Home Decoration, Aesthetics, and Identity: Exploring Meanings in Dwelling Cultures

Rašeljka KRNIĆ   https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2370-433X
Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar, Zagreb, Croatia
raseljka.krnic@pilar.hr

Sara URSIĆ   https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4398-4383
Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar, Zagreb, Croatia
sara.ursic@pilar.hr

ABSTRACT

Deeply rooted in personal and social identity, over the last two decades, the home has become an increasingly propulsive area of research within the social sciences and humanities. The concept of home often serves as a platform for understanding complex social relationships between individuals and groups and reveals the meanings arising from interactions with material culture. In this paper, we use data obtained through the interview method to find out how our participants – younger middle-aged, middle-class professionals – value the aesthetic dimension of their home and what meanings they ascribe to it. The analysis of the narratives on aesthetics, taste, and processes related to decision-making provides insight into how certain attitudes are associated with various dimensions of participants' identities. The results demonstrated that through the elaboration of the visual identity of space, it is possible to articulate different aspects of personal and collective identities. Although the obtained data show how taste and attitudes towards aesthetics function as inherited cultural capital, they also reveal how other cultural influences in a complex postmodern consumer context shape attitudes and tastes beyond directly inherited values.

Key words: home decoration, aesthetics, identity, consumption, cultural capital

1. INTRODUCTION

Considering that most people spend a large part of their time in their homes, either alone or in some form of community, it can be said that the home and the numerous processes related to its creation are extremely important constitutive

elements of life, both in social and personal terms. Deeply rooted in personal and social identity, over the last two decades, the home has become an increasingly propulsive area of research within the social sciences and humanities. The concept of home has served many researchers as a platform for understanding complex social relationships between individuals and groups, and for analysing the meanings arising from interactions with material culture. The place and characteristics of the space in which we live produce and reflect numerous aspects of our lives, from emotional connections, socialisation, social status, and ideology to physical and mental health. Thus, through the concept of home it is possible to explore numerous processes such as mobility, construction of social and personal identities, emotions and belonging, power relations, symbolic meanings, taste, etc. (Short, 1999; Boccagni and Kusenbach, 2020).

In an attempt to understand everything that home represents (at the structural but also micro-level), in various cultures, among different age groups and family types, and in many other contexts, artefacts and practices that are mostly taken for granted, such as sofas, bathrooms, chandeliers, paintings, decorations, laundry or food preparation are viewed through the application of various theoretical paradigms and concepts. The considerations of numerous dimensions of housing deal with the culture of housing, which, as a sociological concept, implies residence as a daily practice. Through material form, symbolic and cultural capital, the home is formed and realised as an intersection of "individual identity, social relations, and collective meaning" (Short, 1999: 10).

If we start from the assumption that all aspects of housing say something about the users of a specific space, then, in addition to researching the structural macro-dimensions of housing, we should also be interested in it at the micro-level, i.e. the interest should be focused on uncovering and deciphering the meanings and practices that occur behind closed doors. Such studies have grown in number over the last two decades, and among other topics, they deal with the role of aesthetics and decoration in the process of imagining and constructing the idea of home. Different items in the house, including furniture, are not just consumer goods that are consumed but play one of the central roles in the construction of what we call home. In other words, these objects are not just objects that we use inside our homes, but they constitute our homes (Cieraad, 1999; Miller, 2001, Reimer and Leslie, 2004). As Gullestad (1995: 319–20) notes: "The home is a rich, flexible and ambiguous symbol; it can simultaneously signify individual identity, family solidarity and a whole range of other values." Among all the items we own, the ones we choose to use or surround ourselves with in our own homes probably speak the most about us. These objects are special because they are chosen to be close to us and at hand, to be looked at almost every day or used as needed, becoming

part of our intimate life and, thus, participating in the creation of our identities. We choose the objects we own mostly by ourselves, they are not imposed on us from the outside, and if necessary, we can get rid of them, if for some reason they do not suit us, so we can say that the material culture of our home "constitutes an ecology of signs that reflects as well as shapes the pattern of the owner's self" (Csikszent-mihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1999: 17)

The objects selected can serve varied purposes, according to the needs of the situation, and can also change meaning depending on the context. Sometimes when objects are exposed, they have a public role as a marker of status, style, or taste, and in some cases, they are also a catalyst for building self-identity and managing family relationships or self-esteem. In this sense, the spaces of home and the material culture that constitutes that space are the intersections of public and private life, where the production of meaning in spatial organisation reflects personal, social, and family relations (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1999; Lawrence, 1987). The way home users relate to objects and how they understand and explain their aesthetic choices reveals consumption as a process of producing meanings, where these meanings are managed through the creation of narratives in conjunction with specific elements of material culture. These narratives in this context often serve as a symbolic boundary, i.e. an instrument of distinction with the purpose of categorising tastes, people, and practices (Lamont and Molnár, 2002). In the chapter focusing on the elaboration of theoretical concepts on which this study relies, the structuralist approach to understanding cultural preferences by Pierre Bourdieu will be presented, along with the postmodernist paradigm of understanding consumption, which builds its fundamental features through a critique of the class-deterministic approach.

