Tastes and Complex Tastes

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Introduction

What is taste? For some, the answer is simple. Taste is about our desires, preferences and feelings. They are "the sentiment of men […] with regard to beauty and deformity of all kinds" (Hume, 1757: 2), embodied in the sensations we feel in the "*prend aux tripes*" (Lévi-Strauss, 1969: 28). But others like Immanuel Kant aver that there is more to taste. Taste isn't merely agreeability, but rather a capacity for judgement. Accordingly, tastes can be better or worse; pure or profane; praiseworthy or objectionable. Some others still like Paul Samuelson argue that taste can be modeled as nothing more than the choices we make — our revealed preferences, so to speak. There's surprisingly little consensus on the matter.

Taste is the same semantically ambiguous polyseme in sociology. Despite being central to the sociology of culture and a frequently-invoked explanans in the discipline at large, taste is taken-for-granted and rarely defined. We begin the essay by trying to clarify current understandings of taste through retroductive conceptual construction. Working from the intuition that synthetic reflection about our collective approaches to the measurement of taste that can help clarify the nature of the concept itself, we survey recent empirical research on cultural tastes and use retroductive reasoning from the measurements of taste to educe their implicit understandings of taste. We find that there are three paradigmatic approaches among sociological measures of taste, each of which associates taste with a distinct modality of action. One measurement paradigm takes taste to be a kind of *preference*, that is a person's affective response towards a cultural object or activity. Another takes taste to be an orientation towards *consumption*, that is a person's realized participation, engagement, or consumption within cultural fields. The third takes taste to be a faculty that produces a person's *social valuations* of culture. Such semantic ambiguity, if left unaddressed, can threaten the validity and coherence of our collective understanding of taste. After considering multiple approaches to disambiguation, we settle on a pluralist conception of taste as a person's *thick subjectivity in a cultural field*. That is to say, taste should be thought of as a kind of orientation ("subjectivity"), expressed through multiple modalities of action ("thick"), that describes how we feel, consume, and praise in cultural fields.

We close with a demonstration of how it can be useful to think of taste in such terms. Recognizing the inherent multidimensionality to taste lets us refine our understanding of complex taste phenomena. By acknowledging the inherent multimodality to taste, we are able to identify and articulate the analytical form of complex tastes through the characteristic antinomies among their constituent taste modalities. We provide an adumbration of the family of complex tastes, using a combinatorial "truth table" to show how each antinomy corresponds to an extant folk concept about taste.

Current understandings of taste

Taste holds an obvious *prima facie* importance in the sociology of culture, but it is also crucial to the rest of the discipline as an explanans of social phenomenon. On the social psychological level, taste has consequences for our social identities (DiMaggio, 1987). Tastes facilitate group identification, and have a functional role in confirming and denying group belonging (Wohl, 2015). Tastes lubricate sociability (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979), and ease the creation of social ties, weak and strong (Lewis & Kaufman, 2018). But perhaps more importantly, tastes have implications for social stratification. Our tastes affect the employment opportunities available to us (Rivera, 2012). Taste in its most literal form refers to gustatory taste, our perception of sweet, salty, bitter, sour, and savory sensations as mediated by a physiologically-defined chemosensory system. From the 16th century and on, taste acquired a separate metaphorical meaning as an expression of a person's aesthetic orientation towards culture (Vercelloni, 2016). It is this guise of taste as *cultural taste,* or taste within cultural fields, that we are concerned with in this essay. We take the cultural fields not just to the cultural industries around music, the televisual arts and literary arts, but also to adjacent creative fields such as the culinary arts and organized play.

What do sociologists mean when they use the word taste? The answer can be elusive. As we do for kindred concepts, sociologists take it for granted that taste has a common-sensical, coherent definition that is shared by others in our epistemic communities. As a result, explicit definitions are seldom offered; and where they are, rarely agreed upon (more on this later). Take the position that taste should be understood as an individual's likes and dislikes when it comes to culture (e.g. Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007; van de Haak, 2020). While this seems like an eminently reasonable definition, it is also contested by seminal studies within the field. Herbert Gans' (1975) celebrated study of taste cultures in mid-century America understands taste not as preference but rather as an "aesthetic urge" that describes an individual's responses to beauty. Pierre Bourdieu, the doyen of sociological studies of taste, likewise equivocates. There are times where he sides with the Kantian conceptions of taste, referring to taste as the "supreme manifestation of discernment" (Bourdieu, 1984: 3). At others, he

shares the economist's conception of taste as "manifested preferences" (Bourdieu, 1984: 49). This may not come as a surprise. In a loosely integrated discipline like sociology, words that are central to the field tend to undergo terminological overloading (Levine, 1985). In this respect, taste finds itself in good company. We imagine readers may be familiar with the continual (and on-going) contestations over the rightful referents of culture (Kuper, 1999), structure (Sewell, 1992), identity (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000), and theory (Abend, 2008), among others. To our knowledge, there has not been a sustained attempt at clarifying and synthesizing the multiform understandings of taste that have been used explicitly or assumed implicitly by sociologists.

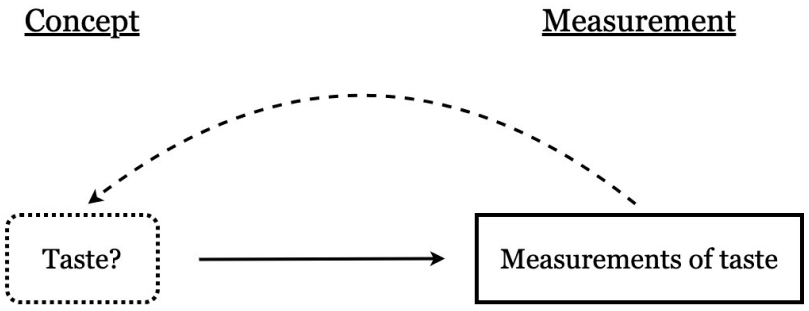
While explicit definitions of taste are rarely offered, measurements of taste are prolific. The measurement of culture has become a hugely influential program within sociology, and the measurement of taste features prominently within it (Mohr et al., 2020). Measures are formal relations that map qualities to numbers. In normal positivist science, concepts precede measures. As Kuhn writes, "to discover quantitative regularity, one must know what regularity one is seeking, and one's instruments must be designed accordingly" (Kuhn, 1961: 190). This is particularly so in the social sciences, where we have to come up with "visible indicators to measure invisible concepts" (Abbott, 1997: 357). It's generally thought that the clearer our concepts are, the better our measures will be. But what happens in cases where we have an ambiguous concept and a surfeit of measures? We propose that in such instances we can use retroductive reasoning from our measures of taste to clarify the semantic ambiguity surrounding the concept of cultural taste (Figure 1).

