

“I Know what I Like”: Parallel Tastes in Fine Art Consumption

Tajana Stankovic, University of Strathclyde, UK

Andrea Tonner, University of Strathclyde, UK

Alan Wilson, University of Strathclyde, UK

INTRODUCTION

In pursuits such as fashion, wine, and art it has been argued that the fashionista, oenophile, and aficionado are those who fully appreciate their respective experiences (Clarkson et al, 2013). Such experiences have historically been regarded as high threshold activities with expertise available to few, guarded by gatekeepers and difficult for the lay individual to achieve (Joy and Sherry, 2003a). However the ever-growing spectrum of online mediated platforms where enthusiasts in many fields share their passions, is changing established institutional structures and forging a new understanding of consumption meanings and hierarchies of access. This paper explores how taste is developed and negotiated in online mediated consumption groups in the context of fine art. Drawing upon a qualitative case study within the UK art market, it discusses the practices that lie at the heart of taste in this context and how online consumption differs from traditional offline practices. It argues that, in art, expertise is no longer the preserve of the critic or art seller with vested interests in desirable taste, rather it becomes democratized as novices engaging in online art communities come to represent a distinct form of distributed cultural authority. Thus, it contributes to recent calls for a more complete understanding of the democratizing role of the Internet in shaping the practice of taste and taste-making (Arsel and Bean, 2013; Dolbec and Fischer, 2015) as well as the deinstitutionalisation of taste (McQuarrie et al.,2015) in online-mediated communities.

Art as field for Cultural Capital Display

The high arts have been commonly seen as symbols of cultural capital. High levels of difficulty are associated with an adequate enjoyment and appreciation of these goods and significant knowledge of their aesthetic codes and canons considered necessary to consume them (Üstüner and Holt, 2010). Power to define these generally acceptable standards of taste lies in the hand of few individuals who have acquired a certain amount of knowledge either through education or social experience (Hoyer and Stokburger-Sauer, 2012; Drummond, 2006).

Art as a field of consumption has therefore been conceived among the paramount grounds that see actors claiming a position within the social hierarchy by pursuing status idiosyncratic to the field (Bourdieu, 1984). Following Bourdieu, taste is an essential component of cultural capital and thus good taste is “prescribed by professional experts in a particular cultural field” (Holbrook, 2005; 75). Judgements of taste are thus found to be inherently powerful signs in defining identity as well as compelling markers of group affiliation (Bourdieu, 1984). The arts are thus characterized by a distinctive cultural capital specific to the field where taste has been commonly conceptualized as an instrument that navigates individuals in evaluating, categorizing and drawing connections between objects and consumption (Hoyer and Stokburger-Sauer, 2012; Coskuner-Balli and Thompson, 2013).

In comparison to this structuralist perspective where taste serves as cultural boundary maker, postmodernism considers the consumer as cultural omnivore, an actor with intrinsic agency (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). Arguing for a fading of hierarchies in advanced societies, objects become freed from tightly defined consumer practices and a spectrum of styles emerges from a newly conferred semiotic malleability (Baudrillard, 1996). So while cultural capital

remains a powerful concept it is demonstrated not through the acquisition of consumption objects but rather through increased focus on the manners of consumption (Holt, 1998). Accordingly, more recent studies have served to form a definition of the forms of field-dependent capital that consumers acquire by participating in distinctive consumption communities (Arsel and Bean, 2013; Arsel and Thompson 2011; Schau, Muniz, and Arnould, 2009).

