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## **Nerdery, Snobbery and Connoisseurship**

### **Developing conceptual clarity within the area of refined consumption**

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## **NERDERY, SNOBBERY AND CONNOISSEURSHIP**

### **Developing conceptual clarity within the area of refined consumption**

#### **Abstract**

As consumers in Western consumer culture have increasingly turned from high cultural to low cultural consumption categories to cultivate themselves, the meanings of the traditional and socio-cultural concepts used to represent different forms of consumer expertise have been blurred or altered. Drawing upon sociocultural literature on taste and distinction we attempt to provide theoretical clarity to the concepts of connoisseurship, snobbery, and nerdery; concepts that are often used interchangeably and without rigor in both (contemporary) popular and academic discourse. The outcome of our conceptual analysis is concretised using a semiotic square to illustrate how the concepts differ from each other. Our analysis suggests that the democratisation of consumption through the *imprinting* of status meanings upon traditionally illegitimate cultural objects may lead to the “bastardisation” of taste regarding those same illegitimate cultural categories – a performance formerly restricted to high culture.

## Introduction

In traditional consumer behaviour literature consumer expertise has dominantly been conceptualised as being cognitively oriented (Alba & Hutchinson 1987). One of the important propositions within this literature stream is that cognitive structures employed to differentiate products become more complete, refined, and truthful as consumers become more familiar with products and product-generated experiences. This subsequently affects consumers' ability to perceive, process, and memorise product information and subsequently to make brand purchasing decisions (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). However, what we argue here is that different forms of consumer expertise may serve other purposes than merely making consumers' brand or product decisions easier and more efficient. From our vantage point, consumer expertise may be regarded as a socio-cultural phenomenon that constitutes a resource for consumers in their quest for cultivation, sophistication, distinction, and status (see, for example, Ritson & Elliott 1999). As a result of what is sometimes referred to as democratisation of consumption, consumer goods and consumer practices that used to be reserved for the elite and bourgeois (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998), have recently become accessible to the masses. This has opened up new consumption possibilities for more people. Concepts such as 'nerd', 'snob', and 'connoisseur' therefore seem to have gained in popularity, appeal, and relevance among the different societal actors who attempt to make sense of the increasingly cultivated and refined forms of contemporary consumption.

Elliott (2006) argues that this development—where consumers increasingly seek refinement by developing expertise related to particular consumption objects or to a particular consumption field—can be traced to two parallel processes: (1) the *popularisation* of consumption objects that

were previously situated directly within the confines of connoisseurship; and (2) the *imprinting* of status meanings upon consumption objects that were previously found outside the domain of connoisseurship. Both of these processes amount to a democratisation of consumption, albeit in contrasting ways.

In the first process—popularisation—objects of consumption that were previously inaccessible to low-status consumers, because of the deep and careful education required to use them symbolically, become more accessible thanks to how-to guides and courses that make the language and terminology accessible to all. For example, UK supermarket chain Sainsbury's introduced a colour coded labelling system for its wines that enabled unenlightened consumers to use the correct terminology to describe their wines: 'crisp and delicate', 'soft and fruity', 'complex and elegant' white wines; and 'light and fruity', 'smooth and mellow' and 'rich and complex' red wines (Atkin 2008).

In the second process, contemporary consumers turn to more ordinary consumption spheres to develop expertise and demonstrate distinction, refinement and cultivation (Ulver et al. forthcoming). This may be fruitfully exemplified by the rise of specialty coffee shops and the growing number of avid coffee aficionados (see, for example, Thompson & Arsel 2004; Kjeldgaard & Östberg 2007). Coffee, as a consumer good, has largely turned into an object of refinement, much as an outcome of brilliant marketing campaigns who wittingly managed to create an entire vocabulary for the appreciation and expression of good taste in coffee (Kozinets 2002). Borrowing greatly from the realm of wine, this lingua not only works to distinguish aromas, nuances, and complexities in taste, but also enables consumers to express their coffee knowledge by navigating with ease and expertise between *doppios*, *baristas*, and *mistos* to create or consume the perfected and personalised beverage (Elliott 2006).

