Reiterating identity through homes and personal possessions in homes

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Spring 2018
Abstract
In western countries homes have developed from being private spaces where people restore items and memories that affirm their identity to places of self-expression and representing one's social status to the public. Self-evidently the home with its interior design, location and size has become a medium which people use to express their style and taste and through which social distinction can be made.

The objective of this thesis is to examine how young people reiterate their identity through the way they live in their student flats and through the relationships with their personal possessions in their homes. I assume that peoples' values and habits are strongly influenced by their upbringing, which must be visible in their homes. Homes in general have been examined previously in terms of social distinction, but a comparing study of students living in the same kind of rooms has so far not been accomplished likewise. Instead of a purely visual representation of a mass of photographs, this thesis studies in depth the reiteration of just a few individuals' identity through the way they live in their student flats. Thus the focus of this thesis is kept on the study of the reiteration of identity through theoretical and practical work instead of the creation of additional visual content.

In this thesis I review literature which covers the roots and the characteristics of identity and the influence of peoples’ tastes, habits and capital on their position in society. The literature review gives already existing evidence of research about identity and its occurrence in society and therefore supports the critical analysis of the accomplished field work. I proceed with explaining the field work, which includes interviews as well as photographs after which I evaluate the found results.
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1 Introduction
In western countries homes have developed from being private spaces where people restore items and memories that affirm their identity to places of self-expression and representing one’s social status to the public.\(^1\) Self-evidently the home with its interior design, location and size has become a medium which people use to express their style and taste and through which social distinction can be made.\(^2\)

In 2012 I visited an exhibition called “Architekturfotografie – Made in China”\(^3\) in Cologne, Germany, where I lived at the time. The exhibition consisted of photographs by various German photographers as well as photographers from China who all documented the ongoing construction boom in China. Back then the administration aimed to provide housing for over 350 000 000 people within the next fifteen years.\(^4\) The exhibited photographs gave me a primary understanding of the expected socio-economic consequences for ordinary people who had to adapt to their built environment. The seemingly dismissed consideration for the people who inhabited (if that is even the right term) the gigantic buildings became obvious through the repetetive photoseries “HongKong Inside Outside” by German photographer Michael Wolf. My first impression was that there was no space left for individuality.

Five years later in fall 2017 I went to Seoul, South Korea for a semester as an exchange student where I studied the relationship of humans to their built environment through my own experiences. I had the chance to live in a building very similar to those I had seen in the exhibition five years back in time. It was a student dormitory of the university I attended and I shared a room with a Korean student. The impressions from the exhibition I had seen years back connected with my current living situation in my mind and I decided to document dormitories by analysing them in terms of visual youth culture.

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Based on the interaction I had with the inhabitants of the dormitory and the photographs I took of the dorms I concluded that the student flats were predominantly spaces of privacy and recovery.

The objective of this thesis is to examine how young people reiterate their identity both through the way they live in their student flats and through the relationships with their personal possessions in their homes. I assume that peoples’ values and habits are strongly influenced by their upbringing, which I expect to be visible in their homes. Homes in general have been examined previously in terms of social distinction⁵, but there are no studies conducted of students living in identical living spaces, such as dormitories, that take in account how personal background and upbringing influence one’s reiteration of identity. Instead of a purely visual representation through the means of documentation, this thesis focuses on the reiteration of just a few individuals’ identity through the way they live in their student flats in Helsinki. Therefore the main focus lies on the theoretical and practical work of research instead of the creation of additional visual content.

In this thesis I review literature which covers the roots and the characteristics of identity and the influence of peoples’ tastes, habits and their capital on their position in society. The literature review is a reflection on the research of identity and its occurrence in society and therefore supports the critical analysis of the accomplished field work. I proceed with explaining the field work, which includes interviews as well as photographs. Thereafter I evaluate the found results.

1.1 Motivation behind the topic

“The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and the technique of life.”

Identity has exposed to be a significant factor in the field of design, as the success of a designer or a company can largely depend on people identifying their brand, product or service. Wether identity is studied by looking at design processes, by observing how users relate to their possessions or wether it is used to analyse design for market research; in any way understanding the complexity of identity is crucial to create usable and sustainable design. Identity is not fixed nor is it stable and therefore the creation and use of good design helps to construct and maintain our identity. I assume that we constantly seek reassurance of who we are through different results of design designs such as objects, fashion and homes. I assume that we surround ourselves with objects that reiterate our identity because it brings us pleasure and the feeling of belonging. We need to belong somewhere in order to develop our identity. The aim of this thesis is to find actual evidence for why we like being surrounded by objects that affirm our identity.

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The relationship between people and their possessions has been studied through various approaches. Petra Ahde-Deal for instance has specifically studied the relationship of women and jewelry. In her dissertation she not only studied the interpersonal relationships of the receiver and the giver of heirloom jewelry, but as well the development of the relationship of a person towards her jewelry. The book Empathic design. User experience in product design has studied why some objects remain in our possession for a limited time, whereas other objects are life-long companions. It examines why some objects are ‘love at first sight’ whereas others only become important and indispensable later throughout their use. Patrick W. Jordan has given early evidence that humans become the focus of design processes and that product designs are not necessarily primarily inspired by materials and shapes anymore but rather by the pleasure they are supposed to give to their users.

