

# Divergent narratives in the imagining of the home amongst middle-class consumers



Aesthetics, comfort and the symbolic boundaries of self and home

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## **Abstract**

Sociological research on consumption has typically emphasized the social 'work' done by consuming things, showing how consumption expresses social identities, symbolizes class and status, and assists in delineating cultural boundaries and networks. In contrast, there are relatively few studies that explore consumption from the viewpoint of actors, seeking to expose the strategies, narratives and accounts that literally constitute the consumption act. Using interview data collected from a sample of middle-class Australian householders on practices of home decoration, this article explores the way consumption practice is linked to imagination and narrative. While the style and design features of the home have been a site for frenetic commodification within Australia, these data demonstrate that people's desires with regard to how their home is presented and understood differ markedly, with some respondents emphasizing conspicuousness and style, and others comfort and relaxation. These narratives are interpreted as markers that socially mediate symbolic boundaries of self.

**Keywords:** consumption, home, narrative, symbolic boundaries, taste

What matters in the consumption act has largely been conceived by sociologists as relating to domains that are external to the consumer. Consumption, which incorporates the acts of anticipation, purchase and

use of goods or services, has been situated centrally to discussions of the symbolic use of goods or services to establish likeness or difference, manage social status or denote some quality of cultural refinement. Despite a divergent theoretical heritage, some of the most influential works on consumption have as their basis a strong social understanding of consumption processes which privilege questions of class, status, inequality and social symbolism. These include: Veblen's (1899/[1934]) account of conspicuous consumption and its relation to pecuniary canons of taste, Goffman (1951) on the deployment of status objects, Barthes' (1993/1957) analysis of the semiotic qualities and attractions of the commodity jewels of modern capitalist expansion, Douglas and Isherwood's (1979/1996) elucidation of the way goods are materials for understanding cultural categories that form the basis of social processes of inclusion and exclusion, and Bourdieu's (1984) account of taste as a symbolic marker of social class and difference. The general observation one could make, based on these principal works, is that the weight of social and cultural inquiry into consumption has been established in domains theoretically entrenched outside, or indeed cut off from, the self. That is, the implicit understanding of such analyses is that the act of consumption serves a predominantly social role, and is ultimately implicated in conveying some type of social, cultural or identity message to others.

This article does not seek to challenge this core notion in the sociology of consumption, but seeks a corrective that addresses the ways in which narrative, symbolic boundaries and practices of consumption constitute such cultural forms. This corrective is necessary because, while the theoretical terrain within consumption studies has more recently shifted towards freedom, expressivity and identity in explaining consumption (as reviewed by Warde, 1997), relatively little empirical scholarly inquiry has been directed toward an understanding of the strategies and practices of individual consumers within particular consumption domains sensitive to the accomplishment of these narratives.

Given the sociological tendency to explain consumption through class and group memberships, it is not surprising that even though studies of emotion and embodiment have gained greater currency within sociological theory generally, this has not yet had a significant effect on the consumption studies literature (Boden and Williams, 2002). In part, this has to do with the intellectual trajectory of consumption studies. As Miller (1995) has pointed out, there has been a reliance on a reductionist paradigm which posits consumerism as either a social and personal 'bad', the lineage of which can be traced from Marx through 20th-century varieties of critical thought such as Marcuse, and Horkheimer and Adorno; or as a potentially liberating 'good', interpreted through the lens of cultural studies theorists such as de Certeau, Benjamin and Shields. While theoretically enabling, neither position has encouraged a complex view of consumption practice.

This paucity of investigation into the interaction between emotion, self and consumption in sociological research is surprising given the fact that a small number of persuasive and influential attempts to actually explain the sustained existence of the cultural ethic of consumerism have employed strong social-psychological, emotional orientations in their explanations. Prominent in this field are Baudrillard's (1996/1968) theory of a psychological 'lack' at the core of consumerist psychology, Campbell's (1987) account of the self-sustaining, autonomous ethic of consumerist desire, and McCracken's (1988) theory of consumption as an act of 'displaced meaning'. Warde's (1994) analysis of threats to self-identity associated with consumption is a further example in this genre that raises important social-psychological questions relating to consumption. All of these pivotal works have foundational emotional elements, though it should be noted they remain relatively undeveloped as part of any explicit theoretical model. Despite being well-regarded works within the field, empirical and conceptual specifications of these constructive and novel theoretical tracts have not followed. Consequently, potentially fruitful lines of empirical inquiry into the emotional, interpretive elements of consumption practice have been left untouched, which has been detrimental to developing sociological explanations of consumption.

Allowing actors to give their own accounts of, and reasoning for, their consumption and aesthetic choices uncovers the way consumption is a process by which meanings are continuously managed through the accomplishment of a narrative, in conjunction with chosen elements of material culture. These narratives can be seen to draw the symbolic boundaries of one's taste, and constitute the process by which actors categorize objects, people and practices (Lamont and Molnár, 2002). Cultural sociologists intuitively know that these category distinctions, which narratives bring to the surface, become the basis for generating social groups and differences, yet little empirical work has been done within consumption studies on the empirical and methodological elements of such processes (Miles, 1996 and Miller, 1998 represent two notable attempts that move in this direction). In this article I use interview data to interpret these narratives, demonstrating how they are linked to the management of self and elements of one's social identity within particular social settings and, within the interview context considered in this article, how they are expressed as certain desires relating to techniques for organizing and decorating the home. It is important to note that such questions are not merely theoretical, essential solely for an adequate sociological explanation of consumerism. Ongoing consumption expenditure within both discretionary and utilitarian domains is seen by some as a primary contributor to various social and economic problems within Australia, including high personal and consumer indebtedness, various types of pollution and waste, widening social inequalities and environmental degradation.

