Toward a Spatial Theory of Taste Formation

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to argue for the development of a spatial theory of taste. We posit that taste might be better understood as being spatially formed and performed via consumers’ aesthetic experiences at various consumption places. We illustrate the usefulness of a spatial conception of taste for contemporary consumer research.

INTRODUCTION

This paper argues for the development of a spatial theory of taste formation. In consumer research, taste has provided a valuable tool and it has mostly been utilized as the theoretical apparatus of our aesthetic choices, preferences, lifestyles and identity projects. However, there is no consensus on how taste is formed and performed in the contemporary marketplace. Consumer researchers have engaged more with the functions and consequences rather than with spatial processes of taste formation. Existing theories of taste are limited due to their primary focus either on consumption practices and/or on postmodern assertions about the fluidity and fragmentation of consumers’ tastes. Based on a review of previous literature on aesthetics, theories of taste and aesthetic consumption experiences, we illustrate how taste might be understood as being spatially formed and performed through consumers’ aesthetic experiences at various consumption places. We highlight the importance of consumers’ aesthetic experiences and their spatial context to the formation of tastes. Inspired by a phenomenological interpretation of Bourdieuian theories of taste and their subsequent use within consumer research, we argue for the development of a spatial theory of taste formation. This reveals the importance of consumption places, which are culturally embedded within certain fields of consumption, and the diversity of ways that consumers’ aesthetic experiences and identity investments within these places might be related to their tastes and identity projects. Accordingly, we argue that a spatial theory of taste offers consumer researchers the possibility to investigate the topanalytic relationality of consumers’ tastes and also place their identity projects within a physical, socio-cultural, and historical frame. We conclude by illustrating how a spatial theory of taste formation might be of relevance to diverse streams of consumer research. We also explain why such a theoretical shift toward a spatial conception of taste would be useful for contemporary marketing theory and practice.

AESTHETICS AND JUDGMENTS OF TASTE

Any discussion about taste necessarily incorporates the concept of aesthetics. Aesthetics is an ambiguous and ill-defined concept. Early abstract conceptualizations of aesthetics might be traced back to the works of ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle in their efforts to build theories of beauty and art. Both philosophers viewed the aesthetic experience as inferior to rational inquiry because it seemed vague or too abstract to conceptualize (Cazeaux 2000). Understandings changed following Kant’s (1790) publication of the critique of aesthetic judgment where he aimed to evaluate whether the faculty of feeling pleasure could lead to the creation of a third philosophical branch to accompany metaphysics and ethics (Kivy 2004). Since then, aesthetics has been studied and conceptualized from a variety of disciplines and streams of thought. One of the main aims of Kantian aesthetics was to explore how and whether standards could be developed for the notion of aesthetic judgments, that is for judgments of taste. Kant maintained that taste is subjective and universally subjective at the same time; subjective to the individual perception level and universally subjective at the social level where it needs to be communicated and justified to others (Gallegos and McHoul, 2006). Kant’s study of judgments of taste initiated a growing interest and discussion outside the field of philosophical aesthetics. Accordingly, any efforts to develop working theories of taste seem to broadly revolve around these two levels.

Within the sociological and consumer research literature, aesthetics and taste have been conceptualized in a diversity of ways. First, taste has been theorized as a mechanism for social and/or cultural distinction (Allen 2002; Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1997). Such studies identify the structural aspects of taste, quite often deal with class-based and status oriented consumption practices and ultimately provide a macro-social interpretation of the consumption phenomena at hand. Second, taste has been studied as a marker of affiliation to specific groups, communities and/or fields of consumption (Arssel and Bean 2013; Arssel and Thompson 2011; Holt 1998; Kates 2002; Thornton 1996). This strand of consumer research investigates consumers’ desire for belonging to groups/communities/fields of consumption, primarily through the employment of taste as a lifestyle marker aligned with the tribal aesthetics of postmodern consumer culture (Maffesoli 1996). These efforts attempt to move away from the macro-social and structural dimensions of taste and build more contextualized interpretations. Third, taste has been considered as a mechanism of aesthetic discrimination (Banister and Booth 2004; Bourdieu 1984; Joy and Sherry 2003; McQuarrie et al. 2013; Wilk 1997). Here, consumer researchers deal either with the processes through which individuals achieve distastes (Banister and Booth 2004; McQuarrie et al. 2013; Wilk 1997) or with aesthetic consumption practices that distinguish them from other consumers in the marketplace and often possess artistic qualities (e.g. Bourdieu 1984; Joy and Sherry 2003). Finally, a wide range of studies explores taste as a sensory output related to five senses (Bloch 1995; Townsend 1987; Venkatesh et al. 2010). Aesthetics and judgments of taste are mainly associated with visual forms of objects and sensory experiences related with texture, harmony, order, and beauty (Venkatesh et al. 2010).

