

IN OR OUT? HOW CONSUMER PERFORMANCES LEAD TO THE EMERGENCE OF NEW TASTES

Pierre-Yann Dolbec, Concordia University

Andre F. Maciel, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

In contemporary consumer culture, a growing number of markets has assigned an increasing emphasis to aesthetic taste (Featherstone 2007; Slater 1997). Organizations often are key drivers of this emphasis, as it allows them to hasten product obsolescence while feeding consumers' status games, a logic well detailed by Simmel (1904/1957) and many others who later built on this argument (Aspers and Godart 2013; Crane 1999; Holt 2002; Lynes 1949/1980).

Whereas the role of organizations in producing new aesthetic tastes has been extensively documented, the role of consumers in creating these tastes is a less theorized area of inquiry. When research engages with this topic (Hebdige 1979; Sandıkcı and Ger 2010; Thornton 1996), it typically explains consumer-driven tastes as the politicized response from social groups that perceive predominant aesthetic standards as highly dissonant from their worldview, socioeconomic status, or both. Though certainly important, these broad explanations tend to miss the micro-interactions and interpersonal negotiations that lead to the development of new aesthetic tastes within specific consumer collectives (Aspers and Godart 2013; Hennion 2007).

To help address this oversight, we inquire about how networked consumers actively shape the emergence of new tastes. In particular, we reveal how a set of consumer-led micro-processes progressively contribute to the emergence of what Arsel and Bean (2013) conceptualize as a taste regime, a discursively constructed normative system that orchestrates the aesthetics of a practice

by coherently patterning the relations between certain objects, doings, and meanings. Thus, our emphasis is not on how consumers perform, diffuse, or become competent in pre-existing taste regimes that are orchestrated by clearly identifiable institutional authorities, such as fashion designers, media publications, and trade associations. Nor is our emphasis on how these institutional authorities develop these discursive systems. Recent works (McQuarrie et al. 2013; Arsel and Bean 2013; Maciel and Wallendorf 2017) detail well these significant market dynamics. Instead, our work focuses on how consumers' accumulated interactions, mostly removed from the influences of institutional authorities, lead to the formation of these regimes, as these actors mutually negotiate understandings of what constitutes taste in a consumption field.

To set up the conceptual stage for this contribution, we first outline the theoretical framework employed to analyze how networked consumers co-construct new tastes, followed by our methodological procedures. We then present our findings and discuss the theoretical insights our research provides.

TASTE AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE

Consumer research has increasingly taken up the conceptualization of taste as a social practice (Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 1996; Warde 2005). Using Bourdieu, many researchers explain how this practice is a weapon that builds distinction *across* social groups (Arsel and Thompson 2011; McQuarrie et al. 2013; Üstüner and Holt 2010). More recently, a second approach in consumer research, aligned with the work by Hennion (2007), has shifted attention

from taste dynamics *across* to *within* consumer collectives (Arsel and Bean 2013; Maciel and Wallendorf 2017).

In this chapter, we build on the second approach. In particular, we engage with the conceptualization advanced by Arsel and Bean (2013) of taste as a social practice composed of three core elements: objects, doings, and meanings. As an illustration, this theoretical approach holds that home decorating is a practice that consists of furniture and ornaments (objects), ways of arranging objects (doings), and the symbolic value of these objects and doings (meanings). In the same vein, fashion is a practice made of designer brands, clothes, and accessories (objects), ways of wearing them (doings), and the cultural associations of these objects and doings (meaning).

It is worth noting that this granular theorization of taste is not just a pointless complexification of the intuitive concept of taste. Rather, it provides researchers with tools to deconstruct the taken-for-granted links between objects, doings, and meanings that social actors come to misrecognize as legitimate in different areas of consumption. Thus, whereas consumers often experience the objects, doings, and meanings that compose taste as a naturally aligned whole, these elements are in fact dispersed in the sociocultural space.

In this regard, a key insight of Arsel and Bean (2013) is the development of the taste regime construct to explain how, in specific fields, these dispersed elements often come together to constitute taste. Once formed, these regimes pattern how field actors assess taste performances by providing clear aesthetic guidance in particular consumption fields. Therefore, tastefully performing within a consumption field requires from consumers the competence to arrange objects, doings, and meanings in ways that are aligned with the prevailing taste regime. As Maciel and Wallendorf (2017) explain, acquiring this competence is often not trivial, particularly

when it involves refined aesthetic sensibilities that were not part of consumers' early socialization into taste.

