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data_scapes: a study of data collection and (mis)information fashion

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Keywords

Data collection, *non-things*, consumerist objects, information culture, personal narratives

Abstract

Data_scapes explores individual narratives from personal screen-based data and speculates on consumerist objects shaped by data collection.

Research questions

How do we speculate on how objects come to be through the algorithmic calculations of our own personal data?

How can we make the process of data collection more transparent and material to a wider audience, especially unaware users?

How can we recontextualize ‘big data’ as situated narrative of our personal lives instead of objects of data collection?

Inspirations

The project took its genesis when reading Sarah Ahmed and her idea about the physicality, or lack thereof, of objects, especially those we consume online. In her book *Queer Phenomenology*, she writes that “objects are objects insofar as they are within my horizon, it is in the act of reaching out “toward them” that makes them available as objects for me” (Ahmed 2006, 55). In this sense, objects that are available through screens, like products of online retailers such as Shein, could be considered *non-objects* as long as they are consumed through the screen. It is the action of buying them, and having the products sent to us, that ultimately makes them become *real* objects. The desensitization caused by the lack of materiality of the object may cause Shein’s clients to overlook how unsustainable the retailer’s production practices are, as everything remains an invisible and out of reach process.

Another core inspiration for the project was Caleb Kelly’s idea of dirt explored in his essay *dirt(y) media* (2021). Kelly explains that “the view of a clean and pristine nature offers an understanding of natural surroundings that is beyond our reach, one that evicts any sense of dirt (Kelly 2021, 3). This opposition of nature and dirt makes humans devalue dirt, whereas Kelly argues we should instead foster more spaces to explore its affordances. With 6,000 new products everyday on average, Shein arguably collects an important quantity of ‘dirt’, both online and offline (Jones 2021). To find a way to extract and use this dirt was at the core of the desired creation of this project.

Research

Paul Slovic first coined the term ‘psychic numbing’ in his article ‘psychic numbing and genocide’ written in 2007 (Slovic). The term refers to the psychological phenomenon in which individuals become less able to feel empathy or concern for others as the number of individuals affected by a tragedy or crisis increases. Slovic’s theory is based on the idea that our brains have a limited capacity for processing information and emotions, and when confronted with a large number of victims, we become overwhelmed and are unable to fully engage with the situation (Slovic 2007). This can result in a lack of action or support for those in need, even in the face of overwhelming evidence of suffering. To counter this consequential apathy of overwhelming realities, Slovic argues that “a single individual, unlike a group, is viewed as a psychologically coherent unit” (Slovic 2007). Of course, Slovic’s theory is based on human tragedy, and so most of his examples explore human contexts. His theory is however applicable in many more spheres, including that of big data and screen-based information.

In their article ‘On Rational, Scientific, Objective Viewpoints from Mythical, Imaginary, Impossible Standpoints’ (2020), Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren Klein argue in favor of emotion-driven data visualization, as opposed to the conventionally accepted dry and cold data visualization that is often prioritized in research and dissemination methods. Pulling from Donna Haraway’s theories, the authors explain that seemingly ‘neutral’ data visualization “masks the people, the methods, the questions, and the messiness that lies behind

clean lines and geometric shapes” (D’Ignazio and Klein 2020, 76). This means that the act of over-simplifying data into ‘neutral’ sets of information de-contextualizes them to the point where they are no longer representative of the original situation’s complexities. The authors go on to argue that “even plain, “unemotional” visualizations are not neutral, but are actually extremely persuasive” (D’Ignazio and Klein 2020, 82) in making people think they *are* neutral. In this context, they wonder how ‘neutral’ information impacts the concept of neutrality, explaining that “the belief that universal objectivity should be our goal is harmful because it’s always only partially put into practice” (D’Ignazio and Klein 2020, 83). Instead, the authors vouch for emotion-driven data visualization, as “deliberately embracing emotions [...] enables a valuable form of data maximalism [while] creating novel presentation forms help people grasp and learn more from data-driven arguments (D’Ignazio and Klein 2020, 87-88). This means that data visualization that create affect may be better in triggering reaction and action from a greater population than plain and dry data visualizations methods.

Paolo Cirio’s Obscurity project against mugshot websites is a great example of digital ways one can approach dirt(y) media creation and a good inspiration for this data_scapes’ project (Cirio 2016). Mugshot websites are online entities that fetch mugshots from police departments and advertise them on well-indexed pages, making it easier to find information when looking up convicts’ name online. However, these methods not only affect criminals, but anyone accused of a crime who’s mugshot website deem of interest for their page (read: innocent people from already marginalized and

negatively stereotyped communities). Large removal fees can be paid to erase information on one website, but it is very likely that the mugshot resurfaces on another page. Though not in function anymore, Obscurity was a website put in place by Cirio where more than 10 million mugshots of people accused and convicted of crimes were hosted after having been ‘stolen’ from these mugshot websites. However, before posting the information, Cirio shuffled the mugshots and personal data attached to the pictures, and blurred them. The information was rendered useless and was posted on an equally well-indexed web page, as to create noise when looking up people’s names on search engines. Usually, the production of completely unusable big data should be seen as harmful and unsustainable, but Cirio creates an interesting layer of arguably useful ‘dirt’ when he uses data in Obscurity’s mischievous ways.

Byung-Chul Han is a Korean born German cultural theorist, and co-author of *Non-things*, a book about information culture and its resulting objects (Han and Stauer 2022). In his book, he argues that objects created from data, or information, are *non-things*, as opposed to *real things* made from human hands and intent (Han and Stauer 2022). As we become more attuned to a fast pace high intensity lifestyle, Han argues that humans stop contemplating objects and are instead interested in hunting information because “it is not possible to linger on information” (Han and Stauer 2022, 7). He also interestingly mentions that “anything time-consuming is on the way out. Truth is time-consuming.” (Han and Stauer 2022, 6). The more information we consume, the less attention we can realistically put on everything, therefore our attention is dispersed

into unusable fragments as opposed to the overly time-consuming truth. In a further chapter, Han explains how artificial intelligence and “big data [provide] correlations and pattern recognition in which, however, nothing is understood” and that “artificial intelligence never reaches the conceptual level of knowledge” (Han and Stauer 2022, 42). He goes on to explain that machines do not have the power to be “gripped”(Han and Stauer 2022, 38), to be affected by something before even comprehending it. According to Han, machines are dry probability calculators and nothing more, they do not have agency. The agency we commonly give them is only a mirror of ourselves.

Very little information can generally be found on Shein’s trend forecasting and production methods. Even their financial statements are not published online, a rare occurrence in such markets. One thing is for certain however, the corporation uses large quantities of data collected from their clients and users in order to produce 6,000 new items everyday on average (Jones 2021). In order to understand better how Shein’s production is influenced by its collected data, I read Shein’s online privacy policy. In it were some information on personal data collection, sharing personal data, consent to share personal data, on tracking technologies, and other topics. Though these documents revealed some information about Shein’s collection, use, and sharing of personal data, it was usually written in ambiguous contexts that did not reveal the full truth. Different tabs listed what the law prescribed and nothing more, each sections finishing with a catch-all “we may use your personal information for any other appropriate purpose [...] which is reasonably necessary to provide the services [...] requested” (Shein) which allows them an extensive grey area in which to be

