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# Using Cultural Repertoires during Unsettled Times

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This research draws on the theory of culture in action, which explains how consumers selectively mobilize their cultural repertoires to understand and solve daily problems. Contemporary life, however, is increasingly unsettled, challenging the adequacy of consumers' repertoires and how they use existing institutional cultural resources. This qualitative study identifies four ways in which consumers use their cultural repertoires and institutional resources during unsettled times. Formulaic uses are when consumers mobilize familiar cultural tools and existing resources to resettle. Versatile uses are when consumers develop new cultural tools to transform while working within demanding institutional resources. Freewheeling uses are when consumers mobilize familiar cultural tools for play but rework institutional resources to be less demanding. Finally, troubleshooting uses are when consumers extend their existing cultural tools to suffice but reject institutional resources. These varied uses of culture capture how consumers either mobilize or develop their cultural repertoires and institutional resources to serve different ends. This study provides a more dynamic, pragmatic, and nuanced explanation of how consumers summon culture to solve problems during unsettled times. A conceptual model explains this process, and the discussion highlights the theoretical contributions.

*Keywords*: culture in action, cultural repertoire, institutional resources, unsettled times, strategies of action, cultural scripts

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Imagine consumers planning their wedding as they transition from single to married life. Significant institutional resources exist, from Hollywood movies offering idealized cultural scripts of romance to books, websites, and professional services giving pragmatic guidance. Moreover, consumers may draw on their familiar cultural tools, such as using their artistic skills to create beautiful floral arrangements or using their organizational skills to coordinate the help of friends and family. Now, imagine trying to plan this wedding during the uncertainty of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, when venues were shuttered, people were afraid, and health guidance was lacking. Consumer research often focuses on consumers who are culturally equipped (Maciel and Wallendorf 2017; Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009; Seregina and Weijo 2017), but what do most consumers do when their cultural tools and institutional resources are inadequate during such unsettled times?

Consumers draw on their existing cultural resources to make sense of and organize their lives (Berger and

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Luckman 1964; Zilberstein, Lamont, and Sanchez 2023). In this study, we focus on consumers' cultural repertoires, or the existing cultural tools they use to solve problems such as skills, habits, cultural scripts, and narratives (Crockett 2017; Swidler 2001b). For example, research finds that consumers engage in daily habits and routines to feel secure (Giddens 1984; Wilk 2009). Ordinary domestic habits such as organizing, cleaning, and baking make consumers feel safe and calm (Arsel and Bean 2013; Dupuis and Thorns 1998). Consumers also mobilize cultural symbols and classification systems to create settled lives of predictable normality (Dion, Sabri, and Guillard 2014).

Yet contemporary consumers live in unsettled times (Swidler 1986). Modern life is increasingly uncertain, as consumers face both significant challenges, such as pandemics, global warming, and economic turbulence, and moderate challenges, such as new technologies and models of remote work (Johnston et al. 2022; Zilberstein et al. 2023). Researchers show that consumers find these unsettled times uncomfortable and that they draw on their cultural repertoires to restore a sense of ontological security (Phipps and Ozanne 2017; Thomas and Epp 2019).

During unsettled times, however, consumers' cultural repertoires are often taxed by new demands. Extant literature offers some guidance on how consumers mobilize cultural repertoires during uncertainty. For example, surfers draw on their extensive knowledge of nature to anticipate unpredictable and potentially dangerous weather conditions (Canniford and Shankar 2013). During an extended drought in Australia that created unsettled times, many consumers tried to reestablish their typical habits (Phipps and Ozanne 2017); however, a few consumers met this uncertainty by building new private water-provisioning systems for their homes. These consumers culturally retooled developing new knowledge, skills, and habits. Similarly, life transitions are often unsettling, such as leaving college, starting a new job, or getting married (Swidler 2001a). New parents need significant skills and capabilities to align new practices as they transition into parenthood (Thomas and Epp 2019). Thus, extant research suggests that consumers with well-developed and rich cultural repertoires are more likely to adjust to the uncertainty of unsettled times.

We draw from Swidler's (1986, 2001a, 2001b) work, which highlights the importance of understanding consumers' cultural repertoires. Rather than assuming that consumers adopt culture and use it consistently, cultural repertoire theory encourages observing how they actually use culture, which may range from accepting, modifying, or rejecting it to using it inconsistently, contradictorily, or superficially. Moreover, Swidler argues that how people mobilize their cultural repertoire differs during settled and unsettled times. During settled times of certainty, little cultural retooling occurs because people mobilize familiar cultural tools that work reasonably well. During unsettled times, however, consumers' existing cultural tools are tested by new problems arising amid uncertainty. Thus, consumers may need to adapt existing cultural tools or develop new ones. Swidler (1986, 2001a) notes, however, that how people adjust their cultural repertoires during unsettled times is still unclear. People are often "reluctant to discard familiar strategies of action for which they already have cultural equipment" (Swidler 2001a, 105).

In addition to their cultural repertoires, consumers can mobilize institutional cultural resources (Thompson and Tian 2008). Culture offers publicly available meanings external to the individual that facilitate certain kinds of action (Lizardo and Strand 2010). Much like field-specific resources (Bourdieu 1990), institutional cultural resources are assets provided by market actors that consumers use to structure their consumption. These institutional resources include, for example, magazines and certification courses that legitimize and establish expertise, such as in the craft beer industry (Maciel and Wallendorf 2017). They also involve guidelines, such as lifestyle blogs that direct homemaking "on everything from paint colors to mattress brands" (Arsel and Bean 2013, 904).

Our guiding research question is, How do consumers use both their cultural repertoires and institutional resources during unsettled times? In answering this question, we extend the limited research on what consumers do when institutional resources are lacking and times are unsettled. We focus in particular on the travel market, specifically exploring the home exchange market in which consumers temporarily exchange their personal homes.

Travel is an unsettling time of uncertainty (Karl 2018), and home exchange is likely to be even more unsettling. Consumers do not usually exchange their homes with strangers and those who do often face challenges of finding suitable exchange partners and living in an unfamiliar home, city, and country. Problems invariably arise. Consumers must solve these problems themselves because the home exchange market offers few institutional resources other than providing an online exchange platform and general advice. Swidler (2001a, 19) argues that culture is difficult to study because when it "fully takes, it so merges with life as to be nearly invisible." However, consumers' use of culture is more visible during unsettled times of travel because they readily draw on cultural repertoires and institutional resources to understand and structure these experiences. Thus, home exchange is an ideal context for exploring how consumers use culture during unsettled times.

## CULTURE IN ACTION

### Mobilizing Institutional Cultural Resources

A wealth of research within consumer culture theory investigates how consumers mobilize rich institutional cultural resources to inform their consumption experiences.

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Canniford and Shankar (2013) demonstrate how consumers frame experiences of nature through an assemblage of heterogeneous resources, including mythic narratives, discourses, technologies, and ritual and embodied practices. Arsel and Bean (2013) show how culture is orchestrated into practices through discursively constructed normative systems of taste regimes. Similarly, cosplayers source their ludic activities from the well-loved "geek culture" arising in popular media (Seregina and Weijo 2017). Thus, market institutions promulgate rich cultural resources through magazines, websites, and transmedia brands (Thompson and Tian 2008). Cultural scripts are common institutional resources. A cultural script is a plan for action that is widely shared, such as the common sequence of actions for going to the movies, attending a concert, or traveling abroad.

Institutional cultural resources often provide a common approach to consumption (Crockett 2017). For example, cultural scripts offer clues that help people select an appropriate course of action in a specific situation (Van den Berg 2008), or the marketplace orchestrates cultural resources into a taste regime, offering consumers a coherent experience of soft modernism (Arsel and Bean 2013). Consumers also use institutional resources, such as aesthetic standards and certification programs, to structure consumption for better taste engineering (Maciel and Wallendorf 2017). Institutional cultural resources provide external scaffolding that consumers use for ordered patterns of action (Lizardo and Strand 2010).

When consumer research explores institutional resources in use, the consumers studied are often the most informed, motivated, and resourced. The surfers in Canniford and Shankar's (2013) study draw on rich cultural resources to frame their experiences. One informant explains how books by Thoreau, Emerson, and London help him experience nature as "a call of the wild" (1056). Another informant notes how he romantically scripts nature as "the opposite of this modern idea that you can just go and buy the commodity of the vacation" (1058). Similarly, Maciel and Wallendorf's (2017) middle-class male consumers are culturally well-equipped to pursue taste engineering. These consumers are employed in professions requiring analytical skills, which help them master aesthetic complexity and ambiguity to become certified beer tasters. Although these studies offer important insights on the translation of institutional resources into cultural practices, they examine a more unified and committed use of culture as achieved by a homogeneous group of consumers mastering structured institutional cultural resources (Maciel and Wallendorf 2017).

However, consumers are not always informed, motivated, or resourced, and thus may mobilize institutional resources with more diversity, especially during unsettled times. For example, consumers' use of institutional resources is not always masterful. Consumers find that the cultural work of cosplay is difficult, is time-consuming, and requires significant expertise (Seregina and Weijo 2017). Although the challenges of crafting cosplay outfits are appealing, the inherent ambiguity leads to both triumphs and failures. Triumph occurs when crafting and performing result in a transformative experience of being "someone else for a day" (Seregina and Weijo 2017, 147). But failures are also common, such as failing to master materials or the character's performance. Similarly, parenting is a domain in which vast institutional cultural resources are available, but these resources are often conflicting, ambiguous, and difficult to master (Thomas and Epp 2019). Although intensive parenting is a pervasive cultural script among middle-class North Americans, institutional guidance is often conflicting.

During unsettled times, consumers may find these institutional resources inadequate, which could also increase the diversity and variety of uses. However, studies assume that consumers are equipped and motivated to do this cultural work (Canniford and Shankar 2013, Phipps and Ozanne 2017). As such, little is known about how consumers, who are less informed, committed, and resourced, use institutional resources. Unsettled times also affect how consumers use their cultural repertoires.

## Cultural Repertoire Theory

Cultural sociologist Ann Swidler (2001a) proposed a theory of culture in which people selectively draw from a repertoire of cultural resources or tools. A person's repertoire is the discrete set of cultural resources available, which include concepts, scripts, interpretive frames, myths, symbols, habits, and skills. People know more culture than they use; some culture is rich, developed, and confidently used, while other culture can be shallow, undeveloped, loosely held, easily altered, held in reserve, or even ignored or rejected (Swidler 1986).

Swidler's work has revitalized the study of culture in sociology by showing the various ways consumers mobilize cultural repertoires in specific contexts (Garrett 2016). Consumers' cultural repertoires provide a range of cultural understandings that they can use to solve problems (Crockett 2017; Maciel and Wallendorf 2017). Because cultural repertoires provide many lines of action, consumers can be inconsistent; cultural inconsistency can be beneficial though if it allows consumers to be more adaptable (Vaisey 2019). Swidler (2001a, 82–83) also suggests that people are better prepared to solve problems when they have rich and developed repertoires because "they can shift justifications for their actions" and "mobilize different meanings to organize different lines of action." Nevertheless, people tend to rely on what they know best because cultural retooling is costly (Swidler 2001b).