In this paper, we use the data obtained through the interview method to find out to what extent and in which manner our participants – younger middle-aged, middle-class professionals – value the decorative and aesthetic dimension of their homes, what meanings they ascribe to it, and what kinds of practices and strategies they use in the process of deciding on the visual identity of the space in which they live. By analysing their narratives on aesthetics, taste, and different processes related to decision-making, we wanted to gain insight into how certain attitudes and behaviours in this context are related to the formation and reflection of different dimensions of their identities, i.e. what actors "inscribe" in space when they intervene in it. In addition, we wanted to find out which processes and mechanisms are involved in the construction of identity through the development and demonstration of tastes, which of those we can associate with modernism, and which with the postmodern understanding of the connection between consumption and identity formation. The main analytical objective of the paper is to examine the connection

between inherited cultural capital, as understood in Pierre Bourdieu's approach, and home decoration preferences, exploring the balance between structural factors and the impact of individual choices beyond structural determinism, drawing on theories of postmodern consumption.

In the following chapters, we present a theoretical framework that includes an overview of different theoretical concepts dealing with consumption, taste and identity, research methodology, results, and discussion of results.

2. CONSUMPTION AND TASTE BETWEEN STRUCTURE AND FREEDOM

The turnaround in the humanities and social sciences during the 1970s regarding research dealing with consumption implied, among other things, shifting the focus from the instrumental aspects of consumption and the paradigm of economism to its symbolic aspects, with a particular emphasis on communication capacities. The sociology of consumption, which gained considerable momentum due to these shifts, increasingly focused on analyses that recognised the role that new forms of consumption play in the consolidation of social relations, personal development, expression of identity, and the general expansion of cultural experience for many people (Warde, 2002).

Studies have become interested in the semiotic and experiential context of various processes of cultural production and consumption, the analysis of subcultural movements, popular culture, and mass media, and understanding the role of style and taste in the formation of group and individual identities. The choice of certain artefacts was increasingly understood as a way of expressing and forming identity through symbolic representation in a specific lifestyle. Activities, choices, judgements, and meanings produced through consumption processes have become extremely important expressive elements of symbolic communication of identity (Warde, 2014). According to Silverstone, "The core of man's cultural activity lies in his capacity to generate meaning, to communicate, to transmit and to order those meanings; it lies in the creation of a specifically symbolic level of existence" (Silverstone, 1981: 2).

The thesis on the symbolic capacity of consumption and the choice of specific cultural goods and services as a symbolic mechanism of identity formation is considered the starting point of understanding consumption within different theoretical and research approaches, and in this sense, it can be said that there is a consensus within the associated academic discourse. However, significant theoretical differences are found in the context of grasping the essential nature of consump-

tion, creating tension between understanding these processes in the modern or postmodern key.

A number of authors have approached the understanding of consumption and the production of symbolic meanings in the consumption context from the perspective of structural determinism. Different forms of consumption and different cultures of taste are understood here as the consequence of class differences that are manifested in specific cultural preferences (Bourdieu, 1984; De Graaf, 1991; Spellerberg, 1995). For Bourdieu (1984), who offered one of the most influential theories of consumption, taste is socially constructed and is an expression of the class position that is largely inherited. Books on the shelves, music, gastronomic preferences, paintings on the walls, hobbies, the part of the city where one lives, furniture choices, etc. are all expressions of cultural capital that define one's personal and social identity. The class position and social milieu in which an individual grows and continues to live will determine the level of cultural, economic, and social capital that the individual possesses, and the level of capital will largely determine the forms of consumption, according to Bourdieu (1984). Different consumer orientations represent a mechanism of distinction and indicate the existence of different cultures of taste within social classes. In this sense, taste plays a symbolic demarcation role between "us" and "them". According to this understanding, the dominant social class maintains and reproduces status hierarchies and distinctions within social, political, and cultural arenas through cultural capital, which manifests itself in a specific taste. Habitus, as a structured set of dispositions, reflects how objects of consumption are classified, i.e., it norms the way in which individual social groups evaluate artefacts. Different lifestyles function, on the one hand, based on common norms, and on the other hand, through a competitive relationship with those outside the group. Cultural capital, Bourdieu explains, ensures respect based on the consumption of products and cultural practices that are demanding and complex and can therefore only be consumed by those who have acquired the ability and adequate education to do so.

Bourdieu starts from the assumption that lifestyles in consumer societies are the expression of class differences, but also the structural heterogeneities of social fields that represent the basis of contemporary distinctions. He displaces the taste, style, and preferences of certain artefacts from the sphere of personal choice and declares them conditioned and predictable. Individuals are not autonomous but are carriers of habitus, and habitus is "internalised through primary, family socialisation and thus becomes a relatively permanent link between the social position of the individual and their taste and lifestyle" (Tomić-Koludrović and Leburić, 2002: 75). Cultural capital, understood in this way, cannot be the result of purely individual efforts, but largely depends on family heritage, so taste is a socially constructed fact.

Although Bourdieu's theories were criticised for not taking into account the flexibility and diversity of new forms of consumption and lifestyles, his insights were also very influential in the analysis of postmodern consumption and the related social stratification. In his book *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) describes a social group that fits well within the postmodern vision of the consumer who strives for the expression of individuality, freedom, satisfaction, and fulfilment of all kinds of desires. It was in the descriptions of these new classes that Bourdieu's work was usually used to develop a postmodern understanding of social differences (Featherstone, 2007).

