

# The ethics of tastemaking: towards responsible conspicuous consumption

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## Abstract

*The systemic nature of cultural production implies that designed objects are made desirable (or acceptable) by tastemakers who endow objects with forms of social distinction. Social distinction highlights or diffuses status and reveals self-perceptions of consumers' identities. In this way, design becomes a form of tastemaking, invested in the construction of identity and is therefore a form of cultural production rooted in consumption. The role of the designer in facilitating conspicuous consumption is therefore critical in the context of social distinction, cohesion and identity.*

*This practice is potentially unethical when cultural production is undermined as a cyclical fashionable commodity in which conspicuous consumption is utilised to indicate who is 'in the know'. This may lead to a wasteful practice.*

*While conspicuous consumption may be perceived as unethical and superficial, or at least contributing to environmental and social degradation, the ethical contributions of design in this context cannot be disregarded. The aspirational nature of conspicuous consumption is evident when individuals in developing economies are pressured to indulge on aspects of consumption before their basic needs are met; the implication is that consumers in all classes and incomes have the desire to express or improve their social status (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004:29). It may be argued (following Mangold, 2014) that socially responsive design prioritises the user's needs over the aesthetics; however the role of aesthetics in tastemaking reinforces social patterns.*

*Tastemakers are individuals who attained enough cultural capital to empower them to determine which new novel ideas, artefacts, or creative acts are recognised as valid and made available for cultural production at large. Their decision making has the potential to influence cultural ethics on a larger scale.*

*In this understanding, consumerism is explored as having the potential to be a meaningful and viable means of generating identity. It is here that the ethical responsibility of the tastemaker becomes relevant.*

*The paper will, through a focus on the links between consumerism and design, attempt to disrupt the perception that conspicuous consumption is a superficial practice to indicate that consumption can be an ethical practice.*

**Keywords:** *Conspicuous Consumption; Cultural Production; Ethics; Tastemaking*

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## Introduction

When the ethical responsibility of design is pondered, a consideration of the role of meaning in design production and its consequent contribution to society at large is necessary. Design is active in the system of production and its products are consumed by users who find correlations between their identity and the embodied meaning of consumer objects.

In this manner individuals can form and express their identities through the consumption and display of goods. Conspicuous consumption may be defined as the process of consuming goods for the purpose of expressing one's status and social standing (Braun & Wicklund, 1989, p. 162). Conspicuous consumption is a social behaviour that is motivated by the desire for social acceptance by compensation for current or perceived social status (Rucker & Galinsky, 2009, p. 550). The act of consumption due to compensation is rooted in a concern with identity (Braun & Wicklund, 1989, p. 164). In "Exploring consumer status and conspicuous consumption", O'Cass and McEwen (2004, p. 26) describe the dominance of consumption as an intrinsic habit of culture:

[Consumption is a] central component of almost all daily events, influencing what and where people eat, the clothing they wear, the furnishing they decorate their homes with, how they communicate and inherently the very nature of their thinking.

These consumption choices can be considered in the larger cultural realm as a contribution to the establishment and reconstruction of the cultural system. In *Cultural Expression, Creativity and Innovation* Isar and Anheier (2010, p. 5) define culture as "the social construction, articulation and reception of meaning". Culture involves representation and enactment which is expressed through the creative lived experiences of individuals.

In this paper, we will illustrate that while conspicuous consumption could be considered as a detrimental practice (socially and environmentally), it is intrinsic to the process of tastemaking, and therefore design. We will consider the designer as a tastemaker. Tastemakers are recognised individuals who are influential in determining whether new ideas, products or creative acts are legitimate for consumption and repetition (Baudrillard 1998, p. 100-102). In determining popular taste, the tastemaker plays a critical role in shaping conspicuous consumption. We will substantiate the practice of conspicuous consumption in tastemaking, by identifying and elaborating on the ethical implications of this practice.

## Consumption in the cultural system

Culture is the produced context in which human behaviour takes place (DFIE 2011). Isar and Anheier's (2010:4) definition is further convenient since it represents the confluence between meaning and capital. Although culture in itself is not a commodity it may be considered as the domain where goods attain social capital and increase in value. Culture thus has the ability to increase the economic value of commodified goods. Culture is a collective product; 'cultural expression' specifically puts emphasis on the expression of a joint group identity or on the position and status of the individual within the collective. Cultural expression supplies the human contribution to the cultural economy:

Culture is the system in which goods are created; or the sphere where creativity can take place. This may be compared to a monetary system which is the locus of wealth; but not a form of wealth. Wealth can be owned individually while a monetary system cannot. In this way culture is the background of our institutions, understanding and creative output (DFIE 2011).