This cultural repertoire theory has similarities to Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus because people's

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cultural repertoires are also linked to their social location in a field. However, repertoire theory differs from the rigidity of habitus because more opportunities exist for culture to conflict and for people to improvise as they situationally leverage their repertoire (Swidler 2001a). Swidler's (2001a) approach is complementary to Bourdieu's because consumers pursue projects that are shaped not only by their habitus but also by institutional cultural structures (Maciel and Wallendorf 2017). Cultural repertoire theory does not assume that cultural resources are necessarily coherent or organized (Weber 2013), which differs from the defined logics of institutional theory. Cultural repertoires are assumed to be less rigid, encouraging researchers to focus on how consumers strategically use cultural tools in practice (Lizardo and Strand 2010). This theory encourages a better understanding of "what different kinds of culture" people use (Swidler 2001a, 186).

Although the idea of cultural repertoires is appealing, researchers are often stymied by problems in conceptualizing and measuring this complex and contingent concept (Garrett 2016; Weber 2013). Toward that end, we examine how people employ cultural repertoires, focusing on interpretive frames and strategies of action. Interpretive frames are the general schemas people employ to orient themselves. Strategies of action capture persistent ways that people get things done. These concepts are important parts of cultural repertoires because they emphasize the more enduring aspects of culture as a means for action (Swidler 2001a).

*Interpretive Frames.* Interpretive frames are schemas through which people make sense of their social world (Goffman 1974). They provide a shared outlook and common behaviors that are often carried in "symbolic vehicles" such as stories, tales, sayings, and rituals (Swidler 2001a, 12). This concept differs from Weber's (2013) notion of goal-oriented actors, in which culture provides the ends (e.g., desire for salvation) and instead focuses on how people pursue their interests (e.g., self-discipline) (Swidler 1986). Interpretive frames provide a general approach and justification for reading the world and determining the appropriateness of actions in different situations (Swidler 2001a). Thus, consumers mobilize interpretive frames to grasp the nature of an experience, to anchor the kind of experience possible, and to know how to respond appropriately (Garrett 2016).

People do not explicitly decide their interpretive frames; instead, these frames arise from the flow of social life. Social life is dynamic, and consumers often consider the usefulness of multiple frames to develop lines of action. For example, mutual respect is a common interpretive frame that people use in relationships to signal that the other person is valued and expected to follow their beliefs and meet their needs (Swidler 2001a). If an interpretive works, consumers will often persist using it to justify their positions.

*Strategies of Action.* Individuals' cultural resources can "harden into formulas" that become their common strategies of actions (Swidler 2001a, 55). Consumers' strategies of action are "the persistent ways of ordering action through time" (Swidler 1986, 273). These persistent patterns arise across different contexts, such as when consumers activate their social networks to find a job, meet a partner, undertake extensive research to select a university, or buy a vacuum cleaner. These strategies of action are influential in shaping what people do, "because people can most easily construct strategies of action for which they already have the cultural equipment" (Swidler 2001a, 86). People are more likely to continue what they are good at doing because new skills, habits, and styles are difficult to learn (Swidler 2001a). People may change their ends relatively easily when facing new experiences, but continuity is still likely to exist in their strategies of action (i.e., how they achieve various ends).

## Cultural Repertoires in Settled and Unsettled Times

Swidler (1986, 2001a) explains how people mobilize their cultural repertoire differently during settled and unsettled times. Settled times are periods of greater certainty in which people employ well-known strategies of action that work well enough. Little need exists for consumers to culturally retool. During unsettled times, however, people operate in uncertainty, which often demands the development of new cultural tools. For example, married life is an unsettled time in which old strategies of action that once worked in single life often no longer work in married life. Nevertheless, Swidler notes that these "new" strategies largely draw on an existing repertoire that is reworked. In unsettled times, established cultural ends are jettisoned with apparent ease, and culture becomes more salient as people reorganize their lives. Thus, an unmarried consumer may have pursued a cultural end of independence and privileged the means of being a cultural omnivore. Upon marrying, this consumer may jettison the ends of independence in favor of interdependence. However, this consumer is unlikely to give up an omnivore lifestyle for which he or she is culturally equipped.

Swidler (1986, 2001a) also notes that settled and unsettled times form a continuum, as there are "more and less settled lives and more and less settled cultural periods" (Swidler 2001a, 94). Whether people develop new strategies of action depends on how unsettled their lives are and how willing they are to undertake cultural retooling. Lizardo and Strand (2010) argue that settled and unsettled times are also distinguished by whether clear institutional structures exist to guide action. Unsettledness is not "restricted to the agent's reflexive recognition that things

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are in fact unsettled" but can be a result of inadequate institutional structures (220).

### Culture Flourishes during Unsettled Times

Swidler (2001a, 130) argues that "culture proliferates where action is problematic." In marriage, two cultural scripts flourish. The romantic cultural script is widespread and proposes that people make a decisive choice (i.e., "love at first sight"), believe a unique partner exists (i.e. "one true love"), discover their true self as they overcome obstacles, and commit to enduring love (i.e., "live happily ever after") (Swidler 2001a, 112, 114). The romantic cultural script is historically rooted in ideals of courtly love but continues to thrive in contemporary society. The cultural script of romance is an *idealized* one that shares a common sequence of action, but in this case, it is exceptional (Canniford and Shankar 2013).

In the case of contemporary marriage, most couples interviewed in Swidler's (2001a) study were skeptical of and explicitly rejected this idealized cultural script of romance. Instead, they asserted a second cultural script called "prosaic realism." The cultural script of prosaic realism asserts that love grows gradually and is uncertain, people can love several people in different ways, love thrives when partners are compatible, and enduring love requires hard work and compromise. We label this as a "pragmatic" cultural script because it captures how couples practically adjust to keep marriage going. Thus, a more generalized extension of Swidler theorizes that consumers can draw on idealized cultural scripts or modify them to be pragmatic cultural scripts (see also Thomas and Epp 2019).

Swidler (2001a) draws attention to the varied ways that people use cultural scripts. She demonstrates how married couples flexibly use both scripts of romance and prosaic realism to understand their experiences. Couples use the idealized cultural script of romance because marriage, as an institution, requires that they commit to one unique person. The institutional demand that marriage is a commitment between two people reinforces the romantic idealized cultural script, helping couples make sense of marriage even if they explicitly reject this idea. Nevertheless, couples are left to figure out how to stay in the institution of marriage. The pragmatic cultural script of prosaic realism better captures how people make a relationship work and stay married.

We employ Swidler's (2001a) insights that people can mobilize both idealized and pragmatic cultural scripts in varied ways (i.e., accept, reject, and modify). We shift from the context of marriage to home exchange, in which two idealized cultural scripts exist that are not easily reconciled. The idealized cultural script of romance presents home exchange as an experience of meeting new people, pursuing adventures, and overcoming the challenges of living in exotic destinations. The idealized cultural script of domesticity presents home exchange as a home away from home. Whether consumers mobilize these idealized scripts or modify them pragmatically, however, is unclear.

## METHODOLOGY

Home exchange is one of the oldest forms of peer-to-peer accommodations (PR Newswire 2017). The marketplace of home exchange was first started by schoolteachers in the 1950s so they could experience new cultures over summer holidays (Yenckel 1983). It quickly gained traction as a more independent form of travel for immersive cultural experiences. Homeowners find temporary accommodations by exchanging their homes on online platforms that charge a $75–200 annual membership fee (Klimczyk 2014). One of the largest online sites, HomeExchange.com, posts more than 315,000 home listings across 187 countries (Brignall 2021). Media stories support the finding that most visits are about 3 weeks, and because most homeowners simultaneously stay at each other's home for free, airfare is the largest expense (Armitage 2021; Waldron 2015).

We conducted the research across two phases between July 2014 and December 2018. First, we analyzed secondary research and formed our general research question. We conducted five initial interviews to understand how people use different online lodging platforms. We selected home exchange as theoretically interesting because consumers are left to work out how to exchange homes with little institutional support. Secondary materials, including books, popular media, and personal blogs on home exchange, provided evidence of the institutional cultural resources, such as cultural scripts, existing in the market. Second, the first author joined two online forums of home exchangers, recorded observations, conducted 26 additional interviews, and expanded data collection to include home and travel photographs (table 1). This study was approved by a university ethics committee.

### Sampling and Researcher Positionality

For the interviews, we initially used a snowball strategy across personal blogs and online forums. We sampled consumers who resided in different countries and exchanged a variety of homes, ranging from studio apartments to multimillion-dollar homes. Theory guided later sampling, as we interviewed consumers with varying levels of experience. We sampled both simultaneous and nonsimultaneous home exchangers. Informants were mostly older, middle-class homeowners, which is consistent with typical home exchangers (Forno and Garibaldi 2015). Thus, the sample was a relatively homogeneous consumer group who had both the time and resources to travel as well as a home to exchange.

We expanded the pool of informants when the first author was invited to join "Home Swapping for Everyone,"

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**TABLE 1**

SUMMARY OF DATA SOURCES

| Name | Sources | Data Set | Purpose |
|---|---|---|---|
| Preliminary research | | | |
| Travel forums | Fodor's, Lonely Planet, Digsville Discussion Forum | Background research | To explore consumers' experiences of different lodging options |
| Initial interviews | Five travelers using different temporary lodging | Ranged from 1 to 2 hours | To generate the research question |
| Secondary research on home exchange | | | |
| Books | Anderson (2018); Buckley (2014); Cantagallo (2016); Klimczyk (2014); Rickby (2012); Robbins and Robbins (2013); Vallance and Alford (2014); Waldron (2015) | Eight e-books written by experienced home exchangers | To understand the history and different perspectives of home exchange and personal stories, tips on the most popular organizations, and guidelines |
| Newspapers | *Financial Times*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Huffington Post*, *The Guardian*, among others | 35 newspaper and magazine articles | To understand media portrayals of home exchange and the institutional cultural resources used |
| Weblogs | TravelSolutions, TravelFamilies, AdventureinWorld, ExplorativeElephant, HolidayExpert, TravelinCommunity, GoAdventures, MiCasaYourCasa, WalkAbout, HomeAwayfromHome | 10 personal blogs and websites on travel and home exchange (pseudonyms used) | To understand diverse firsthand experiences of travel by exchanging homes |
| Home-swapping websites | HomeExchange.com, HomeLink.com, LoveHomeSwap.com | Home exchange guidelines, agreement templates, FAQs | To understand organizational procedures and mediation and the use of cultural scripts |
| Primary research on home exchange | | | |
| Nonparticipatory observations | Home Swapping for Everyone; Chat Room for Home Exchangers | Daily observation (30 minutes), 129 pages of historical posts | To understand common challenges, insider language, and identify informants |
| In-depth interviews | 26 informants (in person, over Skype, and by telephone) | Ranged from 1 to 4 hours, 516 pages (single-spaced) | To understand how people manage travel using home exchange and past experiences |
| Field notes | 20 home tours (in person or virtually) | Ranged from 1 to 2 pages per home, 28 pages (single-spaced) | To contextualize the home exchange experience and material aspects |
| Photos | Home photos downloaded from exchange websites and collected from informants | 434 home and travel photos | To understand the visual representation of the trip to complement the interviews |

a public forum with 842 members, and "Chat Room for Home Exchangers," a private forum with 286 members (these names are pseudonyms). Members primarily used these forums as a place to share problems and offer advice, as home exchange services provide little assistance. From August 2015 to December 2017, the first author recorded observations of these two online forums.