Later studies analyse consumption from the perspective of a late-modern or postmodern understanding of social processes and identity formation and are often critical of structural determinism, especially earlier efforts to understand the processes of cultural consumption exclusively from the perspective of social class. These approaches, in the spirit of postmodern understanding of social processes, reject fixed metanarratives that should unambiguously explain the mechanisms and meanings arising from different social processes and advocate the thesis of the existence of multiple meanings that are created in the interaction of consumers and artefacts. The advanced development of markets in consumer societies implies the availability of increasingly diverse products, and given the promotion of the ideology of equal chances, the choice of artefacts and lifestyles becomes "an increasingly important criterion of social selectivity" (Tomić-Koludrović and Leburić, 2002: 85). In this new perspective of understanding identities, individual choice is becoming increasingly important, and preoccupation with lifestyle is seen as independent of class and age. Instead of being trapped by the determinism of structural elements, Featherstone (2007) sees the postmodern consumer as a creative, playful social actor in search of individuality, creativity, freedom, and pleasure. Building personal identity through various forms of consumption is a topic that held an important place in sociological debates during the 1990s. Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1991) built their theories on postmodern identity-building processes based on the insight that cultural practices and artefacts that people choose have the function of a message, that is, they create an image of themselves that they want to present to others. In developed consumer societies, from the perspective of these authors, identity is not necessarily predefined but chosen through the process of picking a series of artefacts and practices that are at one's disposal. It's not only that contemporary social actors are asked to choose between different types of self, but also to "constitute oneself as a self who chooses − a consumer" (Slater, 1997: 91). In analysing contemporary consumption practices, Beck (1992) argues that class position and family background no longer play such a strong role in determining lifestyle and taste, and concludes that it has become

impossible to determine one's lifestyle and identity solely based on class position. Furthermore, in considering new forms of cultural practices through the unity of the atomised individual, Beck declares stock lifestyles obsolete (Beck, 1994 cited in Tomić-Koludrović and Leburić, 2002).

Building postmodern personal identities becomes a reflexive practice of understanding one's own biography as a narrative that can be directed in different directions. Individuals demonstrate lifestyles through an integrated set of practices that serve as building blocks for maintaining a specific narrative when constructing personal identity. Increasingly intensive processes of individualisation reduce the impact of meanings produced in the context of group identity, so selection, in a way, becomes an obligation, and the responsibility for choice falls on individuals themselves (Giddens, 1991). Individuals strategically "make lifestyle a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions" (Featherstone, 2007: 84). Warde (1994) also reflects on this trait when he says that "consumer choice is deeply implicated in the process of, respectively, creating a reflexive self, constructing a narrative of self, or electing oneself to a shared form of identity" (Warde, 1994: 883). What Bauman observes as a significant consequence of this process relates to the mechanisms of domination, which he sees as inevitable in the context of the functioning of a consumerist society. Bauman discusses how identity in a consumer society is constructed through the goods we buy, the lifestyle choices we make, and the brands we associate with. This endless cycle of consuming to craft an identity creates a form of dependency. Consumers are compelled to constantly renew their identities through new purchases. This cycle traps individuals in a system where they are always chasing the next product or trend, driven by the fear of social exclusion or obsolescence. The power dynamics are subtle but pervasive, with corporations and marketing systems shaping desires and identities (Bauman, 2013). In a detraditionalised and individualised world, individuals are expected (and expect themselves) to focus much more specifically on their self-identity project (Reimer and Leslie, 2004). With greater individual mobility, the social space becomes more opaque and it is increasingly difficult to draw conclusions regarding the objective characteristics of structural differentiation. Lifestyle is increasingly a personal matter, and increasingly less a structural category (Berger, 1994 cited in Tomić-Koludrović and Leburić, 2002).

Our position is that we have no predetermined inclination towards any specific theoretical perspective. The research findings will indicate the extent to which, and in what ways, the practices and meanings participants attribute to the aesthetics of their living spaces reflect structural and/or individualistic factors.

3. METHODOLOGY

The data used for writing this paper were collected as part of the project "Home Spaces: Socio-Cultural Aspects of Urban Housing in Croatia". The project aimed to gain insight into everyday housing practices, with special emphasis on the values and meanings attached to the construction of the home. This was qualitative research that used the semi-structured interview method. The chosen methodology is based on phenomenological research, given that the goal was to thoroughly and exhaustively investigate the phenomenon of everyday residential practices through the conceptualisation of home space as an origin and a product of social reality. Bearing in mind the objectives of the project, which included the analysis of practices, values, and meanings of housing in the urban context, in order to gain insight into how they are connected to structural factors, as opposed to individual choice, the qualitative methodology enabled an in-depth analysis that complements the much more commonly used quantitative methodology, at least when it comes to housing studies in Croatia.

The implementation of the field research began at the end of March 2021 and lasted until May 2021. The interviews were preceded by the construction of an interview protocol based on an analysis of the literature relevant to the research. The protocol included various thematic sets, including those relevant to this paper, related to aesthetics, decoration, and identity in the context of taste. The interviews were conducted by two researchers, the authors of this paper. Conversations with participants lasted between 60 and 150 minutes. The research was conducted in Zagreb on a purposive sample of 15 participants from different types of households: single, family, and non-family households. All participants were younger middle-aged +/- 40 years old, highly educated and employed, with above-average incomes. This sample was selected to align with the theoretical concepts used to explain specific consumer orientations from contrasting perspectives. These opposing theories − structural determinism in Bourdieu versus individual choice in Featherstone − are based on research analysing consumer orientations, particularly among highly educated members of the middle class. The interviews were conducted in the participants' apartments/houses. All the subjects provided appropriate informed consent. The interviews were transcribed, anonymised, and coded using the NVivo qualitative data processing programme. The coding process was inductive: first, descriptive codes were constructed, and then they were systematised and critically interpreted. They were analysed using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). Thematic analysis in sociological research enables researchers to gain insights into the various perspectives and meanings that participants attribute to their experiences and practices. The process of our data analysis consisted of

several steps. First, we noted initial ideas and potential themes leading to data coding. Coding involved marking key information within the data using codes − short descriptions that summarise parts of the text. Our coding was inductive, i.e. data-driven. After coding the data, we analysed the codes to identify patterns and group them into broader themes.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Relevance of Aesthetics and Decision-making Processes