The existence of a constant interaction between users and objects is inevitable. Consumers brand themselves through their purchases and become what they purchase. Objects are defined by consumers through their use. This thesis takes into consideration how peoples’ identity is a confrontation of inherited as well as independently constructed habits by relating to both unconsciously kept objects and consciously chosen objects.

1.2 Background on target group and location

Since I moved to Finland I have lived in the same HOAS student house located in Itäkeskus, an eastern district of Helsinki. Because of the big shopping mall Itis, its many public services and its large public transportation network, Itäkeskus has appeared to be a lively neighborhood. It is also known for its ethnic and social diversity. The same ethnic and cultural diversity can be seen in this student house. I have moved within the same building three times due to renovations and therefore lived with more than ten different people. This has aroused my interest towards how people reiterate their identity in the way they house. The circumstances stay the same but each tenant brings along their own background and habits.

Target group
The three interviewees are permanent students of different universities in Helsinki, who live in exactly the same kind of apartments. Each one has their own private room, which is the only space that was studied in the field work. The interviewees are 20, 22 and 27 years old. They do not know each other and live separately. The interviewees are a random selection and they have not been informed about my project in advance. None of them is studying a field related to this topic which enables new insights to how people respond to it.

Hoas
HOAS (Helsingin seudun opiskelija-asuntosäätiö) is a Foundation for Student Housing in Helsinki region and was founded in 1969 to offer students affordable apartments. Nowadays there are 9400 student apartments in the Helsinki area that belong to HOAS. They include nine different types of apartments, of which my focus are shared flats in east Helsinki. (https://www.hoas.fi/)

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Asiakkaankatu 6
This house was built in 1977 and it locates in east Helsinki, right next to the Itis shopping mall. It has four floors and offers shared apartments, friend apartments and family apartments.

Figure 1. Groundplan, Asiakkaankatu 6, Helsinki
The purpose of this thesis is to focus on personal background and upbringing when studying the reiteration of peoples’ identity through the way they live in their homes and their personal possessions in them. The literature review covers the definition and the roots of identity, the characteristics of the self and its development, cultural capital and its subtopics for distinguishing people from one another. The literature reviews and the conducted interviews enable the examination of how personal background and upbringing influence the way people live in their homes and gives new perspectives on the relationship of identity and design.

The research question is defined as:

**How do people reiterate their identity in their homes?**

The topic is researched through the following supporting questions:

1. In how far is identity determined by personal background and upbringing?
2. How does personal background and upbringing influence peoples’ choices and taste?
2 Literature Review
Since the core of this thesis is the research on the topic of the reiteration of identity through homes and personal possessions in homes the literature review discusses identity and its characteristics, how it is determined by choices and how personal background affects those choices. I refer to Jacques Lacan’s concept of the mirror stage\(^1\), a concept in J. Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory, which describes every human being’s development of self-consciousness through the discovery of their self. In the chapter 2.1.1. I will explain the detailed concept which provides a definition of identity, an essential term in my thesis. I proceed by referring to Mihaly Czikszentmihalyi in the chapter 2.1.2 who in his work \textit{The Evolving Self}\(^2\) has presented the self in its different contexts. The descriptions of the characteristics and the potential of the self support my research topic. In the chapters 2.2 and 2.3 I review Pierre Bourdieu’s book \textit{Distinction: Critique sociale du jugement}\(^3\), in terms of cultural practices and cultural competence, social origin, educational level and the different forms of cultural capital based on which I have structured the interview. The selected literature is a combination of psychological and sociological content.

\begin{itemize}
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2.1 Identity and Self

The terms *identity* and *self* are subtopics of psychology. They are often used equivalently and therefore predisposed to cause confusion.¹ In the Handbook of Self and Identity it however states that identity and self-concepts are “nested constructs”² of a larger term called *self*. The detailed concept analysis of each term was left outside the scope of this thesis. I refer to Jacques Lacan who predominantly uses the term *identity* and to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who predominantly uses the term *self*, in order to provide fundamental knowledge for both terms.

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2.1.1 Definition of Identity

The French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan introduced his concept of identity called *Le Stade du Miroir, comme formateur de la fonction du Je telle qu’elle nous est révélée dans l’expérience psychanalytique* at the Sixteenth International Congress of Psychoanalysis in 1949 in Zurich. According to J. Lacan the mirror stage is an essential moment in life when humans start to distinguish the gap between their experience of who they are and how other people see them, meaning that humans develop a sense of self-consciousness. He says that it usually happens when the child is able to lean forward and hold itself up for the moment the cognition requires, which is at the age of eighteen months.

At this stage of life a child can practice basic movements but is not yet able to co-ordinate and function very well, because the connections between its brain and its body are not well organized. During the mirror stage the child recognizes an image of themself, which remains apart from their own physical body. The image the child sees is more complete and self-contained than the self the child actually experiences but it does not contain the subjective experiences and accordingly remains empty. There is a gap between the subjective experiences or subject and the ideal I, the image seen in the mirror.

