Collegiate Cultural Convergence:

Art, Class, and Other Taste Influences In Harvard Dorm Decorations

Museum of Modern Art, New York

Presented to Professor Stanley Lieberson
And Joel Horwich

Fulfilling the research project requirement of Sociology 150:
The Social Underpinnings of Taste

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Sections:

Introduction and Methods:

Through his 1993 project researching the tastes of American home decoration, David Halle[1] demonstrated that socio-economic class (SES) had some influence on the types of artwork displayed in the American home. Though some types of art and decoration were universal, often, class influenced a homeowner's attitude toward, or understanding of the art. Moreover, Halle's observations suggested that people who live in the same neighborhood (similar style and cost of home) were likely to share similar tastes, while across different neighborhoods, more differences would emerge.

Having read Halle's work, I wondered how various influences on the students living in my own college dorm setting would affect their tastes, and whether or not observations of these students would yield results in line with Halle's. It occurred to me having visited several dorm rooms over my years at Harvard that the types of visual decoration put up by students were remarkably similar in nature or style, for instance, posters of pop culture figures, or posters of impressionist paintings. In many cases[2], it seemed, students would put up exactly the same poster. I knew at least ten people from Harvard who displayed posters of Van Gogh's "Starry Night", an impressionist painting housed at MOMA NY, and depicted on this paper's cover.

I hypothesized, based both on these preliminary personal observations, and on my own knowledge of Harvard students, that the differences Halle observed from his participants would not be as pronounced in a sample from a college dorm setting. As suggested by Halle's own study, I believed that despite the "diverse" backgrounds of Harvard students, the fact that all students lived in a very similar setting would cause a convergence of tastes that would mute any

[1] Halle, David. 1993. *Inside Culture: Art and Class in the American Home. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.*

[2] Throughout this study, when basic ranges are adequate, the following terms are used consistently to represent the matching percentage. "Many" (33% or more), "most" or "a majority" (50% or more), "almost all" (90% or more), "every" (100%). When exact percentages are given, they have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

class based influences. All the residences observed come from the same setting and are similar in size. Moreover, each of the student occupants – herein referred to as the survey participants – considers these dorm rooms to be "temporary housing," occupied for at most nine months.

In addition to these basic similarities among my participants' residency situations, three traits unite Harvard students in ways that had not united the participants in Halle's study. First, all participants would be from the same narrow age cohort of college students in general. Moreover, each participant shares a similar intellectual background, as Harvard maintains rigorous admissions standards. Finally, all the participants in my study are living in a shared close-knit community in which diffusion of ideas occurs rapidly through in-house socialization. I believed that these influences would further cause convergence of tastes, leading students to have similar decorations across all other demographic divisions.

The method of this study involved direct observation of participant (Harvard College Student) dorm rooms, and a demographic survey of participants. To find participants for this study, I used Pforzheimer House of Harvard College. Arguably, as students are placed into individual houses by a computer-randomized lottery, the conclusions derived for any house should speak for the college as a whole. Beginning on one floor/hall of the house, I proceeded to knock on every door through the house, asking any residents that were home to participate. Almost every person who answered a door participated, and I continued this process on three floors in four interconnected "halls", or buildings, until sixty-three (63) participants had been surveyed. This method of participant enlistment is representative, as the intent of this project is to examine behavior in a close-knit institutional setting of liked aged people.

Observations of student dorms included a listing of all forms of two-dimensional visual art affixed to the walls of dorm rooms – herein referred to as "decorations" or "visual art" –

excluding some types described in the following section. In a series of follow-up questions, participants were asked where and when they obtained a certain decoration, and why the chose to display it. In the cases of paintings, or posters of paintings or professional photography, participants were also asked if they had studied the represented piece, artist, or school or art, or if they had seen the original work. For posters that advertised events, participants were asked if they had attended the event or participated in its production. Similarly, for posters of pop culture figures, participants were asked if they were fans of the figure[3].

Having conducted my observations, I now realize that more influences are at work than I originally hypothesized. Indeed, as the data will show, there is a striking similarity across all participants of the study in the kind of decoration used, down to the level of the individual piece of art being found in multiple rooms. However, demographic surveying showed that part of this convergence might be in part to the demographic *similarity* between students, as the true level of "diversity" at Harvard may be somewhat overrated. Class differences were sometimes detectable, but were likely tempered by the lack of marked stratification, and by the four influences that I believe tend to converge styles overall: 1) the similar nature of the dorm room, 2) the similar intellectual background of students, 3) the common age cohort of all participants, 4) the fact that all participants are part of the same close-knit community. Theories of "cultural capital" or "art as status symbol" have no apparent application to this study. Participants' primary motivations in decorating were the creation of aesthetic improvement to their otherwise drab dorm rooms, and as a means of self-expression. While the aforementioned influences tended to converge participant decoration styles, strong gender strongly differentiated between differences were observed in the content and manner of decorating rooms.

[3] See Appendix III for a sample of the survey sheet.

