

## **Summary of Roundtable Discussion at ACR 2008 (San Francisco)**

### **Aesthetics and Consumption**

**Co-chairs: Henrik Hagtvedt and Vanessa Patrick.**

**Attending invitees (alphabetical): Joseph Alba, Rishtee Batra, Frederic Brunel, Ravi Chitturi, Darren Dahl, Xiaoyan Deng, JoAndrea Hoegg, Michael Luchs, Wes Hutchinson, Annamma Joy, Joan Meyers-Levy, Page Moreau, Raj Raghunathan, Rolf Reber, Jonathan Schroeder, Juliet Zhu.**

**Total number of attendees: 66.**

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.
- Dewey on "Art as Experience" talks about a "mere experience" and "an experience" and discusses the drawing in and all-consuming state being characteristic of an aesthetic experience. Is this it, or can aesthetics be viewed as minor moments of pleasure that we seek on a regular basis? Often aesthetic experiences are an "emotional high," not necessarily a "peak experience."

- Aesthetics as an experience (cognitively mediated) vs. an instant judgment.  
Proposed a “race” model (similar to Wyer et al. 1999) that suggests that some aesthetic experiences are instantaneous and not cognitively mediated and others are elaborate and nuanced and take time and cognitive effort. What distinguishes these experiences?? (Wyer talks about the nature/characteristics of the situation driving the most adaptive response and determining which pathway “wins”). Is aesthetics a unique experience? If so, how?
- Aesthetics as a flow experience, leaving little cognitive capacity for reflection and analysis.
- Proposed an “aesthetic schema” that people use to evaluate aesthetics with innate and learned components. Later discussion suggested that perhaps the visual component of the aesthetic schema is more fully developed and that the other sensory components like touch or smell have less developed schemas. This is important, especially in terms of co-creation and mass customization where the marketer assumes that customers know what they like (discussion about the outsourcing of surface aesthetics).
- What are the emotions implicated in aesthetic experiences? What are the emotions involved in “indulging in aesthetics” (guilt)?
- What is the relationship between aesthetics and hedonics?
- Aesthetic value. How does this translate to profit?

## Philosophical Perspectives:

- Kant: cultural capital
- Vitruvius
- Santayana: Immediate, Value positive (discussion agreed that it is not necessarily so and can be negative), Objectified (is not part of the individual but is attributed to the source). The “immediacy” might distinguish the aesthetic experience from other experiences.
- Dickie – institutional theory of art – art is art because certain institutions told us so. Others argue that it makes more sense that the category of art be based on common perceptions, drives, and psychological processes. Parallel of brands dictating what is aesthetically appealing for a product category because of the power of the brand, versus appeal based on common needs and perceptions.

## 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?
- Is there a good way to measure the aesthetic experience and to capture the rationale of the emotional choice?
- How managerially relevant (in the domain of mundane vs. sublime consumption) should this research be? P&G, Hotels, even medical centers want to know how to enhance the aesthetic experience for their customers. What can they be told? Issues of trade dress (look and feel of the brand) – the owning of the aesthetic experience by a firm.
- 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.