From the moment of when the child has recognized themself and seen the ideal I, it will keep striving for it throughout his or her entire life. At this point the child is aware of the (dis)connection between its clumsy movements and the complete image of the body seen in the mirror. Since the child has recognized themself in the mirror to being someone defined by society it will never get back to the pure I. It does not know where its own body ends and the rest of the world begins. It does not yet have the consciousness of being an individual like adults do, because it is not yet a subject of language. The mirror stage is crucial, because it is the only time when a child identifies themself, without knowing the meaning of identity in the way adults define it. The reality of the child will always be different from other peoples’ reality. Consequently identity is exterior and subject interior.

Once the child learns to speak and enters language, the separation between subject and iden-
tity persists, but identity can then be asserted both at the level of images and at the level of language. E.g. when the child learns its own name.

People have more than just one identity. One person can be a mother, a sister, a daughter, a co-worker and a best friend. The same person can be seen as busy or relaxed depending on who makes the judgement. Similar to the way how the child looks in the mirror adults look around in their environment and reflect to their sense of self. People do it all the time, whether consciously or unconsciously by thinking of how they express themselves in what they wear, by seeing themselves in the images around them and by how they live. There are almost endless ways for people to search for definitions of their own identity. Because the images people see around them appear to be always more complete than the experiences of things, identity must be reiterated. Jacques Lacan’s concept of the mirror stage explains the roots of identity and is therefore essential to understand my research topic. I assume that humans have habits, rituals and values that are passed on to the next generation (interviewees), who then repeat those actions consciously and unconsciously.
I will now describe the characteristics of the self by referring to Hungarian psychoanalysist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s book The Evolving Self, which in the chapters The Veils of Maya and The Transcendent Self discusses specifically the potential and the challenges of the self.

Once the existence of identity as Jacques Lacan defined it has been discovered, it will change and develop as long as we live. From the moment where humans have identified themselves as individuals they are always conscious of their existence in terms of their own subjective experiences and in terms of how they reflect on themselves with the support of the environment. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi says that since humans have discovered being aware of their own consciousness they have been able to emancipate themselves from exterior factors such as individual predispositions and regulations defined by society.

M. Czikszentmihalyi says that the emancipation from one’s cultural background and genes brings along both positive as well as negative qualities. On one hand humans are free to build their own self with the help of society and the ability to reflect on others, whereas on the other hand they are instinctively predisposed to protect their selves since the self has become a mere construct of their own and therefore remains vague. “The ideas that become central representations of the self are those in which a person invests the most psychic energy.” which indicates that the construction of the self can be built through objects, money, relationships, religions or habits or whatever one invests time and effort in.

American philosophist and psychologist William James stated:

“...a man’s Self is the sum total of all that he can call his... If they wax and prosper, he feels triumphant, if they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down."

M. Czikszentmihalyi confirms this by explaining how the relationship towards objects changes once humans have discovered the consciousness of their own selves. Objects have become essential in order to construct one’s self and to express oneself. But the more one identifies with objects the more dependent one’s self becomes on them, because without them one’s self might lack definition. The pride that has been built around the ownership of an object is vulnerable to the loss of it. Assuming that through the possession of a certain type of car a person can gain respect and admiration, which contributes to the person’s confidence, happiness or pride. That person will most probably keep on driving this particular car, take care of it and rely on it. In this case the car becomes a symbol of the self and if something happens to the car the self will suffer from it.

M. Czikszentmihalyi points out two interesting arguments that describe his perception on peoples’ approaches towards constructing their identities. First he claims that people who live in societies where there are less material goods available build stronger relationships with other people and therefore the relationships become essential to the construction of the self. Secondly he claims that people who refuse to invest the least possible in goods (both immaterial and material), become less vulnerable, because they own less and therefore have nothing to loose. Their self doesn’t depend on possessions. The interesting fact in these two arguments is that the construction of one’s identity depends largely on wether humans have or do not have a choice to construct their selves on either one of them (objects or relationships).

Relevant in my thesis is M. Czikszentmihalyi’s description of different ways in which people express themselves through material goods. He says that people express themselves through personal objects, household objects, collective representations and images of the ideal self. Personal objects can be obvious and in daily use. He defines that personal objects are objects people carry with them or use regularly, such as purses, jewellery, clothing and cars etc. They are objects that people use to represent themselves in public with, i.e. at work or social events. They are objects that a person uses to express who they want to be. Household objects on the other hand are kept more private and not directly presented to the public. M. Czikszentmihalyi says that household objects help the owner to organize his or her perception of his or her self rather than telling others who they are or want to be, which indicates that the role of these objects is to contribute to the owner’s own happiness and needs.

