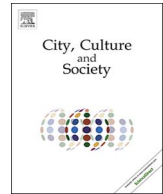




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An empirical research framework for the aesthetic appreciation of the urban environment

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ABSTRACT

The present article aims to construct an empirical research framework for the aesthetic appreciation of the urban environment. By applying the concept of “environmental aesthetics” to “consumer aesthetics,” the present article remarks that urban environments are considered as aesthetic environments when they resemble natural environments. This article proposes an empirical research framework composed of two factors. The first factor is the similarity of the urban environment to the natural environment. This factor is classified into two categories: (1) assimilation into the natural environment and (2) natural change caused by the passage of time. The second factor is the consumer’s relationship with the urban environment. This factor is also classified into two categories, borrowing the two terms of environmental aesthetics: (1) “engaged” and (2) “observational.” This article also discusses the research methods appropriate for this framework.

1. Introduction

These days, we often hear the word “aestheticization” of various things that surround us. Featherstone’s (2007) book is often cited as literature on the aestheticization of daily life. Featherstone, a sociologist, notes that daily life is becoming aesthetic. He identifies three meanings of the term aestheticization in daily life. The first relates to artistic subcultures. The second is the project of turning life into a work of art. The third is the rapid flow of signs and images in contemporary society.

Such a view is shared by marketing researchers. Referring to Featherstone’s book, a marketing researcher Szmigin (2006) argued that distinctions between art and life have recently collapsed. Szmigin explored the two art exhibitions that represent the union of art and marketing and noted that the artist transforms goods into objects of aesthetic value. Szmigin also noted that “the convergence of art and commerce will impact on expectations in terms of communication, product design, and shopping spaces” (Szmigin, 2006, p. 115).

The tendency to become aesthetic seems to penetrate the overall consumer environments in urban daily life in many consumption societies. The present article uses the term “urban” in a broad sense, that is, not restricted to the metropolis or the city, but also including the suburb.

As Chatzidakis et al. (n.d.) argued, recently, space and place have become the intriguing subjects in the field of consumer research and marketing. For example, research has been conducted on “brandscape” as a servscape (e. g., Sherry, 1998) and “retroscape” (e. g.,

Patterson & Brown, 2003). These spaces are considered to provide various aesthetic values, in addition to cultural values.

However, except for a study on the aesthetics of the urban park conducted by McEachern, Warnaby, and Cheetham (2012), most of the investigated spaces and places are artificially made to provide artistic value. A few studies analyze the aesthetic experience that occurs in non artistic places or spaces. Although non artistic surroundings in urban daily life may be artistically valueless, they seemed to have various aesthetic values.

The fact that the urban environments have often been chosen as the themes of genre paintings or cityscape photographs suggests the aesthetic values of the urban environment. Researchers in the field of aesthetics also pay attention to the urban environment, as discussed later in this article. They develop the philosophical discussion of the appreciation of the urban environment.

However, the aesthetic appreciation of the urban environment has not been clearly explained in the empirical research fields. To carry out the empirical research, a research framework seems to be needed.

The present article aims to construct a research framework for the empirical research on the aesthetic appreciation of the urban environment by conducting a critical examination of theoretical studies on “consumer aesthetics” and on “environmental aesthetics.”

First, this article explains what consumer aesthetics and environmental aesthetics are, because both are relatively newly born research fields and do not seem well recognized. Second, this article introduces the philosophical ideas of environmental aesthetics and examines their applicability to consumer aesthetics. Third, this article proposes an

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empirical research framework for the aesthetic appreciation of the urban environment. Finally, this article discusses the research methods appropriate for the framework.

2. The research field of consumer aesthetics and environmental aesthetics

2.1. Consumer aesthetics as the subfield of consumer research

Consumer aesthetics belongs to consumer research. Consumer research, that is, the research on consumer behavior, is the field that is closely related to psychology and marketing. Both fields are basically scientific and focus on empirical research.

The discipline of consumer behavior is defined as “the study of the processes involved when individuals or groups select, purchase, use, or dispose of products, services, ideas, or experiences to satisfy needs and desires” (Solomon, 2009, p. 7). In consumer research, the term “products” has broader meaning than the ordinary usage of this word. It means “goods, services, ideas, events, or any other entities that can be acquired, used, or disposed of in ways that potentially provide value” (Holbrook, 1987, p. 128). Thus, not only acquired goods or services through the monetary exchange through the marketing channels but also various things that satisfy our needs can be the “products.”

The consumer research field was established in the 1950s. The main focus of this field has been the consumer's rational choice of products and decision making. However, since the 1980s, research on the aesthetic appreciation of various things has come to be included in this research field. The consumer's aesthetic appreciation of arts or aesthetic objects is not well explained by the previous framework based on the notion of rationality. Research on the consumer's aesthetic experiences was born from this question. This research is called “consumer aesthetics.”

