Tasteful Work: the Emergence of an Aesthetic Category

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I investigate how the everyday actions carried out by a multitude of market actors lead to the emergence of a market category in the contemporary menswear market. I identify four types of institutional work—bridging work, curation work, support work, and circumscribing work—that underlie the emergence of an aesthetic category.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

EDM is a music category that encompasses a number of different music styles, from tropical house to big room house (Magnetic 2015). Yoga is another example of a category composed of different yoga styles, such as Dharma, Power, and Hot yoga (Ertemur and Coskuner-Balli 2015). The context of this study, the aesthetic category of luxury streetwear, similarly encompasses a number of different styles, from street goth to goth ninja. Tastefully practicing the styles lumped in these categories requires an understanding of different teleaffective structures—i.e. the set of acceptable ends, orders, uses, and emotions (Schatzki 2002)—that governs the practice of taste (Arsel and Bean 2013) for each style. Yet, these different music styles are lumped together under the same category label. We have yet to understand how such a lumping happens, and what are the implications for our understanding of category emergence.

In this brief article, I make the following theoretical contributions: First, I argue that an aesthetic category is constituted of what I term “distinct-yet-related” taste regimes. These regimes are distinct as they are orchestrated by different teleaffective structures, but related as they share a number of objects, doings, and meanings. Second, I propose four types of institutional work—circumscribing, bridging, curation, and support—that lead to the lumping of distinct-yet-related taste regimes under the same aesthetic category.

Studying how categories emerge is important as categories are structuring devices that help orchestrate markets and direct market actors’ perception, attention, and efforts (Verge and Wry 2014). When actors evaluate music artists, yoga studios, and fashion products, they refer to these categories as a basis for their evaluation (Zuckerman 1999). I draw from institutional theory and a practice-based approach to taste, to explain how this happens.

Taste is central to this research in two ways: first, it is a well-known boundary-making mechanism which is important because actors use such “conceptual distinctions… to categorize objects, people, practices” (Lamont and Molnár 2002, 168). Consequently, examining new teleaffective arrangements should offer cues about the emergence of boundaries associated with these. Second, taste is at the center of the evaluation of products in aesthetic markets (Entwistle 2009; Khaine 2014). I use Arsel and Bean’s (2013) practice-based conceptualization of taste. Arsel and Bean (2013, 900) theorize that the practice of taste is orchestrated by taste regimes, “discursively constructed normative systems that orchestrate the aesthetics of practice in a culture of consumption.” I take as a starting theoretical point that in markets driven by taste, the (cultural) codes on which the understanding of categories relies (Glynn and Navis 2013) are tightly linked with the objects, doings, and meanings that are orchestrated by such normative systems.

I combine this practice-based conceptualization of taste with the concept of institutional work. Institutional work are the actions that create, maintain or disrupt the practices, understandings, and rules sustaining markets (Dolbec and Fischer 2015, based on Lawrence and Sudabby 2006). The types of institutional work I introduce are part of the everyday routines of actors in the fashion market. The accumulation of actions resulting from these four types of institutional work from a multitude of actors leads over time to the emergence of a category. I now introduce the context of this study and briefly describe my methodology.

Method

Luxury streetwear is part of the contemporary menswear market. This novel market category emerged in the mid-to-late 2000s, is used by numerous legitimate publications (such as Elle, Business of Fashion, WWD, and Esquire), has redefined menswear (Johnson 2015) and led major high fashion brands towards “a steady move … into the streetwear market” (Reeve 2012). Albeit the translation of streetwear elements to the realm of high end fashion is nothing new, ‘luxury streetwear’ as a category that is covered by critics, catered to by designers, for which there is a wide consumer interest, and which has a strong influence on the development of menswear is novel (Johnson 2015).

I used a multi-method, longitudinal data collection approach, combining 16 in-depth semi-structured interviews, a netnography of two online forums, the forums’ archives (representing 89 threads and 190 003 posts), the archives of related fashion forums (720 posts in 30 threads), as well as archival data in the form of magazines and newspaper articles (590 articles), as well as material from category actors such as blog posts (115 pages).

