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Listening to Consumption: Towards a Sonic Turn in Consumer Research

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Abstract

In seeking to orient consumer research towards the sonic, this paper has three objectives. First, to chart the emergence of the ‘sonic turn’ in the social sciences and, relatedly, to register the echoes of such a turn in consumer research. Second, to draw together the implications of this turn for the ontological, epistemological, and methodological foundations of consumer research as a culturally-framed social science. Third, to tease out the potential impact of the turn to sound in an intellectual context that remains relatively silent, by addressing the question: what does it mean to listen to consumption? We conclude that the sonic turn does not 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. Such a move opens up the space for new, alternative, and disruptive ways of thinking about and doing consumer research.

Keywords: sonic, turn, consumer research, epistemology, ontology, methodology, music

Introduction

“It’s impossible to even think when the thing is on. It destroys you. You can’t complete a thought. You can’t even comprehend what it’s doing to you.”

Lou Reed on *Metal Machine Music*

Lou Reed’s controversial album, *Metal Machine Music*, divides opinion. More than that, however, it draws our attention to the very nature of the sonic. It evidences how sounds are socially organised (as rock music, avant garde noise, or simply the second worst rock ‘n’ roll album of all time [Guterman and O’Donnell, 1991]). But it also demonstrates how sounds are socially organising. The album forces its audience to listen differently; feeling as opposed to thinking, making sensation rather than making sense. Moreover, *Metal Machine Music* underlines our constant negotiation with sound, reverberating through us and with others, evoking different reactions over time, summoning different subjectivities. These observations echo the purpose of this paper in drawing attention to the unique contribution of the turn to the sonic for consumer research, enouncing both its ecological nature and its resonant characteristics.

Meanwhile, a ‘sonic turn’ murmurs across the social sciences confronting the production and consumption of sound in tourism studies (e.g. Saldanha, 2002), urban studies (e.g. Atkinson, 2007), anthropology (e.g. Samuels et al., 2010), cultural studies (e.g. Dillane et al., 2015) and history (e.g. Keeling and Kun, 2011). This turn calls us to engage with the culture, politics, environment and aesthetics of sound. It requires an openness towards, and an ear for sound. It involves a reorientation and reworking of cultural understandings by using the sonic as a point of departure and access. In sum, the sonic turn acknowledges both the increasing importance of sound in our lives and the transformation of sound into an analytical category. Following Bachmann-Medick (2016), a sonic turn in consumer research would attempt not only to understand the consumption of sound, but also to understand the world of consumption through sound. Thus, while we can treat sound as a consumption object in and of itself, as a motivating force in consumption environments,

or as a background against which we conduct our consumption, identity-making and so on, it may be more fruitful to ask: what does it mean to listen to consumption?

Outside of the phonetic implications of brand names (e.g. Yorkston and Menon, 2004) and the contemporary interest in sonic branding (Gustafsson, 2015), the treatment of sound within consumer research has focused largely on music as a marketised and commodified form of sound. Much of this work centres on the use of music as a marketing tool (Larsen et al., 2009) and circulates around notions of how it can be strategically employed in advertising (e.g. Bode, 2009; Olsen, 1995; Olsen, 1997; Scott, 1990) and servicescapes (e.g. Knoferle et al., 2012; Oakes, 2000; Oakes and North, 2008) to encourage specific responses by consumers. In essence, such functional music works to construct “untroublesome and socially useful subjects, as citizens, workers or consumers in territories where control of the soundscape may also be connected to the control of production and consumption functions” (Atkinson, 2007: 1911). Notwithstanding the contribution of this work to our understanding of the relationship between music and marketing, it has been critiqued for neglecting aesthetic experience (Bradshaw et al., 2010) and the social, cultural, historical and political conditions that shape and structure the production and consumption of music (O’Reilly et al., 2013). Elsewhere, music has been considered a consumption object in respect of the emotional and aesthetic enjoyment it provides (e.g. Holbrook, 1986), its relationship with identity (e.g. Abolhasani et al., 2017; Goulding et al., 2002; Hesmondhalgh, 2008; Nuttall et al., 2011; Shankar, 2000) and its symbolic function (Larsen et al., 2010). Additionally it has been construed as a context within which consumption takes place (e.g. Goulding et al., 2009; Sinclair and Dolan 2015). What this body of work suggests is that marketing and consumer research limit their consideration of sound, largely treating it as an object only, and not as an analytical lens. Initial efforts to address the sonic more broadly see it connected to space and contend that “the sonic experience is concretised and embodied by a particular subject in specific physical and social locations, while reconfiguring the boundary permutations of these sonic spatialities” (Chauvin and Bode, 2015: np).

Of course, consumer research has not been soundless. In truth, sound is everywhere; in the world of consumption and in the work that seeks to capture it, in our fieldwork and our interviews, in the clicking of our word processors and in our presentations to colleagues. Further, a sonic turn does not just present the possibility of an alternative to textual, or even visual representation (Peñaloza and Cayla, 2007). Rather, sound offers other qualities including a performative orientation (Drobnick, 2004). The sonic is performative in at least three senses in that it (1) is a productive and performative force that creates spaces (Gallagher et al., 2017); (2) acknowledges a performative sense of being, always becoming, connected to embodiment, experience and the present (Harrison, 2000), and; (3) offers a more-than-representational approach to conducting and communicating research (Gallagher and Prior, 2014). It is a ‘doing’ turn that provides a non-linguistic means of appreciating the world (Logan, 2016), holding the potential for novel, alternative, and disruptive ways of thinking (Tainen, 2007) and doing research.

