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Conference or Workshop Item:

Unravelling the tensions in liquid cultural consumption

Abstract

Drawing on Bauman's (2000) liquid modernity and Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) concept of liquid consumption, this research attempts to frame liquid cultural consumption through six tensions, namely [De|Re]materialization, [Over]Abundance, [Auto|Hetero]nomy, [Con|Pro]sumption, Access vs Possession, Commodification vs Sacralization. We conclude proposing pathways for future research.

Introduction

"Culture is now able to focus on fulfilling individual needs, solving individual problems and struggles with the challenges and troubles of personal lives. It can be said that in liquid modern times, culture (and most particularly, though not exclusively, its artistic sphere) is fashioned to fit individual freedom of choice and individual responsibility for that choice; and that its function is to ensure that the choice should be and will always remain a necessity and unavoidable duty of life, while the responsibility for the choice and its consequences remains where it has been placed by the liquid modern human condition – on the shoulders of the individual, now appointed to the position of chief manager of 'life politics' and its sole executive." – (Bauman, 2011, p. 14)

Liquid modernity is a place of tensions, instability and constant changes. The concept was first framed by Polish philosopher Zygmunt Bauman in his essay *Liquid Modernity* (2000) to account for the characteristics of our society, notably (1) an emancipation from the social norms, (2) the exacerbation of consumer's individuality (3) the melting relationship between time and space, (4) a shift in the perception, stability and purpose of work and (5) an implosion of communities. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) drew on Bauman's seminal work to coin *liquid consumption* and its opposite concept of solid consumption through 4 dimensions, respectively liquid and solid: (1) access *vs* possession, (2) ephemeral consumption *vs* long-lasting consumption, (3) immaterial *vs* material and (4) low *vs* high relevance to identity. Consumers oscillate between solid and liquid consumption (Rosenberg et al., 2023) and can even attempt to solidify their consumption to "manage liquid modernity" (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020). As Bauman (Bauman and Haugaard, 2008) and Eckhardt and Bardhi (2020) state, liquidity should not be taken literally, but is a metaphor to think of, respectively, the tensions within modern condition and consumption.

Bauman (2011) drew upon his concept of liquid modernity to envision how culture permeates in our liquid modern world. In parallel to Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) extension of Bauman's liquid modernity, we will rely on the metaphor of liquidity and an interdisciplinary corpus to attempt to frame liquid cultural consumption through six tensions. We will explain how they can enable us to better understand nowadays' cultural consumption, and, from each of them, we'll derive questions for further research.

[De|Re]materialisation

Our first tension, [De|Re]materialization, directly stems from the rapid technological changes that have changed the rapport between time and space (Bauman, 2000) and from the idea that liquid consumption is principally immaterial (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). Jones et *al.* (2015) conceptualize creative products along two dimensions: their "semiotic codes" and their "material base". One could understand the digitalisation of culture – streaming services and the Internet – as an evaporation of such material base. However, as Belk (2013) artfully points out, what happened was in fact a *rematerialisation*. Although our CDs, DVDs and books are now reduced to lines of code, they still needs a material base – iPhones, TVs, computers, tablets, eReaders – to be consumed (Caliandro et al., 2024; Sinclair and Tinson, 2017). Further, the way our digital devices display our collections of digital cultural goods bears material characteristics – we see and touch them – and could therefore be considered as "digitally material" (Pink et al., 2016). Besides this new materiality of cultural goods, we can observe among consumers a desire to return to ancient forms of materiality, as highlighted as a biting back effect in Magaudda's (2011) research on analogic music consumption in the age of dematerialization, or expressed as a new form of distinction through resistance against music platforms (Webster, 2020).

