Taste Regimes and Market-Mediated Practice

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Taste has been conceptualized as a boundary-making mechanism, yet there is limited theory on how it enters into daily practice. In this article, the authors develop a practice-based framework of taste through qualitative and quantitative analysis of a popular home design blog, interviews with blog participants, and participant observation. First, a taste regime is defined as a discursively constructed normative system that orchestrates practice in an aesthetically oriented culture of consumption. Taste regimes are perpetuated by marketplace institutions such as magazines, websites, and transmedia brands. Second, the authors show how a taste regime regulates practice through continuous engagement. By integrating three dispersed practices—problematization, ritualization, and instrumentalization—a taste regime shapes preferences for objects, the doings performed with objects, and what meanings are associated with objects. This study demonstrates how aesthetics is linked to practical knowledge and becomes materialized through everyday consumption.

Taste is not an attribute, it is not a property (of a thing or of a person), it is an activity. You have to do something in order to listen to music, drink a wine, appreciate an object. Tastes are not given or determined, and their objects are not either; one has to make them appear together, through repeated experiments, progressively adjusted. (Hennion 2007, 101)

Taste has been a fertile research domain for consumer researchers and sociologists because it has been established as a fundamental mechanism for perpetuating social

hierarchies (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998; Üstüner and Holt 2010). Following Hennion, we argue that a long-standing focus on the role of taste in perpetuating social distinction has resulted in a paucity of theories on the embodied and experiential aspects of how taste is practiced. Yet taste, as a matter of routine, practical, and habitual knowledge, has material effects on consumption (Allen 2002; Shove 2003; Warde 1997). As the question of how taste hierarchies are made has been explored extensively in consumer research and elsewhere (Holt 1998; Levine 1988; Peterson and Simkus 1992; Üstüner and Holt 2010), our aim here is different. We seek to develop a theory that explains how taste is performed as a practice with effects on the material. Accordingly, we investigate the ways that taste, within one stratum of a hierarchy, is practiced, reproduced, and maintained in everyday life. We make two theoretical contributions.

First, we introduce the construct of the *taste regime*, which we conceptualize as a discursive system that links aesthetics to practice. The term "regime" has been used in the literature to describe sociotechnical change (Geels 2002; Hand and Shove 2004; Rip and Kemp 1998). While the term "taste regime" also has been used in applications and interpretations of Bourdieu's theory of distinction (Rotenberg 2003; Tonkinwise 2011), its conceptualization is nebulous. To add theoretical precision to this concept, we follow Foucault's (1991) concept of regime of practice, referring to discursive systems that generate their own regularities, prescriptions, reason, and self-evidence. Inspired by this

work, we define a taste regime as a discursively constructed normative system that orchestrates the aesthetics of practice in a culture of consumption. A taste regime may be articulated by a singular, centralized authority such as an influential magazine or blog, be disseminated by a transmedia (Jenkins 2006) brand such as Martha Stewart Omnimedia, or emerge from a loosely linked network of media related by an aesthetic sensibility (Gans 1975).

Second, we use a practice theoretical approach to further delineate the processes that sustain a taste regime through orchestrating objects, doings, and meanings. We argue that the consistent and habitual interaction shaped by the taste regime is composed of three basic practices that regulate consumption: problematization, ritualization, and instrumentalization. These dispersed and abstract practices gain specificity through a particular regime of taste and are incorporated into complex integrative practices, such as domestic consumption. Accordingly, a taste regime propagates a shared understanding of aesthetic order that shapes the ways people use objects and deploy the meanings associated with the material.

Our context is domestic consumption: the everyday and exceptional activities, from changing a light bulb to renovating a home, that produce home as a cultural form. Domestic space, an understudied domain that Sherry (2000) has called on consumer researchers to investigate, is an ideal context to understand the workings of a taste regime because of the sheer number of consumption decisions involved in maintaining a home. Furthermore, design historians have argued that a theory of interiors should emphasize the social, cultural, and psychological aspects of interior space to build connections across disciplines (Sparke 2010). While studies of taste in consumer research deal with domestic consumption (Holt 1998; Üstüner and Holt 2010), they tend to focus on how domestic consumption enforces symbolic boundaries. In the case at hand, we focus on how a taste regime orchestrates practice within these boundaries.

In the following sections, we first summarize the theories of taste and practice, highlighting the significance of *doing* taste. We follow by presenting our specific context, the design blog Apartment Therapy, and the taste regime it articulates. After a brief overview of method, we elaborate on three dispersed practices that regulate the objects, doings, and meanings within the broader practice of domestic consumption: problematization, ritualization, and instrumentalization. Finally, we discuss the contributions and limitations of this research.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Theories of Taste

Taste has been frequently theorized as a mechanism through which individuals judge, classify, and relate to objects and acts of consumption (Bourdieu 1984). Accordingly, taste is often operationalized as a set of embodied preferences that hinge on cultural capital—that is, class-bound resources such as education or long-term familiarity with artistic and aesthetic objects (see Holt 1998 for an overview). In this

view, taste serves as a system of classification that perpetuates symbolic hierarchies through embodied action (DiMaggio 1987). Similarly, within material culture studies, taste is construed as a set of skills that emerge from the relationship between people and things (Miller 2001, 2008). These skills are learned, rehearsed, and continually reproduced through everyday action (Miller 2010).

Central to literature in consumer research and to sociological accounts of taste is a Bourdieuian formulation of class-conditioned habitus. In Bourdieu's terms, "habitus" is seen to structure the embodied attitudes, preferences, and habits that naturalize systems of distinction through everyday practice (Bourdieu 1990). Habitus corresponds with strict social class hierarchies, because it inscribes "schemes of perception, thought and action, [which] tend to guarantee the 'correctness' of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms" (Bourdieu 1990, 54). Thus, taste is seen as a resource for, and a means of, making social distinction through everyday practice.

Critiques of Bourdieuian explanations of taste argue that a rigid conceptualization of social hierarchy overplays the hegemony of a dominant culture and neglects nuanced systems of social distinctions (Erickson 1996; Hall 1992; Lamont and Lareau 1988). Furthermore, recent research theorizes people as cultural omnivores who consume a mix of products and services across categories of high, middle, and low (Johnston and Baumann 2007, 2009; Peterson and Kern 1996). In the postmodern condition, the consumer is imagined as a liberated subject with agency (Firat and Venkatesh 1995) who assembles choices from marketplace resources through a process of bricolage (Featherstone 1991). As a result of the split between the structuralist assumption that taste functions only as a mechanism for perpetuating strict class boundaries and a postmodern mode that, in our view, overemphasizes the idiosyncrasies arising from unique consumer identity projects, little attention has been paid to how individuals convert taste into practice. We argue that taste, as well as the practical knowledge and action through which it is performed (Bourdieu 1984, 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), is neither purely agentic nor completely unconscious and conditioned but rather is a form of reflexivity bounded by socio-culturally constituted practice. Thus, we suggest that consumer research adopt a view of taste that highlights these reflexive object-person relations, and inquires about doing taste. Following Shove (2003), we question the idea of taste as a static state of affairs and ask instead how taste is continually achieved.

A practice-based theorization of taste treats it as "reflexive work performed on one's own attachments" (Hennion 2007, 98) and uncovers the practical knowledge that regulates this work. The practice theoretical approach has been developed by sociologists interested in consumption (Halkier, Katz-Gerro, and Martens 2011; Ilmonen 2004; Shove 2009; Warde 2005) and is typically invoked to understand unsustainable consumption patterns (Hargreaves 2011; Shove 2003) and marketplace transformations (Magaudda 2011; Quitzau and Røpke 2009; Truninger 2011). Other than a few exceptions

(Guggenheim 2011; Hennion 2004, 2007), the consideration of taste as a practice, rather than as a static property or mechanism of distinction, seems to be absent from this dialogue. Connecting taste and practice theory could help researchers understand how taste, and its generative social structure, enters into daily life and creates meaning.

Practice Theory and Consumer Research

The term "practice" has been used in two senses in consumer research. Numerous studies such as Arsel and Thompson (2011), Denegri-Knott and Molesworth (2010a), Humphreys (2010), and Sandikci and Ger (2010) use practice as a cover term for actions undertaken by individuals. In contrast to this use, which refers to a generally accepted convention or management strategy, scholars of practice theory argue that consumption should be understood through an analysis of the ongoing routines, engagements, and performances that constitute social life. According to Reckwitz (2002, 250), practice is "a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described, and the world is understood" that involves "bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge" (202). A practice theoretical approach thus aims to theorize consumers as neither purely instrumentalist and rational (*homo economicus*) nor purely structure dependent and unconscious (*homo sociologicus*) but rather as agents bounded by socioculturally constituted nexuses.

