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Co-consuming a Pet Home: Balancing Functionality and Aesthetics of a Taste Regime

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we aim at exploring how the aesthetics and functionality of pet homes are balanced in the socio-material practices produced in the interaction within digital platforms. The home as a place for consumption is previously addressed in culturally oriented consumer studies discussing practices, and agentic and expressive capacities of objects in home (e.g., Arsel & Bean, 2013; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Figueiredo, 2016; Epp & Price, 2010; Valtonen & Närvänen, 2015). Recent work has addressed the notion of taste (Arsel & Bean, 2013, 2018), conceptualized as an accretion of material goods through processes of socialization, sensemaking and preference shaping. Taste as a reflexive, systematic practice that creates social hierarchies is thus regarded to emerge and become negotiated in interactions between consumers. Our study joins the discussion in which online platforms are considered as the mediators, re-creators and modifiers of taste (Arsel & Bean, 2013; Phillips, Miller & McQuarrie, 2014).

We build particularly on Arsel and Bean's (2013) concept of problematization, which shows how deviations from normative and cultural standards of taste question the alignment of everyday objects, doings and meanings. This conception appears particularly omnipresent in pet homes. Literature on consumer-animal relations describe a balancing between aspired aesthetics of a certain taste regime and the multiple functionalities living with pets requires. To illustrate, Jyrinki (2012) discusses how pets act as their owners' "character developers", and Belk (1996, 127) describes pets as "problems", in which roles they may, "be messy, do damage, and disrupt normal routines" in homes.

The focus of this paper is in the intersection between two areas of consumption; pet ownership and interior decoration, the Scandi-modern taste regime, in particular. We investigate how the socio-material consumption practice of problematization appears as a constant balancing between aesthetics and functionality, and how solutions for these mundane negotiations are produced in the interaction emerging in digital platforms. In doing so, we adopt a distributed agency perspective (Bajde, 2013), rooted in assemblage theory (Canniford & Bajde, 2016). We

expand the notion of co-consumption (Kylkilahti et al., 2016) to describe shared agency between fellow consumers, and between human consumers and non-human, technological and material entities. To this end, the study draws on two sets of qualitative, netnographically generated data from two extensive Facebook-groups related to pets and to interior decoration. We contribute to the extant research by interlinking the prior examinations on co-consumption and non-human animal agency (e.g., Bettany & Daly, 2008; Bettany & Kerrane, 2011; Smith, 2016; Syrjälä et al., 2016; Syrjälä & Norrgrann, 2018, 2019) with literature on socio-material practices illuminating taste regime at home (e.g., Arsel & Bean, 2013, 2018; Phillips, Miller & McQuarrie, 2014; Epp & Price, 2010; Valtonen & Närvänen, 2015).

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Agentic Animals as Co-consumers in Home Assemblage

Although pet animals cohabit with their owners, most of the extant research on consumers and their animals lacks focus on home as a shared consumption space, home emerging only as a by-product of living together with non-humans. To illustrate, one of the earliest consumer studies on pets by Hirschman (1994) illuminates the various roles pets may possess, and the boundaries assigned to pets at home (e.g., if they are allowed on the sofa, or in the bedroom) demonstrate the meanings given to the animals. Similarly, most prior studies on companion animals rely on a human-centered view as, for instance the roles of animals are elaborated from the human's perspective, that is, how consumers experience what their pets mean to them (e.g., Belk, 1996; Brockman, Taylor, & Brockman, 2008; Hirschman, 1994; Holbrook et al., 2001; Jyrinki, 2012).

To address these gaps, the current study joins the post-humanist stream of consumer studies on animal companions (e.g., Bettany & Daly, 2008; Bettany & Kerrane, 2011; Smith, 2016; Syrjälä et al., 2016) and focuses on non-human agencies in home assemblage (Syrjälä & Norrgrann, 2018, 2019). In these accounts, the idea that agency is solely possessed by human consumers is left aside, and instead, the differences and interdependencies between human and non-human entities are illuminated to show how agency appears in varied and multiple qualities in assemblages (Canniford & Bajde, 2016), such as homes.