The Pilot Study:

Before beginning observations in earnest, I began with a seven person "mini-pilot study" to ascertain the most functional way to conduct the main body of this survey. These pilot surveys brought to light an immediate issue with conducting the full set of observations in a manageable time frame. It quickly became apparent that a study of even only the visual wall art in student dorm rooms was too extensive a topic. For instance, in one room in the pilot study, a person had over fifteen 8.5" X 11" or larger visual art forms, and over thirty postcard/photo size pieces. To observe each one would be a tedious process that would not likely be more telling than using a sampling of the visual art in a room. For this reason, I chose to bracket some forms of decoration. For instance, most participants have color photographs, of the 3" X 5" variety affixed to their walls; many participants have fifteen or more photographs. In doing the pilot study, I decided that these photographs would not become a major focus area of the study[4]. For all rooms when presented, they were simply grouped as "photos". Almost all people who had photographs on the wall of their room said that the photos were either 1) of Harvard friends and events, 2) from personal vacations, 3) of people and places from a hometown. Some students also liked to put up twenty or more postcards that usually came in a genre set (postcards of American 1950s scenes, postcards of European Cathedrals, etc). These sets were also bracketed as one item throughout the study. Certain other wall items were ignored as of the pilot study. It seemed sensible, even before the pilot study, to ignore items on walls such as maps, personal notes and correspondence or any other text on 8.5" X 11" or smaller paper, and functional items

[4] Generalizing for the entire study, it seemed that females were more likely than males to decorate with photographs (and more of them), but as was later discovered, females were more likely to decorate with more items than males in all categories. Sometimes students put up photographs that were not 3" x 5", color, or of the aforementioned three subjects. In these cases of "artistic" photography, or posters of photography, the images were more closely analyzed.

(hat racks, lighting, etc. As of the pilot study, I also decided to ignore any artistic decorations on walls that were not relatively two-dimensional[5].

Finally, the pilot study foreshadowed an interesting finding about perceptions of socio-economic class. In both the pilot and main studies, participants were told "sociologists often place North Americans into one of four socio-economic classes; try to place yourself in one of the following: Working Class (WC), Middle Class (MC), Upper Middle Class (UMC), and Upper Class (UC)." Participants were never given any other descriptions to identify the classes; the choice was one of personal identification alone. In the pilot study, 100% of participants self-identified as upper middle class (UMC). This posed an immediate problem for a project concerned with looking at how class affects taste in a collegiate dorm setting.

This result was at first somewhat surprising. As Harvard provides full need-based aid to its admitted students in a need-blind admissions program, I believed that participants in the study would hail from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. To try to learn more about the home economic situation of these seven pilot participants, I returned to each with a follow-up question I thought would not be offensive, "Do you receive any need-based financial aid?" (This question was subsequently kept in the main study). Three of these pilot respondents did receive aid, while four did not. If, without having defined these classes, we assume that in placing themselves in such categories, participants considered both home economic capital and personal cultural capital, it might not be surprising that most students at an elite institution such as Harvard placed themselves in the UMC. However, as the financial aid question was as evenly split as possible, I decided to add more questions to further decipher how participants self identified in the multiple

[5] A few participants did uncommon things such as affix empty boxes of chocolate to the wall, but such occurrences were too rare to analyze. Also, some students affixed Frisbees, woodcarvings, or other three-dimensional objects that were mostly reminders of things from home, but this 3-D decoration was also uncommon, and thus not a focus of the study.

choice SES question. Including the pilot participants, I asked all surveyed, "what do your parents do?" to add a social element to the SES identification. From the responses to this question, I believe participants strongly associate their SES with the career of their parent(s). After the pilot, I also added an optional multiple-choice income bracket question.[6] The question asked participants to place their family in one of three combined family annual income brackets. The choices were, under $50K, between $50K and $100K, and above $100K. Originally, an income bracket question was not planned for this project, however, in discussions with students in the pilot study, it became evident that an optional question of this nature would not be offensive. Moreover, as dorm rooms themselves are distributed on a lottery system, the rooms themselves cannot be an SES determinant, as was neighborhood/house size in David Halle's study. In the end I concluded that the high proportion of UMC participants is in fact based on an economic and social reality. Appendix I summarizes the socio-economic data revealed through all these questions in a series of tables and shows how I arrived at this conclusion.

The Dorm and Its Context

When David Halle conducted his 1993 study, he opened with a chapter called "The House and its Context" which looked at how the function of the home living space and its placement in a community of similar homes influenced layout and design. One key difference between my subjects and Halle's is that all of the participants in my study live in a single large dorm "house" on the Harvard campus in a semi-urban part of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Unlike the participants in Halle's study, residents of the observed dorm rooms are only temporary

[6] As this optional question is the only difference between "pilot" and "main" participants, the pilot participants were included in the general results for the study, and represent seven of the sixty-three total participants as mentioned from herein.

residents; none will reside in the same room for more than nine months. Bedrooms are almost always some form of rectangle shape, and somewhat small, with 110 to 210 sq ft of floor space.

As I conducted observations, I noticed that none of the participants made any great attempt at conspicuous consumption in their decorations. For instance, none of the rooms observed had any pieces of artwork on the walls that could not be purchased for $20 or less. Hold this thought. Only three participants had any original paintings – though several had original freehand sketches – and of those three, all were painted either by the resident or by a student friend. Almost all decorations in this study could be summed up as posters, magazine cutouts, photographs and postcards, and students' original creations. None of these options are cost-prohibitive. In a few cases, some posters were housed in simple frames, but this was rare, and the frames were never elaborate. Such findings are to be expected in a temporary living situation such as the Harvard dorm rooms. For instance, students are not allowed to bang nails into any Harvard dorm walls, limiting the range of options. Framed objects must be hung from molding hooks and fish wire. Moreover, valuable items like computers are occasionally being stolen out of unattended dorm rooms. These rooms are not the safest places for original or valuable works of art.

