



How consumers as aesthetic subjects co-create the aesthetic experience of the retail environment



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ABSTRACT

The consumer aesthetic experience, diverse and complex, seems to depend on the individual's subjective perception. Studies have questioned if this experience can be conceptualized and explained through underlying patterns. Most studies have focused on the properties of aesthetic objects, explaining their influences on consumer responses, while ignoring consumers as aesthetic subjects. Based on the view that consumers seek pleasure out of even the most mundane objects in their everyday consumption, this study explains how consumers interact and formulate aesthetic experiences in the retail environment.

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1. Introduction

Aesthetic experiences have long been studied in terms of both specific objects such as works of art and everyday consumption such as product design and the retail environment. Research shows that consumer aesthetic experiences are diverse, complex, and associated with manifold subjective perceptions. This complexity has led scholars to question whether aesthetic experience can be conceptualized through an underlying pattern. Most studies have focused on the properties of aesthetic objects to explain consumers' responses to them (Carroll, 2001) while ignoring the issue of consumers as aesthetic subjects. Addressing this gap, Venkatesh and Meamber (2008) studied the role of aesthetics in everyday consumption experiences and concluded that consumers can become aesthetic subjects when seeking to attain pleasure out of either aesthetic objects (e.g., painting, music) or the mundane objects in their everyday lives.

Though Venkatesh and Meamber (2008) suggested some of the issues involved in conceptualizing the aesthetic subject, one question remains: How do consumers co-create their aesthetic experiences? The authors called for further exploration, particularly as the topic represents a rich area for consumer research. Accordingly, this phenomenological study examines the way in which consumers interact with the contemporary retail environment – incorporating a mix of art, entertainment, and commerce – and formulate their aesthetic experiences.

2. Aesthetics in consumption and marketing

The term “aesthetics” has various meanings, from sensory experiences relating to arts and everyday objects to a wide range of conceptual categories, such as form and expression, symbolism and imagery, beauty, taste, and feelings (Carroll, 2001). In marketing, aesthetics was first used to market the arts and segment the arts market and was then expanded to the management of corporate aesthetics, such as building brand images and product design. In the field of consumption, studies have focused on experiential and hedonic types of consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Olson (1981) identified three broad streams of research – aesthetic stimulus, experience environment, and consumer characteristics – representing the major factors influencing consumer aesthetic experiences.

First, consumer research on the aesthetic stimulus is based on the notion that the aesthetic experience is an appreciation of an object existing for its own sake. Most early research was conducted on cultural products that provide a fertile ground for research because of their culturally rich and salient symbolic roles, such as those in the visual arts and the theater (Huber and Holbrook, 1981; Levy et al., 1981). While most of these studies compared among aesthetic stimuli and their effects on consumer responses, more recent studies have included everyday aesthetic stimuli such as the visual aspects of product design (Veryzer and Hutchinson, 1998) the imagery used in fashion advertising (Phillips and McQuarrie, 2010), and the influence of package design features on visual attention (Clement et al., 2013).

Second, research on the experience environment investigates where the aesthetic response appears, including both the place

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that hosts the aesthetic stimulus (e.g., a museum or a concert hall) and the architecture that draws consumers to attend, perceive, and appreciate that place (e.g., an historic castle). One set of studies found that places containing cultural products or events, such as museums or galleries, offer symbolic meaning as the medium through which consumers bind with the aesthetic stimulus (Gottdiener, 1998). For example, Joy and Sherry (2003) analyzed the interconnections between embodiment, movement, and multi-sensory experiences within a fine arts museum, which complement consumers' interests in art appreciation. Another dimension of research reveals how consumer aesthetic experiences can be derived from architecture itself. These studies focus on aesthetic-oriented environments, mostly in the domains of tourism and entertainment, such as the ethnographic research on whitewater river rafting (Arnould and Price, 1993), the Rocky Mountain American West (Belk and Costa, 1998), and the Burning Man event in Nevada's Black Rock desert (Kozinets et al., (2002)).

In retailing research, studies of consumer aesthetic experiences have examined the emergence of spectacular retail environments such as themed stores, brandscapes, and brand museums, where commerce and leisure are integrated (Crawford, 1992). In this type of servicescape, consumers are drawn to enjoy the designed environment, as demonstrated in studies of the Mall of America (Csaba and Askegaard, 1999), the ESPN Zone in Chicago (Kozinets et al., 2004), and the Starbucks brandscape (Thompson and Arsel, 2004). Research has found that consumer experiences are directed mostly by developers and retailers, who intend to imagineer aesthetic consumption. Recent studies have further explored the effects of the specific atmospheric attributes that can guide or shape certain kinds of stimulating experiences and social interactions, such as the kinetic quality of store design and its influence on utilitarian and hedonic shopping values (Bonnin and Goudey, 2012) and olfactory cues and their impact on buying behaviors (Herrmann et al., 2013).

