Judging Good Taste: True Preference Or Pretense?

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How can individuals distinguish between authentic preferences and pretentiousness? Four studies show that, relative to simply maximizing the proportion of high-quality choices, occasional low-quality choices serve as signals of authenticity. Judgments of true good taste result from a mixture of choice options that indicate the ability to discern quality independently.

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A Matter of Taste: Consumer Tastes and Judgments of Artistic Quality

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Paper #1: Discrepant Beliefs About Quality Versus Taste
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Paper #2: Judging Good Taste: True Preference or Pretense?
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Paper #3: The Impact of Artistic Ownership on Aesthetic Judgment and Preference
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Paper #4: Selling Out: Producer Motives in Markets for Art
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SESSION OVERVIEW

“Art is the proper task of life” – Friedrich Nietzsche

Artistic expression may be an essential aspect of what makes us human. Developing and communicating tastes for art and culture is fundamental to social life. The subjective nature of taste contributes to the tremendous richness and diversity of human culture (Hirschman 1983) but also to the difficulty of conclusively understanding this area of consumer behavior. Though some prior consumer research has demonstrated that cultural tastes serve to signal identity and facilitate social behavior (e.g., Berger and Heath 2007; Levy 1959), many principal elements of the defining qualities and drivers of consumer taste remain underexplored.

For instance, how do choices and social judgments involving art and taste differ from those involving other sorts of products? What factors influence consumer preferences for art, and what standards of evaluation are applied to judgments of taste and artistic quality? The four papers in this session examine some basic underpinnings of consumer taste and judgments of artistic quality.

The first two papers examine how tastes are formed and communicated within social groups. First, Spiller and Belogolova investigate how viewing a choice as a matter of taste, relative to objective quality, influences how it is perceived, communicated, and enacted. Wertenbroch, Bhattacharjee, and Barasch then examine how including some low-quality tastes in a set of consumption choices can balance signals of good taste and authenticity, thus better indicating true good taste. The final two papers investigate how perceptions of the creative process undertaken by artists drive consumer judgments of artistic quality within the marketplace. Valsesia, Nunes, and Ordanini find that the extent of artistic ownership shapes critical evaluations but not necessarily consumer preferences. The last paper by Bhattacharjee, Berman, Dana, and Mellers examines how perceived artist motives shape consumer judgments of artistic quality: consumers prefer artists who create only to satisfy their own tastes, while artists who seek to satisfy the tastes of others are seen as sellouts.

Together, these papers highlight novel aspects of the antecedents and consequences of consumer taste judgments. All four presentations have at least three studies complete and manuscripts in preparation. Given the primacy of taste to social and marketplace life, we expect this session to generate interest among researchers of consumer preference, decision making, self-concept, aesthetics, creativity, culture, and social judgment.

The goal of the session is not only to provide concrete insights, but also to stimulate deeper questions about the role of cultural and artistic tastes within our lives. Why do we care so deeply about taste and how artists approach their work? How do tastes develop and come to drive important life decisions? In the spirit of the session theme, we hope these ideas will encourage reflection about the nature of consumer research: like artists, researchers are creative producers who are deeply passionate about their work. Accordingly, we hope to provoke a discussion at ACR that is both fruitful and fun.

Discrepant Beliefs About Quality Versus Taste

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Is a cinephile’s choice between a superhero movie and a romantic comedy a matter of which is better or which she likes more? Understanding whether consumers believe a choice set is a matter of taste or quality, is critical because such beliefs affect behaviors and inferences. The question of quality versus taste is a question of perceived objectivity versus subjectivity. Advice seeking differs between domains of knowledge and domains of preference (e.g., Goethals and Nelson 1973; Gorenflo and Crano 1989; Olson, Ellis and Zanna 1983), but this is typically assumed to vary by domain. Instead, we propose that in addition to domain differences in objectivity, there are individual and situational differences in perceived objectivity for a given domain. For example, in Goodwin and Darley’s (2008) study of moral behaviors, they found disagreement in the perceived objectivity of domains traditionally seen as matters of taste.

Discrepant beliefs about taste and quality have important implications for how individuals reason about the world and others’ preferences. We argue that because consumers who believe a choice is a matter of quality see the difference as one that exists in the world independent of their own perspective, they will perceive greater consensus than those who view the choice as a matter of taste. Moreover, because consumers who believe a choice is a matter of taste recognize the role of the match between the option and the chooser, they will be more likely to reference themselves when explaining their choice than those who believe a choice is a matter of quality. Finally, because consumers believe that quality is an acceptable reason to pay more for a product whereas idiosyncratic factors are not (Bolton, Warlop, and Alba 2003), they are more likely to be willing to pay for their preferred option when it is believed to be a matter of quality rather than a matter of taste.