Practice is understood as an interaction between ideas, ways of doing, and the material (Shove and Pantzar 2005), a triad that has elsewhere been described as an inseparable relationship between materials, meanings, and forms of competence (Shove et al. 2007; Watson and Shove 2008); objects, doings, and meanings (Magaudda 2011); understandings, procedures, and engagements (Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009; Warde 2005); or image, skills, and stuff (Scott, Bakker, and Quist, forthcoming). Our theoretical orientation follows one variation of this tripartite typology. We have chosen to use Magaudda's (2011) terminology of objects, doings, and meanings because it allows for a clear distinction between the three categories with respect to concepts familiar to the academic discourse on consumption. Furthermore, Magaudda proposes the model of the circuit of practice, a mediated relationship between objects, doings, and meanings. Through an analysis of the putative dematerialization of music that followed the diffusion of the mp3 file format, he demonstrates how marketplace shifts dynamically reconfigure relationships between the three components of practice. For example, he shows how transformations in the meanings of music and the doings related to listening to music result in a new valorization of the vinyl record, the very object supposedly rendered obsolete (Magaudda 2011). Accordingly, the practice of listening to music remains intact but with a different configuration of objects, doings, and meanings. This circuit analogy forms the basis of our theorization in this article. However, we build on the circuit model to further refine the conceptualization of the linkages between objects, doings, and meanings.

The second element in our theoretical framework relates to the binding together of practices. While agglomerations of practice are difficult to separate, practices can be broadly distinguished by considering use and effect. For example, in their work on brand communities, Schau et al. (2009) theorize how community practices create value. In our interpretation, the practices they describe are what Schatzki (1996) refers to as dispersed practices, that is, activities that are abstracted from specific acts of consumption and could apply to other contexts. Therefore, personalization, classifying, welcoming, and customizing are dispersed practices that could relate to many aspects of consumption aside from brand communities. Holt's (1995) approach to practices in categorizing consumption uses a similar approach to practice and discusses acts such as accounting, assimilating, evaluating, and appreciating.

What is missing from the picture is a theory of integrative practices, which are defined by Schatzki as the comparatively "complex practices found in and constitutive of particular domains of social life" (1996, 98). These practices, such as farming, cooking, or doing business, require not only an understanding of how to do something but also a knowledge of the contexts in which the practice is embedded (Warde 2005). According to Schatzki, what sets integrative practices apart from the dispersed practices is the presence of a *teleoaffective structure*—a set of acceptable ends, orders, uses, and emotions—that governs the practice and embeds it into a context (1996, 2002). In other words, an integrative practice includes a specific "order of life conditions" pursued by its participants (1996, 124). In our interpretation, in Schau et al.'s (2009) work, the integrative practice is the performance of brand community, and the teleoaffective structure is the brand specific values, meanings, and myths that the participants experience, enact, and cocreate. Thus, acts of evaluating or appreciating within the brand community are not dispersed into undifferentiated settings but rather are constrained by the brand community and conform to community-specific rules and understandings. In our case, the teleoaffective structure is the Apartment Therapy (AT) taste regime and the particular configuration of objects, doings, and meanings corresponding to this regime. Through conceptualizing the taste regime as a teleoaffective structure, our theory explicates how dispersed practices are incorporated into integrative practices.

Discursive Regimes Orchestrate Practice

Practices are often abstracted as nexuses or as bundles that are interconnected with other adjacent and parallel practices, but current theories of consumption do not account for how a specific set of objects, doings, and meanings is bounded and differentiated from others (Shove 2009). For example, our context—domestic consumption—consists of a complex system of objects, doings, and meanings with many different configurations. A specific constellation of practices is achieved not only through distinct acts such as purchasing

a bed or running the dishwasher but also by the general way in which objects, doings, and meanings are orchestrated and arrayed into a recognizable, repeatable pattern. We suggest that the workings of a practice nexus need to be better theorized to explain how an individual negotiates the connections between the vast set of marketplace offerings to weave a coherent and precisely bounded set of experiences and enactments. In other words, in the context of home, how does one pick a certain item, say, a teak chandelier, over another, such as a macramé basket? How do people translate desired states of material order such as having spotlessly clean and clear kitchen counters into routines that achieve these states? How do such material conditions become associated with subjective meanings such as simplicity and calmness? What is the operating mechanism that binds and constrains a practice while differentiating it from, or connecting it to, others?

In the context of aesthetic consumption, these questions can be answered by viewing taste as a practice regulated by discursive regimes. A significant body of consumer culture research has already investigated how discursive systems normatively shape consumption (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Research on marketplace discourses has predominantly focused on consumer identity construction (Ahuvia 2005; Dong and Tian 2009; Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010), but this is not the exclusive application. For example, discourses are also seen to bind the cultural understanding of health risks and illness (Thompson 2005; Wong and King 2008) and ways of coping with limited access to consumer goods (Crockett and Wallendorf 2004). Other researchers have shown how changes in discourses have caused institutional and marketplace level shifts in the perception of practices such as file sharing (Giesler 2008) and gambling (Humphreys 2010). Our conceptualization of taste as a regime is parallel to consumer research that has investigated similar practices of normalization of the values around aesthetic practice. For example, prior research has looked at the discursive establishment of practices relating to fashion (Thompson and Haytko 1997), technology (Kozinets 2008), and food (Johnston and Baumann 2009). Along the same lines, we argue that practices of taste are circumscribed and perpetuated through socio-historically contextualized discursive systems. We call this complex discursive system a taste regime, following Hand and Shove's (2004) analysis of shifts in kitchen forms and activities represented in British home magazines over time. Accordingly, a taste regime can regulate a multitude of social spaces ranging from a very narrow taste domain, such as subcultures of vintage car enthusiasts (Leigh, Peters, and Shelton 2006) or Harley-Davidson riders (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), to communities centered on brands (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001), to broader lifestyle-level clustering such as urbanite Muslim women in Turkey (Sandikci and Ger 2010).

A taste regime regulates acts of consumption by providing the teleoaffective structure of a practice that orders objects, meanings, and doings. Our position is akin to Üstüner and Holt's (2010) description of upper middle-class Turkish women who use the Western lifestyle myth to script status consumption strategies. 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. Unlike Üstüner and Holt, our focus is not on the role of taste as distinction but rather on the question of how patterns of taste are transformed into practices. Thus, the practice of taste as experiential action is guided not only by social class but also by people's reflexive engagement with the socio-cultural regimes embedded in these class structures.

Taste regimes orchestrate visual and material order in many aesthetic domains of consumption, including cooking and eating, fashion, travel, and home decoration. A regime offers shared meaning and values that allow individuals to produce and reproduce material representations of a given arrangement of objects, doings, and meanings with a high degree of fidelity. This is achieved through the acquisition and production of meaning through mediated or face-to-face exchanges, the performance of doings, and the embedding of objects in practice. The regime shapes one's ability to evaluate, choose, arrange, and use objects in space, and the specific ways objects are used in everyday life. Thus, a central role of the taste regime is the way it permeates everyday practical knowledge, in the form of doing, knowing, and relating to objects. Through our empirical analysis, we find that this practical knowledge is established through three dispersed practices: problematization, ritualization, and instrumentalization. We then show that these dispersed practices come together in the larger integrative practice of domestic consumption by continually connecting objects, doings, and meanings, the three components of Magaudda's (2011) circuit of practice model introduced above. But first, we discuss our context, a socio-historically constituted regime of taste that regulates the practices involved in making and keeping a home.

APARTMENT THERAPY AS AN EXPRESSION OF SOFT MODERNISM

A calm, healthy, beautiful home is a necessary foundation for happiness and success in the world. Creating this home does not require large amounts of money or space. It requires inspiration, connection to resources, and motivation to do something about it. The basic elements of good home design can be learned and achieved by all. (Apartment Therapy, "What We Believe")

Our research context is Apartment Therapy, a media brand and blog centered on home design and domestic consumption, which offers posts on "stuff to buy, from Craigslist to Design Within Reach, as well as opinions and advice for the apartment dweller" (Green 2004). AT, as its readers refer to it, started in 2004 as an online extension of an interior design service of the same name based in New York City. The blog quickly gained a cult following attributable to

coverage in popular media including the *New York Times*, *Home and Garden TV*, and *Oprah*. By 2011, the AT site registered more than 7 million unique views per month (Mariaux 2011), a figure that eclipsed the annual audited print circulation of magazines such as *Martha Stewart Living* (1,894,134), *Sunset* (1,448,044), and *Good Housekeeping* (4,668,818; ULRICHSWEB 2010). Despite the name, the website is also addressed to people who live in houses. Care is taken to present the problem of space constraints as an issue relevant to the urban, suburban, or rural dweller. Thus, the image of the tiny New York City apartment does not reflect a single target segment. Rather, it is used to add credibility to the brand and to nod to its origins.