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6 Note: Personal objects defined by M. Csikszentmihalyi are not the same as I defined them in my field work. By personal objects I mean the peoples’ personal domestic possessions.
The assumption that household objects or objects not carried much outside of the home would not directly be objects of self expression is doubtful. Household objects as well as the house or apartment itself and its location plays an important role of the expression of the self - not only to oneself but to others as well. M. Czikszentmihalyi confirms this by saying that most household objects help people to affirm their identity, their background and who they want to become in the future. M. Czikszentmihalyi says that homes not only fulfill their owners primary needs such as safety and rest but moreover affirm their owners identity by enabling interaction between the owner and the objects in them. Another form of expressing the self explained by M. Czikszentmihalyi is by collecting certain representations of the self. Collective representations of the self are ways in which people can connect to other people who are not their relatives. This means that people surround themselves with objects or images that make them feel more connected with their idols, a sports team or religious characters. (p.227). These role models, or the people who represent something specific that others strive for, are usually idealized in forms of advertisements or in other forms of media. Like J. Lacan, also M. Czikszentmihalyi says that people will always strive for the ideal self. The ideal self is mostly found in culturally idealized forms. Based on historical visual evidence M. Czikszentmihalyi says that cultures have expressed the ideal self by perpetuating it in forms of statues and paintings, which are comparable to today’s advertisements and other forms of media such as movies or social media. In the past as well as in the present day the individual’s ideal self is rarely similar to that of the culturally desired one. Media nowadays has a tendency to be the guideline of how people should be, what they should like and how they should desire. For instance in the fashion industry it is very obvious which physical attributes and facial features are desirable. But the same applies to interior, socializations and life-styles in general. In all those sectors there are social standards set by influential people. The more powerful a person is the more he or she can influence trends, norms and the ideal (more in chapters 2.3). M. Czikszentmihalyi puts an emphasis on the fact that nowadays people are what they own, which suggests that focusing on the relationship towards objects is important in order to understand their function in this thesis.

There are many similarities between Jacques Lacan’s and Mihaly Czikszentmihalyi’s description of identity and the self. Both clearly describe identity and the self as something never complete and something external to the subjective experiences of people. Jacques Lacan says that the gap between the ideal I and the subjective experience will always remain. M. Czikszentmihalyi confirms this and more specifically describes how the self develops over time. Peoples values and priorities change throughout their lives. Both emphasize the eternal attempt to become aligned with the ideal self, which can never happen, because the ideal self as such does not exist.
2.2 Distinction

Individuality and the distinction from others originated from the urge for freedom and emancipation from societal regulations.¹ Essentially, without a society an individual does not have a reason to distinguish themself from others. French sociologist, philosopher and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu has studied in Distinction: Critique sociale du jugement² how people by distinguishing themselves from others, by means of taste and choice, both join a social circle as well as separate themselves from another. He has furthermore developed the concept of the forms of capital. The forms of capital are crucial in order to understand how he evaluates peoples’ backgrounds and their position within society.

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2.2.1 Cultural Practices and Cultural Competence

Pierre Bourdieu distinguishes between people within a society by their cultural practices and their cultural competence, he states: “cultural goods are the product of upbringing and education and linked to educational level and social origin”\(^1\). This means that a big part of peoples’ current state of being and practices result from how they have been raised and what values have been taught to them in their childhood and later on. As an example one could say, that works of art are only decoded by people who find interest in them and are capable to do so because of acquired skills and knowledge, meaning that culture in the form of art communicates something that needs to be understood in order to be absorbed. Only a person who possesses the cultural competence can decode the encoded. It is easier to understand with another example. Assuming a foreigner walks in a country where everything is written in signs he or she is not used to read. The foreigner only decodes what he or she is capable of e.g. familiar brands or stores, the rest is meaningless, resulting from the person’s lacking competence. Rarely is the motivation to decode cultural goods intrinsically motivated. It requires practice and consistency in order to truly enjoy the practice of decoding works, distinguishing them from others, connecting them, sensing them and categorizing them.

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2.2.2 Educational Level and Social Origin

According to Pierre Bourdieu, Social origin is not identical but similar and linked to the embodied form of cultural capital (explained in chapter 2.3.1) which is or is not given to people and therefore something not to be determined by them. Social origin is not guaranteed to determine peoples' access to education but very likely to influence their educational level. The chances of understanding art works is not guaranteed by educational capital, where one is taught about i.e. art history, but social origin plays an important role in terms of if one can access and appreciate art works. The relationship between social origin and educational level is crucial and has an impact on cultural competence.

P. Bourdieu says that ordinary people without the necessary cultural competence assume a dialogue between art and life, meaning they expect works of art to perform a function. This would mean that their sense form is subordinate to function. Whereas intellectuals, who are from P. Bourdieu’s point of view expected to have bigger cultural competence, can be said to believe more in the representation than the content it delivers. In their sense function is subordinate to form. He says that after all it is the relationship towards cultural practices that defines what class a person belongs to. There are different forms of practicing culture, of which one is i.e. practicing music in the form of playing an instrument. Classification though can happen also in forms of non-cultural practices, such as through the practice of a certain type of sport that is only available to a certain group of people because of the required financial capital. In that case the sport divides people and distinguishes them from others. It is the form of cultural capital that to a certain extent regulates who people are and can become and after all the overall volume of capital (economic capital, cultural capital, social capital) that determines peoples' cultural competence. 1

2.3 Capital

Pierre Bourdieu says that the fundamental distinction happens through peoples’ tastes and preferences. A person’s taste determines his or her belonging to a certain class and the exclusion from another. Furthermore each individual possesses cultural capital in different forms, which determines their state of power over another individual.

