

The Home as Self-Expression: Navigating Identity and Marketplace Pressures in Interior Design

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Introduction

A client's identity, shaped by personal style, cultural background, and lifestyle, significantly influences interior design and renovation choices by impacting aesthetics and functionality. Resources such as budget and time further constrain these decisions, requiring clients to navigate a marketplace that reflects their values and constraints. As Grant and Handelman (2022) state, "Consumers expend great amounts of time and money drawing on the marketplace in acts of self-expression that align one's home configuration with one's unique identity" (p. 882). Thus, understanding the intersection of client identity and resources enables designers to create spaces that align with the client's vision while balancing personal expression and practicality. When the marketplaces that consumers turn to for self-expression through design begin to shape and limit their choices, the result can be a conflict between personal identity and external standards. Grant and Handelman (2022) state in their publication "Dysplacement and the Professionalization of the Home":

Traditionally, the home is regarded as a palace of singularization that is to be aligned with the homeowner's unique identity. This traditional meaning has come to be confronted with a contradictory understanding of the home as a marketplace asset. Homeowners come to experience a market-reflected gaze that shuns singularization while driving homeowners to exhibit expertise in aligning their homes with marketplace standards. Professionalization of the home, through marketplace expertise of and standardization, discourages personalization, leading to an experience of disorientation with the place of home. (p. 882)

When the places consumers frequent for materials negatively influence their self-identity and design choices, it can lead to cognitive dissonance, as people struggle to reconcile their authentic values with the aesthetics of their purchases, possibly feeling conflicted. This dissonance can result in limited choices and reducing satisfaction and well-being, as consumers may feel their possessions fail to reflect their true selves, leading them to avoid misaligned shopping environments over time.

This alignment between one's home and one's unique identity is consistent with the idea that the walls of our homes "work like the clothing that covers our bodies; both are coded to enable us to articulate the various identities that we assume every day" (Lloyd & Johnson, 2004, p. 252). As individuals and families each have unique identities, the home is a critical space for self-expression and identity construction. A person's distinct identity is shaped by a combination of their experiences, beliefs, values, and physical and behavioral characteristics. In Bennett et al. (1988), as cited in Epp and Price (2008), family identity is the family's subjective sense of its continuity over time, its present situation, and its character. It is the gestalt of quantities and attributes that make it a particular family and that differentiates it from other families. Though every individual and family has their unique self-expression and identity, they all rely on the massive design marketplace to obtain the materials, decor, and assistance they need to mirror their identity to their home. With this awareness, marketplaces are the help that clients need to express their uniqueness, but also evoke a judgmental narrative that spurns expressive individual design.

Significance

The purpose of this study is to delve into how clients and families include their unique identity in their homes by utilizing marketplaces, and how those same resources create a market-reflected gaze into their personal home designs. First, we will explore when homes began to be more than just a place of shelter, home as a place of unique identity, and why making a home your own is important. Second, we will examine how self-identity is translated in home design: as consumption and identity, market influence on consumer choices, social status through consumption, balancing personal taste and social norms, and home as a reflection of identity. Then, researched-based evidence and examples will show how people are afraid of a market-reflected gaze that spurns the involvement of self-expression in a home. The information obtained in this study should inspire all present or future homeowners and all designers, professional or not, to not be afraid to express their unique attributes in their homes simply because they're afraid that their design will be judged or deemed worthless.

Literature Review

Several sociocultural dynamics contributed to the prevailing cultural conception of home in North America during the 20th century. Government and industry campaigns at the end of World War II reinforced the home as the center of the ideal American life (Cohen, 2003). Equipped with modern comforts, the independent suburban house was presented as a prize for families sacrificing everything during the war. Having a home provided the opportunity for personal growth for the average middle-class family. In the period following the war, interior design became the focus of domesticity

(Lloyd & Johnson, 2004). For homeowners, the house evolved into a material manifestation of their personality, way of life, and social standing. It became an extension of themselves.