In general, these streams of research highlight how taste is defined individually, through groups, and within social determinants, and practiced economically and culturally within discursive formations in the production of aesthetic appreciation (Fenster 1991). Furthermore, some of these studies position aesthetics and judgments of taste within the everyday lives of consumers. However, it is argued that most of these studies focus on the functions and practices of taste rather than on how taste is formed. Even when they do so, they emphasize the portrayal of consumers’ identity investments in the marketplace and the practices of taste, rather than with how and where consumers form, shape and perform their tastes. Aesthetic experiences and aesthetic consumption practices are inextricably linked with the nature of the context of the contemporary marketplace and have been hitherto studied within consumer research (Joy and Sherry 2003; Venkatesh and Meamber 2006; Houston and Meamber 2011). However, we argue that previous research has failed to adequately position consumers’ tastes within their experiential marketplace context. In this paper, we posit a phenomenological approach to estab-
lish our understanding of aesthetics and taste. Such an approach considers aesthetics as being part of consumers’ everyday lives which unfold through involvement with aesthetically oriented everyday consumption experiences and practices (Venkatesh and Meamber 2006). Accordingly, we consider taste to be spatially formed and performed via consumers’ lived experiences within the contemporary marketplace. In the next section, we delve deeper into issues of taste formation as related to consumers’ selves and identity investments and further illustrate our rationale toward the development of a spatial theory of taste.

IDENTITY INVESTMENTS AND TASTE FORMATION

In the social sciences, it is Bourdieu’s (1984) writings that have received the most attention and inspired subsequent work on aesthetic judgments and the development of individuals’ tastes. The relationship between identity and taste has been a focal point both in his early and later writings on taste, through the development of analytic constructs such as habitus and field. Bourdieu’s work aimed to show that judgments of taste reflect the processes by which dominant groups obtain their power and influence (Woodward and Emmison 2001). Bourdieu (1984) forwarded a sociological conception of taste in which appreciation and judgment of aesthetic experiences mainly serve to create social and cultural distinctions. Consequently, such experiences should be seen more as social rather than aesthetic categories, as ‘social imposition in disguise’ (Korsmeyer 2001, 201). In doing so, Bourdieu argued that taste is formed through the employment of various forms of generalized capital (economic, cultural, social and symbolic) that develop through consumers’ identity investments and lead to different levels of internal disposition, termed habitus. Bourdieu’s (1984) conceptualization offers important insights about identity and taste formation and influenced a wide range of consumer research that dealt with the (re)production of socio-cultural distinctions and consumers’ identity projects in the contemporary marketplace (Arnould and Thompson 2005). However, his conceptualization deals with the structural aspects of taste, which mainly account for consumers’ primary socialization (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013), rather than with how taste is formed and performed in certain social fields, and even more specifically, marketplace spaces.

In his later writings, Bourdieu aimed to dismiss generalized capital conceptions and instead replace them with field-dependent ones, that is with capital conceptions and identity investments that touch on specific social fields (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Field-specific capital is not only acquired as part of consumers’ primary socialization processes but also as part of their participation in various social fields throughout the course of their lives. As such, habitus is continuously developed and re-enacted along with consumers’ engagement in different fields of consumption. Consumer research which explores the tribal aesthetics of the contemporary marketplace is aligned with field theory conceptions. A number of researchers have investigated the communal consumption practices of extraordinary consumption experiences (Celsi et al. 1993; Arnould and Price 1993; Kozinets 2002), of lifestyle subcultures (e.g. Kates 2002; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), of brand communities (Cova and Pace 2006; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Muniz and Schau 2005) and recently of taste regimes (Arse and Bean 2013). This stream of research aimed to explicate how consumers create field-dependent capital through their identity investments in these consumption communities (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013). These studies were often directed towards the portrayal of various consumption practices within which consumers participate, as members of such communities; practices which were often orchestrated by the discursive aesthetics of these communities (Arse and Bean 2013).

Another stream of consumer research explored the socio-cultural tensions that arise within the domain of marketplace performances by employing a field analysis logic. Marketplace performances have been defined as ‘multifaceted social interactions through which different forms of capital (economic, social, cultural) are routinely exchanged, and varying degrees of interpersonal familiarity and commitments to the relationship are established’ (Ustuner and Thompson 2012, 797). For example, several researchers explored the status games of consumers in lower, middle and higher status social fields and how these games are exposed in a variety of marketplace contexts (Arse and Thompson 2011; Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013; Ustuner and Thompson 2012). Although these researchers embraced Bourdieu’s field-dependent conceptions, their inquiries mostly focused on the macro-social dimensions of taste and the status games that are generated when a marketplace performance in a specific consumption field occurs. A notable exception is Arsel and Thompson’s (2011) study into experiences of the hipster myth within the indie field of consumption, in particular consumers’ attempts to disassociate themselves from the hipster myth in order to protect their field-dependent identity investments. As the authors point out, consumers’ lived attachments with (indie) places and their associated cultural ambience help them to relate themselves to the indie consumption field.

