

Editorial Note

“Curating” the JCP special issue on aesthetics in consumer psychology: An introduction to the aesthetics issue

This is the age of Aesthetics, Beauty, and Design. Newly available product innovations from the Apple i-phone to the latest Dyson vacuum reflect aesthetic values. Indeed, Apple's success has been attributed to the infusion of aesthetics into product design. This model of product creation has resulted in Apple becoming one of the largest and most profitable corporations in the United States. Accentuating this point, Daniel Pink (2005) in his recent book, *A Whole New Mind*, designated the coming decade the Conceptual Age, the age of creativity and empathy. This moniker signifies the increasing importance of aesthetics, design, and conceptual values for organizations, individuals, and products. Pink advocates the importance of “soft skills” and suggests that what our economy needs to progress and prosper is a generation of creators and empathizers. In the same spirit, Thomas Friedman (2005) in his best-selling book, *The World is Flat*, discusses how the success of the Western world hinges on creativity, aesthetics, and design in the service of maintaining a competitive edge essential for individuals and companies to stay ahead of cost-based competition from the East.

There is no doubt when we look at the world around us, the world as it is today, that aesthetics is everywhere and impacts everything. Aesthetics has always been of importance; the appreciation of beauty, in whatever manner beauty may be defined, is a human value. An interest in the psychology of aesthetics has been reflected in the consumer literature for some time; however, in recent years there has been a burgeoning call for a richer understanding of how, when, where, and why aesthetics operates (Hoegg & Alba, 2008; Holbrook, 1980). Hence, this special issue of the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* focuses on Aesthetics.

In our role as the Aesthetics Special Issue editors, we were influenced by a recent article in the *New York Times* (Williams, 2009). This article observes that the word “curate,” which was “lofty and once rarely spoken outside exhibition corridors or British parishes, has become a fashionable code word among the aesthetically minded, who seem to paste it onto any activity that involves culling and selecting.” Borrowing this term, we, the curators of this Aesthetics Special Issue, provide in this introductory article an overview of the special issue. We present a summary of the state of the aesthetics literature in consumer

psychology, introduce the articles that constitute this Aesthetics Special Issue, and raise a number of research questions that are viable areas for future investigation in the domain of aesthetics.

What is aesthetics?

Derived from the Greek verb *aesthanesthai* (to perceive) and *aisthētikos* (of sense perception), the term ‘aesthetic’ was, until fairly recently, used in connection with the philosophy of sensation and perception. A myriad of definitions for aesthetics exist, most of which pertain to beauty and an appreciation for beauty. For instance, the *Philosophy Dictionary* describes aesthetics as, “the study of the feelings, concepts, and judgments arising from our appreciation of the arts or of the wider class of objects considered moving, or beautiful, or sublime.” The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines aesthetics as, “of, or relating to, or dealing with aesthetics or the beautiful,” “artistic,” and “pleasing in appearance.” In consumer psychology, aesthetics has been used largely to describe the form or beauty of objects, people, or consumption environments.

What do we know about aesthetics in consumer psychology?

- Aesthetics matters in consumer psychology. The design and aesthetics of products and services have long been recognized as key determinants of marketing and sales success (Bloch, 1995; Miller & Adler, 2003; Schmitt & Simonson, 1997).
- In a marketplace where consumers often take product quality and competitive pricing for granted, aesthetics has become an important criterion by which consumers evaluate and differentiate between product and service offerings to make purchasing decisions (Jordan, Thomas, & McClelland, 1996; Kalins, 2003; Postrel, 2003).
- Most research in psychology, marketing, and even philosophy has centered on what is or is not aesthetically pleasing and what characteristics make an object seem more attractive or beautiful to the beholder (Berlyne, 1971, 1974; Bloch, 1995; Martindale, 1988; Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998). For instance, it is relatively well established that moderately complex aesthetic stimuli are preferred over those that are

very simple or very complex (the ubiquitous inverted U-curve; [Berlyne, 1971](#)).