As Epp and Price (2008) maintain, “Each family houses unique bundles of identities, including family’s collective identity, smaller groups’ (e.g., siblings, couples, parent-child) relational identities, and individual family members’ identities” (p. 50). A home has a multitude of identities within each room, whether through the individuals, or groups of people in a room, or pets, etc. Establishing a distinctive identity for a home is crucial, as it enables people to showcase their lifestyle, cultural background, and personal beliefs, fostering a feeling of emotional attachment and belonging. A house that reflects its individuality improves well-being, encourages coziness, and offers a place for self-expression. Customized houses may also make a statement in the community by indicating status and uniqueness and by providing practical solutions that suit requirements and tastes. In the end, it turns a house into a meaningful and contemplative space rather than just a physical building.

This literature review is categorized into five major topic areas relating to how self-identity is interpreted in home design: (1) Consumption and Identity (2) Market Influence on Consumer Choices (3) Social Status Through Consumption (4) Balancing Personal Taste and Social Norms and (5) Home as a Reflection of Identity.

Consumption and Identity

Consumption and identity in residential design refers to how decisions about the selection and application of materials, furniture, and spaces expresses individual preferences, morals, and social identities. These ideas have an impact on the practicality, aesthetics, and emotional bonds that individuals form with their living environments. Grant and Handelman (2022) note that “Engaging in home renovation consumption is an ideal context because such modifications of place may be considered an essential part of emplacement while simultaneously immersing the consumer in the home improvement marketplace” (p. 886).

Family Consumption and Identity Practices

Family identity is framed as something that is constructed and maintained through shared interactions among relational bundles within the family that engages in both complementary and competing consumption practices (Epp & Price, 2008). Families draw on these shared practices to manage and negotiate their collective identity as a unified household. Consumption, in this sense, involves both the physical use of resources and the symbolic meanings attached to them, such as traditions, rituals, and

routine behaviors that reinforce family connections and roles. In Wallendorf and Arnould (1991), as cited in Epp and Price (2008), generations connect through consumption rituals, such as viewing family photographs and storytelling, that anchor a family to its past. Shared consumption helps align individual, relational, and collective identities, which includes choosing products, services, or experiences that are emotionally meaningful to the family.

Personal Consumption and Identity Practices

Identity and personal consumption are closely related ideas, as a person's decisions about what they use, buy, or interact with reflects and molds their sense of self. Individuals frequently choose goods, labels, or fashions that complement their ideals, character qualities, and preferred social image. Arsel and Bean (2012) argue that tastes are not just individual preferences but are collectively influenced and organized through broader cultural and social forces. Furthermore, a **taste regime** is a socially constructed system that governs and shapes how individuals develop their aesthetic preferences, tastes, and practices within cultural or social groups. In Bourdieu (1984), as cited in Arsel and Bean (2012), taste has been frequently theorized as a mechanism through which individuals judge, classify, and relate to objects and acts of consumption. Advertising and media play a big role in shaping and keeping taste regimes. For example, in interior design, certain décor trends become popular because influencers and tastemakers promote them, helping people decide what to choose. Therefore, “A taste regime regulates acts of consumption by providing the teleoaffective structure of a practice that orders objects, meanings, and doings” (Arsel & Bean, 2012, p. 902).

Market Influence on Consumer Choices

The market plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer choices by driving preferences through trends, economic conditions, and the availability of materials. As consumers' tastes evolve and new technologies emerge, the dynamic nature of the market continually influences how people design and furnish their homes. The marketplace is particularly significant because “Consumers draw on the marketplace as part of their emplacement rituals of singularization, consistent with our cultural understanding of the home as a place to be aligned with the homeowner's unique identity” (Grant & Handelman, 2022, p. 883).

Madigan and Munro (1996) argue that media, particularly lifestyle magazines, play a significant role in shaping domestic aesthetics, influencing homeowners' design choices through idealized representations of beauty and style. These representations become physical manifestations, as “Shops and magazines often display fully coordinated sets of goods (furniture, carpets, fabrics, wallpapers, accessories) and design ranges with carefully matched and contrasting patterns and colors” (Madigan & Munro, 1996, p. 54).