What is problematic, however, is that the (coffee) aficionados of newly culturalised consumption domains are often—within contemporary vernacular—referred to as (coffee) “nerds”, (coffee) “snobs” or (coffee) “connoisseurs”—with no deeper reflection either on the differing meaning of each concept or on what they empirically represent. The concepts of ‘nerd’ and ‘nerdery’, for example, seem to have gained in popularity and esteem lately; and nowadays harbour rather positive connotations of speciality instead of referring only to people who are regarded as peculiar or social outsiders. Snob seems to be used whenever people wish to make derogatory remarks about those who aim for pretention via their consumption practices. But what do these concepts really stand for? How do they differ from each other? And to what extent do their meanings overlap? What do we really mean when we talk about nerdery, snobbery and connoisseurship? By bringing a socio-cultural perspective to bear on our analysis, we will try to supply answers to these questions and, thereby, provide some conceptual clarity to constructs that are often used to delineate the complexity and nuances of different forms of consumption-generated refinement. We will conclude by synthesising these delineations in a semiotic square to visualise the meanings of and differences between ‘nerd’, ‘connoisseur’ and ‘snob’.

### **A Brief Overview of the Concepts**

It is perhaps oxymoronic to write an overview of concepts that one aims to conceptualise. What is such an overview, if not just another collection of connotations, especially without a critical analysis? We are aware of this paradox but still dare to try to introduce the terms in as generic a way as possible.

Historically, we are used to conceptualisations of **connoisseurship** in the work of seminal theorists like Bourdieu (1984), where the term refers to refined taste and Kantian aesthetic disposition among the upper classes. It is the refined accumulation of knowledge concentrated around one specific—or many complimentary—*legitimate* consumer interest(s), such as wine or art. This accumulation of knowledge requires “self-control” (ibid., p.40) and “aesthetic distancing” (ibid., p.34) and thus communicates the connoisseur’s high cultural capital and refinement. The required knowledge can only be accumulated by a person of utmost self-control and discipline who has the resources to invest a great deal of time in acquiring the best exemplars and learning their nuances. Hence it takes cultural *and* economic capital. That connoisseurship relates to upper-class refinement of the actual consumer and of the consumer interest itself appears undisputed in literature.

In contrast, the **nerd**’s etymology is less certain. The term has often been used to describe a person who is seen as socially inept and boringly mundane (Kendall 1999), an outcast who, in addition to the above, is studious (OED Online 2013). The term was initially an insult towards socially insecure men (Woo 2012), especially those who exhibit what Kendall refers to as “specific malfeasances on a continuum of masculine improprieties” (1999, p.264). Nowadays, however, nerds may be either male or female and the term may be considered less derogatory than it previously was, especially when used in a consumption context. The Oxford English Dictionary brings to our attention the idea that the nerd is someone who “pursues an unfashionable or highly technical interest with obsessive or exclusive dedication” (2013). “Nerd culture” is associated with certain traits, interests, and hobbies and a typical “nerd commodity” is the comic book (Woo 2012). The obsessive and exclusive dedication to a certain interest is, in many ways, performed through collecting. Collecting “is a significant activity in many nerdy

practices” and is a main feature distinguishing the nerd from the ordinary person (Woo 2012, p.662). An ordinary person might read a comic but someone who collects comics is probably a nerd!

Nerdery was popularised by popular cultural elements such as *Revenge of the nerds* in the mid-eighties. Because of this and, due to its current ubiquity in Western consumer culture, the nerd is no longer exclusively associated with its traditional anathema and is no longer only seen as a social outsider (Woo 2012). This popularisation, as well as the mainstreaming of what used to be nerdy technology has led to a dramatic change of meaning for the nerd. Now the nerd is celebrated—ironically of course—in fashion and other cultural spheres. Big, thick, plastic glasses—once the trademark of the nerd—are now worn by people that fit the stereotype of the nerd’s archenemy—the cool kids (e.g. athletes and hip hop artists). And highly rated television shows such as *The Big Bang Theory*, feature nerds—with their games, toys, comics, and social awkwardness—as the heroes.

As the ‘nerd’ concept has been popularised, the focus of the nerd’s dedication or obsession has broadened. Nerds’ objects of interest are no longer merely technological. Hence, one result of the popularisation of the term is that individuals with non-technological obsessions, such as coffee lovers have begun to call themselves nerds. But the coffee nerd is not so-called in a derogatory sense. Here the moniker of ‘nerd’ is a compliment given to those who know how to appreciate their objects of interest. Hence, it seems like the term ‘nerd’ has become less derogatory as it has moved from its original habitat to new parts of consumer culture.

