

Using the senses to evaluate aesthetic products at the point of sale: The moderating role of consumers' goals



Sonia Vilches-Montero^{a,*}, Nik Mohd Hazrul Nik Hashim^b, Ameet Pandit^a, Renzo Bravo-Olavarria^a

^a Newcastle Business School, The University of Newcastle, Australia

^b National University of Malaysia, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

In this research, we expand our understanding of how aesthetic products induce shoppers' responses at the point of sale. We advance and test a more integrative approach in which not only the sensory evaluations of the aesthetic product, but also the shoppers' personal goals affect their purchase responses. Study 1 uses a lab setting to reveal that shoppers' sensory evaluations of a new apartment elicit feelings of attachment, which mediate the effect of the apartment's aesthetic features on shoppers' purchase responses. Further, shoppers assess the extent to which the product will contribute to attaining personal goals, which moderates the effect of emotional attachment on purchase responses. Study 2 replicates these findings using a field-study approach. In contrast to prior research, our results show that affective processing is not the sole driver of shoppers' responses to aesthetic products, as its effect is moderated by cognitive evaluations of whether social status and materialistic goals will be attained through the acquisition of the aesthetic product. We discuss how both retailers and manufacturers who market aesthetic products can benefit from appealing to the personal goals of their shoppers.

1. Introduction

The aesthetic value of a product is particularly relevant to shopping behaviour research. Aesthetics is not only one of the universal values by which all individuals can innately appreciate beauty (Langlois et al., 1991), but it also has direct applications to product choice at the point of sale (Sundar et al., 2014). Indeed, the visual appearance of products can elicit affective and evaluative responses (Hirschman, 1986) and even further, aesthetic products can influence product choices (Hoyer and Stokburger-Sauer, 2012; Sundar et al., 2014). For instance, a harmony chair may convey the aesthetic taste of its users (Dhar and Wertenbroch, 2000; Hoyer and Stokburger-Sauer, 2012), and make users feel good and experience pleasure during use (Helander, 2003). Bell et al. (1991) utilised colour photographs of living room furniture to test unity of style, and demonstrate that the shoppers' response was correlated with the perceived unity of a style. Thus, aesthetic products refer to pleasingly designed products which can provide users with sensory pleasure in the form of positively-valenced emotions (Hekkert, 2006; Kumar and Garg, 2010).

Traditional models of sensorial judgment have emphasised the positive effects that aesthetic products have on purchase responses. For example, research on centrality of visual aesthetics (Bloch, 1995) has

shown that compared to products with lower aesthetic appeal, highly aesthetic products trigger higher willingness to pay (Bloch et al., 2003), lengthen the response time of individuals' choices (Reimann et al., 2010), enhance product differentiation (Desai et al., 2001) and remain cherished after their functional value dwindles (Martin, 1998). However, much of the existing literature focuses only on how people react to different design elements (Bloch, 1995; Bloch et al., 2003; Chitturi et al., 2007; Raghuram and Greenleaf, 2006), while the role of the shopper's characteristics and motivations remain largely unstudied. Herein, we follow psychological models of hierarchical processing (Chaiken and Trope, 1999; Strack and Deutsch, 2004) and advance a more integrative approach to explain how consumers evaluate aesthetic products at the point of sale. Hierarchical processing refers to the theory that there are two systems at work when an individual makes a decision. The heuristic system is the emotional system, meaning that decisions made from this system are based on the emotions that a situation elicits; whereas the analytic system represents the rational and critical thinking process (Evans and Curtis-Holmes, 2005; Gauffroy and Barrouillet, 2009; Greene, 2009). The analytic system uses more cognition, which requires more in-depth reasoning before coming to a decision. Thus, both processes compete for control of the response that an individual may make during a decision task (Chaiken and Trope,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Sonia.vilches-montero@newcastle.edu.au (S. Vilches-Montero), nikhaz@ukm.my (N.M.H. Nik Hashim), ameet.pandit@newcastle.edu.au (A. Pandit), renzo.bravoolavarria@newcastle.edu.au (R. Bravo-Olavarria).

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1999; Evans and Curtis-Holmes, 2005). Interestingly, hierarchical-processing theory has been used across settings and decision-making scenarios such as persuasion (Chaiken, 1980; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), social behaviour (Strack and Deutsch, 2004) and causal attribution (Gilbert, 1989), but no research has adopted this view to examine the phenomenon of aesthetic preferences.

Therefore, we propose and test a model in which the first evaluation of the aesthetic product is the result of sensorial and affective processing. The second process consists of a cognitive reflection on the extent to which the aesthetic product will help attain the shopper's personal goals. Across two studies, we demonstrate that in the first stage (stimulus processing), the sensory evaluation of the aesthetic product elicit affective responses. In stage two, individuals' materialistic and social-status goals lead shoppers to further evaluate the aesthetic product and determine whether it will contribute to goal accomplishment, which act as a moderator of the effect of emotional evaluations on purchase responses.

This current research contributes to theory and practice in several ways. We expand the literature on aesthetic products by broadening our understanding of how aesthetic products induce purchase responses at the point of sale. We show that shoppers associate the product's aesthetic features with attaining materialistic and/or social-status goals. Thus, the emotions experienced by shoppers translate into more positive purchase responses. We also expand research on emotional attachment by showing how aesthetic products induce affective processing. This current research calls for a reconsideration of the way that both retailers and manufacturers use segmentation, positioning and communication strategies when launching aesthetic products.