[Over]Abundance

The second tension is inspired by the metaphorical character of liquidity in studying liquid modernity and consumption (Bauman and Haugaard, 2008; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020): the cultural marketplace currently hosts unprecedented *liquidities* of cultural offers. We live in an era of cultural abundance (Glévarec, 2021; Jansson and Hracs, 2018) characterized by an ubiquity, a prosperity and a greater access to cultural offers, which is arguably the result of the dematerialisation of cultural goods. Despite such abundance of cultural goods on the market, there is a lack of diversity consumed, both on the digital[1 & 2] and on the physical markets (Donnat, 2018a, 2018b). The profusion of offers on cultural platforms is one of their key factors of success, but can also have detrimental effects since it can lead to choice overload situations (Bollen et al., 2010; Ferwerda et al., 2019; Gomez-Uribe and Hunt, 2016), situations in which "the complexity of the decision problem faced by an individual exceeds the individual's cognitive resources" (Chernev et al., 2015). It can lead to greater indecision (Besedeš et al., 2015), greater regrets (Gourville and Soman, 2005), a reduction of the quantity and the diversity consumed (Bollen et al., 2010; Haynes, 2009; Scheibehenne et al., 2010) and even to consumers being paralyzed and unable to decide (Sela et al., 2009). A study based on 2,000 American respondents found that the average Netflix user spends 18 minutes choosing what content to watch[3]. Netflix users in the UK spend 187 hours per year simply browsing on the

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[1] *Data Shows 90 Percent of Streams Go to the Top 1 Percent of Artists*. Emily Blake for Rolling Stone (2020). Accessed from: https://www.rollingstone.com/pro/news/top-1-percent-streaming-1055005/
[2] *Does Netflix have a 'long tail'?*. VODClickstream.com (2019). Accessed from: https://vodclickstream.com/does-netflix-have-a-long-tail/
[3] "Netflix Users Spend 18 Minutes Picking Something to Watch, Study Finds". Maglio, T. for The Wrap (2016). Retrieved from: https://www.thewrap.com/netflix-users-browse-for-programming-twice-as-long-as-cable-viewers-study-says/

platform[4]. However, consumers still prefer to choose by themselves even if this implies increased cognitive efforts on their part (Botti and Iyengar, 2004).

[Auto|Hetero]nomy

This next tension reflects the weight of choice in cultural consumption that is nowadays, according to Bauman (2011), incumbent on the individual rather than on social entities. There is more freedom to choose since social norms are waning, but at the same time, more responsibility in choosing. The advent of cultural platforms aggregating humongous amounts of cultural goods and mediating the relationships between producers, artists and consumers (Nieborg and Poell, 2018) has paradoxical effects on how consumers choose cultural goods. On the one hand, consumers have access to unprecedented amounts of cultural offers and are free of choosing whatever they like to watch, listen to or read, as compared to traditional vertical media. On the other hand, their consumption is increasingly reliant on these platforms' algorithms (Airoldi and Rokka, 2022; Beuscart et al., 2019; Shapiro, 2020; Varela and Kaun, 2019; Weingartner, 2020; Wilson-Barnao, 2017).

[Con|Pro]sumption

Once again, relying metaphorically on the image of liquidity and on the blurring social structures and norms, we posit that the status of consumers is in tension within liquid cultural consumption. Firat and Venkatesh (Firat et al., 1995; Firat and Venkatesh, 1993) showed that the postmodern era is characterized by an overlapping of production and consumption: the

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[4] "Brits spend 187 hours browsing Netflix in a year, study claims". Chilton, L. for The Independent (2020). Retrieved from: https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/netflix-browsing-how-much-time-odeon-fact-cinemas-study-a9682011.html

product is the actual producer in that it reveals the consumer's identity. Such blurring goes further since a shift in the status of the consumer was witnessed, most dramatically so in the age of the Web 2.0. Increasingly, with the help of new media and decreasing production costs, consumers are put to contribution by firms and become *prosumers* (Ritzer, 2014; Ritzer et al., 2012; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). Prosumers can have a direct and active impact on the cultural marketplace – i.e., uploading YouTube videos, hacking the platform's algorithms to promote their favourite artists – or a more passive one – i.e., simply wearing a fashion item or being counted as a viewer on media platforms – (Derbaix et al., 2023; Duncum, 2011; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2023; Tse and Tsang, 2021; Vizcaíno-Verdú et al., 2023).

