

COLUMNS

## How public shaming changed status signaling

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Gwyneth Paltrow's [personal book curator](#) is in overdrive.

"What you say is not as important as the bookcase behind you," is the motto of the newly created Twitter [account](#) dedicated to our latest aspiration: bookcases. They are a more socially acceptable Zoom background than lurking pools, private gardens, or antiques. They also signal the somewhat accessible privilege of knowledge.

Still, the *Financial Times*' "How to Spend It" Editor's Letter in April defensively asked, "What does a luxury magazine have to contribute to the world during a pandemic? To put it bluntly who cares about expensive chairs?"

In fact, a lot of people do. Luxury domesticity is the term that [Venkatesh Rao](#) coined in our email exchange from a few weeks back. My take was that the traditional luxury and its stability, permanence, and security are making a comeback.

Mr. Rao and I went back and forth about what is aspirational at the moment, and what kind of aspiration we can expect once the pandemic is over.

Luxury domesticity is gaining steam, and I believe it is hard, cold assets where things are at: the rich are right now at their luxury bunkers, acres of New Zealand real estate, private yachts, and remote islands. Others are in the Hamptons or upstate New York or wherever their second homes are.

Kanye West already tapped into this trend back in the fall of 2019 when he bought a ranch in Wyoming, where he is building a "Yeezy campus" and a "paradigm shift for humanity." Given Mr. West's track record of paradigm shifts in music, fashion and culture, I eagerly await the campus' completion.

Luxury domesticity describes the tangible assets that we all wish we had right now: spacious real estate, yachts, private planes, a car, rare whiskeys.

But it also refers to the "socially approved" status-signaling behaviors such as cooking, re-decorating and exercising.

Peloton's sales in April [jumped 65 percent year over year](#) to \$524.6 million. Tonal sales [tripled in March](#).

If Amazon speeds up release of its [Echo Look](#), a personal stylist device with a built-in camera, consumers will be able to try on clothes at the time when retailers are slowly re-opening, but without the fitting rooms service.

A mirror-like try-on service may cater to luxury clientele, who can virtually try outfits from home.

With an ecommerce spike that is likely to continue even after the physical stores re-open, virtual mirrors create a likely at-home shopping ecosystem.

We can already buy truffles directly from Michelin-star restaurant suppliers, and we can take a free livestreamed cooking lessons from Michelin-starred chefs.

The promise of fine dining experience at our own home, paired with the meditative pleasure of making food with our own hands may keep us inside forever.

Under the guise of convenience, Silicon Valley ensured that consumers rarely feel the need to leave their apartments.

"Social distancing plays to digital technology's immediately tangible strengths: ubiquitous and sanitary access to other people, maximum convenience, broad consumer choice, and endless entertainment at low cost," writes Drew Austin in his [article](#), *Quarantine is the future big tech wanted us to want*.

In 2017, Elizabeth Currid-Halkett wrote that "the city was one's dining room, living room, and extended home rather than the apartment, which is just where we went to sleep at night." How dated, even for 2017.

In addition to apps delivering anything imaginable, hygge, dating back to 2016, catapulted a slew of brands making sure that we have enough plants, candles, and throws to be comfortable at home.

Around the same time, young people came to conclusion that going out requires "[too much effort](#)." The Great Indoors became aspirational back in 2017 and "[domestic cozy](#)" in 2019.

"Why do we live in a small apartment in London? Why do we live in England? Can we live somewhere nicer?" asked my friend [Rachel Arthur](#), a sustainability and innovation consultant.

Ms. Arthur currently works remotely, and has captured the mood of a lot of urbanites, who are increasingly domesticity-curious and willing to consider the dreaded suburbs and the second-tier cities that offer more space and a slower pace of life.

Remote work may speed up spreading out of the urban population. But offices are not only about work, and work is not the sole thing that keeps us in the cities: there is going out, culture and dining, fashion, services, and just the sheer pleasure of neighborhoods and communities.

At least, it used to be. Our beloved neighborhoods are likely to be different than before.

Smaller, independent fashion labels, galleries and tradesmen make the cultural fabric of cities such as New York or London diverse, creative, and exciting. A lot of them will not be there anymore when we re-emerge.

Cities already resemble one another, and not just in terms of "[airspace](#)."

Twenty years ago, Hong Kong was a mishmash of small shops, bars and distinct neighborhoods. Most of those are gone now. Something similar happened in New York, London and San Francisco. The appeal of living in the cities was serendipity and difference.

It was also access to services.

Now, even that is irrelevant.

In March and April, an entire shadow economy of hairstylists, pedicurists, massage therapists, colonic specialists and private fitness instructors sprung up in and around New York: New Jersey, Long Island, Philadelphia, and Connecticut are also all included.

The convenience and privacy of getting a colonic in one's own home may create a habit for many.

The affluent keep [fading into the bushes](#), like Homer Simpson.

Prevented by public backlash from widely sharing the fact that their lives went on with the same conveniences as before, the affluent display their economic power by going incognito during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

As aspiration, invisibility is different from dressing down or downright shabbily that has historically been exhibited by the British upper class. A lack of concern for one's clothes and appearance and for "what people think" is still social signaling, and conveys confidence in one's social standing and is expression of privilege of not caring.

A complete lack of social signaling is the signal.

Habits become institutions, per sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann.

Any action that is repeated frequently "becomes cast into a pattern." Daily rhythms of luxury domesticity, such as exercising, working, getting a massage or trying the latest Gucci dress on become rituals of social distinction.

INSTITUTIONALIZED SOCIAL distinction impacts the economy.

Just like the New York subway in early May was used only by those without any other option, services such as a pedicure, haircut, fitness class or clothes fitting delivered in public spaces will be for those without the private alternative.

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