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Aspects of #Taste

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Abstract

This research critically examines the multifaceted concept of taste through a methodological and multidisciplinary approach, exploring its manifestations within sociology, communication, visual arts, economics, and fashion. By analyzing key scholarly contributions, we highlight how taste regimes structure consumption practices (Arsel & Bean, 2012), how taste emerges as a dynamic social phenomenon shaped by experience and attachment (Hennion, 2007), and how aesthetic taste influences consumer behavior (Hoyer & Stokburger-Sauer, 2011). These perspectives reveal taste as both an individual expression and a structured system of meaning, influenced by cultural and social frameworks. Without claiming to be exhaustive, this study offers an original synthesis of voices and communicative phenomena, showing how taste continuously shapes identity, rituals, and consumer choices.

Keywords: *#Fashion #Consumption #Taste*

Abstract

Questa ricerca analizza criticamente il concetto poliforme di gusto attraverso un approccio metodologico e rizomatico, esplorandone le manifestazioni in sociologia, comunicazione, arti visive, sistema economico e moda. Attraverso l'analisi di studi chiave, evidenziamo come i regimi di gusto strutturino le pratiche di consumo (Arsel & Bean, 2012), come il gusto emerga come fenomeno sociale dinamico influenzato dall'esperienza e dall'attaccamento (Hennion, 2007) e come il gusto estetico incida sul comportamento del consumatore (Hoyer & Stokburger-Sauer, 2011). Queste prospettive rivelano il gusto sia come espressione individuale che come sistema di significati mediato da strutture culturali e sociali. Senza pretesa di esaustività, questo studio offre una sintesi originale di voci e fenomeni comunicativi, mostrando come il gusto continui a plasmare identità, rituali e scelte di consumo.

Parole chiave: *#Moda #Consumo #Gusto*

Introduction

This research work aims to analyze, with a critical and methodological approach, accompanied by multidisciplinary thinking, the various constellations of the fascinating and eclectic concept of *taste*.

We will consider those aspects that we perceive as emblematic in the fields of sociology, communication, visual arts, fashion, and, above all, the economic system.

Within this analysis, we will introduce the notion of *taste* and examine how this multifaceted concept has been outlined within three distinct schools of thought.

Taste Regimes

Taste may be defined as the ability to discern what is of good quality or of a high aesthetic standard. Taste impacts how we decorate our homes, what music we listen to, what art speaks to us... much of our identity is formed around our personal taste. But how do our tastes impact the way the world sees us, or better yet, how we see ourselves?

To explore the answer, we must first understand what a *taste regime* is. In short, taste regimes are the aesthetic sensibilities around which we form habits. To participate in an aesthetic movement, we must establish related habits that tell the story of that aesthetic, both to ourselves and to others. One must look and behave as a member of a community to integrate themselves as a part of it.

For example, one recognizable aesthetic archetype would be the trophy wife. While certain hallmarks of this community fall naturally onto a specific demographic—specifically young women born into an upper- or middle-class socioeconomic background—there are many other variables that may indicate that one is a member of the trophy wife community. Many of these women form a significant part of their identity around looking like a trophy wife, and they participate in daily habits that maintain their social status. The typical trophy wife maintains a fit physical form, doesn't work but spends money, and wastes away her days in workout studios and on exotic islands. To live as a trophy wife, one must meet certain specific physical, economic, and social standards. Ingratiating one's self into a new community requires forming new habits, similar to other members of the community. Among trophy wives, a typical habit may be attending a pilates class. Community members who subscribe to this aesthetic sensibility do this to both stay in shape physically and to make friends with other potential trophy wives, who may offer valuable support or social connections. This is how they exercise the day-to-day habits of a *taste regime*.

Taste regimes are shaped by consistent and habitual behaviors that signal the identity of the individual. These behaviors fall into three categories: *problematization*, *ritualization*, and *instrumentalization*.