From these observations, we acquired insider knowledge and developed initial understanding of the common problems in home exchange. The first author acted as a novice to place informants in the role of teacher. Most often, novices posted queries asking for help when problems arose. Common problems discussed in the online social group ranged from the difficulty of finding an exchange ("It is not unusual to send out 100s of emails"; Chat Room for Home Exchangers, November 3, 2017) to fears of a cancellation or a dirty home when the home "looked really clean and tidy in the photos" (Home Swapping for Everyone, August 1, 2017). More experienced exchangers offered advice and shared personal experiences. The first author occasionally posted "naive" questions, such as "What is considered clean when home swapping?" and "How do you know if your swap partner is trustworthy?" Members offered brief written answers to these posts, which shaped the design of the interview protocol. In addition to observing daily online interactions, we downloaded and analyzed historical posts (Kozinets 2020). We recruited seven informants from blogs and 19 informants from the two

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**TABLE 2**

INFORMANTS

| Informants (age) | Profession | Country | Exchanges | Cultural repertoire |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Formulaic use of culture to resettle | | | | |
| Jenny (40) | Administrator | AUS | 1 | Mobilize |
| Monica (50) | Mother | US | 1 | Mobilize |
| Giselle (62) | University professor | FR | 4 | Mobilize |
| Carly (70) | Retiree | US | 6 | Mobilize |
| Roy (70) | Real estate agent | AUS | 7 | Mobilize |
| Jennifer (35) | Journalist/entrepreneur | ENG | 10 | Mobilize |
| Versatile use of culture to transform | | | | |
| Ross and Cora (50s) | Retiree (banker/nurse) | CA | 3 | Develop |
| Kelly (53) | Retiree (consultant) | AUS | 10 | Develop |
| Donna and Ben (60s) | Retiree (both) | ENG | 12 | Develop |
| Phoebe (65) | Teacher, just retired | NZ | 15 | Develop |
| Albert (64) | Retiree; art curator | AUS | 32 | Develop |
| Bonnie (66) | Retiree (government) | US | 36 | Develop |
| Anna (50) | Entrepreneur | AUS | 80 | Develop |
| Freewheeling use of culture to play | | | | |
| Elaine and Jack (45) | High school teachers | US | 2 | Mobilize |
| Patrick (54) | Civil engineer | ES | 4 | Mobilize |
| Ivan (51) | Retiree | UK | 4 | Mobilize |
| Susan (40) | Entrepreneur/mother | US | 12 | Mobilize |
| Melissa (63) | University professor | IE | 25 | Mobilize |
| Cecilia and George (60s) | IT consultant; retiree | ENG | 50 | Mobilize |
| Marci (65) | Retiree | DK | 50 | Mobilize |
| Troubleshooting use of culture to suffice | | | | |
| Michelle (40) | Physician | AUS | 6 | Develop |
| Richard (40) | Former chef | ENG | 9 | Develop |
| Deanna (55) | Consulting freelancer | US | 15 | Develop |
| Rachel (46) | Writer/full-time | US | 25 | Develop |
| Bea (62) | Academic researcher | IE | 30 | Develop |
| Lucy (68) | Retiree | US | 60 | Develop |

online forums (table 2). Interviews and online observations were conducted and analyzed simultaneously.

## Data Collection Methods

*Interviews and Virtual Fieldwork.* Most informants exchanged their primary home, which is consistent with the online observations and secondary research (Rickby 2012). We conducted all interviews with informants at home except one, which took place at work. We began the interviews with an informal discussion about travel using home exchange to put the informants at ease. Then, we asked them to give a home tour, virtually or in person, during which we took field notes. Interviewees discussed their past experiences of living in different homes, as well as their most memorable travel experiences (e.g., best and worst holiday exchange, first and latest holiday exchange). Interviewees shared common approaches and problems in organizing a home exchange trip. We conducted 23 interviews over Skype or telephone because the informants were international. We carried out three follow-up interviews, visiting exchangers' homes in 2018 to challenge emergent interpretations. Interviews lasted 90 minutes on average, and brief field notes were taken immediately afterward. We used the same interview protocol, and transcribed and coded all.

Informants shared weblinks and photographs of home exchanges that served to "autodrive" the interviews (Heisley and Levy 1991). We were careful when asking questions about socially sensitive issues, such as cleanliness or cultural differences. Nevertheless, informants were generally at ease and often volunteered potentially embarrassing stories, such as burning an appliance, killing a pet fish, and getting lost.

## Analysis

The data analysis was iterative because we used emergent findings from initial interviews to inform analyses at subsequent stages. We used multiple data sources (i.e., blogs, media articles, personal narratives, and online discussions) and forms of data (i.e., interviews, online text and photos, and field notes) to identify different uses of culture. The interview findings provided a more in-depth understanding on how consumers mobilize cultural repertoires and resources to solve problems.

We conducted an intratextual analysis to understand personal narratives within each interview using all forms of

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relevant data. Travel photos and field notes complemented the interview data analysis, offering visual evidence and contextual details. We created a theoretical memo to capture emergent themes for each informant. Then, we conducted an intertextual analysis by comparing across all informants to identify shared themes. The analysis was hermeneutical, and we continuously refined emergent codes and themes, comparing them with theory until the interpretation stabilized (Thompson 1997).

## FINDINGS

We found that home exchange institutions widely circulated both romantic and domestic idealized cultural scripts through an analysis of popular media accounts, blog posts, and books on the topic (table 1). Informants exchanged homes for weeks and even months; they cooked, cleaned, relaxed, and shopped all while exploring new homes, neighborhoods, cities, and cultures. Their experiences of homemaking and discovering new environs meant that both the romantic and domestic idealized scripts were potentially relevant. Institutional cultural resources thus existed in the form of these two widespread idealized cultural scripts, in which one script embraces uncertainty and the other avoids it.

### Two Popular Idealized Cultural Scripts

*Idealized Cultural Scripts of Romance*. Travel has long been associated with idealized cultural scripts of romance (Thompson 2007). Home exchange is also romanticized as a novel experience of another culture and lifestyle (Kasriel 2009). Media and independent blogs describe home exchange as an authentic form of travel because travelers live "like a local around the world" (Valentine 2016). Home exchange platforms stress the experience of stepping into another person's life world: "Travel, at its most enjoyable, is more often about experiencing the details of a place, tasting a culture, stumbling downside streets, getting to know the people who live there, and learning about lives unlike the ones we inhabit" (HomeExchange 2018). Similarly, consumer reviews and testimonials romanticize home exchange as transforming "a tourist in a foreign country into being a friend experiencing new cultures and great places, among friends" (HomeLink 2021).

Home exchange compares favorably with the standardized and inauthentic hotel experiences. Consumers stay in a real home, visit a real neighborhood, and interact with real locals doing "more than we would have done had we stayed in a hotel" (Hardingham-Gill 2021). Home exchange is an adventure that offers different experiences, from an Essex "manor house built circa 1550 with lots of character" (HomeExchange 2007) to an "extremely luxurious five-bed chalet in Chamonix" (LoveHomeSwap 2022). As such, in their books and blogs, experienced home exchangers share stories of their personal growth and transformation, such as becoming more open, independent, and wiser (Rickby 2012; Waldron 2015). Home exchangers commonly promote romantic ideals of achieving *communitas* and discovering collective truths, such as the kindness of strangers or an enduring faith in humanity (HomeExchange 2021; Kasriel 2009).

*Idealized Cultural Scripts of Domesticity*. Home exchange is also presented on platforms and popular media using an idealized cultural script of a "home away from home" (Goodman 2021). This idealized cultural script presents the home as a wellspring of personal and familial comfort. One of the oldest home exchange platforms, Intervac (2022), explains that home exchange offers the comforts of home, making it an ideal setting for family life:

> Come home after a hard day of shopping and sightseeing to the warmth of a friend's home. Sit down in a comfortable chair, and put your feet up, you are on vacation. You have time and space enough for everyone. You are not confined to a dinky hotel room with your whole family, nor do you need to run off to a restaurant or try to heat the baby's bottle in a bathroom sink. Hang out instead and cook a family dinner together. Watch a movie, enjoy each other. Slow down. Take time. You've earned it.

Magazines and online articles echo that home exchange is about feeling "as comfortable on holiday as if you were in your own property" (Robertson 2021). Travelers do not have "to forgo any of their usual home comforts" (Neal 2018), and they will be "more comfortable and [have] roomier accommodation" (Hardingham-Gill 2021). Platforms such as LoveHomeSwap (2022) stress that travelers can "have all the conveniences of home at your fingertips." Home exchangers will find "a kitchen to cook in, DVDs on the shelves to watch and books to read. You won't be in a bare and impersonal hotel room with no character or charm" (blog of informant).

### Mobilize or Develop Cultural Repertoires and Institutional Resources

In figure 1, we capture how consumers, during the unsettled time of travel, use cultural repertoires and institutional resources to understand and structure their experiences. They either *mobilize* familiar tools within their cultural repertoire or *develop* new ones, undertaking costly retooling. They also may *mobilize* institutional resources, in this case, the widely available idealized cultural scripts of romance and domesticity to reinforce the use of their cultural repertoire. Or they may *develop* more pragmatic cultural scripts if idealized scripts are found demanding or lacking.

We identified and theorized four ways of using culture during unsettled times. First, formulaic use of culture involves no costly cultural retooling but instead mobilizes familiar parts of one's cultural repertoire that are structured

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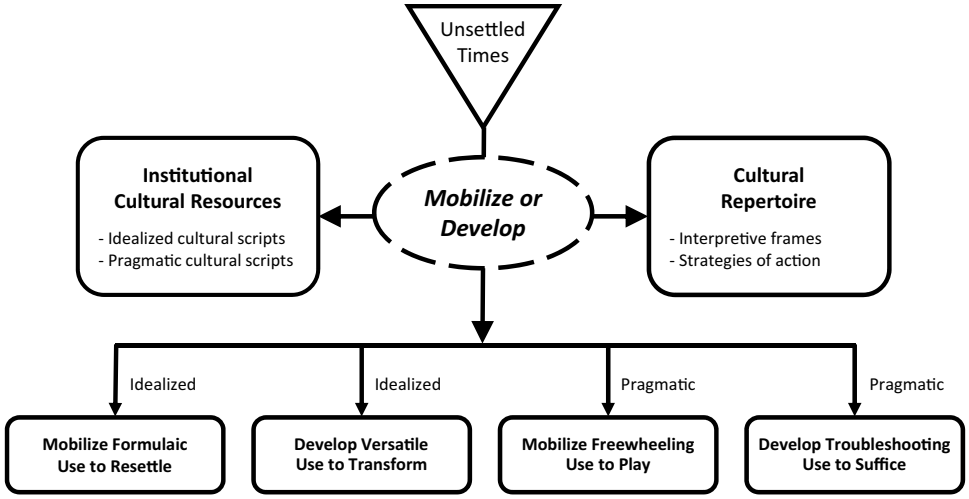
**FIGURE 1**

MOBILIZE OR DEVELOP CULTURAL RESOURCES IN UNSETTLED TIMES




by the idealized script of domesticity. Second, versatile use of culture involves costly developing and retooling of parts of one's cultural repertoire that are structured by the idealized script of romance. Nevertheless, consumers can employ institutional cultural resources more pragmatically, especially when idealized scripts are inadequate (Thomas and Epp 2019). Third, freewheeling use of culture involves little cultural retooling but develops a pragmatic cultural account to structure this experience to be less demanding. Freewheeling uses of culture repertoires are less studied but capture practical uses that allow consumers to be flexible in using resources "on the fly" and mobilizing their existing cultural repertoire. Fourth, troubleshooting use of culture involves retooling parts of the cultural repertoire by developing a pragmatic culture script to structure this experience and rejecting idealized cultural scripts.

