From “Moving Consumption” to “Spacing Consumption:” in Search of Consumption Geographies

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Based on an ethnographic study of a multi-sited festival, this analysis highlights the spatial aspect of mobile consumption. By operationalizing the new mobilities paradigm via a non-representational approach, this paper elaborates the concept of spacing consumption as the process whereby practices of consumption emerge as embodied, performative, and political.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1021567/volumes/v44/NA-44

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ABSTRACT

Based on an ethnographic study of a multi-sited festival this analysis highlights the spatial aspect of mobile consumption. By operationalizing the new mobilities paradigm via a non-representational approach this paper elaborates the concept of spacing consumption as the process whereby practices of consumption emerge as embodied performative and political.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, human sciences have been trying to capture the supposedly increased mobility of society as a result of the flows and movements of people, objects, things, and ideas (Sheller and Urry 2004, 2006). Consumer research studies have been receptive toward this view of the world by producing several conceptual and empirical investigations that emphasize “mobile consumption issues in their worldwide and historical context” (Brembeck, Cochoy, and Moisander 2014, 1).

Consistent with the approach that Brembeck, Cochoy and Moisander (2014) refer to as “moving consumption,” consumer research scholars have analyzed the “embodied sensibilities” of consumers dealing with “mobile-things” (Hansson 2014) and the importance of time and temporality in unpacking the mobile aspects of consumption (Figueredo and Uncles 2014; Dholakia, Reyes, and Bonoff 2014). This present paper aims to produce a further step in the investigation of the mobile nature of consumption phenomena by offering the theoretical concept of “spacing consumption.” This concept captures the mobility of consumption activities in their relationship with their local context by better appreciating the inherent spatial dimension of consumption mobilities. In this effort, the paper resonates with recent work that emphasizes the role of space and place in consumption (Chatzidakis, Maclaran, and Bradshaw 2012; Chronis 2008; Chronis, Arnould, and Hampton 2012; Debenedetti, Oppewal, and Arsc 2014).

To fulfill its aim, this paper identifies non-representational modes of inquiry as an appropriate way to operationalize the new mobilities paradigm in the context of consumer research. In line with recent attempts within the marketing literature to appreciate aspects of consumption activities that are more than representational (Canniford and Bajde 2016; Hill, Canniford, and Mol 2014), mobilities are seen here as the liaison between consumers and the space produced by them.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this paper explores the borders between mobilities and non-representational perspectives. An increasing number of studies in consumer culture theory have endorsed different types of relational ontologies (Canniford ans Bajde 2016). The new mobilities paradigm (Sheller and Urry 2004, 2006) represents an approach that is underpinned by a relational ontology as it promotes an understanding of society and the lived experiences of people (and consumers) not as fixed and given but as constantly played out from the relationships between their movements and trajectories. Furthermore, the new mobilities paradigm highlights the significance of materiality, bodily experiences, and emotions in determining how people are connected to their environment and how they make sense of it.

The ideas of mobility and on-the-move consumers have been “trickling down” into consumer research in different fashions. Some studies have endorsed this view by relaying on Baumann’s (2000) perspective of liquidity and immateriality as a way to analyze “mobile” travelers negotiating identities via food consumption (Bardhi, Östberg, and Bengtsson 2010), or some studies see it as a way to understand possessions with regard to global nomads (Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould 2012). Other studies, instead, have embraced the spirit of the new mobilities paradigm theoretically and methodologically. For example, Hansson (2014) illustrates consumers’ experiences of bringing items home from the store, highlighting the value of their “embodied sensibilities” during their trajectories in urban space. Figueredo and Uncles (2014), through their inquiry into temporal management and structuration of consumption, offer a conceptualization of the temporal dimension of consumption mobilities. Similarly, the temporality of consumption experience is illustrated through the lens of mobility in Dholakia, Reyes and Bonoff’s (2014) analysis of the mobile media permeating the contemporary consumption sphere.