Access *vs* Possession

In today's cultural marketplace as well as today's consumption environment more broadly, access has supplanted possession (Belk, 2014). One of the specificities of the new business models of cultural platforms is that they provide either for free – against watching advertising – or for a small monthly subscription fee access to a virtually unlimited amount of cultural offers (Arditi, 2018). This tension between consuming goods simply through accessing them as opposed to possessing them is one constituent of the liquid vs solid consumption spectrum (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). However, this does not tell the full story. We can distinguish legal ownership – a form of ownership recognized by society, framed by law and to which are associated an array of obligations and rights – and psychological ownership – "the state in which individuals feel as though the target of ownership or a piece of that target is 'theirs' (i.e., 'It is mine!')" (Pierce et al., 2003, p. 86). The datafication of cultural platforms could lead to personalized individual experiences (Caliandro et al., 2024) that would give their users feelings of ownership – "my recommendations", "my watchlist"… Further, NFT represents a new form

of ownership - that is to be ontologically and legally distinguished from traditional ownership (Belk et al., 2022).

Commodification *vs* Sacralisation

This last tension derives from the extreme liquidity of cultural goods on the marketplace and the thought that their purpose in the liquid modern world is to satisfy consumers' needs (Bauman, 2011). Literature on cultural consumption and marketing applied to arts and culture has oftentimes relied on Adorno's (Adorno and Bernstein, 2005), Baudrillard (1970) and Benjamin's (Benjamin and Jennings, 2010) works on the standardisation and the commodification of the work of art. Cultural goods are nowadays blended with other commodities on the over-abundant marketplace, simply serve to "satisfy individual needs" (Bauman, 2011) and have lost their aura. On the one hand, Haddad's works through the lens of categorization (Haddad-Bacry, 2022; Haddad-Bacry and Michel, 2023) challenge the experiential view (Bourgeon-Renault, 2000; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982) and put an emphasis on the utilitarian aspects of cultural consumption. Cultural goods, just like any other goods, are chosen for their anticipated value. On the other hand, stardom and celebrity "have become a defining characteristics of our mediatized societies" (Driessens, 2013). We are perhaps witnessing the paroxysm of Adorno's view that in the Cultural Industries, consumers' tastes and preferences have less to do with the artworks than with the personalities of the artists (Moore, 2012). Tribes of consumers can gather around the worshipping of a particular product – sometimes being some of the devices on which cultural consumption occurs such as the

iPhone – or idols (Cova et al., 2011). One of the most probing examples today is that of "clans" of K-Pop fans such as the "BTS Army"[5].

Conclusion and directions for future research

The changes that the cultural marketplace has undergone over the last two decades have profoundly changed the way we consume cultural goods, the way we consider them as well as the way we choose and experience them. Bauman (2011, 2000) depicts a world of perpetual instability, in which nothing remains solid anymore. Such instability let Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) to conceptualise liquid and solid consumption. Consumer's oscillations between liquid and solid ways to consume goods, services and experiences could then be envisioned as a refusal of the perpetual changes in which our society is entangled. Drawing on their work enabled us to propose six tensions that we believe are key to understand how consumers consume cultural goods nowadays ant the tensions they experience. We summarise them in the following table and juxtapose them to research questions that may be addressed to further comprehend them. We call for further research to attempt to better understand liquid cultural consumption and (1) how consumers deal with the burring of materiality, (2) the desire for choice and abundance and the potential overwhelming feeling that might stem from it, (3) the oscillation between choosing for themselves what to consume and let the algorithms guide them, (4) their blurred status, in-between consumers and producers, (5) when they choose possession over access and how new forms of possession are negotiated, and ultimately, (6) how they treat cultural goods through the commodity-sacrality opposition.

