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The expression of taste regime in consumer practices in home decoration context

Master Degree Project in Marketing and Consumption

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Abstract

Introduction. Home decoration is one of the most important aspects of our lives. It has been proven that our taste has a big influence on our culture, values, decisions, and activities. The previous research on taste was focused more on society and people as social actors, but the increased volume of consumption in our lives raises question – does taste have an influence on our purchasing decisions? For now, only the researchers Arsel & Bean (2012) contributed to the theoretical knowledge in consumption, however, still, there are many issues to be learned. These gaps of knowledge give an opportunity for research in this area, including in-depth investigation the expression of taste in consumer practices and the level of consumer understanding of taste.

Research Question: How is taste regime expressed in consumer practices in home decoration context?

Theoretical Framework. The research is based on the combination of taste regime theory and consumer practices theory, the main idea of which is the notion of taste as a mechanism that can affect and orchestrate consumer practices on an everyday basis (Arsel & Bean 2012). Consumer practice represents activities of the usage of objects through doings and mental activities, taking into account moods and emotions (Warde 2005).

Methodology. The study uses such qualitative research method as semi-structured interview that allows getting in-depth knowledge of consumer understanding of taste regime. In total, 6 interviews with consumers, interested in home décor were conducted, which gave a space for further analysis. To add, e-research was used as complementary, in order to exemplify respondents' answers.

Findings and Analysis. The analysis sheds light on the expression of taste regime in consumer practices, elaborates on the specificities and implications of each taste regime practice on consumer behavior, discusses the complexity of the phenomenon of taste and exemplifies the portray of taste in different consumer practices.

Discussion. This part discusses the issues, related to the difficulty of researching such a complex concept as taste, describes the importance of the current study that contributes to the previous research and emphasizes the importance of future research.

Conclusion. This research shows the recent underestimation of taste regime expression in consumer practices, contributes to the previously done study of taste regimes with the in-depth analysis of the taste from the perspective of consumers, the relation between different regime practices and opens opportunities for further research.

Key words: taste regime; consumer practices

Introduction

Home decoration has become one of the prevailing aspects of our life. People arrange their domestic spaces based on their needs and perceptions of beauty, style, and comfort. Current attention to home décor originates in the 19th century, when 'home' became one of the identity and status indicators, as it was central to socialization and entertainment. Middle-class housewives occupied themselves in endless arrangements of domestic spaces to express their taste and social and financial status of the family. At the same time, for men 'home' had a bit different meaning: it became a shelter, where they could escape from harsh workspace and have a rest. That is why comfort became a central dimension in home décor (Bell & Hollows, 2005).

The perception of home decoration has not changed drastically. It is more transformed into new meanings and dimensions. The idea of family financial and social status realization through their home is still visible in today's society, but it is also turning into self-realization. People present their personalities and values through home decoration so that every piece of interior design constructs customers' personal uniqueness. This idea is also connected to the recently depicted concept of 'aestheticization of everyday life'. Cova & Svanfeldt (1993, p. 297) name it as one of the "strongest characteristics of post-modern societies", which implies turning everyday life into art. People tend to surround themselves with beauty, which is especially visible in home decoration. Therefore, style, taste, and aesthetics are subject to huge attention in the post-modern society and become important for consumers (Cova & Svanfeldt 1993). Societal changes, the transformation of consumption, the perception of art and design result in increasing consumer power of choice (Lafley 2005). Interest and high involvement in home decoration make customers develop their own taste, which then guides their choices and behavior (Cova & Svanfeldt 1993).

Many researchers in sociology, such as Bell & Hollows (2005), Gronow (2002), Hennion (2010) and Manzo (2010) have been studying taste effects on people. It was defined as an activity, or a mechanism, which regulates our everyday choices (Arsel & Bean 2012). So forth, it is integrated into our actions and influences the way we perceive beauty and aesthetics. Manzo (2010) discusses taste as a social phenomenon that functions as an aspect, a characteristic of a particular group of people. Sociologists agree that, historically, the taste was used as a barrier between the upper and the lower classes, and "the upper classes used taste to outdistance the lower ones" (Meyer 2000, p. 34). Taking this into account, the cultural changes in the society were related to taste migration between different classes. Once the current taste standards were adopted by lower classes, the taste-making class turned away from them towards the new ones (Meyer 2000). Nowadays, taste is no longer a 'class' thing, but it still helps to create different independent subgroups and subcultures in societies (Meyer 2000; Manzo 2010).

Such focus on taste in sociology resulted in a deep understanding of this phenomenon and its importance in society, discussing people as social players, at the same time ignoring other fields of research. As the world has never had such a diversity and volume of consumption, as before, the gap in the research on taste from the market perspective has become vivid recently. The phenomenon of a consumer society (consumerism) is currently expanded across the globe and implies high significance of the consumption in peoples' lives. It is not just satisfying the basic needs, consumerism is a leisure experience

that helps people socialize, show their identities and distinguish from others (Castree et al. 2013).

Therefore, only now it is getting more discussable in the form of the theory of taste regimes, created by Arsel and Bean (2012). These researchers inserted the idea of taste regimes into consumer practices and depicted taste regime as actually a mechanism, that directs our consumption activities. It becomes sort of a pile of rules that guides customers through the consumption practices (for example, what to buy and how to use) and fill products with meanings (Arsel & Bean 2012).