- Consumers often base their consumption choices on aesthetic versus functional values. We know, for instance, that the form of a product elicits an affective response while the quality of the product is based on a more cognitive evaluation ([Page & Herr, 2002](#)). [Norman \(2004\)](#) has proposed that product design can elicit stimulus-based affect (mood) as a result of its form or as a consequence of its perceived beauty.
- Aesthetics is everywhere. The importance of aesthetics is no longer applicable only to the arts. A large proportion of aesthetics research in consumer psychology has focused on advertising and product design, especially for product categories where aesthetics has traditionally served as a central product feature. Aesthetics has been studied in service environments ([Bitner, 1992](#)), consumer home environments ([Patrick & Hagtvedt, in press](#)), and even museums ([Joy & Sherry, 2003](#)).
- Aesthetics has predominantly been investigated in the visual domain, but other senses, for example, smell and taste, and importantly the interaction of these senses, do constitute aesthetic experiences ([Krishna, Elder, & Caldara, 2010](#)).

Goals and motivation for the special issue

Research addressing the interface between aesthetics and consumer psychology, especially those using different methodologies, ranging from fMRI to eye-tracking studies, from experimental design to qualitative research, appear in a wide range of publications across diverse disciplines. There is a concern that the scattered nature of these publications may dilute, and even delay, the potential for the conceptual development of aesthetics within consumer psychology.

With this in mind, the Special Issue of the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* on Aesthetics was conceived. The call for papers specified that “consistent with its tradition of publishing consumer psychology research that is cutting-edge, conceptually and theoretically important, and advances knowledge, the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* solicits academic papers (on Aesthetics) to emphasize its continuing interest in promoting such research and increasing its impact.” It suggested that the following areas would define the scope of the Aesthetics Special Issue:

- Principles/themes/elements that underlie design and aesthetics regardless of consumption domain
- Interplay between aesthetics and hedonics
- Role of sensory input in aesthetic experiences
- Conceptual properties of aesthetic experiences and the measurement of aesthetic experiences
- Unique characteristics of aesthetic experiences that are distinguished from other hedonic/affective experiences, and
- Unique effects of aesthetic experiences on consumer information processing and judgments that are distinguished from the effects of other affective/hedonic experiences

Overview of the special issue

Following a rigorous review process, twelve articles were accepted for publication in the Special Issue on Aesthetics. These articles include a variety of topics within aesthetics including multisensory aesthetic experiences, conceptual processing of aesthetics, aesthetic design preferences, and individual differences in evaluating aesthetics. The research methods employed include observations and interviews as well as lab and quasi-experiments. Next, we introduce the articles that comprise the Special Issue on Aesthetics.

Multisensory aesthetic experiences

The article by [Madzharov and Block \(2010\)](#) “Effects of Product Unit Image on Consumption of Snack Foods” opens the special issue with multisensory aesthetic research relevant to the obesity epidemic. [Madzharov and Block \(2010\)](#) provide evidence that consumers unwittingly use packaging aesthetics to determine how much to eat. In a series of three studies, they demonstrate that the visual aesthetics of the product package, specifically the number of snack items depicted on the package, acts as an anchor, influencing consumers’ judgments of the quantity of items in the package. More importantly, these researchers demonstrate that this anchoring effect crosses from the visual modality to impact the amount of snack items consumed from the package. When a product package displays a greater number of snack items (i.e., 15 pretzels versus 3 pretzels), consumers eat more of this snack.

[Krishna et al. \(2010\)](#) “Feminine to Smell but Masculine to Touch?: Multisensory Congruence and its Effect on the Aesthetic Experience” explore cross-sensory interactions between the aesthetics of smell and touch. In two experiments that move beyond the exploration of visual aesthetics, [Krishna et al. \(2010\)](#) find that multisensory congruence between smell and touch interact to enhance product evaluations and the aesthetic experience. These studies explore the impact of product-infused scents on haptic perceptions of texture and temperature and provide evidence that the congruence of multisensory aesthetic inputs contributes to more pleasurable experiences.

Conceptual processing of aesthetics

The article by [Hoegg, Alba, and Dahl \(2010\)](#) “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Influence of Aesthetics on Product Feature Judgments” debunks the conventional notion that, “what is beautiful is good.” Across a series of three studies, [Hoegg et al. \(2010\)](#) examine the influence of design on feature performance when aesthetics clashes with performance. Their research reveals a negative aesthetic effect, a bias favoring unattractive products when aesthetics and feature functionality conflict. This effect challenges the assumption that an attractive product will be universally more appealing than an unattractive product.