In beginning to record the possibilities of the sonic for studies of consumption, we continue in this paper by first sounding out the ‘sonic turn’ in the social sciences. We explicate the nature of turns and specifically address the characteristics of the turn to the sonic. Second, we calibrate the implications of this turn for the ontological, epistemological, and methodological foundations of consumer research as a culturally-framed social science. Collating the philosophical assumptions and goals of the sonic in this way is important in that it charts the implications of this perspective for the pursuit of knowledge in consumer research (see Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Murray and Ozanne, 1991). In particular, we are concerned here with the idea of a sonic ecology that positions sound as an active ingredient in and workspace for social life (DeNora, 2011), and with resonance, or the ensounding of bodies (Berrens, 2016). Third, we offer a tentative analysis of the impact of the turn to sound in an intellectual context that remains relatively silent. We organise this work

around the sonic dimensions of Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR); a sensory phenomenon in which individuals experience a tingling, static-like sensation in response to specific audio stimuli. ASMR, then, provides the raw material through which we bring to life the theoretical arguments being made in the paper. We conclude that the sonic turn does not simply present a set of new objects for enquiry, but rather offers a fresh analytical perspective.

Tracing the Sonic Turn in Social Science

Turns offer the potential for new and critical ways of understanding phenomena. The terminology of turns is useful in that they represent a focus of investigation across disciplines and, ultimately, a lens for analysis (Bachmann-Medick, 2016): “[t]hese two features – the transformation of an investigated phenomenon into an analytical category, and interdisciplinarity, give a research trend the character of a turn” (Peķala, 2015: 22). Since the 1970s there have been a succession of “inversions, reversions or redirections” (Reed, 2005: 1621) more or less related to the cultural turn (Bachmann-Medick, 2016). Thus we have witnessed the linguistic turn (Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Rorty, 1992), the interpretive turn (Hiley et al., 1991; Rabinow and Sullivan, 1979), the spatial turn (De Certeau, 1984; Lefebvre, 1991), the narrative turn (Barthes, 1977; Ricouer, 1984), and so on; each identifying new objects of inquiry and introducing new frames of analysis. At the same time, these rearrangements in our approach and analytical categories are not seismic in the way that paradigm shifts are. Where paradigm shifts imply a radical, abrupt and revolutionary replacement of a worldview, turns are tentative and experimental expressions of connected concerns (Bachmann-Medick, 2016). As such, turns are more compatible with the social sciences and humanities where “ideas change positions, influenced by new research schools, rather than die out altogether, replaced by others” (Peķala, 2015: 23). They call forth alternative understandings of cultural phenomena and, therefore are not without attendant complexities, debates, and tensions (Reed, 2005).

Turns are connected to one another in that a concentration on one analytical lens eventually sparks a reactionary turn to another. The visual turn (Howells, 2003; Pink et al., 2004), for example, is positioned as a counterweight to the linguistic turn that preceded it (Strangleman, 2008). The turn to the visual is thus premised upon the understanding that the visual holds the potential to produce different forms of knowledge than are possible through linguistic modes of enquiry. For its part, the linguistic turn foregrounded the impact of language on our constructions of reality. In contrast, the visual turn opens up a consideration of the increasing visualisation of culture (Bell et al., 2013), the consequential importance of visual experience (Huggins, 2008), and the influence of *scopic regimes* (Rose, 2001). Turns do not all manifest the same way in all disciplines and thus there can be points of divergence. Prominent turns in consumer research have included the interpretive turn (Belk et al., 1988; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988), the turn to materiality (Bettany, 2007; Borgerson, 2014), the turn to practice (Echeverri and Skålen, 2011; Woermann and Rokka, 2015), and the spatial turn (Chatzidakis et al., 2012; Visconti et al., 2010). Within consumer research the interpretive turn is treated very much as a paradigm in opposition to positivism. In truth the move to interpretivism might not represent a paradigm shift at all as it has not resulted in displacement of the positivist paradigm that remains dominant in the parent field. Instead, interpretivism, as a turn that approaches the significance of a paradigm, can be considered a “strong turn” (Peķala, 2015: 23), which binds together other subsequent and more “weak” (Peķala, 2015: 23) cultural turns within consumer research.

Although, as we have suggested, consumer researchers have paid much attention to the consumption of music this does not constitute a *de facto* turn in itself. Naturally, declaring a new turn, in consumer research as elsewhere, holds the possibility not just of recruiting like-minded individuals but also of eliciting critique (Woolgar and Lezaun, 2015). It might be read as just another concession to academic fashion or worse, the provocations of scholarly rivalry (Vasileva, 2015). But ‘weak’ turns are different from paradigms in that there is less likelihood of incommensurability and a greater potential for overlap and agreement across standpoints. For

instance, while we can acknowledge an affective turn (e.g. Hemmings, 2005), the idea of affect cuts across a number of related ‘weak’ turns such as the embodied turn, the turn to practice and, indeed, the sonic turn. The sonic turn can therefore be considered a ‘weak’ turn, part of a ‘strong’ and more ‘paradigmatic’ cultural turn (Peñala, 2015) and with points of connection with other weaker turns such as the visual turn and so forth.