[Figure 1 about here.]

Retroductive reasoning, or retroduction, is best understood as an auxiliary form of abductive reasoning. First introduced by Charles S. Peirce alongside abduction as a form of reasoning that proceeds from consequents to antecedents (Peirce, 1932: 2.755), retroduction refers to an inferential process that produces novel hypotheses about the metatheoretical elements underpinning social theories through the synthetic reflection

of surprising research findings. Like abduction, it is an ampliative mode of inference. Retroduction involves "reasoning back from observations to formulae from which the observation statements and their explanations follow" (Hanson, 1958: 109) and in-so-doing arrives at "what is basically characteristic and constitutive of these structures [behind social theories]" (Danermark et al., 2019: 117). We adapt this intuition to perform retroductive conceptual construction of taste, that there are surprising findings from our collective approaches to the measurement of taste that can help to clarify the nature of taste itself. Following this, we surveyed recent empirical work in sociology that examines cultural tastes in its different guises. We classified them according to the indicators of taste that they used. We looked at published work from select generalist and specialist journals in sociology that sought to operationalize or measure cultural taste. We also included a selection of prominent work in cultural sociology that engage substantively from cultural taste. These include books published in the same period, as well influential pieces from previous periods. Details on the literature we surveyed can be found in Appendix I.

Figure 1: Retroductive Conceptual Construction From Measurements of Taste



We use measurements of taste to clarify what we mean when we say taste.

We find that there are three paradigmatic approaches to the measurement of taste. Each measurement paradigm takes taste to be a distinct modality of action. One measurement paradigm takes taste to be a kind of *preference*, that is a person's affective response towards a cultural object or activity. Another takes taste to be an orientation

towards *consumption*, that is measured through a person's realized participation, engagement, or consumption of culture. The third takes taste to be to be revealed through *social valuations* of culture, in particular the different ways mass audiences, expert critics and award-winning entities rate and review cultural products. We refer to these as the preference paradigm, the consumption paradigm, and the valuation paradigm respectively. Consider a situation where we are interested in a person's taste in music. To get at their tastes, a researcher using the preference approach might ask, "What music artist do you enjoy the most?" A researcher using the consumption approach we might ask, "What music artist do you listen to the most?" A researcher using the valuations approach we might ask, "What music artist makes the best music?"

The preference paradigm

First, taste is commonly measured as a person's like, preference, enjoyment, or desire for a cultural object. We refer to research that measures taste in such a way as belonging to the *preference paradigm*. The preference paradigm takes taste to mean a person's first-order preferences, feelings, or desires towards an object in a cultural field. Such a conceptualization of taste has a long history dating back to, among others, David Hume and Jeremy Bentham (Hume, 1757; Ferguson, 2019). In classical game theory, taste in such a guise is treated as the terminus of all explanations, one of the "unchallengeable axioms of a man's behaviors" (Stigler & Becker, 1977: 76); a person who acts on the basis of taste rather than the pursuit of material interests is said to be acting irrationally (Smelser, 1992). Many scholars in the sociology of culture understand taste in similar terms. To taste, as Antione Hennion puts it, is "to make feel, and to make oneself feel, and also, by the sensations of the body, exactly like the climber, to feel oneself doing" (Hennion, 2007: 101). It is to consider the self-regarding sensory, fantasy, and emotive responses we derive from our engagement with a cultural object (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982).

Research under the preference paradigm often operationalize taste as a kind of "like." Many nationally-representative surveys continuing to measure taste in such a way: the *General Social Survey*, the *Pew American Trends* Panel, the *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* (SPPA) in the United States and the *Understanding Society* survey

in the United Kingdom, to name a few notable examples from Anglo-American sociology. Consequently, many seminal studies of cultural taste been based on such a conceptualization of taste. Peterson et al.'s pioneering work on cultural omnivorousness (e.g. Peterson & Kern, 1996) was based on survey data from the *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*, the United States' largest recurring cross-sectional survey of adult participation in arts and cultural activity. In the survey, respondents are asked to provide binary yes/no response to the question, "'Do you like to listen to [music genre, e.g. classical music]?" Peterson and his colleagues measured a person's omnivorousness by the total number of "likes" they express when asked about these music genre preferences.

The consumption paradigm

Second, tastes are also measured through the consumption practices individuals engage in. Empirical studies that operationalize taste in this way make up the *consumption paradigm*. Under this paradigm, an individual's taste is understood to be a latent orientation motivating consumption in a cultural field. This way of measuring taste is most strongly associated with revealed preference theory in microeconomics and consumer theory, but is also implicitly adopted by many in sociology. This perspective asserts that revealed preferences, our behavioral choices, are the tastes themselves. Revealed preference theory began as a part of Paul Samuelson's attempts at building a general theory of the economy. Samuelson had been dissatisfied with standard utility theory and its reliance on non-observable postulates, and so set about developing "a theory of consumer's behavior freed from any vestigial traces of the utility concept" (Samuelson, 1938: 61). It argues that the best way to measure consumer preferences is to observe their purchasing behavior. Under certain mathematical conditions, economists are able to construct a stylized model of a person's taste through their market behavior (e.g. Varian, 1982).