## Consumption and the meanings of home

As a site of consumption, the home stands as an interesting and important special case. The home remains the largest single economic investment people are likely to make, and seems to have enduring cultural salience in Australia where commentators have long suggested the home has potency as a symbol of modernity, middle-class status and affluence (Boyd, 1952, 1960; Fiske et al., 1987; Horne, 1964; McGregor, 1966; Stretton, 1975). When considering the internal space of a home, it can be observed that domestic spaces are not exclusively public or private, as such meanings shift and slide according to the social and familial relationships of visitors to the spatial organization of the home (Lawrence, 1987). Objects within the home, too, serve shifting purposes according to the needs of the situation. Objects sometimes have a public role in the home as a signifier of status, style or taste. At other times they serve as a focus for managing self-identity, family relations or self-esteem (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Environmental psychologists have typically emphasized the psychic dimensions of home. Not only are domestic interiors spaces to be played with via a person's environmental preferences (Bonnes et al., 1987), they are spaces of familial and friendship-based interaction. At a deeper level, homes are seen as 'warehouses of personal experience' (Lawrence, 1985: 129). As Bachelard (1958/1994) points out, the home is a site that represents a basic and important division in geographical space between the house (self) and non-house (non-self, or other). In the environmental psychology paradigm, homes are sites for the application of resources directed toward the maintenance of self-identity and self-esteem, family relations and notions of insiders/outside (Laumann and House, 1970; Lawrence, 1985, 1987; Rapoport, 1969). But in addition to their psychological dimension, homes carry a freight of sociological meaning. Ways of living in the home, and the organization and selection of the system of objects within its spaces, are circumscribed by moral prescriptions associated with family, gender and class positions (Madigan and Munro, 1996).

My interview data demonstrate that the meaning of the home represents a dilemma for some consumers. On the one hand, it is a contemporary site for systematic, extensive and frenetic commodification through media such as television, newspapers and magazines. Recent rounds of commodification of design, style and decoration within the domestic sphere have constructed the home as a site that allows for the assertion of conspicuous forms of individual style, luxury, aesthetic expression and the management of identities. Yet on the other hand, the home is also an authentic, even therapeutic (Bachelard, 1958/1994), space of shared experience, relaxation, intimacy and emotion, where style, design and conspicuousness are seen to matter little. There is then, a basic conflict between the desire to express individual style, taste and social and personal status through the home, and

a desire to maintain the home as a space that is comfortable and relaxing, and where authentic, genuine personal values can be fostered. Using interview data gathered from a sample of middle-class consumers, this article investigates the ways in which individuals understand and manage this basic dilemma.

## **Data collection and methodological procedures**

Following a mail-out to houses in selected streets within two suburbs of Brisbane, the capital city of Queensland, Australia, face-to-face interviews were carried out with 24 householders. Table 1 gives the basic demographic characteristics of the sample.<sup>1</sup> It shows that the sample comes from a range of age groups, but is relatively homogeneous in that respondents are generally university educated, most have household incomes above \$80,000 and most own their home. Notably, most respondents were women. The interviews lasted 75–90 minutes and were tape-recorded, then transcribed. The inductive principles of open coding, involving the development of categories and themes, were used in the analysis of interview data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The themes reported in this article represent one important thread apparent across these interviews. The extracts presented here are representative of these themes and arise from analysis of interviewee discourse. The interviews generally began with an informal tour of the house and its contents. In exploring the home as a site for the practice of aesthetic judgement, the idea of ‘taste’ was not explicitly put to interviewees as the chief concern of the research. Rather, my decision was to leave the topic for investigation relatively open, and state generally to the respondent that my interest was ‘the way people decorate their homes, the reasons they make such choices and the things that have influenced the way they have decorated their homes’. The advantage of this approach is that respondents do end up talking about their tastes, however, the semi-structured approach lets them decide what aspects of domestic material culture to choose in order to construct their account. The talk of respondents, and the material culture it is associated with, thus becomes evidence of their understandings of taste. Indeed, the objects they choose to discuss are the physical manifestation of such understandings. After the tour a semi-structured interview took place and was a further opportunity to attend to points of interest and clarification, and to put to interviewees hypotheses developed in previous interviews.