Table 3 presents a summary of the findings and organizes their presentation. In the home exchange market, consumers can either mobilize or develop their cultural repertoire. They also either mobilize existing institutional resources using idealized cultural scripts or develop new pragmatic ones. Next, we empirically verify the four uses of culture by discussing two informants in each section that follows (see the web appendix for additional support). We also include explanations of negative cases for greater nuance. These four uses capture travelers' common ways of using culture during unsettled times to resettle, transform, play, or suffice.

## Mobilize Formulaic Use of Culture to Resettle

During unsettled times, a first group of consumers mobilize a formulaic use of culture to resettle (see table 3, cell 1). They fall back on what they know by enacting familiar strategies of action, and the idealized cultural script of domesticity structures their uses. Both Giselle (French, age 62) and Roy (Australian, age 70) represent consumers who face the unsettled times of travel by resettling into their same domestic comforts even when traveling internationally.

*Mobilize Cultural Repertoire.* This group of consumers' interpretive framing is cautious and critical, which drives them to seek the safety and comfort for which they are culturally equipped. Giselle lives in Paris, a popular locale that draws global requests for home exchanges, but her cautious interpretive framing means she does not take advantage of these opportunities and prefers to revisit familiar places like Boston. Giselle's interpretive framing also makes her critical of potential homes that fail to meet her high standards for comfort. She complains about having only four television channels or needing to use a laundromat. Consumers like Giselle are critical of irritations when experiences fall short—these irritations loom large.

These consumers do not culturally retool but instead mobilize their common and typical strategies of action. Their primary strategy of action is to seek what is familiar to avoid surprises. Travelers like Roy select familiar homes (e.g., "just like being at home"), exchange partners who are like them (e.g., people who are "friendly," "so you don't feel like a stranger"), or familiar locales (e.g., a "cozy suburb" like Perth). This group is the most likely to seek home exchange partners who have similar living standards and lifestyles, such as those who have the same profession, have families, are single women, or are grandparents. This

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**TABLE 3**

FOUR USES OF CULTURAL RESOURCES DURING UNSETTLED TIMES

| | Mobilize cultural repertoire | Develop cultural repertoire |
|---|---|---|
| Mobilize idealized cultural scripts | **1) Mobilize Formulaic Use to Resettle**<br>Interpretive framing: critical and cautious<br>• "My comfort and safety are paramount"<br>Strategies of action: common and typical<br>• Seek familiarity (i.e., homes, partners, locales)<br>• Use travel liaisons | **2) Develop Versatile Use to Transform**<br>Interpretive framing: confident and positive<br>• "Life is an adventure"<br>Strategies of action: new and extend<br>• Do open planning<br>• Be culturally inquisitive<br>• Form enduring cross-cultural friendships<br>• Master different domesticities |
| Develop pragmatic cultural scripts | **3) Mobilize Freewheeling Use to Play**<br>Interpretive framing: nonjudgmental and positive<br>• "A new home is an adventure"<br>Strategies of action: common and typical<br>• Be open to some differences<br>• Role play and imagine<br>• Experiment with small changes | **4) Develop Troubleshooting Use to Suffice**<br>Interpretive framing: critical and confident<br>• "Travel is hard work but worth it"<br>Strategies of action: extend<br>• Tolerate cross-cultural differences<br>• Use direct communication noting subtle tells<br>• Develop transactional relationships for closure |

strategy of action makes the unsettled time more predictable by minimizing uncertainty and maximizing security.

These consumers do not develop new tools to manage bad experiences but instead avoid them. Among a group of single women who traded homes, Jennifer's (British, age 35) failed home exchange in Spain became a well-known cautionary tale. In the interview and emails circulated among her regular exchange partners, she describes how she deviated from her typical strategy of seeking people with similar backgrounds and got a "nasty" surprise:

> Oh golly, it was like being in the middle of what we would say here, council estate, nasty, a nasty estate. It was tall breeze locked buildings, lots of graffiti, fair amount of litter. We went up to the flat and we were just horrified. It was dirty. It was all rusted. There were no air conditioners. It was really hot. And there wasn't a single fan. The bed linen just looked grubby. Whether it was, I don't know, but it looked it. Things felt sticky. Everything was thrown together.

Figure 2 shows the photos Jennifer shared, including safety issues of a broken glass door that was poorly repaired. She elaborates: "The water heating system is one that would not be legal in the UK or elsewhere I think [as] it involves naked gas canisters, which need to be attached to the boiler when it runs out of gas." Jennifer left the apartment, complained to the home exchange service, and returned to England to reclaim her Notting Hill home from people with "very different standards." Her failed exchange was a warning of what can happen when consumers deviate from their common and typical strategies of action.

Another strategy of action was using a travel liaison to avoid problems or help with unforeseen ones. These consumers are far more likely to meet their potential exchange partners before a trade, which is uncommon among home exchangers. Giselle describes help from her exchange partner as "almost like a little concierge service" for planning her stay. Similarly, Roy appreciates doing nonsimultaneous exchanges in which each host can introduce their home and neighborhood offering guidance. A subgroup of home exchangers used this strategy to develop a safe trading network. Jennifer relies on this subgroup to avoid another bad experience: "[They have] the same standard as you. So, if they say that [home] is good, then it's going to be good." Carly (American, age 70) introduced Jennifer to some friends: "I can vouch for their flat." Carly also exchanged her home in Boston with Monica, who resides in Paris.

*Mobilize Idealized Cultural Scripts.* These consumers mobilize an idealized cultural script of domesticity to structure travel as a predictable experience. This idealized culture script structures how they use culture to recreate their familiar domestic routines and form a protective cocoon in which to settle (table 3, cell 1). Giselle describes her best home exchange as possessing "all the things I'm used to having . . . so everything was top, you just didn't want for anything." For her, a comfortable home, which derives in large part from having a well-equipped kitchen, a spacious living area, and media access, is paramount: "[The home] was bright. It was comfortable. Everything was there, like I said—the television, the comfortable bed, the brightness, the nice kitchen, the dishwasher, then [homeowner] put in the washer and dryer. It was just very, very comfortable." Giselle also continues her habits: "I'm making a tea 4 o'clock in the afternoon. I'm sitting in the couch in the living room and watching TV. . .. I'm living a life similar to how I would live at home."

Roy also focuses on living the same life abroad as at home. He prioritizes exchanging outlying homes and swapping cars so he can continue his idealized suburban

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**FIGURE 2**

A CAUTIONARY TALE OF DANGER

lifestyle: "You need a car, and we have the habit of it [shopping and traveling whenever Roy and his wife desire]." Roy epitomizes this approach to recreating his domesticity within the home by cooking familiar meals but also beyond the home and into the neighborhood, public transport, and retail shopping. His best home exchange in a suburb in Holland was much like his Perth neighborhood.

> It was just like we moved from home to home in that sense. Every one of the neighbors could speak English. Everyone in the shop could speak English. You get on the bus the driver will say, "Good morning" [or] "Good afternoon, how are you?" Chat away to you. You could say similar, "Great day today, isn't it?"... That was a real comfort. [Because] every time you wanted something, and you weren't sure what to do, you just talk to the nearest person. One of the experiences was in the main supermarket just down the road. I wanted a particular type of cheese but I didn't know whether they sell it in Holland. So, this young person is working at the freezer. I went up to him and ask, "Do you know if you sell this cheese?" And he said, "Oh yes, definitely." In perfect English.

Roy resettles the unsettled time of travel by avoiding potential problems, so living abroad is "dead easy." While the home may be where the heart is, a home is also where consumers such as Roy, Giselle, and others feel culturally equipped to solve daily problems.

These consumers rarely draw on the idealized romantic script but if so, only superficially. Giselle anticipated her first home exchange as an adventure: "We were all excited. It was the first time we were doing [this]. Everything was, 'Oh this was great!'" At the same time, however, she dwelt on the deficiencies of the home—a dark apartment, a poor layout, and an uncomfortable bed. Rather than being transformed by this potential adventure, she uses it to calibrate and maximize her comfort in future home exchanges. Similarly, Roy talks about having a "bucket list," a term used to capture a list of adventures to take before one dies, such as swimming with dolphins or seeing the Northern lights. Roy's bucket list is merely the countries he wants to add to his current tally of 61 countries:

> We are busy doing the things commonly known by young people as a bucket list, isn't it? And we are almost done with it now. Next year we are doing this cruise, going to England and then go[ing] around Spain and Portugal. Once we have done that, it's then a case of going back to other parts for Europe. Or New Zealand or South Africa.

These are superficial uses of the romantic script because little adventure or risk taking occurs, which are important elements of the romantic script.

Unsurprisingly, these consumers use travel to reinforce their cultural repertoire. Even after the bad experience in Spain, Jennifer argued that home exchange "works best when it is what I describe as PLU, people like us." She believes that she belongs to a group of people with "higher standards" and good taste. They select nicely decorated homes, central locations, and predictable experiences. By using culture formulaically, they resettle the potentially unsettling experience of travel.

In summary, these consumers are much like those who depend on habits and routines, such as consumers who mobilize what is familiar, easy, and effortless (Dion et al. 2014; Phipps and Ozanne 2017), but in this case, it is their typical and common uses of culture in interpretive frames and strategies of action. Idealized domestic cultural scripts structure their experience and prevent disruptions, risk, and danger (Douglas 1966). This formulaic use of culture helps

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them travel confidently by avoiding unfamiliar experiences that are uncomfortable and for which they are culturally ill-equipped (Dupuis and Thorns 1998).

## Develop Versatile Use of Culture to Transform

During unsettled times, a second group of consumers also develop new and versatile uses of culture (table 3, cell 2). When faced with the challenges both within and beyond the home exchange, they retool parts of their cultural repertoire. Albert (Australian, age 70) and Bonnie (American, age 66) represent consumers who develop their cultural repertoire and mobilize the idealized script of romance to structure travel as an adventure for which they become culturally equipped.