P. Bourdieu has analysed society in terms of peoples’ taste by categorizing them into social classes depending on the overall volume of capital. The most significant distinction regarding what a person’s or a social class’s preferences and taste are is the amount of cultural capital that this person or this social class possesses. After all „art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences.“. But what is cultural capital and how does cultural capital reflect how people live in their homes, their habits and how they see themselves and what distinguishes them from others? In order to understand the term cultural capital I am going to explain P. Bourdieu’s definition of the different forms of capital.

Capital in general as explained in the concept of The Forms of Capital by Pierre Bourdieu is the „accumulation of labor“, which one could sum up being money, habits or work positions. Capital in general takes time and has a nature to not appear or disappear suddenly. Capital is grown over a long period of time in which it slowly increases in amount. A person that has required a certain skill in playing an instrument will, upon stopping the practice, most probably not forget everything at once, but experience a slow decrease of their skill over time.

In my thesis Pierre Bourdieu’s studies help to analyse the interviewees’ homes and the way they choose to live, because he distinguishes differences in peoples’ habits, preferences, and power. His focus on the differentiation between social classes and the allocation of power through cultural capital supports to evaluate the interviews in terms of how these aspects are visible in the interviewees’ homes.

2.3.1 Cultural Capital Definition

Cultural capital as well as social capital are immaterial and therefore differ from economic capital. Although cultural capital is immaterial it can be converted into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications. Cultural capital can be earned by anyone and can not be measured through figures, but is under each individual’s control.

P. Bourdieu has defined three forms of cultural capital: cultural capital can exist in the embodied state, the objectified state and the institutionalized state. I will now explain the different forms of cultural capital.

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2.3.2 Forms of Cultural Capital

Embodied forms of capital are long lasting dispositions of the mind and body. This is attained by working on oneself. It can be conscious or unconscious self-improvement. Skills and habits mastered as a child are mostly required more unconsciously, as opposed to when an adult learns a new skill. Someone who has danced ballet from his or hers early childhood on does it more unconsciously than an adult who starts to learn this art later on in his or her life. The embodied capital is naturally acquired slowly because it requires time and effort. The embodied form of cultural capital can be easily passed on to a new generation. E.g. if a mother and a father speak each a different language to their child, that child will be bilingual. The child has embodied capital in the form of languages that it can speak fluently. The transmission of this embodied form of cultural capital is not as obvious as passing on economic capital and therefore the embodied form of cultural capital can function as symbolic capital as well. P. Bourdieu points out that it can be „recognized as legitimate competence“ rather than capital. Having abilities that no-one else has, provides one with power. Embodied capital is therefore a powerful capital because of the effortlessness in which it is transmitted. A child growing up multilingual or with innate favourable physical attributes is given advantages over an other that only the embodied form of cultural capital can provide. Objectified forms of capital are material and therefore quite easily transmissible into e.g. economic capital. Objectified forms of cultural capital are basically someone’s property of cultural goods, such as instruments, literature, paintings. Cultural capital in its objectified form can be purchased with economic capital and it presupposes cultural capital for someone to find interest in doing so. With economic capital it is easily purchased, but for someone being able to handle and use the object as it should be requires cultural capital in its embodied form (skill). A person with great economic capital can purchase a piano in a matter of seconds whereas learning how to play and master it properly will take time and willpower until it becomes a skill (an embodied form of cultural capital). Objectified forms of capital are in contrast to embodied forms of capital, easier to loose because of their materiality.

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Institutionalized forms of capital are a person’s capital he or she has earned through i.e. „academic qualifications“\textsuperscript{2}. An institutionalized form of capital is stable because it is proven by an institution and will not be scrutinized over it’s legitimacy further. Unlike self-learned qualifications or inherited skills in forms of embodied cultural capital that do not necessarily have a certificate of completion institutionalized capital remains valid and must not be proven further. P. Bourdieu says that institutionalized forms of capital are in a way stable because they can not be taken away. It is somewhere inbetween material and immaterial.

The conversion of cultural capital in its institutionalized form into economic capital is more presumable than the other way around. A quite common aspect of institutionalized forms of cultural capital is the substitution of academic qualification with one another. A very simple example would be the recognition of previously accomplished studies and incorporating them into a later degree in order to be freed from mandatory and already accomplished studies in the current institution.

2.3.3 Cultural Capital and Identity

If we think of P. Bourdieu’s definition of cultural capital, we should consider our identities amongst others as the sum of different forms of cultural capital, which we inherit from our parents and cultivate throughout later life. How much and what kind of cultural capital we get from our parents depends on their values and choices. Similar to Jacques Lacan who says that identity is external and defined by others and not ourselves P. Bourdieu’s definition of the different forms of cultural capital demonstrates that who we are is partly defined by external factors and to some extent our own choice. J. Lacan, M. Csikszentmihalyi and P. Bourdieu imply that all humans strive for further development throughout their lives. This means that even though we are born with certain dispositions and grow up in certain circumstances our identity is not fully determined by them.