To extend the research approach that focuses on taste dynamics within consumer collectives, we flip around current studies of taste regimes in particular and fashion discourses in general, which generally look at how already formalized discursive systems influence consumer behavior (Haytko and Thompson 1997; Murray 2002; Arsel and Bean 2013; Maciel and Wallendorf 2017). Instead, we analyze how the performances of networked consumers co-create a taste regime by iteratively aligning dispersed objects, doings, and meanings. Of course, this consumer-led taste regime is not radically new, as it draws on pre-existing symbols and materials. Yet, it is sufficiently different from existing tastes to orchestrate the emergence of both a new taste and a consumption field around it. The methodology used to study this dynamic is described next.

METHODOLOGY

We collected longitudinal data on the emergence of an avant-garde taste now known as “goth ninja.” The objects of this taste include brands, such as Rick Owens and Ann Demeulemeester, as well as garments, such as leather jackets with asymmetric zippers and combat boots. It also includes specific doings, such as layering and tucking, as well as meanings, such as avant-garde and craftsmanship. In an analogy with Schouten and Martin's (2014) work on consumer-driven market development, goth ninja can be said to be a consumer-driven taste regime: though some institutional actors provided resources and inspiration for its emergence, goth ninja's trajectory was mainly developed by consumers, in particular by those with great interest in avant-garde fashion. Methodologically, the reduced direct influence of institutional actors in this context for

an extended period is useful to bring into relief the consumer performances that shape the formation of distinctive taste regimes and aesthetic tastes.

The methods used to study the emergence of goth ninja are netnography, archival data, and semi-structured interviews. The netnography consists of 35 months of participant-observation in an online forum on avant-garde fashion that is goth ninja's birthplace: *stylezeitgeist* (Rabkin 2014). This forum started in 2006 with only a few users; towards the end of the netnography in 2012, it had 12,000 registered members, attracting about 38,000 unique visitors per month.

Our archival data includes thousands of posts from this forum. Based on the first author's situated knowledge as a participant-observer, we focused on 74 threads that contained lively aesthetic discussions. One such thread is "What Are You Wearing Today", where consumers post outfits, talk about specific designers, and ask for fashion advice. We also examined discussions that forum administrators classified as highly useful. Furthermore, we selected all discussions between 2006 and 2012 that had more than 100 posts and some activity in the three months preceding the collection of archives. The final selection consisted of a subset of 172,242 posts from 3,200 users.

In addition to netnographic and archival data, twelve interviews were conducted with consumers to understand their taste performances and discursive efforts in the forum and their overall perceptions of fashion aesthetics. Interviews lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours. Three interviewees were recruited through the first author's personal network and the online forum; the other nine, through snowball sampling. Informants' ages ranged from 19 to 33 years old; some are students while most have completed college, holding occupations as diverse as artists and corporate executives.

Data analysis followed a hermeneutic approach (Thompson 1997). We first conducted intratextual analysis, treating specific threads and interviews as separate cases. We then conducted intertextual analysis, identifying recurrent themes across field events and connecting them to related theories. As a quantitative complement to this analytical process, we used the archival data to do longitudinal word counts, thereby mapping the discursive rise and decline of certain objects, doings, and meanings in the focal online forum.

The results of this analysis are presented next, beginning with a descriptive overview of the emergence of goth ninja. In some passages, we substitute artistic drawings for original photographs because we could not obtain participation consent from all users.

THE EMERGENCE OF GOTH NINJA

Stylezeitgeist, goth ninja's birthplace, was founded in 2006 by a consumer who was frustrated with the tastes and discussions that dominated other popular web forums for fashion, such as *The Fashion Spot*:

I was dissatisfied with the way that The Fashion Spot was run. I didn't want to read about models and celebrities. I just wanted to see the clothes and know about the designers and their philosophies. (Goethe in DeLeon, 2012)

Echoing this orientation, the first front pages of *stylezeitgeist* set the tone of the forum by clarifying that discussions should “divorce fashion from consumerism and celebrity culture” (*Stylezeitgeist.com* homepage, March/28/2007). This stated orientation helped attract to this forum consumers who, to a significant degree, reject mass produced fashion in favor of the uniqueness, innovation, and artisanal work they believe to find in avant-garde fashion.