[Reimann, Zaichkowsky, Neuhaus, and Weber \(2010\)](#) “Aesthetic Package Design: A Behavioral, Neural, and Psychological Investigation” examine the aesthetics of package design from behavioral, neural, and psychological perspectives. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), these

researchers find that aesthetically designed packages result in increased activation in the nucleus accumbens and the ventromedial prefrontal cortex. This finding provides evidence that reward value plays an important role in the appreciation of aesthetic experiences.

The article by [Pandelaere, Millet, and Bergh \(2010\)](#) “Madonna or Don McLean? The Effect of Order of Exposure on Relative Liking” explores aesthetic appreciation and finds an order of exposure effect such that aesthetic stimuli viewed earlier are preferred over related, later encountered stimuli. This effect is robust across two modalities, visual and auditory. The process underlying this aesthetic preference effect includes the finding that aesthetic stimuli viewed earlier may be perceived to be more authentic or original.

In a series of three studies, [Townsend and Shu \(2010\)](#) “When and How Aesthetics Influences Financial Decisions” investigate the influence of aesthetic design in financial decision-making, an area where aesthetics was thought to have little influence. This research finds that the aesthetics of financial and investment documents does influence stock valuation and investment behavior such that aesthetic design increases a company’s value. This effect is moderated when investors’ attention is specifically directed to the potential influence of aesthetics on financial decision-making.

Aesthetic design preferences

The article by [Venkatesh, Joy, Sherry, and Deschenes \(2010\)](#) “The Aesthetics of Luxury Fashion, Body and Identity Formation” explores the impact of aesthetics in consumers’ everyday lives. This research relies on the ZMET technique to investigate how consumers’ attitudes and preferences regarding bodily appearance impact their perceptions of the aesthetics of fashion. Interviews with female informants reveal four main themes in the aesthetics of fashion: fashion as wearable art, body and self-identity, bodily appearance and high fashion brands, and aesthetic labor through fashion. This research uncovers the nature of the aesthetic meaning derived from fashion and how body perception is integrated with the aesthetics of fashion.

Using virtual presentation technology similar to that employed by online retailers, [Cho and Schwarz \(2010\)](#) “I Like Those Glasses On You, But Not In The Mirror: Fluency, Preference, And Virtual Mirrors” explore the impact of processing fluency on consumers’ preferences for a mirror image versus a regular image of a familiar versus unfamiliar person. Products, in these studies earrings and eye glasses, are considered more aesthetically pleasing when a familiar person wearing these accessories is presented via a regular versus a mirror image; for an unfamiliar person, there is no effect of a regular versus a mirror image. Processing fluency, the process underlying this aesthetic preference, is engaged only when a familiar person wearing the accessory is presented from the viewpoint under which they are normally viewed.

[Deng, Hui, and Hutchinson \(2010\)](#) “Consumer Preferences for Color Combinations: An Empirical Analysis of Similarity-Based Color Relationships” explore aesthetic self-design in an online athletic shoe color configuration task. These researchers

model color relationships and aesthetic color choices. [Deng et al. \(2010\)](#) investigate the aesthetic principles that guide color selection in consumers’ design choices and find support for the visual coherence perspective, selected colors either matched or were closely related to each other, and the small palette principle, a small number of colors was used in the average design.

[Kumar and Garg \(2010\)](#) “Aesthetic Principles and Cognitive Emotion Appraisals: How Much of the Beauty Lies in the Eye of the Beholder” probe how and why aesthetic product design generates emotion. This research investigates the connections between aesthetic principles and cognitive appraisals. In uncovering the mechanism through which aesthetics impacts processing, they find that consumers prefer balance in the level of attention and pleasantness when evaluating an aesthetic experience.

Individual differences in evaluating aesthetics

[Meyers-Levy and Zhu \(2010\)](#) “Gender Differences in the Meanings Consumer Infer from Music and Other Aesthetic Stimuli” find that both gender and Need for Cognition impact whether consumers rely on descriptive versus hedonic meanings when developing perceptions regarding aesthetic stimuli. These researchers conduct two studies exploring this phenomenon across two aesthetic modalities, music and visual art design. The results of the studies, for both visual aesthetic design and music, show that females base their aesthetic preferences on the descriptive and hedonic meanings of aesthetic stimuli while for males, the level of Need for Cognition determines which meaning is processed.