Sociologists also commonly take practices to be expressions of taste. In sections of *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu refers to tastes as "manifested preferences ... the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference" (Bourdieu, 1984: 49). Many of Bourdieu's

celebrated multiple correspondence analyses therein are based on indicators comprising people's participation in cultural activities and actual consumption practices. When comparing the tastes of teachers against those from the professions, Bourdieu points to their differences in revealed preferences:

> The ascetic aristocratism of the teachers, who are systematically oriented towards the least expensive and most austere leisure activities and towards serious and even somewhat severe cultural practices ... is opposed to the luxury tastes of the members of the professions, who amass the (culturally or economically) most expensive and most prestigious activities, visiting antique dealers, galleries and concert-halls, holidaying in spa towns. (Bourdieu, 1984: 283-284)

Many of the American sociologists who worked with or along Bourdieu operationalize taste in similar ways (e.g. Lizardo, 2006). Such a conceptualization of taste is not limited to those who affiliated with the Bourdieusian program of culture. Stanley Lieberson and Matt Salganik's seminal work on tastes are another two examples of sociological studies that treat taste as a revealed preference. Much of Lieberson's work on the endogenous dynamics of taste is based around a case study of parents' revealed preferences in naming. He takes the case of children's first names to be "a rare opportunity to study tastes in an exceptionally rigorous and systematic way that is relatively free of organized efforts to determine the outcome" (Lieberson & Bell, 1992: 513-514). Salganik et al.'s study of an artificial music market (2006) is one of the most influential studies of cultural taste in recent years. Salganik's team measures the tastes of listeners through their consumption behavior, by considering what they choose to download upon the conclusion of the experiment.

The valuations paradigm

Finally, tastes are often measured through an individual's social valuations of cultural objects or activities. The quality of cultural articles is often, if not always, ambiguous. Much of the scholarship on taste considers how mass audiences, expert critics and award-winning entities rate and review cultural products, in-so-doing producing judgements of taste (Sharkey et al., 2023). Scholars have studied such judgements of

taste in multiform ways. They may take the form of simple numerical ratings (e.g. Kovács & Sharkey, 2014) or long-form criticism (e.g. Johnston & Baumann, 2007). They can also come from different places, from personal judgements of mass audiences (e.g. Smits, 2016) to expert opinion from professional critics (e.g. Chong, 2020). We classify all such studies as falling under the *valuations* paradigm. When studies measure taste through such social valuations, they implicitly take taste to be an evaluative faculty that helps us produce an assessment of the quality of such cultural articles. This approach is most often associated with aesthetics, where scholars commonly define taste as a capacity for responding to beauty (Kant, 2008[1790]), a person's "ability to notice or discern things" (Sibley, 2001: 423), or "the compass that directs our perceptive apparatus on the high seas of sensation" (Vercelloni, 2016: 16). While aestheticians study the normative aspects of such social valuations, sociologists study descriptively the mechanisms individuals may use to produce valuations, from pure reliance on personal preferences, to intersubjective standards of quality/beauty, to deference to broader status hierarchies.

The difference between taste as a measurement of *preference* and as a general *valuation* warrants particular attention. Certainly the two are closely related. "Beauty is pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing," as George Santayana (Santayana, 1896: 31) writes, and a person's social valuations of culture is often deeply rooted in their ability to interpret and translate their feelings about said culture to others. In a *60 Minutes* interview, Rick Rubin, a multiple Grammy-Award winning producer, attributed his success to an evaluative faculty rooted in feeling:

> I have no technical ability. And I know nothing about music. [But] I know what I like and what I don't like. And I'm decisive about what I like and what I don't like. (Rubin, 2023)

However, valuations and preferences can also diverge. Measuring tastes as preferences means restricting tastes to valuations of one particular kind. However, social valuations of culture are routinely influenced by factors outside of first-order preferences, whether it be concerns of status hierarchies, moral goodness, personal interest, or the social context of an evaluation (Zuckerman, 2012; van de Haak, 2020; Jaeger et al., 2023). In

Kantian terms, judgements of taste can involve more than judgements of agreeability. Judgements of taste often also involve judgements of goodness and beauty. When a person is asked about their liking of culture *X*, we are registering exclusively their agreeability to *X*. This is not the case when a person is asked simply to rate the quality of *X*. While their valuation of *X* may be more-or-less influenced by a person's affective preferences, the latter are rarely sole determinants of the former. Affective preferences involves automatic, non-declarative modes of cognition while social valuations involves deliberative, declarative modes of cognition (Lizardo, 2017). Preference and agreeability involve sensibility; social valuations involve deliberative modes of cognition that draw partially on sensibility, but also on our capacity to reason.

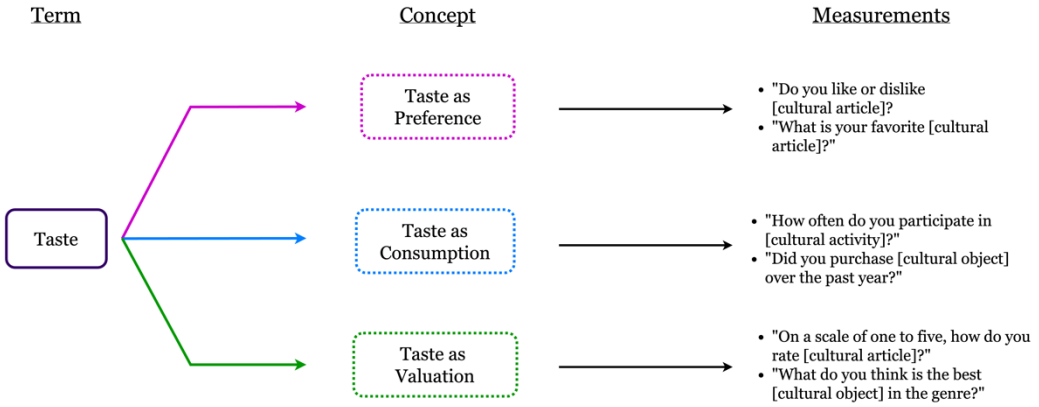
Many sociologists take valuations – whether these be ratings, reviews or criticisms – to be expressions of a person's cultural taste. Pierre Bourdieu was attentive to taste as a capacity of discernment. Following Kant, he believed that taste held an evaluative component. In his elaborations on the pure and vulgar gaze, Bourdieu states that one of the key distinctions between the pure and the vulgar gaze is that the former involves considerations of form and the "noble senses" while the latter involves "a surrender to immediate sensation" (Bourdieu, 1984: 488). In his own surveys, Bourdieu specifically sought to craft questions that tap on respondents' evaluative capacity. One of the ways he did this was by asking survey respondents "if a beautiful photo could be made of these objects, such as Old Master, Landscapes, Sunsets, Famous Monuments" (Bourdieu, 1984: 536). Researchers in consumer research similarly construe taste "as a set of skills that emerge from the relationship between people and things […] these skills are learned, rehearsed, and continually reproduced through everyday action" (Arsel & Bean, 2013: 900). When researchers operationalize taste as a rating (such as a product, album, or movie rating), they are implicitly treating taste as an evaluative capacity. Such studies are common across sociology. Examples of such work include Kovács and Sharkey's (2014) work on the effects of prize-winning on tastes, and Johnston and Baumann's (2007) study of food criticism in major food magazines, to name a few.