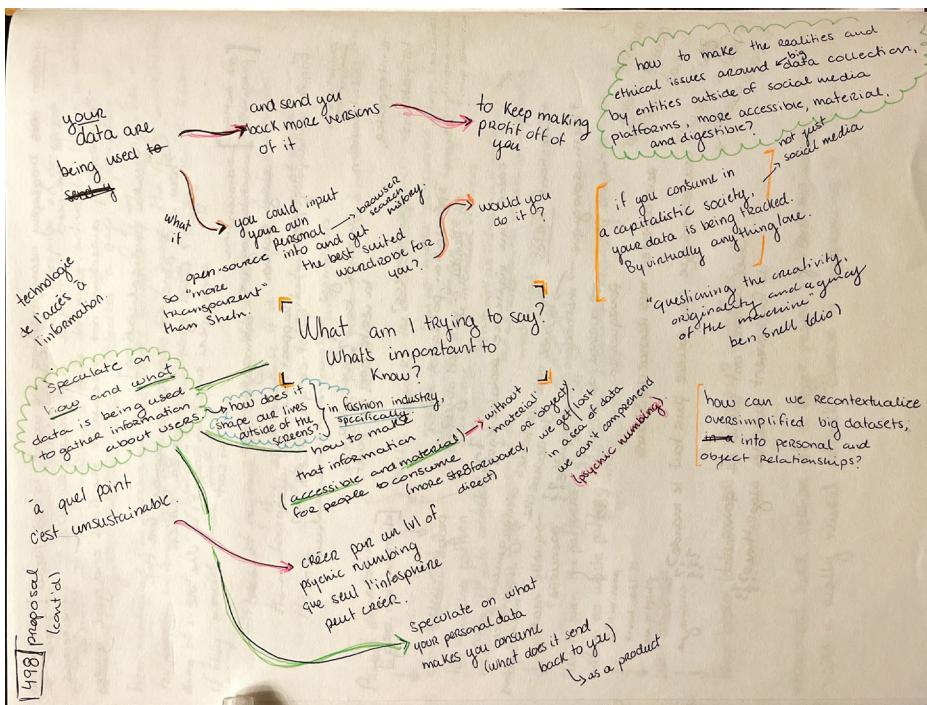
able to collect, use, and share its clientele's personal information. The document vaguely mentioned the use of cookies and tracking technologies such as pixel tracking, without elaborating further on which third party platforms they were 'openly' sharing client personal data with (Shein).

Process

Expanded Research

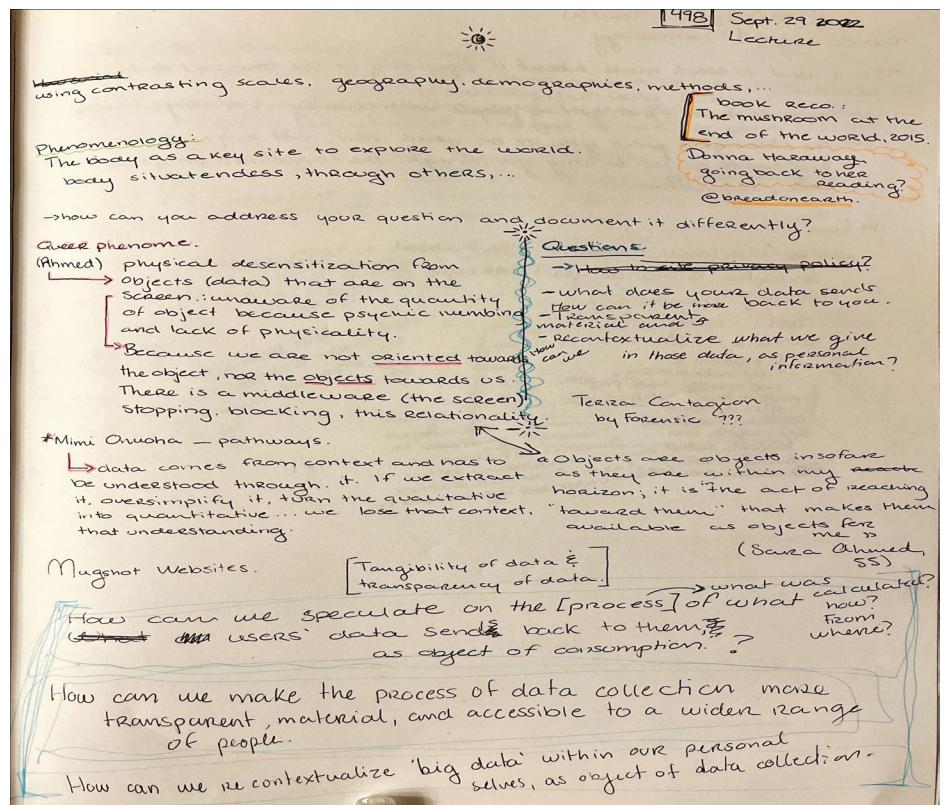
I knew from the beginning of the project that the idea implied a lot of research as well as trial and errors. The 'black box' nature of Shein and of tracking technologies as a whole also made it unsure if I were going to find the answers to my questions at all.

As I was falling into a deeper rabbit hole about Shein, I became dizzy with what I found, even though it was such a fraction of the truth. To understand my topic and what I was *really* looking for, I made a mindmap on point of interests and how they could apply to a 'material' project.



I wanted to find a way to use Shein's dizzying quantity of products without having to engage in the act of buying it, all the while asking myself and the project's users how those products come to be through data collection. Because those objects were always going to remain screen-based experiences for users, I turned myself to sources like Sara Ahmed, Paolo Cirio, and Byung-Chul Han to understand better how data dynamics work.

Notes on Ahmed, Cirio, and other research questions:



Notes on On Rational, Scientific, Objective Viewpoints from

Literature review [488]

Data Feminism: p.73. { On Rational, Scientific, Obj. viewpoint from mythical, Imagin., Impossible Standpoints.

→ project inspired from Sandy Hook's massacre.
↳ webpage based, instead of dry / cold information in form of graph.
↳ "uses rigorous statistical methods, but the visualization is so very different because the work is unframed around an emotion" (p. 75)

Nicole Kamarck & Alan Manning: "the plain style normally recommended for technical visuals is directed toward a deliberately neutral emotional field, a blank page in effect, upon which viewers are more free to choose their own response to the information" (p.75)

↓
Plainness = absence of design = greater freedom → colors + icons stir up emotions
distance
objectivity ≠ ~~ornament~~ = suspect

Harroway → said 'data visualization is "the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere"'
"the view from nowhere [...] masks the people, the methods, the questions, and the messiness that lies behind clean lines and geometric shapes" (p.76)
↳ what appears to be neutral is a "partial perspective", without the context that the 'messiness' gives.
→ point that the false binary between emotion and reason (the latter preferred in research methods + data vis.) are a gendered issue, and to hierarchies that benefits the white cis men of our society. (p.77)

CONT'D. → p. 82.
Even plain "unemotional" visual. are not neutral, but are actually extremely persuasive in making people think they are neutral. / Rhetoric
"then what does this mean for the concept of neutrality in general?" p. 82.

If the most "neutral" data visualization are not neutral, why not something that triggers emotion?
And avoid guilt cause it doesn't trigger change / thought process.