These interviews took place in two suburbs of Brisbane, Australia, which for the purposes of preserving anonymity I shall call ‘Suburb A’ and ‘Suburb B’.<sup>2</sup> Suburb A is one of the city’s ‘establishment’ suburbs, and is surrounded by a number of other prestigious areas. The streets of Suburb A that were sampled are located on the edge of a cliff overlooking an expansive reach of the Brisbane River. One interviewee suggested this district is similar to

Table 1: Social characteristics of the interview sample

<i>Interviewee's name</i>	<i>Age group</i>	<i>Educational attainment</i>	<i>Occupation (partner's occupation)</i>	<i>Household income bracket (AU\$)</i>	<i>Years in current home</i>	<i>Renting, purchasing or own current home</i>
Anita	46–55	University	Executive manager, public enterprise	80,000 +	0.4	Purchasing
Mary	46–55	Secondary schooling	Administrative assistant	40,000–60,000	8	Own
Steve	56–65	Technical	International airline pilot (retired)			
Bruce	46–55	University	Electrician	60,000–80,000	10	Own
Maria	36–45	University	Physiotherapist			
Michelle	26–35	Secondary	Home duties	60,000–80,000	1.5	Buy
Jason	36–45	Part university	Bank manager			
Anne	26–35	University	Radiologist	80,000 +	1.5	Rent
Geoff	36–45	University	Entomologist			
Sally	46–55	University	Researcher	80,000 +	11	Own
Ross	46–55	University	Engineer	80,000 +	4	Own
Linda	36–45	Secondary	Administrative assistant			

Joanne	26–35	University	Photographer	80,000 +	1.5	Own
Trevor	26–35	University	Air force navigator			
Margaret	36–45	University	Teacher (Manager)	80,000 +	10	Own
Robyn	46–55	Secondary	Home duties (Insurance broker)	80,000 +	2	Own
Susan	26–35	University	Administrative assistant	20,000–40,000	26	Own
Samantha	26–35	University	Journalist (Doctor)	80,000 +	2	Own
Amanda	36–45	Technical	Mother (Managing director)	80,000 +	0.5	Own
Lucy	36–45	University	Student, home duties (Retired)	80,000 +	5	Own
Juliette	36–45	University	Home duties, schoolteacher, gallery guide, student (Doctor)	80,000 +	7	Own
Frances	36–45	University	Home duties (Sharebroker)	80,000 +	12	Own
Jane	56–65	Secondary	Home duties	60,000–80,000	2	Own
Andrew	56–65	University	Advertising executive (retired)			

suburbs in Sydney that have a view of Sydney Harbour. The area has some of the city's largest colonial houses, but has also been a suburb where moneyed gentrifiers purchase highly valued land with unfashionable mid-century houses, then demolish them to construct new dwellings. Some of these new dwellings are architecturally valuable, while others are merely massive and opulent. While Suburb A represents an area of extreme wealth and has a unique location to attract the moneyed and elite of the city, Suburb B is an archetypal example of an inner-city suburb that has been subject to gentrification processes over the last couple of decades. Suburb B's houses are generally smaller and less impressive colonial styles, though this depends on location and especially elevation, and most residences could be classified as colonial cottages in contrast to Suburb A's sprawling colonial mansions. However, its inner-city location and the fashionableness of the colonial style dwelling have attracted young, mostly professional people to the area who renovate the houses and hope to benefit from significant capital gains.

The structure of this article is directed by a dual analytic distinction that has been generated by data gathered through fieldwork observation, the analysis of interview transcripts and a brief survey instrument. Interviewees have been divided into two categories. These are based upon their relationship to a core distinction between a desire for *decoration* and a desire for *comfort*. In the first instance are those who relate to the home chiefly in an aesthetic sense and have a strong vision for its decoration and presentation according to conventions of fashionableness, style and 'up-to-dateness'. Alternately, there are those who relate to the home principally as a space they wish to be organized according to the principles of comfort and relaxation. These unique aesthetic discourses may be understood as drawing the boundaries of one's aesthetic taste, and refer to the means and resources respondents have for explaining, accounting and justifying their choices. In essence, they are discursive strategies – ways and means of talking or narrativizing – and are discourses that bring into being particular modes of practice in relation to taste and domestic material culture. In the following sections of this article I explore the basis of each of these discursive strategies.

### **The desire to decorate and possess beautiful things**

In interpreting this first group of respondents I have been guided by a number of important recent works on consumerism that have placed emphasis on the role of psychological motivations as crucial elements of the modern consumerist ethic. I shall turn to briefly consider these. It is the notion of 'lack' which is at the core of Baudrillard's writings on the nature of regimes of sign value in consumer society (1996/1968). At the base of Baudrillard's analysis of consumerism is the theory that while we may consume physical

objects, in fact we are really consuming the *idea* of an object. These ideas are tied to inner motivations and drives, rather than utility. Baudrillard's point is that objects eventually, perpetually disappoint – they never really satisfy the deep psychological needs that direct us toward them in the first instance. Consumption and consumer capitalism is thus founded upon a psychological lack that it perpetually stimulates, but cannot satiate. McCracken's (1988) theory of displaced meanings is essentially similar to Baudrillard's notion of lack. McCracken also postulates a psychological motivation for consumption. In his theory, a chronic aspect of psycho-social life is the gap that exists between the real and ideal; in consumer societies the pursuit of desirable objects is an important resource for making bridges between the real and ideal. Dreaming and fantasizing are important, for it is in this imagined domain that people come to define and build up their notion of an ideal. The psychological pang comes when people acquire elements of their dream, and invariably discover that their lives soon settle back to a mundane reality. After a short high, the theory postulates that people realize their 'dream consumer object' does not satiate a deep, inner dissatisfaction. At this point, the cycle of dreaming for newness begins again. Campbell's (1987) theory is even more elaborate and ambitious, primarily because of the historical argument it is predicated upon. Campbell's thesis is that, alongside the bourgeois, rationalist and technical ethic which characterized Weber's theory of capitalist development, there is a romantic, pleasure-seeking, hedonistic spirit which drives modern consumerism. Central to the cultural complex of consumerism is day-dreaming, fantasizing and self-delusion. A major part of consumption is imagination – consumers desire objects because they believe them to offer something novel, empowering or edifying. People do not thus have an actual desire for acquisition of objects per se, but the acquisition of 'dreams and the pleasurable dramas which they have already enjoyed in imagination' (Campbell, 1987: 90). As in McCracken's theory, so too for Campbell, purchase simply eventually leads to further disappointment, and the cycle of longing and desire begins again.

