Taste the Waste – Constructing New Moralities Through Taboo Consumption

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Drawing on assemblage theory and the concept of territorialization, we show how consumers create new moralities by engaging voluntarily in taboo consumption behavior. In an ethnographic study of dumpster diving, and accounting for the role of materiality in the construction of morality, we find that violating taboos brings a de-stabilizing focus to prevailing morality, creating a space for a new morality to form.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Morality underlies our decision-making and consumption behavior at all time: Is it right or wrong to buy/use a certain product? Is it sustainable to dispose of a certain product in certain ways? Do we feel compelled to conform to certain social norms?

Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler (2010) account for consumption as a form of morality play. Other studies show how morality influences consumption decisions (Crockett and Wallendorf 2004) or challenges social or economic structures (Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007). However, moralities are subject to change. In the beginning of the 20th century it was almost a crime to waste any food or material that could be reused, whereas wasting was considered as an acceptable behavior during the economic boom (Evans, Campbell, and Murcott 2012). The same holds true for slavery or child labor that, in former times, has been considered as morally acceptable, at least by members of non-enslaved races or societies (Bloom 2010). Morality has been presented as a mainly socially constructed concept. However, recent studies suggest that materiality as well as practices play a significant role in shaping morality: morality changes through embodied consumption practices and reflexive experimentation (Sandikci and Ger 2010; McAlexander et al. 2014). Foregrounding materiality and embodied consumption practices allows us to question the role of consumption and understand how consumption changes. Following the claim of McAlexander et al. (2014), this paper examines the interplay between morality and consumption and the underlying mechanisms to change the moral code. We propose morality as an assemblage of material and non-material actors where new actors outside the established structure (for instance, taboo consumption behaviors) have the capacity to de-territorialize (de-stabilize) and re-territorialize (re-stabilize) the morality assemblage. Explicitly, we argue that taboo consumption behavior can act as a change catalyst (DeLanda 2006), as according to anthropological and sociological concepts, taboo consumption behavior is prone to destabilize prevailing social structures and codes (Durkheim 1963; Douglas 2013).

The paper aims at answering the following research questions: Can consumers construct new moralities through taboo consumption? If so, what are the processes involved? What tensions evolve? How are those tensions overcome or negotiated? What is the role of materiality in it?

In order to tease out the nuances of these research questions we rely on ethnographic data gained in the context of dumpster diving. The practice of dumpster diving, in this case, consists of taking discarded supermarket waste and reclaim the food waste for consumption. Dumpster diving is often related to the margins of society such as according to anthropological and sociological concepts, taboo consumption behavior is prone to destabilize prevailing social structures and codes (Durkheim 1963; Douglas 2013) resulting in a new assemblage of morality. Similar to the struggles of assembling nature (Canniford and Shankar 2013) our assemblage of morality is first betrayed through the activity of dumpster diving. Then it is purified again by assigning use value to products finally resulting in a new emergent value coined by re-enchantment. The new moral practice challenges prevailing morality and demonstrates its contradictions and limitations.

This way we add to theory on morality by emphasizing the role of materiality in contrast to the former social-constructivist concept of morality. Through the material violation of an established order a new morality is created coined by an enlightened, value-creating and re-enchanted moral code of consumption. Explicitly, this shows us the role of embodied consumption practices in the overarching system of consumption.

REFERENCES


