Aesthetics and Consumption

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Aesthetics is increasingly becoming an important criterion by which consumers evaluate and differentiate between product offerings and make purchasing decisions. Recognizing this growing trend in the marketplace, a number of consumer researchers have begun focusing on this area. However, there exists no comprehensive, overarching, or integrative theoretical framework for aesthetics research in the consumption domain. Moreover, researchers have no unified view on methodologies or vocabulary, or on how research in the area should advance. Taking the initial step to develop such a common understanding amongst leading researchers in the area forms the central motivation for this roundtable.

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**Aesthetics and Consumption**

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Aesthetics is increasingly becoming an important criterion by which consumers evaluate and differentiate between product offerings and make purchasing decisions. Recognizing this growing trend in the marketplace, a number of consumer researchers have begun focusing on this area of research. However, there exists no comprehensive, overarching, or integrative theoretical framework for aesthetics research in the consumption domain. Indeed, the concept of aesthetics is itself understood in diverse ways, and researchers variously equate it with, for instance, beauty, intrinsic interestingness, artistic appeal, pleasantness to the senses, or a combination of these and other concepts. It may therefore often be necessary for researchers in this area to specify how aesthetics is to be conceptualized in a given research project.

The topic of aesthetics tends to inspire interesting philosophical debate, as it also did during the roundtable, and different philosophical perspectives may help shape different research agendas. Notwithstanding these perspectives, it was noted that a general challenge for marketing scholars is to maintain a focus that is relevant for consumer behavior. Otherwise, aesthetics may become an esoteric topic for those of us with a special interest in the area, rather than the fertile and broadly influential area of research that it has the potential to be, based on the central role it plays in consumers’ everyday evaluation and choice. Keeping this focus in mind, a number of issues brought up during the discussion are presented here in a brief, summary fashion.

**Areas of Discussion**
- Aspects of the aesthetic experience shaped both by universal influences stemming from our common evolutionary heritage and by individual differences stemming from culture and other sources.
- The aesthetic experience is often characterized as one that is enjoyed purely for its own sake, without regard to other, more practical considerations.
- Some argue that aesthetics is divorced from considerations of functionality, while others argue that the perception of a form-function relationship can help shape an aesthetic experience.
- Aesthetics as an all-consuming experience versus minor moments of pleasure.
- Emotions implicated in the experience of aesthetics.
- Is aesthetics a unique experience? If so, how?
- What is the relationship between aesthetics and hedonics?
- Aesthetic value. How does this translate to profit?
- Aesthetics as rich experience versus instant judgment, complexity versus fluency, cognition versus emotion. The race model: some aesthetic experiences may be instantaneous while others are elaborate and nuanced. What distinguishes these experiences?
- Aesthetics as a flow experience, leaving little cognitive capacity for reflection and analysis.
- Aesthetic schema, with innate and learned components.
- Aesthetics as a visual phenomenon, versus aesthetics incorporating all sensory perception. Perhaps the aesthetic schema is more fully developed for visual perception. This is also important for mass customization, where marketers must assume that consumers know what they like.
Contentious Areas

- Are concepts like the sublime relevant to consumer behavior research? Perhaps more mundane concepts tend to be more relevant for the majority of products, while the sublime can be relevant to other consumer experiences?
- According to Maslow, hedonic needs or higher order needs are taken care of only after functional needs have been met. Other evidence suggests that the need for aesthetics is present even when functional needs have not been adequately addressed.
- To which extent is aesthetics high culture or related with luxury, and to which extent is it more pervasive and found even in the most mundane consumption experiences?
- How immediately obvious should the managerial relevance be of research in aesthetics? What are, for instance, some issues related to trade dress, that is, the ownership by the firm of aesthetic presentation (look and feel)?
- Is there a good way to measure the aesthetic experience and to capture the rationale of the emotional choice?
- How does the work on aesthetics add to extant theory? We need to avoid conceptual replications. We need to establish different processes. Is aesthetics just another attribute?

One of the biggest challenges facing researchers in the domain of aesthetics is publishing in top journals. However, given the substantial and growing managerial importance of aesthetics, it seems reasonable that this area be given increasing attention in the marketing literature, as long as the theoretical contribution is also sufficient.

Perhaps interesting empirical effects without substantial theory should also be publishable on occasion, but this will not be sufficient to grow the topic of aesthetics as a viable and broadly influential area of research. Since research on aesthetics in marketing is still at a stage of infancy, it is likely to remain fragmented for some time to come. However, as the area matures over time a broader understanding of aesthetics is likely to emerge, as tends to be the natural progression for most areas of scientific inquiry. The current roundtable, where many researchers were not able to enter and partake in the discussion because the room was too full, clearly demonstrates that an increasing number of marketing scholars realize the importance of aesthetics as an area of research in marketing. Therefore, it seems realistic to hope that academic research in this area will eventually catch up with managerial practice and increase our general understanding of consumer behavior phenomena pertaining to aesthetics.
Since David Mick’s rousing 2005 presidential address calling for more transformative consumer research (TCR), we have seen a flurry of activity and increased institutional support. For example, a special issue on TCR will be published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* in the Fall of 2008, the first TCR conference was held at Dartmouth in 2007 (and a second one is being planned for 2009 at Villanova University), and a Handbook of Transformative Consumer Research is currently underway.

The primary people involved in building the TCR community, such as the members of the TCR task force and TCR Board, have been senior researchers who are well established in their careers. While resources in the form of research grants have been distributed to support the research of young scholars, junior scholars have not been directly involved in the formal deliberations that have shaped the direction of TCR. Moreover, given the diversity of issues spanned by TCR, some emerging scholars have voiced a desire and need to network within the larger community of researchers studying social problems. The long term success of any program of research, of course, depends on the ability to attract, foster, and develop a cadre of new researchers.