Taste as thick subjectivity

Thus far, we have identified three measurement paradigms across empirical research of cultural taste, each of which conceives taste as a distinct modality of action (Figure 2). All of this leaves taste a polyseme, a semantically ambiguous lexeme with multiple distinctive senses (Levine, 1989; Abbott, 1997). While such semantic ambiguity can be a source of productive strain for both empirical and theoretical work, it can be just as vitiating when left unchecked (Levine, 1989). We make our case that a *pluralist* re-conceptualization of taste is the best way of ameliorating such ambiguity.

[Figure 2 about here.]

Figure 2: How Taste is Measured and Conceived



To be sure, the polysemy around taste has not escaped the notice of practicing sociologists entirely. Although often couched in different terms and only accorded peripheral attention, the multiform ways sociologists theorize and operationalize taste been identified as a threat to the external validity of scholarship (e.g. Peterson, 2005, 2007; Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007; Wuggening, 2007). Inconsistency over what we mean when we say taste has led to a proliferation of incommensurate studies that share intended and unintended differences with each other, hindering comparative work across time and space. Take the case of cultural omnivorousness. The knowledge project on omnivorousness of taste has been stymied by confusion over what a particular study *means* when they claim to measure omnivorous taste. As Peterson

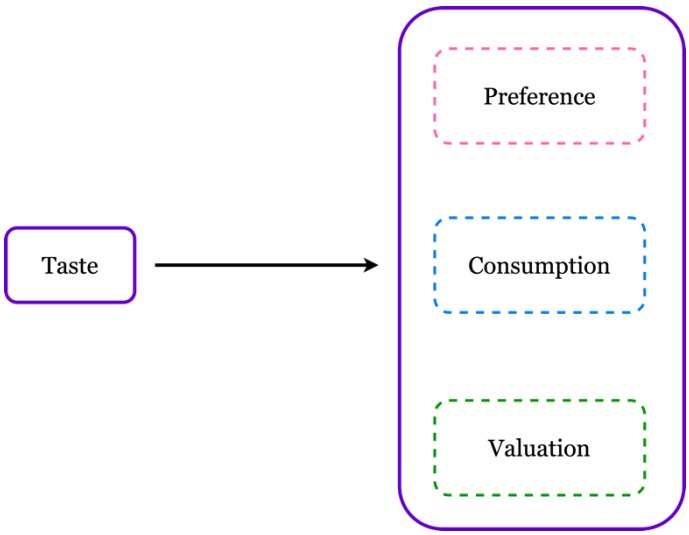
writes, "The first studies [of omnivorousness] measured highbrow snobbery and omnivorousness by looking at the stated preferences … [while other groups of scholars] have strongly advocated the measurement of what people (report) doing rather than relying on their self-reported tastes for cultural activity" (Peterson, 2005: 265). Peterson's observations from 2005 continue to hold true. Because contemporary research on omnivorousness continues to be split between scholars take taste to be best as instantiated by stated preferences (e.g. Goldberg, 2011), and others who instantiate it using behaviors and practices (e.g. Chan & Turner, 2017), it can become easy to erroneously conflate research and draw misleading inferences. It would be a mistake to think that a finding that demonstrating a rise in omnivorous cultural consumption in a population repudiates another demonstrating a decline in omnivorous affective preferences among the same group (Peterson, 2007). However, because the resolution of the semantic ambiguity around taste is peripheral to the main theses of such debates, there is yet to be a synthetic treatment proposing a satisfying disambiguation of taste. This paper intends to be a prolegomenon to one.

The pluralist approach to disambiguating taste

There are a number of reasonable approaches we could take to resolve the semantic ambiguity, some of which you may already be pre-disposed to favor. For instance, we could take the semanticist approach to disambiguation (Levine, 1989; Abend, 2008). This means treating taste as three separate homographs, words that are spelled in the same way but share different meanings: *taste*$_1$ whose lexical sense connotes preference, *taste*$_2$ whose lexical sense connotes consumption, and *taste*$_3$ whose lexical sense connotes valuation. We could take the monist approach and assert one of the three senses of taste – say, preference – to be cultural taste *tout court*, and the others wrong, unimportant, or misleading (e.g. Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007). Or, we might even surrender to the pathos of ambiguity, accept that the term taste may be irredeemably multivocal, and abandon its use as a social scientific concept altogether (Levine, 1989). Each of these approaches makes a different set of trade-offs in the name of conceptual clarity.

But we advocate for a different approach. We argue that taste should instead of conceptualized along pluralist lines as a person's thick subjectivity in a cultural field, a unity of distinct yet complementary referents (Fig. 3). By this, we mean taste should be thought of as a kind of orientation ("subjectivity"), expressed through multiple modalities of action ("thick"), that guides how we feel, consume, and praise in cultural fields. Each of the disparate overlapping senses of taste contribute to our collective notion of what taste is. A pluralist approach to disambiguation suits taste because its different senses are related in a complementary way, and unite different parts of a singular concept (Levine, 1985). We are not the first to make these observations. Bourdieu held a deep belief in the "unity of tastes" (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984: 506), and across *Distinction* uses more than 40 measures to produce a cartography of tastes in mid 20th-century France. Many empirical researchers share similar assumptions, even if they are implicit to their work rather than explicitly stated. For instance, Wilensky (1964) uses affective preferences ("favorites") alongside measures of consumption and participation patterns ("periodicals and newspapers read regularly") in his classic comparison of mass culture and high culture. Antoine Hennion asserts that taste is fundamentally affective (2007), but also sees it as practice, "a ceremony of pleasure, a series of little habits and ways of doing things" (Hennion, 2001: 17). Many of the methods sociologists of culture favor impose a formal multidimensionality onto taste, treating it as a higher-order latent concept spread across multiple dimensions of action. Multivariate statistical tools such as principal components analysis, correspondence analysis, factor analysis, latent class analysis, canonical correlational analysis, and multidimensional scaling are commonly used to reduce a collection of taste measures into a lower dimensional sub-space (Mohr et al., 2020).