Furthermore, by directing attention to both human and animal agency, we regard humans and non-human animals co-consumers (Kylkilahti et al., 2016), whose agency may be captured as co-existing and mutable in relation to emerging situations and conditions that flicker in the networks that produce home. From this post-human perspective, human and animal constitute a co-consuming unit with distributed agency, where both are co-implicative and intertwined within the material-cultural environment of the home. This relates to Cheetham and McEachern (2013), whose notion of inter-subjectivity emphasises subjectivity of the animal entity and the reciprocity of this subject-subject relationship (also, Haraway, 2003). Borgerson (2013) has proposed a typology in which agency is analyzed in terms of effects and intentions, in a way that living entities (be they human or non-human) may hold intentional capacities of agency, whereas non-living things trigger only effects (see also, Syrjälä et al., 2016). For instance, Epp and Price (2010) and Figueredo (2016) understand that the agentic capabilities of material objects in the home are not as purposefully intentional, but they are capable of being agentic through their relations.

Taste regimes and agentic digital communities

A particular characteristic of the home as a place of consumption is that it often involves aesthetic pursuits. Consumers' ideas of a beautiful home can be understood through the notion of taste, which, in Bourdieu's (1984) definition, is a mechanism through which individuals judge, classify, and relate to objects and acts of consumption. In recent work by Arsel & Bean (2013; 2018) taste is conceptualized as reflexively performed everyday practice that reinforces symbolic boundaries, creating social distinction. They have introduced the notion of taste regime, which encapsulates the linkage between aesthetic and action - dimensions that particularly characterize consuming homes. The taste regime concept illustrates the orchestration of objects, doings and meanings in an aesthetic system, and enrolls consumers in processes of problematizing (questioning material objects' relation to the taste regime's meanings), ritualizing (establishing behaviors that align objects with doings) and instrumentalizing (enrolling objects and doings to actualize meanings).

In this research, we focus on pet homes as we elaborate particularly on Arsel & Bean's (2013; 2018) problematization practice, exploring how pet-related practices problematize, and become integrated into a specific interior decoration regime.

Culturally oriented consumer studies have emphasized the way in which discursive systems normatively shape and regulate consumption (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Arsel & Bean 2013), and the role of mediated culture, such as online communities and social media are acknowledged as central tastemakers, cultural intermediaries and triggers of desire today (Arsel & Bean 2018; Phillips et al 2014; Kozinets et al 2016). Participation in communities where a specific taste regime is cultivated offers a fruitful ground for exploring taste from a co-consumption and distributed agency perspective, revealing how the peer-to-peer interactions' show the "flickering" agency in the heterogeneous network of various human and non-human entities.

METHODOLOGY

Our research is grounded in a particular stream of practice theory, the socio-material practice approach, that acknowledges practices not only as social and cultural, but also as material (Fuentes, 2014). Most practice theoretical approaches place the *social* in practices, as activities of social life are carried out over and over again, and this mundane performativity is organized through a variety of collectively shared practices (Halkier and Jensen, 2011). However, as practices are manifested in individual performances and embedded in cultural structures (Halkier et al., 2011; Warde, 2005), the individual *human* consumer is seen as the carrier of practices. Although *material* artefacts are also situated in practices, in these views, they have no agency of their own (Fuentes, 2014) as, for instance, 'objects are handled' (Rexwitz, 2002) by a human activity.

In contrast, post-human practice approaches consider the agentic capacities of non-human entities as pivotal in the making of social practices (Schatzki, 2001). As Fuentes (2014) highlights, "to think in terms of socio-material practice is to treat materiality and its meanings, image and things, humans and non-humans simultaneously and as intrinsically interlinked." This resembles

how assemblages are regarded as continuously shaped in the interactions between heterogeneous entities, both human and non-human, which “gain their qualities and capacities through more or less stable connections with fellow elements” (Canniford & Bajde, 2016, 2). In this way, practices and assemblages are mutually dependent as practices construct assemblages and assemblages in turn shape and have an impact on practices (Fuentes, 2014).