AT's content is focused on aligning home interiors with an aesthetic of soft modernism. Whereas AT as a website is a relatively new phenomenon, the taste regime it articulates relates to a wider network of media and other cultural forms, which emerge from a neoliberal identity project of domestic taste education (Rosenberg 2011). But whereas Rosenberg stresses the role of resale value over the expressive potential of home improvement among working class Australians, the upper middle-class Americans participating in the AT phenomenon appear to have different motivations. In total, 61% of the visitors to AT's sites have an annual household income exceeding $60,000 and 35% have an income over $100,000; 74% have at least a college degree, and, despite the site's name, 50% own their own home (Apartment Therapy 2011a). Thus, it is not surprising that these readers engage with their homes in a way that prioritizes self-exploration and inspiration over the economic value of necessity (Bourdieu 1984). In many ways, the core AT audience exhibits the sensibilities of those groups labeled as the bourgeois bohemian (Brooks 2000), the cultural creatives (Ray and Anderson 2000), or the creative class (Florida 2002): medium to high cultural capital individuals with economic privilege, interest in self-expression, social change, and experiential activities—the same category involved in the middle class repopulation of American center cities (Hymowitz 2008). AT's core narrative is further amplified by two broader cultural forces: the emergence of craft consumption (Campbell 2005) and the reemergence of soft modernism (Gebhard 1995; Rosenberg 2011). We argue that AT has crystallized this specific intersection of socio-cultural forces into a market mediated discursive regime of taste, thus serving as a central marketplace resource for this upper-middle-class group. In the following sections, we briefly trace the socio-cultural conditions that led to the rise of AT.

Historicizing Apartment Therapy and Soft Modernism

Soft modernism emerged as a popular alternative to the high-brow preference for avant-garde architecture in the postwar period (Gebhard 1992). It blended ideas from high modernism, such as the honesty of materials and the relationship between form and function, with a popular taste for neutral colors and the restrained use of signs of comfort, such as pillows

and crafts. This amalgam continues to influence home design. Rosenberg (2011) argues that the prevailing preference for soft modernism serves both symbolic and financial purposes. The stylistic rules of soft modernism—such as a preference for neutral colors—allow one to show consideration for the taste of others while simultaneously reducing the amount of choice offered by the market to a more manageable set. Furthermore, this narrow set of choices offers the possibility for profit, because a house that is considered up-to-date but not too personal has higher market value (Rosenberg 2011).

Popular media have long been instrumental in disseminating ideas about soft modernism across the marketplace. The work of soft modernist architects was featured in widely read magazines such as *Household* and *Sunset* from the forties through the sixties (Bean 2008). From the seventies on, an eclectic approach influenced home design in North America (Harris and Dostrovsky 2008), but by 2000, a preference for high modernism was once again apparent (Leslie and Reimer 2003). Midcentury furniture became highly sought-after and accordingly valued among collectors (Wolf 2004), as evidenced by the popularity of the sets of the American television show *Mad Men* and the styles and names of furniture sold by mass-market retailers such as West Elm and CB2. In response, a range of shelter magazines such as *Real Simple*, *Dwell*, *Sunset*, and *Domino* firmly aligned their content with the in-betweenness of soft modernism. *Domino* intermingled modern furniture with textured fabrics and rustic props (Gothie 2009). *Dwell* aligned high modernism with green living for hip gen-Xers (Sullivan 2007, 74). *Real Simple* commodified soft modernism by fashioning a "sparse aesthetic of muted colors . . . to create appropriate moods and labor-saving ease," and by defining comfort as achieved "through cleansing and nurturing the body as well as the spirit" (Wajda 2001, 78). In a somewhat orthogonal taste regime, Martha Stewart's media empire featured complicated craft, unattainable domestic ideals (Leavitt 2002), and a georgic lifestyle of improbable labor (Bell and Hollows 2005). Whereas *Martha Stewart Living* was like a fairy tale of domestic impossibility (Gachot 1999), its more austere spinoff *Blueprint*, along with *Dwell*, *Domino*, and *Real Simple*, gave instructions for a putatively more efficient, modernist, and tidy everyday life. As advertising budgets shifted to online media (Steinberg 2004) and the housing crash decimated the market for shelter magazines, AT emerged as the online center for soft modernism.

The Rise of Apartment Therapy

AT's ascendance corresponded with the decline of the magazine industry. With frequent updates and infinite room for content, online media gradually displaced monthly magazines (Kurutz 2011). Some blamed the emergence of home design blogs as the main cause of the demise of the well-loved magazines *Blueprint* and *Domino* (Green 2004). From this tumult, AT expanded from a single authored blog to become a brand centered on domestic consumption. A series of books further established and extended the brand. First was the self-help book *Apartment Therapy: The Eight-Step*

Home Cure (Gillingham-Ryan 2006). Patterned after Andrew Weil's bestselling *Eight Weeks to Optimum Health*, inspired by Rudolf Steiner's philosophy of anthroposophy, and drawing on its author's experience as a Waldorf teacher, this book provided an instruction manual for the "Cure," a core AT ritual that we discuss in detail below. Next were two coffee table books, both based on photographs of homes drawn from the AT site that exemplified soft modernism: *Apartment Therapy Presents: Real Homes, Real People, Hundreds of Design Solutions* (Gillingham-Ryan, Slater, and Laban 2008), and *Apartment Therapy's Big Book of Small, Cool Spaces* (Gillingham-Ryan 2010).

Within a few years of its founding, AT had established regional subsites, as well as subsites on cooking, parenting, domestic technology, and green living. Approximately 40 bloggers were employed to generate an enormous amount of content for all the sites (Apartment Therapy 2011b). As of August 2011, about 60,000 individual posts consisting of over 145 million words had appeared on AT's main site alone. AT has quickly become a legitimating nexus that exerts considerable influence over an influential group of middle class consumers. AT is now the 749th most popular website of all those accessed in the United States (Alexa 2012). The website is listed in *TIME* magazine's favorite blogs collection (2010), and, as frequent mentions in the major media suggest, it is often invoked as an authoritative source of domestic advice on everything from paint colors to mattress brands. In sum, AT has become a central orchestrating force in a popular taste regime that influences domestic consumption.

METHODOLOGY

To understand how the Apartment Therapy narrative articulates a taste regime, we used a multimethod approach incorporating quantitative and qualitative analysis, long interviews, and extended participant observation.

Quantitative Content Analysis

The data for our quantitative analysis are drawn from the text- and image-based Apartment Therapy blog. While qualitative analysis constituted our predominant mode of theory building, we used quantitative techniques to refine our theory. To do this, we extracted the textual content of all AT posts from January 2004 to August 2011. This formed a database consisting of over 145 million words. Then, we tagged each word with part-of-speech information (i.e., whether the word is a noun, verb, adjective, etc.) using the Stanford Part-of-Speech Tagger (Toutanova et al. 2003). The total number of unique words in the corpus was 65,530. We then computed word frequencies in the corpus. Taking the 500 most frequently used words, both authors coded each word as an object (including living things), doing, or meaning, paying attention to the tagged part-of-speech. For example, when tagged as a verb, "store" was coded as a doing, but when tagged as a noun it was coded as an object. The first round inter-coder agreements were 68.6% (objects), 72% (doings), and 40.8% (meanings). As expected, mean-ings were hardest to code because of their subjective nature. The authors then asked a third person to code the data for comparison and discussed all disagreements in coding to reach to a consensus, concurrently revising theory and coding criteria. The results of this analysis enabled us to catalog the configuration of objects, doings, and meanings that the AT regime regulates and helped solidify our theoretical framework by demonstrating that the three components of practice are strongly present throughout the AT narrative. Iterative searches of the coded terms in the blog archives also aided our qualitative findings by helping us to identify related posts and themes. Word counts from our analysis are noted in the text where relevant.

Qualitative Narrative Analysis

The enormous amount of content posed a challenge for qualitative analysis. To maintain an enduring familiarity with the text, both authors subscribed to the blog's RSS feed, which we read daily during the process of writing and editing this article. We also analyzed three subsamples of blog data in depth. First, between February and June 2010, while we conducted our initial data analysis, we openly coded 144 posts that overtly discussed taste. Second, we reviewed 1,366 posts published in each first full week of May from AT's beginning in 2004 through 2010 to ensure representative data. Third, as a supplement to the first AT book on the Cure, we took 32 posts categorized by AT bloggers as related to the spring 2008 group cure; we chose 2008 because the quantity of AT posts peaked at 15,427 that year. In these subsamples, we used both posts written by AT bloggers and comments written by community members as data. Our interpretation was also framed by the three AT books. Both researchers coded the data until they reached theoretical saturation, with daily exposure to the blog and iterative searches of the entire 58,274 post database serving to verify and test emergent findings.

Interviews

Next, we conducted 12 unstructured long interviews (McCracken 1988) with reader-participants of the blog to better understand how they relate to the regime and practice it in everyday life. The interviewees ranged in age from 25 to 37. One interview was conducted with a couple. We sought variation across the informants in terms of their involvement with the blog. Accordingly, five were regular readers of the website, four lived in homes selected by AT editors for inclusion in the popular *House Tour* post series, and two were entrants to the annual *Smallest Coolest Home* contest. Finally, we interviewed one paid contributor to the site.

Our interviews started with a general overview of participants' backgrounds and lifestyles and then moved to more specific questions about their home as they emerged through a phenomenological dialogue (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). To provide a context to the interview, we started with open-ended questions about the participants' selection and arrangement of objects in their homes and everyday prac-

tices and allowed the course of the interview to be largely set by the participant. In six interviews that took place in participants' homes, we also included commented observations (Emontspool 2012) in which participants gave the interviewer a tour of their home, describing object biographies along the way (Epp and Price 2010; Hoskins 1998; Kopytoff 1986). In other interviews we asked our participants to narrate an imaginary walkthrough of their homes, describing objects that they would see along the way. We also asked about how participants use Apartment Therapy and other design media. In total, 15 hours of interviews were transcribed.