Brand Evaluation. In Studies 1 and 2 (each N=200), participants made one brand choice from each of four categories (e.g., Coca-Cola vs. Pepsi). All participants explained their choices, reported whether each choice was a matter of quality or taste, estimated how many participants made the same choice they did, and reported willingness to pay for their preferred option over the alternative. Consumers disagreed about how to classify a given choice: across choices, the
minority representation was held by approximately 35% of participants. Believing a choice was a matter of taste (vs. quality) was associated with lower perceived consensus (by about 10 percentage points; \( p < 0.001 \)), greater use of first-person pronouns when explaining their choices (by about 35 percent; \( p < 0.001 \)), and lower likelihood of being willing to pay for one's preferred option (by about 30 percentage points; \( p < 0.001 \)).

What causes such differences in the beliefs about a given domain? Reasoning about the structure of preferences affects beliefs. Prompting consumers to explain why someone else chose a different option than they did should lead them to be more likely to recognize that others have different preferences and therefore believe the choice is a matter of taste. Study 3 (N=200) was similar to 1 and 2 except that rather than explaining their own choices, half of the sample explained why another participant chose the same option, and the other half explained why another participant chose a different option. Explaining another’s discrepant choice increased the likelihood of rating the choice as a matter of taste by about 13 percentage points (\( p < 0.05 \)).

Implications for Transitivity. One way to examine how consumers’ beliefs relate to their reasoning is to examine how they react after observing others’ choices. First, viewing an intransitive set of others’ choices (Alex chose X over Y, Ben chose Y over Z, but Christine chose Z over X) should lead to a greater likelihood of believing the domain is a matter of taste compared to viewing a transitive set of others’ choices (Alex chose X over Y, Ben chose Y over Z, and Christine chose X over Z), because the second is compatible with a single rank-ordering according to quality whereas the first is not. Indeed, in Study 4 (N=100), participants who saw interpersonally intransitive sets were more likely than those who saw transitive sets to report that the product domain (search engines) was a matter of taste rather than quality (\( p < 0.05 \)).

Second, believing a set is a matter of quality (vs. taste) should lead to a greater likelihood of making transitive out-of-sample inferences (e.g., given Alex and Ben’s choices, inferring that Christine will choose X over Z) because quality differences are transitive whereas interpersonal taste differences are not. In Study 5 (N=400), consumers were shown a set of overlapping choice sets from different people. Those who believed the product domain was a matter of quality were more likely to make transitive out-of-sample inferences than those who believed the domain was a matter of taste (\( p < 0.01 \)).

Across studies, contrary to prior research, we find that consumers show little consensus about how to classify an attribute: the minority opinion of taste vs. quality represented one third of participants’ judgments were not simply about matching preferences. These relationships have important implications for bidding behavior, disclosure by sellers, beliefs about price fairness, and beliefs about others’ choices.

Judging Good Taste: True Preference or Pretense?

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Good taste is central to social life. Consumers’ need to demonstrate good taste is strongly associated with cultural capital within social groups (Bourdieu 1984). While the costs of acquiring tastes help ensure that they are reliable signals of distinctions between groups (Berger and Heath 2007), they cannot apply to within-group judgments. Within groups, given that quality standards are shared and there are known benefits to demonstrating good taste, how can individuals tell authentic preferences from mere pretentiousness?

We propose that authentic good taste is a single-peaked function of the quality of chosen options across repeated choices. Relative to choosing uniformly high-quality options, including some low-quality options may help people signal authenticity to themselves and others. Hence, judgments of true good taste, and the corresponding social benefits, may call for a mixture of choice options that suggests an ability to discern quality independently. Supportive evidence comes from four experiments.

Study 1 demonstrates that the presence of bad tastes increases perceptions of authenticity. Undergraduate participants imagined moving into a new dorm and evaluating their new hallmates’ answers to an informal “Getting to Know You” survey including lists of their favorite tastes. Participants viewed the 6 favorite magazines of four hallmates (either all male or all female) and indicated their perceptions of these new neighbors. Magazines were chosen to represent either good (e.g., The New Yorker) or bad taste (e.g., Entertainment Weekly), as confirmed using participants’ ratings on follow-up measures (\( t(241) = 27.39, p < .001 \)). The proportion of good tastes was manipulated among the four hallmates’ selections: 0 good magazines and 6 bad magazines, 2 good and 4 bad, 4 good and 2 bad, and 6 good and 0 bad (with presentation order counterbalanced). Gender had no effect and was collapsed.