In addition to the small and temporary nature of the dorm, privacy is somewhat limited. These rooms are either directly off the public hallway[7], or part of a "suite" in which the bedroom opens into a "common room", a living room like space shared with one or more roommates, which is itself directly off the public hallway. Also, privacy is limited as rooms function as both living and work space, with students coming and going, often at all hours of the night, working or socializing with one another in bedrooms and common rooms. Visitors to individual dorm

[7] By "public" here, it is meant that all 400+ residents of the House share access to the hall.

rooms and suites are frequent because residents' doors are never more than 30 feet apart. The community itself, though bordering the suburban part of north Cambridge, is an ultra high dense living area. In conversations with students discussing this dynamic, I have come to believe that there is also some pressure to "be like everyone else" in the dorm community, which isn't unexpected, as the study participants all fall between 18 and 21 in age. There was a general consensus that putting up fancy pieces of original art might be seen as snobby within the house community. The openness of everyone's private living space prevents ostentatious displays.

The total lack of any religious icons in dorm decorations further demonstrates that the open/public nature of dorm rooms influences student tastes and decoration choices. In David Halle's study of homes, he found that lower middle class/working class homeowners were more likely to put up a religious figure[8], such as the truncated Madonna, in their home. For example, he observed that 78% of working class Catholic homes, but only 40% of upper middle class Catholic homes, depicted such religious iconography. Additionally, he noted that these figures were often out of "public view" in upstairs bedrooms or behind curtains, as some people felt it was "showy" or "rude" to put a "private thing" such as religion in plain view of guests.[9] For all classes in my study, *none* of the rooms depicted religious iconography. As mentioned, the notion of "privacy" in a dorm room, even as part of a suite, is almost non-existent. Thus, students, many of whom are conscious of the religious differences of their many house neighbors, or as described before, are unwilling to be too different from everyone else, choose not to put up such figures. Let me also offer the hypothesis that young North Americans are less likely than older generations to be interested in putting up religious figure/icons at all.

[8] Halle, 60.
[9] Ibid, 174.

As student participants are unlikely to house original pieces of art in their dorm rooms, almost all the decorations I found were student created – collages, drawings, and student taken photographs – or what is commercially available. As was seen in Halle's study[10], among my participants landscape paintings were very popular; 27 out of 63, or 43% of all participants have at least one. However, in *every* case, these landscapes were posters of "famous paintings" by "famous artists", and most were impressionist. Halle noted that only a few wealthy residents of his study had any original landscapes by famous artists, with most works in all class groups, being made by lesser-known artists[11]. While only three of my participants had any original art, *all* of the "landscape"[12] decorations were posters of paintings by famous artists, with a majority of such decorations represented by a handful of artists. As will be elaborated later, students' selections of landscapes are limited to posters that can be bought locally or online. As vendors tend to produce famous well-known pieces, these show up in dorm rooms. It is unlikely that any of the living rooms Halle observed contain a Van Gogh "Starry Night" poster, but seven of them are posted within the living spaces of the 63 participants in my study. Note that this bizarre occurrence is another factor of the context of "dorm life". In both Halle's study and mine we see an affinity for landscapes, but the limitations imposed by "dorm life" increase the likelihood that students' choices, guided by their individual tastes, will converge upon the same work.

Marked Gender Differences: "I got the idea for two flowers from *In Style*"

More so than any other demographic division, gender seemed to have a marked influence on tastes in visual art in dorm rooms. In the study as a whole, there were 28 male and 35 female

[10] Ibid, 59.
[11] Halle, 60.
[12] For my definition of landscape, I use Halle's, "defined as paintings over half of whose contend is land, sky, or water" (59).

participants. While almost all people who answered a door were willing to participate in the survey, I personally observed that females were more excited about participating. While a majority of participants, male and female, were interested in this study and in receiving a summary of conclusions at the end, several female participants volunteered their feeling that "it is fun to talk about the decorations". Such statements were indicative of a larger finding of the study; female participants had a greater affinity than males for decorating walls. Six of 28, or 21% of male participants had rooms with three or fewer items on the walls; two of these had left their walls completely white. Only one of 36, or less than 3%, of female participants had similarly Spartan decorations (said female, an intercollegiate tennis player, had two large tennis posters). Another gender difference is that male participants were somewhat more likely to feature posters what were expressions of fandom toward a modern pop culture figure (bands, movies, celebrities). Fifteen of 28, or 54% of males had at least one poster representing such a figure, whereas only 14 of 35, or 40% of females had at least one such poster. I do not argue that this finding means that males enjoy pop culture more than females; the cause is subtler: Several female participants volunteered their feeling that a consistent theme or aesthetic to their decorations was ideal. One such participant noted that her room had a "purple theme" whereas another noted an "impressionist art" theme. Such themes meant that female rooms would feature only one style of visual art; such participants were unwilling to mix and match styles for aesthetic reasons. Though no specific question of this nature was ever asked, no male participants mentioned a similar aesthetic need and were more likely overall to mix multiple styles of decorations in the same space.

