

Online spaces have material culture: goodbye to digital post-materialism and hello to virtual consumption

Vili Lehdonvirta

UNIVERSITY OF TOKYO

In early 2009, in the middle of the so-called financial crisis, Nobel Prize-winning economist George Akerlof and Yale economist Robert Shiller published a book in which they argue for the following claim:

To understand how economies work and how we can manage them and prosper, we must pay attention to the thought patterns that animate people's ideas and feelings, their animal spirits. We will never really understand important economic events unless we confront the fact that their causes are largely mental in nature. (Akerlof and Shiller, 2009: 1)

In the history of the study of economic policies and behaviours, there is a well-known pattern where a crisis in the real economy results in a change of the dominant approach used to understand it. The Great Depression of the 1930s resulted in neoclassical dogma being replaced with Keynesian economics. The oil crisis of the 1970s resulted in the Keynesian system being scrapped in favour of monetary economics. The latest global economic downturn, suggest Akerlof and Shiller, highlights a need for psychologically and sociologically informed understandings of economic behaviour.

In sociology and anthropology, there is a long tradition of scholarship dealing with behaviour that is today considered part of the economic sphere. This tradition is based on the observation that one of the most important ways in which we relate to each other and ourselves is through material objects (Douglas and Isherwood, 1978; McCracken, 1990; Mauss, 1990). Gifts express love and gratitude. Possessions establish social standing. Dress and accessories organize people and time into occupations and leisure activities.

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And souvenirs picked up during the course of life become anchors for one's identity. This aspect of life is described by the term 'material culture'. Material objects enter material culture when they are given a meaning. A rock in a field has no meaning, until someone picks it up and uses it to build a house, or adds it to their collection of precious stones.

Our museums are filled with evidence of the material culture of past civilizations, while our landfills are increasingly filled with remains of the material culture of past decades. It has been argued that we are today living in a consumer culture: a particular form of material culture, where consumption is highly separated from production, and has become a primary means of participation in society (Featherstone, 1991; Lury, 1996; McCracken, 1990; Slater, 1997). Consumer goods are used to compete for status and recognition, reach for ontological security and self-identity, and seek solutions to problems, real or imagined. Theories from the sociology of consumption can thus be very helpful in understanding economic behaviour and seemingly irrational patterns of consumption.

During the past 15 years, the widespread adoption of information and communication technologies in everyday life has opened up new arenas for participation. People with access to these technologies increasingly identify with, and seek advice and support from, online peer groups (Caplan and Turner, 2007; Rheingold, 2000; Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006). Existing social relationships are also increasingly managed online, while studies of media use show that the proportion of time spent with electronic media continues to increase even in countries where it is already high (Dentsu et al., 2009; Räsänen, 2008).

This shift towards computer-mediated sociability has given rise to the question of what happens to material culture. Many authors writing about the rise of computer networks have suggested that material culture and such values as possession, exclusivity and hierarchy will be increasingly displaced by a new ethic (Himanen, 2001; Leadbetter, 2008; Levy, 1984; Tapscott and Williams, 2006). This 'post-material' ethic consists of such enlightened values as freedom of access, sharing to the benefit of others, using technology to improve the world, creativity as an end in itself and valuing people based on their mental abilities rather than on their station or material possessions. According to the most extreme view, traditional notions of economic behaviour and consumption are increasingly rendered obsolete. A famous document expressing this view is 'A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace', written by John Perry Barlow in 1996. The quotes below illustrate the spirit:

Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind.

Cyberspace consists of transactions, relationships, and thought itself, arrayed like a standing wave in the web of our communications. Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live.

You do not know our culture, our ethics, or the unwritten codes that already provide our society more order than could be obtained by any of your impositions.

We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth.

Our identities have no bodies, so, unlike you, we cannot obtain order by physical coercion.

Your legal concepts of property, expression, identity, movement, and context do not apply to us. They are all based on matter, and there is no matter here.

In our world, whatever the human mind may create can be reproduced and distributed infinitely at no cost. The global conveyance of thought no longer requires your factories to accomplish. (Barlow, 1996)

The declaration associates the ills and inequalities of the existing world with physical matter. This material culture is contrasted with the non-material culture of cyberspace, which is composed of ideas, language and social relationships. Since information is infinitely reproducible, Barlow argues that there is no need for industry, property and deprivation in the new 'Home of the Mind'.

Subsequent thinkers have shown Barlow's vision to be wrong in three ways. First, non-material culture can produce inequality and exclusion just as well as material culture can do (Brock, 2009; Paolillo, 2001; Sussman and Tyson, 2000). This was so before the internet and continues to be so online. Means of expression and knowledge of symbols distinguish 'us' from 'them' in an online community as surely as they do in an immigrant neighbourhood – maybe more, because few other cues are available.