These cultural distinctions form the core web of meanings that guides taste in our empirical context. Nevertheless, this generic web did not translate automatically into a cohesive aesthetic taste. To illustrate this point, consider the drawings in figure 1. On the left side are three typical outfits posted by consumers at *stylezeitgeist*'s inception in 2006. These outfits present a dispersed range of colors, fits, styles, and brands. Conceptually, the objects, doings, and meanings had yet to be aligned to form a distinctive taste; at this stage, the discursive system orienting the aesthetics of consumers' outfits did not constitute a regime.



Figure 1: typical outfits posted in 2006 (left side) and 2012 (right side)

In contrast, now consider the three outfits on the right side of figure 1. They typify consumer taste performances at the end of our data collection in 2012, when goth ninja had crystallized as a distinctive taste. The looks converge on a much cohesive set of objects, doing, and meanings, featuring a dark color palette, layered tops, and pants tucked into oversized footwear. This taste was also removed from mainstream fashion, as evinced by the thread “Strangers reaction to your clothes,” where forum members share the bewilderment that strangers sometimes expressed in incidental conversations. By 2012, fashion designer preference had also converged. From 2006

to 2008, eight different designers swapped places among the most mentioned on the forum; in the following years, only four brands made up the list of top mentioned. In this latter period, this taste regime began to transcend the online forum. By 2009, the taste was referred to as goth ninja in mainstream publications such as the TIME (Betts 2009) and was the *raison d'être* of many publications, Tumblr accounts, and retailers.

The emergence of goth ninja as a distinctive taste, of course, did not occur in the aesthetic vacuum. Forum members initially created their outfits through bricolage with the garments from existing fashion designers they admired. Yet, when looked individually, the aesthetics that characterized each of these designers were at best loosely aligned. Consider, for example, the following differences in terms of positioning in the field of fashion and aesthetic orientation between some of the most-mentioned designers in the forum during the period studied. Rick Owens is a Paris-based designer who regularly participates in fashion shows and whose career ascended in parts thanks to Anna Wintour, the editor in chief of Vogue since 1988 and an influential figure of the fashion world. He gained fame as his slightly modified, asymmetrical leather jackets became favored by Hollywood celebrities in the early 2000s. In turn, Carol Christian Poell is a reclusive designer whose last collection was in 2010; he since re-edits pieces from previous collections. His clothes are so physically difficult to wear that they are said to “wear the wearer” rather than the contrary. Lastly, Guidi is an Italian tannery who is not part of the avant-garde fashion market; the century-old firm concentrates on simple designs that emphasize the quality of its leathers. Despite their differences, these and other relatively dispersed aesthetic elements came together over time as goth ninja. This process was not led by identifiable institutional authorities, but rather by networked consumers who progressively co-constructed a taste regime, thereby aligning these elements into a distinctive aesthetic taste.

In the next sections, we detail the three types of consumer-led processes that chiefly contributed to the emergence of goth ninja. In the first type, *taste regime convergence*, consumers mutually rule out objects, doings, and meanings that they consider too divergent to be aligned as part of a cohesive taste. By contrast, in the second type, *taste regime extension*, consumers mutually expand the objects, doings, and meanings that are part of an emergent taste regime. Lastly, through *taste regime normalization*, consumer interactions stabilize the emergent agreements that originated through their micro-negotiations in the first two processes. To be clear, these three types of consumer-led processes do not operate separately; rather, they interact to produce a taste regime that formalizes and orchestrates a relatively new aesthetic taste in a consumer collective.

Taste Regime Convergence

As defined earlier, this process narrows the aesthetic elements that constitute an emergent taste regime. As shown below, consumers primarily accomplish this by linking certain objects and doings with meanings that are disparaged in the consumer collective, thus pushing these objects and doings out of circulation.