Understanding the taste regime mechanism and its expression in consumer practices becomes more valuable for market actors, especially retailers, pursuing a deep understanding of their customers because it gives them an idea of the consumption, customer goals and perception of the goods. For example, the influence on consumers can be both direct and indirect. Christoforidou et al. (2012) state that if the taste is socially constructed, it means that there is a process of determining criteria that define whether the object fits the taste or not. As a result, retailers get a chance to participate in "aura production" (Christoforidou et al. 2012, p. 188) around the product through external communication and/or collaboration with designers and influencers, add to the construction of taste and manipulate consumer decisions. Additionally, consumers justify their taste through building beauty and joyful experiences around them (Christoforidou et al. 2012). So forth, they come to the stores lead by hedonic and utilitarian reasons, looking for products that would fit their taste and add positive emotions (Bäckström & Johansson 2006). Under this condition, knowledge about how exactly the taste frames consumption activities (both purchase and usage) creates an opportunity for tailored store organization and design.

From the theoretical point of view, taste regime theory hasn't been studied in terms of markets and consumption profoundly, which creates a gap in the research area. The taste regime model of Arsel and Bean (2012) shows that taste is incorporated in daily practices and shapes our abilities to evaluate and choose products. In the study, they also emphasize that consumer taste regime is influenced by the marketplace, by investigating the links between an online blog and domestic consumption (Arsel & Bean 2012). As a result, Arsel and Bean (20212) explore taste and consumption from a new perspective, by doing an overview of taste regime mechanism in consumption context.

Their article became an inspiration for the current research, as several paths for further investigation were determined. Arsel and Bean (2012) only describe that taste regime guides consumers, and state that taste and consumer practices are influenced by external factors, such as the market and communities. Therefore, to fill in the theoretical gap, this study is aimed to go beyond the surface, research consumer own understanding of taste without any direct relation to the market influencers and investigate such issues as: how taste is formed, if and how taste changes with time, in what ways taste is expressed in each practice (stated by Arsel and Bean (2012)) and if there are any patterns of consumer behavior in practices that are related to taste regime. In this study, it is implied that in consumer practices objects, meanings and activities are integrated (Warde 2005). Therefore, consumer practice is helpful to investigate how taste regime is portrayed in, for example, the ways consumers attach meanings to the products and change them through routinized activities. Therefore, this research is valuable from the theoretical perspective, as it adds a deeper knowledge to the current theoretical base of taste regime

and consumption and reveals consumer own understanding of taste. From the practical perspective, this knowledge gives advantages for retailers in learning their customers and planning marketing strategy.

Purpose & Research Question

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the previously done research in taste and taste regimes in consumption. The paper goes beyond the study of Arsel and Bean (2012) and investigates consumer own understanding of taste, how the taste regime is portrayed in consumer practices and an in-depth understanding of consumer perception of taste and taste regime. The research question of the paper was chosen:

How is taste regime expressed in
consumer practices in home decoration context?

The research question is chosen to cover the topic, however, as it is broad, the sub-questions are aimed to break down the research question, frame and guide the process of theoretical search:

What is taste for consumers? How do they talk about taste?
What affects taste formation with time?
Where do consumers get inspiration from?
Are there differences in taste regime expression in different practices? What are they?

The paper starts with outlining a theoretical framework, built on literature from sociology, consumption and consumer behavior theories. It is intended to give some guidance on the topic, help to understand the chosen method and frame the analysis and discussion. Next, the methodology is discussed. Finally, the findings and analysis part represents gathered empirical material, followed by the discussion of the research results and conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

With the help of sub-questions, the theoretical research was done to learn what is already known in the field of study. This research aims to get an in-depth understanding of consumer perception of taste within their practices, therefore it is necessary to start with covering the concept of taste. The theoretical background on taste and taste regime gives the reader an overview of how taste is perceived by researchers and what influence it has on consumer daily activities. The consumer practice theory helps to understand the notion of consumer practices, the links between objects and their meanings and the role of consumer activities. Arsel and Bean (2012) incorporated taste regime into consumer activities, which helps to investigate the taste in the context of consumption practices, identify gaps in knowledge and emphasize the importance of answering the questions stated above. The theoretical framework also helps to plan the qualitative research and frame the presentation of the findings correctly and explicitly.

Taste and taste regime theory

Taste as a phenomenon has always been studied mostly in the field of sociology. Academics, such as Gronow (2002), Tonkinwise (2011), Bell & Hollows (2005) analyze taste from a sociological perspective, not connecting it to markets and consumption.

While conducting the literature review, it has become vivid, that taste as a concept combines specific attributes. First, most sociologists agreed that taste is a social phenomenon that is not naturally given, but *"shared, understood and appreciated by social groups that constitute the subculture itself"* (Manzo 2010, p. 152). While being social, taste functions as a facilitator of the interpersonal interaction through human choices, actions, and discussions (Manzo 2010). Therefore, people with wide range of networks develop 'tastes' for the widest variety of cultural forms (DiMaggio 1987). So, the more social groups/networks the people are involved in, the more different tastes are constructed in them.

Taste is considered not as an attribute of a personality, but more as an activity (Arsel & Bean 2012); or a performance (Hennion 2010). More important, in the research field, it is positioned as an acquired phenomenon, which demands work, investments in money and time. Consumers formulate taste by absorbing social and cultural capital, and in order for the taste to be expressed, an action is demanded, for example, listening to a music or appreciating/buying a piece of art (Manzo 2010; Arsel & Bean 2012).