Participant Observation

Finally, we used participant observation and introspection (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993). Both authors have been regular readers of the blog since 2005. Performing the Cure allowed us to subjectively experience activities endorsed by AT, such as buying flowers every week and using an "Outbox" (a box for the trial separation of possibly unwanted possessions). This led us to better understand how the value system of this taste regime becomes internalized and naturalized through ritualization. Insight into AT also came from one author's (Bean's) involvement as a paid contributor to an AT subsite during 2007 and 2008.

FINDINGS

Taste Regimes Orchestrate Practice

> Our own "personal styles" are created and developed through exposure to, and absorption of, what we see around us every day. I have seen beautiful homes that incorporate the Keep Calm sign, typography posters, IKEA cube shelves, Eames chairs, and any other number of items that have been repeated over and over within spaces featured on this site. Hopefully people will take what they glean from a wonderful repository like AT and find a way to make it theirs. ("Are Vintage Transit Scrolls the New 'Keep Calm'?" May 5, 2010, comment by inkybrushes)

AT's repository of ideas allows people to navigate through a nexus of objects, doings, and meanings and replicate a mode of practice by turning textual and visual representations into practical knowledge. To better understand how this happens, we borrow from Magaudda's (2011) circuit of practice as described above. By using this analytical framework, we show how objects, doings, and meanings are constantly linked to each other through the circuit of practice. In the next paragraphs, we will show a small excerpt from the AT site regarding a dressing table. We discuss how this table enters into a circuit through deliberations on its qualities as a material object, its role in the performance of doings, and its ability to acquire and transmit meanings. Following this example, we will describe three dispersed practices through which the circuit operates to build these connections and form a larger integrative practice.

In a post titled "Scavenger Success Story: Dressing Table Finds a Home" (20 July 2009), AT informs its readers that a dressing table, which once before appeared in a "Scavenger" post, has since found a home in the bedroom of "longtime Apartment Therapy reader" Mindy, who explained:

> The dressing table was a great find! Jennifer, the lady who listed the table, is trying to start her own refinishing/furniture business. I was lucky enough to get a sneak peek into her woodshop where she was in the middle of refinishing some other fantastic finds. I am planning to recover the blue vinyl stool in a hot pink vinyl: DesignTex, Annex in Cerise. I did some research online to find out more about the California furniture manufacturer, Brown Saltman. I believe the dressing table is from the mid-fifties, but I was unable to locate any pieces like this one. Brown Saltman worked with several designers including Paul Frankl, John Keal, and Greta Grossman. I'd be eager to find out more.

Objects. This object, a dressing table, exists in a network of materiality (Borgerson 2005; Miller 2005) that helps constitute the practice of domestic consumption. The network includes the shop where the dressing table was found, the original blue vinyl, the name-brand hot pink vinyl Mindy chose for new upholstery, Mindy's apartment, and her other possessions. Yet, by themselves, these objects do not perform taste. To understand how Mindy's use of objects constitutes taste, we need to look at the network of other material objects relevant to Mindy, what Mindy and others do to these objects, and the associated meanings (Miller 2008, 2010; Shove and Pantzar 2005). This complex performance of taste is orchestrated by the taste regime.

Doings. Doings are bodily activities or embodied competences and activities (Magaudda 2011; Shove and Pantzar 2005) that individuals perform with objects. The first doing in this example is the table's "discovery," a doing first performed by Jennifer and then reperformed and amplified by Mindy. Finding or discovering undervalued objects is highly valued in the AT regime; our quantitative analysis shows the word "find" to be the tenth most frequently used verb in the blog text. Discovering is reinforced by AT itself, which features frequent "scavenger" or "find" posts. Knowing which table—with the right lines, color, and provenance—will be suitable for AT is an embodied and tacit doing. Mindy further engages with this object by conducting research into the manufacturer of the table, which allows her to perform another act of finding: uncovering the name of three obscure furniture designers that help her to better relate to this object. Mindy's ability to reorder the material through doing is also highlighted: she is planning to reupholster the piece. Thus, the table becomes situated in a practice through the performance of a series of doings that help it to be reincorporated into Mindy's life (Epp and Price 2010) and imbue it with appropriate meanings.

Meanings. Furthermore, Mindy's table is situated in a network of meanings that represent the core values of the AT taste regime. The content of this post is typical of AT; "great," "modern," "design," and "color" are four of the top words coded as meanings that came up in our quantitative

TABLE 1

OBJECTS, DOINGS, AND MEANINGS MOST FREQUENTLY MEDIATED
BY THE APARTMENT THERAPY REGIME

Objects	Frequency	Doings	Frequency	Meanings	Frequency
room	103,147	have	524,842	love	114,685
space	75,265	get	155,393	color	91,317
wall	74,090	look	135,644	home	88,782
house	60,830	make	133,233	great	77,600
people	53,417	think	127,061	good	75,153
kitchen	49,028	go	105,532	want	69,281
table	46,868	use	103,892	place	59,869
chair	46,373	see	103,746	like	55,979
apartment	46,124	work	79,147	need	51,426
bed	41,963	find	77,384	new	50,452
piece	38,425	take	59,909	idea	48,494
floor	37,004	live	55,854	design	44,483
furniture	36,794	say	52,940	little	43,536
window	30,933	come	50,441	small	43,519
door	29,952	buy	49,516	nice	41,570
bedroom	28,977	put	46,063	beautiful	32,090
bathroom	28,487	keep	43,374	old	30,005
book	28,344	try	39,519	best	27,812
stuff	27,798	give	37,979	style	26,333
picture	26,985	feel	37,176	art	26,048
paint (noun)	26,649	paint (verb)	33,591	big	25,766
wood	26,422	move	32,744	pretty	24,729
area	25,861	look	27,024	light	21,356
rug	23,986	add	25,964	problem	20,916
friend	22,756	help	24,527	cool	20,813
fabric	21,527	leave	23,868	different	20,654
sofa	21,484	check	22,514	green	19,727
glass	19,193	start	22,269	modern	18,300
lamp	18,855	hang	22,059	fun	17,017
tile	18,163	read	20,534	favorite	16,411
cat	18,144	include	18,843	lovely	15,792
shelf	17,792	create	18,440	clean	15,762
box	17,641	show	17,646	amazing	14,365
water	17,568	sell	16,601	perfect	14,344
house	17,034	dining	15,918	easy	13,033
curtain	15,803	project	15,388	dark	12,894
ceiling	15,344	bring	15,048	happy	12,764
couch	15,039	sit	14,549	simple	12,427
pillow	14,414	consider	14,359	interesting	12,421
plant	14,156	ask	14,236	gorgeous	11,664

analysis. Earlier when Mindy and her spouse entered the *Smallest Coolest Apartments* contest, they had explained that their "approach combines simple clean lines with classic midcentury modern pieces," and that "as obsessive organizers, [we] have achieved [our] aesthetic by eliminating unsightly clutter" ("Mindy & Michael's Small Cool 2007 Entry," April 12, 2007). Mindy's statement aligns perfectly with AT's soft modernist values. She plans to perform further doings on this object, such as changing the problematic upholstery, to align it better with AT's dominant aesthetic, thus enrolling the object into the circuit of practice that we elaborate in the next section.

While AT orchestrates relations with objects across the spectrum of domestic life—from minutiae such as keys (which blog readers are encouraged to wash) to walls (which book readers are asked to meditatively touch before choosing a paint color, so that they connect with the space and

get a feeling of it)—the example we presented here involves a representative, but very small part of the AT narrative. To draw a more complete picture of the objects, doings, and meanings associated with AT, we also performed a quantitative analysis of AT blog posts as described above. In table 1, we show how the words in these three groups of core elements—objects such as chairs, beds, and books, doings such as to make or to paint, and meanings such as love, modern, and clean—constitute the practice of domestic consumption framed by AT. "Love," used 114,685 times in the blog, is the most frequently invoked meaning in the regime and represents the desire (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003) felt for objects that make a home. In our interview, Chantal further expresses how she desired objects that differentiated her home from ordinary spaces and created the right alignment with soft modernist meanings:

Interviewer: Do you remember the time when you went to bed and you just felt that you were at home?

Chantal: Yeah, that's a good question. When I got this table and this light. When I put in lighting fixtures. Cause it used to be, like, just hanging bulbs. And you feel, like, you're in a waiting room or a shop or something. And I've been wanting this [Saarinen] table since I was a teenager also. You know—you cut out pictures . . . My dad is an architect so we had all those *Design* and *Architectural Digests*. And I would cut out from his old magazine and scrapbook what my home would be like. Some girls dream about getting married. I dreamt about a table.