*Develop Cultural Repertoire.* This group of consumers' interpretive frame is confident and positive, which makes them receptive to the challenges of unsettled times. Moreover, they are willing to culturally retool by developing new strategies of action. Their interpretive framing—life is an adventure—means that they encounter problems of travel with the most confidence of all the informants: "I sort of tend to handle [problems] in . . . stride" (Albert). Bonnie states: "For us, if you've got lemons, you make lemonade." This is not a superficial use of a cultural adage but is how Bonnie manages problems like a flooded kitchen upon a late arrival to a new home:

> We got in and there was a leak in the kitchen. The house was flooded. So that was terrible. You're exhausted. You've flown, by then, we were like up for 48 hours. Here we walk into this flooded house. But it worked out fine. I mean we figured out where the water was coming from. My husband was able to turn it off. It didn't turn the water of the house off, it only turned the water to the dishwasher off. We cleaned [the water] up and we just had a wonderful time there. It was just fantastic. But there's a lot of people that would let that color their whole time and you just can't do that.

These travelers handle problems in stride, from tiny studio apartments and dirty laundry to a bathroom missing a toilet and an unsafe neighborhood. Bonnie is even dismissive: "Things happen. So, I wasn't happy with [the owners] about it, but what can I do? You just make the best of it, and you enjoy your time." Problems are positively reframed. Bonnie exchanged a home with no water heating system, so she heated water on a stove to carry out ordinary routines, such as washing dishes, and she took cold showers: "It works. . .. That's in their culture. It's being in somebody else's culture. So, you get used to it."

These consumers' interpretive framing combines with new skilled strategies of action they develop over time. First, they learn and finesse a new strategy of action called "open planning." Most travelers who exchange homes start with a specific destination and dates. Instead, these consumers select a general travel region and a broad time frame and then adjust their plan to capitalize on unexpected opportunities. Anna (Australian, age 50) rejects institutional guidance (from platforms) to only target travelers who request her city because she regularly exchanges with travelers who at first did not consider her region. Thus, open planning converts uncertainty into serendipity. These consumers use open planning to organize extended holidays by setting up sequential home exchanges. It is common for them to arrange back-to-back home exchanges over 4 or even 6 months (unlike the typical 3-week stay). This strategy of open planning involves selecting a general location (e.g., Europe), having a few home exchanges in mind (as well as backups), and then keeping plans fluid until the other home exchange partner commits. Bonnie, for example, planned three home exchanges in Australia over two and a half months, whereas Anna, a masterful open planner, organized three back-to-back home exchanges that spanned six months in total.

The second strategy of action is being culturally inquisitive. Inquisitiveness is not a new strategy of action, but it is extended to being curious about unfamiliar cultural experiences. Albert argues that the whole point of travel is to welcome different experiences: "You know that there are going to be things which are different to your own home. That's part of the experience . . . [so be] open to new ideas and experiences." For example, Bonnie shared an experience participating in a village tradition that made her appreciate the importance of simple pleasures. In a northern coastal village of Denmark, most families gather nightly at 11 P.M. to watch the sunset on lovely summer days: "So, it was really different for us. Because it's times we'd be in bed and there they are watching the sun. Everybody is just enthralled with this sun going down over the sea.. . . They didn't have to be entertained by big important things."

The third strategy of action is forming enduring cross-cultural friendships. Building friendships is a strategy of action extended across cultures that also involves developing significant cultural understanding and skills. These consumers are the most adept at bridging differences and finding commonality with people when they travel who introduce them to new experiences, such as fishing for salmon in the Pacific and overnighting in a floating cabin (Anna), having martinis on a private jetty on a lake (Albert), or boating on the River Shannon and visiting a famous Irish band in a pub in Westport (Bonnie). They argue that the best part of travel is the "friends that we have met" (Kelly, Australian, age 53). Albert invests in and works at these friendships, as "it really enriches your life" when he lunches with friends in Paris, hosts them in Australia, or visits other friends in Berlin. Albert describes a Dutch friend as a soul mate: "[I felt] I'd known her all of my life." He fostered this friendship for years and even attended her funeral. Bonnie stays in contact through

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emails and visits friends in Ireland, Scotland, England, and Italy, arguing that investing in friendships enriches the travel experiences.

*Mobilize Idealized Cultural Scripts.* These consumers mobilize an idealized cultural script of romance to structure travel as an adventure (table 3, cell 2). They are the most adventurous in the destinations explored. They stay in far-flung locales, from Penang and Oregon to the Czech Republic and Turkey, from a converted barn in Norfolk to a 600-year-old mansion in a remote village. They enact an idealized script of romantic travel by going to exotic destinations, taking risks, and being transformed.

Albert immerses himself in "the city and its culture and way of life and hopefully even sees some of the things that a tourist may not see." He plans trips of at least 3 months but often travels for 6–8 months. Albert experiences cities at different times of the day, shops at local food markets "to cook foods the locals would eat," and learns "this is the way of life in that place." This is not the romantic challenge of daring to climb mountains (Tumbat and Belk 2011), but it is the romance of self-transformation. For Albert, these experiences make him "a richer and better person," and he has "changed the way I've looked at life in many ways."

Albert leaves behind his everyday routines for new experiences. He has a love of history and prizes seeing where his ancestors were married or where Martin Luther defied the imperial assembly (i.e., an historical trial that was a key event for Protestant Reformation):

> So, you get those sorts of moments. Or I can't believe that I'm doing this or that. Or I'm walking down the street where my great great grandparents and the three greats, you know, were married. This has all happened because I've been doing house exchanges and was able to go there. . . . [Or] I'm sitting on the train, it stopped, I said, "Oh my God, it's Worms!" These people looked and I said, "Diet of Worms, 1521, Martin Luther before the German Princes!"

Similarly, Bonnie elaborates on her "great exchanges" across the islands of Murano and Majorca, Maroochydore, Bowral, Daylesford, Perth, Bath, Bristol, Whitney, Rosaigh, New York, and Crosano, to name but a few of her 36 home exchanges. Bonnie and her husband prefer "small towns and villages and places that are off the beaten path." One of her best exchanges was at an Italian farmhouse in Crosano where few foreigners visit:

> We experienced the village life. . . . If you're living right there and you're staying in town, and you're shopping in the shops, you're doing all that stuff, you're interacting and you're seeing how the local people live. That's what we do. And we try to find out like there might be concerts going on in a church or a community center. And we'll go because we want that local interaction.

Bonnie enjoys learning small details about Italian village life, such as how the farmers live in town but venture daily to work on their farms outside the village.

These consumers mobilize the idealized cultural script of romance but do not use the idealized script of domesticity as personal comfort. Instead, they develop a pragmatic domestic script of providing general comfort for most visitors. We discovered this insight during their home preparations. Albert anticipates problems people might encounter when visiting his home and then works to solve them. In figure 3 (left picture), Albert secured his valuable glassware so "people don't end up getting embarrassed because they have damaged something that is irreplaceable" (field notes February 4, 2016). He also prepared and tested a sofa bed in his study so he could host families in what he notes is a modest but adequate room (right picture). He prepares his home following a more pragmatic domestic script in which he anticipates the general comfort of different visitors.

These consumers' idealized cultural script of romance rests on their tacit and pragmatic mastery of living in different homes. Over time, they develop new skills that allow them to adjust to different domestic arrangements. Mastering domesticity across many different homes is vital for supporting the more important work of having "unexpected little adventures" (Anna). Albert expects problems to arise but has mastered the mundane from operating different washing machines, microwaves, dishwashers, television remotes, and faucets:

> I could write a PhD thesis on bathrooms, on the showers, and the different sorts of handles and controls or whatever . . . but there's certain[ly] some variety and you have to learn. I suppose the place I [visited] in Berlin, I have a power box inside, they had theirs somewhere else. Or ways to turn the hot water on or off. You certainly find that those sorts of things happen.

As Albert states, "you become an expert" in adjusting to different homes. When homes have too many demands, however, romance may be thwarted. For example, Albert accepts modest homes (e.g., homes with a bare kitchen or no view) but rejects homes that require too many domestic chores (e.g., homes with pool or pet care, luxury homes with high demands for upkeep) that could turn the adventure of travel into hard work.

Over time, consumers' mastery of domesticity becomes part of their cultural repertoire, but it is a skill they use tacitly, usually do not discuss, and may even ignore. Albert reflected on how he learned "shortcuts" to quickly prepare his own home and get used to a new home: "You learn things to do, it comes to you automatically. . . . Instead of spending three weeks, I can spend two or three days and I'm ready." Anna wrote a book on how to prepare and exchange homes; nevertheless, in her interview, she speaks little about this mastery of the tacit and pragmatic backdrop for romance.

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**FIGURE 3**

PRAGMATIC DOMESTIC SCRIPT OF GENERAL COMFORT

For this group, the unsettled time of travel transforms their repertoire as they learn new ideas. Bonnie learns "to accept other people, other ideas, other concepts. . . . It doesn't matter what country you're in. It doesn't matter what religion you are. It doesn't matter what color you are." After years of travel, Phoebe (New Zealander, age 65) argues she is now "reasonably easy going, not too possessive of things." Although she and her husband can afford five-star hotels, "you miss out getting to live like a local [and] meeting more people." Consumers who develop versatile uses of culture like Phoebe do "not . . . let fear stop us." After 20 years of traveling through home exchange, she applies this to other aspects of life: "same with mammograms, same with everything, yep." Albert learns from others and transforms "how you can live as well."

In summary, these consumers develop their cultural repertoire supported by the idealized romantic cultural script and resting on their tacit mastery of pragmatic domesticity. They may not be as adventurous and risk-taking as athletes (Canniford and Shankar 2013; Tumbat and Belk 2011), but they break away from the familiarity of daily life by developing a richer cultural repertoire that allows them to flexibly adjust to any situations and enrich their experiences. They develop open planning to broaden their vistas, cultural inquisitiveness to be open to new experiences, and friendships that span cultures.

## Mobilize Freewheeling Use of Culture to Play

A third group of consumers mobilize freewheeling uses of culture to play (table 3, cell 3). Both Susan (American, age 40) and Marci (Danish, age 65) are representative of this group. They mobilize their existing cultural repertoire, but their use of culture is more playful, as they blend the opposing idealized scripts of romance and domesticity to create a new script of romanticized domesticity.

*Mobilize Cultural Repertoire.* During the potentially unsettled time of traveling, this group of consumers' interpretive framing is nonjudgmental and positive. A new exchanged home is an adventure to experience a new domesticity that is rarely unsettling. As Susan enthuses, "each exchange has been so incredible in different ways" and "you just have to have a little bit [of] the attitude that this is all part of the experience." Marci even enjoys the experience of exchanging with an economically poor family in Eastern Europe. This interpretive frame of the home as adventure stands in contrast to consumers with a critical and cautious framing, such as Jennifer, who was mortified to vacation in a tenement building and is more like the positive framing of versatile users Albert and Bonnie.

These consumers do very little cultural retooling and instead mobilize their common and typical strategies of action. Their first strategy of action is to be open to different domestic ways of life. For example, Susan's family enjoyed sleeping in the basement of a European home as an authentic way that locals cope with the heat. Susan is also fascinated by the different home arrangements, such as a hybrid home–office layout or creative uses of limited spaces. Elaine and Jack (American, age 45) advocate home exchange in their travel blog, sharing exciting new lifestyles they have tried, such as swimming in a private pool in a condo complex, playing Mattel Electronic Football

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from the 1970s, and strolling along a golf course behind an exchanged home. They are more relaxed and open to different types of domestic comforts, and a new home is "something you can learn" (Patrick, Spanish, age 54). Melissa (Irish, age 63) will forgo internet or Wi-Fi on holiday: "Nowadays people think when you are offline the world ends." Thus, new homes are not unsettling but are instead comfortable domestic adventures for which these consumers are equipped. However, they do typical tourist activities beyond the home and do not culturally retool for greater adventures.