Generally all forms of cultural capital are in correlation with one another. A great embodied form of capital may lead to great academic capital and therefore expand the overall cultural capital of an individual. Classes differ by the overall volume of capital (economic capital, cultural capital, social capital).¹ People with a great overall volume of cultural capital are more powerful and influential than those with less and most likely set social standards and expectations. A class usually differs from another class by its amount of cultural and economic capital. The volume and the composition of capital of a person in a certain class is not necessarily fixed or stable as one can move from one class to another whilst the relevance of a certain kind of capital changes. This again influences how and with what people identify themselves.

3 Methodology
The practical part of this thesis are the conducted interviews and photographs taken during the visits at peoples’ homes. The interviews were conducted as a means to examine if the theories explained above and the literature review are able to be proven in practice. It is important that the interviewees were not familiar with the research topic. The questions asked were clearly structured but only served as a guideline for the conversational interviews. Three interviews were conducted in total. The photographs are a documentation of the space and the objects that were discussed during the interviews.
The interviews were conducted in order to test the accuracy of the reviewed interviews and to find answers to my thesis questions. Instead of merely getting answers to my interview questions, my aim was to observe and study how people actually perceive the questions and if these interviews can be successfully completed with people who have not studied this subject. The people were randomly selected. I spontaneously knocked on different doors in the student housing facility that I live in, which led me to people I didn’t know. I chose this method because I wanted people to represent their home in the state it was in without having a chance to change or reorganize it’s state. This brought along the risk that no-one would be willing to let me into their room. The random selection was necessary in order to get an authentic insight to their homes. Apart from their cultural background, which was left outside the scope of this thesis, all interviewees had in common that they all live in the same building, all study in Helsinki and are between twenty and thirty years old.

Furthermore I photographed their rooms to get an idea of the use of space. I took more detailed photographs of their possessions in order to visualize the objects talked about during the interview. The photographs are documentations and not artistic expressions. They support the content of the interviews and give evidence of the field work.

3.1 Selection and Criteria
3.1.1 Interview Structure

The interview is structured based on Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts, which were discussed in the previous chapters. P. Bourdieu’s concepts were chosen for the structure of this interview in order to address identity in a social context. Peoples’ cultural background and upbringing construct and influence their identity. This interview is a method to prove those aspects. The chronology of the questions is clearly structured and consists of a total of six questions. It starts with encouraging the interviewee to reflect on their home from a new perspective. The first question aims to have the interviewee reflect on who they define themselves to be based on their home and to further describe their relationship with their home and their possessions.

The second question deepens the interviewee’s understanding of why they think their home describes them as a person by asking what could be the factors having influenced their way of living in their home in a certain way and not another. P. Bourdieu claims that people differ from one another depending on the overall volume of capital (economic, cultural, social) which is both inherited from parents and the choices made later in life, which again are influenced by the habits adopted from their role models. This question should let the interviewees describe what they think defines who they are and if they mention aspects described by P. Bourdieu’s different forms of capital. He claims that people or classes with an overall bigger capital dominate the taste of those with less. Therefore this question should investigate if the interviewees are aware of being inspired by influential trends or matters of pop culture and the post internet era that have had an impact on their way of living.

The third question focuses on the interviewees’ perspectives on their awareness of their home representing themselves and how that is visible. This question lets the interviewee reflect on his or her past and how he or she has grown up in terms of the inherited values and forms of living as well as using space. It also is an attempt to let the interviewees reflect on how much they think their choices are influenced by external factors.

The fourth question should give tangible evidence of the topics discussed above. Therefore I asked the interviewees to choose two objects with two different characteristics. The first one should be an object that the interviewee has consciously chosen into their home because he or she defines their identity through it. I expect this to be an object that they have seen in advertisements, social media or among peers, which is presumably not related to their family traditions and values. The second object should be one that they have unconsciously kept, because they think they are supposed to keep it, because of i.e. family traditions, inherited
values or sense of responsibility. The answers should show the interviewee’s relationship towards two different kind of objects, one kept out of a feeling of responsibility or unconsciously to i.e. continue family traditions and one that has been chosen out of own interest, taste or pleasure. My aim was to find out which is considered more precious or valuable by the interviewee.

The fifth question draws on to the previous question and should encourage the interviewee to think of one object as describing who they are and the other describing who they would want to be. I assume that we choose objects partly because we feel obliged to continue family values. Interesting to me are the objects that we choose to support the construction of our own and new identity. How do we end up choosing them, where do we get the ideas to purchase or collect them and what do we want to express through them?

The last question summarizes the topic of identity and self-expression. It asks the interviewee to mention a way in which they distinguish themselves from others in general. P. Bourdieu claims that we distinguish ourselves from others by having a certain taste or preferences that we believe to strengthen our sense of individuality as well as a sense of belonging.
3.2 Interview Findings

This is a comparative analysis of the conducted interviews in which the visual observations made in the rooms will be taken into consideration, because they support the understanding of the evaluation.

Although none of the interviewees had studied this topic before nor had they looked at their homes from the perspective of how it might define their identity they were still able to analyse why their homes looked the way they did.

All of them pointed out that the apartment they live in was not the idea of their ideal home. This was because of financial reasons. The apartments are affordable\(^1\) and in the lowest price category and therefore targeted by the interviewees. The rooms were arbitrarily assigned to the tenants by HOAS.