Gender also influenced tastes surrounding the content of visual art forms. For instance, common sense would tell us that even in modern North American society, flowers are typically

associated with females. Whether or not such tastes are inherent or learned/constructed in modern definitions of gender is not to be answered here. Simply put, for whatever reason, such differences in taste are exhibited, and influence decorating habits. Of all 28 male participants, three, or only 11% featured art that depicted a flower or flowers. Of the 35 females, 13 or 37% featured flowers in their artistic decoration choices. Male and Females also differed in their affinity toward, and preferred content, of landscape paintings (in posters). Only 8 of 28, or 29% of male participants had landscapes, though most of those that did had more than one. Of these eight men, seven featured at least one ocean scene, for instance, Winslow Homer paintings, that almost always depicted a stormy ocean. Interestingly, Halle found that of all the landscapes in his study, only two of 349 were "turbulent"[13]. Judging by this odd difference between the landscape owning males in my study, and Halle's look at the general population of home-owning adults, I can only hypothesize that the young single male participants of my study see stormy ocean scenes as a way to decorate with landscapes while remaining "manly"[14]. Some of these of the male-owned landscapes were famous paintings by Monet or Van Gogh, but again, were predominantly nautical scenes, though three were the aforementioned "Starry Night". While several other men featured paintings by Van Gogh and Monet, these were not landscapes, but rather people or cityscapes, such as Van Gogh's "Café at Night".

Women had a much higher affinity for landscapes, with 19 of 30, or 54% possessing at least one, four of whom had Van Gogh's "Starry Night". Possession of at least one landscape often meant possession of multiple, with a majority of women landscape owners having two or more, and 26% of the landscape owning group having *twenty* or more. Typically in the case of these landscape fanatics (five of the 35 females total), participants had cut up several old

[13] Halle, 69.

[14] I make this hypothesis as one of the seven males in my own study with a "stormy sea" poster.

calendars of art typically by Van Gogh or Monet and used these as their sole source of room decorations. Overall, female tastes seemed to favor landscapes far more than male tastes, whose landscapes often focused solely on nautical scenes. Moreover, the content of *all* the women's landscape decorations could best be described as "pastoral".

For all of these noted gender differences, the "average" behavior of participants followed what I would call standard gender roles in contemporary North American society. Men are not "supposed" to like decorating. Periodicals that feature fashion and decorating advice are marketed to a female audience. That some male participants in this study did little or no decorating reaffirms the practice of these social gender guidelines, and demonstrates that they persist even in an institutional setting in which males and females are next-door neighbors and relative "equals". It also suggests why some women in this study went out of their way to talk about aesthetics, or were especially excited about the survey topic. Similarly, flowers in American society have taken a distinctly feminine relevance. Decorating tastes obviously followed this pattern of a flower-female association. As our western society, despite attempts at "gender equalization," is filled with references to the differences between "what it means" to be male or female, male/female decorating differences remain clear.

"Class? Could you be more specific?"

As this study progressed, one question elicited more awkward expressions than any other, namely the question about identifying with a socio-economic class. In several cases, participants asked, "What do you mean" or queried for a range of incomes to go with each SES. In the end, almost all participants placed themselves in one of the two middle categories. Having discussed most of the key gender differences, we will for the time being ignore that distinction. For all 63

study participants, only two labeled themselves working class and only two labeled themselves upper class, about 3% for each class. Thirty-nine, or 62% of participants labeled themselves upper middle class, while the remaining 32% (20 of 63) self-identified as middle class. As mentioned before, the high proportion of UMC or UC participants may be in part due to the perception of relatively high cultural capital or intellectual knowledge of students at an elite Ivy League college. Another likely explanation is that despite Harvard's own efforts to solicit a diverse pool of candidates, wealthier students from better educational backgrounds (good suburban public schools, or private schools) apply in much greater numbers and thus represent a large chunk of the population. The actual economic capital of this large UMC/UC pool seems validated, as depicted more extensively in Appendix I. As only two people labeled themselves UC, I lump them in with the UMC from here on, and similarly I lump the two WC participants with the MC to create a "high" and "low" division of participants[15]. Wealthy participants may feel that upper class has an heir of aristocracy to it that is reserved for "old money" or the "super-rich", but this study is not adequate to determine how class is distinguished. In any case, America is often referred to as the nation of the vast middle class.

There is obviously then one factor about "being a Harvard student" that will tend to influence tastes. Few Harvard students come from "working class" or "blue-collar" homes[16]. Thus, we are likely to see a convergence of tastes, not only because students share those qualities that are necessary to gain admission to Harvard, but also that such students are almost always in the middle class or above. Class based difference, if any, will most likely fall within differences in the wide range of what is seen to be North America's vast Middle Class (the MC and UMC).

[15] Though such a division may not be "natural", as so few participants were at the extremes, the division was at least convenient.

[16] See Appendix I for data.