A second strategy of action is role-playing a different life, but this playful imagining is limited to the home stage. Susan argues that her family can "live like a local":

> [Home exchange] is really living life as someone else. You are staying in their home whether it's big or small. You see what food they have access to. You see what their garden is like. What their transportation system is like. All these different experiences have really shaped how [the children] see things and how they see the world. And that's just been a really good experience for our kids.

Marci tracks all 50 homes she has visited, and for every single home, "there is always a difference [between our lifestyle and theirs] and that is what you come . . . for." Elaine and Jack enjoy imagining a different lifestyle when they stayed in a "modern hip cool apartment" that was "really starkly decorated." Although they prefer their cozy traditional home, they temporarily try out the different lifestyle, such as a modern home in a fashionable neighborhood with a relaxing patio that uses different technology: "It was kind of fun to pretend that we are hip for a change." Susan shares that "even though we have never met [the homeowners], we just liked them a lot." Patrick also argues that you "feel close to the people."

This strategy of action is confined to the home stage using domestic props for entertainment. It also requires a personalized home, rather than impersonal holiday homes available for exchange. These consumers dislike impersonal homes that are "completely featureless so you cannot imagine who lives there" (Marci). Susan romanticizes "going to their market, or their grocery store, or you [are] riding their bikes, or you [are] driving their car." She loved a kitchen in San Francisco where she imagined how the family prepares meals with lots of good knives, chopping boards, and fresh herbs. This group is the least likely to make friendships when exchanging homes (which likely limits their opportunities for more challenging experiences). Melissa even finds that meeting the homeowners interferes with her romantic imaginings: "I quite like just imagin[ing] what people are like, which is why probably I don't like meeting them." Thus, this role-playing relies on common and typical strategies of action.

Although these consumers mostly mobilize their existing cultural repertoire, a third strategy is to bring new ideas back home for experiments that can lead to small changes in habits. These are not self-transformations of consumers who develop versatile uses of culture but are smaller life hacks. As these consumers are particularly attentive to how people live, they sometimes try out new ideas particularly in terms of decorating. Marci has integrated both large and small ideas from other people's homes, from renovating a room in her house when inspired by a spacious German home, to buying a cupboard she admired in Sweden, to incorporating home décor ideas, such as creating a photo wall that mixed art and family pictures (figure 4, left picture). Susan takes ideas from her home exchanges and blogs about the topics (e.g., "laundry line in the basement," "growing vegetables in small spaces"). Most changes involve adopting new mundane routines, such as hanging laundry outside or cooking with a new ingredient. But some changes are larger; Susan posted in her blog pictures of backyard chickens from one home exchange (right side picture): "As it turns out, we really liked their chickens." Her family now raises "wonderful backyard chickens" in a pen that they built (figure 4, right and bottom pictures). Thus, they play with small domestic changes when returning home but do not do significant cultural retooling.

*Develop Pragmatic Cultural Scripts.* Surprisingly, these consumers reverse everyday domesticity to be romantic; thus, they develop a new pragmatic cultural script for which they are culturally equipped (table 3, cell 3). They are romantic like the versatile travelers except they romanticize the homes. They enjoy temporarily leaving their familiar domestic life and having the adventure of entering the exotic life of another. They develop the romantic idea of home exchange as "a great escape" (Susan) from everyday life, but it is an escape from one middle-class home life to a different one.

These consumers seek new experiences, consistent with the idealized romantic script, but these are the different domestic experiences of the ways other people live. They believe that they are swapping lifestyles and cultures and "living life as someone else" (Susan). Marci elaborates on this intriguing experience:

> Houses are really, really different. And you get to see how people live. It is like a TV program called *Do You Know the Type?* where you would guess who lives in this house. It's sort of like that, but you can see what sort of people they are in some way. When you live in their house, you see something that is different [than] when you just visit people.

Marci views this way of traveling as more authentic; she perceives herself not as a tourist but as someone who is playfully stepping into another person's home and life.

Thus, these consumers make the home the center of their romantic experience. They are curious about how people lead different lives in their different homes. Marci is fascinated by domestic life in an everyday French home: "It was . . . an

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**FIGURE 4**

INTEGRATING SMALLER DOMESTIC ROUTINES

Source: Photos were taken by Susan and Marci and posted on their blogs

ordinary house with … ordinary rooms. But every little, tiny thing was different. All their decorations, their cups, their tables and furniture, everything was different. Not one single IKEA thing. That was really inspiring." She also enjoyed a Swedish home owned by an artist that was full of small drawings where "every day [she] noticed something new."

Living another life is playful rather than unsettling. Susan explains that even ordinary practices are enjoyable when homemaking somewhere new:

> I'm just enjoying. I'm just reading my book, enjoying wine, sitting on their patio. You are on vacation. You are not in your home. You are not having to do your chores. I mean yes, you are still cooking, and you are doing laundry when you are leaving. You don't wanna leave dirty sheets but you really are on vacation. You are not with your own stuff and it's different. I much rather to do dishes at [their] house than I would at my house any day. It's all that sort of thing. That is not your same old stuff.

Mundane tasks such as cooking, doing laundry, and washing dishes are all the more interesting because these routines occur in someone else's home.

However, some homes resist romanticizing. For example, Susan and her family used a standardized vacation home in Spain more formulaically as "a place to sleep [and] a place to do our laundry." They had to venture into the local neighborhood to enjoy the romance of different ways of living, such as tasting fried pig ears, shopping in the local fish market, and learning how to cook sardines from locals. Similarly, Patrick was initially frustrated by the European homes he exchanged in Paris, Copenhagen, and the Loire Valley. He felt forced into more formulaic uses of culture in homes that were too like his Barcelona home: "In Europe, you don't feel the differences, [homes] are very, very similar to yours." A home exchange in the United States was one of Patrick's best experiences, partly because he could romanticize domesticity, such as a garbage disposal: "When you use the sink, they do have that kind of destroyer here. You push and then, 'BRRR!' And this is very very, this is something I only saw in movies. You don't have it in Europe. Anyway, [homeowner] had it. … I mean [the] kids were playing with that constantly." These consumers generally view unsettled times as fun and playful and structure them by reversing the cultural script of domesticity to be romantic.

Although Elaine and Jack enjoy seeing "how other people live and get a sense of what we might be like if we [had] chosen a different life path too," they do not

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culturally retool. "We just like to get away, just unwind and be away," and they are always after "something that is different and unique." Although consumers appreciate differences and novelties, "I don't think staying in someone else's home impacts on our daily routine that much" (Susan). They minimize the hard work of being adventurous (for which they are not culturally equipped) by reversing the idealized scripts so that the domestic is romanticized. This pragmatic adjustment allows them to avoid failures and retain "surprise and improvisation" (Seregina and Weijo 2017, 157).

In summary, these consumers develop a new pragmatic script by making exchanged homes a romantic experience of living a different life that is playful. They mobilize their existing cultural repertoire by being open to new homes, role-playing, and experimenting with small changes, which does not involve the costly retooling of repertoire needed for versatile uses of culture. They find joy by temporarily living in different homes and neighborhoods requiring only small changes in their domestic routines.

## Develop Troubleshooting Use of Culture to Suffice

During unsettled times, a fourth group of consumers develop a troubleshooting use of culture to suffice (table 3, cell 4). They extend their cultural repertoire for a "good enough" home exchange. Lucy (American, age 68) and Bea (English, age 62) are representative of this group who reject both idealized cultural scripts of domesticity and romance as not germane and develop a pragmatic cultural script of travel as "hard work."

*Develop Cultural Repertoire.* This group of consumers' interpretive frame is critical and confident. They expect that problems will arise but they can handle them. Thus, they view travel as hard work but worth it. For example, Bea complains about a host of problems: black mosquitos, poor public transportation, dirty homes, bad traffic, isolated suburbs, broken can openers, locks that turn the wrong way, expired food in the pantry, and so on. She explains, however, that these problems "don't spoil a holiday," as she is confident they are manageable or tolerable.

These consumers mostly extend their existing strategies of action, rather than do the cultural retooling of versatile users. One strategy of action is tolerance, which they extend to, for example, less-than-ideal homes and locales. Rather than being open to new experiences, they endure unusual destinations for affordable home exchanges. As Lucy notes:

> So, if you are flexible, you will get something . . . and some of my experiences are in places you would never think of going as a tourist. I mean, I had a home in the Black Forest in Germany once. I never went to a big city on that swap because I was around Lake Constance, which is a banana-shaped lake that divides Germany from Switzerland. And so, don't rule anything out.

Lucy forgoes the popular destinations to secure travel even if destinations are neither her first nor even her second choice. Similarly, Bea traveled to Finland "where I felt we really were outside our comfort zone. Because I couldn't make sense of the language . . . . I just felt like [I was in] a very different place." Unlike travelers who are more versatile in their use of culture and are culturally inquisitive, these consumers' strategy is to put up with unsettling experiences.

Another strategy of action that they extend to home exchange is to be clear and direct when communicating with potential exchange partners. They avoid problems by setting accurate expectations of their homes. Bea likes to "be up front about things." Lucy is also direct and bluntly shares that "there's nothing really special about this [my] house." She would rather lose a home exchange than misrepresent her home and warns people who want a walkable neighborhood that her suburban home requires a car. Although the home exchanges are free, the airline tickets are not. Lucy's strategy to deal with this precarity is to communicate clear expectations, specify dates, and enforce a short time frame to eliminate people who are not serious. This is unlike the cultural retooling strategy of open planning. Nevertheless, it requires shrewd skills to discern telltale signs that the home exchange may collapse when potential partners are slow to respond and are not forthcoming about important details. Lucy avoids failed exchanges by looking for tells when working with questionable exchange partners: "I never purchase mine until I've seen evidence that they have their ticket. They have to send me evidence."

Finally, these consumers extend the strategy of action of being transactional in market exchanges to home exchanges. Across their many home exchanges, both Lucy and Bea have made friends, but this is an exception rather than the rule. Lucy calls her travel counterparts "business associates" to emphasize this is serious work. She is only "friendly" with experienced exchangers "who understand what the rules are, and they don't back out." These consumers are focused on the successful execution of the home exchange rather than building friendships. Among this group, Deanna (American, age 55) is the most relational and cleverly exploits home exchangers who make inquiries about her home even when it is unavailable. She often provides these visitors with a tour of her city, though this offer is transactional as she then contacts them when visiting their hometown for a reciprocal tour.

*Develop Pragmatic Cultural Scripts.* Consumers in this group develop a pragmatic cultural script, but they explicitly reject idealized scripts (table 3, cell 4). If their basic needs are met, a wide range of homes and locations will suffice as "good enough." Lucy does not try to recreate the

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comforts of her large townhouse as idealized domesticity: "I'm not too concerned if the house is old and run down as long as things work well enough for me to be okay there." Deanna also explains: "I am not looking for fancy . . . just those really basics, stuff that I think most homes have." These consumers develop a pragmatic cultural script based on the actual differences they encounter.