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[5] https://kpop-fanon-fandom.fandom.com/wiki/List_of_Fan_Club_Names_and_Colors

Tension	Description	Corresponding literature	Research questions
[De|Re]materialization	Cultural goods have emancipated from their material constraints and are embracing new forms of materiality.	Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Bauman, 2000; Belk, 2013; Caliandro et al., 2024; Jones et al., 2015; Magaudda, 2011; Pink et al., 2016; Sinclair and Tinson, 2017; Webster, 2020	- How to envision the new configurations of materiality in cultural consumption? - If material consumption is more identity-defining, then to what extent are media devices perceived by consumers as their new identity-kits (Belk, 2013)? - What about the digital material items/goods conveyed through them?
[Over]Abundance	Partly due to their emancipation from material constraints, cultural goods are overly abundant. Their abundance can overwhelm consumers.	Bauman and Haugaard, 2008; Besedeš et al., 2015; Bollen et al., 2010; Botti and Iyengar, 2004; Chernev et al., 2015; Donnat, 2018a, 2018b; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020; Ferwerda et al., 2019; Glévarec, 2021; Gomez-Uribe and Hunt, 2016; Gourville and Soman, 2005; Haynes, 2009; Jansson and Hracs, 2018; Scheibehenne et al., 2010; Sela et al., 2009	- How can we understand the choice of cultural products in an era of cultural abundance? - Are social norms and structures really waning or are they still operating at the individual level?
[Auto|Hetero]nomy	Consumers experience more freedom from social norms and can choose what to consume on social platforms, but their choices are influenced by algorithms.	Airoldi and Rokka, 2022; Bauman, 2011; Beuscart et al., 2019; Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Shapiro, 2020; Varela and Kaun, 2019; Weingartner, 2020; Wilson-Barnao, 2017	- Are consumers feeling autonomous in choosing? - What is the impact of their level of autonomy on their cultural consumption? - Are there situations when autonomy/heteronomy is experienced differently?
[Con|Pro]sumption	The status of consumers is liquefying, and they are increasingly put to contribution, passively or actively, by the cultural marketplace as procucers.	Derbaix et al., 2023; Duncum, 2011; Firat and Venkatesh, 1993; Firat et al., 1995; Ritzer, 2014; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Ritzer et al., 2012; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2023; Tse and Tsang, 2021; Vizcaíno-Verdú et al., 2023	-How is that tension articulated in the consumer's mind and to what extent are they aware of their blurry status? - How are prosumers' productions consumed as compared to regular producers'?
Access *vs* Possession	Nowadays, consumers rather pay to access cultural goods rather than to own them. However, the notion of psychological ownership,	Arditi, 2018; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Belk, 2014; Belk et al., 2022; Caliandro et al., 2024; Pierce et al., 2003	- How is that tension between access and possession articulated in the consumer's mind when experiencing access-based offers? - How are the new forms of possession – feelings of ownership on access-based

	new forms of digital possessions and solid consumption patterns can challenge that view.		platforms, NFTs – negotiated by consumers in their identity-seeking endeavours?
Commodification *vs* Sacralization	Cultural goods are increasingly apprehended through utilitarian modes, while cultural icons are sacralised.	Adorno and Bernstein, 2005; Baudrillard, 1970; Bauman, 2011; Benjamin and Jennings, 2010; Bourgeon-Renault, 2000; Cova et al., 2011; Driessens, 2013; Haddad-Bacry, 2022; Haddad-Bacry and Michel, 2023; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Moore, 2012	- How do consumers perceive the status of cultural goods? What factors determine such perception? - Are cultural icons or their cultural productions the main point of focus?

Appendix

Here are a few questions to consider:

1. Are there other tensions framing liquid cultural consumption?

2. What are the underlying questions regarding each tension (e.g., Ethics for [Auto|Hetero]nomy)?

3. Do these apply to all consumers? Are some consumers more or less sensitive to them?

4. What pushes towards one or the other end of the tensions? When do we value abundance/feel overwhelmed by it? When do we sacralise or commodify cultural goods and why?

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