How Does Taste Change? a Field-Level Analysis of the Dynamics of Field-Specific Cultural Capital

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Using the notion of taste regime, I explain how taste stabilizes and changes through the unfolding of symbolic struggles between consumers capitalizing on three strategies aimed at (1) accumulating and (2) preserving stocks of field-specific cultural capital, and at (3) subverting the distribution of field-specific cultural capital.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The constant renewal of our consumption world is a staple of capitalism (Schumpeter 1942). This is perhaps nowhere evident as in fashion, a field governed by the reinvention of yesterday’s trends (Rinallo and Golferro 2006). From fashion to consumer electronics to coffee culture to music, most of consumption fields are partly taste-driven. Yet, how does taste change remains an unanswered question. On the one hand, taste is performed through taste regimes, or “discursively constructed normative systems that orchestrate the aesthetics of practice in cultures of consumption” (Arsel and Bean 2013: 900). Consumers’ knowledge about the objects, meanings and doings articulated through taste regimes constitute their FSFC (Arsel and Bean 2013). On the other hand, consumption serves as a ground for status claim (Holt 1998; Ustuner and Holt 2010). I propose that consumers unintentionally enact field-level changes by altering taste regimes through their strategies to, consciously or not, better their field position.

I study this dynamic by unpacking the changes in field members’ taste in the context of avant-garde menswear. I use a multi-method longitudinal approach taking a fashion web forum as my central site of study. This web forum is the breeding ground, recognized authority and place of gathering for avant-garde menswear enthusiasts. It has some 15 000 members (in comparison, a well-known avant-garde menswear retailer in Chicago estimated his local market to be of about 300 consumers) and has facilitated the launch of three designers, a magazine and a web store. The choice of avant-garde fashion is relevant as it is where change in taste would be the most expected (Bourdieu 1996). More, fashion forums are an important part of the fashion industry as they are “routinely read by industry insiders and can be powerful influencers of purchasing behaviour” of both fashion buyers and consumers (Rabkin 2013). My data set is comprised of field notes following a 2 year-long netnography, 7 interviews with field members, more than 175 000 forum posts over a 7 years long period, and some 50 articles from traditional and online media related to the field.

I employ Bourdieu’s field theory and generate insights through a field-level analysis. More specifically, I use the concepts of field; cultural capital; symbolic capital; and conversion value to make sense of the symbolic struggles pertaining to the FSFC-related strategies of consumers (see Bourdieu 1986; 1996; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). As my context is based on aesthetic and taste, I also draw from Arsel and Bean (2013) notion of taste regime as an operationalization of FSFC.

The field is seen as a space of possible positions that consumers can attain through the conversion of their FSFC into symbolic capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). It evolves through consumers’ actions towards the accumulation of field-specific cultural capital, the preservation of their stock of FSFC, or their efforts to disrupt the distribution of FSFC. Consumers accumulate FSFC when they join the field by using the web forum as a codified database of field-related knowledge. Also, the consumption-related problems emerging from the taste regime (Arsel and Bean 2013) create challenges that push consumers to acquire FSFC. As consumers gain expertise, they start to seek information outside of the field and develop a thorough understanding either of one of the core objects of the taste regime, such as a core designer, or of several peripheral ones. Consumers preserve their FSFC by actively engaging in judging other members’ taste, answering questions from newer members and extending the existing objects, doings and meanings arrangements of the taste regime. Finally, consumers try to disrupt the distribution of FSFC by legitimizing new objects, meanings or doings unrelated to the current taste regime, or working to delegitimize existing objects, meanings and doings arrangements.

These strategies, played concomitantly by all field members, unfold through symbolic struggles in which the arrangement of and value associated with the objects-doings-meanings of a field change. As the field evolves, the conversion value of the FSFC changes, that is, the value of certain forms of knowledge associated with the taste regime fluctuates. As these symbolic struggles develop, taste changes.

I contribute to a growing literature on field-level analyses (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013; Giesler 2012; Martin and Schouten 2013; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013) by explaining how consumers’ symbolic struggles lead to changes in taste regimes and in the conversion value associated with a specific stock of FSFC. Over time, the field changes as these modifications bring about new possibilities for position-taking by field members.

REFERENCES


