

# You MAY LIKE This Book

by Felix Gillette

1 **W**hy do we like the things we like? For centuries, the question has intrigued everyone including Immanuel Kant, Virginia Woolf, and Sigmund Freud. Yet despite much scrutiny, human taste has long remained 9. Enter the Internet. Not only have music streaming apps and video-on-demand services given us a vast array of inventory to choose from, but they've also created an unprecedented amount of data on human choice. Might the fundamental dynamics of desire be revealed therein?

2 In *You May Also Like: Taste in an Age of Endless Choice* (Knopf; \$26.95), Tom Vanderbilt sets out to demystify human appetites, exploring the forces underlying our tastes in art, music, food, baby names, even cat breeding. Along the way, he interviews sources at Netflix and Pandora. He scours academic literature on Yelp reviews. He visits the headquarters of flavoring giant McCormick. He travels to a company, NeuroFocus, that monitors subjects' preferences using brain sensors. He drinks pilsners with judges at the Great American Beer Festival.

3 It's tricky to observe in isolation, but partiality tends to reveal itself more reliably when pinned down in relationship to the favorites of others. We all want to believe our taste is a reflection of our individuality, not the result of subconscious groupthink, but usually that's not the case.

Vanderbilt also visits the offices of Hunch.com, a "recommendation startup". There, he watches software accurately predict his answers to a long series of questions about what he likes based on whom he follows on Twitter. When a Hunch data scientist tells him that "taste is a space on a graph," he's mildly horrified.

4 The book bounces the insights of modern data scientists off the work of generations of critics, economists, neuroscientists, philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists. Taste, we learn, is an extremely relative phenomenon currently swerving through an age of extreme relativity. Often what the Internet reveals is what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu noted decades ago: Our predilections are strongly influenced by social



affiliation. The ubiquity of social media only makes us sway in the wind even more.

5 In the end, Vanderbilt churns out plenty of trivia ("Pink Floyd is one of the bands most liked primarily by Republicans") but little in the way of new models. His key takeaway is that taste remains a complex and erratic phenomenon that's endlessly shifting according to environmental, physical, and – echoing Bourdieu – social pressures. "The picture of taste I have presented is hardly reassuring," Vanderbilt writes. "We often do not seem to know what we like or why we like what we do. Our preferences are riddled with unconscious biases, easily swayed by contextual and social influences."

6 Vanderbilt is a skillful synthesizer, and *You May Also Like* is full of unexpected connections among seemingly disparate ideas. Before writing about taste, Vanderbilt wrote a book about traffic. He sees an analogy between the two. "Taste," he writes, "is like traffic, actually, a large, complex system with basic parameters and rules, a noisy feedback chamber where one does what others do and vice versa, in a way that is almost impossible to predict beyond that at the end of the day a certain number of cars will travel down a stretch of road, just as a certain number of songs will be in the Top 100."

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