As expected, perceptions of individuals’ good taste increased linearly with the proportion of good magazines (\( F(1,239) = 258.84, p < .001 \)). However, perceived authenticity decreased linearly with more good tastes (\( F(1,239) = 127.56, p < .001 \)). Importantly, undergraduates’ desire to socialize with hallmates (i.e., befriend and seek recommendations) varied quadratically with their proportion of high-quality reading choices (\( F(1,239) = 99.77, p < .001 \)), peaking for those selecting some low-quality options. In other words, participants indicated the greatest desire to befriend and solicit reading recommendations from individuals who selected 4 good tastes but also 2 bad tastes, and these individuals were significantly preferred to those with the “best” taste (M=4.75 vs. 4.38, p<.001). Results held controlling for perceived preference similarity, suggesting participants’ judgments were not simply about matching preferences.

Do these effects depend on the particular social meanings of these tastes or subjective perceptions of quality? Study 2 sought to address these possibilities and further rule out potential effects of preference similarity. An online adult sample of self-described wine novices imagined attending a wine tasting event to meet new people. Attendees tried 20 different wines and selected 8 favorites. Participants viewed the wine selections of five different individuals at the event, which were manipulated to contain different proportions of good quality versus lower quality wine (as defined by Wine Advocate numerical ratings and categories): 0 good wines and 8 bad wines, 2 good and 6 bad, 4 good and 4 bad, 6 good and 2 bad, and 8 good and 0 bad (with presentation order counterbalanced). Again, results revealed significant linear trends for both good taste (\( F(1,90) = 135.15, p < .001 \)), and authenticity (\( F(1,90) = 105.37, p < .001 \)), such that perceived good taste increased and perceived authenticity decreased with a greater proportion of good tastes. As in Study 1, participants’ desire to befriended individuals and seek their recommendations exhibited a significant quadratic trend (\( F(1,90) = 13.24, p < .001 \)), with those selecting the most good tastes actually rated the worst on these social outcomes. A significant quadratic trend also emerged on perceptions of individuals’ ability in a blind taste test, a measure of independent discernment (\( F(1,90) = 17.17, p < .001 \)). Judgments of true good taste peaked for those choosing some lower-quality wines, confirming that those selecting the greatest proportion of good tastes were not judged to have true good taste.

Study 3 tested our mechanism with a misattribution paradigm, using the presence of a free gift to manipulate the signal value of wine choices. Providing a free gift to manipulate the signal value of wine choices...
eliminated differences in predicted blind taste performance ($p = .821$), but social outcomes still favored individuals choosing some low-quality wines across conditions ($F(1,178)=40.24$, $p < .001$ overall), underscoring the social importance of perceived authenticity.

While Studies 1, 2, and 3 demonstrate how the presence of bad tastes drives inferences of others’ authenticity, Study 4 expanded our investigation to self-signals of authenticity. In particular, we manipulated concerns about good taste versus authenticity and measured the quality of the tastes expressed by participants. An online sample of self-described movie buffs reflected on their taste in movies. They wrote a paragraph discussing whether their taste is truly good, whether their taste is truly authentic, or simply describing their taste (as a control). Next, participants listed 3 movies that they would personally recommend to a friend. The main dependent variable was the quality of these movies according to Rotten Tomatoes, a website that aggregates critical reviews and combines them into one numerical rating.

Invoking authenticity concerns led participants to recommend movies with lower quality ratings ($M=78.51$) compared to the good taste ($M=84.01$, $p = .018$) and control conditions ($M=83.94$, $p = .033$). Analyzing recommendations categorically for the presence of bad movies ($< 75$ rating) yielded similar results: compared to both the good taste (39%) and control (43%) conditions, a significantly greater proportion of authenticity condition recommendations included bad movies (64%, $\chi^2(1)=6.13$, $p = .013$). Interestingly, these participants also judged themselves as significantly more able to truly judge the quality of a given movie ($M=6.11$) relative to the good taste ($M=5.58$, $p = .016$) and control ($M=5.47$, $p = .003$) conditions. Hence, participants’ increased selection of bad tastes may have worked as a self-signal of authenticity and actually increased self-perceptions of true good taste.

Our findings demonstrate that signals of good taste are subject to authenticity constraints. Occasional low-quality choices help consumers signal authenticity to themselves and others. True good taste may require trading some beauty for truth.