The sonic turn, then, is part of the more wide-ranging ‘turn to culture’ (Hall, 1997) and is offered as a challenge to occularcentrism (Kavanagh 2013): “a concerted attempt to wrest the bases of human knowledge away from the long-standing hegemony of visual, text-based and representational models” (Born, 2013: 6). Similar challenges to the visual have come through other modalities such as smell (Strati, 2000; Valtonen et al., 2010; Henshaw et al., 2016; Canniford et al., 2017), touch (Valtonen et al., 2010; Jansson-Boyd, 2011), and taste (Hoegg and Alba, 2007) and owe a huge debt to the multisensory agenda put forward by Elizabeth Hirschman and Morris Holbrook (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). For its part, the turn to the sonic represents an acknowledgement of the increasing importance of sound as a site for analysis, aesthetic engagement, and theoretical development (Drobnick, 2004; Faudree, 2012). In positing a sonic turn here we follow Papenburg and Schulze (2016) by arguing for analyses [of consumption] through sound rather than just analyses of [the consumption of] sound. Just as with the turn to the visual, one argument for a sonic turn rests on the ubiquity of sound in the modern era: “we hear everything from factories, sirens, church bells and the humming of a computer, and these sounds shape the societies that take shape around them” (Latham, 2017: 387). Nonetheless, the sonic turn does represent something of a departure from its parent cultural turn in that it dispenses with the notion of sound as ‘text’. It moves beyond a concentration on meaning (Goodman, 2010) and instead considers the broad spectrum of experiential and rhetorical affordances of sound (Ceraso, 2014). Such a move requires a shift from ‘reading’ culture to ‘sensing’ culture and from ‘cultural texts’ to ‘empires of the senses’ (Howes, 2004; Papenburg and Schultze, 2016): “sound is immersive and proximal, surrounding and passing through the body. And while texts and images involve the spatial juxtaposition of elements, the sonic arts involve a temporal flux in which elements interpenetrate one another” (Cox, 2011: 148).

We are careful here not to position the sonic as simply a replacement for the visual or any other modality. Moreover, while we could apprehend the sonic as an inevitable step along the road towards a “democracy of the senses” (Berendt, 1985: 32) within a multisensory approach to the study of consumption, the sonic is even more. The sonic brings with it novel and unconventional modes of thinking and knowledge production that hold the potential to connect to other theoretical and empirical developments within the field such as the unfolding of consumer embodiment (Joy and Sherry, 2003; Hewer and Hamilton, 2010; Patterson, 2018), the aestheticisation of everyday life (Cova and Svanfeldt, 1993; Venkatesh and Meamber, 2008), the production of affect (Hill et al., 2014), the emergence of the neoliberal consumer subject (Bradshaw, 2011; Giesler and Veresiu, 2014), in addition to a more sensory approach to ethnographic fieldwork (Valtonen et al., 2010).

In the following sections we chart the ontological, epistemological, and methodological reverberations of the turn to the sonic in order to comprehensively assess their implications for consumer research. In so doing we employ ASMR as a case exemplar to give substance to our arguments around the philosophical foundations of the sonic. From its humble beginnings, ASMR has been transformed into a powerful consumption object perfectly tailored to the demands of the neoliberal project of self-care. Thus, its use here is predicated on the ability of ASMR to allow us access to the resonances of the market, consumption and sonic phenomena.

Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response

Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) is a recently acknowledged, but understudied 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 and the rustling of paper (Andersen, 2015; Barratt and Davis, 2015). An undeniably affective experience, members of the ASMR community find the sensation difficult to describe. Anderson (2015: 686) characterises it as a “physiological charge”, that results in a “reliable low-grade euphoria” (Ahuja, 2013: 443) accompanied by feelings of relaxation and well-being (Barratt and Davis, 2015).

The triggers for ASMR vary from person to person, but are predominantly aural and cover a range of different kinds of sound. The most common trigger appears to be the whispered voice, hence the self-styled moniker of the online ‘Whisper Community’. Other triggers include rustling paper, crinkling plastic, tapping fingers, scratching, blowing, the dulcet tones of painter Bob Ross, and, even the crackling of ice floes. While many of these triggers can be encountered through interpersonal interactions and ambient noise in everyday life, the emergent online ASMR community provides access to triggers, primarily via YouTube media, that can be retrieved on demand, at any point in time. Such videos also highlight the role of visual and interpersonal stimuli in triggering ASMR responses. Role-play videos recreate the performance of everyday, ordinary tasks (Andersen, 2015). These involve someone paying close attention to a task, the viewer, or a task involving the viewer, where the viewer is placed in a position of “close proximity” (Barratt and Davis, 2015: 2) to another person in order to be cared for. While the visual and interpersonal elements are important, Barratt and Davis (2015) note that these videos typically emphasise sound as the main trigger for ASMR.

Most enthusiasts describe their use of ASMR media as a means to relaxation, while some also enjoy remedial benefits in managing chronic conditions such as insomnia and recurring headaches (Ahuja, 2013). Thus ASMR is promoted within the community as offering a solution for stress and sleeplessness, and as facilitating a sense of well-being and personal transformation. This distinguishes ASMR from other sonic phenomenon, such as ‘frisson’ which also produces a tingling sensation, but one that is energising and invigorating, rather than relaxing and calming. Figures on the incidence of ASMR in the population are hard to come by, and “causes are subjective and contested even among those devotees who nonetheless insist on its existence” (Andersen, 2015: 686). Little research has yet been conducted on why people experience ASMR, but it does seem clear that you either experience it or you do not – it is not a response that can be learnt or acquired.

In the mid 2000s, members of online forums began posting accounts of the sensations they experienced in response to certain sonic stimuli in order to find out if such responses were shared by others (Ahuja, 2013). In seeking to legitimate a phenomenon that is difficult to explain physiologically, the emergent ASMR community strove to ground their experience in scientific terms and empirical proof of its existence. The name – Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response – borrows from science, and thus, argues Anderson (2015), locates the currently non-normative ASMR experience as potentially universal by situating its origins in human biology. This globally shared sonic phenomenon has matured into a thriving online community, with members united in their desire to share triggers with one another. Currently, there are 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. For example, Gentle Whispering ASMR has close to a million subscribers while ASMR Darling has 670,000. Of course these ASMRtists are also able to monetise their work to the tune of about €7 CPM. It is the marketisation of this sonic phenomenon which is of interest here.

Next we offer an explication of sonic ontology, epistemology and methodology and their implications for consumer research, returning back to ASMR each time to offer concrete examples that support our arguments.