Figure 3: The Pluralist Approach to Disambiguation



The pluralist approach disambiguates by arguing that the disparate, overlapping senses of taste each contribute to our sense of what taste is.

[Figure 3 about here.]

The unity of taste under a pluralist disambiguation is further borne out by the difficulty in disentangling its preference, consumption and valuations from one another. Ashley Mears (2014) makes one such argument in a recent theoretical discussion about the nature of taste. Across her work, she has found the evaluative dimensions of taste to be inseparable from its affective dimensions. Although her studies of tastemakers in fashion were centered on evaluations of quality, she found that much of the evaluations emerged from an affective, embodied plane (Mears, 2014). Mears' observations are generalizable to other instances of social valuations. When a consumer rates a book, movie, or music on an online review aggregator, they are often doing so in an informal and unstructured manner, with significant heterogeneity in their criteria of valuation (Sharkey et al., 2023). It is rarely certain if a consumer rating is made on the basis of personal agreeability, some intersubjective notion of quality, deference to a status hierarchy, or an admixture of the three (Jaeger et al., 2023).

It is also consonant with how taste is understood in other domains. Consider how taste is conceptualized within gustatory studies (the root sense of taste). Here, taste refers to the conscious perception of food compounds that bind to specific receptors in the tongue and the palate (Lindemann, 1996). Contemporary scholarship on gustatory taste assumes a set of basic taste sensations. While there is broad agreement on a set of five basic tastes, gustatory taste is also commonly conceptualized as a multidimensional phenomenon (the "taste tetrahedron") where each basic taste component can be thought of as a taste dimension (Henning, 1916).

Complex tastes

But perhaps the true test of clarity is in its usefulness (Peirce, 1935: 5.402). In a justly famous essay, Gilbert Ryle (1968) uses the case of four winking boys to demonstrate the necessity of thick description in distinguishing social actions. The involuntary twitch, wink, parodic wink and rehearsal of a parodic wink may be reducible to the same physically identical movements, but they are clearly distinct social actions. Recognizing them as such requires a multimodal consideration of their being. An analogous logic applies to taste. Treating taste as a thick subjectivity in a cultural field allows us to refine our understanding of complex taste phenomena – configurations of cultural taste that cannot be reduced to a person's preference, consumer behavior, or valuation.

In the section to come, we show how we can think of complex tastes as tastes that containing antinomies among its constituent modalities. We provide an adumbration of the family of complex tastes, constructing a combinatorial "truth table" to show how each type of complex taste corresponds to extant folk concepts about cultural taste (Becker, 1998). We use the following set of hypothetical tastes to illustrate complex taste phenomena (Table 1). Johnny and company are a group of teenagers in high school. We're interested in understanding their tastes for Dr. Disrespect ("the Doc"), a popular video-game live-streamer known for his elaborate, bombastic self-presentation. At the thinnest level of description, Johnny and company may each be described as having a "taste" for Dr. Disrespect. Yet we intuit monolithic characterizations like this to be inadequate. We argue that this is because they are complex taste phenomena, each of which can be analytically described by a unique antinomy in the modalities of taste.

[Table 1 about here.]

Table 1: A Septet of Tastes for Dr. Disrespect

Person	Description	Pref.	Cons.	Val.	Type
Johnny	Johnny enjoys and admires Dr. Disrespect. He watches the Doc's *Call of Duty* streams everyday after school.	+	+	+	Simple taste
Jesse	Jesse is Johnny's best friend. He watches Dr. Disrespect as much as Johnny does. He describes the Doc as "cringe" but enjoys it anyway.	+	+	−	Guilty pleasure
Haruka	Haruka is Johnny's younger cousin. Coming from Yokohama, he speaks limited English. Haruka watches Dr. Disrespect with Johnny, and sincerely admires the Doc. But because of the language barrier, Haruka admits that he doesn't enjoy the Doc as much as he'd like to.	−	+	+	Pre-acquired taste
Nico	Nico is Johnny's younger brother. Like Johnny, Nico enjoys and admires Dr. Disrespect. Lately, he has been preoccupied by other diversions. He follows the Doc's stream when it's live, but often hides it in a separate tab on mute.	+	−	+	Taste pose
Mo	Mo considers himself Johnny's rival. He doesn't like the Doc and considers his content awful. But he hate-watches the Doc to make fun of Johnny for it.	−	+	−	Distanced consumption
Kaci	Kaci is Johnny's younger sister. She grew up watching the Doc with Johnny, and used to enjoyed him greatly. But she's stopped. She considers him a bad influence, and tries to persuade Johnny to stop too.	+	−	−	Justified abstention
Kylie	Kylie is Johnny's girlfriend. She is an aspiring social media influencer. While Kylie does not enjoy or watch the Doc's content, she respects the Doc as an iconoclastic entertainer who performs in front of tens of thousands daily with aplomb.	−	−	+	Distant praise

What are complex tastes?

To begin, let's take a look at Johnny's taste for Dr. Disrespect. Johnny enjoys, consumes and admires the Doc. Suppose someone were to ask us about Johnny's taste, and we responded with either of three responses:

> *Oh, Johnny loves Dr. Disrespect!*
> *Oh, Johnny watches Dr. Disrespect all the time!*
> *Oh, Johnny thinks Dr. Disrespect's just the best!*

Each seems to suffice. A taste like Johnny's can be described as simple. *Simple tastes* are tastes where the multiple modalities of taste are harmonized and matched to one another. When we speak loosely of a person's taste, we tend to make the implicit assumption that they are simple tastes. One characteristic of simple tastes is that they are easily reducible to singular modes of action; they lend themselves to thin conceptualizations of taste. However, not all tastes are simple, and we would be remiss to treat them as such.