> In Europe, you never get what you give up. Forget it. They live in smaller places, that's just the way it is. . .. People fret and say, "My house is so many square meters, I want the same in the house I'm swapping." You won't get a home exchange that way. What do you care? What are you doing in the house? Are you just using it to sleep and shower or are you having a wedding? (Lucy)

Lucy emphatically rejects idealized domesticity, as "you're not really living like a local"; she also rejects idealized romance, as you are not "having a wedding." She is an avid traveler who has completed 60 home exchanges. If an exchange appears viable, she locks it in: "You take what you get and be glad of it." Lucy is practical and has modest demands. Her listing says: "My house is clean, and I hope yours is too." She stresses being realistic that "neither of you lives in a museum and all homes have quirks" (blog post).

These consumers develop a pragmatic script after exchanging homes that challenge domestic routines. Even basic domestic routines, such as cooking and laundry, can be difficult, as Lucy explained:

> My first home exchange was owned by people who were pack rats. They never threw anything out. So, you'd opened the cabinets, and it was all so dirty. They had so much stuff in the house. I mean the kitchen could not be used for cooking . . . and I didn't realize they had a dryer. I found it in the garage at the end of the home exchange. It was covered by overflowing junk from the house. And the cleaner told me they had cleaned up the house before I came. And I looked at her and we both started laughing.

Although Lucy is exasperated, she stays at homes that are filthy, homes falling apart, a home with a promised car that was broken, a home infested with insects, a home so hot in the summer that she was told to sleep in the garden, and so on. These consumers view these problems as something "you put up with." An exchanged home is basic lodging: "The house is just the place to hang out. . .. I mean the house is just the location, and no matter where you go, it's always interesting if you haven't been there before" (Lucy). Bea also stresses the importance of making do: "There is very little that you can't live with." She develops a pragmatic script of domesticity based on a long list of disrupted routines and discomforts: too small homes, refrigerators with science "experiments," uncomfortable sofas, inconveniently located bathrooms, missing cookware, too small cups, different rules for putting out trash, different washing machines, and so forth.

These consumers also reject the idealized cultural script of romance. They are somewhat adventurous though, such as trying different foods and going to unusual locales. Lucy loves history, researches her travel destinations, and learns basic phrases in the local language to travel independently: "You always learn stuff on these trips, nothing is ever like you think it is going to be." Bea also likes to learn "a smattering" of language. She is into food preservation and felt connected with the preserving culture in Austria. Although they enjoy learning about new cultures and regions, these consumers do not romanticize home exchange but focus on the hard work and problems that must be solved.

Home exchange provides a variety of problems that they confidently solve. Bea heats her water for tea in a saucepan when finding no kettle, uses a block of wood from the garage when a cutting board is missing, makes do with small teacups, gets used to unfamiliar kitchen gadgets found in new homes, and generally overcomes any domestic problem. Although Bea is proud that "we find some way around whatever looks like a problem," these workarounds do not support a romantic script of adventure, escape, or transformation.

In summary, these consumers reject the idealized scripts, both romantic and domestic. They develop pragmatic scripts and extend their cultural repertoire to solve the problems of arranging and completing home exchanges. They make do with exchanged homes that are good enough by extending their cultural repertoire to live in and travel across different homes and locations. Rather than failing to enact idealized cultural scripts (Thomas and Epp 2019), these consumers develop pragmatic cultural scripts as a formula for success.

## DISCUSSION

This research explores consumers' use of culture during unsettled times. Building on Swidler's (1986) cultural repertoire theory, we find that consumers vary in how they use culture. Consumers either mobilize familiar tools within their cultural repertoire or undertake costly retooling. They either mobilize idealized institutional resources or develop pragmatic ones. Combining these patterns, we identified four ways of using culture to manage unsettled times: formulaic, versatile, freewheeling, and troubleshooting.

Our research makes two key contributions. First, inspired by Swidler's (2001a) study of love and marriage, we show how idealized and pragmatic scripts coexist and thrive to serve different ends. Consumer culture theory celebrates idealized scripts, such as romance (Arnould and Price 1993; Canniford and Shankar 2013), domesticity (Arsel and Bean 2013; Dion et al. 2014), and adventure (Scott, Cayla, and Cova 2017; Tumbat and Belk 2011).

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However, little research examines how or why consumers maintain, modify, or abandon these scripts, such as when times are unsettled or institutional structure is absent. This study fills this gap by demonstrating how a pragmatic approach to culture complements the prevailing idealized approach. In the same way that married couples simultaneously hold idealized scripts of love as lasting forever and pragmatic scripts of love as hard work, consumers use institutional resources in both idealized and pragmatic ways.

Our research extends Swidler's (2001a) theory of cultural repertoire by showing the varied ways consumers employ institutional resources. We demonstrate cultural repertoire theory as an enabling lens for understanding how consumers use culture during unsettled times. Prior consumer research focuses on nimble uses of institutional cultural resources (Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2001, 2002; Seregina and Weijo 2017). Similarly, we find that some consumers are versatile in using cultural resources for transformative ends, but we also find that consumers are formulaic, or more rigid, in settling ends. Researchers frequently study extraordinary experiences (Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2001, 2002; Scott et al. 2017; Seregina and Weijo 2017) and may have inadvertently missed more widespread formulaic uses of culture.

Cultural repertoire theory, which encourages researchers to unravel how culture is used (Swidler 2001a), reveals that many consumers use culture more pragmatically. Informant Lucy emphatically rejected both idealized domesticity ("you're not really living like a local") and idealized romance (you are not "having a wedding"). Instead, Lucy's use of culture is pragmatic, and her ends of travel are to suffice. Similarly, Susan pragmatically adapts institutional resources—she romanticizes the domestic for ends that are playful. Thus, consumers use idealized scripts and develop pragmatic scripts to serve very different ends.

Second, we explain how consumers can either mobilize familiar tools within their cultural repertoire or extend and develop new cultural tools. The limited research on unsettled times often focuses on the most informed, motivated, and resourced consumers. These consumers engage in costly retooling, such as surfers masking or purging incongruent elements to preserve a romantic discourse (Canniford and Shankar 2013). They are culturally equipped to participate in complex taste regimes and engineering (Maciel and Wallendorf 2017) or elaborate cultural performances (Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2001, 2002; Seregina and Weijo 2017).

Our findings show how consumers reject costly retooling and instead mobilize familiar tools within their existing cultural repertoire. When unsettled, some consumers are formulaic, using common and typical strategies of action to resettle. For example, Giselle and Roy seek comforting experiences for which they are culturally equipped. Some consumers also use common and typical strategies but are freewheeling in their use of culture and are playful in unsettled times. For example, Susan and Marci use existing strategies of action, such as role-playing and imagining, to try out a different lifestyle without costly retooling.

By contrast, consumers who are versatile in their use of culture undertake retooling by extending and developing new strategies of action. Bonnie learns and masters open planning to take advantage of unexpected opportunities. She and Albert are culturally inquisitive and develop enduring friendships that span cultures. These versatile uses of culture leverage the unsettled times for transformation. Consumers who are troubleshooting in their use of culture also extend their existing strategies of action, such as Marci and Lucy, who tolerate cross-cultural differences and communicate directly but subtly. These uses seek solutions to problems that merely suffice. Although some novel strategies emerge (e.g., open planning), most "new" strategies involve small or large extensions of consumers' cultural repertoires. This finding supports Swidler's (2001a) conjecture that consumers create "new" strategies largely from their existing repertoires during unsettled times.

A cultural repertoire approach, however, invites a richer conception of how people use culture. People vary in their mastery of different parts of their cultural repertoire and willingness to mobilize or develop these tools in different situations. Consumers in the home exchange community lack a shared institutional goal and have little social scaffolding. This situation provided us the opportunity to observe a wider variety of uses of culture, foregrounding consumers' tendencies toward common, typical, and pragmatic uses. Next, we compare our findings with those from studies drawing on assemblage and practice theory that also investigate culture in action.

## Formulaic and Versatile Uses of Culture Drawing on Idealized Cultural Scripts

*Cultural Repertoire and Assemblage Theory.* Like Swidler's (1986, 2001a) cultural repertoire theory, assemblage theory examines emergent and precarious elements that come together. Assemblage theory explains change assuming that reality comprises heterogeneous collections that are more or less temporary (Canniford and Bajde 2015).

Our findings overlap with insights from assemblage theory research, as they relate to versatile consumers who are informed, motivated, and resourced. In our study, versatile users creatively work with diverse cultural resources to maintain idealized scripts during unsettled times. A leak that floods the kitchen, such as informant Bonnie discovered, is ignored and even helps reinforce the romantic cultural script of travel as transformative. Similarly, surfers skillfully work within an unsettled network of material and technological resources that are misaligned with their

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idealized cultural scripts of nature (Canniford and Shankar 2013).

However, this cultural work involves "a skillful filtering and interpretation of nature" (Canniford and Shankar 2013, 1065). For example, surfers ignore or dismiss contradictions in idealized experiences of nature. One surfer forgets the mundane as he communes with the ocean, and another recounts riding a wave as a present-focused moment of uninterrupted freedom and creativity. We find that versatile uses of culture involve more than developing cultural repertoires to maintain idealized scripts. Importantly, the romance of travel rests on mastering pragmatic scripts of home exchange, as no doubt the romance of surfing relies on pragmatic scripts of surfboard maintenance and understanding weather patterns.

Not all consumers are versatile though. Prior studies using assemblage theory do not highlight, as we do, consumers who use culture formulaically. Even consumers daring enough to travel are not always versatile in their use of culture. Swidler (2001a) draws attention to consumers' strategies of action as the hardened formulas driving action, suggesting that people are less versatile. Some consumers are formulaic in their use of culture, settling into well-worn grooves of familiarity. Traveler Jennifer cannot ignore a violation of her idealized domestic script and flees back to the settled comfort of her Notting Hill home when faced with an unfamiliar and disappointing home. Jennifer's formulaic use of culture is comfort seeking and inflexible. Many consumers want to wear the same type of clothing, eat the same foods, and enjoy the comfort of old friends and are not enamored with new cultural changes or challenges. Consumers who visit restaurant chains like McDonald's are comforted in the certitude that the Big Mac will always be big and the Happy Meal will always be happy. Although assemblage theory can explain these regimented bodies, prior research highlights this repetitive process as restrictive rather than comforting (Carrington and Ozanne 2022).

A cultural repertoire approach is consumer-centric, focusing on how consumers use culture rather than whether they are embedded in a heterogeneous amalgamation of material and semiotic resources. Future research might explore how consumers employ a fuller range of pragmatic and idealized resources. Pragmatic scripts play an important role in tacitly supporting the enactment of idealized scripts, but limits exist, such as when pragmatic demands overwhelm the romance of travel. Service providers can play a vital role in supporting the pragmatic scripts on which idealized scripts flourish. By providing support for a variety of cultural uses, providers can also broaden their appeal to more consumers.