Problematization can be qualified as the search for solutions to self-assessed problems. A taste regime problematizes objects by continually questioning how they align with the regime's core meanings. In the trophy wife analogy, one might assess what shade of hair dye may be most flattering and accentuate the brightness of her skin, making her most attractive to prospective partners. Or she may evaluate her

possessions to decide if they are likely to earn her enough social capital with her peers. How might her matching athleisure set impact her status among the other trophy wives? What brand of lipstick is most likely to spark a potential social connection when a fellow community member spots her reapplying?

Next, there is ritualization. Ritualization links desirable meanings to mundane daily actions. It is the establishment of a symbolic activity or of a set of behaviors that are repeated over time that represent meaning to the individual. So, the trophy wife might have many different daily and weekly rituals to maintain her trophy wife status. For example, her daily skincare routine will help her to not only physically maintain her beauty, but she will also gain the feeling of meeting the aesthetic standards of a trophy wife by engaging in this behaviour. She may buy certain brands, get certain cosmetic procedures to look younger, etc. Each day, after completing her skincare routine, she feels like she has fulfilled her duty to maintain her trophy wife status and upkeep all the habits required of the aesthetic she strives to embody.

And finally, there is instrumentalization: the process of transforming problems into a method of goal fulfillment. This is how the individual connects objects and habitual actions to the actualization of meaning. How does she make her problems work for her? If the trophy wife is presented with the problem of needing to maintain her fit appearance to fit in to her social circle and to fulfill her aesthetic goals, how do the objects she owns influence her in solving this problem? In several ways, actually. If she recently bought herself some stylish new workout pants, she may be motivated to attend her upcoming pilates' class. Then, when she goes to this class and brings her new reusable water bottle, one of her fellow aspiring trophy wives may own a similar one. They may strike up a conversation and even start a mutually beneficial friendship over it. Perhaps she might use that social connection to further network within that community. In this way, the workout pants and reusable water bottle serve as actors to motivate action within the taste regime.

But how do taste regimes result in the construction and performance of our identities? Let's put it in the context of another example: domestic consumption. How does the way you decorate your house shape your identity? The answer lies within a complex system of objects, doings, and meanings. How does one pick an item to put in their home- say, a kitchen table? How do material conditions of the table- such as the size of the table, the color of the wood, the number of seats at the table... How do we associate these qualities with subjective meanings? What stories do our objects tell about us? A large table may imply that we are of a high socioeconomic status. A light-coloured wood could convey that we prefer the "unfinished," bohemian look. Many seats at a table might imply that we have a big family or entertain friends often. Our preferences speak volumes about our identities. Many questions can be answered about us by viewing our aesthetic choices in home decor as the result of our taste regimes. In short- every object we keep in our home is part of a story that our taste regime is telling about us.

Many people want to project a certain image of themselves in their homes. They are seeking solutions to the self-diagnosed problems of their taste regime. (This, you may recall, is called problematization). Readers of home design blogs and magazines may have a particular interest in the aesthetics of domestic consumption. They may engage with their homes in such a way that prioritizes self-exploration and inspiration- not just the economic value of necessity. For example, objects that

were handmade (rather than machine manufactured) may invite a soft, welcoming presence to balance the coldness of bare floors or empty tabletops. Knowing the understated complexities of the language of domestic design speaks to one's level and type of aesthetic taste. Home design blogs and magazines make the marketplace more easily navigatable by spelling out these standards. This is how they allow individuals to live out their taste regime through a series of *objects*, *doings*, and *meanings*.

In searching for a piece of furniture that aligns with our domestic aesthetic, one must consider the piece of furniture from several perspectives. This *object*- a couch, for example- has utilitarian use as a domestic object, much like a tool. It is used for lounging, for filling empty space in a room, for providing a welcoming area for residents and guests. These are the fundamental functions of the object, above all else.