"The belief that universal objectivity should be our goal is harmful because it's always only partially put into practice" (p.83)

"emotion and visual minimalism are not incompatible" either (p.84)

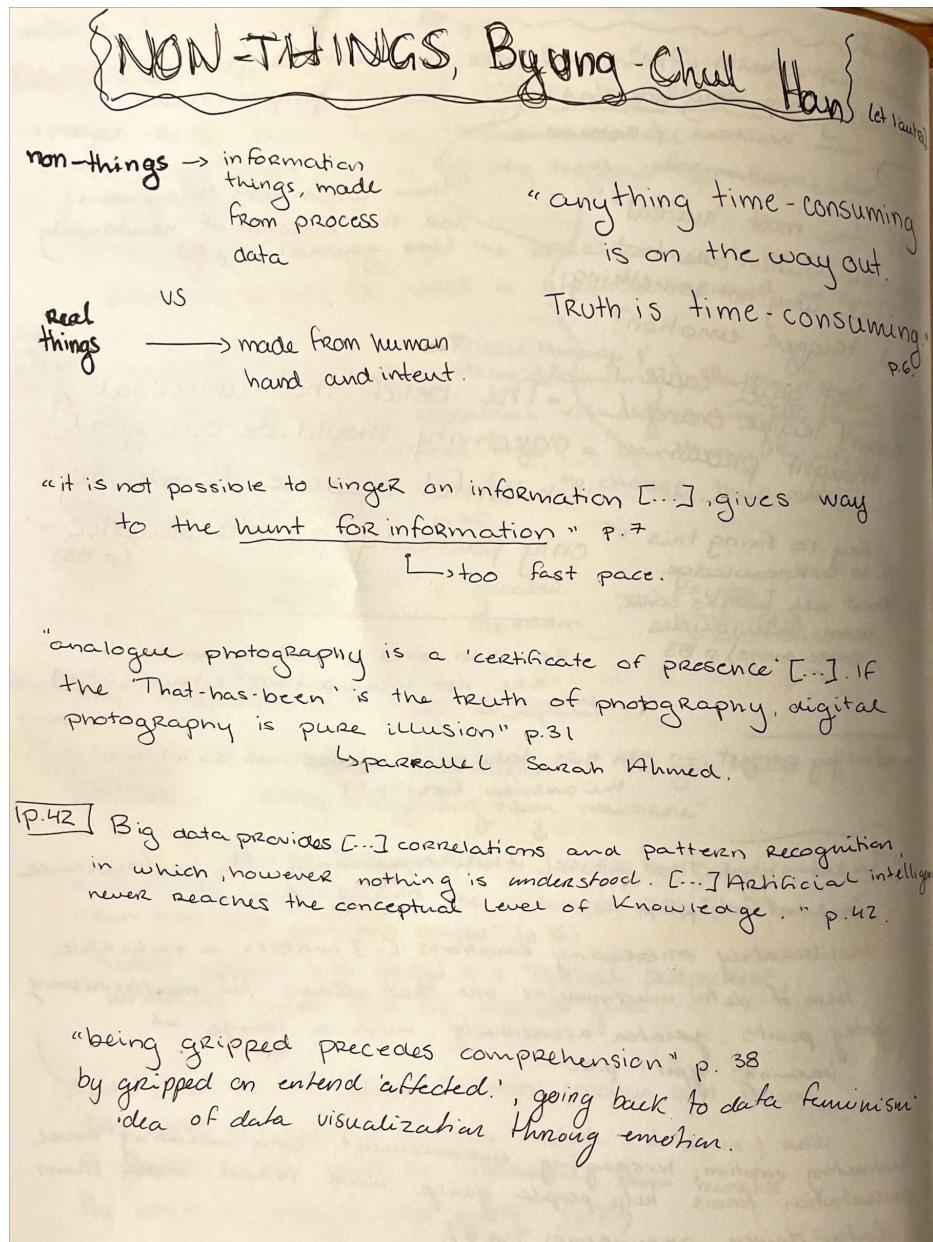
A sort of joy project → "In this data performance, we do not see the overview first" p.87.

"The emotions that arise when experiencing the performance [...] is affect" p.87.

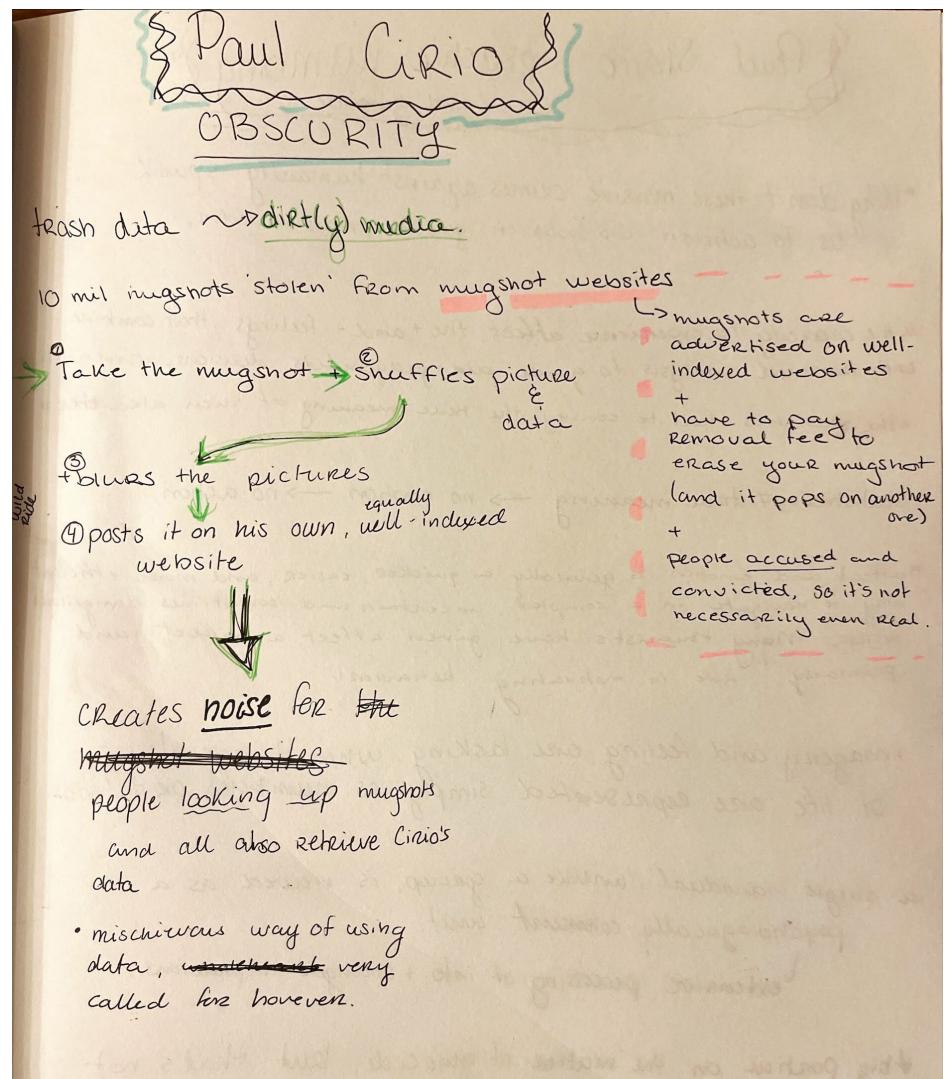
"deliberately embracing emotions [...] enables a valuable form of data maximalism, one that allows for multisensory entry points, greater accessibility, and a range of learning types" p.88

"activating emotion, leveraging embodiment, and creating novel presentation forms help people grasp and learn more from data-driven arguments" p.87.