In Makino's (2015) discussion on consumer aesthetics, aesthetically appreciated objects are considered to have certain desirable “aesthetic qualities.” “Aesthetic quality” is a phrase used in the field of aesthetics and is defined as the perceived feature that “requires the exercise of taste, perceptiveness, or sensitivity” (Sibley, 1959, p. 421). Aesthetic quality includes various kinds of qualities, such as “graceful,” “delicate,” “dainty,” “elegant,” or “garish.”

Makino (2014, 2015) noted that the earliest research on consumer aesthetics is Holbrook and Huber's (1979) study. Holbrook and Huber argued that traditional consumer research has neglected aesthetic products such as artistic offerings. They conducted an empirical study on the appreciation of jazz recordings.

Holbrook (1980) attempted to construct a theory of consumer aesthetics and defined consumer aesthetics as “the study of the buyer's cognitive, affective, and behavioural responses to media, entertainment, and the arts” (Holbrook, 1980, p. 104). Holbrook (1980) indicated that the “experimental aesthetics,” which belongs to the field of experimental psychology, is theoretically useful to conduct the empirical research on consumer aesthetics.

Thus, conducting the experiments that measure consumers' responses to aesthetic objects was recommended as the starting point of consumer aesthetics. Holbrook (1980) showed the theoretical relationship between the structural complexity of the artistic stimulus and the degree of aesthetic response, based on the psychological theory. The relationship is indicated by the model of the inverted-U-shaped curve. According to this model, the highest aesthetic pleasure is experienced when the aesthetic object is moderately complex. The validity of the model is analyzed by the experiment.

In addition, in experimental psychology, Berlyne (1971) discussed that not only the complexity but also various stimulus properties that raise that arousal, such as novelty, are considered to be the determinants of the aesthetic response.

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) developed Holbrook's (1980) idea and advocated a new research perspective. They argued that consumer

research needs to investigate not only the consumer's choice and product purchases but also the consumption experience. They stressed that consumer behavior such as appreciation of the arts or leisure activities requires explanation in the context of the consumer's experience. After the publication of Holbrook and Hirschman's (1982) research, various studies of consumer aesthetics have been carried out. However, there are few studies that organize or classify the previous research of consumer aesthetics.

Makino (2014, 2015) classified consumer aesthetics into three categories by the type of the appreciated object. The first category includes research on the appreciation of artwork and popular cultural products. The second category includes research on consumers' responses to well-designed products or shops. The third category includes research on a wide variety of aesthetic experiences in daily life, such as feeling warm, nostalgic, or melancholy, toward the surroundings. In this category, neither the artwork nor the designed products are the object of appreciation. The consumer's surroundings as a whole are the object of appreciation. The research on the aesthetic appreciation of the urban environment, which is examined in this article, belongs to the third category.

Of these three categories, research addressing the third category is scarce (Makino, 2015, 2016). A research framework for conducting the empirical research in this category seems to be needed. Makino (2015, 2016) argued that the perceived time duration is a factor that is supposed to have significant influence on the aesthetic experience. Especially in the aesthetic appreciation of the urban environment, the perceived time duration seems to be critically important, because urban environments are usually change very fast.

Referring to the geographical literature, Chatzidakis et al. (n.d.) also suggested that temporal dimension is important to describe consumer activities that have occurred at a certain space or a place. According to them, the meanings of places are continually emergent. Thus, experienced aesthetic qualities are considered to be continually emergent or changing in certain environments.

2.2. Environmental aesthetics as the subfield of aesthetics

Environmental aesthetics belongs to aesthetics. Environmental aesthetics is a philosophical research field that discusses the aesthetic value of the environments. In this field, the environment is regarded as the object of appreciation (Makino, 2015).

As Berleant (1997) argued, although the appreciation of nature has a long history, in Europe attention to the aesthetic dimensions of landscape developed in the eighteenth century, when attitudes toward nature shifted from threatening to beautiful. However, in the academic field of aesthetics, “most attention has been directed to the arts and not to the natural world” (Berleant, 1992, p. 1). As Berleant (1997) noted, environmental aesthetics is only emerging as a discipline, and scholars began to develop this discipline from the 1970s.

The background of this trend was the growing concern about the apparent degeneration of the natural environment (Carlson & Lintott, 2008a). Furthermore, Carlson and Lintott (2008a) remarked that the philosophical world has been gradually aware of “the new developments in ecology and the environmental sciences and the power and significance of the environmental movement” (p. 7).

Carlson (2009) argued that the primal concern of environmental aesthetics is the natural environment. As the result of the use of nature as a model for art, nature and art are considered to be aesthetically similar (Berleant & Carlson, 2007).

Recently, it has been considered that the issue of aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment has not only theoretical significance, but also practical significance. Carlson (2008) argued that environmental aesthetics has become needed in the various related fields such as environmental assessment or landscape architecture, because environmental aesthetics indicates the aesthetic values of the environment. Thus, now the ideas of environmental aesthetics are connected to

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