Beyond that, what is more specifically being done with the couch? These *doings* are actions that embody our dedication to the objects. Knowing which couch is right for an individual is important to the story the couch tells about its owner. The couch represents a searching process, as well as a decoration process, that creates more meaning for the owner. How did the owner find, create, and/or decorate this couch? The couch offers more than just its utilitarian value alone. For example, when the owner specially imports new fabric to reupholster the cushions or when the couch was inherited from their recently deceased grandmother, these objects hold deeper meaning than merely a place to sit. These elements, called doings, help to create emotional appeal for the couch and increase its value to the owner.

Finally, we must address the *meanings* of the object. What does this couch's style, design, color, represent to the owner? What story does its appearance tell about the owner? A soft, mid-century style couch may tell a very different story than a strikingly modern couch, upholstered in patent leather. These differences may be challenging to put into clearly defined terms, but they are different nonetheless. The objects we keep around us, whether we mean for them to or not, reflect meanings about ourselves and about our taste.

The notion of taste, therefore, must be continually performed. Taste regimes alter the way we are perceived, by both ourselves and by others, due to their capacity as objects, as doings, and as meanings. Taste is heavily influenced by external forces, but we can influence how our taste is perceived by refining our taste regimes through problematization, ritualization, and instrumentalization. In short, we tell the world about our taste by the habits we form, the objects we surround ourselves with, and the meanings we assign to them.

Those things that hold us together: taste and sociology

The French sociologist Antoine Hennion, in his article 'Those Things That Hold Us Together: Taste and Sociology' (published in the scientific journal 'Cultural Sociology' in March 2007), analyzes the concept of taste.

The writer's work, aims to "unveil", to "remove the opaque veil", which conceals the profound and hidden meaning of the things that surround us on a daily basis, laying bare the social mechanisms triggered, through a series of reflections on the individual read in relation to the social system within which he/she finds him/herself

to *acting*, with the aim of arriving at the concept of *Aletheia* (ἀλήθεια), bringing truth to light.

We find it fascinating to think that the analysis of the definition of Taste, which seems to be an abstract and

evanescent concept, in reality, examined in its internal and external complexity, is a means and a practical

tool used by sociologists to reflect and make people think about how things in the world work, revealing

their intrinsic meaning. Hennion seeks to awaken our 'sleeping memory' through the mobility of his omnivorous gaze.

Figure 1: Luis Buñuel, *Un Chien Andalou*, 1929.



Surrealist Cinema Manifesto: one of the most important scenes in the history of cinema. With this image, the artist aimed to pierce the spectator's eye, showing them everything they had never seen before (or never wanted to see).

Reflecting on what taste is, in fact, helps us to understand the ways in which we sensitize ourselves to things, to ourselves, to situations and moments, while at the same time controlling the way in which these feelings can be shared and discussed with others.

The concept of *action* represents another theoretical fulcrum central to the discourse proposed by the author: for Hennion, in fact, in order to arrive at the perception and definition of taste, one must train one's capacity and sensitivity, (based by human nature on individual and collective determinisms of attachment), through *experience*.

An individual can only arrive at the revelation of taste, conceived by the author as active pragmatic reflection, if he is truly ready to set aside the personal attributes that constitute his habitual identity.

When the subject has a new experience, it takes a 'leap into the void' in the Kierkegaardian philosophical sense of the term; when it goes further through a new action, it places itself in a 'risky' situation insofar as it does not fully know the consequences of it.

To accomplish a sense of taste, it is therefore necessary to have preparation, obstinacy, and training to condition oneself to allow oneself to elastically overcome what at first seemed to require brutal effort.

The intense pleasure of this cancellation of self, in order to enact a precise gesture, is the concentration that brings us to the knowledge of a certain thing.

Taste for Hennion, then, is not an attribute or a property but is an *activity*. It is, for the author, a *curious activity*: it is an actively sought passivity, or an activity intentionally undergone, letting oneself be carried away, overflowing with the surprises that arise from contact with things.