Furthermore, the market plays a central role in shaping taste regimes, with market actors (brands, media, and marketers) influencing and regulating what is considered “good taste” and thereby structuring consumer preferences. This links with the concept of taste regimes because “Taste regimes are perpetuated by marketplace institutions such as magazines, websites, and transmedia brands” (Arsel & Bean, 2012, p. 889).

However, media, such as home renovation shows and magazines, increasingly push homeowners to see their houses not only as personal spaces, but as market assets. This idea creates tension between expressing individual identity and adhering to professional, market-driven standards like neutral color schemes, open floor plans, and high-end appliances. Homeowners often feel pressure to conform to these trends which can result in a sense of unease and “dysplacement,” where their home no longer fully feels like a personal space, but a commodity shaped by external expectations. Grant and Handelman (2022) explain that “This countervailing dynamic serves as a force of displacement in which consumers’ effort to align their homes with their unique identities are confronted by expectations to instead align their homes with marketplace standards” (p. 883).

Social Status Through Consumption

The term “social status through consumption” describes how people use the items they purchase—such as experiences, vehicles, clothing, or technology—to convey their societal position or status. Individuals frequently buy products and services to show off their income, taste, or social group membership and use them for practical purposes. A person may purchase a luxury vehicle or high-end apparel, for instance, to show their elevated social status, whilst another may choose environmentally conscious items to convey principles such as environmental stewardship, which can also be indicative of a certain social status. Madigan and Munro (1996) explore how social status is expressed and reinforced through home decoration and consumption. They argue that the home as a key site of consumption is often used to project and communicate social standing, taste, and identity.

Furthering this, “Taste regimes regulate lateral distinctions between economic strata by setting apart the styles, preferences, and dispositions of one middle-class group from another, but they also link to consumption patterns so that individuals can habitually enact these distinguishing mechanisms” (Arsel & Bean, 2012, p. 902). An individual’s taste is not just a personal preference but is shaped by social forces, and people often align their consumption with socially accepted norms to express status. Arsel and Bean (2012) suggest that the endorsement of tastemakers (like influencers or critics) helps define what is considered “high status” or desirable, and consumers

adopt these choices to signal their place in the social hierarchy. In essence, by adhering to or rejecting certain taste regimes, individuals use their consumption as a tool to navigate social status and establish their identity within a specific social context.

Bourdieu (1984) argues that people use taste and consumption practices to create social distinctions. Individuals from higher social classes consume specific goods and engage in cultural activities that separate them from lower classes. For instance, they might prefer fine art, gourmet food, or classical music, which are viewed as symbols of status. In contrast, "Lower income households are less likely to buy new furniture at all relying on second-hand purchases and hand-me-downs" (Madigan & Munro, 1996, p. 44). People's tastes, shaped by their class background, serve as markers of social status, helping to distinguish and reinforce their place in the social hierarchy.

Balancing Personal Taste and Social Norms

People often experience a subtle tension when making choices in areas like fashion or home design. These decisions involve a careful balance between expressing personal identity and aligning with societal norms or trends. Personal taste is a person's preferences and way of expressing themselves, while social norms are more inclusive cultural or commercial standards that influence how decisions are perceived by other people. As Grant and Handelman (2022) explain:

When consumers engage in alterations to their homes, whether the alteration is an act of asserting home-unique identity, or one that aligns the home with marketplace standards, consumers reflect on the judgment that will be cast on their home. These judgments may be observed in media portrayals, they may come from one's friends and family members, from marketplace professionals such as real estate agents, contractors, and designers, or from the consumer anticipating the judgments from a marketplace person. (p. 899)

Arsel and Bean (2012) argue that people often align their consumption with socially accepted norms to fit in or signal their status within a particular group. Also, tastemakers, such as influencers, designers, and critics, play a key role in shaping the tension between personal taste and social norms. Tastemakers define what is "trendy" or "high status," but individuals still have the freedom to interpret these trends in ways that align with their identities. This idea, for instance, emphasizes how homeowners may feel compelled to adopt current design trends, such as open floor plans or neutral color schemes, even when they would like to add unique touches to their homes. If you deviate too far from these standards, people may see you adversely,

particularly if you think of your house as a financial asset that must be appealing to potential buyers.