Such efforts based on late Bourdieuan work started to recognize the corporeal nature of physical and social space and how it influences fields and the distribution of capital. Yet, we argue that even Bourdieu’s late field-specific writings provide a largely aspatial sociological analysis (Hanquinet et al. 2012). As Crossley (2001) notes, both field theory and the habitus concept fail to take into full consideration the reproductive role of human agency, which is grounded in individuals’ actions and interactions and ultimately shapes and/or transforms their habitus. His argument is based on a phenomenological interpretation of Bourdieu’s work and points us in two directions.

First, it reveals that existing theories of taste formation fail to uncover how consumers who participate in these marketplace contexts might be positioned within a broader socio-historical framework (Askegaard and Trolle-Limnet 2011). We argue that, amongst others, the reason for this is the emergence of the ‘practice turn’ (Warde 2005) within consumer research which shifted scholars’ attention toward the exploration of consumption practices and activities that result from consumers’ exercise and performance of their tastes. However, one of the main limitations of practice-oriented approaches to taste is their lack of positioning within a broader structural framework (Warde 2014). In Bourdieuan terms, this would require delineating the exact interrelationships between consumers’ generalized and field dependent identity investments (Arse and Bean 2013; Arse and Thompson 2011).

Second, Crossley’s argument pinpoints the embodied and transformative potential of the habitus concept, potential which is recognized by scholars within and outside the sociological field (Casey 2001; Wacquant 2004). Previous consumer research studies have illustrated that identity is shaped and developed through consumers’ continuous engagement with discourse and experiences (Joy and Sherry 2003; Thompson and Hirschman 1995; Venkatesh and Meamber 2006; 2008). As Venkatesh and Meamber (2008) point out, aesthetic consumption experiences might lead to taste formation along with cultivating consumers’ identities. Extending this line of work, we propose to delve deeper into the spatiality of such aesthetic and aesthetically oriented consumption experiences and their influence on consumers’ tastes and identity investment processes.
A spatial theory of taste might allow consumer researchers to place consumers’ identity projects within a broader structural framework of relations based on Bourdieu’s field theory, and also reveal its embodied and transformative potential. In doing so, we highlight the need to analytically bridge the construct of taste with that of the aesthetic experience in order to be able to explore how consumers enact their identity investments in the marketplace through their participation in aesthetic experiences that are grounded in the wide array of consumption places available at hand. In the next section, we turn to the concept of the aesthetic experience and the ways it has been hitherto utilized in consumer research in relation to space and place.

AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES AND THE SPATIALITY OF TASTE

Aesthetic experiences and aesthetically oriented consumption experiences have been of major interest in marketing and consumer research. The concept of the aesthetic experience has been subject to multiple meanings and usages in the broader field of consumer research. We posit a broad definition of the aesthetic (consumption) experience that covers experiential, symbolic, sensory and affective dimensions (Charters 2006; Houston and Meamber 2011). We further illustrate how these dimensions of the aesthetic experience have been hitherto investigated within consumer research. During recent decades, consumer research scholars shifted their attention toward aesthetically oriented consumption experiences. These are aligned with the ‘experiential turn’ within management circles, which highlights the centrality of staging memorable experiences as key drivers of economic value (Pine and Gilmore 1998; Schmitt 1999). The aesthetics of experiential consumption are associated with post-modern theorizations of the overall aestheticization of everyday life (Featherstone 1990; 1991) and a shift from a production-oriented society, based on work ethics, to a consumer-oriented society, based on consumption aesthetics (Bauman 1998). Postmodern experiential consumer research pinpoints the multisensory, experiential, and emotive facets of consumption through the diffusion of a bricolage of subjective choices, symbolic meanings, hedonic reactions, and aesthetic principles (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) and the existence of pluralistic and free-floating tastes and lifestyles (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Consumer researchers have explored the sensory and affective aspects of consumption experiences that often acquire an extraordinary nature (e.g. Arnould and Price 1993; Celsi et al. 1993; Kozinets 2002). Other studies have been concerned with the exploration of aesthetic consumption practices as evidenced in a variety of aesthetic consumption spaces (e.g. Joy and Sherry 2003; Venkatesh and Meamber 2006; Houston and Meamber 2011). Finally, recent experiential consumption studies explored the processes by which consumers create attachments to consumption spaces (e.g. Debenedetti et al. 2014; Kozinets et al. 2002; MacLaran and Brown 2005; Visconti et al. 2010). Such studies aimed to investigate how consumers develop emotive and/or symbolic associations with their surroundings (Debenedetti et al. 2014).