One has to do something to listen to music, drink a wine, and appreciate an object. Tastes are not given or determined, and neither are their objects; one has to make them appear together, through repeated experiments, progressively adapted.

From a sociological point of view, taste becomes a collective experience that is based on personal dispositions, norms and general frameworks that in turn originate from social determinants.

Within this critical analysis of *taste*, the sociologist unveils the mechanisms of 'social determinisms', inviting us to overcome them, even though there is inevitably an initial inertia/resistance. Social determinism is very dangerous in that it threatens to blind us, causing us to fall into a loop of repeated frozen actions.

Taste is an active way of putting oneself in a condition where something can happen to oneself.

Taste, as an activity, is not predetermined: it points to contact, to a 'between' situation, to the place and time of the uncertainty of sensation. Taste lives in the act of tasting, in the gestures that enable it, in the know-how of the subject performing the action.

Taste exists only through the *act* of *taste*. Being a pragmatic activity, those who act do so in relation to an object. During this experience it is of paramount importance that the subject reflects on what this thing 'does' to him. The objects manifest themselves, undress themselves and we must with concentration try to read them.

There is an intimate link between *reflection* and the *capacity* of things to emerge/manifest themselves/come to light φαίνω (faĩnò), understood in the sense of manifesting, appearing, shining.

To accentuate listening means to reintroduce the act of tasting into taste. Taste can only manifest itself when it comes into contact with an object.

The ordinary state is this spontaneous management of multiple relationships with one's own body, with others, with things, with events, rather than in the univocal installation of oneself in a relationship with a defined object.

The central focus of this analysis is undoubtedly the notion of *Reflection*, a fundamental concept of anthropology, the discipline in which it exploded and flourished.

Reflection is the foundational act of taste. Paying attention, pausing, pausing on what is happening leads to the manifestation of the object being tasted.

This article, although not explicitly, takes up nodal theoretical themes such as that of Gillo Dorfles, art critic and aesthetologist, who in his book *L'intervallo perduto*, written in 1989, firmly states that pause is a human necessity.

Exposed to millions of visual messages, today we are less and less able to see; yet, seeing determines our place in the world, just as the relationship between what we see and what we know determines our identity, both individual and collective. All external stimuli reset the 'zone of respect' towards things, they crush us and block our attention, our judgment.

Now more than ever we need to look for a free space not to be filled in order to recover our authentic axiological and value judgement. We must try to reduce the 'all full' that prevents our gaze and thought from appreciating the value of things and not just their presence.

Tasting, therefore, can represent a pause within the proximal flow of life.

We must always be willing to start doing and tasting again, living experiences as if for the first time, never relying on preconceived ideas, because the more one tastes, the more one will become aware.

Aesthetic taste in human behavior

Through their paper "*The role of aesthetic taste in consumer behavior*", Hoyer and Stockburger-Sauer's shared goal was to review the very broad and varied literature on taste to develop a conceptual definition of consumer aesthetic taste and to suggest a framework for guiding research on this topic in consumer behavior and marketing.

In their interpretation, consumer taste plays a critical role in judgment and decision making. In today's markets it can be challenging to differentiate products and services by their functional attributes only. Marketers are aware of that and as a result, are increasingly turning to affective, hedonic, and symbolic values that offerings deliver to consumers.

The authors first articulate the concept of taste around its popular science definition (i.e. from Dictionary.com) that is "one's personal attitude or reaction toward an aesthetic phenomenon or social situation, regarded as either good or bad" or "the sense of what is fitting, harmonious, or beautiful; the perception and enjoyment of what constitutes excellence in the fine arts, literature, fashion, etc.". The same way, in consumer behavior, "good taste" has been defined as "that prescribed by professional experts in a particular cultural field".

Therefore, as Berlyne states, taste is viewed as being related to an individual's sense of aesthetics. A positive valence is inherent in this term, as it is somehow related to beauty.