This brings us to their complement, complex tastes. The presence of multiple dimensions to taste raises a natural question about unusual taste configurations: what happens when the different modalities of taste disagree with one another? Our preference, consumption habits, and standards of evaluation are not always aligned. If we were to think of taste as existing in stylized positive-negative binaries, then an expected alignment of positive preferences, positive consumption, and positive evaluations is only one of seven possible combinations involving positive taste orientations ($2^3 - 1$) (Becker, 1998). We understand complex taste phenomena in terms of such taste disagreements. *Complex tastes* are tastes that contain characteristic antinomies among its constituent taste modalities. Unlike simple tastes, complex tastes cannot be described by recourse to a single mode of action. Indeed, an omission of the antinomy between its taste modalities denies a complex taste the nature of its being. Our conceptualization of complex cultural tastes follows kindred lines of thinking from studies of gustatory taste. As mentioned earlier, gustatory taste is often represented as a multidimensional phenomenological space. Within such frameworks, complex

gustatory tastes are understood as tastes that cannot be described by singular basic taste components. Gustatory tastes can be complex for different reasons. Some are complex because they involve mixtures of different basic taste components or because of their multimodality (McBurney & Gent, 1979). Complex tastes can simulate several sensory systems simultaneously, such that it's hard to decide if they are a taste, a smell, a tactile sensation, or a conjunction of them all. The taste of peppermint, for example, involves the joint stimulation of three sensations: the tactile (cold), the olfactory (minty) and the gustatory (sweet and bitter) (Nagata et al., 2005).

Six varieties of complex tastes

The tastes of Johnny's kin and kith are instances of complex tastes. Complex tastes are heterogeneous phenomena: going by our earlier statement, there are six unique combinations of taste antinomies.

Guilty pleasures

We turn first to Jesse's taste. We had labeled Johnny's taste for Dr. Disrespect as an instance of a simple taste. While we could adequately summarize Johnny's taste in flat one-dimensional descriptions, it is hard to do the same to Jesse's. To describe Jesse's taste accurately, we must take joint note of all three modalities of taste. For example, we may describe him as someone who holds a critical view of the Doc despite enjoying and watching his content all the time. This is the antinomy that is fundamental to Jessie's taste towards Dr. Disrespect.

Jesse's taste belongs to a particular family of complex tastes. The most common referent for this is the *guilty pleasure*. The guilty pleasure is a folk concept that refers to the pleasurable consumption of cultural content a person considers to be bad for one reason or another. All of us have guilty pleasures we relax around. We may acknowledge the "aesthetic uncoolnesses" around the "sprightly but inane movies" and "half-baked television programs no sophisticated person would admit to watching," but this self-awareness does not deter us from sincerely enjoying and consuming them (Moore, 2018: 282). Some guilty pleasures are perceived as such because they defy hegemonic aesthetic standards. Tastes towards romance fiction provide one case-in-

point. Although romance fiction plays an important compensatory role in the life of readers, "fulfilling basic psychological needs for women that are induced by culture but are unmet in day to day existence," many readers treat it as a guilty pleasure (Radway, 1984: 113). Because romance fiction was perceived by hegemonic standards to be frivolous, low-brow and even pornographic, readers felt guilt for spending time and money on it. Even readers who did not personally share negative views of romance fiction acknowledged such a gaze from the media, their spouses, and children. Many consumers of "bad" television likewise describe their predilection as such. Similarly, McCoy and Scarborough (2014) find that many watchers of reality television self-described their television habits as "guilty pleasures." Despite feeling "ashamed of their television habits" and being "conscious of the fact that they are watching something that they have a negative opinion about," they continued to watch and privately enjoy programs such as *America's Next Top Model* or *Judge Judy* (McCoy & Scarborough, 2014: 52).

Other guilty pleasures are held as such because they are associated with the transgression of moral commitments. Consider the following account from Ram in *Beer in the Snooker Club*, a self-professed socialist who spends his life dancing between the twilight of privilege and socialist political agitation.

> There is something about that club. Just walking along the drive from the gate to the club-house, seeing the perfectly-kept lawns on either side, the specially-designed street lamps hovering above you, the white stones lining the road, the car-park, and then the croquet law — *croquet*! a place where middle-aged people placed croquet … The trouble with me is that I like that. I like to put my hand in my pocket with a bit of cuff showing; a suspicion of waistcoats under my coat, and a strip of handkerchief in my breast pocket. I like it. I am *aware* that I like it. (Ghali, 2014[1964]: 126-127)

Ram can't help his "champagne-socialist" tendencies, but neither can he escape reflexive condemnations of them. Otherwise-beloved cultural products may also be evaluated as bad because of their undesirable associations to status groups. Some Star Trek fans label their Star Trek engagement as a guilty pleasure because they resent the stigmatized associations with other fans. Such fans often make self-deprecating

references to their Star Trek predilection ("I must admit to being addicted to Star Trek") and feel ashamed of their tastes ("The [perception of Trekkies] as 'compulsively attached' to a television show, or as 'near-addicts' has affected my involvement in Star Trek, from a general embarrassment of my Star Trek toys to a reluctance to be pegged as a Trekkie") (Kozinets, 2001: 73-74).

Pre-acquired tastes

Haruka shares Jesse's admiration and consumption habits when it comes to Dr. Disrespect. But Haruka differs in a crucial aspect – he derives limited pleasure from his consumption of the Doc. Such a taste configuration is mostly associated with the acculturation of acquired tastes. The acquired taste is a folk concept that is used to describe tastes where pleasure did not come "naturally" for a person (i.e. one must spend time or resources "acquiring" said taste). The term acquired taste refers to the end-point of a process of acculturation. While the finally-acquired taste may resemble that of the simple taste, the taste configuration it takes up for the most of its processual unfurling – the pre-acquired taste – does not. Instead, the pre-acquired taste is often marked with the antinomy we spot in Haruka's: a mismatch between positive orientations in consumption and valuation, and a negative orientation in preferences. We run into pre-acquired tastes in both gustatory and cultural fields, from foods and drinks (Sifton, 2019), to eclectic hobbies (Henriquez & Maynes-Aminzade, 2019), outré art, music and literature (Baldin & Bille, 2023). We note that the pre-acquired taste is *one* realization of such a taste configurations, and that other valid interpretations are possible. A person who praises and consumes culture -- that they dislike -- solely for the status associations they gain would also fit this taste configuration. Such a person may not necessarily be indifferent to acquisition of the taste, and leave the antinomy unresolved.