Sonic Ontology

Understanding ontology involves addressing questions about the nature of reality and of social beings. A sonic ontology must grapple with what it means to understand our own being in the world as a sonic phenomenon. To this end we draw attention to the ecological and resonant properties of sound. Ecological considerations help us recognise that social life is composed of and by the sonic, that sound has the potential to shape spaces of experience, and that the nature of the sonic object is contextual. Resonance teaches us that our selves vibrate with sound, and that sound encourages us to be flexible subjects that generate affect.

Sound is socially constitutive. We do not simply appreciate sound, but we become part of it and it becomes part of us. Indeed, we are invited to perform the spaces of reverberation that we inhabit (Cobussen, 2016). In beginning to trace the possibilities of a sonic turn for investigations of consumption we thus draw upon Tia DeNora's (2011) concept of a 'sonic ecology' as the first of two key ontological principles. A sociologist, DeNora underscores how sound is indelibly social, exposing the everyday things that people do while they are doing music (Roy, 2006). Following on from research on soundscapes (e.g. Arquette, 2004; Schafer, 1969), the notion of a sonic ecology shifts our focus away from the more passive form of listening that is commonly captured in consumer research by terms such as atmosphere, servicescapes, and musicscapes (e.g. Oakes, 2000; Oakes and Warnaby, 2011; Oakes et al., 2013). A sonic ecology can instead be regarded as the bi-directional, aural interactions between people (and other organisms) and their environment. 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). A sonic ecology, then, incorporates the relationships between people, materials, environments, their patterning and spatial order, and includes the "inside of action, its pre-cognitive and non-verbal features such as emotion, impulse and embodiments" (DeNora 2011: xi). In sum, the sonic ecology guides and is guided by, invites and is invited by, and deters and is deterred by our patterns of sociability, interactions with people and the environment, and our movements in and through space.

As noted by Arquette (2004), sonic space does not follow the same rules as physical space, primarily because it is very difficult to physically contain sound. Bull (2001) defines sound as non-spatial, in the sense that it engulfs the spatial. While some consumer research seeks to understand the consumption of sound as bounded or shaped by spaces (e.g. Goulding et al., 2009; Sinclair and Dolan, 2015) we can look to the media, culture and urban studies literature to tentatively flesh out the idea that sound can be used by individuals to reconfigure both public and private space (e.g. Atkinson, 2007; Gallagher, M 2016; Gallagher et al., 2017; LaBelle, 2010). It follows that what a sonic ontology can bring to consumer research is an interest in the re-creation and re-configuration 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 Whisper Community, through which social, physical, and temporal spaces of experience have been reconfigured. Once solitary, natural, and randomly occurring, the experiences associated with ASMR have been stylised 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.

An ecological sonic ontology also highlights the contextual nature of the relationship between the sonic object, subject, and environment. At the most rudimentary level, a sonic turn demands that we consider the nature of the sonic object. Caused by vibrations, sound is intangible and only becomes audible in passing through some kind of transmission medium. As such, sound is always mediated, and thus we often comprehend the sonic object in its material form i.e. a recording, an instrument and so on. In a capitalist society, engagement with sound is governed primarily by the market and thus our attention is focused on music, as a marketised or commodified form of sound imbued with cultural and economic meaning (e.g. Attali, 1985; O'Reilly et al., 2013). Philosophers have long

argued about the nature and value of music (Bowman, 1998). However, music is not the only expression of the sonic object. As Schaeffer (1966: 23) argues: “by sonic object I mean here sound itself considered in its sonic nature, rather than the material object (instrument or any device whatsoever) from which it comes.” A sonic turn therefore demands that we consider the ontological distinctions and relations between sonic objects in consumer research – including sound, silence and noise.

These forms of the sonic object are often defined in relation to one another. For example, silence is commonly understood as an absence of sound or a “lack of content” (Klett, 2014: 156). The composer John Cage however problematised this notion, by equating ‘silence’ with ‘noise’, where ‘noise’ is ‘background noise’ – the murmurs and sounds that fill every silence (Cox, 2009). This is exemplified in his work, 4’33”, which is notable for its absence of recognisable musical material, instead shifting our auditory focus to contingent environmental sounds. Thus “noise becomes music, audience becomes performer, and the term ‘silence’ is exposed as purely nominal” (Arquette, 2004: 166). Similarly, music and noise are frequently juxtaposed. For example, Attali (1985) argues that noise is fundamentally threatening and violent, but that the control and ordering of noise by those in power, transform it into music. Noise therefore, does not simply coincide with loud sounds or even jarring sounds, but rather with sound out of place (Bailey, 1996). What is interesting to note is that the sonic object is classified not by some inherent sonic quality, but in accordance with how society defines and constructs place, i.e. what is in the right place or the wrong place. To illustrate, the triggers for ASMR are sounds that are found in our everyday environment, and which generally, would not be thought of as music. In fact, outside of the ASMR community, sounds such as the rustling of paper, would often be thought of as noise. However, through the institutional recognition of this aural phenomenon and the formation of an associated community, a ‘right place’ is constructed for this special category of trigger sounds. In turn, they have been packaged and made accessible on demand – in other words, these sounds have been transformed into a sonic product and their relationship to the sonic subject is reframed.

Hargreaves and North (1997) note that sounds are transformed into music through the meanings people imbue in them within a given social and cultural context. Attali (1985) argues that this transformation and ordering of sounds is more than subjective. Rather, it is driven by the political-economic context and thus illustrates how societies structure political power and economic relations. There is, however, a tendency in much research, including work on consumers, to think of sound (particularly music) as a context within which thought and action happens; a context that shapes and structures, but which does not become an active participant in social life. For example, Goulding et al. (2002) explore rave as a milieu for contemporary consumption phenomena related to identity and the emergence of new communities. In contrast, the nature of sonic reality is dynamic, open, fluid, contingent, and this spills over into the nature of social beings who can be understood as resonances and reverberations themselves, rather than hermetically sealed individuals.