Hoyer and Stockburger-Sauer also analyze sociology writings on the subject. As taken up by Bourdieu, individuals possess economic resources as well as cultural

capital, which comprises aspects such as cultural knowledge, experiences, tastes, and world views. Thus, taste is considered to be part of an individual's cultural capital (family upbringing, formal education, and occupational culture). For the sociologist, taste is solely determined by cultural and social status. On this, he is joined by DiMaggio who views taste as an "identity marker that facilitates interactions" and helps in constructing social relations and understanding group memberships.

In consumer behavior, it has been widely recognized that individuals use consumption objects to express their individual and social identity to their environment. The reason is that by using certain products and services, consumers can indicate their social class, occupation, lifestyle, status, etc. (e.g., Solomon). Thus, "taste is understood as manifested preferences and becomes objectified in consumption objects".

Taste as manifested preferences can be seen as an expression of social competence that seems to be shaped by society and influenced by cultural norms. Individuals tend to conform to established taste conventions which are often influenced by cultural values, such as ethnicity, religion and social class. These inherited values have a significant impact on individuals and shape their preferences, whether they are aware of it or not.

The authors state that in general, the streams of thought on taste in various disciplines, from sociology to philosophy, relate the concept to perception, judgment, and aesthetic experience, and agree that the terms

consumer aesthetic taste, aesthetic taste, consumer taste, taste, and good taste could be used synonymously.

Interestingly, by the middle of the 18th century, the concept of taste had largely replaced the concept of beauty as the most important aesthetic term. This was mainly attributed to its immediacy and its close connection to the senses. In itself, the term "aesthetics" originates from the Greek language (aisthetikos) and relates to sense perceptions. Academic work has used the term aesthetics in two ways: first, to refer to a theory of the beautiful, and second, to refer to a person's sensitivity to the beautiful (Stitch).

However, the problem perhaps to be found is that research on aesthetics is very often limited to visual aesthetics, due to its obvious association with and perception of beauty, even though all five senses are involved in sense perception.

That said, Hoyer and Stockburger-Sauer agree that taste has an important subjective element, but don't let us forget that according to Ferry, aesthetic appreciation or taste has an objective dimension and that these judgments may be quasi-objective (i.e., when experts tend to agree and their judgments are based to some extent on criteria that might be objectively determinable).

In light of this, the researchers state that on the one hand, taste is viewed as something very personal or individual. On the other hand, there is general agreement in society that some aesthetic objects are "better" than others.

For product design in general, there have been design principles (i.e., attributes of "good" design) established that were mostly derived from the arts, such as unity,

proportion, symmetry, complexity, color, or prototypicality (e.g., Creusen and Schoormans). There are also works of art that are generally agreed upon as “masterpieces.”

Then, some individuals might be better able to perceive subtle differences in these dimensions than others, pointing to a higher aesthetic sensitivity or taste. Thus, it is obvious that generally acceptable “standards of taste” have emerged over time, mostly influenced and shaped by the judgments of people who have received a certain level of training through education and socialization.

Consumption habits, both in the past and present, play a crucial role in maintaining social class distinctions. Some consumers are better equipped in making product decisions than others do, due to their knowledge and experience. This expertise, typically defined as a “temporary stable outstanding performance in a particular domain” is “assumed to be based on extensive specialized knowledge”. A product-class expert is then considered as a consumer with greater domain knowledge and whose content and organization of this knowledge is superior to that of non-experts or product novices.

Historically, consumer behavior researchers have been strongly interested in studying this phenomenon. However, a key gap is that it has ignored the hedonic side of consumption, which involves aesthetics and taste.

For Hoyer and Stockburger-Sauer, knowledge is not the same as taste, as knowing how to play an instrument is not the same as having good taste in music. For example, someone may be considered to have excellent taste in music by others despite having limited knowledge of music theory and technical aspects. In this case, there is a clear distinction between consumer taste and expertise, as the person is high in aesthetic taste but low in knowledge. On the other hand, someone may have extensive technical knowledge about music theory but lack good taste in music. Additionally, some consumers may be both low or both high in music knowledge and taste. Finally, there are consumers that are either both low or both high in music knowledge and taste. It would therefore be interesting to explore whether there is a correlation between expertise and taste (i.e., whether superior knowledge leads to higher levels of taste or vice versa).