As taste formation happens within a social context, it requires a 'schema', a shared frame of references or a collective interpretation of symbols. Although taste is stated as a personal matter, the 'good taste' or the 'particular taste' stated in society, becomes *"beyond the individual, as a social binding"* (Bell & Hollows 2005, p. 91), which regulates consumption activities and functions as a regime for consumer choices.

Consumer Practice Theory
Practice theories within the studies of consumption have been discussed by many researchers, such as Holt (1995), Shove and Pantzar (2005), Warde (2005) and others. For instance, Shove and Pantzar (2005) in their article discuss the importance and the implications of practices that change forms of consumption. A practice can be defined as: *"...a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood that involves bodily activities, forms of mental activities, things..."* (Warde 2005, P. 135). Most of the researchers might name elements of practices differently, but in order to be consistent through the course of the paper, one unified schema of the practice will be used: practice as an integration of objects, doings, and meanings (Arsel & Bean 2012). The elements themselves are connected through the understandings (for example, what to do), rules and instructions, and 'teleoaffective' (Schatzki 1996, p. 89) structures, which imply personal moods and emotions (Schatzki 1996).

The researchers' understanding of consumer practices might be a bit different, but they all agree upon the basic assumption that consumption, or appropriation of goods, happens within some particular practice with the goal of involving those goods in the process of this practice (Warde 2005). It is related to all types of practices, including arranging domestic space and home decoration. All purchased items are involved in consumer practice and convey specific meanings.

The integration of Taste Regime into Consumer Practice Theory
As it was stated earlier, there was no research of taste as a regime in the sphere of marketing before. Recently, the researchers Arsel and Bean (2012), the only ones so far, applied sociological phenomenon of taste to the field of consumption, specifically, home consumption, by integrating the taste regime into consumer practices. Their article results

in a framework where taste functions as a regime, influences consumer behavior through the practices of problematization, ritualization, and instrumentalization. They explain it by the fact that taste as a regime offers share values and meanings that shape how people choose and use products in their environment (Arsel & Bean 2012).

Arsel and Bean (2012) stated that taste *"as a habitual knowledge, has its material effects on consumption"* (Arsel & Bean, 2012, p. 899). Taste regime was defined by them as *"a discursive system that links aesthetics to practice"* (Arsel & Bean, 2012, p. 899). As taste is expressed in conduct and choice of customers, taste regime itself regulates consumer practices, by providing a teleoaffective structure of practice that orders objects, meanings, and doings. In the context of home decor consumption, taste regime provides a mechanism that orders the way consumers use the objects and endow them with meanings. In its essence, taste regime orchestrates consumer practices within those boundaries (Arsel & Bean 2012). To add, in these boundaries, while people exposing their tastes, they also reveal subconsciously their values, status, and identities. For example, if Scandinavian design emphasizes minimalism and functionalism, people, who like it, tend to approach to Scandinavian brands, choose natural reusable materials and adhere to recycling. In this sense, taste as a regime orchestrates not one, but several aspects of consumer life (Christoforidou et al. 2012).

This mechanism is executed through the consumer actions: people acquire and produce meanings in face-to-face exchanges and by performing doings. The regime shapes personal abilities to evaluate, choose and then use objects in their everyday life. As a result, taste regime penetrates consumer practical knowledge through three dispersed practices: problematization, ritualization, and instrumentalization (Arsel & Bean 2012). The idea is outlined in Figure 1 (Arsel & Bean 2012, p. 910).
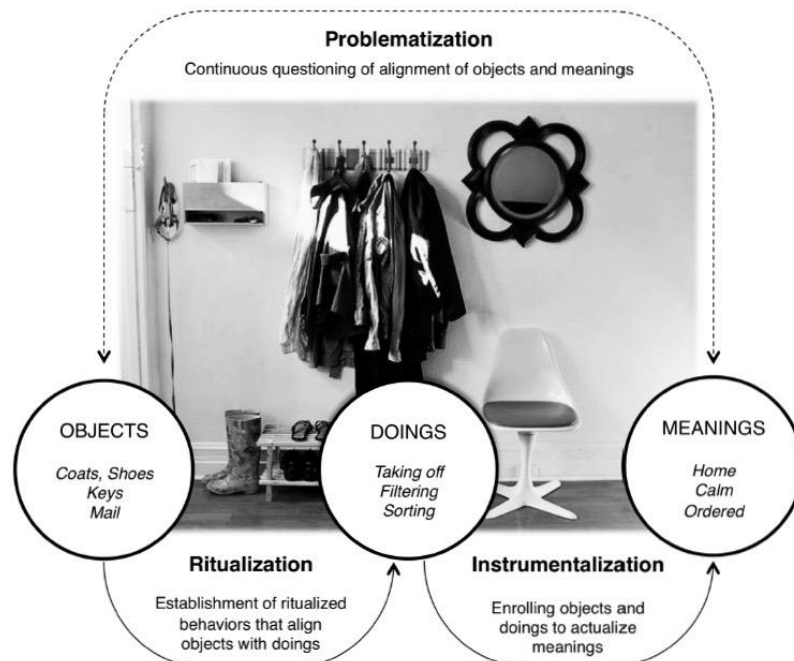

Figure 1. An illustrated example of how taste regimes regulate practice (Arsel & Bean 2012, p. 910)
Image (Apartment Therapy, 2010)