Notes on Byung-Chul Han's Non-things:



Notes on Paolo Cirio's Obscurity Project:

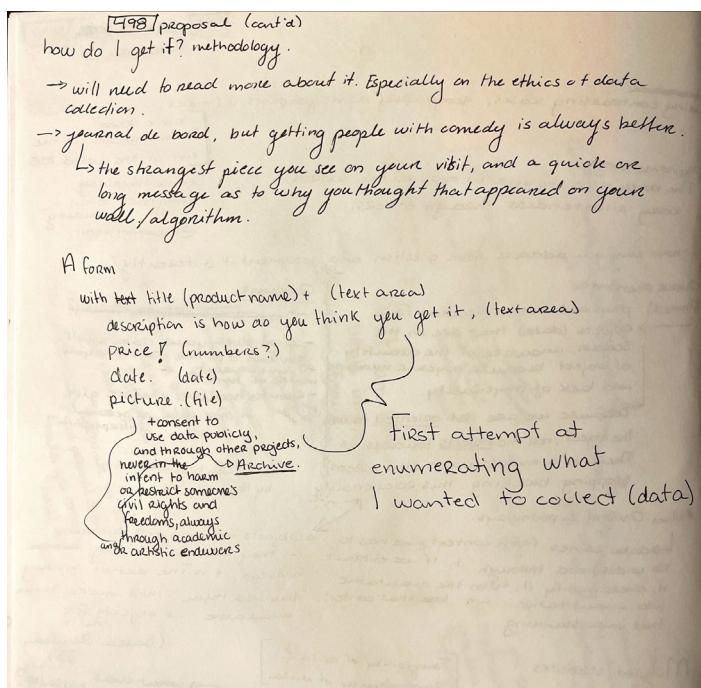


Initial ‘journal’ ideas

I somewhat knew I wanted to create a form of journal keeping track of a low-tech account of how people thought Shein’s algorithm behaved. And by algorithm, I mean the one that targets website users with specific products they think they’ll like. With more than 6,000 new products everyday on average, my guess is they use some kind of algorithm to target clients with specific products they think they’ll like.

So how to gain general public awareness of how companies use algorithm, but still poke fun of Shein while doing it because sad/horrifying information does not impact viewers well.

These are the first attempts at listing what I wanted to collect with that ‘journal’:



Simultaneously, every single time I would go on Shein’s website (I never went on Shein’s website before this semester, but found myself on there quite a lot because of this case study, ironically), I would screenshot if a new product banner had appear (every 2-3 days):





This was one idea I had of journaling the absurdity of the scale of production / fast-pace trends, but decided against it as it were too impersonal to the public.

I wanted to find a way to affect them more personally, bring more individual emotion.

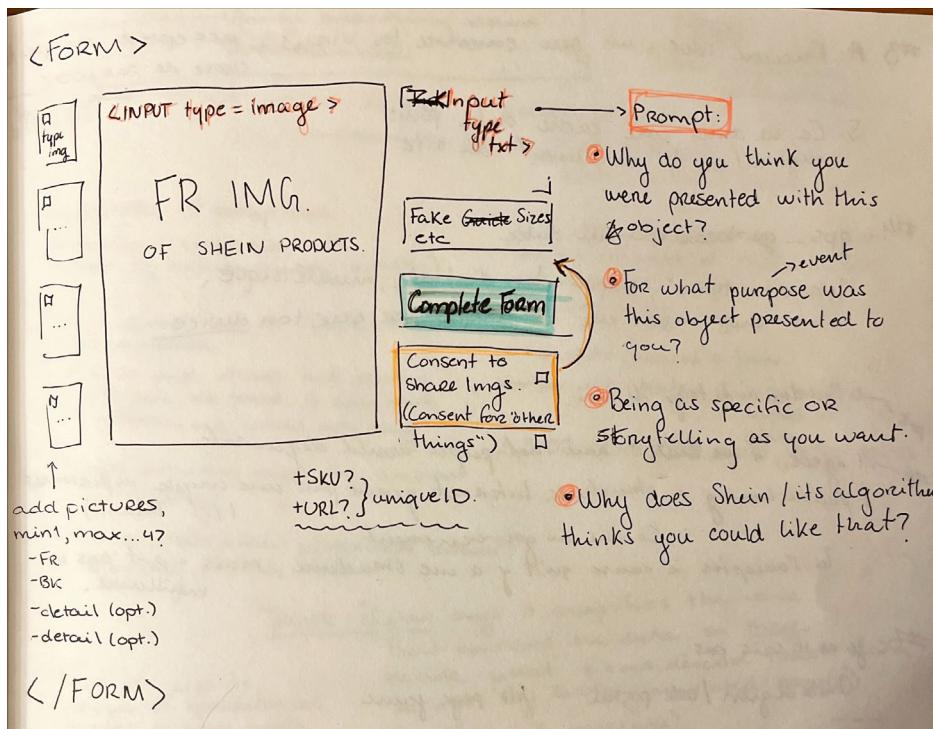
The idea started to take shape as a website based form to keep track of absurd Shein product when I came across this tank top:




I then set myself to create a data base of weird Shein products, where the goal was to have a participatory “experienced” dataset of products and the reason why people thought they were targeted with that specific object.

I wanted to avoid giving my own biases, and instead wanted to prioritize whatever the user had to say about eccentric Shein finds. I wanted to give the project’s agency entirely to the consumers, who otherwise lack it, even unknowingly.

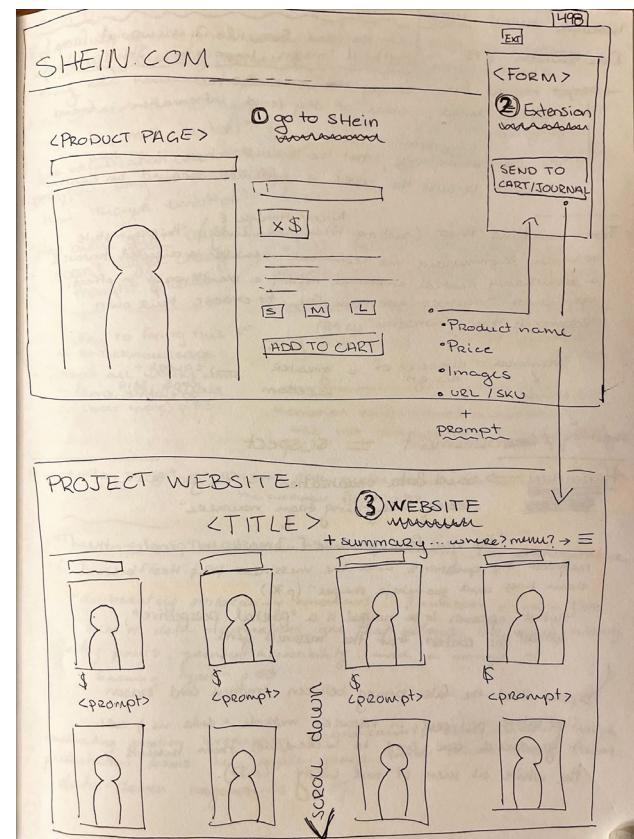
As a website based project, the first design of the journal looked like this:



During the mid-term presentation, the main take away was that the interface lacked “integration” within the already built Shein website which was an inevitable part of the project (as I needed their data -- their products, as part of the journal)

The idea came from one of my peers (Jean-Philippe Côté) to create a google chrome extension instead, as they were written on the same technologies used to host websites (html, css, javascript). That way, I could embed my project more organically in the Shein user experience.

So the final sketch looked like this:



Making the extension

Creating the extension came in four phases: research on how to make them, integrating a server side (to store the journal), fetching all the necessary information from Shein's website, and finally making all of that embed itself organically within Shein's own client experience.