Indeed, perhaps due to the lack of heavy stratification, tastes seemed to converge even more than the total of participants in Halle's study. Even across the class differences of my participants, class differences were fairy muted. At least regarding styles, members of all classes liked many of the same the same things. For convenience, we can break all participants into two groups, the WC/MC and the UMC/UC. For each participant, I looked to see if he or she had at least one popular culture "fan poster" and separately, at least one poster of "high art"[17]. The results show only slight differences across class, which in the context of this small sample size may be negligible. As show in Table One, 21 of the 41 UMC/UC, or 51% had at least one fan poster, while 13 of 22, or 59% of the WC/MC had at least one fan poster. For high art, the results were similarly close: 25 of 41 UMC/UC, or 61% had at least one poster of high art, while 12 of 22, or 55% of WC/MC participants had high art. As some students in fact had neither high art, nor pop culture fandom posters in their rooms, it is evident that many people must have displayed both, and I found this to be true for both class groups. I would argue that broad class effects are muted in an elite academic institution like Harvard. It is likely that most students have

Table One: Presence of Pop Culture Posters and High Art Poster by SES

	Pop Culture Poster	"High Art"
UC/UMC	21/41 (51%)	25/41 (61%)
WC/MC	13/22 (59%)	12/22 (55%)
Totals	34/63 (54%)	37/63 (59%)

some appreciation of high art, and also as they are all young, most probably also are fans of some form of popular culture. It is these facts, less so than class, that affect these two tastes.[18]

[17] These are my own terms. A "fan poster" is a poster of a contemporary (no earlier than the Beatles) popular culture figure or group or work that is put up as an expression of fandom. A "high art" poster depicts a painting by a famous artist who has achieved placement in a major museum.

[18] Comparing affinity for pop culture fan posters to high art posters for both groups, it seems "high art" is slightly more enjoyed than popular culture decorations at Harvard. An interesting follow-up study might involve a comparison of this survey's results, and a similar study conducted a different academic institution, such as UMASS

Not only do class differences not seem to influence the broad classes of decoration chosen, but the exact pieces of art found in all participants rooms converge at a much greater rate than could possibly be expected in actual homes of the types Hall views in his study. As already mentioned, seven participants had "Starry Night". Other repeats, that is, decorations seen in multiple rooms, and not simply multiple times in the same room, included Van Gogh's "Café at Night", and Picasso's "Las Meninas", and "Don Quixote."[19] Looking at some of the pop culture posters that represented participants' fandom, the films Trainspotting, Amelie, Fight Club, and Breakfast at Tiffany's all had three or more repeats, as did the band Weezer, which notably has an ex-Harvard student front-man. Explanations for these repeats of course include several internal taste similarities that have already been mentioned, but an important external mechanism is also mentioned later.

Despite the similarities between our two "class groups" and the high occurrence of repeat decorations, we do see some subtle differences in how students obtained items that are easily explained by differences in wealth. One subtle difference I noticed is in the way class influenced a participant's foreign connections. I labeled any female participant[20] "foreign" who exhibited one of the following traits: had posters/postcards of paintings or advertisements not made in North-America (but *excluding* all impressionist art), had photographs self-taken or purchased in a foreign setting, or had a poster of anything (including impressionist art) of which the participant could claim she had seen the original while in a foreign nation. I excluded impressionist art because it was already abundant in all class groups. In marking female participants this way, I found that 12 of the 23 UMC/UC females had such a "foreign"

Amherst to gauge the affect of academic elitism on taste, or the effect of having a higher portion the WC/MC group actually be from the working class.

[19] There must have been also several Monet repeats, but as participants often had Monet's in large sets, their individual names or works were not recorded.

[20] This gender restriction was done for simplicity.

distinction among her visual art. In many of these cases, these women had either photographs from a place visited abroad, or had a poster of a painting (impressionist art inclusive) that she had actually seen while abroad, typically at a museum in France. Of the MC/WC females *only one* of twelve got marked "foreign"[21]. None of this class of women had pictures from foreign trips, or had posters of paintings they had actually seen while abroad.

Continuing this comparison of female participants, I noticed one other difference marked by class, which closely paralleled findings in David Halle's study. I noted that the UMC/UC females were more likely to possess paintings of "abstract art"[22]. Of the WC/MC female participants, only three of twelve, or 25% had such art, and in one of those cases, the participant was an aspiring Visual and Environmental Studies (art) concentrator who did her own abstract paintings. Of the UMC/UC female participants, ten of 23, or 43% has at least one form of abstract visual art. This finding mimics that of David Halle's study that most abstracts were in upper class, especially urban homes.[23] In Halle's study, 43.5% of the "upper-middle class" participants had Abstract art, closely matching the finding of my study, while only 2.5% of the "working class" in his study did.[24] While a ten-fold difference exists between my "WC/MC" rate and Halle's working-class rate, this difference is meaningless as my rate represents only one true "working class" respondent. Few participants with abstract art could claim to have ever studied this type of art throughout their education. The question I ought to have asked these women, but didn't know to at the time was, "is your home decorated with any abstract art?" Without this

[21] This female had an abstract painting by Kandinsky that she discovered at a store in Harvard Square, liked, and purchased specifically to decorate her Harvard dorm.

[22] Defining "Abstract Art" is, however, quite difficult, and many people "know it when they see it". For this study we will use David Halle's working definition of the two properties of this style (Halle, 121): "First, it eschewed easily recognizable images of the external world: it was 'non-representative.' Second, it was presented as 'art'. . . and considered of aesthetic value."

[23] Halle, 61.