Design thereby creates meaning associated with product value and generates opportunities for social distinction. Isar and Anheier (2010, p. 4) summarise Csikszentmihalyi's systemic perspective of cultural production as such:

[T]he interactions between, first, the creative person, second, the domain (a specific cultural symbol system) and third, the field (defined as made up of domain gate-keepers such as art critics, gallery owners, star performers, etc.) are what determine the emergence and in particular the recognition of a creative act or product. The creative individual takes information in a domain and transforms or extends it; the field validates

and selects new ideas and methods; the domain then in turn preserves and transmits creative products to other individuals, societies and generations.

In other words, cultural production is a circular system of selection, curation, synthesis, preservation, and transmission. Cultural production is an iterative, collaborative project which is dependent on individual creative acts which are collectively mediated. Consumption choices are moral judgments which may determine the evolution of culture (Douglas & Isherwood 1979, p. 37).

It becomes arguable that cultural production cannot be seen as a static process, neither is it remade every day. Culture is reproduced by daily activity through which cultural practices are conveyed and repeated between individuals. In this manner it is a traditive process. In addition, through individual creative acts and artefacts or through collective innovative acts and artefacts, novelty is introduced in the cultural system. Novel acts and artefacts are either rejected, after which they are no longer available for further reproduction, or they are accepted into the cultural domain and subjected to further iteration. Cultural production is thus a traditive, innovative and iterative process which is mediated. To subvert this culture may be considered as a medium of agency and power. Its potential as a hegemonic instrument is visible in the process whereby cultural capital is passed from person to person.

The systemic nature of cultural production implies that designed objects are further made desirable (or acceptable) by tastemakers who endow objects with forms of social distinction. Social distinction highlights or diffuses status and reveals self-perceptions of consumers' identities. In this way, design becomes a form of tastemaking, invested in the construction of identity and is therefore a form of cultural production rooted in consumption. The role of the designer in facilitating conspicuous consumption is therefore critical in the context of social distinction, cohesion and identity.

In *The Consumer Society. Myths and Structures*, Baudrillard (1998, p. 27) offers a description of the 'drugstore' which illuminates this context:

The drugstore (or the new shopping centre) achieves a synthesis of consumer activities, not the least of which are shopping, flirting with objects, playful wandering and all the permutational possibilities of these ... In the drugstore the cultural centre becomes part of the shopping centre. It would be simplistic to say that culture is 'prostituted' there. It is culturalized. Simultaneously, commodities (clothing, groceries, catering etc.) are also culturalized in their turn, since they are transformed into the substance of play and distinction, into luxury accessories, into one element among others in the general package of consumables.

Baudrillard's view of a drugstore highlights the role of a consumption environment as one that is a nexus for cultural production. His notion that culture is culturalized during commodification and that this facilitates the culturalization of consumer commodities emphasises that design is critical in that it influences social distinction. During this culturalization process, goods must be recognised as 'valid' or 'valuable' to be made available for further dissemination.

This practice is potentially unethical when cultural production is undermined as a cyclical, fashionable commodity in which conspicuous consumption is utilised to indicate who is 'in the know'. This may lead to a wasteful practice in which culture is diminished in the service of mass consumption recycling (Baudrillard 1998, p. 100-102). For Baudrillard, cultural recycling is the new cultural product and it is used to reflect the cultural consumer's ability to be 'in the know' and to 'know what's going on'. In this case, culture is perceived as a cyclical, fashionable commodity that needs to be updated continuously. This is in exact opposition to the traditional definition of culture which is conceived as an inherited legacy of works, thoughts and tradition and the continuous dimension of critical and theoretical reflection (Baudrillard 1998, p. 101). This new cultural capital is obtained by showing that you are informed and up to date; that you know what is new. Cultural

recycling is bound in the 'cycle' of fashion in which individuals are expected to 'recycle' themselves on a seasonal basis (Baudrillard 1998, p. 100).

An object intended for cultural recycling is not made to last (Baudrillard, 1998:101) and obsolescence is designed into the object. This is specifically evident in fashion design and ITC technologies. The electronic gadget must be the ultimate contemporary example of cultural recycling and it did not exist in Baudrillard's time. It is the superficial forces of cultural recycling which lead to consumers sleeping in line waiting for the latest iPhone.