Taste as Idiosyncrasy of Practice

Cultural capital, an important asset for status display, is enacted in consumption through the portrayal of tastes and consumption practices (Allen, 2002; Üstüner and Holt 2007, 2010; Holt, 1988). Studies have explored the manner in which different levels and forms of cultural capital shape tastes, preferences and consumption patterns (eg. Allen 2002; Arsel and Bean 2013; Holt 1998). As such, recent studies point to the conceptualization of taste as practice (Holt, 1998), performance (Hennion, 2007) and regime (Tonkinwise, 2011; Arsel and Bean, 2013). Holt's (1998) interpretation of taste focuses on the meaning consumers attach to their product choices and Hennions (2007) definition is centered around the way in which taste materializes through acts of consumption, yet both agree that taste cannot be reduced to mere product choice. Taste regimes emerge as discursively entrenched systems (Arsel and Bean, 2013) which navigate and instruct aesthetic practices, offering a comprehensive understanding of taste by looking both to the symbolic meanings assigned to consumption objects as well as the performative 'doing' of taste. This shifts the focus from the object of consumption to the underlying practices involved. Practice theory has therefore become a common means of theorizing acts of consumption and developing our understanding of both enthusiast groups and the objects of their desire (Warde, 2014).

With the increase in a 'social media savvy society', not only has the Internet changed the modalities of production, sale and distribution of art, it has also changed the modalities of consumption as "no longer does an individual have to abide by the dictum of a cultural elite – critics and historians" (Joy and Sherry, 2003a; 157). An individual's ability to discern between the beautiful and dexterous versus the laboured and unpleasant has been thus described as taste in a specific field of consumption (McQuarrie et al., 2015). The advent of new forms of community such as those found within social media have brought with them a range of new ways of demonstrating taste and influencing the individual. Their democratising power is challenging the traditional institutional dictums of aesthetic judgement making way for new taste makers and taste making. It is increasingly argued that individuals develop their cultural capital in a specific field by exercising taste through investment in these online communities (Arsel and Bean, 2013). Such communities have been defined as groups formed around a shared passion or interest which mediate the learning and negotiation process through participation among members of the collective in order to achieve a mutual understanding of common practices (Goulding et al., 2013). Hence, a community of practice is described as a "group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger 1998; 10). Practice Theory is being used to explore contemporary taste because it addresses the collective commitment of participants in a community, emphasizes the way in which objects are meant to be used, the way they are valued and the shared engagement in defining a collective purpose of existence (Warde, 2014).

Nevertheless, despite the online-mediated opportunity to exercise the doing of taste (Arsel and Bean, 2013) detached from institutional structures and axioms in the field of art, Di

Maggio's (1987:445) argument that "populations of artworks can be partitioned into groups, or genres, on the basis of the persons who choose them" continues to be relevant through this definition of objectified taste. Indeed Aresel and Bean (2013:899) argue that in these democratized spaces emerges "a discursively constructed normative system that orchestrates practice in an aesthetically oriented culture of consumption" developing what they defined as a taste regime.

METHOD

The data comes from a qualitative case-study of the UK art market (Yin, 2014). We approach art experiences through the lens of constructed subjective meanings encompassing consumption and embodiment processes of aesthetic appreciation (Joy and Sherry, 2003b). Therefore we sought to gather data encompassing "ideas, emotions and understanding of all who take part in an activity in such a way that a common or shared outlook emerges" (Biesta, 2010; 716), we did this through a series of semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholder groups in the art world, with the aim of articulating the viewpoint of the actors' experience regarding a socially constructed reality and the situational dependency of the studied phenomena (Maxwell 1996; Denzin and Lincoln 2008). We spoke with 12 art consumers participating in online art communities. We also gathered the perspectives of intermediaries with traditional institutional roles. This set of respondents was constituted by 12 galleries, 2 intermediary companies, 5 artists and a large art-fair director. These informants helped in corroborating, challenging and providing alternative perspectives on the accounts of the key informants and thus aided in achieving a triangulation of viewpoints to sustain a deeper understanding of the phenomena (Schouten, 1991). In total, 25 hours of interviews were transcribed.

Data was analysed adopting the content analysis method, which consists of the identification of themes that have emerged from the collected data (Spiggle 1994). After we determined recurrent themes, new emergent themes have been identified with the aim of broadening and developing the understanding of taste as negotiated within online appreciation communities (McCracken, 1988; Moisander and Valtonen, 2006).