[24] Ibid, 123.

data I can only hypothesize that the higher SES women are more likely to be familiar with abstract art from their own homes, as suggested by Halle's findings. As most participants mentioned that the "liked the way it looks" as the top reason for choosing any form of "high art", I can only assume the higher class women are more likely to arrive at Harvard already fans of abstract art, and thus likely to decorate with it. Nothing at all suggested that the use of abstract art was a form of exclusionary cultural capital.

The Convergence of Internal and External: "I saw it at The Coop, I liked it, I bought it."

At this point, one might still wonder why "out there" in American homes, styles of art differ more than they do in the Harvard community, despite the class and gender differences that are somewhat to be expected. So far, the explanations we have examined are those of common background, whether economically, culturally, or intellectually based, of most Harvard students. The students who enter Harvard, and associate over a period of years are more likely to have similar tastes than any set of random people plucked from the street. As David Halle saw similarities among homes of the same neighborhood, as these homeowners typically shared an SES, we might be wiser to label all participants in this study as members of the "Harvard Student" SES, a group of predominantly white, upper-middle-class youth, from the suburbs. However, these explanations have only looked at internal factors, that is, aspects of the participant's individual characteristics and upbringing that influence their tastes, and thus decoration choices. It is imperative however, that we examine external influences on the kinds of posters and other visual art that end up on the walls of members of our newly discovered "Harvard Student SES."

When commercially produced posters were found in participant rooms, every effort was made to discover how the poster was obtained, and why. Focusing on posters of paintings or famous photographs, in almost every case, a student had the poster because he or she "liked" what it depicted. In the rest of the cases, the poster was a gift, which reminded the participant of the giver, or the poster included a well-liked quotation, which was favored over the image itself. We could assume, however, there are a huge number of posters that participants in our study might like. Why then, do the posters that make it on the walls of Harvard students, make it, and so many of them reoccur with frequency?

One explanation of the source of poster choices might be called the "Harvard Square" explanation. Residents of Pforzheimer House, the Harvard dorm where this study was conducted, all share Harvard Square as their nearest shopping district. Indeed, 34 of 63, or 54% of all study participants claim that at least one of their posters was purchased because they discovered it at a Harvard Square store, most often The Coop, liked it, and bought it specifically for their dorm room. If this is a typical pattern, we can assume that students' choices are limited first by their tastes, but next by what visual art is actually available locally. I noticed that many posters with only one occurrence in the study were purchased online.

When students did not find their poster at a Harvard Square store, some other "Harvard" connection often underlay the choice. Several participants mentioned that they had found some of their art in the "basement" of their dorm, which meant this art was in storage and unclaimed from the previous year. Also, some participants mentioned that they purchased their art from the previous year's graduating seniors in May. This fact reveals two key behaviors that are present in the Harvard students. First, that graduating seniors are selling their room decorations suggests that these decorations were purchased specifically and only for their Harvard dorm room, not

their future permanent residence. Almost all participants in the survey mentioned that at least one decoration was purchased specifically to decorate the dorm room. That younger students are buying from graduating students suggests that the same forms and style of art are circulating within the community. This dynamic in part explains why certain works or styles appear in high quantities.

While student's choices are somewhat limited by all of the aforementioned factors, and while influences on taste also tend to converge, the reasons student list for seeking decorations in general are few, and widely shared. The quotation that begins this section paraphrases the largest body of responses that I got when asking participants of this study why they had chosen any particular piece of artwork. While thus far we have focused on the various influences on individual tastes, we have not yet made a direct correlation between taste and actual behavior. In his study, David Halle concludes that theories such as "cultural capital" or "art as a status symbol" are too simple to explain his findings.[25] I conclude that neither theory has any relevance whatsoever to the participants of my study. Cultural capitalists would generally argue that knowledge of art is used as an exclusionary device. There is no evidence to suggest this finding whatsoever in the community I studied. When asked why they had put up a particular piece, my participants' number one response was "I have it because I like it". In some longer discussions on the matter, participants noted that their decorations served three main purposes. One was to improve the appearance of the "institutional off-white" walls and plain décor of the rooms they obtained each fall. The second purpose was often to create reminders of cherished people and places; photographs, which were not a heavy focus of this study, usually satisfied this need. The third key purpose, sited frequently, (exact numbers were not kept) was that decorations were a

[25] Halle, 82.

"representation of the self," that is, however simple, room decorations are a means of self-expression. While a handful of rooms in this study were decorated completely with, say, impressionist art, at the very least, such participants remarked that they were a huge fan of the style, or that the style reflected their personality. Most rooms however include other forms of "self-expression". When a poster of a pop culture figure was present in a room, a participant always said that he or she was a fan of the figure depicted, and that the poster was a representation of that fandom, with 34 of 63, or 54% of participants having at least one such decoration in their room. In a category similar to these fandom posters, I recorded the number of participants who had at least one of what I refer to as a "personal affiliation" decoration. Such decorations were visual representations of some affiliation the participant had outside the confines of his or her room, excluding personal photographs, and were found in 30 of 63 rooms, or 48%. Such decorations included posters of events in which the participant had been an organizer or attendee, decorations that represented a hobby or team, or a local, state/provincial, or national affiliation. For instance, this study included seven participants from Texas. Of these, five had a decoration (four flags, one advertisement) that made direct reference to Texas. Several participants had publicity posters for Harvard campus events they had worked on. Some of these participants volunteered that in addition to "self-expression" these decorations represented fond memories. Aesthetic appeal ("it looked good"), pop culture fandom, fandom of artists or styles, self-expression, and captivation of memories were the reasons given by almost all participants to explain their choices. Nothing about the participant responses or the actual choices ever hinted remotely at the possibility of a cultural capital explanation for art choices.

