

Bringing style home

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Does the ideal ratio of couch to rug size keep you up at night? Are the exposed wires of your stereo causing you angst? Is that crocheted toilet paper cover kitschy enough to be cool? If you wonder, then you are not alone.

For Concordia University's Zeynep Arsel, such questions have led to exciting new research into buyer behaviour. The assistant professor of marketing at the John Molson School of Business teamed up with Jonathan Bean from Parsons The New School of Design in New York City to co-author a recent article in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#). Together, they investigated how the notion of taste can be seen as an integral part of [personal identity](#) in addition to serving as a boundary that sets one apart from the crowd.

The researchers turned to a surprising source for their findings: Apartment Therapy, a popular website with a fresh take on present-day interior decorating that has had more hits than Martha Stewart's online empire. Arsel and Bean painstakingly combed through hundreds of thousands of posts and comments on the website to uncover how its readers were forming their own notions of [personal taste](#) by following a prescriptive view of what constitutes cool when it comes to interior decorating.

"It turns out that reading Apartment Therapy or watching a do-it-yourself home decorating show is way more than just a passive leisure activity," explains Arsel. "It's really an element of practice that influences how people relate to objects and what they do with them."

While our choices in interior decorating may begin as a simple imitation of what we see online or on TV, those decisions eventually become ingrained.

Arsel herself was not immune to this pattern of [consumer behaviour](#). She first came to the Apartment Therapy website out of personal curiosity rather than academic interest. "I was just getting my first apartment as a new PhD," she recalls. "It was a lower duplex that was totally typical of Montreal and I wanted some decorating ideas to help me liven up the dark space."

Through personal experience and in-depth research, Arsel and Bean developed a new theory that sees taste-making as a tripartite process that involves problematization, instrumentalization and ritualization.

First, the consumer problematizes his or her own environment by comparing it to the prescriptions on the web site and acknowledging that things could be improved. Then, they rationalize a design choice or purchase through the process of instrumentalization or, in other words, linking this choice to goals and meanings. Finally, imitation becomes ingrained behaviour through repetition and ritualization.

"We start by looking at these decorating sites and emulating what we see. But through repeated exposure, we develop our own standards for what can in fact become personal taste," says Arsel.

More information: Journal of Consumer Research: ejcr.org/
Zeynep Arsel's website: zeyneparsel.com/

Provided by Concordia University

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