What the interview data gathered in this project show is that consumer dreams, longing and desires are striking elements in the discourses of those motivated by a decorative aesthetic. This component of my sample are strongly motivated to dream about the aesthetic element of their homes, they commonly report 'loving' consumer objects, and they have a longing for new consumer experiences. It is this sub-group of my sample who have been most strongly animated by what Campbell (1987) labels an autonomous, hedonistic consumer ethic.

In the first instance it is clear that these respondents get much enjoyment and satisfaction from home decoration, or at least imagining their homes being redecorated. They are often avid readers of home decoration magazines, excited by the images, ideas and decorating themes they source

from these journals. The following extract from the interview with Robyn illustrates the enthusiasm associated with dreaming about home decoration:

*Int.:* Where do you get your ideas from, generally?

Robyn: Magazines, yes.

*Int.:* What are your favourites?

Robyn: House and Garden, that's the original House and Garden. I used to read Verandah which is an American magazine. Old favourites like the Australian magazine and I have a bible that I get every week and it's called Hello Magazine. Have you ever heard of it?

*Int.:* Maybe ...

Robyn: I'll go and get one so you can see what it's like. We all read it – my husband reads them first of all.... It's actually produced in Spain but it's mainly an English magazine ... it's just about all the rich and famous but it has beautiful homesteads in it, beautiful homesteads. There's always an article ... see here's one here ... there is always an article on someone and their home.

*Int.:* So you get ideas ...

Robyn: Yes, yes I do get ideas.

*Int.:* So you think it's better than the Australian ones, or it's just got richer ideas or, it's a weekly one too, is it?

Robyn: It is weekly, yes. I have been getting it for a long time but I have actually decided that I'm going to stop getting it.

*Int.:* Why is that?

Robyn: Well, it's going up in price more and more all the time and I just thought perhaps I shouldn't be buying it every week anyway.... There's a beautiful photo in here that I want to show you, I think it's of one of Prince Charles's Highgrove – his gardens. You just pan over the page – it's just brilliant.

A common thread through these interviews is the motivation to find 'beautiful' things. The word is used repeatedly in the extract from my interview with Robyn, above, and is also used frequently by other respondents. These interviewees characteristically report enjoying shopping, they enjoy consuming images in decorator magazines and they enjoy dreaming about how their homes could look. The idea of the 'beautiful thing' is compelling and important, and comes up on numerous occasions across my interviews. In addition, a reading of Bennett et al.'s study of tastes illustrates a similar theme evident in their data, with one respondent from their sample reporting that 'I just like nice things' (1999: 27). Interestingly, in a series of psychological studies carried out with undergraduate students, Richins (1997) attempted to specify which emotions were actually involved in the consumption experience, or at least reflections upon such experience. Her data shows that love and excitement are amongst the most commonly reported feelings linked to consumption. One interpretation is that this 'loving',

'desiring' talk about 'beautiful' objects represents a restless search for personal satisfaction through consumption. In addition (as suggested by the work of Lamont, 1992), it can be seen to function as a cultural operation that allows people to use the material world as a resource for exercising moral judgements; consumption thus has a moral quality which is based on notions of 'good' and 'bad', 'beautiful' and 'ugly'. Anna – in her early forties, who lists her occupation as 'mother' and whose husband is managing director of an advertising agency – puts it most clearly:

I'd also say that I do love beautiful things and we are lucky we have got some beautiful things.... I enjoy beautiful things whether it be in my home, going to the ballet seeing someone sing a beautiful song, whatever. Ummm ... and I think that bearing all that in mind I mean really who wants to sit and look at something that's really ugly and not attractive to the eye and I hope you don't think this sounds completely shallow or anything, but I like to be surrounded by beautiful things.