Nevertheless the way each interviewee dealt with not being able to fully choose their home was different. Whereas one person conveyed the inconveniences on the circumstances others accepted them and did whatever was possible within those circumstances that contributed to their satisfaction with their homes. This became obvious in the different interiors. E.g. all had bought furniture from second hand retailers, for their cheaper price. Based on the interviewees’ responses to the question of how satisfied they were with their interior and how comfortable they felt in their room I evaluated the perceived coziness of the space. The photographs visualize the functionality and the composition of the furniture, wall decorations and accessories and the use of color and textiles. Ultimately the coziness is a subjective experience of each individual.

The answers were also implying the different relationships towards their possessions in the context of one’s situation. They described each what kind of objects they possess, such as middle-class items, traditional items and personal things and defined who they are in terms of their financial and cultural background as well as their personal interests and their upbringing. Two of the interviewees were foreign nationals which was not immediately obvious in their interior, however became visible once they described what those elements were that represented their cultural background.

Figure 2. Room 1

Figure 3. Room 1 marked in groundplan, Asiakkaankatu 6, Helsinki
Figure 4. Room 2

Figure 5. Room 2 marked in groundplan, Asiakkaankatu 6, Helsinki
Figure 6. Room 3

Figure 7. Room 3 marked in groundplan, Asiakkaankatu 6, Helsinki
As already discovered in the beginning of the interview everyone was able to point out elements that made them different from others and therefore individualistic. Two could also apply that distinction to their homes and make judgements on how their homes possibly define them. One person stated: “I think that all Finnish homes of people in their twenties look the same and yes my home is like that too”. This indicates that trends are not only unconsciously followed but chosen. Two interviewees could not explain why they did their interior in a certain way, of which one person stated that he purchases whatever he needs without making an additional effort of designing his home in a certain way whilst the other interviewee pointed out that she does not think that her home is strongly influenced by media or interior design concepts, instead she does things the way she likes without thinking of what others think of it.

To evaluate how the interviewees’ social, economic or cultural background had an impact on their way of living is more complex. This is partly because I do not know how each interviewee has grown up and I do not know anything about their family background and therefore have to rely on their responses. Two interviewees quite clearly explained some of their parents’ values that were visible in their rooms. One interviewee explained that generally young people own very few books, but that her family has always valued books and read a lot and she proved that this appreciation has had an impact on her relationship towards books as well. She owned more books than any other interviewee. She also said (which was already mentioned above) that she thinks that her home is a representation of a middle-class lifestyle, but could not give evidence. The other interviewee said that she has learned to filter what she really needs and therefore purchases furniture for instance more consciously. This results from the fact that she moved to Finland from abroad and then in Helsinki moved again and now appreciates to own less. But she has kept quite many objects which she has inherited from her family back home. They are objects that are representations of her culture, such as embroideries with traditional symbols.

Drawing on the responses of the previous questions one interviewee was clearly conscious of how her home defines her position in society, how her parents’ values have been adopted to her current home and how her home looks similar to the many other peoples’ homes in her age group. Another person was aware that her home is not only satisfying the most essential human needs but is also a place where she expresses herself and her interests. One person seemed not to be interested at all in representing who he is and where he comes from through his interior. As an outsider I did not notice anything that could have indicated i.e. his Vietnamese background or that he played soccer and was very passionate about it.

Medal, Theremin and Salt Crystal Candlestand

These were the objects (see figures 8, 9, 10) that the interviewees chose consciously into their homes to express their identity. They had either gotten them for an action (medal) or purchased them (salt crystal candlestand, theremin). These were objects expressed what their interests were (theremin=music, medal=soccer) and who they wanted to be (theremin=a person being able to play it). They were also objects that were consciously chosen to represent and continue their background (salt crystal candlestand=inherited family values).
Caramel Box, Lamp Shade and Small Silk Frame

These were the objects (see figures 11,12,13) that were unconsciously kept by the interviewees. The caramel box was an object the interviewee had received from a friend who had visited London and had brought this as a souvenir. The interviewee stated that he did not like caramel and therefore gave me the actual caramel from inside the box. But he kept the box because he felt responsible to value his friend’s polite gesture. One interviewee had a lamp shade that she had inherited from her grandmother. She said that she tried using it and “it actually even works” but it is not the main source of light in her room, if at all. It rather stands in the shelf as a reminder of her relationship with her grandmother. One interviewee showed her small silk frame, with a traditional Latvian pattern that she had once made in a crafts camp back home. She could not explain why it was still with her, as it was not of big financial value but she said that it was work after all and therefore she did not bear to throw it away or give it to someone who did not know the context of it.

Comparing the objects that were unconsciously kept and the ones consciously purchased or stored it reveals that the relationships towards these objects is very different. The consciously purchased or kept objects were decisions made by the owner to construct their identity. The objects were representations of who they were and who they wanted to become. They were objects that represented the interviewees’ goals and dreams apart from their predispositions. The objects that were unconsciously kept were expressions of the relationships with other people and did not focus as much on constructing one’s identity but rather reminding one of their given identity and background. Nevertheless both were objects that meant something specific to the owner. From the results we can conclude that identity is the combination of the inherited predispositions and the choices made later in life. The two types of objects show how identity is reiterated in different ways and that possessions are more than just physical evidence of one’s identity. The objects as tangible manifestations of peoples’ origin and their future.

