Representations of Space: Methodological Tensions in Spatial Consumer Research

D. Matthew Godfrey, University of Arizona, USA
Melanie Wallendorf, University of Arizona, USA

We explore the methodological tensions and disconnections between consumers’ lived spatial experiences and researchers’ representations of these experiences. Proposing a novel approach that combines ethnographic, historical, and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) research, we examine ways that consumer research can better align theoretical and methodological perspectives on space.

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Space and Consumption: Using Lefebvre to Examine an Interplay of Multi-Level Forces in the Consumptive Process of Space

Chair: Annetta Grant, Queen’s University, Canada

Paper #1: Home is Where the Tension Is? Examining the Cultural Complexity of Creating the Space of Home
Annetta Grant, Queen’s University, Canada
Jay M. Handelman, Queen’s University, Canada

Ankita Kumar, University of Wisconsin, USA
Craig J. Thompson, University of Wisconsin, USA

Paper #3: How Multiple Stakeholders Produce Branded Urban Spaces
Rodrigo B. Castilhos, Unisinos Business School, Brazil

Paper #4: Representations of Space: Methodological Tensions in Spatial Consumer Research
D. Matthew Godfrey, University of Arizona, USA
Melanie Wallendorf, University of Arizona, USA

SESSION OVERVIEW

Consumer researchers have a growing interest in spatiality. Early spatial research in consumer literature considers the ways marketers engineer space to convey brand ideologies that enable certain consumption activities and prescribed values (Borghini et al. 2004). This stream of retail research, known as “servicescape” research, also focuses on understanding how consumers co-create meanings in marketer-structured spaces (Borghini et al. 2009; Kozinets et al. 2004; Sherry 1998). More contemporary research considers how consumers engage in resisting dominant ideas of what space is and how people should use it (Bradford and Sherry 2015; Visconti et al. 2010). Responding to a recent move to consider the "more phenomenological and social-relational dimensions" of space (Chatzidakis, McEachern and Warnaby 2015), in this session, we ask what is the interplay of multi-level forces by which space shapes, and is shaped by, consumption? We organize the session around Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of the production of space.

Lefebvre’s theory is premised on a cultural understanding of space. This perspective departs from a view of space as a concrete, material object, to a view of space as socially created which, in turn, creates and organizes society. In this perspective, the creation of space entails an interplay between material and social forces, and the actions of people. This model focuses on the micro and macro-level forces that contribute to shaping space and its meanings, and how consumers negotiate these forces in the material enactment and cultural understanding of space. It also emphasizes the various contradictions that exist within space, and the historical evolution from which these contradictions derive.

Each paper in this session highlights one or two elements in Lefebvre’s model to collectively arrive at an examination of the forces and processes that shape, and are shaped by space. Paper 1 examines the consumption surrounding home renovations to provide an understanding of the confluence of media, marketers and consumers that create meanings of the home, and how these meanings shape the material enactment of homes. Paper 2 examines the different expressions of taste and ensuing contestations over legitimacy of the dominant midcentury modern aesthetic between contemporary neighborhood residents with different cultural capital endowments.

Paper 3 distinguishes the key elements in the production of branded urban spaces, analyzing how they concur to constitute the material, imagined, and lived dimensions of space. Paper 4 explores the methodological tensions between consumers’ lived spatial experiences and researchers’ representations of these experiences to consider ways that researchers can better align theoretical and methodological perspectives on space.

This session informs a rising interest in spatiality research. We extend the role of resistance (Paper 2) and introduce the role of harmony (Paper 1) as components in the process of shaping space. We enrich understanding the strategic use of space in reproducing dominance (Paper 3). We also contribute to methodologies relevant to spatiality research (Paper 4). This session is relevant for researchers interested in spatiality as it expands a theoretical perspective of the multi-level societal forces and processes in the recursive shaping of space and consumption.

Home is Where the Tension Is? Examining the Cultural Complexity of Creating the Space of Home