In the trajectory of goth ninja, an exemplar case of this process involves the brand Raf Simons, the “avant-garde kid” (Fischer 2013) of the 1990s who “irrevocably change the face of menswear” (Fury 2016). This brand was among the most cherished on the online forum between 2006 and 2008; however, starting in 2010, the brand sharply fell into decline. A significant factor in this decline was the thread that some consumers created specifically to discuss what they viewed as Raf Simons’ aesthetic fiascos. Below is one such discussion regarding a solid black

towel that had the following sentence written in a white font, “there is a crack in everything that’s how the light gets in”:

North: It's hilarious how low Raf Simons is willing to go, but yet again he fails... From the looks of the image and “message,” you could assume that this is a piece of new art—maybe stencil white on black canvas. The truth is that it is a simple (or not so simple) beach towel from Raf Simons with a very open-ended message: “there is a crack in everything that’s how the light gets in.”

South: This is so utterly useless and it doesn't add ANYTHING to his brand...

Chinned: Raf may not have gone mainstream yet, but this is sellout. I used to love Raf, and I admire some of his pieces. But this is bullshit! He could as well join KVA on Dior, or he could start designing for Dsquared. What's up with this? Does Raf want douchebags to wear his designs? Items like this are pure cash cows in the industry... This isn't design.

Through highly normative discussion like this one, consumers discursively delegitimize particular objects from an emergent taste regime by tying them with disparaged meanings. In the discussion, Chinned expresses a criticism that ideologically resonates with forum members and avant-garde enthusiasts: he accuses the designer of “selling out,” trading stylistic purism and innovation for the money that comes with the diffusion of a brand to broader audiences, a motive that is antagonistic to the meanings that structure avant-garde fashion. Chinned also articulates a feeling of betrayal that further denigrates the brand: he states the designer is still capable of doing the things he used to love, but the designer has chosen to do otherwise. By framing the designers’ work as a choice, he reinforces the association between the brand and the undesirable meaning of commercialism.

In addition to ruling out specific objects by associating them with disparaged meanings, consumers also contribute to a taste regime's convergence by linking specific doings with such meanings. In the next passage, forum members extensively debate a doing that became central in goth ninja, the proper way of tucking pants into boots:

Remoe: The boots are too tight in the ankle for tucking, looks awkward.

Agrii: I'd lose the boots. Or at least un-tuck the pants. It's tough to pull off boots with soles that thick. Looks a little too construction worker in the military.

Kazai: Boots don't look good at all in both pictures (shape and, most of all, the soles are way too heavy), neither does the tucking (and for practical reasons too: you couldn't even seat without seeing your pants going out of the boots).

Bomoo: regarding the fit in question I actually liked the boots themselves but they ultimately do not work with the rest of the outfit color wise, and are rather heavy and too tight for tucking.

Through discourses that tightly connect particular objects with certain doings but not with others, consumers gradually develop a convergent understanding of an emergent taste. To a large extent, they do so by linking objects-doings sets with some particular meanings. Like many other consumers, note how Agrii employ figures that invoke lowbrow taste (e.g., construction worker) to validate his aesthetic opinion, thus further restricting the elements that constitute the taste regime co-constructed by the members of this consumer collective.

In goth ninja, most aesthetic norms were not created or diffused by recognized institutional authorities, but rather through micro-negotiations among a group of consumers dissatisfied with existing fashion tastes. These consumers do not participate in the world of fashion by simply shifting from one style to another, a dynamic well explored in previous research on fashion

cycles (Lieberson 2000). Instead, they remain committed to gradually refining the aesthetic sensibility of a consumer collective, thus directly shaping the creation of a taste regime through continued interactions and normative performances.

Although consumers' convergence on objects, doings, and meanings is a core process in the emergence of distinctive tastes, restricting these elements too much may create an aesthetic repetitiveness that would be lethal in the world of avant-garde fashion. The next section unpacks the process that counterbalances this aesthetic convergence by opening up new taste possibilities to the members of a consumer collective.

Taste Regime Extension

This process leads to the expansion of the objects, doings, and meanings that constitute a taste regime. Consumers achieve this primarily by integrating into their taste performances objects and doings that, though previously absent in the regime, invoke meanings that resonate with the consumer collective.

As an entry point into this process, consider the left side of figure 2, which shows member Zhang wearing an object that was largely overlooked in *stylezeitgeist* by then: a hat by designer Number (N)ine. As shown below, this member's curated performance caused an outpour of compliments:



Figure 2: Introduction of a new object to the taste regime (left);
consolidation of the object into the taste regime (right)

Zhang: my first [post on the thread]. Please take kindly on me sz [*stylezeitgeist*]... number nine, rick owens, viridi anne, julius, guidi

Xioauxom: Zhang - loving it, I'm an absolute sucker for outfits in such style. Bah, for the cloak/big scarf + round hat combination itself!