In the third area of research, consumers' characteristics, studies have examined how individual differences influence the ways in which consumers respond to aesthetic stimuli. These determinants include general demographic profiles (e.g., age, gender, education) and consumer psychography and sociocultural backgrounds. Wallendorf et al. (1981) explored the cognitive complexity that underlies consumers' ability to appreciate an aesthetic object. Kloepper (1987) suggested that the aesthetic response to the semiotics of advertising arises from the tension between sensory attainment and intellectual, abstractive challenge. In addition to these cognition-created analyses, Holbrook (1986) proposed that aesthetic experiences vary as a function of gender as well as of visualizing versus verbalizing tendencies, intrinsic versus extrinsic motivations, and romanticism versus classicism orientations. Recent research in this area has explored specific consumer characteristics and their combined effects on consumer responses. For example, Meyers-Levy and Zhu (2010) explained the difference between males and females as the difference between high and low needs for cognition and their perceptions of the meanings of advertising's aesthetic background (i.e., music and graphic design). Lee et al. (2013) studied the emotional distress due to failed relationships and found that it leads to a mood-congruent aesthetic preference (i.e., the desire to listen to sad songs when feeling sad). Most studies of consumer characteristics have modeled the individual differences that affect aesthetic experiences.

The above review of the research on aesthetics in consumption and marketing demonstrates the intricacy of aesthetic experience, which can be subject to individuals' preferences, stimulated by the aforementioned factors (i.e., aesthetic stimulus, environment, and consumer characteristics). Most studies chose to focus on the properties of aesthetic objects and their influence on consumer responses (Caroll, 2001) rather than deal with consumers as aesthetic subjects explicitly. In response, Venkatesh and Meamber (2008) examined the role of aesthetics in everyday consumption and proposed that

individuals may act as aesthetic subjects when seeking to project themselves and create enjoyment or pleasure even from the most mundane objects in their everyday lives. Their study empirically demonstrated this process and discussed some of the issues involved in conceptualizing aesthetic subjects, including consumer motivations (e.g., to attain hedonistic consumption, a sense of immersion, therapeutic appeal, novelty) and the impact of aesthetics upon their lives, ranging from simple involvement (e.g., making purchase decisions according to sensory appeals) to more complex connections (e.g., creating self-transcending mental states).

To date, the discussion of aesthetic subjects has been limited due to the rooted philosophical instance of aesthetics, which normally begins with the aesthetic objects and the way in which people respond to them via their sensory experiences. How consumers, as aesthetic subjects, co-create their aesthetic experiences remains underexplored. As stated by Venkatesh and Meamber (2008), "the difficulty for most thinkers with taking the aesthetic subject as a starting point to initiate experiences has been that it has the problems of dissecting the variety of aesthetic experiences" (p. 51). As a result, aesthetic experience has been discussed largely in and of itself rather than in terms of how one experiences it.

This study aims to explore how consumers as aesthetic subjects formulate their experiences. Given the variability of individual differences, this research has followed a phenomenological approach that helps describe some of the underlying themes and analytical concepts within the wider area of subjectivity. The intent is to find coherent structures that can become the bases for a theoretical understanding while leaving intact the variability inherent in the phenomena. The research shows that consumer aesthetic experiences may involve both the specific aesthetic objects (e.g., arts and cultural events) and everyday consumption. This study will thus focus on the contemporary retail environment, which represents both realms of experiences. Numerous studies (e.g., Baudrillard, 1983; Fiske, 1989; Gottdiener, 1995; Sandikci and Holt, 1998; Bäckström, 2011) argue that the retail place has become an "aesthetic" world in which consumers often come to enjoy the atmospherics (e.g., decoration, architecture, display), not for any specific functional reason but because the experience of being in the servicescape has become its own reward.

3. Methodology

This study applies qualitative research techniques to data collected at one of the most prominent shopping malls in the United States. Gurnee Mills is a 1.8 million sq. ft. off-price retail and entertainment destination that features many large anchors, over 200 specialty retailers, and a variety of themed restaurants and entertainment. The mix of tenants at Gurnee Mills is continuously changing in order to maintain the Shoppertainment® identity. This, together with a blend of arts in everyday consumption, has drawn in a variety of consumer profiles, from the mass to the high-end and from locals to international tourists. It is claimed that consumers generally spent 3 h in this place versus an average of 1 h and 15 min at other shopping centers, proving the success of facilitating enjoyment beyond the regular purchasing function.

Following the approach of interpretive phenomenology, this study sought to facilitate participants' articulation of the meanings of their own experiences (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). Three major research techniques – observation, interviews, and projective tasking – were implemented at various times during visits occurring over a one-year period. The observation focused on how consumers interacted with elements of the retail environment, such as products, places, and other people. In some cases, shopping trips or walking tours were initiated in order to observe

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