To generate an in-depth understanding on the prevailing socio-material practices and construction of taste in home assemblages as they appear in digital platforms, we employed netnography (Kozinets, 2015). Relying on the premises of (n)ethnographic research, in which the researcher ideally participates in the interaction within the community under study (Kozinets, 2015), we followed and participated in discussions in two Finnish Facebook groups, one focusing on dogs (“Dogs”) and the other on interior decoration (“Modern and Scandinavian interior decoration”). In the dog-related Facebook group, we focused on the discussions on home-related matters, whereas in the interior decoration group we did the same in relation to pets in homes. As the idea of netnography is to study everyday life within virtual social interaction (Kozinets, 2015), it offers an unobtrusive way to generate data (Kozinets, 2006). Indeed, the topics appeared abundantly in both of the groups, which enabled us to observe the discussion without deliberately triggering any further discussions ourselves. Our material consists of both verbal discussion as well as pictures shared in the two communities.

FINDINGS

Our empirical examination addresses the questions of how pet-related practices intersect with and problematize adherence to a Scandi-modern taste regime, and how the digital Facebook communities as discursive systems play a role in this. Our findings and empirical illustrations, summarized in Table 1, are structured according to how objects, doings, and meanings are linked and orchestrated into patterns of consumption. The analysis focuses particularly on the problematization practice (Arsel & Bean 2013) when pet-related consumption considerations are assessed against the taste regime.

Even if pet-related *objects*, like their beds, toys or food containers can be perceived as challenging to align with the taste regime in a satisfactory way, the digital community contributes by offering a platform to share ideas, inspiration and concrete product tips on how to resolve these problems and balance functionality and aesthetics in the pet home.

Pet-related *doings*, from neutral activities such as eating or sleeping, to more strongly interfering like smothering or destroying, problematize the taste practice, particularly considering that the agency of these doings is partly beyond of the human consumer’s control and intention. In this respect, the digital community can provide peer resources for handling this integration by, for instance, providing ideas how, and with what kind of material resources to organize the pet-related activities in accordance with the taste regime (e.g. storing various pet items practically, but out of sight) or proactively plan interior solutions with a consideration of pet-related doings.

The *meanings* and material expressions related to Scandi-modernism are recurring topics of online discussion. Members of the Scandi-modern group characterize the style with terms such as clarity, minimalism, neutral colors, natural materials and designer items. When a pet is co-

consuming the home, it may be perceived as a threat or limitation to these pursuits, expressed for instance as reluctance or hesitation to invest in delicate and/or expensive products, that one would choose were it not for the practical considerations. The collective online discourse reflects such trade-offs and problems, seeking peer reassurance, recommendations and warnings, as well as suggested solutions for integration. Nevertheless, pets and the Scandi-modern home are not always regarded as a problematic clash in the online discourse, but the groups also exhibit content of the two becoming integrated in unproblematic ways. From this viewpoint, the pet as a cultural symbol in fact rather enhances the specific taste regime and is used to match the décor (Syrjälä & Norrgrann 2019). While dogs carry a symbolic meaning related to homeliness in general (“a house without a dog is not a home”), the data provide examples that the role of dogs is also an aesthetic one. Picture material in the forums showcase dogs that are, for instance, color matched with their surroundings, or accessorizing the décor similarly as sheepskin rugs as typically used within the taste regime to indicate warmth and texture.

Overall, the social platforms where taste is negotiated and practices discussed contribute to the integration of practices in several ways. In line with previous research (Phillips et al., 2014, Kozinets et al., 2016) these networks allow consumers to dream, plan, develop desires, and discover and refine their taste, be it by passively following the content, or more actively taking part in interaction and even through concrete peer-to-peer problem solving and practice integration.