Jung: Zhang, it's uber great...more please!

Torsto: Easily the best [look] in a long time, very nice Zhang!

Beenthereandhere: Should be into the HOF [Hall of Fame]? Wicked Zhang!

This performance was successful because it incorporated an object that, though novel, clearly materialized a central meaning in this consumer collective: somberness. Well-received performances such as the one above incite other consumers not only to acquire the same or similar objects, but also to reproduce that taste in their own performances. The right side of figure 2 shows a member integrating Zhang's hat into his own post with the following

disclosure: “I guess consider this a very literal nod to *Zhang* and that great Number (N)ine preacher hat he often wore. All clothes and ring mine. Shoes and hat are random pieces from my closet. (*Verde*)”

Not every member can introduce new objects and doings so seamlessly and successfully. Those who do so, like Zhang, are considerably involved in the broader field of fashion, being thus familiar with other taste regimes and their associated objects, doings, and meanings. To build on this point, consider the introduction of a Junya Watanabe dress into goth ninja. Because this piece required an intricate set of doings to be tastefully dressed, a member with considerable fashion knowledge had to explicitly link this object with particular doings:

I received a nice note from another forum member this morning that mentioned, amongst other things, the difficulty of wearing a AW 06 Junya skirt ... I would agree that it is difficult, at least for those of us who aren't particularly tall (I'm 5'4"). So, I took it as a task to style the skirt in other ways as an experiment. And I'm wearing it today, so there: First, I rolled the waist twice to shorten the length of the skirt... I then removed all eight epaulets and closed two collars in their original shape. I strapped one epaulet on buttons so they would be behind my leg thereby forming a space through which I could stick my legs. The result, a curious Elizabethan-era/Sarouel hybrid, is quixotic to say the least...I adjusted the skirt using the epaulets I had removed earlier, creating volume by crossing the straps and layering them. Detailed explanations such as this one, along with highly curated visual performances like the one introducing the hat, progressively help expand a taste regime by broadening the objects and doings that compose it. These performances thus counterbalance the aesthetic limitations created by the process of taste regime convergence detailed earlier.

Consumer performances and discursive efforts that lead to taste regime convergence and expansion thus refer to the concomitant negation, selection, and juxtaposition of existing aesthetic elements. To some degree, these performances resemble the relationship with the world of fashion that many mainstream consumers have, as they also negate, select, and juxtapose mass-mediated fashion elements to develop individuated aesthetics that fit their everyday lives (Haytko and Thompson 1997). However, because consumers repeatedly interact in a bounded consumer collective, our informants do more than developing individuated styles; they end up co-constructing and diffusing a distinctive discursive system nested within the broader field of fashion. This system is initially loose and tentative, formed by generic oppositions to mainstream tastes; but over time, it crystalizes as a regime, which legitimizes only certain objects-doings-meanings arrangements. The next section further explores the crystallization of consumer-driven taste regimes by analyzing the process that normalizes these arrangements.

Taste Regime Normalization

“Met 2 guys in a hotel bar the other night... They asked me if I was wearing this due to my religion. I said yes... I was wearing pod shorts, long T, geobaskets, etc.—you know, the *uniform* [emphasis added].” (TheBuys)

Whereas the two previous processes remove or introduce objects, doings, and meanings, taste regime normalization refers to the stabilization of the links between these elements. This process culminates in the recognition of a taste “uniform,” as the quote above shows.

In the focal forum, this stabilizing process unfolds most explicitly in threads such as “WAYWT” (What Are You Wearing Today) and “Hall of Fame,” where consumers both post pictures of themselves wearing outfits and comment on each other’s attires. Picture 3 shows a post that was commended for its alignment with the taste regime orchestrating goth ninja:



Picture 1: Post of member with a “tasteful” look

Edward: I particularly like the scarf and the boots underneath the pants! I normally don't like it, but the slim shape of the toe just seems to make everything flow nicely, and your legs look crazy long. The sharp lines in the coat are brilliant too!

Tomorrow: Love the fit of the trousers, goes really well with the devoa

DoD: Really nice. Best way to wear grey is lots of it and in variation.