First, a taste regime problematizes, or questions, how objects are aligned to the stated regime's core meanings. While considering an interior design object, consumers are involved in the process of judging whether the object fits their inner taste regime or not (Arsel & Bean 2012). For example, consumers evaluate a dining table in the store based on the qualities that are important to them: whether the table is big enough, with a good shape. or the color fits their preferences. Secondly, ritualization is connected to multiple behaviors that happen in episodic sequence. Ritualized behaviors are repeated over time and affect consumer ways and meanings of acquiring and using goods. As a result, consumers have a set of established rituals that provide a script for their actions (Arsel & Bean 2012). Continuing the example with the dining table, ritualized behaviors here are: eating by the table, watching TV, drinking coffee in the morning or having a cozy dinner with friends. The third practice, instrumentalization is *"the process of connecting objects and doings to the actualization of meanings"* (Arsel & Bean 2012, p. 909). On this stage of consumer practice, taste regime gives consumers resources and suggestions for connecting the material objects with their meanings, so to say, creating a bond between *"the pragmatic and the symbolic"* (Arsel & Bean 2012, p. 909). As a result, this mechanism of taste regime lets consumers move from realizing a problem to their goal fulfillment through practices (Arsel & Bean 2012). Using the example, in this practice, while using the dining table, the person realized that this table is associated with home, calm weekend mornings and comfort.

Being within the framework of taste regimes to fulfill the goals demands constant process of work, time and money (Manzo 2010). In most of the time, taste in consumption stays relatively static because ritualized behaviors are learned through the time, which makes this mechanism relatively stable. At the same time, the changes in taste happen with the time, or because of significant changes, but still, both occasions demand some adjustment time for the consumers (Southerton 2001).

The theoretical framework gives an overall understanding of the taste regime mechanism that exists in consumer lives. At the same time, it reveals research gaps that are subject to study. To complement the current study on taste regime it us necessary to do an in-depth study on the consumer understanding of taste regime and investigate when and how exactly the taste as a regime appears and affects consumer decisions in each of the practices, described by Arsel and Bean (2012): problematization, ritualization and instrumentalization.

The theories help to build the method and the analysis with the purpose of getting the necessary information. In-depth understanding of the concept of taste itself and the relations between consumer practices and taste regime help to plan and construct the interview questions with the respondents and later – represent findings.

Methodology

In order to get a deep understanding of the taste regime portrait in the consumer practices in home decoration industry, the qualitative method was chosen. As this paper studies consumers and tries to investigate their insights, reach their understanding of the taste regime in the context of home decoration, qualitative research is the most appropriate way, as it does in-depth studies and "*captures the context richness of people's everyday lives*" (Yin 2010, p. 3-4).

The qualitative research itself represents several features, such as: *"studying the meanings' of people's lives, representing the views and perspectives of the respondents, covering the contextual conditions in which people live and contributing insights into existing concepts that may help to explain human behavior"* (Yin 2010, p. 7-8). The current study perfectly complies to these characteristics: through the qualitative interviews in contextual conditions (respondents' homes), we studied the consumer perspectives of taste regimes and contribute to the current theories in and taste consumer practices with the insights that help understand consumers more deeply.

As it was mentioned above, the main method used in the study – interviews, guided semi-structured (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). This type of interviewing was chosen because it allows covering both What? and How? questions, so to say, learning both consumer experiences and their thoughts, elaborations, and emotions. Semi-structured interviews also imply an outline of topics that need to be discussed, which makes the data systematic and comprehensive, but at the same time let the conversation be informal (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). The conversational mode in such interviews allows two-way interaction and variety (Yin 2010). To decrease the risk of difficulties in discussions, such approach in interviews makes consumers feel more comfortable, give them the freedom to talk, and, as a result, allows gaining the insights that have not been revealed before.

The aim of the interviews was to discuss consumer attitude and their own understanding of their homes in relation to taste, the changes in tastes, what inspires people and their thoughts on how their taste is portrayed in their practices that are related to the processes of purchase and usage of the products. The questions were prepared beforehand (see Appendix 1).

It is important for this research to have respondents interested in home décor and interior design, because they have enough experience and knowledge in this field, and they like it and more willing to share. With this purpose, the snowball sampling method (Yin 2010) was chosen on purpose – the first respondents willing to contribute to the research, lead to the other ones. Plus, those who referenced, were sure about the genuine interest in the design of those they recommended. Such participant characteristics positively affected the amount and quality of the gathered data. As a result, 6 in-depth 40-minute interviews were conducted. The reason behind 6 interviews is that the saturation of ideas (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008) was reached on the 6th interview, the topics repeat each other, which makes the data rich and enough for the analysis of the discussed concepts. All the participants, aged between 25-38, have changed several apartments, and up to this moment have been living in their current apartment for 6 months and are not planning to move somewhere else. Their interest in home decoration and design is expressed in following online design web pages (websites and social media accounts) and online communities in social media. Table 1 represents short descriptions of the respondents.

Name	Age	Occupation
Sara	36	Employee, banking sector
Emilia	27	Student, business administration
Sofia	27	Employee, restorer
Emma	25	Employee, restorer
Martin	38	Employee, IT sector
Anna	31	Employee, consulting

Table 1. List of respondents

Four interviews were conducted in participants' homes that helped to visualize the content (they showed the objects). In two other interviews, the participants were asked to imagine and narrate their homes with the help of supportive questions and examples. This was done to help respondents feel more comfortable talking about familiar objects, and as a result, it was easier both for the interviewer and respondents to follow the logic of narrative, ask questions and answer. As an example, during the flow of the interview, one of the respondents was asked to imagine the dining table in their current kitchen, describe its color, taste, how they bought it and why. So, the story of the table and the kitchen helped to get answers to questions about the taste, purchase decision and further usage. Unfortunately, the respondents were reluctant to photograph and show in the research their home décor objects, discussed in the interview. This might be a limitation due to lack of visual aspect, especially considering specificities of the research area. At the same time, the goal of the research is not to show different home surroundings and consumer styles but to depict how consumers talk about the taste and their homes, and what they feel in there. So, the lack of pictures should not limit the research greatly.