Insecurity marks the **snob** out from both the connoisseur and the nerd (Epstein 2002). The word is said to come from the Latin phrase ‘*sine nobilitate*’, abbreviated to ‘s.nob.’ and translated as

‘without nobility’ (Elliott 2006; Epstein 2002). Insecurity about his lack of nobility drives the snob in a quest for status through which he attempts both to elevate himself to the nobility’s level and also to generate a distance between himself and other common people (Epstein 2002). Snobbery, then, is the use of arbitrary measures through which individuals seek self-affirmation. Snobs use the practice of snobbery as a way to be, or at least imagine being, superior at the expense of other individuals. As a tentative working definition we fall in line with Epstein’s (2002, pp.18–9) thoughts:

*I take the snob to be someone out to impress his betters or depress those he takes to be his inferiors, and sometimes both; someone with an exaggerated respect for social position, wealth, and all the accoutrements of status; someone who accepts what he reckons to be the world’s valuation on people and things, and acts – sometimes cruelly, sometimes ridiculously – on that reckoning; someone, finally, whose pride and accomplishment never come from within but always await approving judgement of others*

This notion of something coming “from within” rather than from outside oneself will be important in our delineation, below.

### **Delineations Along Dimensions**

In the following section, we present the findings of our closer investigations of nerdery, snobbery, and connoisseurship. These investigations were purely conceptual and based on the outcome of a collaborative workshop between the authors and other sociocultural researchers at



Lund University. Each researcher was asked to bring to the workshop texts they found central to understanding connoisseurs, nerds, and snobs. These texts, and the workshop they inspired, provided the input for the discussion below, in which we attempt to de-blur or delineate our three refinement concepts—nerdery, snobbery, and connoisseurship—along several different dimensions: democratisation and expertise; legitimate and illegitimate culture; sense and sensibility.

### *Democratisation and Expertise*

According to Elliott (2006) the snob exists as a result of democratisation of material abundance and taste. According to this idea, the window opens for the snob when a consumption object is popularised and proliferates, since the available resources on the subject also proliferate. For the snob is actually not a connoisseur, but a pretender whose knowledge is superficial and not authentic or “from within” (Epstein 2002, pp.18–9). Paradoxically, the snob, of course, despises democratised taste, as he wants to elevate himself above the vulgar crowd’s lack of ‘proper’ taste. By historical definition (Bourdieu 1984; Elliott 2006), the connoisseur is dependent on hierarchy and, hence, is also positioned against democratised taste. However, although both the snob and the connoisseur act as guardians for refined taste within refined, non-democratised, categories, only the connoisseur can hold the position of true expert, as his knowledge is mystified through and deeply rooted in habitus (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998) and not superficially imitated or achieved.

It is important to emphasise that the true or authentic expert—the connoisseur—gains his knowledge through serious devotion to, long-term familiarisation with, and extensive experience

of, a particular field within legitimate culture—such as art, classical music or wine. The particular knowledge is often transferred in a master and apprentice relationship, as it cannot be transmitted solely by precept or prescription. Connoisseurs are therefore people with refinement and a pure aesthetic gaze, who have developed a knowledge that enables them to recognise and express perfection. By virtue of their slowly developed expertise they instinctively have, and can convey and evaluate, good taste. The snob however needs rules and principles to evaluate and express nuances, quality and taste within fields of legitimate culture—such as the how-to guides and courses described earlier.

The connoisseur does not just know what kind of material or consumer objects are tasteful, he is also an expert in how to practice the consumption of those objects in a tasteful and elegant manner. That includes how those different objects are combined, juxtaposed, and synthesised in appropriate ways. It also involves the slow acquisition and proper use of a lingua that enables him to competently appreciate, describe, express, and tease out the nuances of the different objects and the experiences they give rise to (Holt 1998; Bourdieu 1984). Failing to use the correct lingua would reveal an individual as a snob with only superficial knowledge and pretended expertise in a particular consumption area—a quasi-connoisseur. For Rod Phillips (2005), a Canadian wine connoisseur, the popularisation of wine is, therefore, not *democratisation* of taste, but *bastardisation*. In Phillips' view, the deep and careful education and knowledge acquisition needed for connoisseurship is, today, largely becoming shallow and artificial as people play language games, tossing about terminology that they have found, for example, in a convenient twenty-page pocket guide from Starbucks. In de Tocqueville's new democracy ([1840] 1998, cited in Elliott 2006), things are always in reach and a wider range of possibilities is opened up to more people. This forces people to do things they have imperfectly

learnt, and to talk about things they have poorly understood, in addition to devoting themselves to things for which they are badly prepared. For de Tocqueville (ibid.), the constant opportunities generated by democratisation nurture a persistent hurry, where people's curiosity is both limitless and cheaply satisfied at the same time. They have neither the time nor the taste to understand things thoroughly and care more about knowing a lot than about knowing anything well or in-depth. This is quite the opposite of how the connoisseur acquires his knowledge—through long-term and slow familiarisation.