For Margaret, a forty-ish teacher, there is an apparent quality of insatiability in her search for aesthetically pleasing objects. In turn, self-satisfaction is derived from presenting a coordinated, idealized style. Newness is desirable; aspiration to be stylish, individual and distinctive seems to be an important factor for younger households in particular (Madigan and Munro, 1996: 52). In Margaret's case, the formal area of her home is a cool, minimalist space, with predominantly black and white tones, and glass, chrome and leather furniture. Interestingly, there are no family photographs or other objects which explicitly denote group membership or ties. Rather, most things signify individuality and personal style – coffee-table books, sculpture and modern art. Margaret's choice of three ideal features of a home indicated in the accompanying survey clearly approximates the style she has achieved in her home: 'uncluttered', 'spacious' and 'distinctive'. What is also clear in the following interview extract is that the pursuit of taste and fashionableness is tied up with an anxiety that is both satiated, and in turn animated, by 'wishing', 'loving' and 'looking':

*Int.:* *Where do you get your ideas from for decorating and organizing the space in your home?*

Margaret: Umm ... I don't know really ... it's something I've always enjoyed.... I guess I read magazines.... I love shopping, I could spend an afternoon just pottering around Freedom or somewhere like that ... not with intention of buying anything, but just because I like looking at what other people do and their ideas.

*Int.:* *So where would you go if you had a free afternoon to shop?*

Margaret: Freedom ... yeah I like those sorts of places, then again I'll be quite happy pottering around the whitegoods in Myers or something like that ... just like wandering around and looking at what people are doing.

*Int.:* *What is there in that for you?*

Margaret: Don't know ... maybe I think 'Oh, I wish I could have that', but I think it's more I'm interested in how people put things together to get an effect, so creativity I guess.

*Int.:* *Are aesthetic things important to you?*

Margaret: Yeah, yeah ... umm, I like what you can do with different colours, and putting colours together which are a bit unusual and that ...

Other participants express similar sentiments. While effusing about her favourite home magazine, Robyn justifies her love of browsing images by seeking the interviewer's assent: 'And they're just really beautiful things to look at aren't they?' For Samantha, a stereo system is nominated as one of her favourite objects. At a structural level, it reflects trends associated with the aestheticization of everyday domestic objects from stereos and telephones, washing machines and refrigerators, to juicers, can openers and glassware. This trend seems to have recently infiltrated mass markets, and at its elite end is associated with the rise in fashionableness of celebrity designers like Philippe Starck and Marc Newson, and brands like Alessi. In terms of domestic technology, companies like Bang and Olufsen ('B&O') produce expensive, everyday technological goods like stereos, telephones and headsets with an architectural sensibility. This style seems to have captured Samantha's imagination: 'I love my "B&O" stereo.... I love that – I'm very happy with that. I often wonder, again ultimately if we did that back room modern and kept the navy theme, I quite like the navy out there, I might actually have it mounted on the wall and make it a feature itself.'

These extracts show that the aesthetic experts of my sample are thus also those most strongly animated by the search for satisfaction through consumer objects, styles and tastes. Through their repeated use of words like 'love' and 'beautiful', these respondents demonstrate that there is a strong motivation for demonstrating good taste – as suggested by recent theories of consumerism that I have reviewed – and that the search for good taste is animated, in part, by a restless desire for 'beautiful things' that are perceived to enhance one's life. This aesthetic-moral expression is most likely how it is experienced by these respondents; that is, as the search for beauty and pleasure, not as the vulgar desire to be distinctive, superior or to have 'more of everything'. Rather, it is a personal search for satisfaction through consumption, which is at all times mediated by notions of a consumption etiquette or scheme of taste.

## **Relaxed, homely and practical: the desire for living comfortably**

In the previous section we have seen how those interested in decoration and the aesthetic aspects of the home are driven toward an ideal vision of how

they wish their home to be decorated, have well-developed views on the constituent decorative elements that are perceived to make up a beautiful home and have a strong, almost fantasy-like, desire for newness, fashionableness and beautiful objects. In this section, I turn to the group of respondents whose choices are not principally guided by pursuit of beauty in colour, 'feel' or 'look', but by matters of comfort, practicality and relaxation.

The shift from an aesthetic of decoration to an aesthetic of comfort is well illustrated by the case of Anita. I have already classified respondents as more or less animated by an aesthetic of decoration, beauty and distinction. In reality, it is somewhat misleading to classify people as simply occupying either end of such a spectrum. While there are some who sit closer to each extreme many, like Anita, also express characteristics of both. She is able to talk about her aesthetic rationale for beauty and does have some commitment to a scheme of decoration, however what is more important to her are issues of comfort, casualness and relaxation within her home.

Around 50, Anita lives with her daughter in a colonial house in a near-city suburb. She holds a job at the elite level of the State Public Service, and has a high personal income. Anita is an energetic, thoughtful and lucid respondent. Our interview proceeds on the couches in her living room, later in the evening, over a glass of red wine.

Although Anita did not describe her taste in such a way, her home evokes a bohemian ambience that the decorators I described above would likely see as rambling and cluttered – in her living room there are numerous pieces of Aboriginal art, lamps, wine bottles, plants and books. There is a faint suggestion of political activism and intellectualism; later in our interview Anita says that 'I buy Aboriginal art because I'm committed to supporting Aboriginal art and its artists.' Anita contrasts quite markedly with those whom I have previously described as 'aesthetic experts' in one important way – she is not animated by a drive toward newness, fashionableness or distinction in the way she talks about her home. Rather, she perceives the values of comfort, relaxation and casualness to be markers of her tastes:

*Int.:* *What are the most important things in terms of how you have organized and presented your home?*

Anita: I suppose, comfort and accessibility, that people feel comfortable, feel like they can put their feet up on the chairs and couch and that sort of stuff ... some sort of um, pleasing aesthetically, but not in a structured way, you know, so that you can look out windows and that sort of thing.