As for families, members often have different tastes and priorities, so they negotiate and compromise. For example, parents might allow children to have more personalized rooms while keeping shared spaces like the living room more neutral to meet social norms, appeal to visitors, and ensure that their home remains attractive to future buyers. This careful balance means that “Families encounter countless barriers to identity enactment. The marketplace both enables and constrains the type of identity construction practices available to families” (Epp & Price, 2008, p. 59).

People often pick styles, furniture, and décor that match what is considered tasteful and high-status in society. The home reflects a person’s social standing, and many feel pressure to decorate in ways that fit in with what their social group finds stylish or acceptable. Madigan and Munro (1996) discuss, “Questions of style, design, and tastefulness evidently cause anxiety, but they are largely subsumed by familial values [...] and also by the desire to maintain ‘respectability’ through maintaining high housekeeping standards” (p. 41).

Home as a Reflection of Identity

The home reflects identity because it showcases the personal tastes, values, and social status of the people who live there. The choice of colors, furniture, and décor allows individuals to express their unique style and creativity. Therefore, “‘Home’ is an important expression of identity, yet it is an identity which is only partially achieved through appearances (furnishing and decor) and overt consumption” (Madigan & Munro, 1996, p. 53). Beyond personal preferences, the home also signals cultural background and social class, with design elements reflecting heritage or social standing. In essence, Arsel and Bean (2012) show that the home is a key site where identity is both constructed and displayed, shaped by both individual preferences and external social influences.

What’s more, the way a home is arranged reveals the values and lifestyle of its occupants. A minimalist home might suggest a preference for simplicity, while eco-friendly features indicate environmental consciousness. Homes also act as social signals, giving visitors insight into the homeowner’s tastes and status. In this way, a home becomes a visible and personal expression of identity. In Casey (2017), as cited in Grant & Handelman (2022), “characterization of place as the ‘cardinal meridian of human experience’ where mind, body, and place align, draws our attention to the co-constitutive relationship between place and the human experience. Place shapes its inhabitants and its inhabitants shape place” (p. 884).

Reflecting your identity in a home is crucial because it fosters a deep emotional connection, turning the space into a personal sanctuary that promotes comfort and well-being. A home that mirrors your tastes and values allows for self-expression, providing a sense of fulfillment while also communicating who you are to others. This personalization can enhance functionality, as the space is tailored to meet your unique lifestyle needs. Beyond that, such a home can become a legacy for your family, imbued with personal or cultural significance, making it meaningful across generations.

Conclusion

These experts reached a consensus that consumption and identity are deeply intertwined in the context of home design, with choices about materials, furnishings, and aesthetics reflecting individual preferences, family values, and social norms. The home as both a personal and social space serves as a key site for expressing identity, shaped by the tension between personal taste and market-driven trends. Madigan and Munro (1996) articulate that "Home and family are powerful concepts which shape not only the way in which we *perceive* our physical surroundings, but also the way in which we *construct* our surroundings" (p. 55). Whether through family rituals, personal consumption, or social status, the home reflects a balance between the individual's desire for uniqueness and the societal expectations of style and status. Ultimately, how people design and interact with their living spaces reveals not only their identity but also their place in broader social and cultural systems.

Moreover, the market's influence on consumer choices plays a crucial role in shaping this balance between personal identity and social expectations. Media, tastemakers, and marketplace trends often drive individuals toward certain design norms, creating pressures to conform, particularly when homes are seen as financial assets. According to Grant and Handelman (2022), this dynamic can lead to a sense of "displacement," where the home feels more like a commodity than a personal refuge. However, individuals still navigate these external forces by integrating their unique preferences, values, and cultural identities into their homes. As such, the home becomes a complex reflection of personal expression, shaped by both individual agency and external market forces, revealing the ongoing negotiation between self-identity and societal norms in domestic spaces.