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we have delved into the socio-material practice of problematization (Arsel & Bean, 2013), and elaborated on how it appears and is balanced in the interaction emerging in digital platforms concerning pet homes. Furthermore, we provided illustrations on how agency appears distributed across various human and non-human entities when assembling home. The human consumer and non-human animal appear as a co-consuming unit, in which the non-human animal poses several functional demands for the human consumer in their attempts to align with Scandi-modern aesthetics. Yet, the solutions for these problematizing occasions, regarding objects, doings and meanings are sought for in digital platforms, which in itself also exhibit agency by resolving problems, mediating, and re-creating the Scandi-modern taste regime. In this way, we have advanced extant knowledge by combining research on socio-material practices and taste in homes (e.g., Arsel & Bean, 2013, 2018; Epp & Price, 2010; Valtonen & Närvänen, 2015) with distributed (animal) agency (e.g., Bajde, 2013; Bettany & Daly, 2008; Bettany & Kerrane, 2011; Smith, 2016; Syrjälä et al., 2016; Syrjälä & Norrgrann, 2018, 2019).

From a managerial viewpoint, we believe that the socio-material practice view that considers how different consumption arenas intersect, offers new ways to understand what constitutes value for customers, and which different kinds of requirements need to be negotiated in specific consumption practices intertwined in a taste regime. Such understanding may offer new business opportunities for companies who manage to take a broader view of the practices surrounding their products and integrate the diverse requirements - for instance practicality and

aesthetics - into their offerings. In our empirical context, examples of such include pet products that are positioned as interior design and lifestyle products, or in the marketing communication of a design sofa brand, that emphasizes the fabric's suitability for domestic life including pets and children.

Future research should indeed focus on other co-consuming units, such as parents and children (Thompson, 1996), which would open up not only novel managerial implications but also views to distributed agency. Further, a limitation of the current study is that it has employed visual materials only in a supporting role for interpretation, so future examinations should dig deeper into visual analysis, as pictures are constantly pervading as a larger and more meaningful part of social media communication.

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Table 1: Integration between pet-related practices and Scandi-modern taste regime in Facebook groups

	Problematicization	Balancing	Interaction in the digital communities	Illustrations from digital platforms (openings of discussion threads)
Objects	toys, beds, bowls, food, leashes, sofas, rugs, floor materials, space	optimizing the aesthetic-functional ratio in objects, redefining "ownership" boundaries of objects, hiding/camouflaging, accessorizing	seeking and sharing product ideas, recommendations, inspiration; reinforcement of the taste regime through shared product understandings and preferences	"What kind of baskets for dog toys you have? Preferably, some that look stylish enough to be kept in the living room by force of circumstance 🐾" "We are expecting a puppy to our home. Could you post pictures of how your dog with his/her bed, bowls, and equipment is part of your home"
Doings	sleeping, eating, playing, destroying, messing up, storing, cleaning, moving between indoor/outdoor, taking into possession	finding material solutions that enable an integration pet-related doings and the taste regime; handling animal agency beyond human control	seeking and sharing ideas for organizing and planning the home and its functionalities	"I have a project of staircase painting ahead, which I have been avoiding already a year. And ever bigger pain comes from stair mats / anti-slip mats. Me, myself, I wouldn't ever want such a thing, but I need to think about our old dog, who still rushes wrecklessly in the stairs. So, please, post pictures of what kinds you have in use. 🐾 I can find web-pages myself, so what I need is just pictures to assure me that they are not all ugly 😊"
Meanings	challenged minimalism, unclutteredness, tidyness, lightness, purity, threatened design orientation	integrating demands of easy maintenance (e.g. detachable and washable) into material objects; re-assessing the "sacnility" of designer items	discursive portrayal of pets as obstacles in the taste regime; as unproblematic extensions of the taste regime; as a way to express individuality within the taste regime	"It would be nice to see phobs of other Scandineavian and modern homes with pets 🐾🐾 This is ours (+ one dog not in the picture)" "Honest opinions and viewpoints, please. Dare I really buy an off-white wool rug in a dog and cat family? Are they really so dirt-repelling that the occasional vomiting (which of course always ends up on the newest or most expensive rug) doesn't cause stains? Am I dreaming in vain of a white wool rug?"