This paper is organised as follows. We start by developing theoretical arguments for our conceptual model. We posit that processing aesthetic products elicits emotional attachment, which in turn affects individuals' behavioural responses. We also present arguments for how materialistic goals and social status goals moderate the effect of emotional attachment. Then, two studies are presented, which lend support to our conceptual model. A discussion of theoretical contributions, managerial implications and limitations of the study complete the paper.

2. Conceptual model and hypotheses

Fig. 1 presents our conceptual model. The first part of the model proposes that processing an aesthetic product will elicit emotional responses, which translate in emotional attachment to the product. The second part of the model posits that once emotional attachment is elicited, shoppers conduct cognitive processing to determine the extent to which the aesthetic product contributes to attaining personal goals (i.e., materialistic and social-status goals). This evaluation acts as a moderator of the effect that emotional attachment exerts on purchase responses (i.e., purchase commitment and purchase intention). Hereafter, we present theoretical arguments for the relationships proposed in the model and formally advance our research hypotheses.

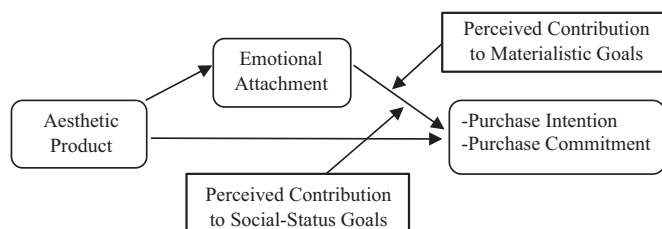


Fig. 1. Conceptual Moderated Mediation Model.

2.1. The relationship between aesthetic products, emotional attachment and purchase response

The first part of our conceptual model focuses on sensory, affective processing of aesthetic products. Prior research has shown that aesthetic products can elicit affective processing and emotional responses (Hirschman, 1986). For instance, aesthetic products composed of curvier elements tend to evoke a stronger pleasure response compared with those defined by straight lines (Tyan-Yu et al., 2017). A chair may convey the aesthetic taste of its users, and make users feel good and experience pleasure during use (Helander, 2003; Hoyer and Stokburger-Sauer, 2012). Moreover, consumers who perform sensory evaluations of aesthetic products engage in more intense affective processing (Chitturi et al., 2007; Reimann et al., 2010) and tend to feel highly impressed by the aesthetic appeal of the products they purchase (Bloch, 1995; Page and Herr, 2002).

Interestingly, despite the convergent evidence indicating affective processing of aesthetic products, the precise implications of the emotions elicited remain largely unknown. Herein, we draw on the literature on emotional attachment to propose that the positive emotions elicited while shoppers process an aesthetic product will translate into an emotional attachment to it. Emotional attachment is conceptualised as a condition where the customer experiences an affective desire to establish a relation with an object or person (Bowlby, 1980; Fraley and Shaver, 2000; Lewicka, 2011). Specifically, emotional attachment is referred to as a target-specific bond between a person and an object/person, which involves feelings of connection, affection and passion (Thomson et al., 2005). Relevantly, emotional attachment impacts behaviour. For instance, strong emotional attachment in a romantic relationship may lead to a higher willingness to make sacrifices for or to invest in that person (Fraley and Shaver, 2000). Bonding with a brand elicits desires of proximity and connection (Pandit and Vilches-Montero, 2016); while separation triggers anxiety and distress (Grisaffe and Nguyen, 2011; Malär et al., 2011). Therefore, emotional attachment induces the desire to prolong the initial emotional connection felt with the object/person through actively avoiding separation and switching (Grisaffe and Nguyen, 2011).

Drawing on the literature, we predict that when using the senses to evaluate aesthetic products at the point of sale, shoppers will engage in affective processing leading up to feelings of connectedness and affection in the form of emotional attachment. Further, we expect that the emotional attachment will induce the desire to prolong the initial proximity and connection felt with the aesthetic product through purchase. The rationale for this expectation is that aesthetic products are sensory-rich products, and sensory evaluations of a product elicit affective processing (Chitturi et al., 2007; Reimann et al., 2010) which impact consumer choices (Biswas et al., 2014). Similarly we expect that emotional attachment will induce the desire to prolong the initial connection felt with the aesthetic product through purchase. (Bowlby, 1980; Fraley and Shaver, 2000; Thomson et al., 2005). Therefore, consumers will experience higher purchase intentions (i.e., the desire to acquire the aesthetic product) and purchase commitment (i.e., willingness to sacrifice other purchases in order to acquire the aesthetic product) for aesthetic products.

Additionally, in a departure from studies which have focused on shoppers' post-purchase attachment to brands (Kumar et al., 2015), we predict that shoppers will experience emotional attachment to aesthetic products during the pre-purchase stage, when they initially encounter the product at the point of sale. We formally predict that:

H1(a): Emotional attachment will mediate the effect of aesthetic products on purchase intention.

H1(b): Emotional attachment will mediate the effect of aesthetic products on purchase commitment.

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