Second, virtual spaces are not independent of offline identities and institutions, but permeated by them (DiMaggio et al., 2001; Miller and Slater, 2000; Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2002). In many online arenas, material possessions and consumption styles are flaunted openly. Even in anonymous arenas that strive to obscure participants' socioeconomic status from each other, participants' conduct and use of language suggest a great deal about their background (Kendall, 1998). It is true that the mediated and anonymizing nature of online communications, even if imperfect, has offered significant respite for groups from sexual minorities to political dissidents (Chase and Mulvenon, 2002; Mehra, 2004). But, for the most part, virtual spaces integrate into everyday life as opposed to standing apart from it.

Last, virtual space is not an open frontier. If a metaphor must be used, it should rather be described as a built-up area where architecture conditions and coerces every movement: from user interfaces and navigational paths to access control lists and rights management systems (Gillespie, 2007; Lessig, 1999; Yee et al., 2008). These architectures are just as tangible in their effects as the material features of physical environments. And almost two decades of

beliefs, practices, movements and conflicts now exist concerning them (Clark et al., 2005; Jordan, 1999; Lastowka and Hunter, 2004). For example, individuals concern themselves with such issues as how much prestige there is in holding moderator status in a particular channel, to whom should you give access to your private server, and what are your most precious files. These beliefs and practices cannot be described as non-material culture, because they involve assigning cultural meanings to tangible features of digital architecture. It can therefore be said that *virtual spaces have material culture*. After all, virtual spaces are not incorporeal dream worlds, but real artefacts that are experienced through the senses. Parts of these artefacts enter material culture as people appropriate them for different uses, functional and symbolic.

Miyamoto Shigeru of Nintendo has used the phrase 'touchable images' to describe video games (Fukuda, 2000: 6). In today's networked games and online hangouts, images exist not only on one screen, but in a virtual space where they can touch the lives of many people, and obtain a social life. During the past few years, it has become increasingly common for the creators of computer-mediated social arenas to take some of these tangible images, detach them from their surroundings, turn them into objects that can be exchanged between participants, and sell the resulting 'virtual goods' to the participants for real money (Hamari and Lehdonvirta, 2010; Lehdonvirta, 2008; Nojima, 2008; Zackariasson, 2009). For example, what in the online games of the past used to be 'high scores', have in today's so-called social games become 'gold coins'. Both high scores and gold coins are obtained through skilful play, and both are associated with meanings of status and success in the material cultures of the spaces that feature them. But unlike high scores, which are strictly tied to one person, gold coins can be exchanged between participants. Moreover, they can often be purchased for real money.

Recent studies have documented this phenomenon and analysed it from various sociological perspectives, using interviews to examine what kinds of meanings people attach to virtual goods, and observing the purchase, use and exchange of virtual goods to find out what kinds of roles they play in social relations (Landay, 2008; Lehdonvirta, 2009; Lehdonvirta et al., 2009; Martin, 2008). The results of this research show that people consume virtual goods for much the same reasons they consume material goods: to establish social status and live up to the expectations of their peer groups, to build and express identity, and to seek solutions to problems, real or imagined. In other words, the results show that many online arenas are now permeated by that specific type of material culture, consumer culture.

Traditional consumer culture is facing unprecedented challenges today. On the one hand, consumers are told that if they do not consume more, the economy will collapse and everyone will be worse off. Consumption has become a civic duty, and private sentiments should be brushed aside. On the other hand, consumers are told that if they do not urgently cut down on their consumption, the Earth will face a most serious climate crisis. In resolving

this conflict that arises from the dominant understanding of the economy, Akerlof and Shiller's advice to apply more psychologically and sociologically nuanced understandings of economic behaviour is surely useful. But one hopes that we can also take this opportunity to go beyond nuances and think a bit more deeply about what consumption is, and what the economy is for. Studying virtual consumption in online communities affords a unique angle to these questions. If it seems amazing that people would be willing to pay real money for virtual goods, it is good to remember that this is an observation regarding the nature of our consumer culture in general, of which virtual consumption is only a naked example.

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Vili Lehdonvirta, is a researcher at the Helsinki Institute for Information Technology and visiting scholar at the University of Tokyo, Interfaculty Initiative in Information Studies. *Address:* Interfaculty Initiative in Information Studies, University of Tokyo, 7-3-1 Hongo Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 113-0033, Japan. Website: <http://www.hiit.fi/~vlehdonv/>
[email: vili.lehdonvirta@hiit.fi]