The "art as status symbol theory" is equally irrelevant in the setting of the college dorm, as any work of art viewed in the study, except for participants' own creations, is commercially

available to one and all. Even in cases where someone might have purchased a print in France, a person without the means to travel abroad can easily purchase the same print online. Moreover, recall that at the beginning of this paper, I highlighted the fact that conspicuous consumption was not an apparent motivator in any of the decorations. As mentioned before, it is unlikely that students within the tight-knit dorm community would actively attempt to set themselves apart from their fellow students in any way, let alone acquisitions of expensive art in a temporary living setting.

A Model For The Behavior of Dorm Decorators:

Having discussed all of the preceding data, it is now time to create a model for the behavior that occurs in the decoration of Harvard dorm rooms. I would argue that the decorating habits of my participants and their peers are a form of collective behavior as defined by James Coleman, and cited by Professor Lieberson in his recent work *A Matter of Taste.* Lieberson summarizes[26] Coleman's three general properties of collective behavior: "

- They [that is, forms of collective behavior] involve a number of people carrying out the same or similar actions at the same time.
- The behavior exhibited is transient or continually changing, not in an equilibrium state.
- There is some kind of dependency among the actions: individuals are not acting independently."

We have already explored how my participants' choices of style and identical pieces converge in a way not common in the main population, demonstrating the first property. We can assume that the second property is true, but looking only at the present, cannot prove it. Common sense dictates that college students' tastes will shift, as they have over the past. We have just

[26] Lieberson, Stanley. 2000. *A Matter of Taste: How names, fashions, and culture change. New Haven: Yale University Press.* Pg 143.

examined that the third property is also true; students are depending upon interaction within their dorms (buying off of seniors, getting ideas from fellow students, finding unclaimed decorations) that demonstrate how students' individual decoration choices in part rely on decisions already made or being made by other students.

Adding this notion of collective behavior to our picture, we can now construct a model for how various influence on taste interact to have a *net effect* which causes *convergence* of decorating behaviors in the community setting observed.

1. There is no individual privacy. At any given time, a student knows how the rooms of his housemates are being decorated.
2. Some students will feel a need not to greatly differ in style selection or value of decorations to other students. An aversion to being very different will push choices toward convergence.
3. A student's commercial decoration purchases are primarily limited to what can be found online, or at a local venue, or from other house residents. This limitation will tend to push choices toward convergence.
4. All students studied are living in the same style housing where petty thefts are frequent, and residency is short. This common trait will tend to converge choices toward inexpensive commercial items and self-creations.
5. Similar educational backgrounds will push tastes and familiarity with different styles of decoration toward convergence.[27]
6. The youth of all students will converge tastes, resulting, for instance, in a higher proportion of pop culture type decorations than would be seen in the general population.
7. The different socio-economic backgrounds of students' home life will tend to cause divergence along class lines in some styles and range of familiarity with some decorations but the extent of divergence will be muted somewhat by #2 and #4 (no conspicuous consumption).

[27] Although this postulate is not discussed at length in this study, it is perhaps the most obvious and requires the least discussion.

8. As students are not evenly spread among SESs, but heavily lumped in the upper-middle class, overall, tastes will converge.
9. *For students in the Harvard dorm setting, the styles and individual selections of dorm decorations will be remarkably more similar across a sample of dorm residents than a sample of actual homeowners, even compared against homeowners within a single class and neighborhood. Gender differences, pervasive throughout society, will be the main cause of different behaviors, and of course also, the individual personalities of the decorators.*

It is very important to note that the results of this study tell us nothing about the *specific tastes* we would find in a survey of American college dorm rooms. As Harvard is an obvious standout among educational institutions, we would expect that some of the styles and tastes prominent in decoration in this study (perhaps abstract or impressionist art) would be less common at a state school, (but perhaps even more common at a school for the arts). At the same time, as the age cohort for almost all undergraduate colleges is the same we would expect some tastes (for instance, pop culture posters for films such as "Fight Club) to be similar across such a survey. What if anything then, does my survey tell about dorm life decorating in general? At most, this survey reveals that styles will *tend to converge* though *which styles each school converges upon may differ.* If we believe that students at all or almost all colleges are like Harvard students in 1) youth, 2) shared community of a dorm hall, 3) shared intellectual achievement/background *within the school*, and 4) similar size and residency of duration of rooms, we could conclude that styles will tend to be similar with most marked differences based on *gender* and *socio-economic status.* Of course, for any two people, all of the differences between their decorating choices can be explained by the personality and sum of life experiences of the two individuals.

Appendix 1:
Socio-economic classes.

After adjustments in the pilot study, a series of questions were asked to determine the socio-economic classes of the study participants, and to see what factors influenced a participant's self-placement in one of these categories.

From Table One, note that a majority of participants saw themselves as Upper Middle Class, and almost all participants put themselves in one of the two middle categories.