Other top meanings that came out from our quantitative analysis are abstract concepts such as "color" (91,317 occurrences), "home" (88,782 occurrences), and "great" (77,600 occurrences). While these meanings are quite abstract by themselves, they take on specificity through deliberation within the regime's narrative and, more importantly, their relation to contextual meanings such as "small" (43,519 occurrences), "light" (21, 356 occurrences), and "modern" (18,300 occurrences). Furthermore, these meanings are repeatedly and continuously aligned with specific objects and doings. This repetition and the consequent consistency allows participants in the AT taste regime to achieve states of materiality, such as light colors and modern furniture placed in small, sparsely decorated living rooms, that strongly relate to shared meanings.

As such, AT articulates a taste regime that patterns a way of relating objects, doings, and meanings. This pattern renders the world of marketplace offerings navigable. Steered by the AT taste regime, individuals choose similar objects to which they perform similar doings in order to achieve similar meanings. This convergence is readily transparent to our interview participants, many of whom joke about the similarity of preferences across the AT community. For example, Barb, a paid blogger, indexes her preferences and the meanings within her home against those of her friends, the AT community, and the marketplace at large. She acknowledges the symbolic boundaries between the AT taste regime and others: "It's like my Eames chair: here I am thinking that it's kind of cool and special, and it probably is within my group of friends; but within the AT community, my house is probably a huge cliché."

Yet AT's repository of ideas is more than a resource for mimicry or a case of trickle-down taste because AT helps its readers learn what to do with objects and how to generate meaning through them. Participating in AT allows one to gain access to a virtual manual that circumscribes the boundaries of practice by defining the what (objects), the how (doings), and the why (meanings) of domestic consumption. But how are these three components held together in a consistent and coherent fashion? How do participants replicate taste through practice and navigate through an infinite set of marketplace offerings? In the next section, we elaborate on this question. We show how the AT taste regime operates as a teleoaffective structure to steer the three dispersed practices that continuously orchestrate objects, doings, and meanings. These three dispersed practices are problematization, ritualization, and instrumentalization.

Problematization

We are obsessed with dishwashing soap solutions. Saw this at a friend's house and went right home to make one ourselves. On his kitchen sink, there was a vintage style Geyer Freres 1895 bottle with a cork pourer stuck in it. Inside was a mixture of dish soap and water. When you needed some soapy water, all you did was turn it over and pour. As much as we try to keep our sink minimal, this was very practical and had a rough and ready, old-salt type of cool to it. The bottles are the key. They are thick and a little imperfect. (From "Best Product: Lorina Bottles + Cork Pourer," May 10, 2006)

A taste regime problematizes objects by continually questioning how they align with the regime's core meanings. Here we define problematization in the same way that Thompson and Hirschman (1995) use the term: to indicate how deviations from normative and cultural standards, such as physical appearance or gendered behavior, become coded as problematic. In the context of taste, this could be judging the appropriateness of garden gnomes (Bourdieu 1984) or the combination of plasma TV and antique furniture (Üstüner and Holt 2010). In our database, the term "problem" comes up 20,916 times in the text of posts with titles such as "On the Problem with Duvet Covers" (March 9, 2011), or "Design Suggestions for Bedroom with Red Carpet?" (July 8, 2010). Specific posting categories labeled as "Good Questions" and "Problem Solver" are devoted to the process of problematization. The most quotidian of practices are fair game for scrutiny, such as what to do with magazines once you've finished reading them ("How Do You Control Magazine Clutter?" October 29, 2007), or which appliances and kitchenware to keep on display ("What Do You Display on Your Kitchen Countertop?" March 1, 2011).

The regime generates problems through making almost every domestic object a potential source of a problem. Serious conversations about seemingly mundane things unfold on AT—not only dish soap, but also the use of decorative pillows ("Pillows on the Bed: How Many Are Too Many," February 26, 2009) and the ideal ratio of couch to rug size ("How Big Should a Rug Be?" August 28, 2008; "Good Questions: New Carpet Too Small or Just Right?" May 28, 2009). In addition to specific and literal domestic problems about objects, the taste regime can also work at an abstract level to problematize the material organization of the home. Clutter is a frequent target ("7 Signs You Are Turning into a Hoarder," December 15, 2009). While McCracken claims disorder, enclosure, and a certain degree of clutter are the epitome of homeyness (1989), posts on AT usually frame clutter as a problem that urgently needs solving. One recurring theme is the perceived disorder of packed bookshelves and their lack of alignment with simplicity—a meaning that was articulated 12,427 times on the blog. Our

interviewee Mia echoes a similar sentiment. Her use of AT is not just for normative advice on how to best decorate her home but also to find ways to achieve further simplicity. She perceives her home as a balance to the emotional landscape she experiences: her nomadic status and her chaotic mind require a simple yet balanced arrangement of stuff, an analog to soft modernism:

> I've moved around so much in my life; I've been quite nomadic. And clutter or things make me nervous. If I need to move, I want to be able to do it with as much like ease as possible, without much fuss. My mind, as it is, is cluttered enough and crazy enough that I want my surroundings to be as empty as possible without looking, you know, ugly. I still want it to look nice.

As Apartment Therapy's "What We Believe" page, quoted above, makes clear, the practice of problematization requires participants to exercise focused intention on the making of home. This process is further buttressed through the depiction of domestic transformation throughout the AT narrative as an attainable fantasy (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2010b). With posts classified as "Look!," "Before and After," "Roundup," and "Inspiration," AT provides a resource library or idea book to normalize specific looks and meanings. Looking for ideas for self-diagnosed problems is also a point of entry for some into AT, such as one of the authors, who first came across the site while looking for paint colors for an unpleasantly dark living room, or for interviewee Agnes, who found AT while actively seeking ideas for a home renovation.

Ritualization

> After the work day's done, whether we work out of the house or in a corner of the living room, we've developed a little routine that transitions us out of "work head" and into home and relaxation mode. In a few short minutes, we take care of the mundane chores of living and prepare for the next day. We've now got it down to where it's become automatic. Create your own list by riffing off the one we posted: (1) Plug in our cell phone and ear piece, (2) Check landline messages, (3) Briefly check personal email, (4) Retrieve and sort snail mail, (5) Put on music, (6) Change into comfortable clothes, (7) "Swiffer" floors, (8) Start dinner and pour a glass of wine, (9) Relax! ("Winding Down: After Work Rituals," May 3, 2008)

Ritualization is the establishment of an "expressive, symbolic activity constructed of multiple behaviors that occur in a fixed, episodic sequence, and that tend to be repeated over time" (Rook 1985, 252). Rituals influence how individuals acquire objects, what they do with objects, and how objects serve to generate and perpetuate meanings by linking belief systems and observed practices (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). A regime establishes this by prescribing ritualistic sets of doings into objects and by providing scripts that guide how individuals use material objects (Rook 1985).

Repetition of doings through rituals is therapeutic, enhances consciousness of actions, and instills a sense of control (Russell and Levy, forthcoming):

> I like doing it [the Cure] 'cause it gets you a chance to reconnect with the objects you own. And clean out anything that—it's like combing your hair, you know? You feel better after a shower. And you're like "ah, fresh and good." And it gives you goals also to make your house more livable. Those little tiny things that you, like, "oh, I'll do that later! I'll fix that lamp." It gives you a timeline of work to be done, and I like that about it. (Chantal, interview)

In AT, ritual is an explicit part of the Cure. It combines the goal of realizing domestic transformation with the acquisition of new doings and the perpetuation of new habits. The Cure is the focus of the first AT book, *Apartment Therapy: The Eight Step Home Cure*. It describes a ritual process of envisioning, cleaning, reordering, buying, repairing, lighting, creating a sacred space, and celebrating, complete with worksheets and lists of shopping resources. The Cure encompasses all four types of rituals—possession, exchange, grooming, and divestment—that McCracken (1986) identifies. It is structured by weekly assignments and deadlines corresponding to distinct stages of transformation. For example, readers are instructed to buy fresh flowers weekly, so as to nurture and take care of the home and make it a personalized space; advised to touch the walls before painting them to make "intimate contact" with their homes (Gillingham-Ryan 2006, 77); and instructed to throw a housewarming party when their home is cured. All three acts can be classified as possession rituals. Exchange rituals are practiced through constant sharing of the Cure experience online with the community, asking for advice, and setting up expectations on reciprocity much like Weight Watchers or Alcoholics Anonymous (Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010). The Cure itself could also be classified as a grooming ritual that applies to both home, body, and mind: individuals are advised to purchase candles and bath salts and instructed to wake up early and take a bath before work to, in AT's terminology, "clear" the mind and soul. The end goal is not merely a more attractive or tasteful home, but the achievement of meanings through the physical transformation of the home. These desired meanings are described by informants and on the blog as "calm," "mindful," "meditative," or "soothed" as in "House Call: Philip's Calming Proportions" (January 20, 2011). The Cure also deals with divestment rituals, with attention paid to the ridding of clutter, as this is one of the core aesthetic aims. For example, the book advises one to set up an Outbox. Potentially unwanted possessions are put in the Outbox, which is granted symbolic power to turn once singularized objects (Epp and Price 2010) back into commodities: "once an item has sat in the Outbox for some time, it releases its hold over the owner and becomes just an ordinary object that one can easily decide what to do with" (Gillingham-Ryan 2006, 78). The rituals surrounding the use of the Outbox mean that it works as a

transition place (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005) for possessions that are no longer wanted.