The flow of the questions and topics was always different depending on the participant and the surroundings. Most of the interviews started with an explanation of the research, general questions about the participants' homes and their story of living in different accommodation in general. This lets the participants relax and understand the topic, and the researcher – getting to know each particular interviewee better to manage the flow of the interview. As a result, all the questions were covered in each interview, that was recorded and transcribed later (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008).

In addition, the electronic research (e-research) (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008) was done to check the examples and sources, mentioned in the interviews. It was stated before that his research doesn't investigate the influence of the market, companies and social media on consumer taste purposefully. However, several respondents mentioned social media sources during the interviews. Applying e-research, in this case, let the author obtain a comprehensive representation of the context and the respondents' stories, understand them and get in-depth insights, which per se is the purpose of the research. The online sources, mentioned in the Findings, are both related to Instagram social media: Elfvinggarden (Moraeus, 2017) and House Plant Club (2017). With the purpose stated above, these two sources were observed: the recent pictures and the latest comments under the pictures. This let the author understand the topic of the content and main activities of the users. In total, the amount of 50 pictures were enough to gain richness of the data (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008) as the pictures and the comments started repeating each other. Soon, in the process of e-research, it became clear what the purpose of each online source is and what idea the pictures convey.

According to the theory, the quality of the research is supported by the two concepts: reliability and validity. Reliability implies that the degree of consistency of the research is of that level that other researchers are able to replicate the study that delivers the same findings (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). Validity implies that the data is collected, interpreted and presented properly (Yin 2010). With the aim to strengthen the reliability and validity, the method is described in details, the portraits of the respondents and the interview questions are presented. The interview questions were compiled based on the

theoretical framework and the research questions. Also, the *"rich" data"* (Yin 2010, p. 79) from the in-depth interviews and e-research contribute to the quality of the research.

Trustworthiness and credibility of the research were achieved through transparency (Yin 2010). This characteristic of the research is usually described from the perspectives of the participants and readers. First, the aim of the study, theoretical background, and method procedures were discussed with the respondents. They were also asked a permission to record the interviews. To add, the interviews were done in English to adhere to evidence and increase the quality of the research. All in all, it compensated the lack of private photos and did not interfere the research results. With the aim to keep the transparency, all the research procedures are described thoroughly here, the list of references used to compile the study is also available for the readers. Additionally, all the interviews with the participants were transcribed and are available on request. The findings are presented in such a way that the reader can follow the logic of their appearance and the evidence from the interviews related to the theoretical background.

Analysis
After conducting and transcribing the interviews, the analysis started with open coding, which implies breaking down the data into several parts, based on the concepts/categories (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). Theories of taste and taste regimes became a basis for classifying the data on this stage. Therefore, the topics of taste in general and three taste regime practices became these broader parts, under which the data was read through. Next, the axial coding was applied, which means getting deeper into the analysis, trying to find new types of relationships (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008), which in our case, is a profound analysis of different answers on each question within the categories. Finally, on the last stage of coding, the similarities and tendencies among respondents' answers were depicted and united into the topics that are presented further in the text. E-research was conducted simultaneously with the process of coding. Consumer practice theory was used as a framework to follow the logic of the respondents' consumption behavior, the relations between the objects, doings, and meanings were the guiding lines through the interview texts.

Findings and Analysis
In this section, the findings are presented according to the topics, revealed during the coding and analysis process. The narrative is divided into two major sections. The first section starts with the findings related to the concept of taste in general and how it is related to consumer practices. Here, the findings are divided by topics, or questions, for easier visualization and understanding of the material. Then, the second major section is dedicated to the taste regime practices which are the categories used in the theory of taste regimes by Arsel and Bean (2012): problematization, ritualization, and instrumentalization. Each of the three processes shows different ways of taste expression and consumer understanding of the taste in their home decoration. Thus, it has been noticed that in consumer practices the processes of problematization and instrumentalization are tightly related, as, according to the consumer practice – people tend to give symbolic meanings to the objects they acquire (Warde 2005). So, these practices are presented together. Next, the ritualization practice is analyzed.

The first section. The concept of taste
What inspires consumers in their taste formation?
First, the research states that taste is appreciated by different social groups (Manzo 2010). In the beginning of the interviews, after the description of their homes, respondents were asked to elaborate on what inspires them in their taste, arranging their homes. A common ground in answers was noticed – social groups have a big influence on consumer taste formation.