In order to later discuss the concept of distinction, i.e., the way cultural and aesthetic preferences serve as a tool for creating value hierarchies, we will first present the results regarding the importance of space aesthetics to our participants. The importance of aesthetics, specifically the decorative aspect of home design, is evident in the fact that most participants consider it a highly relevant aspect of their homes. Apart from the three participants who do not consider the decorative aspect of their home design particularly important, everyone else emphasises that the dimension of "beautiful" in their home is of particular significance to them. They associate the aesthetic experience with the need to spend time in a space that is beautiful and pleasant according to their subjective criteria, and some of them highlight that the aesthetic characteristics of their home have a very strong impact on their mood and emotions.

> *I think it is extremely important how you define your space aesthetically because colours and materials affect how it will look, but also how you are going to feel in that space.* (Ivor)

> *From 1 to 10, absolutely 10. Because it's affecting my mood, this aesthetic component. It's what I look at all day, so if it's an ugly wall, if it's something ugly around you, if it's an ugly table, if it's an ugly wood colour, it's affecting me a lot, it's depressing me terribly.* (Marta)

For Karlo, the relevance of the aesthetics of his living space lies, among other things, in its strength to provide refuge from a world that he finds to be marked by superficiality and discontinuity:

> *Our home is our refuge in these times of ugliness, brief information and messages that we're moving through, from one brief instant gratification to another dose of dopamine that now has to take place in some extremely fast-paced cycles. I actually want to create a space that has continuity, and especially con-*

tinuity of some kind of beauty that sustains my inner state and my beauty as a human being, etc. (Karlo)

Although participants' statements indicate that the comfort and functionality of space are generally valued more than aesthetics, most of them nevertheless emphasise that the real priority is to reconcile all these requirements so that the aesthetics do not impair functionality and comfort and vice versa. Those who find it important to reconcile the different functions of space notice that such an approach requires some effort, time, and commitment. This kind of harmonisation implies a process of continuous reflection on space and its possibilities, which is present among almost all respondents who have valued the aesthetic dimension of their home very highly.

Most participants who consider the aesthetic and decorative dimension of the home a very important aspect of the quality of living and, consequently, have aspirations to balance comfort, functionality, and aesthetics, design their space very thoughtfully, i.e. hardly anything is chosen by chance or inertia. When they talk about how they decorated their apartments or certain parts of the apartment, it is clear that these are processes that sometimes imply long-term reflection and strategies that have been developed and built over time and through experience. These participants talk about a very focused thinking process that, in addition to being a source of satisfaction and fulfilment, can be exhausting and time-consuming.

When we were shopping for the couch, I think I went to see it five times, and I was taking the fabric samples home, comparing them to the colour of the walls and furniture, thinking whether it is good, if it will fit... I mean, I'm terrible, I can't make up my mind at all. Not that I can't make up my mind, but I have a few variations so I can't make up my mind between them, so, uh, it's taking too long. (Rada)

Sitting in a chair, thinking about what I want here or there, you know. What could possibly be convenient here... And you know, I have this vision, sometimes even subconsciously, because I haven't articulated it yet and then I see this piece and then I say − that's it − this piece needs to come here. (Arsen)

Different strategies applied to the process of interior design sometimes imply both risk-balancing and carefully calculated choices. Some of the participants seek help on various websites specialising in interior design. Strategic reflection on the choice of individual pieces of furniture or some items for Ivor, for example, implies a number of decisions that must take into account both functional and aesthetic criteria. Such choices, in addition to partly relying on common sense or intuitive

reasoning, are also, in his case, based on the acquired knowledge in the field of professional design:

> *Because of sloping windows, we cannot have a lot of closets − this was our problem, where will we put things? The aesthetic decision was to put low cabinets because low cabinets do not block the view and do not disturb the flow of the apartment. An architect once told me that, and it seemed logical, but you don't think about it usually. If the furniture is below the waist, you will not visually perceive it as something that blocks the view or interferes with the space.* (Ivor)

To gain a clearer understanding of the importance our participants place on aesthetics and taste in interior design, we also examined whether this topic finds a place in family discussions, i.e. whether it is something that is talked about and debated. By posing this question, we did not aim to deeply analyse family relationships or power dynamics that may be reflected in decision-making about aesthetics; rather, we intended it simply as an indicator of its relevance. Regarding the strategies and decision-making process in multi-member households, the data show that, in most cases, one person makes the majority of decisions related to the aesthetic identity of the space, and usually that person cares more about the aesthetic dimension. However, occasionally there is an equal or similar level of interest but differing visions and approaches, which sometimes lead to conflicts and delays in the decision-making, and at other times to more effective solutions. Joint decision-making in the household sometimes implies sophisticated communication strategies between partners and a certain type of "negotiation" aimed at combining and reconciling sometimes initially diverse visions of design solutions.