**The Impact of Artistic Ownership on Aesthetic Judgment and Preference**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

This research introduces the concept of “artistic ownership,” the extent to which artists both conceive of and execute their own work, to the literature on cultural goods. We document how artistic ownership impacts critical acclaim but not consumer preferences for such goods.

Experts and consumers appear to have different assessment goals, and may thus utilize different information to form evaluations. A fundamental goal of the critic is seen as establishing organized standards by which artistic value can be assessed. We argue that critics charged with providing aesthetic judgments purposefully integrate artistic ownership into their evaluations. In contrast, consumers’ decisions for most cultural goods (investments exempted) depend on aesthetic preferences, or simply what they like, and thus need not be defensible. Our work nonetheless shows that ordinary consumers, as well as critics, will include information about artistic ownership when charged to make an aesthetic judgment, but not when expressing their aesthetic preferences. This research helps explain why cultural goods can be judged as superior based on criteria that have no discernible effect on consumer’s subjective consumption experience.

Music is an especially suitable domain in which to study the impact of artistic ownership, as writing credits for a song (a good measure of artistic ownership) are published by reliable sources and are often known publicly. At one extreme, a song can be the product of professional lyricists and composers who subsequently turn it over to someone else to perform. This was the case with Rihanna’s 2007 breakout hit “Umbrella,” which was originally written for, but rejected by, Britney Spears. At the other extreme, a song can be written, composed, and performed by the same person, as is the case with “Love Story,” Taylor Swift’s best-selling single. In study 1A, we utilized two different real-world data sets to examine how the extent to which a song’s performer was involved in the writing process impacts on both critical acclaim (reflecting aesthetic judgments) and market performance (reflecting aesthetic preferences). We first looked at all 1,029 hit singles that reached number one in the Billboard Hot 100 singles charts between 1958, when the ranking was first introduced, and 2012. We then looked at all 690 songs that made it onto Billboard’s Top 40, regardless of position, from 2009 through 2012. We find songs performed by singers who write their own material are more likely to receive critical acclaim but are no more likely to achieve platinum status, an indicator of exceptional popularity and what consumers actually buy.

Consistent with these findings, artistic ownership is considered important in many creative industries. Comedians who write their own jokes are respected while those who rely on others to produce their material are frequently the object of professional contempt. Reader’s Digest reports the #1 thing television chefs don’t tell audiences is they don’t create their own recipes. And fashion critics admire designers who can draw, cut and stitch (e.g. Yves Saint Laurent) while frequently dismissing those who cannot (e.g. Ralph Lauren). In Hollywood today, the term auteur is often used to distinguish directors who write their own screenplays. Accordingly, in study 1B, we replicate our findings in another domain, and document how film critics are more likely than filmgoers to venerate movies by directors who write their own scripts.

In study 2, we move to the lab to investigate whether observed differences between critics’ and consumers’ evaluations might be due to critics possessing different and perhaps more refined tastes as compared to most consumers. Thus, we manipulate whether the performer of a song is described as its sole author or whether authorship of the song is attributed to a third-party lyricist and composer. Aesthetic judgment is assessed by asking respondents which songs they deem worthy of historic recognition and would choose to put into a time capsule, while aesthetic preference is measured by liking. We find that by explicitly asking consumers to make an aesthetic judgment (i.e., basing their evaluation on the historical and cultural importance of a work) leads them to disproportionately favor songs for which the performer shows greater artistic ownership. In contrast, when the same consumers report their preferences (i.e., what they like or what they would buy), artistic ownership has no discernible effect. The goal of the task, rather than differences in taste, appears to determine whether artistic ownership is considered in the evaluative process.

Study 3 explores competing explanations for critics’ positive predisposition to works with greater artistic ownership. Perceptions regarding the talent of a work’s creator as well as the effort they exerted in its creation are known to play a role in the evaluation of a cultural good but have been shown to have opposing effects (Cho and Schwartz 2008). Talented artists are presumed to exert less effort and vice versa. Study 3 tests the potential mediating role of both perceptions of talent and effort on aesthetic judgment and aesthetic preference. We find perceptions of the artist’s talent mediate the impact of artistic ownership on judgments, while perceptions of the artist’s effort do not.
Taken together, this work introduces artistic ownership as a novel characteristic of cultural goods and documents both its influence on aesthetic judgments and its relative lack of influence on aesthetic preferences. Aesthetic judgments—the role of critics—are supposed to be dispassionate. Consequently, these types of evaluations may compel the individual to rely on standards that seem more objective. Artistic ownership is one such standard. We show that increasing artistic ownership increases perceptions of the amount of overall artistic talent that has gone into creating a cultural good, an ostensibly compelling reason to support its artistic quality. But it is not a great rationale for a positive subjective response. One can appreciate the artistic quality of a painting, a song, an entree, or a film without really liking it. These findings help explain why critical judgments and consumer preferences often diverge.