My findings emerged from an iterative process moving back-and-forth between data collection, data analysis, and theorization (Spiggle 1994). As my work progressed, I started to focus on the emergence of the luxury streetwear category. I coded each type of data in light of my emergent findings to answer my research questions, using an institutional approach to categorization as my enabling theory.

Institutional Work and the Creation of New Aesthetic Market Categories

Although still a regime outsiders serves well to illustrate the distinct-yet-related aspect of these regimes. Although similar to regime outsiders, these two looks showcase the following differences for regime insiders. On the left, we have a consumer wearing a number of brands orchestrated by the goth ninja regime, mostly Rick Owens (the jacket, shorts, and sneakers). On the right, we have a consumer wearing a mixture of high fashion brands associated with the street goth regime such as Pyrex (the shorts), streetwear brand such as Supreme (the hoodie) and mainstream sportswear brands such as Nike (the sneakers). Although divergent, both of these looks highlight similar objects, such as the heavy reliance on the color black and drop-crotch shorts, as well as doings, such as the use of leggings underneath the shorts. Next, I show how four types of institutional work lead to the lumping of distinct-yet-related taste regimes under the same aesthetic category.

Circumscribing Work

Circumscribing work represents the efforts of actors that leads to the lumping of distinct-yet-related taste regimes under the same category. Firstly, some of the media and market-knowledge generating firms lack a proper understanding of the specificities of each regimes and as a result lump them as one of the same, thereby subsuming the regimes’ differences and facilitating the creation of the category. PR executives Ella Dror and Ashley Smith, who represent some luxury streetwear brands, emphasize this point when they mention that “different ‘areas’ [of fashion]… are sometimes lazily grouped together jointly … within fashion media” although there is “there’s an important distinction to make between” them (Johnson 2015).
For example, Esquire magazine (Deleon 2015) introduce “17 luxury sneakers brands” and presents the Adidas Y-3 ‘Qasa’ sneakers with a description mentioning “goth ninja [as] the go-to descriptor of all things dark, designer, and drapery”, while the shoe is mentioned only 10 times during the last 10 years on the web forum at the center of this taste regime, but is part of adjacent regimes (health goth and street goth). The representation of these objects and some doings as being part of the same category to less informed consumers.

A second insight is that some of these actors who are well-aware of the differences between these distinct taste regimes willingly decide to simplify their complexities and differences and choose to group them as a whole to facilitate their news narrative. For example, Jon Caramanica (2015), of the New York Times “Critical Shopper” column, clumps together brands such as Givenchy, Raf Simons, Rick Owens, and Hood by Air, to explain how “the gulf between luxury fashion and street wear has largely disappeared.” For consumers, constantly seeing these brands grouped together by knowledgeable critics and showcased with pictures of highly similar outfits can orient their sensemaking efforts towards grouping these elements as part of one and the same. Together, these two processes lead to the conflation of multiple distinct regimes that might look the same to regime outsiders into a single category. I next explain three types of institutional work that facilitate circumscribing work and lead to the emergence of an aesthetic category.

**Bridging Work**

Bridging work refers to the bridging of two or more existing market categories by products or market actors. It has been recognized that category hybridization is often the starting point of a category (e.g. Jensen 2010). The name of the novel category under study, ‘luxury streetwear’, emphasizes this hybridization between luxury menswear and streetwear.

In my context, Rick Owens, and especially his “Dunks” shoes, represents an early example of such bridging work. Released in 2008, these shoes have become a staple of the closet of multiple regimes under the ‘luxury streetwear’ category. Pictured in Figure 1, they exemplify well bridging work: they are at the junction of the sportswear, streetwear, and high-end menswear categories. The sportswear influences are present as the shoe was intended as his “own parody combining Puma, Nike, and Adidas motifs” (Owens in Wallace 2015). The proximity was such that Nike sued Rick Owens (Wallace 2015). The streetwear influences are found within the Rick Owens aesthetic language, with machine-wash leathers, “elegant… goth…street” (Colapinto 2008) which at the start of his career was “real popular with rockers” (Courtey Love in Colapinto 2008).

Finally, these shoes are well-embedded within high-end fashion as they were, according the fashion director at Barneys, “perfectly Barneys [and] appeals to a luxury customer” (Colapinto 2008). Following the emergence of the luxury streetwear category, Rick Owens became “fashion’s most imitated designer” (La Ferla 2009).