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The home is “the epicenter of…citizens’ emotional bonds, leisure practices, and financial portfolios” (Rosenberg 2012). It shapes and defines one’s place in the world. Consumer literature implies that people constantly create and recreate home through consumption practices. Consumer research draws attention to the home as a space laden with meaning and of ubiquitous importance in consumers’ daily lives: it is central to a person’s identity (Belk 1988; Tian and Belk 2005), the enactment of family (Epp and Price 2008; Epp and Price 2010; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), and the enactment of taste, aesthetics, and refinement (Arasel and Bean 2013; Dion, Sabri and Guillard 2014; Üstüner and Holt 2010). This literature reveals inherent paradoxes in the way consumer researchers understand home. The home is a site for self-expression (Belk 1988), but it is also a site of conformity, to taste for example (Arasel and Bean 2010). The home is a site for family practices of doing crafts together at the kitchen table (Epp and Price 2010), which may conflict with social norms of tidiness that manifest in the home (Dion, Sabri and Guillard 2014). Thus, the home as the epicenter of consumers’ lives is also a contentious site. The consumer literature tends to examine the formation of home through specific facets of what happens in the home (e.g., as a place for the individual, family, or taste). However, we also know that macro historical forces have a hand in shaping the meaning of home. Governments have historically encouraged home ownership through affordable mortgage policies. The home has come to occupy cultural importance, at the macro-level, to the prosperity of a country (Cohen 2004; Rudolph 2015). Therefore, the home is a space of incredible complexity and cultural importance, however, the ubiquity of the home masks its cultural complexity. The purpose of this work is to examine how consumers navigate the cultural paradoxes, multi-level forces, and overall work of creating and recreating the space we call home.

We employ Lefebvre’s (1991) model of the production of space as a theoretical lens to understand how consumers negotiate and create home as a space. This model attunes us to the many macro and micro-level dynamics within which one is immersed when constructing the space called home. Using the context of home renovations, Lefebvre’s...
model focuses our attention to the creation of space as a negotiation between an historical understanding of the home (spatial practice), the representation of home by media and designers (representations of space), and the home as a site for the enactment of self (lived space). This context of home renovations is relevant as it captures consumers’ experience of transforming a space. Consumer literature that examines public spaces demonstrates that underlying meanings of space become most salient when people physically transform the space (Bradford and Sherry 2015; Visconti et al. 2010). Our data provides a comprehensive view of the market surrounding home renovations. It includes an observation of the market and media surrounding home renovations, in addition to 21 deep interviews with consumers engaging in home renovations and four interviews with industry providers.

Our analysis leads to three major findings. First, the consumer experience of home renovations is characterized by stress and anxiety. We find that these feelings emerge from a misalignment between Lefebvre’s notions of representations of space, or the space as represented by designers, magazines, and television shows, the spatial practice, or an understanding of space as the result of the historical understanding of space, and lived space, where images and symbols of what space should be are made material. We find that homeowners’ experience of stress manifests from maintaining alignment between these nodes of space. Homeowners hold an ideal image for enacting their ideal life in the home, but struggle with understanding how to materially enact it in a way that aligns with the historical-cultural ideals of home.

In a second finding, consumers’ stress stems from a perceived anonymous gaze in the home criticizing and judging their home. Based on informants’ reports, this anonymous gaze is representative of a marketplace actor who is “more fashionable, more modern, and more with it” than our informant consumers. We propose the consumer is subject to a panopticon-like gaze that they appease by way of a market intermediary.

Thus, as a last finding, this work introduces the concept of the Market Visionary. The market visionary is adept at understanding both the consumer and the market, and, thus, it is well-positioned to guide homeowners in aligning the nodes of space that Lefebvre identifies in his model. In their role, market visionaries aid consumers to imbue renovation materials with meanings that are aligned with the consumer’s identity. In doing so, the market visionary translates the representations of the ideal home into the homeowners’ personal space and aligns the enactment of the consumer’s ideal home in ways that both the market and consumer deem acceptable. In so doing, the Market Visionary helps to appease the anonymous gaze.

Our findings contribute to a strategic understanding of how the creation of space leads consumers to engage with the market. We introduce a new type of market intermediary who is deeply embedded in understanding both the market and the consumer, and the consumer’s quest to bring space into cultural alignment between an historical understanding of the home, marketers’ representations of home, and the home as a site for self-enactment. Lastly, the creation of space is commonly thought to occur through resistance (c.f. Visconti et al. 2010). Our findings show that balance and harmony are equally important aspects in the creation of space.

**Home, Contested Home à la Home Sweet Home: Understanding Legitimacy in a Midcentury Modern Taste Regime**

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Taste has lately become a central domain of research in CCT (Arnaud and Thompson 2005). While the most influential perspectives employ a Bourdieuan lens to examine how consumers employ taste in the performance of identity and social distinction (Arnaud and Thompson 2011; Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998; McQuarrie et al. 2013; Üstün and Holt 2010; Üstün and Thompson 2012), more recently researchers have used experiential-practice theory accounts to direct attention toward the aesthetic pursuits of consumers and the market orchestration of taste (Arnaud and Bean 2013; Hennion 2007; Maciel and Wallendorf 2017; Warde 2014). However, such trickle-down interpretations do not illuminate how consumers with different levels of cultural capital understand, interpret and challenge, from their particular socially situated subject positions, the normative aesthetic ideals perpetuated by cultural authorities (Holt and Thompson 2004; Üstün and Holt 2010).