One variety of pre-acquired tastes that is particularly well-documented in the sociology of culture is that of the fashion producer in-training. Fashion producers use their personal preferences to make selection decisions when assessing models. Fashion producers make such calls based on their subjective evaluations of a model's "look."

In interview studies, they speak often of their ability to size-up models with a single glance: "An instant! You know, you know, *you know*," was how a major stylist described his decision-making process (Godart & Mears, 2009: 677). This look is a mercurial and elusive quality that producers are unable to articulate in clear terms. Godart and Mears report that "when pressed to explain their selection decisions, producers could not say what makes one model a better pick than another" (Godart & Mears, 2009: 678). Instead, they cite their personal feelings and embodied to seeing model with distinguished looks. "It's very exciting when somebody walks in the door and you–and this is because I love my job – you get, you know, your tummy goes," explains a casting director (Godart & Mears, 2009: 678). But such embodied reactions are intentionally acquired. In another study of bookers in fashion, Entwistle (2002) describes how her preferences as an outsider were antipodal to those who were initiated to the field. Models described as "stunningly beautiful" appeared to her instead as "odd looking" and "fragile" (Entwistle, 2002: 318). To the extent that preferences among taste-makers in fashion are similar, they are the product of effortful and strategic coordination.

Taste pose

Nico enjoys and thinks highly of the Doc. However, he pays little attention to the Doc's stream even as he nominally claims to be watching it. This is an example of a *taste pose*. The taste pose is a variety of complex taste where a person likes and admires particular cultural article. At the same time, there is at least one meaningful sense in which they did not participate in the full consumption of the cultural article despite a lack of resource constraints. The mismatch we find here is between a positive orientation in preference and judgements of taste, and the negative orientation in consumption.

Consecrated works of culture are often find themselves the subjects of taste pose – hence Mark Twain's characterization of the canonical classics as "something that everybody wants to have read and nobody wants to read" (Twain, 1900). Taste poses are also exemplified by the phenomenon of the "unread bestseller." A book can sell well, and still go unread. As a *Guardian* columnist puts it, "One of the drawbacks of being a bestselling author is that no one reads you properly. Sure they read you, but

do they really read you?" (Rebellato, 2010). Many best-selling books, such as Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* and Thomas Piketty's *Capital* have been known to sell well yet go unfinished (Dearden 2014). In the case of *Capital*, many readers gave up particularly quickly, often stopping not more than 30 pages into the book (Ellenberg, 2014). Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose* is another work that gained a repute as an unread bestseller:

> Says Howard Kaminsky, president of Warner Books, which bought the [*Name of the Rose*]'s paperback rights for $550,000: "Every year there is one great unread best seller. A lot of people who will buy the book will never read it." It serves, he has said, as a "passport" to intellectual respectability. "It doesn't hurt to be seen carrying a copy at the Museum of Modern Art. It hints you've got something more in your mind than getting picked up." (Still, 1983).

To be clear, a taste pose does not make a claim about the sincerity of avowed pleasures and participation. Someone who holds a taste pose towards *Name of the Rose* may sincerely praise and claim to enjoy the work. It is the sense that there is a meaningful way in which the consumption is unrealized that distinguishes taste poses from simple tastes.

Distanced consumption

Mo consumes a particular article of culture even as he simultaneously dislikes and disapproves of it. We refer to complex tastes with such antinomies in taste modalities as *distanced consumption*. Distanced consumption refers to the volitional consumption of culture a person considers neither good nor pleasurable. The eponymous distance refers to the normative distance between a person's consumption of an article of culture, and their emotive and valuational responses to the same (McCoy & Scarborough, 2014; Peters et al., 2017). Acts of ironic consumption are a notable example of such distanced consumption that has received both scholarly and popular attention. Consumers engaging in ironic consumption "plays with the normative contradiction of both watching and condemning," often reveling in the putative badness of the culture they consume (McCoy & Scarborough, 2014: 49). In a study of television viewers engaging in ironic consumption of *The O'Reilly Factor*, Gray notes

that many of their respondents "kept going back for more," despite vociferous disparagement:

> [For] all these posters' criticisms, many keep going back for more … Viewers, however, appear to engage actively in their antifandom, watching O'Reilly precisely to raise their blood pressure or, as the predominantly intellectual-rational tone of their posts suggests, as somewhat of an intellectual-rational challenge. (Gray, 2005: 854)

Peters et al.'s study of Dutch patrons of karaoke bars (2017) find that the maintenance of such ironic distance between a person's "real tastes" and their ironic consumption allows them to engage in a simultaneous display of both their cultural openness and cultural superiority.

Another variety of distanced consumption that has entered the zeitgeist over the past decade has been acts of "hate-watching." Hate-watching is a folk concept that refers to the practice of "watching a show or movie you suspect you will emphatically dislike, for the purpose of being able to talk about how much you disliked it" (Ambrosino, 2014). As a leading Urban Dictionary entry puts it,

> Hatewatching is distinct from enjoying a guilty pleasure, wherein you like something despite its obvious badness. A hatewatched show is one the viewer genuinely despises but cannot stop watching […] Whatever the reason, the hatewatcher can't look away from the trainwreck. (beatnikherbie, 2013)

Other examples of such distanced consumption include the South Asian diaspora who hatewatch *Indian Matchmaking* for its promulgation of hegemonic casteist and classist values (Guha, 2023), or middle-class Americans who hate-watch reality shows like *The Bachelor* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (Letak, 2022).

Justified abstentions

Kaci finds Dr. Disrespect enjoyable. However, she has come to think poorly of the Doc, and has chosen to stop watching his streams. We call Kaci's taste an instance of *justified abstention*. Justified abstention are characterized by a mismatch between a positive orientation in preference and negative orientations in consumption and

valuation. The non-consumption in justified abstention should occur in the absence of resource constraints.