Homes and the possessions in them are one way to study the reiteration of identity. This question was supposed to give the interviewees other options to respond to how they express themselves and how they distinguish themselves from others, if home is not the medium they use to do so. The interviewees explained that they had a weird humor, this drive to always discover new things or passion, which are self-assessments, quite subjective judgements, but clear statements of how identity can be expressed in immaterial ways as well. The interviews were a successful method to analyse how the reiteration of identity is visible in homes and the personal possessions in them. In their materiality they both (home, possessions) provide measurable and comprehensible evidence for one’s identity.
Figure 8. Medal

Figure 9. Theremin

Figure 10. Salt Crystal Candlestand
Figure 11. Caramel box

Figure 12. Lamp shade

Figure 13. Silk Frame
4 Discussion
The aim of this thesis was to find out how people reiterate their identity in their homes. The research problem was approached by studying personal background and upbringing in terms of their influence on identity. The conducted field work gave evidence that homes are a significant element in the reiteration of identity and simultaneously it shed light on the complexity of identity and the ways it is being constructed, expressed and reiterated.

**Relationships with objects**
The focus during field work was kept on material possessions. The homes that were studied all had a fair amount of stuff, but none of the rooms was very full. Therefore M. Czikszenmihalyi’s claim that people with less material goods build stronger relationships with other people could not be examined or proven. As a result from the conducted interviews his claim that people who refuse to invest in the least amount of material goods have less to loose can be proved. All interviewees had strong relationships towards the objects they had consciously purchased.

**Educational level and social origin**
Another focus was on the interviewees’ personal background and upbringing as a determinator on how people reiterate their identity. Pierre Bourdieu says that the forms of cultural capital are representations of what social conditions people come from. They are both inherited and constructed and therefore not completely fixed. The interviews gave evidence that something like cultural capital exists in the embodied, objectified and institutionalized forms. This became obvious through the ways how the interviewees had chosen their style of living. Cultural capital is linked to educational level and social origin. The matter of educational level could not be assessed since all the interviewees studied at universities in Helsinki. The matter of social origin, however, came up in the conversations.

**Self-assessment**
The interviews were strictly structured after theories and concepts by Pierre Bourdieu, therefore the scope in which I could concede can be considered narrow. It became obvious whenever an interviewee could not respond to my question directly. In further research I would have to prepare an alternative way in which to approach interviewees individually. The strict structure also might have influenced the answers I received, in so far as the interviewees gave examples which I anticipated and expected to receive. The conversations
were nevertheless a constructive contribution to the literature review and to my proposed thesis. Upon summarizing the literature review and comparing it to the interviews it is safe to claim that personal background and upbringing are inevitably interconnected to identity and are present in homes.

**Further Exploration**

This thesis raised the question of how much peoples’ gender weighs in studying ways of reiteration of identity through homes and peoples’ relationship with their domestic possessions. The interviews were equally fluent regardless of the interviewees gender, but there were obvious differences in what home meant to female and male interviewees. The female interviewees seemed to adapt to their environment quite well, by accepting the circumstances and by decorating their rooms and consciously shaping it to match their desired look. After all they emphasized that they wanted it to look personal. The male interviewee on the other hand did not even consider that his home could look different from what it did. After a conversation that lasted forty-five minutes we came to the conclusion that his home is maybe not the primary space of self-expression. In further research gender could be a potential focus, which would specify the field of research. At the same time it could distract from the initial question of how identity is reiterated through homes and possessions in homes.
5 References


6 List of Figures

**Figure 1.** Groundplan Asiakkaankatu 6, Helsinki, Retrieved April 24 2018, from https://www.hoas.fi/kohteet/asiakkaankatu-6/

**Figure 2.** Room 1. photographed by Talvikki Kollmann

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**Figure 4** Room 2. photographed by Talvikki Kollmann

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**Figure 8** Medal, photographed by Talvikki Kollmann

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**Figure 10** Salt Crystal Candlestand, photographed by Talvikki Kollmann

**Figure 11** Chocolate box, photographed by Talvikki Kollmann

**Figure 12** Lamp shade, photographed by Talvikki Kollmann

**Figure 13** Silk frame, photographed by Talvikki Kollmann
Appendix 1. Interview outline original

1. Can you tell me about your home in terms of how do you think it describes you?

2. What factors do you think have influenced the way you live in your home?

3. Do you consciously think of how your home defines who you are?

4. Can you tell me about two objects:
   1. one object that you have consciously chosen into your home because you define your identity through it!
   2. one object that you have unconsciously kept or stored because you think you are supposed to keep it, because of i.e. family traditions, inherited values, responsibility etc.!

5. Do you think one object describes who you are and one describes who you want to be/become?

6. How do you distinguish yourself from others (peers who are the same age or belong to the same class i.e. flatmates, students, friends) in general?