Unlike the enthusiastic decorators and aesthetes examined in the first half of this article who read decorator magazines with intense interest and tend to enjoy the experience of shopping for new styles and objects, Anita admits to some dreaming about ideal environments, but is clearly less enthusiastic about both of these things than the aesthetic experts:

*Int.:* Do you read home magazines?

Anita: No ... no, but occasionally I think, in dentists' waiting rooms and stuff, [I've] looked at stuff like that and lusted after neat little tables with lovely table cloths and stuff. For example, I pulled the other day for the first time in my life, over to ... I was coming back for work purposes, past Peter Baker-Finch, who has a sort of furniture lifestyle shop over at Annerley and I thought 'Oh yeah, I should have all these things, these nice things', but yeah ... I'm not a slave to fashion.

An important component of this outlook is Anita's identification of herself as someone who is not so conscious of her environment, suggesting she is not someone strongly motivated to long for newness or fashionableness.

*Int.:* Do you think you have an aesthetic eye? How sensitive are you to your surroundings?

Anita: Not very. I don't think I'm particularly sensitive in a specific and noticing things sense to other people's houses ... like I can go to another person's house and people say 'Did you see that thing on the wall, wasn't it horrible?', and I think I hardly noticed it, although I do notice artwork, because I'm interested in it, but I'm generally not a very visually oriented person, and when I read people talking about 'There's a corner of my house that I love to sit in because of its particular aspect' I think 'Oh, I wish I was that self-conscious that I would notice that', I'm a bit less conscious of my environment.

Similar sentiments are expressed in my interview with Mary and Steve. Both retired – Mary worked in administration, Steve was an airline pilot – Mary's choice of the enclosed verandah as her favourite space in the home is consistent with the theme of comfort and relaxation. It is an informal space, long and narrow in shape, and used for watching television, listening to the radio and reading newspapers and 'having a warm drink'.

*Int.:* Can I ask you now what part of the house you like to use most often?

Mary: Well if I've got something to read ... then this is the sort of area perhaps where you have your morning cup of coffee, where you read the paper ... and so I suppose I'd say that this is the room that I'd want to say is my favourite space, even though it's just a ... it's just like an enclosed verandah, but it's just what I enjoy.

The word 'comfortable' comes up numerous times in my interview with Mary and Steve – this is significant because it suggests that the house and its furnishings are not chiefly prized for their colour, design or texture, but for their comfort and practical value. Notably, both Mary and Steve chose 'comfortable' as the most important feature of their ideal home, with similar descriptors 'clean and tidy', and 'easy to maintain' also in their top three selections. The aspirational descriptors 'elegant', 'distinctive' and 'modern' feature as their least preferred descriptors of an ideal home. The following extract from my interview with Mary and Steve underlines (and is italicized as a point of emphasis for the reader) the expression of such a sentiment:

Steve: So yeah, I guess my ah ... idea is more along the practical lines ...

Mary: Clean lines, easy to clean ...

Steve: *Comfortable*, easy to work and live with and ahh ... umm ... just day-to-day practical things.

Int.: *In terms of your preferences for styles of furniture ... if you were to buy a new piece would you go for modern, or antique period styles?*

Mary: No I probably wouldn't go for antiques because a lot of those are terribly *uncomfortable*, but I guess we virtually, with the lounge that we've had, that's a Moran that we've had for nearly ten years, and we hunted high and low before we found something that was *comfortable* and looked ok, and I think *comfort* in what you're sitting in ... style, well nothing really here is that traditional ... furniture; like our dining room is important so everyone can talk to each other and the chairs actually are very *comfortable* chairs, they're very simple chairs, but they're very *comfortable* ... so I suppose it's *comfort* more than anything else.

Bruce and Maria have similar feelings. They live in the same suburb as Mary and Steve, though their house is in a smaller, less prominent, and less prestigious street. Both tertiary educated, Bruce works as an electrician and Maria a physiotherapist. They have renovated their house and have done the same with others in the past as a way of making a capital gain. When I asked them to explain the most important features in determining how they had organized their house, Maria responded first by saying: 'I like to make our place like a home, so you can just walk in and sit down and relax.' Bruce continued: 'We've been to open houses in the area and many of them have many modern renovations.' While their choices are generally based in a heritage style, Bruce contrasts their own taste to 'modern renovations' which are implied to be colder, less inviting, and not as comfortable. The word 'modern' also suggests status-seeking. It is interesting to note that on the accompanying survey instrument, both Bruce and Maria choose 'comfortable' to describe the most important factor for their ideal home, with 'clean and tidy' second most important and, notably, 'modern' as the least important factor.

For Michelle and Jason (home duties and bank manager respectively), the tempo of the interview is also directed by talk of comfort, practicality and costs. Their renovated worker's cottage is not elaborately decorated or themed, and like neighbours Bruce and Maria, the issue of capital gain is important. When asked to describe the most important things that have determined how they organized or decorated their home, they respond:

Jason: Now that the kids are getting a bit older we need more space, more family room space, um ... but we do, despite this being our fourth home, Queenslander, we are still enjoying living here, we like the high ceilings, and probably when we first bought our first house, what was it? ... eight years ago, everyone said that they were just a nightmare to keep clean, and the maintenance on it and painting in it ...