Aside from the Cure, ritualization occurs at a microscale in AT every day. For some who read the site daily, such as interviewee Agnes, keeping up with AT is itself a matter of daily routine. For others, such as the blogger who wrote the post that introduces this section, ritualization is an intentional process of linking desirable states and meanings to mundane daily doings. In our quantitative analysis, we found 1,477 posts that discussed habits or habitual behavior, 682 posts that discussed routines, and 320 posts that discussed rituals around home. Our qualitative assessment jibes with this pattern. We have frequently read posts that prescribe normative rituals such as "8 Tricks to Make Making the Bed a Habit" (April 2, 2008) or ones that invite people to share their own domestic routines such as "Kitchen Rituals" (November 17, 2010). Cleaning is a typical target. It is ritualized with a set of instructions, such as to hide the dish detergent when it is not in active use, or to schedule different tasks, such as vacuuming or laundry, on a specific day. For example, one of AT's most popular posts—at the time of this writing it had received 161 comments—prescribes a monthly routine that enables one to keep their home clean and tidy at all times ("How To Clean Your House in 20 Minutes a Day for 30 Days," December 7, 2011). This is not coincidental: the doing of cleaning is frequently depicted as essential to the desired meaning of calm, which is in turn associated with a general lack of clutter and specifically with the sparse aesthetic of soft modernism.

Thinking of habit as structuring practical knowledge has impact across the three-part scheme of objects, meanings, and doings. These doings affect both the meaning of the behavior associated with these tasks and the material traces of evidence associated with their performance, such as the visual and material order of one's home. More importantly, as Ilmonen (2001) argues, a long-term ritualization and routinization shapes practical consciousness (Giddens 1986) that in turn guides ordinary, normalized, and effortless action. Building on the idea that routinized behavior generates practical knowledge (Bourdieu 1984, 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), Ilmonen suggests that the effect of routine is akin to the command the athlete achieves over the body through repeated action. Cleaning, as discussed in the previous paragraph, is one example of this. This practical knowledge influences dominant modes of daily action, such as the habitual attempts to keep surfaces clear that Claire, Chantal, and Mia described in interviews as a result of their engagement with AT.

Instrumentalization

> You know when you spend a lot of time creating a space and really putting thought into it—and you want to have people over to share that space with you. And so it's nice when your friends come over and they like what you've done and they feel welcome and—because what we don't want to have is a museum. You want people to feel like they want to come over. (Robert, interview)

Whereas ritualization incites participants to perform doings on objects, instrumentalization refers to the process of connecting objects and doings to the actualization of meanings. In other contexts, this could be signing up for a support group for dieting with the goal of achieving desired physical and mental states (Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010) or adopting gendered hobbies such as automobile racing to perform masculinity (Holt and Thompson 2004). As one part of the Landing Strip concept shown in figure 1, AT advises installing hooks to hold keys and coats by the door; if they are used, the effect is the creation of a welcoming entrance, an aesthetically pleasing home, and an organized life. The regime offers resources that allow participants to achieve these transformations of meaning and space by framing objects and doings as instruments of change (Molotch 2003). Thus, processes of instrumentalization help meanings to slide between the material world and the immaterial world and the pragmatic and the symbolic (Cranz 2004).

Suggestions for how to use objects or doings to achieve desired meanings make up a significant portion of the site. Approximately one in five of the posts (10,202) in the archive we collected include the words "how to" somewhere in the post or comments, such as "How to Avoid the Catalog Look At Home" (April 16, 2009) or "Good Question: How to Modernize this Dining Set" (September 8, 2006). In the dish soap post, the solution is to repurpose a glass lemonade container so that a commodity can blend into the home environment by being stripped of undesirable signs of commercial production (Coupland 2005; Kopytoff 1986; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). The problem of disorderly bookshelves, as documented by numerous posts on AT, can be resolved by organizing books by color, or by wrapping one's entire book collection in white dust jackets.

Through instrumentalization, materialism and aesthetic consumption are transformed from a problematic obsession or affliction into a deliberate mode of goal fulfillment in the way that an athlete exercises or an artist does studies for a painting. The taste regime normalizes instrumental person-object relationships, by casting objects as actors that mobilize agency over individuals (Latour 2005; Miller 2001) and thus script interactions (Akrich 1992; Fallan 2008). The conscious engagement with objects and spaces and the everyday performance of taste is consistently presented as a way to resolve life problems. For example, the AT book instructs the reader that buying flowers is a nonnegotiable component of the Cure and that flowers are far more than decoration or indulgence. Flowers, the reader learns, set "a standard for attention to detail . . . that enlivens the senses and invigorates our vision" (Gillingham-Ryan 2006, 59).
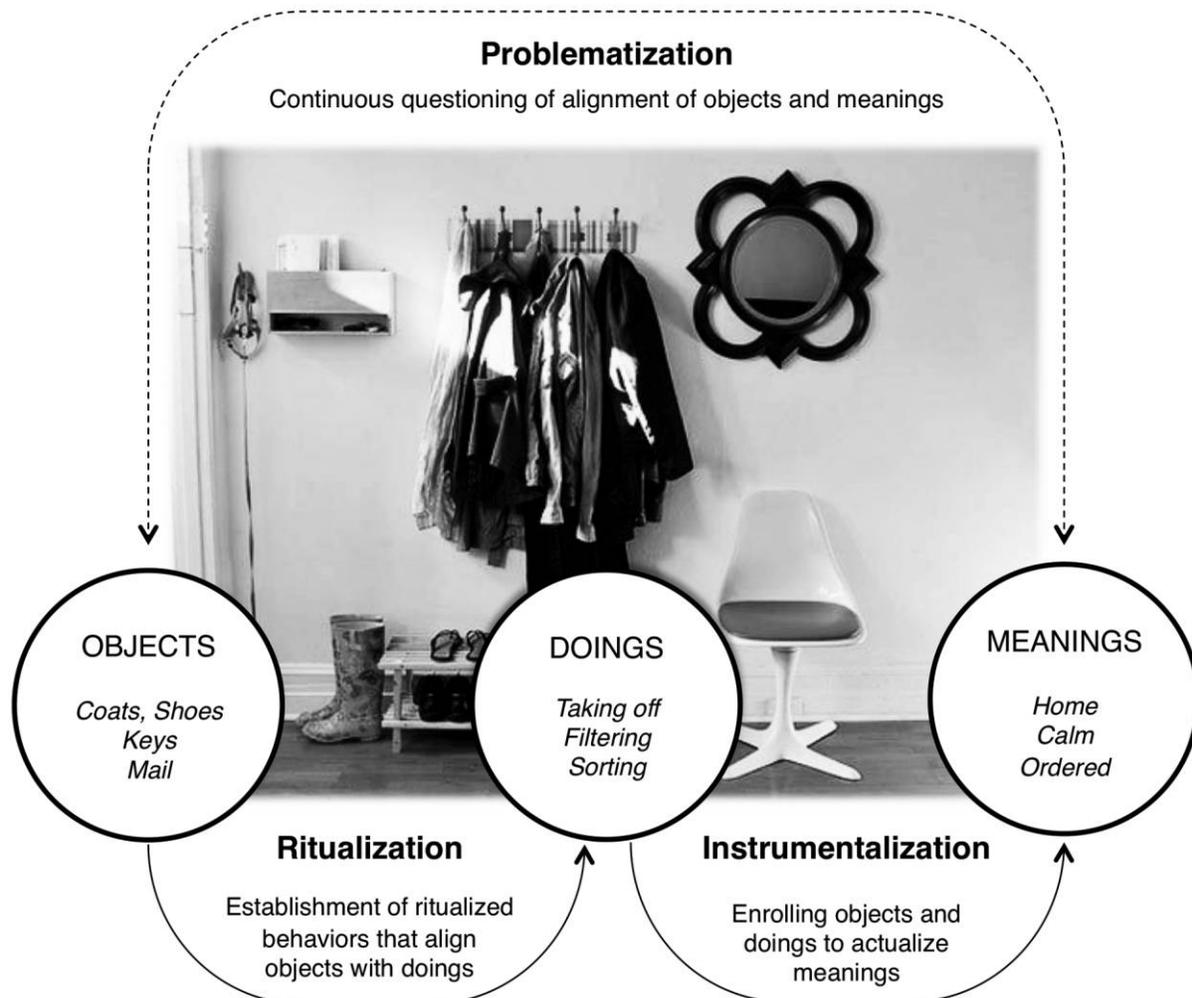
Instrumentalization is continuously reinforced through the AT narrative. For example, to convince the skeptical reader to participate in the Cure, the AT book tells the story of Beth, who transformed her life by changing her apartment. Beth lived in a "white box with beige furniture, light brown wood floors, and not much on the walls." But her apartment "had no heart." Newly in love, Beth undertook a project to inject color throughout her apartment. The result: "the apart-

FIGURE 1

AN ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE OF HOW TASTE REGIMES REGULATE PRACTICE

"I want us all to think about the biggest weapon you can have when fighting for order in your home- The Landing Strip. Part filter, part strategy for entering your home, you can either work toward the three main elements today (coat hook, door mat, Landing Strip) or you can simply establish a Landing Strip routine for the setup that you already have."