[Yang, Zhang, and Peracchio \(2010\)](#) “Understanding the Impact of Self-Concept on the Stylistic Properties of Images” explore how consumers’ self-concept impacts evaluations of the stylistic properties of images, specifically, the camera angle used to depict a product. Across three experiments, [Yang et al. \(2010\)](#) find that a downward looking camera angle is preferred by those consumers who are motivated by duties and obligations, an ought-self, as compared to consumers motivated by hopes and aspirations, an ideal-self. When a product is viewed from an upward camera angle, consumers with an ideal-self offer more favorable evaluations than consumers with an ought-self.

Recommendations for future research

Many interesting and provocative questions about aesthetics in consumer psychology have yet to be explored. The following describes a number of the questions on the frontiers of conceptual development in aesthetics research.

- *How does aesthetics impact decision-making?* A substantial body of research has focused on the dual process models of decision-making (see [Evans, 2008](#) for a review). Within a decision-making context, there is a growing interest in examining gut-level reactions to objects as a whole ([Loewenstein, 2001](#); [Loewenstein, Weber, Hsee, & Welch, 2001](#)), and it would be interesting to investigate both the cognitive and

noncognitive responses to nonverbal aesthetic objects as well as the cues that guide consumer decision-making.

- *What constitutes an aesthetic experience?* Is aesthetics an experience cognitively mediated or is it an instant holistic judgment? Are there multiple pathways to the evaluation of an aesthetic experience? As proposed by the “race” model (similar to Wyer, Clore, & Isbell, 1999), there may be some aspects of aesthetic experiences that are instantaneously processed and not cognitively mediated, while others may be elaborate and nuanced taking time and cognitive effort. What distinguishes these experiences? Are aesthetic experiences unique? If so, how?
- *What differentiates aesthetic objects from other objects?* When is aesthetics traded off for other values or attributes, and what are the consequences of such a trade-off? Some research suggests 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 (Norman, 2004). What is the interplay between the aesthetic and functional aspects of products?
- *Are there individual differences in response to aesthetics?* Do consumers have an aesthetic identity? Consumers have an ethnic or sexual identity, an identity based on the region of the country they are from and their social class. Together these constitute a consumer’s social identity. What is the relationship between these aspects of a consumer’s identity and their aesthetic identity?
- *How do consumers identify what is aesthetically pleasing?* Do consumers possess an “aesthetic schema” used to evaluate aesthetics (see Patrick & Hagtvedt, in press)? Are some aspects of such an aesthetic schema, perhaps the visual component, more fully developed? Do consumers possess less developed aesthetic schemas for the other senses such as touch or smell? How do such aesthetic schemas develop?
- *What affective responses accompany aesthetic experiences?* What are the emotions implicated in aesthetic experiences? Are dark-side emotions, such as guilt, involved in “indulging in aesthetics”?
- *How do metacognitive concepts such as creativity, imagination, and intuition cohere with aesthetic theory?* For instance, Norman (2004) suggests that product design can elicit stimulus-based affect (mood) as a result of its form or as a consequence of its perceived beauty. Can this same form or perceived beauty and aesthetics result in enhanced creativity, imagination, and intuition?
- *Are there cross-cultural differences in response to aesthetics?* Are there cross-cultural aesthetic universals? How valid is Helena Christensen’s assertion that, “The more people explore the world, the more they realize in every country there’s a different aesthetic. Beauty really is in the eye of the beholder.”

Concluding comments

As the *curators* of this Aesthetics Special Issue we would like to thank the authors who submitted research to this special issue, all of the special issue reviewers for their excellent reviews and quick turnaround times, and especially the Editor of Journal of

Consumer Psychology, C.W. Park, for providing us with this editorial opportunity. To the readers of this special issue, we encourage you to pursue the study of aesthetics in consumer psychology and to see the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* as an outlet both welcoming and receptive to new and exciting developments in aesthetics. We sincerely hope that the readers of this Aesthetics Special Issue will continue to generate important, interesting, and innovative research in the domain of aesthetics in consumer psychology.

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Vanessa M. Patrick
 Bauer College of Business, 385J Melcher Hall,
 University of Houston, Houston,
 TX 77201, USA
 Corresponding author.
 E-mail address: vpatrick@uh.edu.

Laura A. Peracchio
 Sheldon B. Lubar School of Business,
 University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee,
 PO Box 742, Milwaukee,
 WI 53201, USA
 E-mail address: lperacch@uwm.edu.

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