Elliot (2006), therefore, argues that in contemporary society there has been a move from connoisseur—one who knows—to snob—one who knows superficially. The word 'snob' originally referred to someone who lacked the proper behavioural codes of the nobility and now, more widely, refers to someone who lacks the appropriate knowledge and manners to perform a certain role. Translated into Bourdieu's (1984) terms, the disparity between connoisseur and snob is the difference between bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie. The bourgeois connoisseur's consumption is motivated by the sincere, authentic, and autotelic—for its own sake—interest in an area of legitimate culture but the petit-bourgeois snob's consumption is instrumentally—as a means to an end—motivated by pretention and the conscious search for distinction. The snob is “committed to the symbolic...haunted by the look of others and endlessly occupied with being seen in a good light”, while the connoisseur is committed to something for its inherent and natural beauty (aesthetics) or pleasure, and for its own sake, without consciously caring about other peoples' scrutinising gaze” (Bourdieu 1984, p.253; see also Rocamora 2002).

### *Legitimate and Illegitimate Culture*

The popular use of the word ‘nerd’ in all kinds of consumer contexts sheds additional light on the idea of democratisation. Instead of incorporating only consumer categories traditionally associated with “legitimate culture” (Bourdieu 1984) such as art, classical music or wine, nerdery incorporates popular categories such as beer, coffee, oil, water and chocolate. The nerd is the connoisseur of contemporary consumer culture with a more uncertain class background—an expert in ‘illegitimate’ or popular culture. The level and the substance of a nerd’s expertise may be equally as deep and profound as that of a connoisseur and so, objectively, the coffee nerd could be called a coffee connoisseur. However, in folk taxonomy, she is a nerd. The difference seems merely that a nerd is an expert in a field that is regarded as peculiar and narrow or of lower status than more traditionally ‘legitimate’ cultural fields. The connoisseur is engaged in categories that are assumed to be complex to appreciate, such as classical music, fine art or French wines—categories commonly associated with the upper classes (Bourdieu 1984; Elliott 2006). The nerd is engaged either in anti-Kantian categories that are easy-to-like, accessible, trendy, popular, and common—e.g. coffee or technology—or ‘socially awkward’—e.g. birds, stamps and railway modelling (Woo 2012). Coffee is a new object of refinement, not traditionally seen as a high cultural pursuit. It falls into the latter category and hence, we more often hear about coffee-nerds than coffee-connoisseurs.

In terms of esteem, recognition, and seniority, connoisseurs and their fields of legitimate culture have often been thought hierarchically superior to nerds and their respective fields, which are often stamped with juniority and even immaturity. It is probably considered immature or childish to immerse oneself in collecting and building toy trains in comparison with collecting antiques or artwork. In the same way, being immersed in classical music communicates mature intellect and refined taste, while immersion in hard rock music may convey the opposite. However,

connecting back to Elliot's (2006) notion of democratisation of culture and taste, it can be argued that the distance between popular (illegitimate) culture and fine (legitimate) culture has decreased, as new areas of popular culture have appeared as targets for refinement. The nerd has begun to open up previously closed high cultural categories, allowing the movement of low cultural categories into the same arena; thus she is a democracy connoisseur.

Since the snob looks to set himself above the masses, he typically emulates the connoisseur and takes an interest in 'legitimate' cultural categories, with the difference between snob and connoisseur being that, as outlined above, the snob is seen as a pretender who is not authentically engaged (Elliott 2006; Epstein 2002). Importantly, the nerd must display at least as much deep knowledge and expertise as the connoisseur does. Just as the connoisseur risks looking like a snob if his knowledge appears studied or contrived for appearance's sake, so the nerd risks falling into the category of undistinguished mass-consumers with low cultural tastes if her interest appears pretentious.