Table One: Male, Female, and Total Responses to SES Question

	Upper Class	Upper Middle Class	Middle Class	Working Class	Totals
Males	1/28 (3.5%)	17/28 (60.7%)	9/28 (32.1%)	1/28 (3.5%)	28/28 (100%)
Females	1/35 (2.9%)	22/35 (62.9%)	11/35 (31.4%)	1/35 (2.9%)	35/35 (100%
Both	2/63 (3.2%)	**39/63 (61.9%)**	20/63 (31.7%)	2/63 (3.2%)	63/63 (100%)

From Table Two, note that there is a strong correlation between self-selected SES and Income.

Table Two: Income Ranges of Four SESs.

	I < $50K	$50K<I<$100K	$100K<I	Totals
UC	0/2 (0%)	0/2 (0%)	2/2 (100%)	2/2 (100%)
UMC	0/39 (0%)	6/39 (15.4%)	23/39 (59%)	29/39 (74%)*
MC	3/20 (15%)	14/20 (70%)	3/20 (15%)	20/20 (100%)
WC	2/2 (100%)	0/2 (0%)	0/2 (0%)	2/2 (100%)
All Groups	5/63 (8%)	20/63 (31.7%)	28/63 (44%)	53/63 (84%)*

*Row totals do not equal 100% because only 84% of participants answered this question, with three abstentions, and seven "pilot study" participants.

From Table Three: Note that almost all of the MC/WC participants are on financial aid, whereas a majority of the UC/UMC is not. We can conclude from Tables Two and Three that people strongly consider their economic status when picking an SES.

Table Three: Answers to "Do you receive any need based financial aid" by SES.

	No Aid	Financial Aid	Totals
UC/UMC	26/41 (63.4%)	15/41 (36.7%)	41/41 (100%)
MC/WC	2/22 (9%)	20/22 (91%)	22/22 (100%)
All Groups	28/63 (44.4%)	35/63 (55.6%)	63/63 (100%)

On the following chart, note how perceptions of SES are strongly tied to parents' job type (professional vs. white/pink vs. blue collar).

Parents Professions, By SES (Appendix I Continued)

Upper Class

2 Lawyer
Business Executive

Upper Middle Class

6 Lawyer
6 M.D. specialist or surgeon
5 M.D.
5 Psychologist
5 Small Business Owner
4 Research Scientist
3 Professor
2 Judge
2 Manager
2 Nurse
2 Administrator
Speech Pathologist
Librarian
IT Architect
Photographer
Business Publisher
College Counselor
Computer Designer
Music Teacher
Journalist
C.E.O./Media Buyer
Office Manager
Optical Equipment Technician
Diesel Mechanic (*Blue collar)*
Orthodontist and educator
Quality care specialist
Ex World Bank
Ex Engineer
Office clerk
College Executive
Travel Agent
Priest (Episc.)
Ex-Analyst
Designer

Middle Class

4 Teacher
3 State Employee
2 Professor
2 Nurse
2 Real Estate
2 Guidance Counselor
2 Secretary
2 Small import business
2 Gov Employee
Assistant Director of Association
Administrator
Farmer (only “rural” participant in study)
Librarian
Medical and Legal Illustrator
Computer Company
M.D.
Computer Engineer
Store Clerk
Engineer
Stocks
Social Worker
International Trade
Computer Programmer

Working Class

Construction Worker (*Blue Collar*)
Cab Driver (*Blue Collar*)
Fast Food Manager

Number of careers is greater than 63, as many participants had multiple working parents, or in one case, multiple sets of parents.

Appendix II: Additional Demographic Data

All survey participants were asked to identify whether they lived in an urban, rural, or suburban setting, and also to self-identify their race or ethnicity. The vast majority of responses to these questions were "white" and "suburban" and in the end, it seemed there was not enough variance to discuss these variables. The full results follow:

Home Living Area:

Urban:	11/63	17%
Suburban:	45/63	71%
Rural:	7/63	11%
Total:	63/63	99% (figures do not add to 100 due to rounding)

Self-Identified Race/Ethnicity

White:	42/63	67%
Asian:	7/63	11%
Hispanic:	5/63	8%
Mixed:	4/63	6%
Jewish:	3/63	5%
Chinese:	2/63	3%
Af/Am:	2/63	3%
Indian:	1/63	<2%
Japanese:	1/63	<2%
Lebanese:	1/63	<2%
No response:	1/63	<2%
Total:	69/63	<111% *

*(Figures do not add to 100 because participants were free to make multiple responses)

Interview and Observation Sheet (Appendix III: SAMPLE)
Dorm Decoration/Art Project
Michael Hines, Sociology 150

M / F I<50 50<I<100 100<I

Age: Mother:

Father:

Upper Class

Upper Middle Class FA NA

Middle Class

Working Class

Home State/Province: U S R

Self-Identified Race or Ethnicity:

Visual Art Decorations: (Continue On Reverse) (Questions: Why This Item? Before or After Harvard? Did you learn something about this art? Interesting Follow-ups.)

Works Cited

Halle, David. 1993. Inside Culture: Art and Class in the American Home. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lieberson, Stanley. 2000. A Matter of Taste: How Names, Fashions, and Culture Change. New Haven: Yale University Press.