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Listening to Consumption: Towards a Sonic Turn in Consumer Research

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Synopsis

A sonic turn acknowledges the increasing importance of sound as a site for analysis, aesthetic engagement and theoretical development. Rather than being interested in the consumption of sound, we are concerned here with understanding the world of consumption through sound. Addressing the phenomenon of ASMR, we ask what it means to listen to consumption and conclude that a sonic turn doesn't simply present a set of new objects for enquiry, but rather offers a fresh analytical lens that provides a non-linguistic means of appreciating consumption.

Introduction and Background

In pursuing a sonic turn we uphold two key ontological principles: sonic ecology and sonic resonance. There is a tendency within consumer research, to think of sound (particularly music) as a context within which thought and action happens; a context which shapes and structures, but which does not become an active participant in social life. Consumer research has endorsed a passive form of listening that is captured by terms such as atmosphere, servicescapes, and musicscapes. An ecological approach encourages us to consider how the sonic context implicates itself in consumption. A sonic ecology, then, incorporates the bidirectional, aural interactions between people (and other organisms) and their environment and includes the "inside of

action, its pre-cognitive and non-verbal features such as emotion, impulse and embodiments" (DeNora, 2011: xi). This poses the questions: "how are 'we' listening and, through listening, interrelating with our environment; and how is our sonic environment calling upon us, triggering us to act and react?" (Cobussen, 2016: 4).

Bodies thrum with the sounds of the world around them. Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (2007) explains that sound has an internal resonance, without which there would be nothing to hear, and that this resonance also projects outwards. As it spreads in space, it vibrates and becomes perceptible by the listening subject, who is also marked by resonances. This resonance of sound enables connections with other people. More than any other sense, sound is utopian in the desire for proximity and connectedness.

Issues and Questions Considered

To place these arguments in context we consider ASMR. ASMR is a recently acknowledged sensory phenomenon in which individuals experience a tingling, static-like sensation across the scalp, back of the neck and elsewhere in the body in response to specific, mostly audio stimuli, such as whispering.

An undeniably affective experience, members of the ASMR community find the sensation difficult to describe but attribute to it a low-grade euphoria accompanied

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by feelings of relaxation and well-being. The triggers for ASMR vary from person to person but are predominantly aural.

In the mid-2000s, members of online forums posted accounts of the sensations they experienced in response to certain sounds to determine if such responses were shared by others. The name – Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response – borrows from science and, thus, argues Andersen (2015), locates the non-normative ASMR experience as potentially universal by situating its origins in human biology. ASMR now represents a thriving online community, with close to 7.5 million videos on YouTube that are tagged ‘ASMR’. ASMRtists, those who create ASMR sounds and videos, have a dedicated and growing following and are able to monetize their work to the tune of about €7 per thousand impressions (CPM). Further, marketers have begun to utilise the ASMR experience in advertising. A sonic turn encourages an interest in the recreation and reconfiguration of spaces of experience through sound, both by the consumer and by the market. For example, ASMR affords and is afforded by certain social actions and interactions found within the ASMR community, through which social, physical and temporal spaces of experience have been reconfigured. Once solitary, natural and randomly occurring, the sounds associated with ASMR have been stylized as a social, digital and on-demand experience, engaged with intentionally by those with the capability to do so, in the pursuit of well-being, relaxation and so on. This shifts our attention away from meaning (the main focus of Consumer Research) towards the practices, performances and experiences through which everyday life happens, and the push and pull between sensing, affect and meaning. To illustrate, ice floes crackle regardless of human presence, resonating with sound waves that do not mean anything. When encountered by human bodies, incidentally or intentionally through an ASMR tagged video, these sounds can trigger a physiological reaction that is then experienced as relaxing, soothing and calming. Gallagher (2016: 1) evidences how these videos are treated

as ‘inputs’, “judged not as messages to be understood or interpreted, but by their ability to elicit particular affective and somatic outputs”. In turn, this highlights the increasing ‘hyperaesthesia’ or sensual logic that governs advanced capitalist markets, whereby consumers engage with commodities in non-rational, but aesthetic ways.

Outcomes and Findings

Of interest to consumer researchers is the fact that the listening human subject has been transformed into an embodied and affective consuming subject through the marketisation (and medicalisation) of ASMR. An extant sonic experience has been reframed as a consumption experience and put to work in the service of the market-driven individual project of self-care and well-being. Simultaneously, pre-existing ambient sounds have been re-produced as consumer objects in themselves and are marketed so successfully that YouTube has become awash with them. Using the tools of the market, ASMR supporters have found a digital place to produce, distribute and consume potentially affective soundscapes.

Rather than seeking to make sense of the consumption of ASMR, the sonic turn encourages us to focus instead on important questions about aesthetic and sonic culture in the era of neo-liberal markets and consumption; such as how ASMR emerged as a new form and space of embodied engagement with the sonic and how this space was shaped by different and competing logics; how consumers make sensation through the meeting of the physical, the symbolic and the sociological inherent in ASMR and how this challenges existing market and power structures; and how the interactions and resonances between all actors and entities in the ASMR ecology shape and are shaped by their engagement with sound. In conclusion, then, a sonic turn opens up space for new, alternative and disruptive ways of thinking about and doing consumer research.

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