FINDINGS

Findings begin by examining traditional access barriers grounded in cultural capital levels, and proceed to discuss the forms of emergent practices and taste structures in the newly formed online art spaces drawing comparisons with conventional offline tastes.

Cultural Capital as Requisite for Access

Our data shows that consumers find the art market an unfamiliar consumption territory but one which they have often longed to be part of. As C5 discusses:

I have a problem, being a nurse you have to be aware of everything you put on social media. I was once put aside by my manager and asked what I was doing and I think that the girls in my office don't understand why I'm so into art. So I say to them, why you go to the gym? It is the same thing but I don't think they understand (C5)

This reflects the discussions in the literature that art has been often epitomised as consumption heavily marked by cultural capital class based distinction. It is assumed that a formal education (Drummond, 2006) and thus a high level of embodied cultural capital (Holt, 1988) is necessary

in order to be granted access to the traditional art practice system. This creates conflict in consumers' who find themselves at odds with these expectations as C3 discusses:

Buying art is always experienced with joy but also a bit of guilt. I do come from a low background family, I am not really educated in a traditional way or manner (C3).

Perpetuating this distinction, gallery owners, also usually collectors and consumers with traditional education in the field of art, commonly classify themselves as part of an exclusive community and recognise that this creates a cultural threshold which is difficult to traverse.

'People are frightened to go into galleries...there is this aura of intimidation' (G1); 'the art world created this mystic world around them so people are afraid to step into it' (G3) and 'they see it with suspicion and doubt' (G4).

The perception that art is an exclusive domain meant for privileged individuals who are accustomed to this type of leisure activity due to their habitus is reflected in the experiences of consumers when they engage with the traditional structures of the market as C3 discusses:

Galleries make me feel uncomfortable. I once walked into a gallery, and I could immediately see the evaluation of me, almost bombastic language came out from the lady, floury language...I felt myself playing into the role and I came out feeling really dirty. It wasn't a nice experience for me at all. (C3)

For many consumers their experiences in the traditional art domains make them reject such places as relevant art access point and seek out alternatives less bound by the taste dictates of the market.

Knowledge as Quintessence of Good Taste

Art is considered a knowledge product with the assumption that "the purchase of art is based on the knowledge of experts" (Joy and Sherry, 2003a; 176). The importance of knowledge about the product category has emerged as a focal point of discussion among traditional galleries, experienced buyers and online consumers. Stakeholders of the art world firmly state the difference between 'good taste' and 'bad taste' using the pool of knowledge or field specific capital. Gallery Owner 6 discusses:

The more experienced is the art buyer he has a better idea about what is good quality, whereas a less experienced person is just interested in an image for the house and they will go for the safer option...I would say they look for different things. (G6)

Given that the interpretation of good taste is considered an outcome of education and knowledge, the gallery institutions consider that they serve an informational role (McQuarrie et al., 2015). They provide customers with mentoring and advice in order to help them progress from novices to connoisseurs:

We are trying to teach them...we are trying to make them recognize the differences and appreciate the quality of a piece of art. They need to understand what is behind it.(G7)

As such, dealers and galleries feel both ability and obligation to shape and develop taste (Joy and Sherry, 2003a) in the traditional sense. The transfer of knowledge is thus tied into a series of practices which result in a bonding link between institution and customer: *we sort of build relationships with our clients quite strongly because we go and install the work, we advise them...they are loyal to us* (G8)

Conversely, knowledge in online-mediated communities is separated from institutionalized actors in the field. Arsel and Bean (2013) thus argue that consumers develop field-specific capital through participation in these consumption spaces. However, from the accounts of novice consumers it emerges that knowledge is not a dominant component of their experience. They emphasize the affective over the symbolic and do not try to emulate the scholarly practices of the cultural elite.