In a first time, it was a lot of unanticipated research to build a google extension. It may be built on the same framework as websites, but its API technology uses very specific libraries of codes that trigger extension-specific events. I had to teach myself all of those, which are vaguely introduced in their online documentation:

	content of screen, individual windows or tabs.
devtools.inspectedWindow	Use the <code>chrome.devtools.inspectedWindow</code> API to interact with the inspected window: obtain the tab ID for the inspected page, evaluate the code in the context of the inspected window, reload the page, or obtain the list of resources within the page.
devtools.network	Use the <code>chrome.devtools.network</code> API to retrieve the information about network requests displayed by the Developer Tools in the Network panel.
devtools.panels	Use the <code>chrome.devtools.panels</code> API to integrate your extension into Developer Tools window UI: create your own panels, access existing panels, and add sidebars.
devtools.recorder	<small>Chrome 105+</small> Use the <code>chrome.devtools.recorder</code> API to customize the Recorder panel in DevTools.
documentScan	<small>Chrome 44+</small> Use the <code>chrome.documentScan</code> API to discover and...

commands	Use the commands API to add keyboard shortcuts that trigger actions in your extension, for example, an action to open the browser action or send a command to the extension.
contentSettings	Use the <code>chrome.contentSettings</code> API to change settings that control whether websites can use features such as cookies, JavaScript, and plugins. More generally speaking, content settings allow you to customize Chrome's behavior on a per-site basis instead of globally.
contextMenus	Use the <code>chrome.contextMenus</code> API to add items to Google Chrome's context menu. You can choose what types of objects your context menu additions apply to, such as images, hyperlinks, and pages.
cookies	Use the <code>chrome.cookies</code> API to query and modify cookies, and to be notified when they change.
debugger	The <code>chrome.debugger</code> API serves as an alternate transport for Chrome's remote debugging protocol . Use <code>chrome.debugger</code> to attach to one or more tabs to...

In a second time, I integrated the server so that, even if the extension needs to be installed manually through Google's developer tool, the clients can all access the same journal, which is hosted on a third party website. This means that, once the client sends their product in the journal, the information is sent to a link outside of the extension. And once the client retrieves the journal by going on the extension's main page, they query all the data from the link that hosts the information. That way, the information is mobile and transits everywhere on the internet, though needs to have the extension installed to be readable by clients.

Code for posting the data to the server (we write the product name, the url, the price, the images and the client's prompt entry

```
dataScapes.php ×
server > dataScapes.php
You, 2 weeks ago | 1 author (You)
1 <?php You, 2 weeks ago * all dataScapes up to date ...
2 if($_SERVER['REQUEST_METHOD'] == 'POST')
3 {
4     if(isset($_POST['productName'])){
5
6         $productName = $_POST['productName'];
7         $url = $_POST['url'];
8         $price = $_POST['price'];
9         $currentImgs = $_POST['currentImgs'];
10        $journalEntry = $_POST['journalEntry'];
11
12
13        //If you use fopen() on a file that does not exist, it will create it,
14        //given that the file is opened for writing (w) or appending (a).
15        $theFile = fopen("journalInput.txt", "a") or die("Unable to open file!");
16
17        fwrite($theFile, "productName:".$productName."\n");
18        fwrite($theFile, "url:".$url."\n");
19        fwrite($theFile, "price:".$price."\n");
20        fwrite($theFile, "currentImgs:".$currentImgs."\n");
21        fwrite($theFile, "journalEntry:".$journalEntry."\n");
22
23
24        fclose($theFile);
25        echo("WE HAVE SUCCESSFULLY read the vars AND saved to the file ... ");
26        // you must exit
27        exit;
28    }
29
30 }
31 ?>
```

Code for getting the data from the server:

```
dataScapes_send.php ×
server > dataScapes_send.php
You, 2 weeks ago | 1 author (You)
1 <?php You, 2 weeks ago * all dataScapes up to date ...
2 if($_SERVER['REQUEST_METHOD'] == 'GET')
3 {
4     //echo("here");
5     //get the data
6     //exit;
7     $theFile = fopen("journalInput.txt", "r") or die("Unable to open file!");
8     //read until eof
9     //$/i=0;
10    $outArr = array();
11
12
13    //there is 5 elements for every objects
14    $NUM_PROPS = 5;
15    //echo("test");
16    while(!feof($theFile)) {
17        //create an object to send back
18
19        $packObj=new stdClass();
20
21        for($j=0;$j<$NUM_PROPS;$j++){
22            $str = fgets($theFile);
23            //split and return an array ...
24            $splitArr = explode(":",$str);
25            $key = $splitArr[0];
26            $val = $splitArr[1];
27            //append the key value pair
28            $packObj->$key = trim($val);
29        }
29        $outArr[]=$packObj;
30    }
31
32    fclose($theFile);
33    // var_dump($outArr);
34    // Now we want to JSON encode these values to send them to $.ajax success.
35    $myJSONObj = json_encode($outArr);
36    echo $myJSONObj;
37    exit;
38 }
39
40 ?>
```