The respondents marked several things that inspire them in their taste modifications, in changing their surroundings. It doesn't mean radical changes in taste, they talked more about smaller things that add value to their homes. First, most of them mentioned their relatives and friends as sources of inspiration. As an example:

"I'm influenced by people around me. If I'm at friends' place and see paintings they have… I don't know much about it, so I like to see what they have, ask them…It doesn't necessarily mean that I will buy the same, but I will think about it." (Emilia, 27)

Another source of inspiration was mentioned by all the participants – social media communities and personas. Most of them gave me examples of the social media accounts they follow, for example, @elfvinggarden (Moraeus 2017). This online page represents inspiration in all types of home décor, different rooms, objects inserted in interior design and also gives a space for visitors to comment and share (Moraeus 2017). One of the respondents notes that social media have a very big influence on the taste formation:

"...Following people interested in interior design in social media, I get the idea. Somehow my taste comes from that because I start to like what I see and I want to have the same at home" (Sara, 36)

Another respondent (Emma, 25) is slowly redesigning their living room and gets inspiration from pictures in social media that show different ways of how plants can be inserted into décor. This is a House Plant Club - an Instagram community that publishes and discuss different ways of home décor using plants and flowers. As it is a community, every user can share their home, ask for a piece of advice, discuss and inspire others (House Plant Club, 2017).

Picture 1. Saved on the phone picture of the respondent

<u>Taste changes with time and experience</u>
First, all the respondents have noticed changes in their tastes with the time and their experience. These findings align with the previously done research in sociology by Southertone (2001) who states that personal taste may change with time, because of life changes or attained experiences.

"I got older, style matured...Now I have clearer path what I want to be. Before I was more practical thinking "I need this shelf, I buy it", not thinking "Do I like how it looks?"." (Sara, 36)

Most of them also stated that money has a big influence on the changes in their taste behavior. Raised income now give the respondents more opportunities to start thinking of what they really like. People start paying attention to aesthetics and style around them, forming their preferences and thinking of how they can make their apartments fit their taste. There is noticed a tendency from being more practical to choose according to their preferences in style.

"Money is important, 10 years ago I would never rebuild the room, I would just live with what I have. Now I can go out and see what we like and just buy it." (Martin, 38)

<u>People who live together, learn together and come to the same taste</u>
The stories of the respondents show that when it comes to cohabitation, people face problems related to clashes of tastes. Half of the interviewees talked about how hard it was for them to move in with someone else and find compromises while arranging their apartments. For example, one of the respondents explained that she and her partner had very different tastes when they moved in together. The taste differences in furniture were expressed in the colors, texture, sizes, and style. This is how she describes their process of finding a compromise:

"Before we moved in together, he had one taste and I had another, we didn't like each other's tastes, so the first time we were going to buy furniture together, what we ended up buying - none of us liked. We bought some kind of a compromise, furniture no one really liked." (Sara, 36)

After a while of living with each other, people start moving from compromises to agreeing on something and, as a result, their tastes change, mature and become the same.

"Now we are on the same path. We have sort of the same taste.... Still, have disagreements, but mostly we end up agreeing on something, not having a compromise."
(Sara, 36)

<u>Taste demands time and efforts</u>
It has been stated by sociologists that taste demands activities, time and efforts to be formed and expressed (Manzo 2010; Arsel & Bean 2012). The respondents discussed that it cost them time and mistakes to understand what their taste is and how they want their homes to look like. Consumers go through ongoing processes of problematization, ritualization, and instrumentalization, trying to connect objects with meanings through their usage (Arsel & Bean 2012). If they don't like the result, they start all over again. It

confirms other researchers' findings in different research areas, such as culture, music, and art. DiMaggio (1987) and Manzo (2010) proved that people can develop their taste through activities, by investing work and absorbing the culture and social capital. The interviews show that these theoretical statements are also applied in the context of home decoration, and show that taste can be named as "a habitual knowledge" (Arsel and Bean 2012, p. 899).

"Some years ago, I was totally different, I wanted everything, constantly searching for something I didn't know, moved furniture every day… I couldn't calm down at all. I've made taste mistakes. After a time, I think now I know what exactly I want. But it took me time, yes." (Sofia, 27)

Also, it was noticed in the interviews that people tend to formulate their taste with its schema and boundaries long before the moment they can actually bring it to their lives. Having different life situations, some respondents notice that while living in temporary homes, they didn't pay much attention to the surroundings. Respondents have lived in several apartments and have had periods of time when they could not afford much, but even then, they have already started thinking about their future home, how they want it to look like. One of the respondents has a vivid example: due to work, this person moves a lot and doesn't want to spend much effort on arranging current home. She is not attached to any social media account, but she has been accumulating ideas for her future home in her phone as pictures.

"Even if I can't buy things today…I save pictures in my phone for my future apartment, so I kind of already know what I want…." (Sofia, 27)

Picture 2. Saved on the phone picture of the respondent

The next part of the analysis will be specifically related to the taste regime practices.

The second section. Taste regime practices
Problematization and instrumentalization
According to the theory, problematization refers to questioning whether the object fits the taste regime of the consumer or not, and instrumentalization means relating objects with meanings, symbols. These two processes also related objects and meanings in consumer practices (Arsel & Bean 2012). The interviews showed that the process of problematization is tightly connected to the symbolic meaning of the object (instrumentalization). So, to say, consumers tend to question (problematize) how objects aligned to the meanings they are looking for.

All the respondents were asked to describe what they think of their taste and how they see their homes. As a result, all of them explained both their taste and their homes in different relatively abstract nouns and adjectives that showed that they have an idea of what their home means to them. For example:

"…Things in order, and open, roomy. Focus on things that you like, but still open, that's important to me. Open space… bright colors, maybe because of winter…" (Emilia, 27)

Consumers see the whole picture of their homes and, on the stage of problematization, they start the analysis process to decide if the *small objects fit into their big picture of a perfect home*. But how does the process of problematization start? After the analysis of the answers, we notice that consumers usually spend some time thinking about their homes, how they look like, they notice what they don't like and then, they just need a hook to grasp their attention, for example, the answers to the questions: "Why did you notice this object?" were: *"I was passing by", "I've seen it somewhere else", "I was looking for this color"*, *"It was on a sale"* etc.