Since elements of cultural recycling are clearly visible in the production of design, Baudrillard's criticism of cultural recycling must be taken seriously. He states that cultural recycling is "arbitrary, transient, cyclical, and adds nothing to the intrinsic qualities of the individual" (Baudrillard 1998, p. 100). This is the attainment and application of cultural capital in the most banal and superficial ways. Lane (2009, p. 63-64) discusses the 'new temporality' that emerged in which people live their lives as the successive consumption of objects; this is in contrast to the previous era where objects were timeless and made to outlive their users (e.g. ceremonial chalices, cathedrals and monuments).

While conspicuous consumption may be perceived as unethical and superficial, or at least contributing to environmental and social degradation, the ethical contributions of design in this context cannot be disregarded.

Cyclical cultural production, although critical to the creation of meaning that is involved with identity construction, results in a by-product of displaced commodities which are no longer 'new' or desired. This is ethically problematic as consumption could contribute to social degradation (distinction according to status and the highlighting of privilege) and environmental decay (waste or disposal of resources that are no longer fashionable, but still useful). The desire of consumers to elevate their social standing can contribute to unsustainable economic demand and social distinction which is based on the superficial notion to avoid negative social status, rather than actual value:

While a signalling effect is also at work in the present approach, the price of the good signals the quality of the consumer rather than that of the good. In some circumstances, a price increase triggers such an increase of the signalling value of the conspicuous good that its market demand grows. Interestingly, it is the desire to avoid social ostracism, rather than the search for prestige, which may lead to an upward-sloping demand curve (Corneo & Jeanne, 1977, p. 56).

The aspirational nature of conspicuous consumption is evident when individuals in developing economies are pressured to indulge in aspects of consumption before their basic needs are met; the implication is that consumers in all classes and incomes have the desire to express or improve their social status (O'Cass & McEwen 2004, p. 29). It may be argued (following Mangold 2014) that socially responsive design prioritises the user's needs over the aesthetics; however the role of aesthetics in tastemaking reinforces social patterns.

The purpose of cultural reproduction is to duplicate existing norms although variation may be allowed between iterations. The acceptability of the variations is dependent on the creativity of individuals or on a group's inherent conservatism (DFIE 2011). In this realization, consumerism is considered to have the potential to be a meaningful and viable means of generating identity. It is here that the ethical responsibility of the tastemaker becomes relevant.

## Tastemakers

Tastemakers are included in this discussion since they play a particularly important role in the mediated process of cultural production. Tastemakers are those individuals who have attained enough cultural capital to empower them to determine if new artefacts, novel ideas, or creative acts

are recognised as valid and made available for future iteration. In *The Tastemakers* Millard (2001, p. 13) describes the art establishment as it used to be:

Culture was dull. It cost a lot, but that didn't matter because no one ordinary bought it. It was sold to institutions, most likely banks or galleries. It was unconcerned with popularity, so the populace was unconcerned with it.

This changed when young British artists became "concerned with ease of comprehension rather than perplexing intelligence" (Millard 2001, p. 25). In their essence, cultural goods can be considered for their role as communication devices. The discussion of *grand art* is applicable to the more mundane practice of conspicuous consumption since cultural production is not only dependent on cultural 'pinnacles', but on the everyday (Craig-Martins in Millard 2001, p. 135). It is implied that cultural production takes place in a hierarchical fashion, but it is assumed that culture moves up and down the hierarchy. In Isar and Anheier's account (2010, p. 5) creativity and innovation emerge at the intersections of social, cultural and political forces. They continue that the margins and boundaries are often more productive than the centre of the system and it is impossible to judge what is current and to predict their future importance.

It is the role of the tastemaker to act as an arbiter or mediator in this process. The tastemaker must provide validity to novel artefacts and practices. In essence, it is the tastemaker's responsibility to move marginal artefacts to the centre. Tastemakers are authoritative; their authority is dependent on the accumulation of cultural capital. The accumulation and synthesis of cultural capital was described by Bourdieu (1984, p. 326) in *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. In Bourdieu's account the process of transcribing cultural capital between different levels of the hierarchy is not a one way process. It is promiscuous and subversive, it takes that which does not belong together and mixes it; this is a process of selection of memes from the cultural repository and their synthesis. It would be simpler to imagine this as a one way process where cultural capital moves either 'up' or 'down' the social hierarchy. Douglas (1996, p. 56) summarises Miller's theory of emulation as such:

According to the theory of emulation, the envious lower classes keep copying the upper-class styles, and the upper keep trying to distinguish themselves, so the style for luxuries seeps down ... First happiness goes up as design travels down the social scale, then the upper class begins to be unhappy because its designs are no longer distinctive. It adopts a change, to outpace low-class emulators, and the emulators' happiness goes down, until they gradually catch up again.