> *Filip and I have diametrically opposed views of the decor of the apartment, which is a problem. I spent the first two years in enthusiasm but whatever peace I found and said − I'm gonna buy it − he refused. And then I gave up. I think we both care about how our flat looks, but nobody got what they wanted because we have different visions. Filip has his, I have mine that he doesn't like and then we have the status quo.* (Mia)

> *When Maja doesn't like an idea, and I think it's great, then I start to insist, and I am trying to somehow sell it to her… We start to negotiate, that's our process. She, in my opinion, has great taste and she's going to suggest something that I haven't thought of. In the end, the decision is mutual.* (Ivor)

4.2. Home Decoration and Taste as a Reflection of Self-Identity

Our data show that most participants consider their home a mirror of their personality and an integral part of their identity, in the sense that their character, personality, and individuality are contained in their aesthetic choices. In her testimony, Luna demonstrates how she perceives her home as a medium through which she can tell her life story and show what kind of experiences have shaped her life.

> *I would say you can get a sense of my identity through observing some aspects of my apartment... it shows a way of life that's a little bit different maybe, it demonstrates my appreciation for comfort and you can tell the story of my life through decorations I displayed.* (Luna)

Home decoration as an expression of individuality is also considered important by Vanda. For her, home space is an opportunity to demonstrate the individuality of a person who is not drowned in the masses. She mentions Ikea[1] in a negative context, as a metaphor for mass-produced design that is, therefore, impersonal and ordinary. Arsen thinks alike, distinguishing between those who design their apartments according to the designer's instructions or by copying trends in magazines on the one hand, and creative, personal demonstrations of character through aesthetic choices on the other.

> *I don't want my apartment to be Ikea or any other designer clichés. The majority of people have similar decorations and styles as if they lack the individuality and knowledge to bring to it something of their own. And it's like they don't even care. This lack of interest is fascinating.* (Vanda)

> *I can always tell how much something is copied from magazines and how much personality someone puts into it. And if people have a lot of money, then someone will sort it out for them more or less, or they will buy things that they see in a magazine, that they like somewhat or think represent them, but it is without personality, so it will be wow, but still a clean copy of a trend, nothing more.* (Arsen)

From almost all the analysed narratives, it is evident that the participants believe that the way they have thought about and realised their homes speaks about them in a deeper and more significant way, and also that specific aesthetic choices can reveal parts of their personality that make them unique and distinguish them from others. In addition to believing that space can say something about the more permanent character traits of the owner, Karlo shows through his statement that aesthetic choices can reflect a change in their current internal states and emotions. For

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[1]   One of the world's largest furniture companies based in the Netherlands.

Ružica, too, home space is a mirror of character and a deeply personal expression of creativity.

> *Those little things in the apartment mean a lot. I think my apartment and its aesthetics are connected to the notion of who I am. I think most of what I buy, especially something that looks eccentric, is a mirror of my inner state. Then as my inner state changes, so do the materials, textures, colours, etc.* (Karlo)

> *It's kind of hard for me to imagine some people living in completely empty apartments, with a mattress on the floor and a closet for suits and a computer in the corner. I can't call it home. I mean, there's nothing personal about it, you don't see any character. Just like people dress differently or wear different makeup, people leave their stamp through the choices of furniture and decorations in their home. It's important to me, what my flat looks like, because it shows what kind of person I am.* (Ružica)

Those participants who believe that their apartment is in some way above average demonstrated the most interest in the aesthetics of their home and devoted the most time, attention, knowledge, and focus to it in their previous statements. What these participants believe distinguishes their approach to decorating is the demonstrated commitment and continuity of interest. Although there are rare statements in which this is explicitly stated, it can be concluded from the analysis of the overall narratives that this group of participants considers that their departure from the average and those with a lot of money but lacking taste is a consequence of superior taste. Furthermore, several participants stated that their apartments are average and very similar to the majority when they take into account their immediate surroundings, friends, acquaintances, etc.

> *It departs from the average, because of the architecture, but also because of the details and the little things that we brought. I put a lot of effort into making it nice.* (Marta)

> *I don't think it's an average apartment just like I'm not an average guy.* (Karlo)

> *My relatives in Sinj do not have such a decorated apartment, but all my friends have a similar approach.* (Ružica)

From the analysis of the data, it is evident that a majority of our participants consider their home as a kind of platform that enables them to express individuality and creativity, and that the way they have decorated it represents a part of their identity and sensibility. Decorating one's home in a certain way is, for some, very important because they understand it as a materialisation of their character and their quite subjective and unique emotional states. They believe that their home

represents who they are. Here, we see how reflexive consideration of the role of taste in constructing personal identity aligns with postmodern theories on consumption, where individual choices gain increasing importance. In this context, we were also interested in whether our participants cared about what someone else thought about how they decorated their home and whether they made a distinction concerning who might be making such an assessment. The results show that most participants care about how others perceive their space and what impression it will make on them. They are also very pleased to hear praise about the décor of their home. However, there are some differences between participants − for some of them, emphasis was placed on comfort, cleanliness, and neatness, while some specifically referred to the aesthetic dimension. Participants who prioritise the aesthetic aspect of design emphasised that they care much more about having their apartment complimented by someone whose taste they particularly appreciate than someone who does not meet their criteria in this regard. From these results, we see that taste, or the aesthetics of space, is understood by some participants on a symbolic level as a powerful social signal, in contrast to practicality or tidiness. It serves as an indicator of social status and belonging to a particular social group, where adequate education is assumed, i.e., the necessary level of cultural capital that enables the recognition and appreciation of certain symbolic messages.