Bodies thrum with the sounds of the world around them. The second key principle of a sonic ontology in which the listening subject is central is this ‘resonance’ of social beings. In challenging the dominance of ocularcentrism and offering up the possibilities of listening as a mode of thinking (Janus, 2011), philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (2007) explains that sound has an internal resonance, without which there would be nothing to hear, and which also projects outwards. As it spreads in space, it vibrates (Henriques, 2010) and becomes perceptible by the listening subject, or *corps sonore* (resonant body), who is also marked by reflection and self-reflection, or in other words, by resonances. These resonances “give birth to sense – sense as sensual perception, sense as dynamic, directional, impulsive sense, and, perhaps least of all, sense as meaning” (Janus, 2011: 187). Listening, as an active way of being in the world, is intimately bound to subjectivity, for the listening subject is one who is constantly anxious about and striving to make sense of the world

(Coulthard 2012): “when one is listening, one is on the lookout for a subject, something (itself) that identifies itself by resonating from self to self, in itself and for itself, hence outside of itself, at once the same and the other than itself, one in the echo of the other, and this echo is like the very sound of its sense” (Nancy, 2007: 9). As a consequence, sonic subjectivity is plural, a self that is not a point, but a membrane through which sound vibrates (Connor, 1997), characterised by sociocultural and material frequencies of repetition, amplitudes and intensities of feeling, and the sonorousness of timbre (Henriques, 2010).

Sounds change us. Experiencing sound encourages us to constantly recalibrate the senses (Drobnick, 2014), reorienting ourselves in the moment towards sound. The sonic, then, incorporates a performative aspect (Drobnick, 2004) and is process-orientated (Herzogenrath, 2017): “the performative is the gap, the rupture, the spacing that unfolds the next moment allowing change to happen”, (Dewsbury 2000: 475). The self that resonates, then, is in a constant state of becoming, of contingency, deconstructing stability (Cobussen et al., 2013), embracing the vibration of “variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, cited in Herzogenrath, 2017: 4), and irrevocably tied to sensemaking through the body and through doing something with the body (Maier, 2016). Indeed, addressing subjectivity in sonic terms has potential in respect of further understanding both how sound might be used as a technology of the self and how the self is never a private affair. First, sounds may be summoned as raw materials - ‘semiotic particles’ in the reflexive, continuous and symbolic project of self-construction for the attention of self and others (DeNora, 1999). Second, sound reminds us of the elasticity of the self, making evident the continuity and discontinuity of our subjectivity (Boyd and Duffy, 2012), and clarifying the connectedness between inside and outside, self and other (Tiainen, 2007; Patterson and Schroeder 2010; Hill et al., 2014). Further, listening conveys the notion of being attuned to the possibility for a relation to self (Nancy, 2007). Sound has a logic of evocation, hailing us as listeners. Thus, sonic phenomena encourage us to engage with their possibilities, to gather up their points of diffusion (Chow and Steintrager, 2011), to connect to a variety of fast-moving, slippery subject positions; in essence, to be a flexible subject (DeNora and Belcher, 2000). Similarly, ASMR hails different subjectivities. As an anomalous, but fairly widespread aural phenomenon, ASMR transforms the listening human subject into a consuming subject through its medicalisation and marketisation. Sonic subjectivity is also shaped by conditions of production and consumption, and is relational. The resonance of sound enables connections with other people. As a consequence Bull (2004) argues that more than any other sense, sound is utopian in the desire for proximity and connectedness. This can be observed in the ASMR community, where members are physically disconnected and alone (Ahuja, 2013), but where a “nonstandard intimacy” (Berlant and Warner, 1998) between the listener and the whisperer is created in an intimate, albeit public, sonic space via the affective power of the whispered voice (Anderson, 2015).

Sound moves bodies. The sonic subject is an embodied, affective and multi-sensory subject that sounds and resounds (Born, 2013). To understand listening merely as cochlear reception is inadequate for a sonic ontology, in which every being, body and object vibrates and has acoustic qualities (Gallagher et al., 2017): “Vibrations offer an opportunity to conceptualise the permeability of individuals in their environment as they selectively transduce and amplify its energetic patterns – that is, propagate affect” (Henriques, 2010: 84). Bodies also affect sound through their material characteristics, and this in turn alters the capacity of sound to affect other bodies in a resonating movement variously called flow, circulation, transmission, contagion, travel, translation and vibration (Gallagher, M., 2016). These resonances, may or may not register as what is commonly called ‘feelings’. A sonic ontology thus facilitates a disentangling of affect and emotion. For example, while at one level affect and emotion are “tethered by intentionality, memory, and nostalgia” (Andersen, 2015: 685) in ASMR, the experience is undeniably affective. It is a physiological reaction that precedes the cognitive coding of the event as emotions and feelings and

the cultural definition of those feelings, via reference to the material and sensory dimensions of popular consumer culture (Papenburg and Schultze, 2016), as relaxation and well-being.

Sonic Epistemology

A sonic epistemology is a way of knowing that arises through sound. It reflects a process of knowledge acquisition that is not *about* sound, but *by* sound and listening (Schulze, 2016). Rather than simply replacing one kind of data with another, a sonic epistemology embraces new forms of knowledge, ways of knowing, and types of relationships between the would-be-knower and what can be known. It shapes the way we understand our world. It is, in the context of consumer research, how we understand consumption through listening.

