership of their own risk as an expression of adulthood by using research, equipment, individual skill and mindfulness of personal limits. We interpret this as a form of calculated agency, whereby the individual takes control away from the structure of society through conducting illegal acts whilst mediating personal risk.</td>
<td>A <em>number one rule for most people is never explore alone. Ever. If you do injure yourself and there is no one about and your phone battery has died (very common now as you will probably know), what will you do? Always exploring with one or more persons could save your life or their life. You should always trust your own judgement too, if something doesn’t feel right then it usually isn’t. Know your own limits and always stay fully aware. Many places, particularly industrial, have hazards around every corner. You can’t just explore these places expecting everything to be safe. You need to assess every situation. A rotten floor can easily be disguised underneath carpet and as such may not support your weight, resulting in injury. (Stray off the path)</em></td>
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