The present study extends this debate and appreciates the spatial character of consumption mobilities by identifying three different “modes” through which mobile consumption practices are articulated. These modes stress the aspects of embodiment, performativity, and political dispositions of consumers. Here, performativity refers to the expressive enactment of consumption practices whereby consumers articulate a mise-en-scène of bodily movements as a means of engaging in a communicative relationship with other consumers and the environment. Political dispositions, instead, understood in terms of affects through the ideas proposed by Spinozian philosophy, refers to experiential bodily states, or rather the deeply rooted emotional forces that drive the actions of consumers’ bodies and can eventually become a tool to express social differences.

Situated at the core of the new mobilities paradigm is the idea that contemporary society is “in play,” engineered through the movements of people and things that travel across space. Spatiality is indeed implicit in the very concept of mobility. A stimulating angle that combines focuses on both mobility and spatiality can be found by drawing from non-representational theories (Cadman 2009; Lorimer 2005; Nash 2000; Thrift 2000), which have recently been introduced in marketing theory (Hill et al., 2014) to highlight the emotional consumption geographies stretching beyond the realm of sight and visuality (Henshaw et al. 2015). Non-representational theories can be used in this respect in order to envision a research methodology that encourages spatial research practices (Vannini 2015, 4).

METHOD

In order to capture the spatial character of the mobilities implicit in consumption activities, this study identifies consumption practices as its unit of analysis. Following Beyes and Steyaert (2011, 47), this effort intends to complement the established attention to visual and verbal self-reported accounts of participants by gaining insights into the materiality and performativity of spatiality. In line with a non-representational approach to research (Vannini 2015), a “performative ethnography” (Cadman 2009, 6) has been carried out. This resonates with Hill and colleagues’ (2014, 14) call for ethnographers “to expand on research sites, contexts and samples by seeking out
novel ways to describe and track the distributed world of consumption.” Accordingly, the authors of this current study endorse such an approach by immersing themselves into an itinerant and multi-site festival called “Pink Night” (La Notte Rosa) held in 2011.

The Pink Night Festival occurs every first weekend of July in one of the most widely recognized mass-tourism areas in Italy, the Romagna Riviera. The event was conceived by the Department for Tourism of the Rimini Province in 2006 to re-launch tourism and sustain economic development. The festival has been conceived as a participatory celebration in which 110 kilometer coast of “the entire Riviera turns pink” (promotional brochure). The organizers point out that the festival was designed as a response to the traditional format of Light Night or nuit blanche events for which white is instead the main thematic color.

Because of such features, the Pink Night constitutes an appropriate site for analysis. In fact, according to a mobile understanding of space, the festival can be recognized as a way through which the Romagna Riviera is set up “in play” through different activities going through different localities and temporalities. Indeed, the event involves 12 municipalities along the coast with the attractions occurring either simultaneously or at different times along the whole coastal area. In particular, concerts, live performances, fireworks, and other minor happenings are designed by both local administrative bodies and private contributors (for example, shop owners and hoteliers) with the aim of generating economic turnover around a multi-site experience of thematic consumption. Participants are encouraged to dress themselves in pink clothes and display a variety of pink accessories. The theme of the Festival encourages retailers to propose on the shelves a wide range of pink items and service providers to offer experiences playing around the main color of the celebration. As a result, pink street furniture, special menus at restaurants, lighting games, fireworks, decorated shop windows create an engaging atmosphere.

Data collection started with a preliminary text analysis of official documents as well as selected interviews held with key organizers which allowed the authors to collect background information and become acquainted with the staging of the festival. Subsequently, an intensive investigation of the festival resulted in a four day, around the clock full immersion of the researchers in the event, during which time they closely interacted with the environment and consumers, paying specific attention to how consumers enacted during the Festival across space. Not only were the researchers engaged in observing the bodily movements of the participants, but they themselves were similarly involved in movements, shifting from one location to another in order to capture the spatial practices of consumption within shopping areas and public spaces. This resonates with the spirit of mobility in methodology (Hein, Evans, and Jones 2008) which advocates methods such as observing transfer points, walking while