Justified abstentions are commonplace in cultural fields. Justified abstentions are involved when individuals practice abstentions from behavioral addictions, "chronic, progressive compulsions to consume a particular substance or engage in a particular activity" (Garriott & Raikhel, 2015: 478). While the compulsive non-medical self-administrative of drugs are the paradigmatic example of addiction (Weinberg, 2002), other manners of behavior can likewise be perceived as a form of behavioral addiction (Singer, 2012). Problematic cultural consumption classified by the DSM5 as behavioral addictions include shopping, binge-eating, gambling, excessive internet use, excessive social media use, and excessive gaming (Robbins & Clark, 2015). While justified abstentions involve the rejection of consumption, they do not involve the negation of desire. The brain gradually adapts to the chronic exposure to addictive behaviors, producing durable changes in neuropsychological structures, most notably in the exchange of key neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine. The obdurateness of such desires is a primary contributor to relapse (Weinberg, 2002).

Justified abstentions also occur when a person makes strategic decisions to reshape their habitus. Members from marginalized communities may strategically abstain from preferred cultural consumption habits when they find themselves in social contexts that are hostile to their proclivities. In such situations, many individuals go against their native affective preferences and make willful decisions to resist consumption. Consider the following example from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, where the eponymous narrator describes the experience of encountering sweet yam, a justified abstention from his childhood to distance himself from social identifies tied to the Black South:

> I saw an old man warming his hands against the sides of an odd-looking wagon, from which a stovepipe reeled off a thin spiral of smoke that drifted the odor of baking yams slowly to me, bringing a stab of swift nostalgia. I stopped as though struck by a shot, deeply inhaling, remembering, my mind surging back ... What a group of people we were, I thought. Why, you could

> cause us the greatest humiliation simply by confronting us with something we liked. (Ellison, 2010[1952]: 367)

Justified abstentions of similar motivations can also be found among the upwardly mobile. For example, a socially aspirational person in the mid-century United States who came from a middle-class background would likely have to eschew the mass cultural forms they grew up enjoying due to the strict high-low culture class homologies that defined the cultural hierarchy at the time (Bourdieu, 1984).

Distant praise

Finally, we have Kylie. Kylie sincerely admires the craft behind Doc's work even though she does not personally enjoy or watch the content. The antinomy we find here is that of negative orientation in preference and consumption juxtaposed against a positive orientation in social valuation. We refer to such sincere praise that flies in the face of contradictory affective preferences and consumption habits as *distant praise*.

Social valuations of culture do not have to be justified on the basis of personal consumption or personal pleasure. An appreciation of technical excellence, moral goodness, and social influence, to name a few, are among the contributors to our tendency to praise and dispraise any particular article of culture (Zuckerman, 2012). Kant puts forward one case for this. In *Critique of Judgement* (2008[1790]), he argues that we should not admit our first-order affective preferences as criteria when producing pure judgements of beauty; insofar as pleasure is involved, pure judgements should only take disinterested pleasures – the pleasure we take from the beautiful – into account. Disinterested pleasure is obviously different from first-order agreeability. A spice-averse food critic is still able to sincerely appreciate the beauty behind *mala* Sichuan cuisine; a fainthearted movie critic an artful horror film; a mechanically-challenged video-game reviewer the impeccable tuning behind a punishing video game; a disinclined music critic the artful chromaticism behind a piano étude.

Conclusion

More than half a century ago, Herbert Blumer (1954) wrote an incisive diagnosis of a fundamental problem stalking sociological theory, warning of the "distressingly vague" concepts that were becoming prolific in the field. The reason for the pervasive ambiguity, he argued, was that most social scientific concepts were sensitizing concepts "grounded on sense instead of on explicit objective traits" (Blumer, 1954: 8). Yet, Blumer was ultimately sanguine over the problem:

> Does it mean that our field is to remain forever in its present state of vagueness and to forego the possibilities of improving its concepts, its propositions, its theory and its knowledge? This is not implied. Sensitizing concepts can be tested, improved and refined. Their validity can be assayed through careful study of empirical instances which they are presumed to cover. (Blumer, 1954: 8)

Taste is one such sensitizing concept -- theoretically important, immediately intuitive, yet at the same time laden with multiple meanings that don't always cohere together. Like Blumer, we take the semantic ambiguity around taste to be an invitation to theorizing responsibly about a term that is important to so much of the discipline.

The first ambition of this paper is humble. Through retroductive conceptual construction of previous empirical work, we identify three paradigmatic approaches to the measurement of taste, each of which associates taste with a distinct modality of action: the first with affective preferences, the second with consumption practices, and the third with social valuations. The second is to provide a reasonable disambiguation of this polysemy. We argue that we ought to think of taste as a person's thick subjectivity in a cultural field, that is to say a fundamentally multidimensional orientation that describes how we feel, consume, and praise in a cultural field. The third and final ambition is to show how this way of thinking can be useful. Conceptualizing taste as multimodal lets us refine our understanding of complex taste phenomena. We use characteristic antinomies between the modalities of taste to articulate the analytical form of complex tastes. Each of the complex tastes so-identified corresponds to extant

folk concepts about taste -- from "guilty pleasure" Netflix binges to the quotidian "hate-watching" of content that disgusts us.

Appendix I: Sources included in literature review

To get a reasonably thorough overview of the different ways contemporary sociologists have measured cultural taste, we conducted a literature review of all articles mentioning taste and its cognates across a range of generalist and specialist journals that were published from January 2011 to December 2020. We perform our literature review in two passes. In our first pass, we run a Boolean keyword query in *Web of Science* for articles mentioning taste in these journals across our period of observation (n = 233). In our second pass, we read each article and identify the specific ways authors have sought to measure or operationalize taste. If an article does not contain an explicit measure of cultural taste, we exclude it from our review. In total, we reviewed 84 journal articles that discussed measurements of cultural taste.

We included the following generalist journals in our survey: *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, *Social Forces*, *Sociological Forum*, *Sociological Theory*, *Theory and Society*, *Organizational Science*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Sociological Science*, *British Journal of Sociology*, *European Sociological Review*, *Proceedings of the National Academy of the Sciences*. We included the following specialist journals in our survey: *Poetics*, *Cultural Sociology*, *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, *Journal of Consumer Research*.

In addition to the articles selected through this procedure, we also drawn on prominent studies of taste published in other periods, such as Stanley Lieberson's (2000) work on fashion in naming, Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) work on taste, and Salganik et al.'s (2006) work about social influence on tastes. We also sought out works from the earlier periods to historicize our understanding of taste (e.g. Johnstone & Katz, 1957; Wanderer, 1970).

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