Brooklyn: very nice Chapeautier...you should think twice about trading or blacking out those gloves...they really enhance the outfit

The forum contains hundreds of performances in which members embody the current elements of the taste regime that orchestrates aesthetic in this consumer collective. In these performances, members do not seek to introduce new elements to the regime; rather, they essentially put together what forum members call “sz [stylezeitgeist] approved” objects, arranging them in ways that are authenticated by the regime (the right doings). These curated performances help normalize a taste regime by making it visible to other forum members.

While the passage above shows a resounding agreement on a certain taste display, this is not always the case in this consumer collective. To elaborate on this point, consider the following extended excerpt from a heated debate that involved multiple forum members. In it, member Rain tries to distance the brand Carpe Diem from the meaning of artisanal work that is central to avant-garde fashion in general and to goth ninja in particular. This charge provokes a strong reaction from members who were aesthetically committed to Carpe Diem:

Rain: Most of the designers coming out of the Carpe Diem school are in fact not as artisanal as people describe them... These designers (and those following their aesthetic nonsense) are mostly doing deconstructed sportswear in which the so-called artisanal hand is actually missing... What is really missing nowadays is a real commitment to craft, garment construction as well as pattern cutting and to pushing these values forward into innovative territories

Draven: Not sure if I understand your post correctly but are you suggesting that what Amadei [a key designer of Carpe Diem] makes is essentially sportswear? If so can you point to an example (aside from the aviator sweatshirt) of this?... The only connection that I see to sportswear is certain funky anatomic patterns, which Poell is also no stranger to using.

TheZ: An Artisan is a highly skilled individual who can produce items... by simply using the knowledge and acquired skill level without needing all the industrialized processes and machinery found in a traditional garment factory... [Amadei] clothing IS indeed artisanal. [Amadei] is creating garments that are in some ways more artisanal than Poell and are not particularly tailored pieces but in a way a modern wardrobe with purely unorthodox patterns and look.

Lowkey: I still don't see how any of this would warrant saying that Amadei's work is strictly not artisanal. Surely the term can be interpreted in many ways and yes, it's thrown around quite often, but in all its simplicity I think it means goods that are made in a more traditional and smaller scale production process, as opposed to larger scale production in a remote factory. A small atelier with a handful of workers handling the design and construction process surely meets these criteria.

In this discussion, Draven strongly reacts to allegations that Carpe Diem designer Amadei produces sportswear, a product category far removed from avant-garde fashion. He does so by first framing as an exception the designer's piece (aviator sweatshirt) that is potentially misaligned with avant-garde fashion. He then draws a parallel between Amadei and a beloved designer in the forum, Carol Christian Poell, thus re-stitching meanings of uniqueness and craftsmanship to the brand under contestation. Following Draven's answer, TheZ and Lowkey also seek to further efface incipient links between the objects branded as Carpe Diem and the meaning of mass production.

As Shove and Pantzar (2005) argue, taste is a practice that needs to be continuously reproduced to be made a recognizable entity. This is particularly true in collectives in which taste standards are not diffused by clearly designated institutional aesthetic authorities, as with much

of goth ninja's trajectory. In these cases, the reproduction of taste happens through taste performances, discursive struggles, and micro-interactions such as the one above, in which consumers manage to maintain particular arrangements of objects, doings, and meanings as part of an emergent discursive system that orchestrates a particular taste.

DISCUSSION: MICRO-PROCESSES OF TASTE EMERGENCE

Often, new tastes develop through the intentional work of institutional actors who want to increase or maintain market relevance (Aspers and Godart 2013; Crane 1999; Lynes 1949/1980; Simmel 1904/1957). But new tastes also emerge in other ways. At times, they emerge when large social groups devise total lifestyles and disruptive aesthetic responses to aspects of mainstream culture they view as deeply problematic (Hebdige 1979; Sandıkcı and Ger 2010; Thornton 1996). Other times, they emerge through the struggles that characterize the relations between adjacent social classes, which continuously seek to develop particularized tastes to build social distinction (Simmel 1904/1957; Bourdieu 1984; McQuarrie et al. 2013). These macro forces are clearly central to explaining how new tastes develop in consumer culture. However, they typically miss many of the concrete processes that lead to the emergence of new tastes. Hence, our work's focus on the micro-processes through which specific consumer collectives form new tastes.