The concepts of craft and art add another layer to the discussion. The craft consumer (Campbell 2005) is a postmodern consumer whose production, as well as consumption, is central to her identity project. Craft implies routine, with the craftsman lacking the creativity and freedom of the artist (Sennett 2009). For the connoisseur it is difficult, if not impossible, to participate in crafting his legitimate, or high cultural objects—which may often be considered art. For example, it takes very specific training to become a producer of fine French wines and one can almost certainly not become a Renaissance painter! Even if it were possible, craft is about getting one's hands dirty—which does not fit with the educated and analytical pursuits of the connoisseur. If a connoisseur should be involved in the creation of his field—e.g. as a composer of classical music—he would become not a craftsman but a professional artist, rather than a

connoisseur. The nerd, on the other hand, usually has more opportunity to immerse herself in her modern, and popular, cultural category of interest. Nerdery does not preclude craftsmanship and, since it is a way for the nerd to deepen her understanding and passion, it is quite common for nerds to be craftsmen in their field. For example, the home-beer-brewer is a typical beer nerd and knows everything about beer, not least because of her craftsmanship. The nerd is in this sense more postmodern.

Soft values of creativity may be argued to have helped the development of nerds—like home-brewers—as legitimate. Meanwhile, the development of nerdery might also be argued to have helped legitimise the craftsman as an artist. Again, we see elements of democratisation here. Craftsmanship is no longer the property of guilds or master craftsmen, to be bestowed on worthy apprentices. With the rise of nerdery and its colonisation of accessible cultural fields, we begin to see that anyone can become a craftsman, or even perhaps an artist. They just need the right amount of passion.

### *Sense and Sensibility*

The delineations between ‘nerd’, ‘snob’ and ‘connoisseur’ become more complex when looking through the lens of historical fiction. Fisher (2010) analyses how Jane Austen’s status conscious characters define connoisseurship and finds the dichotomies of rationality and subjectivity at play, together with love and knowledge. “He admires as a lover, not as a connoisseur,” (ibid., p.216) says the character, Marianne, about Elinor’s admirer, Edward, in the book ‘Sense and Sensibility’. At first, ‘sensitivity’ coincides with ‘lover’—emotion—and ‘sense’ with ‘connoisseur’—cognition—but, upon further readings, Fisher finds that the connoisseur must not

be utterly rational or objective but also possess some love and passion for his interest. He should exhibit sense—cognition—as well as sensibility—emotion. This is a delicate balancing act that legitimises the connoisseur’s taste as proper and authentic at the same time.

A similar balance between cognition and emotion—sense and sensibility—can be found in Douglas Holt’s (1998) interpretation of Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of connoisseurship. Bourdieu emphasises the unique capacity of a pure gaze, which is “*inscribed*” (ibid., p.31), disinterested and aesthetically distanced. Holt, however, conceptualises connoisseurship on the one hand as distanced—accentuating aspects ignored by others, developing finely grained vocabularies, and teasing out ever more detailed nuances within a category—but on the other hand as engaged—“in passionate appreciation of consumption objects”. Hence, here passionate interest meets rational disinterest—sensibility meets sense—in a balancing act that is complex and difficult to master. If too passionate, one may tip over to vulgar and popular admiration (Bourdieu 1984), as did Austen’s Edward (Fisher 2010). If not passionate at all, admiration will probably not lead to the acquisition of the knowledge required to be a connoisseur. The disinterest may be derived in the Bourdieuan sense as the connoisseur actively drives his interest.

Emotion, or sensibility, is also seen in nerdery. The nerd pursues her interest “with obsessive or exclusive dedication” (OED Online 2013). Obsession suggests passion and hence the nerd, like the connoisseur exhibits emotion. However, in contrast with the connoisseur, the nerd is traditionally seen as socially inept (Woo 2012), and therefore lacking the sense and proper behaviour that the connoisseur exhibits. While the mature and senior intellect of a connoisseur may enable him to maintain a cool and analytically distant position from his interest (Holt 1998), the nerd seems to have a harder time creating and maintaining such a distance. She is less able to coolly reflect upon herself and what she is doing and is less discerning in her choice of interest,

which is perhaps why she has chosen a less ‘legitimate’ passion than the connoisseur. The nerd just can’t help being that immersed, hence The Oxford English Dictionary’s (2013) comparison of nerdery with obsession. The nerd may therefore have a greater claim to passion than the connoisseur or the snob because her interest lies in an area that chose her rather than vice versa. The nerd is all sensibility and little sense.