We address these issues in this paper, through an investigation of the ways in which contemporary homeowners in a postwar neighborhood in the Midwestern US, variously interpret the meanings and ideals of the midcentury modern (MCM) design aesthetic. We investigate how tastes are ‘actually’ practiced and what conflicts ensue from interactions between consumers possessing high and low levels of cultural capital (HCC and LCC respectively). This research is based on in-depth interviews with homeowners and visual analysis of the 13 homes. As a theoretical lens, we draw on Bourdieuan insights on taste (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998).

Participants’ understandings and realizations of the MCM design aesthetic are determined by their field dependent cultural capital, but not generalized cultural capital. In practice, displays of cultural capital operate through the processes of singularization (Kopytoff 1986) and emulation. In this “legitimizing theatricalization” (Bourdieu 1990, p. 139), reproduction of the MCM home décor and taking a curatorial and informed attitude to the unique history and aesthetics of the homes by preserving the original wallpaper or “Cherokee Red” concrete floor become conspicuous markers of taste and qualify these HCC homeowners to participate in architectural tours, which grant them considerable symbolic capital. Interestingly, in an effort to achieve aesthetic purity or uniformity, heirloom furniture and articles of home décor are desacralized and either discarded or banished to the more private spaces of the home. In addition to valuing this aesthetic, the residents tend to idealize the midcentury practice of community (Boym 2001). Even maintaining tranquility in the neighborhood by helping older residents and being responsible dog owners and parents, are normative expectations in the recreation of the imagined midcentury ambience. On the other hand, the LCC articulation encompasses evocations of autonomy and private property rights. Thus, we have “two antagonistic world views” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 199), forced to reside closely, which inevitably leads to conflicts over what may be deemed legitimate taste.

Midcentury homes with small galley kitchens, dearth of storage space and carports are often incompatible with contemporary lifestyle practices. The architectural control committee from the 1950s has expired so residents are no longer legally bound to follow the original stringent design guidelines. Since many of the newer residents are paying premium prices and implicitly selecting into the neighborhood, their plans for modifications to the inside or more concerning, to the exterior of the home are met with consternation when they disregard the original design aesthetic. We trace the unfolding of the dynamic of conflict and negotiation of compromise owing to collective pressure that leads to tenuous balances between communal and individual identity projects.

Bourdieu has argued that individuals perceive each other through a “symbolic veil of honor” attached to their practices and misperceive the real basis of these practices: the economic and cultural capital that both underlies the different habitus and enables their
realization” (Weininger 2002, p. 145). In this upper middle-class research context, we find that the HCC group (which includes individuals with varying levels of economic capital) inflicts symbolic violence on the LCC groups that serves to impress upon the LCCs their lack of taste. They counter this affront with appeals to personal autonomy, private property rights and the plea that the MCM aesthetic is outmoded and impractical. However, through collectively exercised power, which recognizes the legitimacy of the MCM taste culture, the aberrant LCC individuals are forced to make reparations, which while not eliminating the offending architectural features, serve to make them less salient. Thus, the HCC and LCC groups have the different identity outcomes of aesthetic self-expression and aesthetic subordination.

The identification of these tensions adds to Arsel and Bean’s (2013) conceptualization of taste regimes. The experiential-practice theory perspectives tend to downplay (though not completely ignore) such struggles over taste in favor of analyzing how tastes are linked to practices. An interesting question that is posed by this research is what about the MCM aesthetic lends itself to this kind of conflict which appeared to be more or less managed by the Apartment Therapy discourses.

We investigate the undertheorized area of tensions between individuals with different levels of cultural capital forced to exist in close proximity to each other. In this analysis of the ‘politics of space’ we look at the taste practices through which individuals build symbolic capital within a field as well as the operations of symbolic violence and contestations over legitimacy of tastes. Finally, this study reveals the ideologies and subjective consumer experiences at play in consumption surrounding homes in an upper middle-class context (Holt 1998; Lung-Amam 2013; Miller 2010; Sherry 2000).