Bourdieu (1984[1979]4, p. 323) stated it differently:

This middle-brow culture (culture moyenne) owes some of its charm, in the eyes of the middle classes who are its main consumers, to the references to legitimate culture it contains and which encourage and justify confusion of the two.

Phillips (2005, p. 217) sums up the role of the 'tastemaker' as such:

In Bourdieu's terms, the figure of the tastemaker can be understood as indeed a significant conduit for the formation of popular tastes, but in no way one that is democratic.

In all three accounts, design acts as a form of communication or a carrier of information which is used in the process of cultural (re)production. It is utilized in the Marxist sense to differentiate social classes (or as a form of distinction). The tastemaker acts as an agent of change since this individual is empowered to translate cultural capital between classes and to make emergent practices acceptable, or to reject them.

As the creative individual acts within the field, so the field acts within the domain. The field is the metaphorical space in which institutions, practices and discourses can be identified (Webb *et al*,

2002, p. 86). Bourdieu (1993, p. 162-165) defines the field as an autonomous social universe, with its own laws. This 'universe' is inhabited by its particular institutions and particular forms of capital can be accumulated. The field has specific struggles particularly in defining questions about knowing who part of the field is. Change is introduced in the field by the intermediary or creative person who challenges the status quo:

The speaker who can 'take the liberty' of standing outside the rules fit only for pedants or grammarians – who, not surprisingly, are disinclined to write these games with the rules into their codifications of the linguistic game – puts himself forward as a maker of higher rules, i.e., a taste-maker, an arbiter elegantium whose transgressions are not mistakes but the announcement of a new fashion, a new mode of expression or action which will become a model, and then modal, normal, the norm, and will call for new transgressions by those who refuse to be ranked in the mode (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 255).

Tastemakers carry designations such as *virtuoso*, *connoisseur*, and *expert* to indicate a lifestyle freed from basic and material needs to which 'vulgar' people are sacrificed (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 293). This lifestyle is geared towards aesthetic appreciation and expressions of 'good-taste'. Bourdieu (1996, p. 294) continues that this is geared (along with philosophical investigations into the knowledge of objects) towards the social construction of the object. During the historic consideration of capital the emulation of upper class taste and attitudes was considered as important: taste is established at the highest social level and it is attenuated and filtered down through the social strata (Girling-Budd, 2004, p. 27). Taste is considered as an inescapable social aspiration (Millard, 2001, p. 246). Although it is clear from the descriptions above that tastemakers carry hegemonic agency, they also provide a valuable role as cultural producers in their mediation between producers and consumers of cultural capital. It is through their selection, recognition, and dissemination of the new that validity is provided to cultural capital. This in turn makes it available for production on a larger scale. They are influential in determining popular taste and utilise fascinated media to disseminate ideas and to influence culture in general (but visual culture specifically) (Millard, 2001, p. 27).

If creativity is more fruitful at the margins of the disciplines, (or when established norms are deliberately questioned), the tastemaker has a cultural function as an arbiter of acceptability. The tastemaker establishes the model for further emulation. Isar and Anheier's (2010, p. 4) account (*above*) of mediation in the cultural domain implies that not all novel ideas and artefacts are considered as valuable. Although taste may be referred to as unique to the individual, it is linked to social stratification (De Certeau, Giard & Mayol 1998, p. 182). Taste is acculturated. Once novel ideas or artefacts are validated by the tastemaker, they become acceptable and are made available to others.

In summary, tastemakers are individuals who attained enough cultural capital to empower them to determine which new novel ideas, artefacts, or creative acts are recognised as valid and made available for cultural production at large. Their decision making has the potential to influence cultural ethics on a larger scale.

## Ethical conspicuous consumption?

The digital age creates a solipsistic and individualized world mediated by screens and digital communication. The hegemonic power of this may suppress the political and social (Leach 2002, p. 232-234). This is a dangerous situation of which designers must take note. Design can be considered as a form of tastemaking in which the relationship between design and consumerism is influenced by and influences cultural ethics. In this realm the consumer artefact is considered as a component in a 'complex super-object' which involves the consumer in a series of complex motivations within the social production system (Baudrillard 1998, p. 27).