Findings

Consumers design their homes to reflect their identity as a form of personal expression and emotional connection. Through decor, they showcase their unique tastes, values, and cultural backgrounds, creating spaces that feel authentic and comfortable. Designing allows people to shape their environments, giving them control over their surroundings and fostering a sense of well-being. Consumers engage in emplacement rituals of

singularization to assist in establishing alignment between their place of home and their distinct individual and family identities, given that the house is a site of distinctive identity. In these singularization-related emplacement rituals, our informants set up their homes according to their identities by using the market (Grant & Handelman, 2022).

Additionally, home decor often represents important life experiences or aspirations. Whether it is displaying meaningful objects or selecting colors that evoke specific emotions, consumers create homes that not only reflect who they are but also tell their personal stories. Rituals refer to the habitual or symbolic practices that individuals perform regularly in their living spaces. These rituals are deeply connected to personal identity and values, often reflecting cultural traditions, personal routines, or lifestyle preferences. They help create a sense of comfort, stability, and meaning in the home environment. Epp and Price (2008) highlight how rituals play a significant role in shaping family identity through consumption. They contend that family rituals, whether connected to feasts, customs around the dinner table, or other regular activities, strengthen the family's sense of unity. Families can express common values, preserve relationships, and negotiate individual and communal identities with the use of these rituals.

In parallel, according to Grant and Handelman (2022), the term "market-reflected gaze" describes the outside pressure homeowners face to match the standards of the market rather than their tastes (p. 883). This look presents the house as an asset subject to market rules rather than the place of personal identity and singularization. Because they believe that their houses are assessed or appraised according to how well they fit these predetermined criteria, homeowners are discouraged from personalizing their environments and experience a sense of uncertainty. The evidence presented in Madigan and Munro (1996) study suggests that people feel like they are under increasing pressure to conform to a heightened consciousness of design and style in the home. The homeowner's distinctive choices are highlighted by the critical market-reflected gaze, which undermines the possibility of an inhabitant-place alignment. People's residences are always under scrutiny, which brings disgrace to the bad decisions made by the owners. Viewers are reminded by the judges' persistent judgment that they may be their neighbors, acquaintances, or even relatives. Specialists in the field, such as contractors, interior designers, and real estate brokers, support criticism (Grant & Handelman, 2022).

Conclusion

There is a complicated and important link between a consumer's individuality and how the market affects house design. Through investigating how lifestyle, cultural background, and personal style influence design decisions, we have observed how identity is entwined with the tools and resources at hand. Homeowners may have a confusing experience due to the conflict between their expression and external commercial norms, as demonstrated by the idea of a "market-reflected gaze" that questions individuality in house design (Grant & Handelman, 2022). To restate the main research issue, this study aimed to comprehend how customers strike a balance between their individuality and the limitations placed on them by external factors. Madigan and Munro (1996) say that "People can obviously be manipulated by advertising without realizing, or despite their best intentions" (p. 55). The results imply that although the market provides vital resources for interior design, it also brings pressures that may stifle genuine self-expression. This issue emphasizes how crucial it is to design environments that, despite cultural conventions and commercial standards, are faithful to the client's vision.

In practical terms, this study promotes a more individualized approach to house design by urging designers and homeowners to reject the temptation to adhere to strict market standards. Future studies should closely examine how certain demographic characteristics, including socioeconomic position or local culture, affect the relationship between design choices and identity as the market develops. Referring to the introduction, we reinforce the notion that dwellings, like our wardrobes, are potential symbols of who we are. In Besbris (2020), as cited in Grant & Handelman (2022), the home stands as unique in its status as a private place where rituals of emplacement serve to align the home with the unique identities of its dwellers. As time goes on, it is encouraged for both homeowners and designers to rise to the challenge of striking a balance between functionality and the ability to express one's individuality, resulting in houses that are authentic reflections of their personality. The house should continue to be a place of uniqueness and personal meaning despite outside influences.

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