Excerpt of the database .txt file:

```
/img.ltwebstatic.com/images3_pi/
2022/10/17/16659730567f7a9780a6510d1efd9a5b6230bd3749_thumbnail_220x293.webp,/
/img.ltwebstatic.com/images3_pi/
2022/10/17/16659730584067b7f584e285d567fceff064023dda_thumbnail_220x293.webp
journalEntry: SLAYYY
productName: Patch Detail Hooded Puffer Coat
url:undefined
price:CA$107.00
currentImg://img.ltwebstatic.com/images3_pi/
2021/10/08/1633668589cd5676b248acfb0a00cb5bbc2c94d9b9_thumbnail_220x293.webp,/
/img.ltwebstatic.com/images3_pi/
2021/10/08/1633668591f1f781a5b323952527a682dae7587c08_thumbnail_220x293.webp,/

2021/10/08/16336685939a840ecb180fe201ac3526685905e843_thumbnail_220x293.webp,/

2021/10/08/1633668595c1e635652a0f28412cf71158a3423856_thumbnail_220x293.webp,/

2021/10/08/16336685979ca0c66552a83fa303a3eff568ae7572_thumbnail_220x293.webp,/

2021/10/08/1633668599ea411154e0e29cd8382e8e5494357ca_thumbnail_220x293.webp,/
journalEntry: I genuinely have no clue for what seasons the model is dressing
for.
productName: Ribbed Knit Crossover Sweater Dress
url:undefined
price:CA$24.49
currentImg://img.ltwebstatic.com/images3_pi/
2022/09/22/16638317391f18b98d1642c300711efd3296dfc2a5_thumbnail_220x293.webp,/

2022/09/22/1663831745f178ead95749c837f5850b252455c614_thumbnail_220x293.webp,/

2022/09/22/16638317486e44b84b23cfe1a3b3870bc68bdd49dd_thumbnail_220x293.webp,/

2022/09/22/16638317524b6071dc0ee7479e228186b8182a2d4d_thumbnail_220x293.webp,/

2022/09/22/1663831758675e3b8b5a07a94e4482d724281caa7e_thumbnail_220x293.webp,/

2022/09/22/166383176269fa4b2147bede76421f1a0b07f320c_thumbnail_220x293.webp
journalEntry: IS THIS GONNA WERK
productName: SHEIN SXY Crisscross Split Hem Coat
url:undefined
price:CA$29.99
currentImg://img.ltwebstatic.com/images3_pi/
2022/10/19/1666164393c034c5fd4978f45273b460e48e41a494_thumbnail_220x293.webp,/

2022/10/19/1666164395d8924c97876a8e8d048e6cfaecf83109_thumbnail_220x293.webp,/

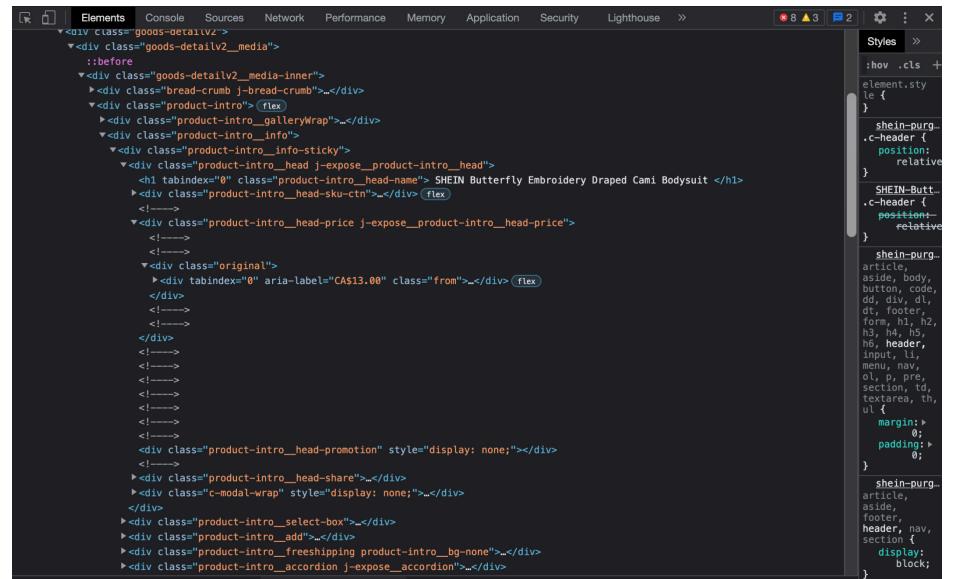
2022/10/19/1666164397f8997dba38d02e2d07b944be48add528_thumbnail_220x293.webp,/

2022/10/19/166616440052c2f4f4ab31555584a891158c4204a7_thumbnail_220x293.webp,/

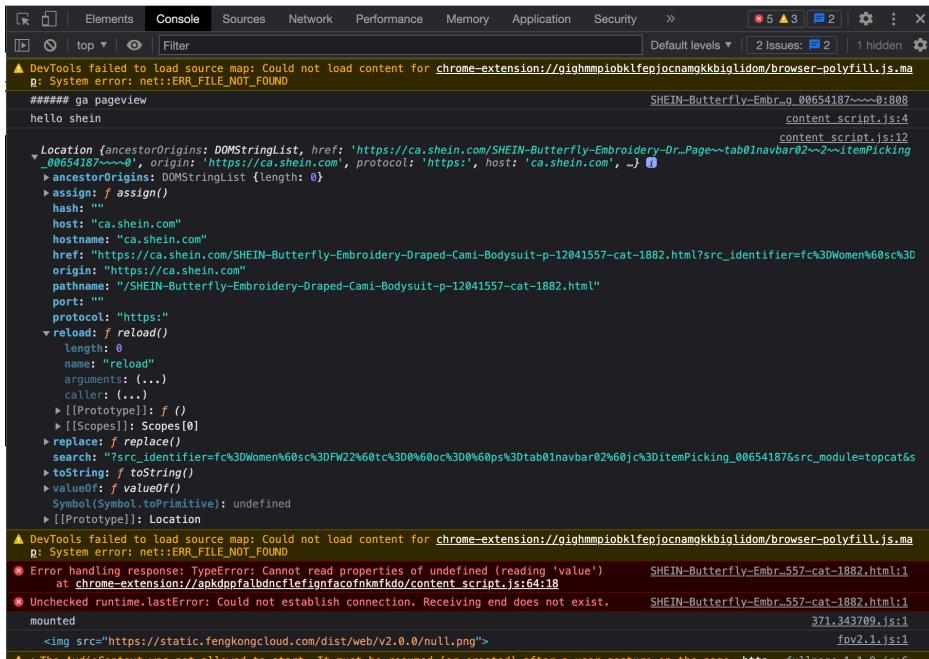
2022/10/19/16661644023045667a79b945515f7df9ab4cfb99d1_thumbnail_220x293.webp
journalEntry: There is no way in heaven's name you can buy something that
looks like that for 30$. Are they insane.
```

Simultaneously, I had to find a way to retrieve information from Shein's website using their html and css elements. I had to inspect countless product pages' source code to figure out how to query the data using universal variable applicable to all their products.

Example of html code I search in to find specific tag like the product name, the price, ...



Example of javascript object and arrays I had to dig into to find the links to the product images. These one were very tricky to have, as Shein tries to protect their images copyright (which are highly likely not even theirs)



After quite literally ‘hunting for information’, as Han puts it, on Shein’s website, I was able to write in my own code the pathway to retrieve the information I needed for my journal :

```
//Extract different information about the product from html elements
//will be null unless on a specific product page */

//name of the product
let productName = document.getElementsByClassName("product-intro__head-name")[0].innerText;

//main product image
let mainImg = document.getElementsByClassName("productImg-extend__main-image")[0].getElementsByTagName('img')[0].src;

console.log(mainImg);

// get all images (including main)
let allOtherImgs = document.getElementsByClassName("j-verlok-lazy");
let allImgs = []
for (let i = 0; i < allOtherImgs.length; i++){
  let imgURL = document.getElementsByClassName("j-verlok-lazy")[i].dataset.src
  allImgs.push(imgURL);
}

//price of the item (is only one number as a string with $ (ex: '13.00$')
//let price = document.getElementsByClassName("product-intro__head-price")[0].getElementsByClassName("original")[0].getEle

//get the first, most discounted price
let price = document.getElementsByClassName("product-intro__head-price")[0].getElementsByClassName("span")[0].innerText
console.log(price)

//url of the product page
let url = window.location.baseURI
//let url = window.location.href
console.log(allImgs)

//Send the information extracted to the extension popup (popup.js)
chrome.runtime.onMessage.addListener(function(message, sender, sendResponse) {
  // console.log(message);
  if(message.name === "fromPopup"){
    console.log("we send the information to the popup")
    //Send the product name, main image, url and price (all strings)
    sendResponse({productName:productName, mainImg:mainImg, url:url, price:price, allImgs:allImgs});
  }
});

//shein
```

Funnily enough, I spent so much time digging in Shein’s ‘dirt’ I was even able to find some of the tracking technologies they name in their privacy policies, and the third party companies they share those tracking information with, which they do not name in their privacy policy.

Final documentation

Finally, after having learned how to build an extension, built a server, and found the path to retrieve all necessary information from Shein, I was finally able to put all the pieces together.