Logocentric epistemologies and scopic metaphors dominate our thinking about what, and how we know about consumers and consumption, thus subordinating the epistemological status of hearing. For example, we pursue ‘enlightenment’ and equate understanding with seeing (Kavanagh, 2013). A democratisation of the senses (Berendt, 1985) broadens the senses of sense, therefore enabling an acknowledgement of the ubiquitous role of sound in mediating the relationship between human beings and their environment and unlocking knowledge gained by “thinking with our ears” (Bull and Back, 2003: 2). While not promoting a countermonopoly of the ear (Erlmann, 2004) or an inversion of the sensory order into a form of sonocentrism as warned against by Cobussen et al. (2013), a sonic epistemology values sound and listening as important ways of knowing (Hemsworth 2016): “it is through careful and attentive listening that the world appears in a different way, or, perhaps better, another world is brought into unconcealment” (Cobussen et al., 2013: n.p). Erlmann (2004) argues that this quest to ‘hear culture’ suggests the possibility for new ways of knowing a culture and for understanding how people know each other and their environment. For instance, Gallagher, R (2016: 10) notes that the preference ASMR enthusiasts have for speech that is unintelligible or in a foreign language, frees the human voice from the need to convey information, bringing to light “the aesthetic and affective substrates that undergird interaction and communication”. Sound can therefore be understood as a knowledge object, that bears the histories and logics of the worlds from which it has been extracted (Hudson and Shaw, 2015).

Although research on sound is ample and widely accepted across academic disciplines, minimal attention has been paid to the epistemological value of sound (Cobussen et al., 2013). Thus far, it appears that sound has been considered an unreliable witness in research: it is seemingly “too uncertain to provide a source of valid knowledge, except perhaps when subsumed within video and stabilised by the referential qualities of the image” (Gallagher and Prior, 2014: 3). We see this epistemological challenge manifest in ASMR videos, which Gallagher, R (2016) argues are experiments in what Michel Chion (1994: 112) calls ‘rendering’ – an attempt to capture and “convey [the] effect or feeling associated with [a] sound source” in this case, through what is perceived as the more epistemologically reliable, and marketable, sense of vision.

A key epistemological question is what specific kind of knowledge is primarily accessible and presentable through sound? Sound, as suggested by Revill (2016) involves the simultaneous interplay of physical vibration of materials, the phenomenology of listening, and meaning. Attuning ourselves to sound in consumer research presents us with the opportunity to capture the overlooked, the neglected, and the liminal that feature increasingly in non-representational, more-than-representational, and performative modes of address (Gallagher and Prior, 2014). This shifts our attention away from meaning which is dominant in interpretive consumer research and Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), to also consider 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 constantly 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. Moreover, the performative approach to knowledge that the sonic incorporates, helps to provide access to the affective, expressive, and embodied aspects of consumption (Boyd and Duffy, 2012): “listening to sounds and music renders place quite differently than does vision ... listening occurs around and through our bodies” (Duffy and Waitt, 2011: 121). For it is the body that enters into a specific sensory, semiotic, and social environment, and it is the medium through which practices are performed. In this sense, sonic epistemic practices might enable a deeper understanding of our sensory engagement with and embodied orchestration in consumption; our ‘tuned’ experience of body and world (Woermann and Rokka 2015).

Although sonic epistemology is in a nascent state, Schulze (2016) offers three current examples: human echolocation, acoustemology, and sonic fiction. Human echolocation is concerned with practices of corporeal, auditory perception, such as palatial clicks with the tongue and deep listening, that are used by humans to create representations of an environment so that orientation can be secured. What is unique as an epistemology, is that echolocation concentrates exclusively on barely documentable and representable forms of sensory perception, to the exclusion of logocentric ways of approaching the outside world. Acoustemology (i.e. acoustic epistemology), proposed by Steven Feld (1996), frames sounding and the embodied experiencing of sound as a distinctive condition of and for knowing the world that draws on the intimate relations between sound, space and place (Born 2013). Thus, as highlighted by Schulze (2016), the fundamental epistemological character of acoustemology is that it incorporates all inquiries of the outside world that are approached via the auditory senses. Sonic fiction is a personal, stylistically innovative, and idiosyncratic narration of an individual’s sonic experience that explores the semantic aspects of sonic practices in everyday life. As such, it is a way to make sense of, and understand sonic experience, through the creation of a complementary artefact. Schulze (2016: 117) claims that these examples demonstrate how sonic epistemologies are currently articulated: “first, as newly explored or refined cultural practices that prove to be epistemic practices (human echolocation); second, as comprehensive approaches that manage to integrate a rich diversity of epistemic practices under one methodological concept (as in acoustemology); and finally, as forms of representing the results of epistemic practices that themselves bear strong epistemic potential”.

Sonic epistemologies necessarily call forth a different relationship between the would-be-knower and what can be known than those that exist under logocentric epistemologies. In developing a sonic sensibility, Gallagher et al., (2016) advocate the practice of ‘expanded listening’, which (1) enables the recognition of how sound affects bodies in ways that extend beyond human perception, cognition and knowledge; (2) reveals things that are not available to the other senses, such as the propagation of vibrations across material thresholds; and (3) attunes to sound’s capacity to both connect, and change, disparate bodies. For example, through a deep and expanded listening of ASMR videos, Gallagher, R (2016: 1) evidences how they 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 (Howes, 2004) that governs advanced capitalist markets, whereby consumers engage with commodities in non-rational, but aesthetic ways (e.g. Venkatesh and Meamber, 2008). Accordingly, we offer the metaphor of an ‘amplifier’ to capture the role of a researcher in acting as a membrane that listens to bodies listening and then transforms these resonances into new knowledge and understandings of consumers and consumption.

Sonic Methodology

Even when researchers are ready to accommodate sound, or focus on audio-centred forms of social practice (Erlmann, 2004), traditional modes of data collection, analysis and presentation tend to hold sway. Interviews and observations are our stock in trade (Chien, 2009), transcription seduces us into a preoccupation with the written word (O’Dell and Willim, 2013), and sound is ultimately “reduced to the discursive”, (Jensen et al., 2015: 64). The sonic turn brings with it a renewed

emphasis on methodology though such methods continue to range from the simplistic to the complex, and from the faithful capturing of sound to the more-than-representational performance of sonic research. Further, sound as methodology has the ability to cast new understandings from previous work and to explore entirely new questions altogether (Daza and Gershon, 2015), the kinds of questions that are unattainable for those who rely on visual observation alone (de Garis, 1999).