All I know is what I like and why I like it... It is not an academic exercise...Galleries frame what is considered good art (C1). I am not a dry academic though, I learn what I am interested in. (C3)

Novice consumption preferences and product choices are guided by autotelic pleasure (Holt, 1998; Thompson, 2013) rather than symbolic meaning (Belk, 1988). Online art community participants do not exhibit strategies aimed to resist the hegemonic forces of established market institutions rather they engage in conversations about art based upon their strong enthusiasm and fascination with the field (Dolbec and Fisher, 2015). Accordingly, they show differences in understanding and interpretation of the meaning assigned to objects of art. They define taste purely based on hedonic criteria shaped by community consensus. Shared taste overrules scholarly discussions of artistic worth.

Extending the findings of Arsel and Bean (2013) and Dolbec and Fisher (2015) our findings suggest that a new parallel taste regime is being established in online art appreciation.

Quality in art difficult to judge? It's nonsense and I will tell you why...this is when snobbery comes in and elitism. Somebody is relying on somebody else telling them the worth of something. To be true to yourself, you should be able to judge that worth yourself...(C1)

A regime of aesthetic standards liberated from market institutions, where value is understood through individual judgement rather than set guidelines of taste practice, offers every participant the opportunity to express judgement on what is taste and negotiate acceptance of this within this community.

You don't have to be knowledgeable about art. Either you like it or you don't like it. The technique of what they do and how they do it, I don't have knowledge about that. It looks simple but people tell me it is not simple. (C6)

Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) suggest that parallel taste structures emerge as novice consumers amend institutional practices. Contrary to Arsel and Bean's (2013) account, art taste regimes do not converge through discursive systems, participant interaction and experience exchange because the online art sphere is deprived of the traditional market taste-makers and the knowledge pool is not enriched by these voices. Rather the participants believe that market

actors such as gallery owners are undermining the art world due to their disregard of novice tastes: *Because I think it is elitist and they are just serving a specific clientele.*(C7)

A parallel can be drawn also with Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) community of riders who depreciate both richer subgroup and lower milieu consumers. Our online communities label the traditional circle of art buyers pretentious snobs.

Online Space as Negotiator of Taste

Our data suggests that consumers who develop their passion for art using online platforms, do not encounter the traditional codes of consumption (Üstüner and Holt, 2010). Along these lines, the modality of product evaluation and criteria for judgement differ between the group of novice internet consumers and the more experienced buyers. Novice taste becomes tightly linked to personal identity and social affiliation (Richins, 1994; Rindfleisch et al., 2009). Accordingly, participation in one online collective implies the rejection of views and practices associated with the traditional offline art world (Wenger, 1998). As C1 explains:

I find it all a bit pretentious...the art can have a great story behind but the reality is how it leaves you feeling. I don't even understand what these people are saying..."I don't like this piece of art, I've been told a short story about it and now I love it...". So would not that person be better reading a book if they like stories. For me it has to leave a feeling and a story is not going to change that. (C1)

Novice buyers highlight the importance that aesthetic criteria bear over the interpreted meaning and discourse underpinning the product thus emphasising the role of beauty over technique. The engagement of consumers in online art spheres enables them to be assimilated in novice art consumption practices however the cultural capital acquired through these interactions stays specific to the field of online mediated art consumption without a clear evolution of the underpinning practices.

There is so much online people can find that at the end they build a market for it that feeds itself. But I don't know if this market ever becomes educated...I think that all the social media does that... There is so much art out there online and a lot of people do not understand quality even though they are very confident about their knowledge (C4).

Vargo and Lusch (2011) suggest that value is defined and dependent upon both symbols and practices which can be considered as institutions that guide the process of evaluation. Traditional cultural class consumers, by engaging with institutions like galleries and attending events such as vernissages and exhibition openings, have the opportunity to interact with other participants in the field thus securing a sharing of understandings and experiences which will enable them to interiorize such practices (Saatcioglu and Ozanne, 2013). Complex discussions involved with the meanings of the objects being appreciated and the cultural pedigree of the artist (Üstüner and Holt, 2010) become dominant: *I think the narrative of a painting, the journey of a painting is very important...it is not just a picture on the wall (Art Fair).*