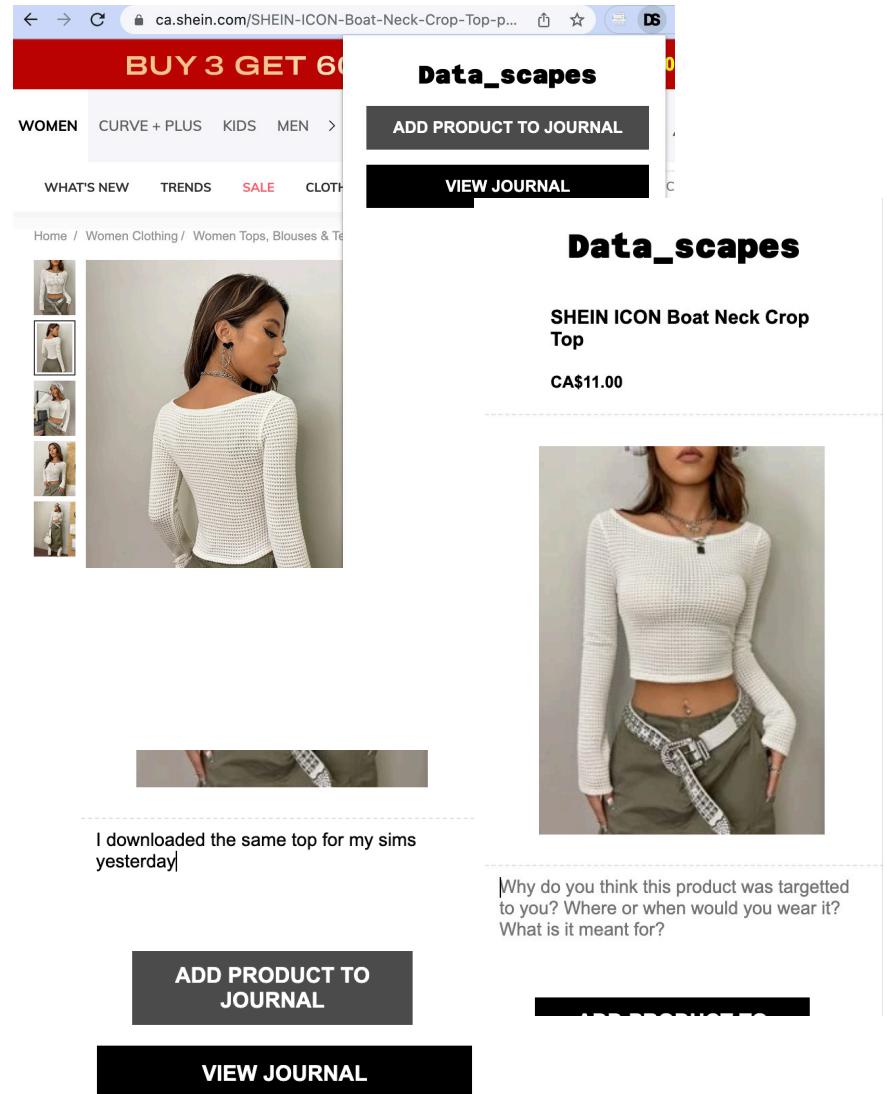
Because I wanted the experience to embed itself as organically as possible in Shein's user experience, I decided to use a very similar interface as the online retailer's. Bold sans-serif font was chosen, as well as a minimalist black and white look. To parallel their 'add to bag' button, I made a similar 'add to journal' one on the extension's pop up window. The journal's aesthetics also inspires itself from a website product page, with the product name, price, images and the following client's prompt that serve as product description.

An example of how the process unfolds:

Upon seeing a quirky, absurd, funny object on a specific Shein's product page, the client clicks on the extension's logo and can 'add product to journal'. The client can also directly go to the journal from whatever website they are on by clicking 'view journal' at any point.

The product name, price and following images from the current page will be loaded onto the extension's pop-up window. Under it, the client is prompted to write about why they think they got targeted for that specific product.

More questions serve to let the client wonder about their own relationship to that object, and how they think it materialized into their individual algorithm.



When they are satisfied with their answer, they can finalize their entry by clicking once more on 'add product to journal'. Their product is now part of the data_scapes journal.

By clicking ‘view journal’, the client opens Data_scapes’ full collection of all the objects that everyone has inputted into the database, before, during and even after the 4th space presentation. As desired, the project lives on outside of my own agency, and belongs to whoever uses it.

Data_scapes' journal

of curious Shein products and why the algorithm thought you'd like it

HOW TO PARTICIPATE

SHEIN ICON Boat Neck Crop Top

CA\$11.00



I downloaded the same top for my sims yesterday

Butterfly Embroidery Mesh Contrast Sequin Thong

CA\$4.00



Reverse tramp stamp

Baby Girls Sunflower And Slogan Graphic Bodysuit & Pants

CA\$15.00



Its okay daddy i'm not into boys

Slogan Graphic Tee

CA\$9.00



I can't deny its validity but I wouldn't put it on a shirt

Slogan Graphic Thermal Lined Sweatshirt

1pc Head Massage Tool

3D Flower Applique Sequin Cami Bodycon

SHEIN EZwear Turtleneck Drop Shoulder Split Hem

Reflections

Data_scapes’ ‘journal of curious Shein products and why the algorithm thought you’d like it’ is a low-tech and humorous way of approaching big data collection from online entities in a laid back and emotion-driven way. Instead of scaring users by horrifying them with technical and quantifiable information, I challenged myself to find a way to recontextualize Shein’s eccentric designs choices into individual and material narratives. The *non-things* created from information may lack the materiality of objects within our reach, but they still are embedded with a story that is worth taking in consideration and learn from.

Not being able to know the technical aspects of technologies used by Shein created the opportunity to dive into a collective imaginary and speculate on the mechanics of commercial algorithms at a micro-level. Using individual narratives as the foundation of the project, I was able to make the project’s users reflect on their own relationship to data, as well as the products that are created from them.

A screen recording of the experience can be found on this link :

https://hybrid.concordia.ca/s_hontoy/data_scapes/liverecording.mp4

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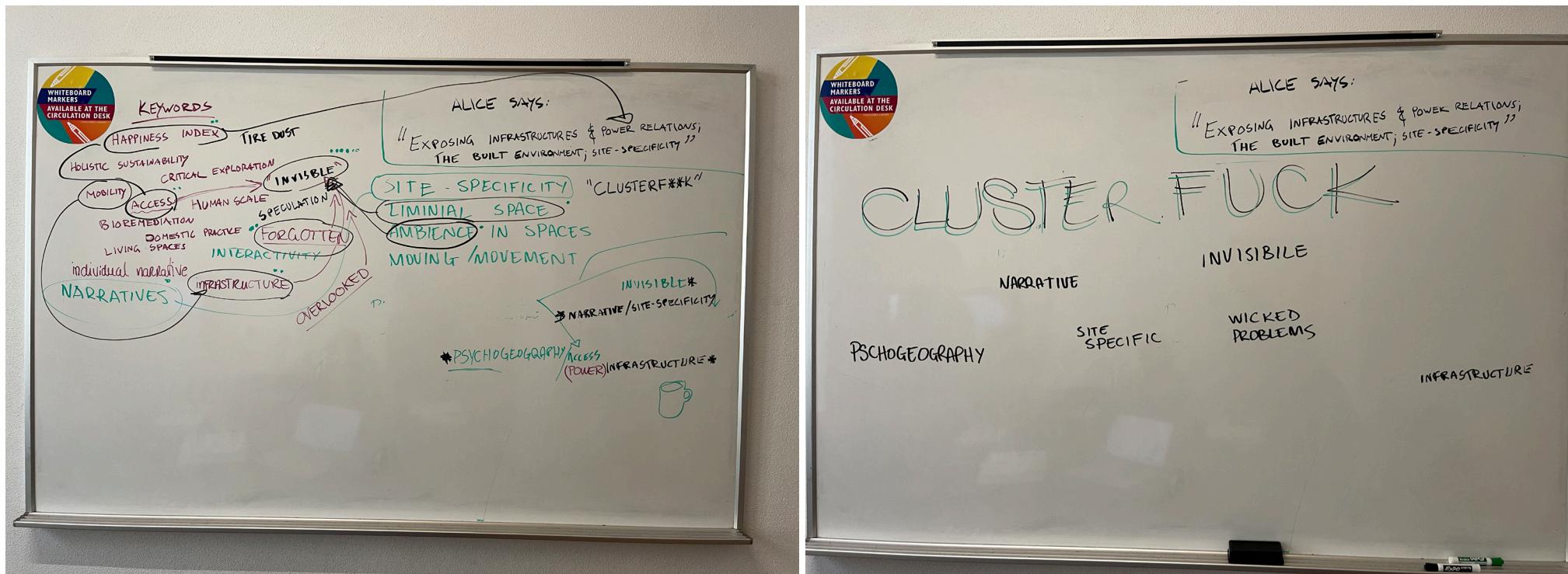
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SECTION II

Process

Our first meeting's goal was to find common denominators for all our projects.