Michelle: I think too, the thing is, they can be comfortable and you can furnish them quite cheaply because we started off with very little money when we first started out and most of the furniture we've got ... had, is, from when we first got married, and, we just bought bits and pieces at a time, they do look good, better in the Queenslander with the vj's<sup>3</sup> rather than a brand new home, so the character is already there in the home, so you don't have to spend a lot of money making the character.

## Discussion

According to Bourdieu (1984) there is a positive association between the likelihood of expressing aesthetic aspirations for one's home and social class, as indicated by occupation. Bourdieu asked respondents what words they would choose to describe their ideal home and what words they would reject. His findings can be interpreted unproblematically: aesthetic categories ('studied', 'harmonious', 'imaginative') are used more frequently by those in upper-class locations, and alternately, the proportion of functionalist choices ('clean and tidy', 'practical', 'easy to maintain') is more important for the middle to lower classes (Bourdieu, 1984: 247–8). In this way, the rules that govern the aesthetic management of the home are merely different applications of the universal systems of aesthetic interpretation and appropriation which form the basis of Bourdieu's theoretical scheme. In the Australian context, Bennett et al.'s (1999) replication of Bourdieu's question on notions of the ideal home report the most interesting and robust results along gender lines, with women emphasizing practical, everyday aspirations and men desiring status goals such as having a distinctive home. Yet their qualitative interview data tell a slightly different story which is consistent with Bourdieu's classification. For middle-class women aesthetic expertise and coordination are valued most highly, while in working-class homes order, cleanliness and family happiness are most valued. Bennett et al. (1999) are, then, in agreement with Bourdieu's emphasis on the working and lower-middle classes privileging non-aesthetic categories, at least within the domain of home decoration. Likewise, Madigan and Munro's (1996) study of working-class and lower middle-class households finds that, despite the extensive, recent commodification of the home within consumption cultures and the emphasis on lifestyle consumption within the theoretical literature, 'being able to make people feel welcome, comfortable and relaxed ... appear[s] to be the dominant concern of householders' (Madigan and Munro, 1996: 54). In this light, then, the results from the current study of a divergence between aesthetic 'decorators' and unaesthetic 'comfort-seekers' are unexpected, given that the interview sample is gathered from a relatively homogeneous social-economic group. These respondents are, on the whole, highly educated, in professional occupations and

have high household incomes. Such factors would lead one to expect them to aspire predominantly to modes of aesthetic distinction, yet this is not the case. This empirical generalization presents scholars of consumption and taste with a problem. How is it that from within a relatively homogeneous group of socially and economically privileged, geographically proximate, enthusiastic consumers, it is possible that two divergent narratives of aesthetic judgement have emerged? In the concluding discussion to this article, I explore a variety of factors that may contribute to this generalized finding.

I suggest a key reason for this anomalous finding relates to the particular nature of the 'home' as a consumption site. While it is true that domestic visual style and design have become more prominent as a site for expressive consumption – anecdotally reflected in the proliferation of home decorator magazines, furniture stores, newspaper supplements, and television shows dedicated to homes and real estate markets – there seems to exist an enduring desire to have a home which is, above all, a site for comfort and relaxation, at the expense of values of decoration and aesthetic style, even for some of the well-off members in this sample. Because it is a space associated with familial comfort and relaxation, consumption within the home is able to some degree to resist these widespread processes of commodification and fetishization of domestic decoration and aesthetics. Relatedly, this resistance is founded upon emphasizing relaxation, welcoming and comfort; in short, the ideal, middle-class family home. There seems to be, then, a moral component which underpins the organization and presentation of domestic space and which relates to matters of decorum, respectability and presentation of a protocol of domestic welcoming. The fact that most of the respondents within this sample are female suggests that it is likely to be women who take on chief responsibility for maintaining and presenting this display of domestic worth (Madigan and Munro, 1996).

The role of narrative and discursive presentation of self within the interview setting is an important element when considering this finding. In constructing a narrative of taste they feel comfortable with, these enthusiastic consumers face various dilemmas that need to be resolved or rationalized – from what aspect of their home's colour scheme they don't like, to the appearance of particular objects in their living room, and the balance between an authentic or genuine self that avoids the excesses of consumerist values, and one that engages too heavily with consumption, fashion and lifestyles. There is likely to be a degree of discursive monitoring that inhibits the intensity of presentation of materialist values – those who seek comfort ahead of decoration are aware of the expectations of having a beautiful home, but choose to position themselves apart from such expectations. The activity of home decoration thus becomes an expression of the boundary between self and others, an opportunity to establish a material marker of self and one's family. Though these respondents have a relative abundance

of economic capital, these interview data illustrate a specific relation to such capital that involves a conscious distancing from overt materialism and acquisitiveness in favour of a narrative that stresses values of home, comfort and family. One profitable way of understanding these processes is through the idea of boundary maintenance (Lamont, 1992; Lamont and Molnár, 2002). In her extensive comparative study of the moral bases for the drawing of social boundaries Lamont (1992) finds that some respondents are critical of those who emphasize socioeconomic success too highly in judging self-worth. She concludes that those who draw these 'anti-socioeconomic' boundaries fail to appraise or give credence to reading socioeconomic status as equivalent to moral status, despite having acquired a substantial degree of socioeconomic success themselves. A further consideration is that the data reported here may be related to the particular aspirations of the Australian middle-class, which are likely to be historically and socially unique, as Corrigan has noted in his survey of Australian decorator magazines:

Beauty is honest, tasteful, casual, comfortable and striving to be democratic – no fraud, vulgarity, formality, lack of appreciation of bodily needs, or elitism. Home aesthetics, then, seems to exist to display certain core values of the Australian middle class. (Corrigan, 1997: 105)

Questions also need to be asked about the social context that allows these accounting behaviours to surface. Though the semi-structured interview often resembles a friendly conversation more than a survey, to show a virtual stranger around your house and its contents could provoke a response of anxiety or suspicion in some people. An alternative way of looking at the problem is to see this type of interview as merely another type of social setting or interaction where the narratives are constructed *in situ*: 'understanding *how* the meaning-making process unfolds in the interview is as critical as apprehending *what* is substantively asked and conveyed' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997: 114). Such a position has been advocated in recent theories of the 'active interview' (e.g. Briggs, 1986; Holstein and Gubrium, 1997; Miller and Glassner, 1997) in the literature on qualitative research. The downplaying of materialist aspirations for one's home that is evident in the data I present here may be an artefact of the interview situation. Yet, to recognize this as part of accomplishing an accountable narrative within the interview setting helps in understanding how taste and consumption are practical, reflexive accomplishments which are embedded in wider discourses about home, family and moral value.

## Conclusion

In order to appreciate and understand the power of the cultural ethic of consumerism, researchers must first theorize consumption from the view-

point of actors. By adopting such an approach, this research has shown that domestic objects and styles transcend the realms of both the material and the aesthetic. They become part of a larger symbolic universe that assigns objects of consumption a moral force, which is in turn linked to the construction and maintenance of self-boundaries that are contextualized within particular consumption settings such as the home. This moral dimension allows the ethic of consumerism to acquire a deep, widespread importance to individuals through offering continual opportunities for one to purchase, or fantasize about, commodity symbols, or, alternatively, to disavow them as shallow, unauthentic or materialistic as required. In this way, such narratives are discursive strategies for negotiating fields of consumption and can be understood as 'etiquettes of hedonism'.

These data suggest that while hedonistic desires might account for part of the energy that propels consumerist practice, they are tempered by counter-discourses of consumption that take account of the etiquette of good taste and the goal of living a 'comfortable', 'relaxed' or 'balanced' lifestyle. For the consumers considered in this project, such counter-discourses impose self-disciplinary restraints on the expression of hedonistic practices and desires, and are particularly apparent within the exchanges of the semi-structured interview setting. Campbell has persuasively argued that the pleurability of modern consumption is in the manipulation and regulation of the psychological, emotional desire and meaning inherent in dreaming or thinking about novel goods, rather than their actual consumption – 'wanting rather than having is the main focus of pleasure-seeking' (Campbell, 1987: 86). The dreams, longings and imaginings of those who express a desire to decorate and aestheticize their homes reported here seem to confirm that such motives are important, but this may be the case for some respondents or segments of the population only. Clearly, this project cannot make generalizations in this regard. Further empirical investigations are required to show which groups of the population hold such desires, what the objects of their desires are and how such desires are related to actual consumption practice. These data indicate that the existence of a hedonistic attitude is unlikely to be a universal feature of consumption but, more probably, is a style of consumption sometimes adopted by most people. A counter-discourse of restraint, discipline and delayed gratification is in part provided for by the scheme of taste, which disciplines consumption according to particular etiquettes. These etiquettes are observed in everyday notions of 'too little', 'too much', 'appropriateness', 'balance' and a variety of other concepts used to make judgements about consumption, taste and material culture (see Woodward and Emmison, 2001 for an empirical investigation of these schemes). Such etiquettes serve to discipline people's consumption patterns, encourage a view of them as edifying, life-sustaining and generally 'good', and serve to displace consumerist desires as practices which improve and sustain self. It is these etiquettes of hedonism

that constitute an important area for further research in the field of consumption studies, especially for enthusiastic, privileged and committed consumers such as the ones in this article.

Furthermore, while this article has considered consumption practice alone, studies which illustrate the production of consumption desires and how such desires are regulated and managed by cultural ‘producers’ are necessary to further contextualize contemporary consumption. If consumerism is identified as an enduring social, economic or environmental issue or problem, then to understand why it is such a robust and appealing ‘way of life’ (Miles, 1997), sociologists should direct attention to showing how it is internalized and realized in both the language, narratives and dreams of people, and in the cultural economy.

## Notes

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- 1 The names used in this article are not the real names of the participants.
- 2 Readers who are interested in finding out the names of these suburbs may contact the author directly.
- 3 The term vertical joint, often shortened to ‘vj’, refers to a carpentry technique for joining internal wall boards which was designed to improve the visual appearance of joints by cutting a v-shaped angle on the meeting edges. Vertical joints were generally used in houses before the 1940s and have since become an iconic feature of Queensland homes. The term is now a staple of real estate marketing for ‘Queenslander’ houses.

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