The political economy of the sign is a synthetic structure which results from the convergence of the bourgeois vulgate (and its emphasis on 'culture') and the Marxist vulgate (which is ideologically

aligned to economics); these vulgates are dependent on the transcription of content into either of these forms (i.e. meaning or capital) (after Baudrillard 1976, p. 112). The political economy of the sign therefore represents the attempts of 20<sup>th</sup> Century theory to reach synthesis between these facets. In his criticism of *The Consumer Society*, Lane (2009, p. 38-39) states that Western culture is dependent on its objects to construct its identity; but it can be taken so far as suggesting that these objects must be destroyed (particularly through in-built obsolescence) in a continuous sequence of cultural recycling. The consumer society represents the synthesis between capital and meaning through its driven need to generate meaning and to indicate expenditure, status, and identity through conspicuous consumption.

Baudrillard (1976, p. 113) states that the commodity value of any object is not 'added on' as a message but is itself set up as a total medium of communication which governs all social exchange. The primary function of the consumer object is then to contain a message which can be consumed; its operational purpose, or use, in this case can then be relegated to being a mere container for meaning. Baudrillard further asserts that whether the 'material contents of production' or the 'immaterial contents of signification' are considered matters little. The object exists as a sign-form in which the code of the political economy reduces symbolic ambivalence. The tangible and intangible aspects are synthesized into a single construct. When consumer goods are considered as such conflated objects in which their material contents and immaterial signification can no longer be differentiated, their value as meaning-carrying objects destined for interpretation is elevated; the medium is the message.

Culture is subject to the same expectations to be 'up to the minute' as material goods (Baudrillard, 1998, pp. 101-102); it is therefore inevitable that the 'acculturated' signify their cultural capital by being in the know. This is a characteristic of culture in a post-global world and the dangers of living in a period of rapid cultural change must be accepted. Designers (and researchers) express their 'up-to-the-minuteness' as a method to display innovation by proxy. In the same vein that the media indicates happiness by showing people who are happier because of their possessions (Lane 2009, p. 69) the publication of 'good' design artefacts indicates design fulfilment. When designers consume novel design through its publication, it enables them to imbue their own work with an artificial sense of innovation and relevance. This points towards an assumption held by many which can be summarised in the aphorism "the more you know, the more you have to design with".

Objects of consumption have social meaning such as status, prestige, fashion etc. Like the Saussurian sign they function differentially and arbitrarily through their relations with other objects (Lane 2009, p. 72). They exist firstly, as object of mass production; and secondly, as mediators between small scale and mass production (after Bourdieu).

Whereas conspicuous consumption and cultural recycling may be criticized as wasteful practices, they offer designers the opportunity to make ethical decisions by introducing, or promoting ethical choices, and 'consuming' these choices in conspicuous ways. McCloud (2010:236-269) discusses a series of ethical consumption choices which extends from the physical activity of shopping (as a consumptive experience) and includes branding, repurposing existing items, supporting crafted or place-bound objects, suggesting preference in cars based on their interior experience, etc.

## Conclusion

While conspicuous consumption could be a detrimental process which highlights social divide and creates environmental waste, it is a process that supports the cultural identity of those who associate with or aspire to associate with its products. Conspicuous consumption is impacted by popular culture.

The designer is a tastemaker who accumulates cultural capital and synthesises it into that which is popular. This is achieved through the use and display of consumption and its products which are deemed worthy for dissemination and reiteration by the tastemaker. Tastemakers accumulate and

validate that which is popular, playing an active role in deciding what should be consumed. Therefore, conspicuous consumption is an inevitable by-product of tastemaking in design.

Conspicuous consumption is especially evident in the fashion and gadget technology industries where cyclic iteration of goods is prominent. Designed-in obsolescence of goods is a valid practice in that, although wasteful, allows consumers to demonstrate their identity and subscription to popular culture through consumption intermittently.

The opportunity for tastemaking to influence popular taste in this cyclic way highlights the repeated impact design could have on defining popular culture and deciding what is taste-worthy for consumers. This creates the prospect for design to embrace its responsibility in impacting rapid cultural change and promoting innovation. The potential for practicing ethical tastemaking in conspicuous consumption also arises in the designer's ability to deliberately exercise discretion in the type of cultural capital that is selected for consumption and the frequency at which it is consumed.

## Acknowledgement

The research was completed as part of the requirements for the degree PhD (Interior Architecture). I completed the research with financial assistance in the form of a scholarship and bursary. The views expressed in the paper are mine and not necessarily shared by my employer.

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