And we had the idea of calling our event:



During the second meeting, we finalized the documentation for the event's planning and visited 4th space to plan the exhibition out.



We made some design choices. Some that made the cut, others that didn't.



We decided it would be a good idea to not only have others present one's project, but also have some sort of AI generated questions to entertain possible silences and prompt conversations. Any question is a good question after all.

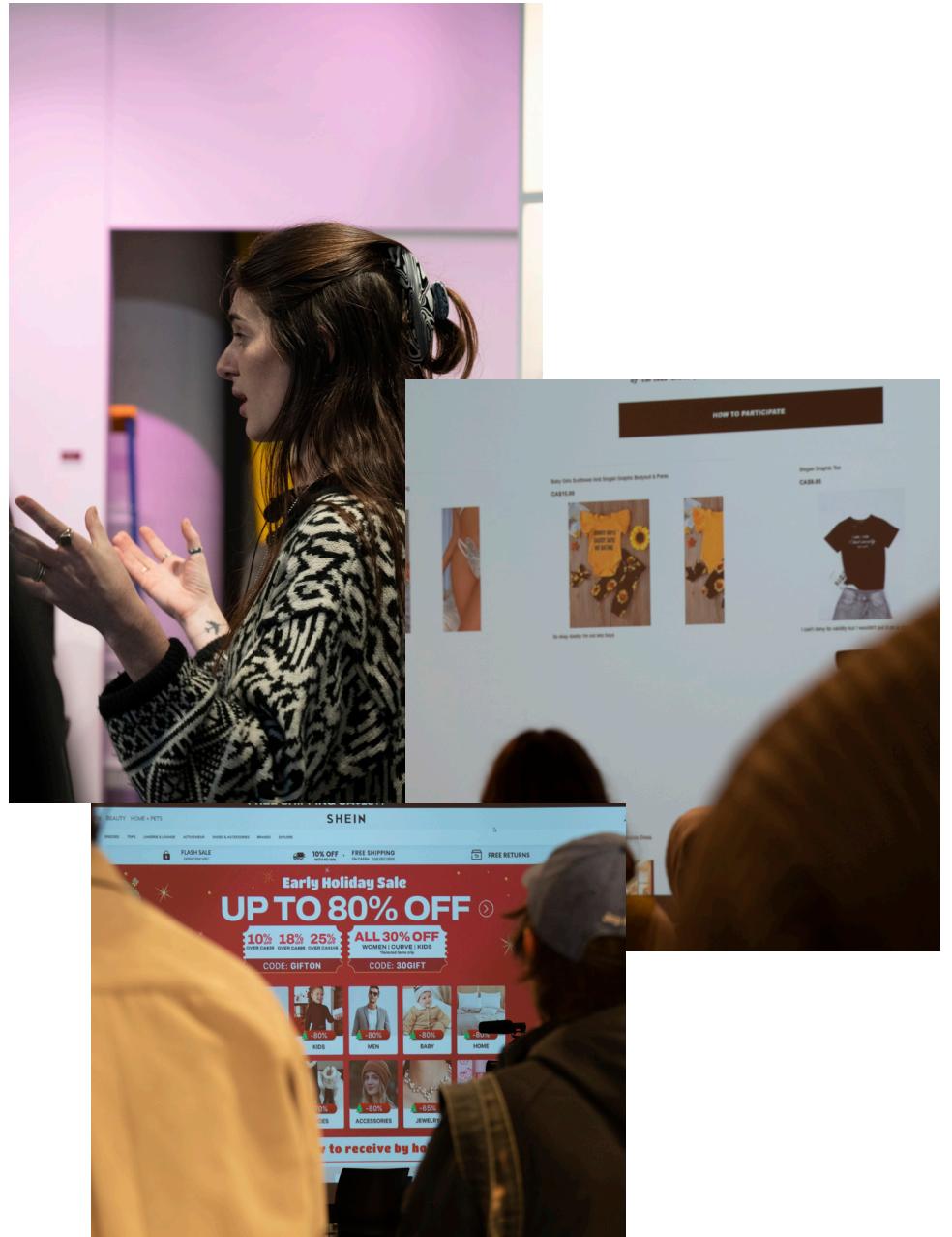
Using the tool created by PrepAI (prepAI.in), Sarah A.M. and I inputted all of our cluster's members' proposals, parts of our course outline, and the final project's brief, and let the machine generate different variations of questions from the text.

I generated and loosely filtered the questions that just made no sense in a linguistic way. We were left with an array of AI generated questions about the materiality of different topics, from digital to built environment and urban design.

These are the questions we ended up with:

```
{ } questions.json > ...
2   "questions": [
3     "Where does the field of urban design predominantly exist?", 
4     "What is easy to take for granted if one is an habitual driver?", 
5     "What is the purpose of the installation?", 
6     "What would you like to account for?", 
7     "What was the object you wanted to render uncomfortable?", 
8     "What are food futures possible and plausible through?", 
9     "Where does the material go when we can no longer see it?", 
10    "What would we do by looking at documentation and cartography?", 
11    "How can we conceptualize the absence of something?", 
12    "What is the problem with tire wear and tear?", 
13    "What are two separate things?", 
14    "What is an interesting opportunity to explore what defines an image and its associations?", 
15    "What are some ways to use digital media in a critical form to bring awareness to the separation of the body/mind within a real world?", 
16    "What would I hope to bring forth a critical way in provoking?", 
17    "What are some platforms that you researched?", 
18    "What is an important aspect of your research to analyse?", 
19    "What are produced simultaneously?", 
20    "How can we re-contextualize our modern fossils?", 
21    "Capturing and displaying the invisible creates the possibilities of what?", 
22    "What can we learn about the way we live, consume and produce?", 
23    "What can engagement with a material lead to?", 
24    "What is the role of design and art in the evolution of the built environment?", 
25    "How would responses to public problems be different if we considered the vibrancy and the agency of materiality?"
```

And finally the event, namely the presentation of my project:



Reflection

Although the mediation event came at a time in the semester where I really thought I could not handle it, I am really satisfied with how it turned out and grateful of the experience it brought me. The events the day of could have hardly unfolded in better ways. The project presentations were meaningful and entertaining. The AI questions loosened the spirit and were even able to generate great answers from the artists. As a presenter, it also felt meaningful to present a final project as part of an official exhibition/mediation and may have been what gave me my final push when I needed it.

As for data_scapes, the response was even better than anticipated. People found the idea entertaining and funny all the while taking in consideration what the project was really trying to say about targetted products and algorithms. The use of 4thspace's big touchscreen table really helped sensationalize my project which I am very grateful for.

If I were to reiterate the project in an exhibition environment like this, I would potentially add more websites on which to query 'weird' products from, namely Pinterest, or Wish, or Facebook Marketplace, etc. The project focuses on Shein because it was at the center of this specific research, but the issue of data collection expands on the entire internet.

You can download the extension here:

https://hybrid.concordia.ca/s_hontoy/data_scapes/download-datascapes.html

Steps to upload the extensions on your google chrome:

1. Click on the “download datascapes extension folder” button (top left corner) in the link provided above
2. unzip the folder in your download folder
3. Go to your google chrome browser (the project only runs on google chrome)
4. type in the google chrome url box: chrome://extensions
5. Toggle the ‘developer mode’ on in the top right corner
6. Click on the “load unpacked” button that just appeared
7. Select the folder you downloaded and unzipped in step 2
8. Go in your google chrome extensions drop-down menu and pin data_scapes so it is easier to use.