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Embodiment and Corporeality</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub-themes</td>
<td>experiencing through multiple senses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snippets from the data</td>
<td>eating “pink meals” and “pink piadina”; listening to (and following by bike) the “DJ Baba mobile music station”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>body painting; purchasing and exchanging wigs and jewellery items</td>
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<td>lining up at bars; pub crawling on bicycles; sweating and smelling; men chatting up women and offering drinks; welcoming tourists</td>
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<th>Theme</th>
<th>Performativity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub-themes</td>
<td>playing and making believe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snippets from the data</td>
<td>dressing up and teasing during bachelor and bachelorette party trips; engaging in ludic and exuberant activities; cheating ticket inspectors and getting free riding on trains; shopping to compete for creating the most shocking pink outfits</td>
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<td></td>
<td>showing off pink outfits; checking-in on Foursquare; taking selfies and posting on social media websites; buying and fixing decorations to garnish private houses and shops</td>
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<td>posing in front of cameras; adorn small pets with pink items; creating customized T-shirts that create team spirit and sense of belonging; being tagged on Facebook</td>
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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Political and affection</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sub-themes</td>
<td>avoiding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Snippets from the data</td>
<td>residents traveling “against the flow” and leaving the coastal areas; creating shortcuts to avoid crowded public spaces; creating shortcuts to find peaceful restaurants and attractions</td>
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<td>making fun of participants who are not adequately attired; complaining about the decrease in attraction quality in relation to previous editions of the festival</td>
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<td>enjoying the chic Pink Night at the Grand Hotel by drinking the special Pink Martini; being left out of the Grand Hotel gates by guards</td>
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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Audiening (traditional aspects of consumption within Festivals)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub-themes</td>
<td>“gazing”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Snippets from the data</td>
<td>watching firework shows; seeing gigs; taking pictures of funny people dressed in pink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>parking bicycles; parking cars; organizational buyers occupying public land to implement below-the-line activities; neighborhood communities decorating public spaces</td>
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<th>Theme</th>
<th>Coordinating and planning</th>
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<tr>
<td>Snippets from the data</td>
<td>carrying bikes on trains to travel from attraction to attraction more effectively; lining up on cars while arriving in the attraction areas; discussing alternative routes and plans for the night</td>
</tr>
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talking, and using time-space accounts to record movement. Mobile researchers followed consumers along their trajectories throughout the event by using cars and bicycles, but most often they traveled by foot.

The observation produced a series of field notes that were digitally recorded on site and then manually transcribed into about 20 pages and several pictures and videos. Further pictures were collected after the event online, via social media websites. Both transcripts and research-driven visual materials became object of a “thematic analysis” (Bryman 2008, 554) that helped create an index of central themes and sub-themes emerging from the data. This was chosen as an appropriate analytical method due to its flexibility, given the presence of heterogeneous types of data including both verbal transcripts describing practices and images illustrating practices.

While the verbal accounts produced by consumers at the festival were often central to understand the meanings guiding their consumption practices, the authors put efforts into capturing spatial and bodily aspects, offering detailed accounts of the movements and gestures of the consumers involved in the festival. In this respect, the present methodology incorporates the “internal design proxemics” construct (van Marrewijk and Broos 2012, 87) as a way to study the “spatial arrangements” and “sociomaterial performances” in consumption practices. Yet, by further considering movements and gestures, the present study integrates the prevalent representational modes of knowledge based on verbal and visual accounts that characterize established research procedures within consumer research (Hietanen, Ronka, and Schouten 2013).

**DISCUSSION**

Three of the main themes emerging from the analysis of the consumption practices captured during the Festival (see table 1) provide an opportunity to unpack the spatial aspect of the mobilities inherent in consumption activities. While more traditional aspects of consumption usually characterizing festivals are also identified in the analysis (i.e. “audiencing”, “coordinating and planning”), the first three themes illustrated in table 1 are discussed to elaborate the concept of “spacing consumption” This concept refers to a way to capture the generative movements that constitute consumption activities and simultaneously produce space through consumption practices (see figure 1). Through this conceptualization, consumption is viewed as a particular manner of dwelling and being rooted in space, highlighting the reciprocity between consumers’ activities and the space where consumption “happens.” In particular, the concept of spacing consumption understands the mobility of consumption practices as characterized by the three aspects which of “Embodiment and Corporeality”, “Performativity” and “Political and Affection” (see table 1 and figure 1). These three aspects of practices capture three complementary aspect of the spatiality inherent in the consumption mobilities observed.