**How Multiple Stakeholders Produce Branded Urban Spaces**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Inspired by the spatial turn in social sciences (Soja 1980), recent developments in consumer research have started to discuss how market actors concur to produce different types of spaces and how space recursively shapes markets (Castilhos, Dolbec, and Veresiu 2017). These studies advanced pioneer accounts of the relations between the managed materiality of servicescapes and consumer experiences (Sherry 1998), shedding light on the many forms through which consumers and producers negotiate meanings and ideologies and appropriate commercial and public spaces through consumption and market practices (Bradford and Sherry 2015; Chatzidakis, Maclaran, and Bradhaw 2012; Maclaran and Brown 2005; Visconti et al. 2010). Although conflict and compromise between multiple market actors are more or less explicit in such an emerging stream, we still lack more systematic empirical analyses of how different stakeholders dynamically concur to produce different dimensions of space.

To address this theoretical blind spot, I deploy Lefebvre’s (1991) spatial triad to analyse the development of a branded urban space — a complex spatial entity that emerges in post-industrial cities, which includes private (shops, residences, and offices) and public (parks, streets, and natural resources) spaces and is bounded by a strong brand narrative. To Lefebvre (1991), the production of space unfolds in three intertwined and overlapping moments (or levels) of space: first, the spatial practice (material space) refers to the material geographies and concrete spatial forms; second, representations of space (imagined space) refer to the conceptualized space of urban planners, architects, policy makers, and artists among others; third, representational spaces (lived space) refers to space as experienced by consumers, who can comply or resist to material and symbolic determinations. So how do market actors concur to produce material, imagined, and lived dimensions of space in branded urban spaces?

To answer my research question, I conducted an extended case study of the implementation of Jardim Europa neighbourhood (JE) in Porto Alegre, south of Brazil. Developed by a single firm, JE is a complex of upscale condominiums surrounding a public park, which is located on the frontier between upscale and lower-class neighbourhoods, including squatter areas. Bounded by a brand narrative that caters to the aspirations of local upper-middle-classes and at the same time that excludes lower-class consumers, JE development unfolds through a complex set of negotiations between consumers, producers, and regulators. To account for these complex relations, I have collected three types of data from January of 2012 to December of 2016: first, I conducted interviews with residents from the condominiums and squatter areas as well as interviews with the developer’s employees, municipality representatives, and park users; second, I conducted participant observation in the neighborhood, especially at the park; third, I also collected archival data, specifically from the municipality, the local media, and the developer. My dataset is composed of 37 hours of audio recording, totalizing 518 single-spaced pages of transcription, 46 pages of field notes, 577 pictures, 40 minutes of video footage, and more than 500 pages of archival data.

I distinguish three key elements in the production of branded urban spaces that recursively concur to constitute the three dimensions of space (Lefebvre 1991): first, architecture and urbanism relate to the material dimension of space by assembling and linking private spaces of family exclusivity with communal and public spaces of leisure, consumption, and contemplation that enable a self-rewarding daily life for condo residents. It also relates to the imagined dimension of space as its materiality constantly and carefully evokes sophistication, cosmopolitanism, and privilege; second, brand narrative relates to the imagined and lived dimension of space by assigning meanings and ideals to the neighborhood’s materiality and by providing a discursive system that links material reality to daily consumption practices, offering prescriptions and normative cues that orient consumers’ spatialized experiences; third, spatial governance establishes a link between material and lived space by normalizing behaviors and amenity uses, providing patrimonial maintenance, and reassuring isolation from the outside via integration between security systems and residents’ conduct inside the condominiums. Moreover, at the public level, spatial governance seeks to manage potential threats to JE’s value proposition that could arise due to the proximity with the popular surroundings through a systematic vigilance over lower-class groups in their uses of public spaces.

Taken together, these elements contribute to successfully legitimize JE as an upper-middle-class neighborhood in the city while recursively creating a shared identity among upper-class residents and reproducing objective and subjective forms of exclusion of lower-class consumers. This detailed analysis of the production of branded urban spaces sheds light to intensified forms of exclusion in the city. While traditional segregating spaces (e.g., gated communities) create a sharp division between insiders and outsiders (Caldeira 1996), branded urban spaces gradually colonize public space, controlling the spatial narrative and imposing a set of acceptable behaviors according to the dispositions and aspirations of targeted consumers. Lefebvre’s (1991) spatial triad provided a unique lens that allowed to unveil the complexity of the production of branded urban spaces, providing a more political and systemic perspective to the emerging body of spatial studies in consumer research.
Representations of Space: Methodological Tensions in Spatial Consumer Research

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Attention to the importance of space and place has increased across the social sciences in recent decades. Consumer research has followed suit, examining a myriad of ways in which space influences culture and behavior, and vice versa (Castilhos, Dolbec, and Veresiu 2017). We extend this productive discussion through the methodological development of geographic ethnography, a novel combination of ethnographic and Geographic Systems (GIS) data and analyses.