Selling Out: Producer Motives in Markets for Art

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Markets are founded on the premise that consumers choose products that best meet their needs. Hence, it makes sense for producers to signal a willingness to adjust their products to match consumer preferences. But consider a musical artist who conducts research to create a song that satisfies consumer needs. Would this song be judged favorably?

Though recent work examines the role of artist identity in judgments of artistic quality (Bar-Hillel et al. 2012; Newman and Bloom 2012), and some theorists describe a disjunction between the demands of audiences and the demands of expert art critics (e.g., Hirschman 1983), this question remains largely unaddressed. Despite the prominence of art within human culture and the pervasive presence of commerce in our market society, little work has examined the psychological determinants of perceived artistic quality within markets.

We investigate consumer judgments of selling out, or perceptions that producers have compromised their integrity to pursue external incentives. To provide the first examination of this phenomenon, we examine the influence of perceived producer motives on consumer product evaluations. Four studies identify a key difference between markets for commercial products and artistic products. Consumers reward commercial producers who change their products to suit consumer preferences, but penalize artistic producers who do just the same. People prefer artists who satisfy their own preferences and ignore others’ preferences, even those of expert critics whose preferences typically define high-quality art. Artists who adjust their products to fit others’ preferences are seen as selling out, destroying consumer perceptions of product quality and reducing purchase likelihood. Importantly, our results show that such artistic integrity violations affect product quality only in markets for art, and suggest that consumers apply different standards of producer integrity in commercial markets.

Study 1 demonstrates that judgments of actual experienced song quality depend on perceived producer motives. After listening to a song, participants were less willing to download it when the artist was described as motivated by consumer preferences rather than their own preferences (4.43 vs. 5.63, t(92)=3.21, p<.002). This motive reduced perceived artistic integrity (4.43 vs. 5.63, t(92)=9.11, p<.001) and was labeled as selling out (51% vs. 4%, χ2(1)=26.58, p<.001). Perceptions of artistic integrity mediated the effect of producer motives on consumer perceptions of product quality.

Using the same scenario, Study 2 shows that these results hold even when artists seek to satisfy expert critics whose preferences define high-quality art. We compared artists who adjusted their products to better fit either their own changing preferences, consumer preferences, or critical preferences, relative to a no-product-change control condition. Motives significantly affected perceived quality (F(3,167)=4.60, p=.004). While changes driven by artists’ own preferences had no effect on product evaluations relative to maintaining their style (5.51 vs. 5.86, p>.288), changes motivated by consumer preferences (4.74 vs. 5.86, p=.001) or critical preferences (5.05 vs. 5.86, p=.011) decreased perceived quality and were widely seen as selling out (75% vs. 60% vs. 13%, χ2(1)=50.31, p<.001). Perceived artistic integrity again mediated the effects of producer motives on perceived product quality.

Study 3 identifies an important distinction between artistic and commercial markets. Relative to a producer focusing only on their own preferences, considering customer preferences decreased perceived quality (t(59)=-3.01, p=.004) and perceived integrity (t(59)=7.12, p=.004) within four artistic domains (novel-writing, painting, songwriting, filmmaking). In contrast, openly focusing on customer preferences increased perceived product quality (t(59)=11.31, p<.001) and integrity (t(59)=5.67, p=.001) across four commercial domains (software programming, home contracting, event planning, brand management). These results illustrate that producer integrity is defined differently within artistic versus commercial markets.

Study 4 replicates these results within the same product domain: a photographer who takes photographs intended to be used as art versus commercial products. Participants’ product evaluations showed an interaction between producer motives and product usage (F(1,156)=21.01, p<.001). Relative to the producer satisfying his own preferences, product changes made to suit consumer preferences reduced perceptions of artistic photograph quality (6.15 vs. 4.91, p<.001), but improved perceptions of commercial photograph quality (5.17 vs. 6.01, p<.010). Measures of artistic integrity mediated these effects on perceived product quality when photographs were meant for artistic usage, but did not affect the perceived quality of photographs meant for commercial usage. These results further confirm our theorized distinction.

Though art and commerce are both central to human society, we illustrate a fundamental difference in what individuals expect of producers within these domains. People penalize artistic producers who change their products to fit consumer tastes but reward commercial producers who do the same. Ironically, consumers most prefer artists who seem to ignore consumer preferences.

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