With respect to data collection beyond the textual accounting for sound, the most basic approach to be utilised is one of sound recording. Field recording is a means of providing documentary evidence (Duffy et al., 2016) that helps illuminate the sonic characteristics of consumers and spaces of consumption (Gallagher and Prior 2014) and that shapes our experiences as consumers in such spaces (Duffy et al., 2016). A particular innovation in the collection of field recordings is the soundwalk (Gallagher and Prior, 2014; O’Keefe, 2015) in which the researcher, as walking listener, becomes more fully attuned to the environment (Westerkamp, 2006). According to Gallagher and Prior (2014) there are two types of soundwalk: the ‘listening walk’ (Schafer, 1994) that involves the researcher walking along a predefined route and either listening carefully to the environment or recording it as they go, or ‘audio drifting’ (Gallagher, 2015) that involves walking through an environment while listening to a device playing an experimental audio work about that environment. In all such cases listening produces a different experience and understanding of an environment than does vision (Duffy and Waite, 2011).

In an effort to pay attention to life in the making, the “ongoing performances of culture” (Hill et al., 2014: 384), Morton (2005) advocates a non-representational and performative approach to data collection and production. Because of the focus on the performative present, data gathering is not planned or structured in advance and pursues motion and fluidity. As such Morton (2005) makes use of spoken diaries, sound recordings, photography and video to account for the unpredictability of performance and its attendant responses. Sound diaries (Duffy and Waite, 2011; Smith, 2000), and even ‘sonic souvenirs’ (Dib et al., 2010), have been utilised to similar effect elsewhere in accessing the role of sound in sensemaking and memorialising. The performative is also practiced through the medium of ‘soundscape composition’ (Drever, 2002; Freeman et al., 2011; Waldock, 2016), a more artistic “transmission of meanings about place, time, environment and listening perception” (Westerkamp, 2002: 52).

When it comes to the analysis of sonic data, traditional techniques such as content analysis, thematic analysis and so forth continue to be used. These can now be supplemented and even replaced by programmes of rhythm analysis (Boyd and Duffy, 2012; Ikoniadou, 2014), and variations on sonic mapping including sonic cartography (Gershon, 2013a) and visceral sonic mapping (Duffy et al., 2016).

Naturally enough, established consumer research methods such as netnography seem ideally placed for the study of ASMR given that it is predominantly an online phenomenon. However, ASMR may also lend itself to the use of sound diaries and other performative approaches to record the affective experience of consumers submitting themselves to the nonstandard intimacy produced by trigger sounds and videos.

Not all characteristics of a culture can be expressed discursively (de Garis, 1999) and neither can they be translated through representational discourse alone. Asad (1986: 159) contends “that under certain conditions a dramatic performance, the execution of a dance, or the playing of a piece of music might be more apt. These would all be productions of the original and not mere interpretations: transformed instances of the original.” In teasing out the possibilities for the communication of sonic research, Gallagher and Prior (2014) draw close attention to three principal formats: capture and reproduction, representation, and performance. The first of these formats,

capture and reproduction is concerned with the faithful reconstruction of a sonic environment in order that others can also listen to it. In contrast, a representational format seeks to provide a thick sonic description: “Processes of recording and playback can be seen as an interpretation of action, since sound is a form of movement-in-the-world, and the technologies and techniques used to record and re-enact it are informed by various conventions about which frequencies are meaningful and which are noise, what should be included and rejected” (Gallagher and Prior, 2014: 276). Finally, performance in communication connects to the use of performance in data collection in that it is designed “to engage with the intangible, imperceptible, ephemeral and affective dimensions of life” (Gallagher and Prior, 2014: 277), to resonate with and through audiences. The performative is not without its challenges, however, as researchers seek to re-create affective intensities experienced in the field (Duffy et al., 2016) and to bring consumers, consumption, and consumption contexts ‘into form’ (Smith, 2000: 618). In particular, the mobilisation of sounds in performance are likely to fall on deaf ears unless there is a “convergence of various contexts such as the material properties of the sounds themselves, the auspices in which they materialise as well as the stocks of sonic knowledge available to the individuals who experience them, assign them meaning, and respond to them” (Vannini et al., 2010: 332). In other words, the sounds we use in our research performances need to be elocutionary in nature, demanding the attention and regard of our audiences (Vannini et al., 2010) and triggering their stock of sonic cultural knowledge. Ultimately, sounds are useful in performance for they help reveal the concerns and values of our research subjects, our audiences, and ourselves (Gershon 2013b).

Conclusion: Towards a Sonic Turn in Consumer Research

A sonic turn in consumer research ushers in a fresh analytical lens that views reality as ecological and human beings as resonating. It promotes a way of knowing that is more-than-representational, affective and embodied. It encourages the mobilisation of the performative in data collection, analysis and presentation. It asks us what it means to listen to consumption. The result is a number of key issues within consumer research that require a degree of sounding out.

A sonic turn invites us to rethink how subjects, objects, contexts, and the socioculturality of consumption are enacted in practice and research. While a sonic turn is more than a focus on objects of enquiry, a sonic ontology does at the most rudimentary level urge us to expand our interest in what can be consumed beyond music, to all different kinds of sound and the relations that exist between them. More broadly, a sonic turn attunes us to the sonic ecology of consumption spaces – how consumers are listening to their own consumption, and through listening, resonating with one another and the objects and contexts of consumption. This speaks to a kind of “flattening” of ontology in consumer research as outlined by Bajde (2013) and Bettany and Kerrane (2010) that puts all entities on a similar footing as a focus for analysis.