– "Day 8: Establish a Landing Strip," November 2, 2011

Problematization

Continuous questioning of alignment of objects and meanings

OBJECTS

*Coats, Shoes
Keys
Mail*

DOINGS

*Taking off
Filtering
Sorting*

MEANINGS

*Home
Calm
Ordered*

Ritualization

Establishment of ritualized behaviors that align objects with doings

Instrumentalization

Enrolling objects and doings to actualize meanings

"Landing strips only work if you train yourself to use them and grow accustomed to setting down parcels right inside the door and making sure your keys come out of your coat pocket and get set aside."

– "Fall Cure: The Landing Strip," October 28, 2009

Image: "The Spring Cure: The Landing Strip," March 29. 2010

"Remember, your home is another form of 'skin' and it is 'you.' Anything you do for your home, you do for yourself… Building a Landing Strip will help you filter the outside word, keeping your home calm and cutting down on your junk mail will give you back years of life."

– "The Fall Cure: Week Three - Weekend," September 30, 2007

ment came to life . . . And that man she was dating? He would eventually become her husband" (Gillingham-Ryan 2006, 32–33). This holistic quest for a better state of existence is similar to Thompson's (2004) study of consumers who have sought physical well-being through transcending the material limitations of medical science. That purification and control of the physical environment can be transformational for the self is a core assumption of AT:

> It's a proven fact that our home plays a significant part in how we feel emotionally. Although if not kept up it can make us physically sick, it can also make you a little down in the dumps . . . [The Cure is] a great reminder that our participation in our own home is mandatory for our own health and sanity as well as the physical appearance of our space when company comes over. Be a part of your home and allow it to breathe and you'll be greatly rewarded. (From "5 Simple Ways to Make Your House Less Depressing," December 1, 2010)

Another such resonance is that clean and sparsely decorated homes are represented as calm and healthy reflections of the people who dwell therein. Accordingly, spare arrangements, natural materials, and neutral colors are valued. For example, white sheets are aligned with the meanings of happiness, serenity, and luxury ("Do Clean Sheets Make A Better Night's Sleep?" May 9, 2007), an association made especially powerful in the domestic context because of the special status of the bed as a refuge, which is further underlined by the frequent discussion of the bed on the blog (41,963 occurrences). Instrumentalization not only transforms rituals that might otherwise seem indulgent, such as buying flowers or frequently changing sheets, into needed acts, but also turns chores such as cleaning and making the bed, which might otherwise be seen as drudgery, into desirable meanings such as fulfillment and accomplishment:

> I can see something I did that was good, that was progress, that was achievement and, wow it makes you feel in control. It's like a sense of control and also a sense of power: Hey I did that! I took something messy and I made it clean. (Susan, interview)

Practicing Soft Modernism through Apartment Therapy

> I wonder if you showed me a picture of an apartment if I'd say "Oh that would probably be drawn from Apartment Therapy"—or no. I think there is to a certain degree like carpet: no; wood floor: yes. Like floral sofa: no; very geometric architectural orange sofa: yes. I don't want to call it the IKEA phenomenon, but I think there is definitely kind of a modernist moment. (Susan, interview)

We have thus far shown how AT taste regime provides a roadmap for practicing soft modernism. Yet one thing that needs to be elaborated further is how individuals use this mass-mediated regime to construct personalized domestic practice. Like most discursive formations, the AT taste re-

gime is neither monolithic nor isolated from other regimes. Such a nebulous conceptualization of regime is not a surprise since "overlapping and even conflicting practices" can reside within cultures of consumption (Kozinets 2001, 68). Furthermore, Warde claims that practices are not "hermetically sealed off" from one another (2005, 141). Likewise, AT is interconnected with similar and oppositional taste regimes.

As mentioned above, craft consumerism (Campbell 2005) is one dominant narrative that intersects with AT. In AT, craft is valorized by the portrayal of handmade products as tasteful, as well as by the celebration of a do it yourself (DIY) ethos. This ethos is perhaps best exemplified by the frequent depiction of repurposing projects such as the lemonade bottle dish soap dispenser and the practice of IKEA hacking (Rosner and Bean 2009). While a home decorated predominantly by IKEA is problematized, customizing and personalizing IKEA products is seen as a way to decommodify these objects. As endorsed on the site:

> We love our IKEA hacks since the furniture is moderately affordable and easily modified to suit our needs, whatever they might be. While the standard all-IKEA look might look dated, there's nothing stopping you from hacking your heart out, to customize your furniture to what you want it to look like. (From "The Best in IKEA Hacks," December 29, 2011)

The situation of DIY and craft in the AT taste regime is discursively bounded. In soft modernism, the markers of craft—objects that show they were handmade rather than machine manufactured—are used for balancing the coldness of bare floors and empty tabletops. But not all crafts are equal. Some are deemed to better fit with the taste regime than others. For example, when AT asked about the limits of the craft aesthetic, a debate arose about crocheted toilet paper cozies. When judging objects, the AT regime links aesthetics to practicality (Garvey 2003):

> Anything that collects dust like that annoys the crap out of me. I can clean a lantern or a bottle easily, but how the heck do you clean a crocheted doll? You can't exactly throw it in the washing machine. I suppose you could beat the dust out of it, but it's never really clean that way. Besides all that, they're creepy! (From "Least Liked Craft," September 29, 2009, comment by lifeinthefortress)

Here, it is not just the physical properties of an object but also the doings and meanings associated with this object that frame how it is incorporated into the home. Crocheted dolls and macramé decorations cannot align with the dominant doings in the regime such as cleaning because of a conflict with meanings such as cleanliness and simplicity. But the vintage glass bottle (mentioned above in the post about dish soap) is not perceived as kitsch because it aligns with the doings and meanings inscribed by the regime.

In other cases, our participants express how other identity narratives they identify with reframe their interpretation of AT. For example, Patrick, who grew up in a family of farmers and still feels nostalgia for the countryside, incorporates accessories that he labels as "granny chic"

into his home. Another example is Jacques, who accessorizes his home with memorabilia relating to the narratives of fifties industrialism and mod culture that strongly shape his identity:

> *Interviewer:* I've been thinking if there's a style to "Apartment Therapy" and I kind of saw your place a little bit different from that . . .
>
> *Jacques:* I totally agree with you and I think I actually take it as a compliment, 'cause I'm not trying to copy a style. I want to be the one copied. I mean that's flattering to me that somebody will go "Oh yeah, that's cool, and you know I never thought of this that way." And I'm not only midcentury modern; I mean I've got antiques. On the other side of the wall I have an old store display case for cookies that's probably a hundred years old; and that's more traditional. But it's a *Delicieux* general store display cookie case, so obviously that had to come here . . . but you couldn't see the furniture you see here in a suburban house, it just wouldn't fit, it wouldn't go.

Jacques's old factory loft is filled with repurposed vintage dentist's chairs, mailboxes, and 50s industrial memorabilia. While he claims otherwise by staking a claim of consumer sovereignty (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Holt 2002), his aesthetic is an example of the AT taste regime, with attention paid to flow, sparse spaces, and carefully curated objects. He aptly differentiates his loft from a suburban home, a symbolic distinction that is essential to AT taste and frequently underlined on AT. For example, when a reader submitted a picture of a McMansion style house and asked for decoration advice, another reader responded: "Is this in New Jersey? The decor looks a little 'Carmela Soprano' to me. I'd just do whatever it takes to get far far away from the *Soprano* look" ("Good Questions: What Colors Should We Use in This Room?" October 23, 2007). Whereas the content of many AT house tours and comments indicate AT enjoys a strong readership in suburban and rural areas, the specter of a stereotypical suburban aesthetic (Wunsch 1995) is where the AT community draws a symbolic boundary.

The AT regime, like all marketplace narratives, intersects with other related regimes. It is interpreted with bounded diversity and is a ground for continuous contestation (Kozinets 2001). Like all organic cultural formations, the community of AT is protean, with flexible boundaries and interpretive frameworks (Kates 2002). Yet despite this multiplicity and intertextuality, it harbors a strong reliance on the inbetweenness of soft modernism. More often, in the way typical of social distinctions (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Üstüner and Holt 2010), AT's boundaries are established through what AT is not: a suburban McMansion or a toilet paper cozy. Within the boundaries construed by these oppositions, participants create their own soft modernist spaces through the bounded reflexivity referred to earlier. That is, they reflexively navigate through a specific set of objects, doings, and meanings orchestrated by the taste regime.