With the exception of a handful of these studies (Debenedetti et al. 2014; MacLaran and Brown 2005; Visconti et al. 2010), aesthetic and aesthetically oriented experiential consumer research has not accounted for the spatial dimensions of the contemporary marketplace that emerge in different consumption places, and shape consumers’ aesthetic experiences. Indeed, place itself has been mostly utilized as a static concept and rarely as a significant source of meanings within the consumer research domain (Sherry 2000). In addition, the exact interrelationships between the spatiality of aesthetic experiences and consumers’ tastes remain underexplored. We argue that this is mainly a result of the fact that both space and place have been subject to a wide range of definitions and interpretations within consumer research, and the two terms are often utilized interchangeably. In this paper, we are inspired by a phenomenological approach to space and place (Bachelard 1964; Casey 1998; 2001; Tuan 1977). A phenomenological conception implies that place is simultaneously a ground of action that is physical and historical, social and cultural (Casey 1998; 2001), and that we subsequently understand the world through our spatial experiences in various consumption places. We argue that most of the above studies do not follow a phenomenological understanding of place and rather tend to treat place as something that is subsumed into existing categories. In other words, consumer research has not explained how habitus and taste are topoanalytically related to the aesthetic experiences that emerge in a wide range of consumption places (Bachelard 1964). Such a topoanalytic exploration is argued to be able to lead to the development of a spatial theory of taste that fully uncovers the embodied and transformative potential of consumers’ tastes while placing them in a broader structural framework of relations. In doing so, it might also lead to the creation of experiential snapshots that capture the fluidity of postmodern consumer tastes.

A SPATIAL THEORY OF TASTE?

Our theoretical discussion calls for the development of a spatial theory of taste formation that is more attentive to the significance of the consumption places that are culturally embedded within certain fields of consumption, and to the diversity of ways that consumers’ aesthetic experiences and identity investments within these places might be shaped, influenced and related to their tastes and identity projects and vice versa. As a result, a spatial theory of taste is concerned with two main research objectives, namely how consumers’ tastes are performed in the contemporary marketplace through their engagement in a wide range of aesthetic and aesthetically oriented consumption experiences, and how, in turn, the meanings of specific consumption places tend to shape consumers’ aesthetic experiences and tastes. Little empirical work, within consumer research, reveals the embodied and potentially transformative potential of consumers’ tastes and simultaneously positions identity investments within a broader structural framework of relations. Previous studies have focused more on the practices and outcomes of taste, rather than with how taste is actually formed and performed at the marketplace through consumers’ participation in aesthetic experiences which are grounded in various consumption places. A spatial theory of taste formation might allow consumer researchers to investigate the topoanalytic relationality of consumers’ tastes within and across fields of consumption, and also place their identity projects within a physical, socio-cultural, and historical framework.

A spatial theory of consumers’ tastes contributes to, and opens avenues for, future research in distinct yet interrelated trajectories of consumer research. It responds to recent calls from a stream of consumer research theorists that argue for a move towards an epistemology of consumer culture theory research (Arnould and Thompson 2005); one which takes into account ‘the context of context’ (Askegaard and Trolle Linnet 2011, 381) of inquiry through the exploration of both the macroscopic and microscopic dimensions of consumption experiences. Also, future consumer research efforts on the spatiality of taste could fall into the emerging stream of research that investigates the spatial poetics of the contemporary marketplace (Debenedetti et al. 2014; Kozinets et al. 2002; MacLaran and Brown 2005; Visconti et al. 2010). Linking space and place with taste might provide novel insights into the experiential and/or retail design of contemporary consumptionscapes, and also uncover the transformative potential of consumers’ tastes that are enacted within the con-
temporary marketplace, and how they influence and affect consumers’ ongoing identity projects. A spatial conception of consumers’ tastes would lead to the development of a nuanced theory of taste formation, which is arguably missing from contemporary theorizations of taste within consumer research and beyond.

In the light of the maturation of the experiential consumption era, the nature and context of the contemporary marketplace seems to be of central significance to the development of a refined understanding of consumers’ choices, preferences, and tastes. Places are important. The French commercial spaces investigated in Debenedetti et al. (2014), the past and present spatial environment of the Irish Powys Court shopping mall in MacLaran and Brown (2005), the public street art spaces in Visconti et al. (2010) are all powerful examples that show us how consumers perform, and potentially transform their tastes through their place-specific identity investments. As Arsel and Thompson (2011) illustrate, indie consumption places act as colors in consumers’ identity palettes to help them draw their disassociation with the hipster myth in the canvas of the indie consumption field. Addressing how such diverse consumption places might both affect and create continuas of consumers’ tastes, might arguably lead us to a novel and sophisticated approach to segmenting and targeting consumers; an approach grounded in consumers’ identity investments within the genius loci of the marketplace.

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