In stark contrast, Epstein’s (2002) snob seemingly lacks sensibility—emotion or passion. He thrives on self-affirmation and has little regard for whether he is authentic or possesses proper knowledge as long as the illusion of expertise is upheld. As Epstein emphasises, snobbery often “entails taking a petty, superficial, or irrelevant distinction and ... running with it” (Epstein 2002, p.15). The snob is all sense and no sensibility.

The difference between nerds, connoisseurs, and snobs in terms of sense can also be viewed in a more explicitly moralistic way. The connoisseur, by Bourdieuan definition, knows his manners. The snob tries to emulate these manners but the nerd does not. Hence, even if both the nerd and connoisseur score highly on material knowledge in their area of interest, only the connoisseur scores highly on manners. The exclusive obsession and dedication of the nerd (Woo 2012) is focused entirely on the specific object of interest. Sense, behaviour, or manners in the traditional sense, seem to be much less relevant.

### **Semiotic Square**

In our quest to clarify and delineate the concepts of nerdery, snobbery, and connoisseurship, we made use of the semiotic square. Semiotics is the study of meaning and “broadly speaking ...

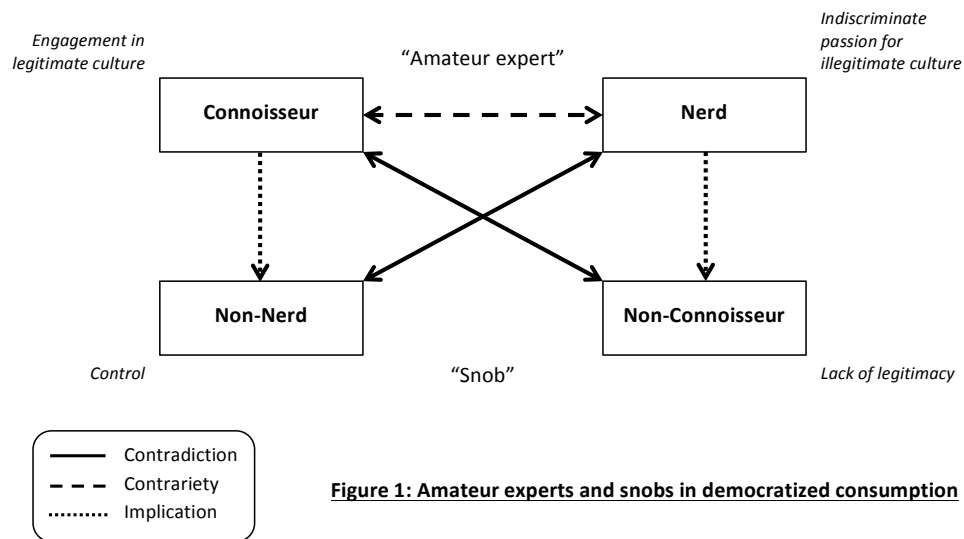


analyses the structures of meaning-producing events, both verbal and nonverbal” (Mick 1986, p.197). Starting with the premise that connoisseurship and nerdery determine two semantic categories, we projected these categories in order to “inter-define ... positions of meaning” (Floch 1988, p.238). One important notion to keep in mind is that the semiotic square (Greimas [1979] 1982 cited in Östberg 2003) rests on Saussure’s (1916) assertion that there is no meaning without difference or, in other words, that the meaning of a concept consists of what the concept is not. The construction of the square builds on the identification of “two different types of opposition at work in languages: privative relations and qualitative relations ... known as contradiction and contrariety” (Floch 1988, p.238). In this visual representation of a linguistic system of relations (Floch 1988), we will demonstrate how nerdery gets its meaning through the ways in which it discursively differs from connoisseurship. We will also show that snobbery gets its meaning through differentiation from both nerdery and connoisseurship.

### *What is and what is not?*

Although both connoisseurs and nerds are amateur experts who are both engaged in their respective fields of consumption, connoisseurs and nerds contrast in the legitimacy assigned to their fields of consumption by the wider society. Nerds are therefore said to be indiscriminating in their choice of consumption field but more uncontrollably passionate about their interest. Therefore, the non-nerd, in contradiction to the nerd, is marked out by his ability to control her passion or perhaps to control where her interest falls. The connoisseur too implies control, but not over the choice of particular consumption field in which he is engaged, which is somewhat innate and related to his upbringing or education, where he slowly acquired deep and field-

specific knowledge—here we can relate Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, which is not chosen in a controlled way (Grenfell 2008). However, the connoisseur, unlike the nerd, does have control over how he behaves in regard to his interest. While the nerd burns for her passion and will bring it up at every opportunity, the connoisseur displays more sense and manners. Nerdery implies lack of legitimacy and the non-connoisseur, in contradiction to the connoisseur, is noted for her lack of legitimacy, both because her field of consumption represents illegitimate culture and also because she lacks the deep knowledge to be considered a nerd.