Interaction is a necessary component for successful constitution of a shared identity (Goulding et al., 2013). Shared understanding is achieved through the sharing of experiences, contexts, institutions and language (Akaka, 2014) highlighting the specificity of doing taste (Arsel and Bean, 2013) in the online and offline art worlds. The what (object), the how (doings) are mutually acknowledged with collectively defined understanding, however the why (meaning)

(Akaka, 2014) sets the point of departure between expert and novice Internet consumers' art consumption.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper extends understanding of the ways in which taste emerges from practice. It bridges the divide between taste as embodied and taste which is dependent upon individuals' agency (Arsel and Bean, 2013) distinguishing between institutionally governed practices and those founded on the principles of free access and rights of expression championed by the internet (McQuarrie et al., 2015). Online, taste emerges from idiosyncratic practices, consumer preferences and understandings that are characterised by a distinctive normative system applicable only to the online consumption context. The online system has evolved as a consumption alternative to the power laden, cultural capital rich offline art market which retains high access barriers (Holt, 1998). Online art consumption emerges as a hedonic rather than knowledge driven domain (Hoyer and Stokburger-Sauer, 2012) with distinctive practices, taste structures (Sandicki and Ger, 2010) and cultural capital (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013). So while platforms of online participation may have widened art's accessibility, rather than evening out tastes and practices, they result in the formation of parallel taste structures (Sandicki and Ger, 2010). This may be attributable to the flexibility and ephemeral nature of relationships among participants within the online art world, which resemble publics rather than communities. Arvidsson and Calliandro (2015; 399) suggest that "public sharing of perspectives and experiences that derive from a plurality of identities and practices, [...] are not elaborated into explicitly recognized common values that can provide a source of identification" explaining the multiplicity of online practices evident in this study. This represents a suitable avenue for future research about the making of taste in a broader range of online spaces.

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Table 1: Findings

| Themes | Description | Participant Data |
|--|---|---|
| Cultural Capital as Requisite for Access | Fine art is epitomised as consumption heavily marked by cultural capital class based distinction and thus a high level of embodied cultural capital is necessary in order to be granted access to the traditional art practice system. As novice consumers seek out for alternatives less bound by the taste dictates of the market, this capital requisite is not anymore necessary in the online consumption space. | <i>Galleries make me feel uncomfortable. I once walked into a gallery, and I could immediately see the evaluation of me, almost bombastic language came out from the lady, floury language...I felt myself playing into the role and I came out feeling really dirty. It wasn't a nice experience for me at all. (C3)</i> |
| Knowledge as Quintessence of Good Taste | Contrarily to experts, knowledge is not a dominant component of the experience in novice consumers as their consumption preferences and product choices are guided by autotelic pleasure rather than symbolic meaning. | <i>The more experienced is the art buyer he has a better idea about what is good quality, whereas a less experienced person is just interested in an image for the house and they will go for the safer option...I would say they look for different things. (G6)</i> |
| Parallel Taste Regime | Parallel taste structures emerge as novice consumers amend institutional practices in view of a regime of aesthetic standards liberated from market institutions. | <i>You don't have to be knowledgeable about art. Either you like it or you don't like it. The technique of what they do and how they do it, I don't have knowledge about that. It looks simple but people tell me it is not simple. (C6)</i> |
| Online Space as Negotiator of Taste | The engagement of consumers in online art spheres enables them to be assimilated in novice art consumption practices however the cultural capital acquired through these interactions stays specific to the field of online mediated art consumption without a clear evolution of the underpinning practices. | <i>There is so much online people can find that at the end they build a market for it that feeds itself. But I don't know if this market ever becomes educated...I think that all the social media does that... There is so much art out there online and a lot of people do not understand quality even though they are very confident about their knowledge (C4).</i> |

Abstract

This paper explores taste through practices in online and offline fine art consumption. Through online communities, art expertise has become democratised beyond established institutions but online art communities represent distinct and parallel practices, tastes and cultural capital. Online expertise does not grant cultural capital offline nor impact established taste regimes.