> *Yeah, I care and it makes a difference who is coming. As I appreciate aesthetics, I care more about the opinions of people who I think have great taste.* (Luna)

> *It's important to the ego. It can't be irrelevant to someone like me. But, you know, I definitely don't care if I'm criticised by a guy whose taste is beige.* (Karlo)

From some narratives, it is evident that there is a strong identification with the taste they have acquired and that, for them, the process of taste evolution is conscious and reflexive. This process takes place under the influence of various factors, including the acquisition of specific design knowledge. Some of our participants are not particularly interested in acquiring new knowledge or being entertained by specialised content on architecture and interior design but some of them − mostly those whose interest in aesthetics is most strongly expressed − continuously follow trends, explore, and acquire knowledge on the topic. They choose such content very thoughtfully while demonstrating their taste and aesthetic preferences by filtering the content to which they are exposed. Their statements demonstrate a tendency to create a taste hierarchy where certain approaches are valued as superior ("creative and innovative design") and others as less valuable, so they are called "trash" and "pap". Here, the approach to interior design is understood as a form of cultural capital that has the role of stratification – some TV shows are perceived as

intended for connoisseurs and those with more sophisticated tastes, while others are seen as intended for audiences with less developed tastes and knowledge.

Interviewer: *You are obviously interested in the topic. Do you watch the shows?*

Arsen: *Yes. But I don't watch Mirjana Mikulec[2] and similar shows.*

Interviewer: *And you don't like it why?*

Arsen: *Well, it's furniture that you buy in department stores, and it's been 10−15 years since I've seen that style of minimalism or that quasi-artificial kitsch, the new kitsch. It's all bullshit. I saw a lot better and more creative 20 years ago at Super Chanel or BBC Prime, where people did a lot better and cheaper things and were much more creative. This show by Mirjana Mikulinec is literally like someone decorating your apartment like a hotel room, and I've seen hotel rooms, so I can tell you these are cheap hotel rooms.*

Ivor: *We're watching Grand Designs. We're not watching those shows on TV that have been popular lately because it's all pap if you ask me.*

Interviewer: *What does it mean when you say that everything is pap?*

Ivor: *The type of Mirjana Mikulec show. I simply find it to be trash. I get that they have to do what people want to see, but I just don't find these solutions and this aesthetics interesting because I don't see anything new.*

Exposure to various art forms such as music, films, architecture, books, etc., is also recognised by some participants as an important factor in the formation of taste regarding home decoration. The following quotes show how the creative process of designing a home is, for these participants, intuitively perceived as an extension or reflection of deeply subjective emotional experiences arising from the encounter with different art forms. The self-identities that are constructed through the consumption of certain cultural contents and the taste that is developed in the process are reflected in the way the concept of home is considered and realised. In accordance with our objectives, we illustrate the interaction between Bourdieu's approach and a more flexible postmodern context, showing that self-identities are constructed as an interplay between individualisation and the influence of habitus.

I think my love for straight lines comes even from music, early Kraftwerk especially, because to me the sounds are very much related to shapes. Some sounds can sound to me like a cone, some like dots, etc. Then, my taste was definitely shaped by the Yugoslav architecture aesthetic that I like very, very much. (Karlo)

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[2]　Mirjana Mikulec is the most famous interior designer in Croatia. The public knows her best as the host and editor of a show about interior design called InDizajn with Mirjana Mikulec.

Watching movies, books, music... it all affects choices that we make in space. When decorating a space, you're actually trying to create a feeling, and all of these arts I mentioned create a certain feeling and atmosphere, so by playing with all of these segments, you create the atmosphere of your home. It all comes together. (Ružica)

4.3. Home Decoration as (Un)inherited Cultural Capital

In addition to being interested in how our participants valued works of art in the context of their home decoration, we also wanted to find out whether there was a certain continuity in this sense, i.e. whether their parents or grandparents owned artistic objects in their homes and, if so, how they valued them. The results, as expected, show that the majority of participants who spoke with the most knowledge, passion, and interest about the role of art in their home came from families in which art is valued and where the topics relating to art were present during their childhood. At the other end of the spectrum, the findings also show continuity, so the majority of participants who do not have a particularly developed taste in the art domain mostly come from families where art was not of much importance.

My grandmother loved art, she had originals and stuff, and she had plenty of it. I spent part of my childhood with her, so that's probably where that love for art came from. In fact, she instilled in me that some things are valuable, and some things aren't. She instilled in me certain criteria. Something that's handmade and stuff like that, not some shit you buy here in Lesnina[3]. (Arsen)

Parents possess works of art and it matters to them. They keep getting things they like. They have artist friends to buy or get stuff from, so it's important to them. (Ivor)

When talking about their parents' homes in which they used to live when they were young, participants mostly, but not exclusively, concluded that in those homes, the requirement for functionality was a priority, while aesthetics was of secondary importance. The exception is Maša, whose parents are architects, and whose entire life has been devoted to aesthetics and design. Her case is interesting because, unlike her parents, who are focused on design, she has not developed an interest in decorating her own home. However, her statements show that the transfer of taste did happen, although, according to her, this is not evident in the realisation of her own home. Apart from various media such as magazines, TV shows, and the Internet, several participants emphasised the role of families in developing aes-

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[3]   Lesnina is one of the leading home furnishing retailers in Croatia.

thetic criteria, which indicates that paying special attention to home decoration can also be seen as a form of inherited cultural capital.