"I've been looking for it for some time. Once I was passing by and saw it on a sale. Cute, lovely, simple. Exactly what I like." (Sofia, 27)

Further, in the process, people question whether the objects fit their criteria. Interesting to notice that, according to the interviews, often symbolic meanings tend to prevail when it comes to the purchase decision. For example:

"I dropped by to the store to buy another thing, but I saw this small lamp, I liked the style and the type of lighting that would be a good fit for my room, so I bought it." (Martin, 38)

"I was looking for the blue rug online, I like blue…initially sorted out them by the price. Then, wanted it to fit the space, not too small, not too big." (Emma, 25)

Ritualization
This process implies consumer behavior to relate objects with doings. According to theory, ritualization implies that consumers execute several behaviors in sequence, using the objects, so after several such activities, consumers have the 'scripts' or rituals of how exactly to use the objects (Arsel & Bean 2012). Here, the interviews supported the theory and also revealed several notes.

First, the respondents' answers allow guessing that consumers start imagining how they use the product, or so to say, they process the rituals in their mind before the actual purchase. This process of thoughts is so powerful that affects the purchasing decision in the future. For example, one of the respondents have recently bought a new sofa:

I want to feel comfortable in it. I imagine coming home from work and laying on the sofa. A place to relax. I wanted the one to chill in" (Anna, 31)

Second, when it comes to purchasing, it was discussed that those symbolic meanings are an important factor in a purchase decision, and sometimes they seem to prevail over practical/behavioral matters for consumers. That is why consumers tend to buy products

based only on their meaning, not considering the usability part. Later, they think of how to use the product after the purchase. Several respondents give examples of how they have bought the product based only on their feelings. When they came home, they realized that the object didn't fit their home and they didn't know how to use it. Here, the *two paths of ritualization practices* were noticed.

The first path of ritualization can be called *an adaptation of the object*. The consumer doesn't regret the purchase and spends some time adjusting the object, fitting it into space. This is one example of purchasing the designed flower pot:

"I've been looking for it for some time. Once I was passing by and saw it on a sale. Cute, lovely, simple. Exactly what I like. I bought it and had problems after because flowers didn't fit it. I didn't think about it when I was buying it. I spent some time to find the solution, but I never regret the purchase because I still liked it and I knew I would find how to use it" (Sofia, 27)

The second path of ritualization practice happens when a *consumer regrets a purchase*, makes attempts to fit the object, uses it for some time, but still doesn't like it and starts thinking of how to get rid of it.

"After a week, none of us liked this table. We both hate throwing things away that are working good, so we kept it because bought it with good quality and expensive. We will probably keep it for some years now" (Sara, 36)

In some cases, consumers find the ways to free themselves from regretful purchases:

"Some time ago I used to sell a lot. I sold about 50% of décor things in my previous home" (Anna, 31)

Discussion

The findings of the research give a deeper understanding of the taste regime portrait in consumer practices. The study agrees with the previous research and shows that taste actually plays an important role in consumer practices and guides them throughout their activities in home decoration context. This section summarizes and explains the findings that complement the previously done research (such as Arsel and Bean (2012) and Manzo (2010)) and opens new topics for further discussion.

Answering the questions of *how the taste changes over time and what factors affect taste formation*, the research shows several points worth discussing. First, the findings indicate that people are influenced by the social groups around them, such as friends and family. This is already known from the previous research, but this study reveals some particularities that haven't been noticed before. People around consumers contribute to their taste formation but it does not mean direct influence. Often, the process of change and inspiration comes in the situations not related to home decoration and style. According to the respondents' stories, meeting for a dinner with friends or moving in together can trigger unobtrusive changes in taste in home decoration.

Second, many respondents realize that the *online communities and social media influence their taste formation*. Arsel and Bean (2012) discuss it in their study, but they don't cover

how exactly the influence happens and in what circumstances. This research sheds light on the issue. The effect is mostly happening with consumers who are interested in home décor, or their current life circumstances trigger them find inspiration from outside. The interviewees noticed that they use particular social media sources on purpose – to get help in making their tastes come true. For example, one of the respondents follows an Instagram account, related to plants in home décor (House Plant Club 2017), because she likes this type of design and wants to have it at home. She is looking for the way to make her taste realize at her home, considering the plan of the apartment, colors and other practical factors. So, these communities and social media help consumers find the ways to perform their taste in their lives, by arranging new apartment or renovating.

Third, findings that go beyond previously done research, reveal that consumers tend to *formulate their taste before they can actually perform it in their lives*. According to the study, due to different reasons (financial, life and work circumstances), consumers are not able to purchase the products, but still passively develop their taste. One of the reasons of passive taste formation named by the respondents is lack of finance. This statement makes the author think of the role of money in taste formation itself. The financial situation can influence consumers' possibility to fully express their taste because then people cannot bring to life everything that conforms to their taste in home decoration. Does it mean that people that can't buy products they want at a particular moment, negotiate between their true taste and taste they can afford at the moment? The sociologists, such as Hennion (2010), note that taste is considered as a performance, through which people make statements, does it mean that home decoration that doesn't fit consumers' true taste is not a taste statement? Also, does in mean that financial situation can also affect the consumer taste itself? These questions are considered as another path of research that could be possibly done in the future and would focus on the taste formation and money relationships.