**Spatial practices as embodied**

During the Pink Night Festival, consumers construct their bodies as “space” literally through practices of ingestion such as drinking alcohol during the pedalata alcolica (a pub-crawl performed by cyclists) and through the work they do on their bodies by adorning it with pink accessories, thus contributing to the staging of a collective pink landscape in the streets and on the beach. It is through the idea of embodiment that the concept of spacing consumption allows us to better acknowledge aspects of movement that are not only or not at all cognitive and verbalized (Thrift 1997), as evident in the on-the-move consumption of alcoholic beverages and music performed by cyclists following the “DJ Baba mobile music station.”

The aspect of embodiment thus understands consumption practices as activities that involve situated “flesh and blood” subjects whose lives unfold through reciprocal interactions with their environment (Thrift 1997). This is in line with accounts of non-representational aspects of consumption which recognize that precognitive corporal knowledge may transcend cognitive elaboration (Hill et al., 2014, 10). Acknowledgments of the significance of embodied experience in consumer research are certainly not unprecedented; for example, Joy and Sherry (2003) note the embodied aesthetic experience of consumers within art museums. Similarly, the significance of the embodied practices of a moving consumer has been highlighted by Hansson (2014) in his study of familial experiences of bringing items back home from the store. The concept of spacing consumption takes this perspective further by implying that consumption is a practical way by which people become involved in their world, create knowledge, and directly interact with their physical environment. This is in line with the argument of Goodman, Goodman and Redclift (2010, 6) who claim that “it is the very consumption of spaces and places by our (non)mobile bodies that gives us somewhere to live and make our lives, act from and be acted upon.”

**Spatial practices as performatives**

The pink-colored “flow of consumers,” moving from one attraction to the other along the Romagna Riviera, exemplifies the performative character of spatial mobile practices. The moving bodies of pink-attired residents and tourists converge to form a co-constructed performance that shapes a picturesque pink geography along the main streets of the sea-resorts. The aspect of performativity refers to the expressive practices through which consumers engage in showings and presentations among one another and within their environments. This performative aspect (Thrift 2003) is strongly linked to the aspect of embodiment, as one of the principal ways whereby the bodies of consumers participate in consumption practices. This is in line with accounts of non-representational aspects of consumption which may be understood as assembled flows of presentation practices in space (Dirksmeier and Helbrecht 2008).

The theoretical metaphor of performance has often been referred to in consumer research (Chronis 2008; van Marrewijk and Broos 2012) as the idea that consumers perform on a given stage and in front of an audience. However, the concept of spacing consumption suggests a slightly different application of the performance metaphor that draws from the notion of performativity (Thrift and Dewsbury 2000). Consumption practices are not just choreographies enacted by performers on given stages of consumption (retail spaces or in shopping malls), but they might also be activities that contribute to the shape of those environments (e.g. public squares and beaches) and are therefore actively constitutive of them. The carnivalesque parade created by the flows of crowds moving from one attraction to the other between different municipalities and districts illustrates the performative characteristic of consumption. This picturesque flow of bodies becomes in itself an attraction that is able to encourage other consumers to purchase pink items and take an active role in the transformation of the landscape into a diffused experience of carnival.

**Spatial practices as political**

The aversion against the festival and the presence of tourists expressed by residents traveling “against the flow” and leaving the coastal areas is a spatial manifestation of consumption’s political aspect. This is also exemplified by the contradictions observed between the corporeal disposition of consumers and the verbal discourses conveyed by them during the interaction with the researchers of this study. One of the informants, for example, criticized the event...
while simultaneously expressing her commitment to it by actively participating in the pink carnivalesque parade.

The political aspect thus refers to the feelings and emotions characterizing consumption practices which result in manifestations of bodily movements and facial expressions. In line with non-representational accounts of consumption, affects can be seen as engines that engender consumers’ mobilities that in turn produce change and keep consumption practices in motion (Hill et al., 2014, 11). This may be a promising avenue for consumer culture, as shown by the critical discussion of the affective body and the affective body image developed by Featherstone (2010). The affective character of the consumption practices emerging from the analysis of the Pink Night Festival provides empirical evidence for one of the most thought-provoking tenets of the new mobilities paradigm, namely the “recentering of the corporeal body as an affective vehicle through which we sense place and movement, and construct emotional geographies” (Sheller and Urry 2006, 216).