> *Well, there are similarities, but they're not realised in any sense in reality. We don't have different tastes, but they work much more on it, they pay attention to it.* (Maša)

> *They talked about it at home, it was their preoccupation, it was a joint activity. My interest in aesthetics existed from a young age and then I hung out with people who were into design and art, which formed me a lot through high school and the beginning of college.* (Luna)

> *Well, I think my parents influenced my taste a lot, and then the magazines and the Internet.* (Vana)

> *There's continuity in taste, that's for sure. I got some of their stuff. We took some things from them that we liked, some paintings. This one* (showing) *is my grandfather's poster, and he made a frame for it. There is a resemblance between us in that way. Parents form your style or at least direct it in some way.* (Ivor)

Statements related to the coherence of the general style of home decoration between our participants and their parents indicate a somewhat less pronounced continuity than when it comes to the attitudes towards specific elements like artworks in their homes. Only a few participants noted that there are similarities in the style of home decoration between them and their parents. Continuity does not have to be purely a transfer of taste, in the sense of significant overlaps in style; rather, regardless of differences in style, the relationship to aesthetics itself can also be inherited:

> *From my parents, I inherited the attitude that aesthetics is important. The taste is different.* (Arsen)

In this case, aesthetics is the sense of taste in Bourdieu's terms.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results obtained in this study suggest that, for most participants, the idea of home is much more than a functional, usable dimension of space. Thematic analysis and insight into the meanings that participants attach to various processes in relation to their interaction with the living space reveal the home as a mirror entity that simultaneously reflects and produces dimensions of identity. We can say that in order for a home to truly be a home, it is not enough to squeeze in a table, bed, chairs, washing machine, and toilet; it is necessary to make the space specifically personal − a space with which its users will connect on a deeper, emotional level. One of the ways in which space is individualised is interior decoration, which is, as can be seen from the presented statements, an extremely important aspect of constructing a home for most participants. Engagement focused on the aesthetic aspect of the design has proved to be important for a number of reasons, including the possibility of materialising and objectifying many of the values with which users and creators of space identify themselves. It can be said that the way a home is made can tell a lot about how someone lives and what is important to them. Although most participants are instinctively inclined to put functionality and comfort ahead of aesthetics, in further elaboration of their attitudes they emphasised that the decoration of their home is at the very least equally important when deciding about the selection and composition of objects and furniture. The way they designed the interior of their homes is a kind of creative statement and, for some, represents a process that is never really finished. As shown by our data, combining colours, prints, furniture, works of art, and various objects in a unique way enables the expression of deeply personal sensibilities and values. As highlighted in the theoretical discussion, Featherstone (2007) describes the postmodern consumer as a creative, playful social actor in search of individuality, freedom, creativity, and pleasure. Cultural practices and artefacts chosen by individuals act as messages, forming a self-image they aim to project to others. This self-image − what social actors perceive as their personal, individual identity − serves as a basis for distinction in the Bourdieuian sense. Although this distinction may be more independent of class and other structural factors, it becomes a foundation for differentiating between various cultures of taste.

The building is cold, reduced to function, and non-personal, while the home is deeply personal and exudes intimacy. From the analysed narratives, it is clear that aesthetics and decoration are in service of achieving a specific atmosphere. For the majority of participants in this research, a home must be warm and must say something about its owners. The results also indicate that through the elaboration of the visual identity of space, it is possible to articulate various aspects of person-

al and collective identities. Apart from the fact that the design of living space can serve as an expressive manifestation of self-identity, the design process can also reflect the specific dynamics of relationships within the household. Data showed that sometimes these processes serve as a platform for cooperation, creation, and consolidation of a common identity, and sometimes represent a kind of battlefield, a space of conflict or negotiation during the decision-making process. Based on their research, Remier and Leslie (2004) also note that the choice of home furnishings is often negotiated, thus embodying a common and agreed identity. Miller (1998) draws a very similar conclusion, emphasising that the process of negotiation among people emotionally and materially involved in home construction strongly determines the type of consumption and the values attached to the purchased artefacts. For some women and men who present themselves as egalitarian couples, it becomes important to emphasise the commonality of tastes that should reflect the compatibility of the couple in love (Miller, 1998).

Sociological research has shown that people belonging to the same social class have very similar living rooms (Laumann and House, 1970). Although each home is in some way personal and unique, our participants are generally aware of the fact that, regardless of the individual expression that can be observed in each space, their homes are not too different from the homes of their friends. Our results clearly indicate that taste, as Bourdieu claims (1984), serves to create and maintain distinctions between different social classes. This can be explained on the one hand by structural influences – members of the same social class are expected to be exposed to similar cultural codes, have similar purchasing power, similar taste, and access to artefacts – and on the other hand, by processes of postmodern identity shaping, where the demand for individuality, personal expression, and uniqueness is emphasised. What further indicates the postmodern character of a specific approach to aesthetics is the emphasis on fluidity and eclecticism of style, which can be found in the narratives of some of our participants. It represents a shift from the much stiffer and more framed stylistic expressions of modernism to an approach that, in the manner of postmodernism, allows for a kind of "stylistic promiscuity", as long as such "promiscuity" is carefully thought out and perceived as a reflection of individuality and an expression of a unique personality. The parallel existence of modern and postmodern patterns can also be seen in the results related to the transfer of taste. It is safe to conclude that knowledge, as Bourdieu (1984) states in his theory of social distinction, serves as a precondition for taste. Although the statements of some participants show how taste and attitudes towards aesthetics function as inherited cultural capital, i.e. how they are determined by family and class structure, the data also reveal how other cultural influences within a complex postmodern consumer context shape attitudes and tastes beyond inherited values.