Prior spatial consumer research tended to focus either on the macro-level forces shape that space and place, or on ways that consumers use or understand space and place as symbolically meaningful. These perspectives correspond with what Lefebvre (1991) terms spatial practice, or the reproduction of spatial orders, and representational space, or the contested and embodied meanings of space. Largely missing, however, are discussions of a third node of Lefebvre’s spatial triad: representations of space, which are ways that order is imposed upon space through scientific codification of space and place. Researchers, like city planners, may fall prey to problems of representation through translating consumers’ lived spatial experiences into data for analysis and publication.

Research based largely on qualitative interviews (e.g., Maclin and Brown 2005) or longitudinal text analysis (e.g., Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Humphreys 2010) provide a rich understanding of the symbolic meaning and long-term social changes. However, these methods may run the risk of flattening out either space or time in ways that obscure their important dynamics. Ethnographic methods have the potential to bridge these gaps by capturing both spatial and temporal dynamics. However, we argue that consumer research has yet to fully realize this full potential. Studies such as those by Visconti et al. (2010), who employ participant observation to uncover contestations of the meaning and use of public space, and Bradford and Sherry (2015), who use ethnographic fieldwork to examine the domestication of public spaces, gather rich spatial data but still remain grounded primarily at the level of consumer meaning. In translating dynamic experiential observations into field notes, memos, photographs, and interview transcripts, much of the original spatial and temporal richness can be lost in translation.

We propose geographic ethnography as a methodological remedy that retains, as far as possible, the dynamics of time and space as observed and experienced in the study context. The method begins with spatially-oriented ethnographic fieldwork. In our research, we focus on a “public market” recently constructed as part of a wider urban redevelopment initiative. We observe, participate in, and talk with consumers, vendors, and management about the space as it changes and unfolds through two years of fieldwork. In addition to conventional field notes, we capture data in explicitly spatial formats. These include visual data such as video and photographs, maps drawn in field notes, and geocoded data captured from interviews and participant observation. Next, we situate these data temporally through the analysis of archival newspaper articles and planning documents that chronicle the history of public markets in the region from the early 1900s to the present. We also record temporal changes in the spatial data collected within and between visits to the field site. Finally, we utilize GIS software to map consumer movement across the city to understand the ways people move between the public market and other related consumption sites.

Through our geographic ethnography we find that public markets occupy a strikingly similar position in the contemporary United States as they did at the beginning of the twentieth century. First, public markets offer a means for consumers, vendors, and developers to stake territorial claims in space. Consumers and vendors exert ownership over tables, chairs, and areas in the market. But public markets also act as vehicles for urban renewal and the territorialization and displacement that occur through these processes. Non-Anglo ethnic groups are either explicitly or implicitly excluded from full participation in these redeveloped urban spaces. Spatially, the public market spaces we studied play a less central role in these marginalized consumers’ daily consumption practices.

Second, territorial claims are legitimized through social negotiations over ownership rights. These owners—whether social or legal—receive and maintain social legitimation by taking responsibility for spaces and objects through maintenance and care, benevolent interactions, and respect of the ownership rights of others. For example, café patrons in the market are welcome to work at communal tables for extended periods of time, but according to baristas, “people are supposed to bring their own dishes back.” Over time, the spatial layout and roles permitted in public market spaces shift to accommodate these new “owners” and their practices—such as a new coffee shop bar and additional wifi-enabled seating.

Finally, people who are perceived as not taking adequate spatial responsibility compared to the rights they claim are not allowed to claim maintain their rights to public market spaces. Rights are typically lost through redevelopment and redistribution of space by actors with more power and socially legitimate claims to ownership of the space. For example, for several years families were permitted to picnic with outside food in a market courtyard, but when playful kids started throwing rocks management paved over their favourite gravel play area. Additionally, in the metropolitan region of our study, nearly all of the historical farmers’ markets that survived more than a decade were located (or relocated) in predominantly white, affluent areas.

This research provides important points of discussion regarding the state of space, place, and “representations of space” (Lefebvre 1991) in consumer research. We show that by making research methods more spatially and temporally sensitive and explicit, scholars can push theory about space and place beyond current conceptualizations and toward a more holistic understanding.

REFERENCES