CONCLUSION

Contributions

> [Apartment Therapy] helped me to make my apartment the way that I have it. I am a minimalist so I would see posts on Apartment Therapy. . . . There is no clutter. There is nothing that's, personal, a pen or anything like that. So I really like that. So that is how I kind of made my apartment. (Claire, interview)

In this article, we extend the notion of taste from a boundary-making process to a practice that is discursively constituted and continually performed. Whereas taste is frequently framed as a means for symbolic distinction, we argue that this attention has led to a deficit of knowledge about the ways individuals practice taste in their lives. Similarly, while consumer researchers have used practice as a way to understand consumption, the notion of taste has remained implicit in these theorizations. This article bridges these two interrelated theories to provide a practice-based approach to taste. We agree that taste is still class conditioned to a certain extent. The marketplace, however, provides people with endless sources of narrative influence that affect how taste is practiced within class boundaries and used for subtle distinction. For example, suburban middle class consumers could choose between Martha Stewart's vision of impossible domesticity (Leavitt 2002) and *Real Simple's* minimalist materialism (Wajda 2001). These two trajectories, though rooted in similar class positions, are channeled through two distinctive regimes that have their own systems of taste. Reading *Real Simple* magazine every month, immersing oneself in the Martha Stewart brand empire, reading fashion, food and wine magazines, engaging with online car customizing communities, and watching DIY television and makeover shows are not simply passive leisure activities, but rather elements of practice that influence how people relate to objects and what they do with them.

Contributions to Theories of Practice. First, building on Magaudda's (2011) concept of the circuit of practice, we describe how taste regimes help people to navigate through the world of objects, and how objects, doings, and meanings are used to achieve specific forms of practice. We suggest that Magaudda's theory is underspecified and could have broader applications in consumer research. Specifically, the circuit of practice concept is not only useful for explaining macro-institutional changes, but also can be used to understand the mundane ongoing processes that link objects, doings, and meanings into coherent patterns of consumption. By providing a systemic view that connects all three elements of practice—objects, doings, and meanings—we extend theories of practice and begin to address the criticism that a discrete act of consumption is too often viewed as a practice unto itself, rather than as a moment constitutive of broader practices (Schatzki 1996; Shove and Araujo 2010; Warde 2005).

Second, a systemic view of practice can also help us

understand how complex integrative practices (Schatzki 1996) are held together. While Schatzki discusses how dispersed practices intersect integrative practices, consumer researchers have not differentiated between the two. As our findings demonstrate, dispersed practices such as problematization are contextualized into consumption through teleoaffective structures, which consist of ends, orders, uses, and emotions. As a result, the teleoaffective structure determines what constitutes a problem and for what reasons this problem needs to be resolved. In our case the teleoaffective structure takes the form of a taste regime, and thus problematization is focused on aligning material objects with the AT aesthetic. To apply the theory to a case outside of our research context, take the integrative practice of brand communities outlined by Schau et al. (2009). They identify 12 key practices involved in the creation and maintenance of brand community. These practices (which we characterize as dispersed) generate opportunities for consumers to create value beyond what the firm offers, yet none of them operate independently or outside the context of brand; they "work together and drive one another" (35). While Schau et al. (2009) visually represent the interaction of practices with a gear metaphor and make reference to the way practices related to brand community "are bundled" (32), they do not formally theorize the nature of this relationship. We argue that it is the teleoaffective structure of brand-specific values, norms, and mythologies that orchestrate the integrative practice of brand community. Thus, a practice based approach can illuminate how connections between marketplace cultures that revolve around broad interests—whether brands, aesthetics, or resistance—are held together as complex, yet recognizable, entities unto themselves.

Third, we highlight practical knowledge as a mediated phenomenon. Gans (1975) depicted a taste culture as a mass-mediated phenomenon, but the landscape of mass media has changed significantly since then, not least by the diffusion of social media. Our findings demonstrate how practical knowledge can be acquired and habitualized through engagement with mass mediated regimes. In their analysis of MG enthusiasts, Leigh et al. (2006) discuss how subcultural members communicate to other members the knowledge and skills related to restoring antique cars and thus achieve a shared understanding of how an authentically restored MG should look. Similarly, AT enables active and continuous participation in the taste regime as a form of leisure entertainment while furnishing its participants with the knowledge and doings needed to practice taste. Whereas Bourdieuian theories conceptualize practical knowledge as a socio-historically shaped and class conditioned phenomenon (Allen 2002; Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), our work suggests that mass-mediated regimes affect the acquisition of practical knowledge beyond social class conditioning. Taste regimes provide a framework for practice, enabling participants to cultivate practical knowledge through continuous and reflexive engagement with objects, doings, and meanings. The result of this engagement, as we describe below, also furnishes participants with cultural capital.

Contributions to Theories of Taste. A regime model can also help us understand how taste gets linked to daily practice. For example, AT makes it possible to have a home that can readily be identified by others as belonging to the associated taste regime. Furthermore, AT offers resources for the acquisition of everyday practices for people who pursue this recognizable ordering of objects in space. This is accomplished through justifying preferences for particular arrangements and types of objects, and by turning these preferences and activities into rituals and habits. Therefore, we extend theories of taste—which already account for why people gravitate toward specific aesthetic categories—by explaining how these categories are achieved through everyday practice.

Understanding taste as a regime also helps explain how individuals gain cultural capital through their participation in the marketplace. For our participants, AT not only made the range of choices offered by the marketplace comprehensible and describable by linking brand names, styles, and meanings to objects, but also increased the range of possibilities beyond their existing knowledge by prescribing doings to use objects in ways they might have not thought possible otherwise, or by enlarging their lexicon with new meanings they adopt from the marketplace. Whereas surrogate consumption (Solomon 1986) suggests delegating the choice process to third parties in an attempt to reassure the sign value of products with minimum time and effort, our participants are deeply involved in the making of their homes. As argued earlier, members of the AT community are not interested in replicating arrangements of material goods but rather in investing in practical knowledge that results in a deeper involvement with the regime. Arsel and Thompson (2011) argue that individuals invest in cultural capital through continuous participation in fields of consumption. Similarly, Schau et al. (2009) discuss how practices, within the context of brand communities, endow participants with cultural capital. We further refine these assertions by describing how the taste regime that binds an integrative practice also continuously demarcates the boundaries of a consumption field from which participants draw cultural capital. In other words, the specific set of objects, doings, and meanings that the practice orchestrates also constitutes the assortment of cultural capital resources available to participants in the taste regime. Thus, while our analysis is conducted in the taste regime of domestic consumption, our theoretical findings can be extended to other fields of taste, such as music, arts, and food, and exemplify how everyday practice can build cultural capital.

Limitations and Future Directions

In our case, the community of AT shows evidence of all three markers of a brand community (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001): consciousness of kind; rituals and traditions; and, to a certain extent, moral responsibility. Furthermore, this community operates through a participatory medium. We, however, deliberately isolated the participatory and cocreative nature of the AT regime to better circumscribe our contributions. Instead, we focused on the narrative's translation

into practice. More inquiries should be made regarding the democratization of tastemaking through collaborative marketplace communities. For example, one can argue that the comparatively egalitarian narratives established through blogging exemplify a distributed form of cultural authority that is in stark contrast with traditional models of tastemaking. In other words, you can have a home of good taste and simultaneously stake a claim of authority in an ongoing discussion about exactly what it is that constitutes good taste.

The AT phenomenon also uncovers interesting questions regarding shifts in gendered norms of domesticity. AT's own research shows its readership is 41% male. AT was started by a married straight man, Maxwell Gillingham-Ryan, who is frequently featured in popular media. This is significant, because in many media representations the fields of interior design and decoration are coded as female, whereas architecture and product design are coded as male (Sparke 1995). AT frequently confronts dominant ideas about gender by providing accounts of changing domestic gender norms (Courtney 2009) by showing portrayals of heterosexual men engaging in traditionally feminized acts of decorating and women in masculinized practices such as furniture refinishing. Yet, in an open recruitment process, only three volunteer interviewees out of 12 were male. While we acknowledge this as a limitation of this study, through our extended engagement with the blog, we found an approximately equal representation of gender in the blog content, such as in house tours and contests. Thus, we suggest that consumer researchers could systematically inquire about how gender norms are shifting in domestic practice.

We stress again that our research does not seek to address the question of how taste hierarchies are made. Yet we should stress that the core group of the AT audience belongs to a very specific social class segment. The people predominantly portrayed on the website are privileged individuals and couples living in America. Likewise, whiteness is a central actor in the AT narrative but one that remains offstage. In the period of material and social change that followed World War II in the United States, middle class values were communicated through the representation of clean, orderly spaces (Harris 2007). AT's interiors communicate this sort of social and economic privilege and so resemble an attainable version of the representations in the magazine *Wallpaper*, which celebrates a distinctly global, transitory, and portable mode of affluence (Cullens 1999). In this regard, we acknowledge that taste regimes perpetuate existing cultural hierarchies and enforce symbolic boundaries. Furthermore, prior research on cultural narratives has extensively inquired on the variation on consumers' interpretive strategies as well as resistance to marketplace influences (Arnould and Thompson 2005). As the focus of this article is on the AT regime rather than the differential use of this resource by individuals, we suggest future research inquire further about consumer resistance strategies to the hegemonic taste regimes mediated by the market, and to the social distinctions perpetuated by these hegemonies.

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