Thus, separating knowledge and taste is an aberration when it comes to consumer behavior. Hoyer and Stockburger-Sauer suggest a more nuanced approach and that examining both notions can lead to a more comprehensive and complete representation of consumer behavior, particularly in product and service categories where aesthetics play a significant role.

As it is easy to understand, consumers don’t only buy things because it is utilitarian. Sometimes, it is because of the feeling they give them: we can think of sports cars, luxury bags and designer clothes compared to laptops and microwaves.

In addition to the utilitarian/hedonic distinction, there are individual differences in terms of how the consumer evaluates a situation. Some people rely more on their expertise and knowledge (think of an accountant about to make a financial decision) and others who might rely on their taste and personal “gut-feel” (think of an amateur who has little knowledge of art history but rely on his taste to judge a masterpiece).

And finally, other individuals like an art critic who may possess both expertise and a strong sense of taste which could be employed to make the same judgment.

In light of this, a new question appears to them and is in need of investigation: How does a consumer's taste and expertise enter into the consumer decision-making process?

The authors suggest a framework that classifies three different broad categories of people that are ranging from the heavy use of cognition to the heavy use of affect. The key principle is that the importance of taste in the judgment process increases from Category I to Category III. Further, they acknowledge that the categories should reflect a person X product interaction because the categories vary with respect to the product and the person involved in the judgment process. Therefore, the use of cognition versus affects and expertise versus taste varies across products and people.

In Category I, cognitions are the main driver of judgment. These are more likely to involve products but keeping in line with the notion of a person X product interaction, there are also individuals who possess knowledge and expertise toward products that are more hedonic in nature. Individuals in Category I strongly apply their expertise in making judgments and decisions for these products. Examples might include automobile engineers, art history professors, and tailors.

Category II contains consumption situations where both cognition and affective/sensory processing are heavily employed. Here, individuals possess a certain degree of knowledge in the category but do not base their judgment solely on expertise; rather they inject an element of taste as well. Thus, both cognition and affect are important for these judgments. Examples would include art critics and fashion designers who possess extensive expertise in art and fashion respectively, but also need and possess a certain level of good taste.

Category III represents situations where products and services are more hedonic or sensory in nature and individuals rely predominantly on a "gut feel" or sensory aspects in making judgments. Again, consistent with the principle of a person X product interaction, this can vary across individuals. For example, an art connoisseur may not know much about the technical details of a particular work, but s/he would be able to judge the piece based on his or her sense of good taste.

In the final section of the paper, the author's outline what they feel are some of the major areas for investigation in consumer behavior and marketing research.

Notably:

- To conduct a broad level scale investigation across a variety of product domains and identify an individual's general predisposition toward having good taste
- To examine how individuals who possess both expertise and taste combine their expertise and taste to make judgments and decisions.
- To identify which factors play the greatest role in developing aesthetic taste. Specifically, do certain types of experiences or socio-cultural factors lead to higher levels of taste?

Those final questions lead us to the conclusion that the role of taste in consumer judgment and decision making represents a fertile ground for future theory development and research. It has been determined that taste plays a critical role in determining how consumption situations are judged and evaluated, yet at the present time, we know little about how this occurs.

Conclusions

Taste is philosophy, art, imagination, daring, travel and its universe sends out aesthetic as well as civil and social messages.

As we have seen, the brilliant spirit of taste is still alive and its artistic vision continues to influence the present.

Without claiming to be exhaustive, given the complexity and breadth of the subject, we have therefore sketched a coherent and, we believe, original picture made up of different voices and communicative phenomena that explain the power of influence on the masses of this fascinating world.

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