However, the analysis of this current study emphasizes that these emotional geographies are seldom neutral and rarely implicit in a flat space. In line with Thrift’s conceptualization of the spatial politics of affect, consumers’ practices appear to be embedded within a field of forces in which issues of control and resistance can emerge and be expressed in the way consumers move or do not move. This hints at the role played by affects in shaping people’s political dispositions as highlighted by non-representational theorists (Cadman 2009, 6). The “bottleneck” observed at the entrance of the exclusive event held at the Grand Hotel in Rimini is an expression of mobilities and immobilities inherent in the consumer practices, with consumers being clustered through boundaries that they might not able to cross.

![Figure 1: The concept of spacing consumption](image)

**Figure 1: The concept of spacing consumption**

**CONCLUSIONS**

This paper extends the existing literature that examines the role of mobilities in consumer research (Brembeck et al. 2014). This study highlights the spatiality that characterizes consumption mobilities through an account of consumption practices in a multi-site and participatory Italian festival. Following recent attempts to bring relational ontologies into marketing (Hill et al. 2014; Hietanen et al. 2013) and building upon the growing consumer research literature that explores the nexus between consumption and space (Chatzidakis et al. 2012; Chronis, 2008; Chronis et al. 2012; Debenedetti et al. 2014), the present paper argues that the idea of “moving consumption” is inherently spatial and therefore could be further conceptualized as spacing consumption, given the profound relationships between mobilities of products, consumers, and the spaces in which their trajectories are being played out.

Highlighting the spatial aspect of mobile consumption practices implies that the mundane practices of consumers cannot be easily separated from the spaces in which they occur. Consistently, this approach gives due recognition to the reciprocity between the mobility of consumption and the space both resulting and determining those mobilities. Consumption practices can thus be understood as happening in the form of a process of spacing that includes the performance of consumers via a multitude of spatial practices, occurring within a relational space that is in turn also affected by those spatial practices.

Consumption, conceptualized as an activity through which groups use interconnected systems of commercially produced images, texts, and objects to make collective sense of their environments (Arnould and Thompson 2005), could thus be understood as “one of the key relationalities actively constructing and changing spaces and places which in turn recursively affect consumption practices” (Goodman et al. 2010, 13). Accordingly, the construction of space and its consumption are closely intertwined and occur through the embodied and spatial practices of consumers. In fact, it may be suggested through the lenses of non-representational theories that consumption practices are not inherently stable nor are they separated from space, but rather they constitute a way of performing or transforming in the flows of everyday life.

This paper suggests that consumer research could look more closely at the consumption of space as a process that is associated with the construction of space and is based on consumers’ activities. In other words, this implies an empirical effort “to detected minutiae underpinning of various consumption contexts” (Hill et al. 2014, 14) – meaning the mobile spatial practices identified in the present study – and “to connect these minutiae to larger scale events” – meaning how multi-site and itinerant festivals contribute to create and change “themed spaces” (Firat, Pettigrew, and Belk 2011) that go beyond the confined forms of theme parks or shopping malls, so as to embrace a whole region and its municipalities.

Echoing the words of Mansvelt (2005), the concept of spacing consumption can be defined as the process through which the mobile practices of consumption emerge as geographies of embodiment, performance, and power. Such an understanding does not restrict consumption to particular consumption sites and spaces, to the end of a commodity chain, to a circuit of culture, nor to practices of self-identification [...]. Rather, various modes of knowledge about consumption can be seen as performative of these things, circulating and being invested with power in situated contexts (Mansvelt 2005, 164).

The main limitation of this study lies in the transitory nature of the empirical phenomenon investigated. Even if the Pink Night Festival well represents the genius loci of a territory, its historical entrepreneurial orientation, and its attitude to adopt synergic event-marketing strategies, the consumption practices studied specifically refer to these particular circumstances. Other multi-site and itinerant festivals should be investigated in different locations, and also different forms of mobile consumption should be taken into consideration other than the forms allowed by the ephemeral character of festivals. Questions about the relevance of aspects such as embodiment should also be addressed by future studies by recognizing the differ-
ent manifestations of materiality and corporeality that characterizes consumption practices that occur in online and virtual contexts.

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