Moving to the *taste regime expression in consumer practices*, the findings that contribute to Arsel and Bean (2012) taste regime framework are discussed here. The processes of problematization and instrumentalization show that consumers actually choose products based on their taste, what was stated by Arsel and Bean (2012) before. There are also some new findings in this field. First, taste helps consumers question whether the objects conform to their preferences or not. People check whether every object fits their taste which is perceived as a 'big picture'. The problematization itself starts instantly, unexpectedly, as something attracts their attention. In terms of instrumentalization, different qualities, characteristics, and meanings assemble consumer taste. The findings reveal that the symbolic meanings are often more important than other factors in purchase. The process of ritualization revealed new tendencies that worth paying attention. First, consumers' start imagining the process of ritualization (or how they can use the products) before the purchase. This has a big influence on the purchase itself. Secondly, the study shows two scenarios of ritualization practices that happen with consumers. If the products do not fit the taste or the environment after the purchase, people either adapt them in the home décor with time or regret the purchase and seek for the opportunities to get rid of the object. Arsel and Bean (2012) in their study discuss the taste regime practices as a consistent process, where each practice goes one after another. The findings in this research let the author discuss that the practices can happen instantly, overlap each other, or change their sequence.

To finish the discussion part, this research let the author realize that taste itself is a complicated concept that is hard to grasp and analyze. For instance, answering the question of understanding taste itself was hard for respondents. Most of them talk about their personal taste, what they like and do not like, but they have a vague understanding of taste. This leads to the conclusion that taste is a complex phenomenon to understand, which implies a need for further study.

Conclusion

This research displays the recent underestimation of taste regimes in consumer practices and shows the opportunities to re-evaluate taste as a concept for future deeper research, and a tool for retailers. The aim of the study is to investigate the consumer understanding of the taste regime, do an in-depth research of each taste regime practice, stated by Arsel and Bean (2012), and try to answer the questions of how exactly taste is expressed and what are the specificities of each practice in terms of taste involvement. The chosen theories and method helped to answer the research question and sub-questions, and show the complexity of the phenomenon of taste and its regime.

From the practical perspective, the research is valuable for the retailers in understanding their customers, which can help in tailoring marketing activities. Researchers portray taste as a knowledge, developed through activities and ritualized behavior (Arsel & Bean 2012). This study supports the stated above and adds that, if people passively formulate their taste before actually having the opportunity to purchase products, it gives retailers a space to educate potential customers. One of the ways could be "aura production" around the brand (Christoforidou et al. 2012). So, when customers have the opportunity and finances, they know where to buy. Another implication for the retailers indicates that as symbolic meanings are often more important than practical characteristics, it gives retailers a need for a research of their consumers, how they understand their taste and what is the purpose of their home. As a result, the retailers can get valuable resources for the future inspiring formulation of the online materials in order to attract consumers based on the symbolic.

When it comes to academic implications, the study attempts to close the two gaps in knowledge about taste and consumer practices. First, the concept of taste and the taste regime theory, used before in sociology, is studied within a market of home decoration and gives insights about consumer behavior. Secondly, the research of Arsel and Bean (2012) represent an overall framework of taste regime portrayed in consumer practices, which triggered more questions and a wish to conduct more in-depth analysis of this framework to fill in the gaps in their study. As a result, the findings indicate how taste changes with the time and what factors influence such taste formation. For instance, the study reveals that social groups, such as family, and social media have a different effect on the taste formation. When it comes to taste regime practices (problematization, instrumentalization and ritualization), this research gives a deeper understanding of how they function and relate to each other, how taste is expressed in each practice and what it means for consumers. When combining all the findings and tendencies, shown in the current research, it comes to mind that the taste regime practices are more complicated than they were described by Arsel and Bean (2012) and can overlap each other in some circumstances.

In the process of the research, it was realized that taste regime is a complex phenomenon that is hard to analyze. With this, several paths possible for future research are indicated. First, this study covers only the consumer perspective, therefore, it gives an opportunity to study the retailers' perspective in the future which will contribute to academic knowledge and help home decoration and design retailers. Second, some study revelations triggered new questions that are worth future studies to contribute to the current knowledge in this field and get a deep and full understanding of the taste regime phenomenon. For instance, how much is the mutual influence of taste for cohabitants? The qualitative research states that the process of ritualization may include different practices, which makes the author ask questions: how regretting the purchase affects the taste? Also, the findings show that consumers have a taste formulated before they can actually make it happen due to financial reasons. This raises motives to investigate the relationships between finances and taste in consumer practices and how the financial situation affects the formation of taste and, eventually, the décor of consumer homes.

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Appendix 1

<u>Questions for the consumers</u>

- Age group, occupation
- What inspires you in terms if taste? How do you express your taste? (examples)
- Have you noticed your taste changes with time? Think of what affected these changes.

Process of choosing/ using products (with examples):

- If you see the product and you like it, what do you notice first? What thoughts are on your find?
- You want to buy this product; how do you understand that it fits your taste?
- While thinking of buying the product, what thoughts/key points do you have in mind? Do you think about how you will use the objects?
- Do you change your attitude to objects with time? State examples (negative and positive)
- Can you think of an example when you regret the purchase? When? What are the reasons?
- When and how do you understand that the product has fulfilled its purposes? (Example)
- In your opinion, how do you understand taste? What is taste for you?