This focus reveals three consumer-led micro-processes that iteratively construct a discursive system that orchestrates the aesthetic of a given practice—a taste regime. Taste regime convergence clearly defines the sets of objects, doings, and meanings that constitute this aesthetic; by contrast, taste regime expansion introduces new elements to it; finally, taste regime normalization stabilizes links between the objects, doings, and meanings that form this aesthetic.

In the context we studied, the combination of these performances crystallized as goth ninja, a taste that first became dominant in a consumer collective and later recognized as a major trend in the broader field of avant-garde fashion.

Based on our findings, we predict that the emphasis of these three micro-processes will change over time, even though they continue to happen concomitantly. To elaborate on this point, it is useful to introduce the notion of a *settled* taste regime, when a high degree of consensus exists, and *unsettled* or *emergent*, when a low degree of consensus exists.

In unsettled and emergent regimes, taste extension and convergence are mostly centered on what will become the core objects and doings of an aesthetic. This is key to position an emergent taste away from existing aesthetics, while creating a set of elements that consumers can combine in creative and coherent ways as they participate in a taste-centered collective. Gradually, the iterations between convergence and extension make taste path-dependent. The objects and doings acquire a “prototypical” status, serving as basis for the emergence of a ‘uniform.’ In unsettled and emergent regimes, the discursive system is more open and changes in taste are often drastic.

As a taste regime settles, taste regime normalization takes on a greater importance. As more consumers develop a shared understanding of the discursive system, consumers begin to avidly defend the objects, doings, and meanings they consider tasteful against divergent discourses that may threaten these elements’ legitimacy. Together, these shared understandings and defenses inhibit the consumer collective’s overall disposition to introduce radically different new objects, doings, and meanings. Yet, the taste extension and convergence micro-processes continue to unfold. In a settled regime, these processes concentrate on extending the details associated with previously introduced core objects and doings, such as which pants or shirt from the last

collection of a designer should be integrated to the regime. In settled regimes, changes in taste are more incremental.

The consumer-led processes we theorize in this chapter do not transform institutional aspects of the fashion market. They neither introduce new logics nor new types of actor to a consumption field, a process that consumers may drive even unintendedly. Our findings thus contrast with those of Dolbec and Fischer (2015), where passionate and connected consumers unintendedly brought changes in the underlying institutional logics governing the fashion market and the institutional work reproducing it. At the same time, the consumer-led processes we theorize do not simply replicate the tastes established by institutional actors in the field of fashion, as when fashion bloggers publicly display high-fashion trends to gain prestige with mainstream audiences (McQuarrie et al. 2013). Instead, the processes of taste regime convergence, extension, and normalization operate between institutional changes and taste replications, contributing to the emergence and evolution of tastes. Drawing from Dolbec and Fischer (2015), we predict that these processes will flourish when consumers face relatively low experimentation costs, have places to interact, can perform practices that are observable by others, and find technological infrastructure to do so. In addition, we predict that a consumer collective will influence significantly the evolution of tastes in the larger field of fashion when it is constituted of consumers who are culturally competent and willing to interact with less competent ones. It is this combination of cultural competence with critical mass that will make an emergent taste more likely to be “read by others in the field” (Dolbec and Fischer 2015: 1454).

In conclusion, our work explores an understudied topic in consumer research: how consumers perform taste when taste standards are open to contention and the outcomes of these

performances. In contemporary consumer culture, individuals' tastes often are often bounded by pre-existing taste regimes that are diffused by clearly designated institutional authorities such as blog publishers, trade associations, fashion firms, and religious doctrines (Arsel and Bean 2013; Maciel and Wallendorf 2017; McQuarrie et al. 2013; Sandıkcı and Ger 2010). In these situations, consumers tend to cultivate aesthetic knowledge through continuous and reflexive engagement with the operating regime. When a field lacks such authorities, one could reasonably expect a proliferation in the objects, doings, and meanings that make up taste, particularly among avant-garde consumers who generally valorize innovation and uniqueness. Yet, instead of this proliferation, we show that consumers may well end up patching together from existing resources a novel and increasingly normative taste regime, thus re-creating structures that pattern what is considered tasteful in a consumer collective while giving rise to new aesthetic tastes that become a publicly available cultural resource.

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