**Figure 1: Amateur experts and snobs in democratized consumption**

The use of the semiotic square highlights the idea that the non-nerd and the non-connoisseur can both be seen as ‘wannabees’ or ‘try-hards’. They lack the uncontrolled passion to be nerds, rather choosing their object of interest based on the likelihood that it will confer status. And they lack the legitimacy afforded to connoisseurs by way of the status of their consumption field and to nerds by way of their depth of knowledge. The non-nerd and the non-connoisseur can both be seen to be fit Epstein’s (2002) description of snobs. In postmodernity, where old class structures are eroding and nobility is no longer necessarily something to aspired to, a snob would, rather than *sine nobilitate*, more correctly be someone *sine authenticitate*.

We might also argue that the meaning of the word snob has changed and broadened as a result of the democratisation of consumption. In the second of the two processes that leads to the democratisation of consumption (Elliott 2006)—namely the *imprinting* of status meanings upon consumption objects previously found outside the domain of connoisseurship—snobs now have new consumption objects or fields that they may colonise in their quest for approval and status. It is not only the connoisseur, with his in-depth knowledge of one of a narrow range of high cultural fields, that the snob can emulate but also the nerd, with her passion for one of an increasingly broad selection of popular cultural fields. As well as being non-connoisseurs—or quasi-connoisseurs—who try to pass themselves off as wine- or art-connoisseurs, snobs may now also be non-nerds, who try to pass themselves off as coffee-nerds. Snobs can acquire a superficial knowledge of new or popular cultural fields, with which to symbolically distinguish and confer status upon themselves, just as they did with traditional high cultural fields. Thus, the democratisation of consumption through the *imprinting* of status meanings upon what were traditionally illegitimate cultural objects may also lead to the “bastardisation” of taste regarding those same illegitimate cultural categories. Where bastardisation was once restricted to high culture, democratisation of consumption means that bastardisation can now also occur in popular culture.

### **Conclusion**

We have suggested that the abundance of goods in consumer culture, along with the democratisation of consumption—where the symbolic application of consumer goods and practices, which used to be reserved for the elite and bourgeois, have become accessible to the

masses—has opened up new consumption possibilities. At the same time, the use of words marking consumer expertise, such as ‘connoisseur’, ‘nerd’ and ‘snob’ are used increasingly, and in new ways. In this conceptual paper, we have differentiated between the concepts of nerdery, snobbery and consumption by referring to historical and contemporary literature and also by using the semiotic square to subtly delineate the differences and, therefore, the relations.

The meaning of the word ‘connoisseur’ remains largely unchanged as compared to traditional interpretations. A connoisseur remains a person who has slowly cultivated a deep knowledge and an aesthetic gaze for a category that is traditionally regarded as belonging to high or legitimate culture. He is highly engaged with his consumption object of interest but retains control over his passion.

The meaning of the word ‘nerd’ has changed considerably from derogatory to somewhat complimentary. Whereas the term used to refer to an individual’s status as a social outsider now it refers to their belonging to a consumption field that is outside of traditionally legitimate culture—i.e. popular culture. The term still conjures up impressions of awkwardness or lack of social sense, which is reflected in the modern nerd’s inability to control her passion for her object of interest; a passion that drives her total immersion in, possible craftsmanship, and subsequent abundant knowledge of the subject.

Through our use of the semiotic square we have proposed an extension of the meaning of the word snob. The word ‘snob’ used to refer to a person without nobility or legitimacy, who sought to emulate connoisseurs by acquiring a superficial knowledge of a high cultural consumption object—such as fine wine. Now, we argue, it may also refer to a person without uncontrollable

passion, who seeks to emulate nerds by acquiring a superficial knowledge of a popular cultural consumption object—such as coffee.

We have argued that the democratisation of consumption through the *imprinting* of status meanings upon what were traditionally illegitimate cultural objects may also lead to the “bastardisation” of taste regarding those same illegitimate cultural categories. Where bastardisation was once restricted to high culture, democratisation of consumption means that bastardisation may now also occur in popular culture.

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