*Cultural Repertoire and Practice Theory.* Practice theory highlights how consumers are enrolled into practices that order consumption and social life (Schau et al. 2009). Consumer researchers show how institutional resources discursively shape practices of daily life, often drawing on idealized cultural scripts to order these practices (Arsel and Bean 2013; Maciel and Wallendorf 2017). Our approach focuses more broadly on culture repertoires rather than the practices to maintain this social order. Our findings on idealized cultural scripts parallel these findings; however, we also attend to consumers' pragmatic uses.

Arsel and Bean (2013) theorize taste regimes, such as Apartment Therapy, as authoritative guides in the ideals of domestic taste education. They describe Apartment Therapy as a "resource library or idea book" (908) that "provides scripts" (908) of well-structured institutional resources to guide consumer practices within this taste regime. Taste regimes and idealized cultural scripts work similarly by providing a common plan for action. A taste regime minimizes uncertainty by reducing choices to a manageable set and providing clear guidance on how to achieve a beautiful home or a calm oasis. Unsurprisingly, this creates more uniform taste systems.

We use cultural repertoire theory to explain when consumers reinforce idealized social order or when they pragmatically adapt. Consumers who mobilize a formulaic use of culture likely appreciate the taste regime as a clear and simple guide. Maciel and Wallendorf's (2017) research on beer taste engineering identifies a process that operates similarly. When consumers learn a complex system of taste evaluation, institutional resources are structured through ritualistic tasting practices and established taste standards for different beers. Thus, both beer drinkers, as in Maciel and Wallendorf's (2017) study, and home decorators, as in Arsel and Bean's (2013) study, can mobilize their cultural repertoire in a formulaic way supported by taste regimes. Moreover, these researchers employ Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus to demonstrate how consumers with similar social conditioning relate to similar institutional resources. This resonance between Swidler's framework and Bourdieu's habitus is unsurprising as Swidler combines Bourdieu's focus on social conditioning with the continuous influence of institutional discourses (Maciel and Wallendorf 2017). While not the focus of our study, we also observe elements of this habitus resonance among formulaic uses, such as when consumers searched for home exchanges with "people like us."

Our research extends these insights by emphasizing how consumers with varying cultural repertoires would respond differently to taste regimes. Thus, consumers might ignore these guides, use them sparingly, ridicule them, or even develop oppositional taste regimes. In our study, the consumers who deviated from idealized scripts found them either too demanding or irrelevant. Some consumers lacked the strategies of action to travel romantically by managing daring adventures or building cross-cultural friendships. These consumers instead were freewheeling in their use of culture and pragmatically found romance in ordinary

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domesticity, which they were culturally equipped to handle. Consumers who were troubleshooting in their use of culture pragmatically rejected idealized scripts and developed a cultural script of travel as hard work.

Moreover, culture proliferates during unsettled times rather than necessarily coalescing into a regime (Swidler 2001a). Consumers are often forced to retool because they lack institutional structure or find that structures compete (Lizardo and Strand 2010). In our study, consumers had to figure out how to make home exchange work across the unsettling time of travel by either mobilizing or developing their cultural repertoires. Future research might explore how unsettled times affect consumers' use of taste regimes, such as when an aesthetic style becomes unpopular. Versatile users of consumers are equipped for change, but what prompts formulaic users to abandon cultural tools? Which institutional resources are flexible across different uses, and which resources must be jettisoned?

## Freewheeling and Troubleshooting Uses of Culture Drawing on Pragmatic Scripts

*Cultural Repertoire and Assemblage Theory.* Assemblage theory research assumes that reality is always becoming and that assemblages are constantly moving from more stable to less stable integrations (Canniford and Bajde 2015; Carrington and Ozanne 2022). These assemblages coalesce to create specific relational capacities; thus, capacities arise in the social and material assemblage network rather than in consumers themselves (Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman 2017). This focus on capacities has important implications. For example, Epp, Schau, and Price (2014) explore the relational capacities arising when material and semiotic elements of family networks are reassembled after geographic dispersion. Although Swidler's (1986) cultural repertoire theory prioritizes humans and their use of culture over distributed networks, some comparisons can still be made.

Our research contributes by discovering that some uses of culture, such as freewheeling and troubleshooting, are successful because consumers hold culture more loosely. For example, consumers often hold idealized culture scripts of family life, such as the script that an "idealized family dinner is equated with home-cooked food, planned and prepared most often by a woman, eaten at a regular time, according to prescribed etiquette" (Epp et al. 2014, 91). These consumers are enacting idealized family scripts prescribed within structured institutional resources. But families are constantly evolving from married couples to nuclear families and empty nesters to new extended families. Likely, pragmatic scripts are important for helping families adapt over time. Amid unsettled contemporary life, consumers may need to reject or modify idealized family scripts. An idealized family script might portray a takeout dinner as a failure; a pragmatic script might alternatively portray takeout as playfully trying new cuisines or a satisficing dining option for busy families.

Consumers also vary in their ability to use idealized and pragmatic cultural scripts. Elements of their cultural repertoire, like interpretative frames, may make them more cautious and critical or more confident and open. Epp et al. (2014) identify a family's imaginative capacity as integral to their adoption of new practices using technology. We also highlight that it is consumers who can flexibly mobilize their cultural repertoires to enact more pragmatic alternatives that are often successful. Freewheeling uses of culture employ strategies of action of imagining and role-playing to be successful, while troubleshooting uses of culture employ strategies of tolerating differences and communicating directly.

A theory of cultural repertoire draws attention to more pragmatic uses of culture. As Swidler (1986) notes, culture can be less used, loosely held, easily altered, held in reserve, or even disregarded or spurned. Future research might examine pragmatic uses of culture that lead to changes in institutional cultural resources. For example, in unsettled times (e.g., 2007–2008 financial crisis, COVID-19 pandemic), many young adults may question the idealized cultural scripts of success (e.g., career advancement, home ownership, children) and the relevance of a university degree as a tool for such. Future research might explore pragmatic uses of institutional cultural resources to alter and create new idealized scripts for success, such as combining traditional idealized scripts of career advancement with new concepts of social activism and volunteerism (Zilberstein et al. 2023).

*Cultural Repertoire and Practice Theory.* Practice theory research also focuses on the breakdown of social order when consumers' practices misalign and fail (Thomas and Epp 2019). This pragmatic turn in research seeks to understand how consumers use institutional cultural resources to realign disrupted practices in unsettled times (Phipps and Ozanne 2017). Our focus on cultural repertoires adds depth to understanding how practices misalign or fail for consumers who pragmatically use institutional resources.

For example, Thomas and Epp (2019) examined the idealized cultural scripts that parents employ when anticipating the unsettling time of a newborn. Often, when shifting from envisioned practices to enacted practices, parents fail to anticipate potential problems. Their research finds that practices fall apart when parents lack embodied skills that only come from regularly performing a practice. By contrast, we show how consumers' use of cultural repertoires influences how they even understand problems. For example, consumers who are freewheeling in their use of culture are more playful and see fewer problems, as they readily adapt their script by romanticizing the misaligned domestic practices. This provides an alternative perspective

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to practice misalignments, as these consumers seek out unsettling practice misalignments as part of the romance. Thus, parents who view the chaos of raising a baby as part of the romance of parenthood may not even consider their practices misaligned.

Furthermore, our research offers a different understanding of the meaning of practice failure. Consumers who troubleshoot using culture rejected idealized scripts and tolerated misaligned practices as good enough solutions. These consumers expected problems to arise and often handled them. They encountered dirty homes, broken cars, and bad traffic but tolerated these misaligned travel practices as part of the experience. Parents encounter poor sleep, dirty diapers, and naughty children, and for many, this hard work is also worth it. Thus, misaligned practices are not always problematic. Rather than focusing on disruptions as a breakdown in practices, our findings reveal that for some consumers, unsettled times of disruption are an inescapable part of the cultural experience.

Phipps and Ozanne (2017) explored an unsettled time during a prolonged drought. Their focus on practice realignments provides an understanding of different states of ontological security. Our research extends this research by demonstrating four different ways that consumers use culture during unsettled times. Future research might attend to breakdowns in practices as an opportunity to study pragmatic uses of culture. Practice breakdowns can fuel consumers' pragmatic use of culture and even inspire innovations.

## Limitations and Future Research

Swidler's (1986) theory of culture in action suggests that during unsettled times, cultural repertoires are reworked as consumers struggle with new problems (Zilberstein et al. 2023). Our study was not longitudinal and did not capture travelers undertaking significant cultural retooling. This limitation is also an opportunity for future research to understand the processes by which cultural repertoires are abandoned and reformulated. Our study captures more contingent uses of culture, in which consumers mobilize existing cultural resources or develop extensions and new tools to meet challenges. Future research might investigate more dramatic changes in cultural repertoires, such as when people move to a new country, learn a new profession, or adjust to a new disability or chronic illness. Life sometimes forces costly cultural retooling, and consumer research could benefit by having a better understanding of the obstacles and opportunities these consumers face.

We conceptualized consumers' cultural repertoires by examining interpretive frames and strategies of action. However, more work is necessary to understand consumers' cultural repertoires and how they might vary across size (small and large), dynamism (core and peripheral), or diversity (simple and complex), to name a few potential directions. Moreover, future research might conceptualize cultural repertoires at the group level to better understand how families or brand communities collectively mobilize and develop cultural resources. A family cultural repertoire approach might reveal how cultural resources may be additive or even multiplicative, such as in the case of families spanning geographic distances (Epp et al. 2014). Different family members can take responsibility for setting up technology, sharing legacy recipes, telling family stories, and capturing memories, thereby creating a multiplicative effect as different cultural resources are enacted across the group. Caring assemblages also emerge that combine family and market resources for tending to senior family members (Barnhart and Peñaloza 2013). A family repertoire approach might combine and leverage the family's and market's total strategies of action for a larger pool of resources, increasing the chances that creative solutions are forged.

Some researchers comprehensively measure cultural repertoire in one ecological space (Garrett 2016; Weber 2013). Unaddressed, however, is the topography of cultural repertoires across consumers' different life domains and the extent to which similarities exist or if this concept manifests with greater variability. This research identified four uses of culture. Although these patterns represent distinct ways of using culture, future research might examine whether and how any hybrid uses of culture exist, such as couples forming a hybrid between one partner's formulaic use and the other partner's freewheeling use. Future research might explore when and how consumers tighten and loosen their uses of culture.

Prior research emphasizes the formation of markets around consumers with versatile uses of culture in which institutional resources are structured. However, freewheeling and troubleshooting uses of culture could play an important role in forming or expanding markets by supporting consumers' heterogeneous needs. Although these consumers are less committed to idealized cultural resources, their loose, diluted, and even skeptical ways of using culture likely promote new cultural uses and meanings. If travel using home exchange can be both a transformative adventure and a protective cocoon, the market is primed to welcome a broad array of consumers with different cultural repertoires.

# DATA COLLECTION STATEMENT

The first author conducted all of the online and in-person interviews, online observations, and fieldwork between July 2014 until December 2018 in Melbourne, Australia, as part of her doctoral dissertation. The second author acted as confidante throughout the process. Data were discussed and analyzed on multiple occasions by the first two authors using the first author's interview transcripts, online secondary data, and naturally occurring photographs and texts.

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The study and the informed consent procedures were approved by a university human ethics committee. All interview transcripts, images, fieldnotes, and archival data are stored at the Harvard Dataverse under the management of the first author.

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