Utilising the sonic as an analytical lens, with its attendant ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions, works to reinvigorate and reconfigure contemporary debates in consumer research, in particular, those related to embodiment, affect, and the aestheticisation and neoliberalisation of everyday life such that fresh understandings come to the surface. A turn to the sonic functions to resurrect and refocus discussions about the multi-sensory nature of experience (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982), thereby acknowledging the central role played by the body in terms of sensing the world around it: “heard sounds give embodied sensation to properties of depth, distance and proximity, suggesting feelings of clarity, delicacy and intimacy, transforming and animating the experience. Sounds envelope and reverberate deeply within bodies in ways which are specific both to their phenomenal properties and to historically constituted modes of listening, understanding and interpretation” (Revill, 2016: 247). In the wake of this work, and despite the tremendous focus on consumption experiences, the sensorial dimensions of the body have continued to be relegated to the periphery of consumer research discourse with just a few exceptions (e.g. Valtonen et al., 2010). As such, a sonic turn

holds the promise of returning us to first principles in interpretive consumer research. Thus, we might begin to develop our understanding of the body as the meeting place of the physical, the symbolic and the sociological (Slutskaia and De Cock, 2008), and in bringing all these bodies together we might also move discussion away from bodies *per se* and towards embodiment, the manner by which we engage with and perceive the world (Abercrombie et al., 2000), “bridging phenomenological dimensions of the body and its situatedness ... existing at the confluence of sentience and sensation, regulation and active agency” (Tulle, 2007: 331).

The consideration of affect brought about by the turn to sound is interesting in that affect is seen to offer a more materially grounded approach to the consumption experience (Blackman, 2002). In this sense, the study of vibrations, resonance and affect (Henriques, 2010) works to bypass, or at least temporarily suspend, the focus within consumer research on meaning and interpretation, for “[t]heorists of affect argue that constructivist models leave out the residue or excess that is not socially produced, and that constitutes the very fabric of our being”, (Hemmings, 2005: 549). For example, within studies of the consuming body it may be time for us to stop asking what bodies mean and instead to focus on how bodies sense the world of consumption and what bodies do (Budgeon, 2003; Patterson and Schroeder, 2010). Of course, as Paasonen (2014) suggests, separating the pre-reflective experience of affect from its reconstitution through language is an impossible dream. Further, we should ultimately be concerned with how our interactions with consumption objects “arouse us to meaning” (Sobchack, 2004: 57, cited in Paasonen, 2014) forging connections between sensing and sensemaking.

Sound does not respect our edges; it passes from one to the other. In traversing our ‘porous boundaries’ (Thrift, 2008), vibrating through, across and between bodies (Henriques, 2010), sound calls forth various consumer subjectivities (Hill et al., 2014) and undergirds shared experience. Further, consumption meanings are animated in the here and now by this circulation of affect (Ahmed, 2004). Thus, in highlighting the movement of affect, a turn to the sonic also helps elucidate the aesthetic ecology of markets and the aestheticisation of everyday life. Contrary to understandings of aesthetics as being restricted to fine arts, an emergent view argues that aesthetics - defined as emotions, feelings, and shared passions - are omnipresent in all aspects of everyday life experiences and consumption practices (Cova and Svanfeldt 1993; Venkatesh and Meamber 2008). This dissolves the distinctions between high art and popular culture, blurs the boundaries of art and life (Featherstone 1991; Szmigin 2006; Venkatesh and Meamber 2006), and in doing so challenges theories that locate the power of aesthetic legitimisation with society’s elite and which argue that contemporary consumers’ desires and consciousness are ‘false’ and manufactured (e.g. Adorno and Horkheimer). A sonic turn brings forth a sonic subject who, in line with Deleuze and Guattari (1987), is empowered through the affect and feelings resonating through the sonic ecology of spaces and practices of consumption.

In consumer research, the dominant neo-liberal logic of contemporary markets frames consumers as ‘consuming subjects’ (Firat and Dholakia 2017). Neo-liberal thought celebrates the free market as a liberating force that fosters human well-being through good moral conduct and individual responsibility. While much critiqued for its individualised and individualising effect on social order (Bradshaw 2011), Fitchett et al. (2014) argue that mainstream marketing and consumer research in its many variants, share a neo-liberal view of an agentic consumer who is the primary site of social and cultural action. Focusing particularly on CCT, Fitchett et al. (2014: 503) suggest that a challenge for the field is to examine its own neo-liberal precepts and reification of the consumer, and that in doing so: “it might prove fruitful to design research spaces where the logic of consumption can be questioned in more critical terms, perhaps examining contexts where consumption either does not, and arguably should not, be the primary unit of analysis”. To this end, the ecological and resonant ontology of a sonic turn calls us to engage with the interactions and relations between people, culture, politics, environments, technology and the aesthetics of sound,

rather than focusing our interest primarily on marketplace actors [consumers] and actions [consumption], in order to make sense of everyday consumption and the emergent logics that govern it.

What then does a sonic approach bring to our understanding of ASMR? What does it tell us beyond how sound is consumed? How does a sonic approach contribute to our very understanding of consumer culture? Of particular 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 technological and disciplining tools of the market, ASMR supporters have found a digital place to produce, distribute and consume potentially affective soundscapes. Gallagher, R (2016: 8) argues that it is unsurprising that the new cultural form of ASMR has arisen now, because this is an “era of austerity and political volatility, in which the shift to a postFordist culture of precarious work and the dominance of neoliberal healthcare policies oriented toward ‘responsibilising’ individual citizens rather than supporting state welfare programmes have fostered pervasive uncertainty and stress. In this context it makes sense that web users increasingly look to platforms like YouTube for solace, affirmation and relaxation”. 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 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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