Bridging work also contributes to the category’s evolution by facilitating its expansion and encouraging the solidification of the links between elements of distinct-yet-related regimes. An example of this is the collaborations between designers and accessible fashion brands. Through collaborations, brands and designers come together and propose products that fit within the emergent aesthetic category. These collaborations are intended to target non-regime-specific consumers, such as “the Adidas consumer” (Mellbery-Prall 2015), rather than regime insiders, extending the reach of the emerging category. Examples abound: Rick Owens and Adidas, Undercover and Nike (under “Nike Giakosu”), and Louis Vuitton and Supreme. These collaborative efforts infuse an emerging category with new products, serve as a mechanism for established but outsider producers to enter the emergent category, and extend the reach of the category.

**Curation Work**

Curation work entails the selection and interpretation of elements of regimes as well as their representation through discourses and images. This facilitates the creation of linkages between elements of distinct-yet-related taste regimes and signals to a non-regime-specific audience that the elements of these regimes belong to the same aesthetic category. Examples of this are found in lookbooks and editorials of retailers, which both represent objects of distinct-yet-related regimes together and provide scripts for “grooming rituals” (McCracken 1986). This curation also happens through the brands and designers a retailer chooses to sell. Retailers that span a number of regimes help in bringing these regimes together by offering a selection of brands that span the regimes of an emerging category. For example, SSENSE, a “store and e-store’s menswear [which] buy is focused on ... luxury streetwear” (BOF 2015), distributes brands that are elements of the goth ninja regime such as Ann Demeulemeester and Rick Owens, and brands that are elements of the street goth regime such as YEEZY, Hood by Air, and Off-White. They also represent them together, visually fostering linkages between these regimes. Lastly, I discuss support work and how these facilitates the establishment of convergent elements and sensemaking efforts from external audiences.

**Support Work**

Support work represents the everyday efforts of actors towards the offer of knowledge and advice around elements of a regime and the tasteful performance of the taste regime. Support work is not equal for all objects, doings, and meanings and acts as an indicator of the centrality of these elements within a regime, allowing actors from the media and market-knowledge generating firms to make sense of emerging regimes more easily. An example of this is the amount of attention given to certain brands cited and talked about on regime-centric web forums. How over time the online conversations crystallized four brands which were the most important ones for the regime.

When major publications such as the New York Times cover the emergence of the ‘luxury streetwear’ category, they leverage what is the most accessible elements of a regime which then become central key elements of the emerging aesthetic category. For example, an article in GQ mentions that “Demeulemeester’s dark designs have a diehard cult following, especially amongst fashion heads who lean towards the Internet-dubbed “goth ninja” aesthetic” (Deleon 2013). Other consumer-driven content pieces use the most-mentioned brands of these web forums as well as the pictures posted on these online communities. For example, the “Goth Ninja RPG Strategy Guide Part I” thread on the widely forum Reddit took “most of the pictures … from the Stylezeitgeist WAYWT thread” as examples (GarvinCadalence).

**Discussion: Categories and Market-Level Changes**

Research on markets either has assumed that marketers worked towards the creation of whole markets, as exemplified by the following quotes of articles within that research stream: “brand-mediation market creation process” (Giesler 2012, 56) and “the emergence of a new market within the motorcycle industry” (Martin and Schouten 2014, 855), or has yet to conceptually distinguish between markets and categories. Yet, in the luxury streetwear case, and although the emergence of an aesthetic category in the fashion market led to the constitution of novel designer and retailer identities as well as the
creation of a number of consumption communities and specialized media outlets, the fashion market has mostly continued its evolution following its existing logics, norms, rules, conventions, logistical infrastructure, required technical skills and competencies, pricing mechanism, and competitive space (see Martin and Schouten 2014). More, the set of institutional actors, institutional logics, types of institutional work, and institutional boundaries stayed relatively unaffected (see Dolbec and Fischer 2015). In short, based on existing conceptualizations of markets in the literature (Dolbec and Fischer 2015; Martin and Schouten 2014), a new market was not created. A new market category was. Exploring developments in markets through the lens of market categories not only offers a perspective that addresses changes in markets that are more frequent (vs. the creation of whole new markets), it also opens the door to new research perspectives.

REFERENCES