While the data indicate different forms of acquiring taste and aesthetic sensibility, we can nevertheless conclude that, when it comes to attitudes towards aesthetics in general, continuity is more strongly emphasised, whereas in terms of specific tastes and styles diversification prevails. In other words, parents were univores, children are more omnivores in general, but not less in search of distinction, so we can say that the maintenance of distinction is in continuity. However, whether we talk about a taste that is inherited or a taste that seeks to point to some form of emancipation through individuation, the home and its visual identity are instruments of demonstration of a specific lifestyle, values, and belonging to a particular social and cultural habitus, i.e. they are mechanisms of distinction. In other words, the way we decorate and conceive our space has a symbolic value and conveys a certain message. Such a role of design, i.e. specific consumer orientation and aesthetic sensibility, is clearly visible in the results related to labelling a certain type of taste as non-inventive trash. Cultural competencies, which in this case relate to certain knowledge about architecture, design, and art, were most pronounced in participants who in their statements emphasised the existence of generational transfer of aesthetic values and tastes. In this example, we see how Bourdieu's notion of habitus operates, being reproduced through unconsciously incorporated knowledge, orientation, and competence. Although, as we have seen, participants very rarely share exactly the same style of decoration with their parents, the results show that, despite the absence of stylistic continuity, socialisation within a certain type of habitus often results in the inheritance of a certain level of cultural capital, in this case, aesthetic values, including attitudes towards works of art. Although in the postmodern social context we can talk about consumption that is freer, more egalitarian, and more dependent on individual affinities, it is the primary socialisation habitus in which predispositions for consumer orientations are formed, i.e. the value system through which artefacts are evaluated, utilised, and imbued with symbolic context.

Home and all its complex manifestations, including the choice of furniture, prints, colours, and paintings on the walls are part of a narrative woven into the construction of personal and collective identities that are intertwined. In this sense, we can discuss processes that point to complex mechanisms of production of meanings that are not unified. People's homes are important, but in different ways. Our research refers to the attitudes of younger middle-aged professionals, and members of the middle class in the urban context; however, for a better understanding of the role of decorative aesthetics in home design and identity construction, future studies should include members of different social groups with different demographic characteristics and a comparative approach.

Rašeljka Krnić, Sara Ursić: Home Decoration, Aesthetics, and Identity: Exploring Meanings in Dwelling Cultures

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The study contributes to understanding how individuals use home decoration aesthetics as a means of self-expression and identity construction. It highlights how choices regarding home decoration and aesthetics serve as a reflection of individual and collective identities. By integrating Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus with postmodern theories on identity and consumption, the study enriches the theoretical discourse on how structural and individual factors influence tastes and aesthetic preferences in modern societies. The study advances sociological and cultural research on the significance of the home by focusing on how middle-class individuals use interior design to navigate and construct social distinctions. It extends knowledge on how home aesthetics serves as a platform for exploring broader social themes, including power dynamics, identity, and social stratification.

Finally, regarding limitations, the specific setting of this qualitative study, which focuses on younger middle-aged, middle-class professionals in an urban context in Croatia, may pose a challenge to the transferability of conclusions to similar contexts. Because of this, we have relied on auto-reflexivity regarding the concepts and the applied method, the pronounced contextual setting, transparency, and thick descriptions to address and hopefully mitigate this challenge.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The authors declare that institutional ethical approval was not required. However, they confirm adherence to the best practices of ethical research.

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Partial access to analytical materials and raw data is available upon request.

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Uređenje doma, estetika i identitet: Istraživanje značenja u kulturi stanovanja

Rašeljka KRNIĆ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2370-433X
Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, Zagreb, Hrvatska
raseljka.krnic@pilar.hr

Sara URSIĆ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4398-4383
Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, Zagreb, Hrvatska
sara.ursic@pilar.hr

SAŽETAK

Duboko ukorijenjen u osobnom i društvenom identitetu, dom je u posljednja dva desetljeća postao sve dinamičnije područje istraživanja unutar društvenih i humanističkih znanosti. Koncept doma često služi kao platforma za razumijevanje složenih društvenih odnosa između pojedinaca i grupa te otkriva značenja koja proizlaze iz interakcije s materijalnom kulturom. U ovom radu koristimo podatke dobivene metodom intervjua kako bismo saznali koliko naši ispitanici – mlađi sredovječni stručnjaci srednje klase – cijene estetsku dimenziju svog doma i koja joj značenja pridaju. Analiza narativa o estetici, ukusu i procesima povezanim s donošenjem odluka omogućila je uvid u to kako su određeni stavovi povezani s različitim dimenzijama identiteta naših sudionika. Rezultati su pokazali da je kroz oblikovanje vizualnog identiteta prostora moguće artikulirati različite aspekte osobnih i kolektivnih identiteta. Iako dobiveni podaci pokazuju kako ukus i stav prema estetici funkcioniraju kao naslijeđeni kulturni kapital, također otkrivaju kako drugi kulturni utjecaji u složenom postmodernom potrošačkom kontekstu oblikuju stavove i ukuse izvan izravno naslijeđenih vrijednosti.

Ključne riječi: uređenje doma, estetika, identitet, potrošnja, kulturni kapital