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Everyday consumer aesthetics

Vanessa M Patrick

This review introduces the notion of everyday consumer aesthetics. Everyday consumer aesthetics entails non-art, non-nature aesthetic experiences that are diverse and dynamic and result in specific consumer actions (e.g. purchasing) and consumption behaviors (e.g. recycling). Two broad trends observed in the recent literature are highlighted: a focus on the quantification of the use and impact of aesthetics, and, the study of specific new aesthetic features and their theoretical underpinnings. Recent insights and advances in consumer aesthetics research pertaining to elements of packaging, shape and surface appeal, color, dynamism and visual change, embodiment and individual differences are presented. Future research endeavors to expand the scope and impact of everyday aesthetics in consumer behavior are discussed.

Address
University of Houston, USA

Corresponding author: Patrick, Vanessa M (vpatrick@bauer.uh.edu)

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''Experiences of everyday life are replete with aesthetic character''

- Irvin [1]

Most classic definitions of aesthetics pertain to art and the appreciation of natural beauty. Aesthetic philosophers from Plato to Hegel have held the 'highbrow' view that only art objects and nature are considered the proper subjects of aesthetic inquiry, and relevant aesthetic properties are derived from an examination of these subjects. It is not surprising, then, that the *Philosophy Dictionary* defines 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.' Early research in consumer behavior mirrored these notions with consumer aesthetics research relying largely on the art-centric constructs of symmetry, prototypicality, unity, harmony and completeness [2–5].

The emergence of everyday aesthetics

While art remains the quintessential model for aesthetics, philosophers have begun to recognize that 'ordinary, everyday aesthetic experiences are more significant than experiences of high art in forming and informing one's identity and view of the world beyond personal experience' [6]. Consequently, there has been a shift in philosophical discourse with the emergence of a new stream of philosophy termed *everyday aesthetics* [7]. In contrast to a 'spectator-like' experience of art, 'everyday aesthetics is a diverse and dynamic experience, that more often than not leads to specific actions: cleaning, purchasing, repairing, discarding, and so on' [8].

Although aesthetic philosophers debate the nature and scope of everyday aesthetics [1,9–11], most agree that everyday aesthetics is 'something of a catch-all, a default third basket for what is not comfortably categorized as fine art or natural beauty' [12]. Consumer researchers — those of us who study non-art, non-nature everyday aesthetic objects and experiences — are slam-dunk in the middle of this 'catch-all.'

The main purpose of conceptualizing the study of everyday *consumer* aesthetics in the context of its philosophical counterpart is three-fold: (1) to highlight that the shift from a focus on art objects and nature to everyday objects and experiences entails the investigation of new aesthetic properties and their theoretical underpinnings, (2) to emphasize that the seemingly trivial, ordinary, innocuous aspects of our aesthetic life have pragmatic psychological, moral, social, and political consequences and influence choice and a whole host of other consumption behaviors, and (3) to provide marketers the insight, opportunity, and power to design goods and services in a manner that can improve the quality of life and well-being of consumers and the environment.

Consumer aesthetics research

It is fair to say that research in consumer aesthetics has taken off. There was a brewing interest in the topic at a roundtable at the Association of Consumer Research conference in 2008, which resulted in the curation of a special issue on Aesthetics in Consumer Psychology [13]. Since then, a considerable number of research articles on aesthetics have been published in marketing journals. This surge of interest in aesthetics in the past five years did not stem entirely from academic discourse. Marketers have recognized the importance of aesthetics and design,

and research has reflected this interest. In particular, research over the past five years in the leading consumer research journals has focused on quantifying the use and impact of aesthetics in marketing and on the study of specific new aesthetic features and their theoretical underpinnings.

A considerable number of recent research papers have focused on not only demonstrating the role of aesthetics, but also on quantifying its impact. The impact and role of aesthetics has been studied across multiple facets of the consumption experience. Product design is widely recognized as a key driver of success in competitive marketplaces [14–16] and subtleties in product design have been shown to influence the way consumers choose and evaluate products and brands [17–19]. Research has found that product design dimensions can influence consumers' purchase intentions, word of mouth, and willingness to pay [20••]. The aesthetics of store environments have been found to influence product attractiveness and shopping intentions [21,22], and it has been demonstrated that visual elements of direct mail communication can determine opening rates and campaign effectiveness [23]. A number of studies have also investigated the scope and boundaries of aesthetic influence. For example, when aesthetics features are perceived to impede product performance, a bias in the direction of the unattractive product emerges [24]. Research has also found that the use of aesthetics can sometimes backfire, and that overstyling products can negatively influence their perceived functionality [25].

In addition to defining and quantifying the role of aesthetics, recent consumer research has also moved beyond traditional art-centric constructs (e.g. symmetry) to investigate a broader set of aesthetic features and consumption experiences. This investigation has contributed to an enhanced understanding of consumers' aesthetic schemas [26]. The study of everyday consumer aesthetics has opened up an investigation into a number of specific features or elements that I will briefly discuss next.

Elements of packaging

Recent work has established that what is depicted on a package can influence consumer perceptions of quality and portion size, and determine consumption quantity. Even psychometric and neuroimaging findings reveal that aesthetically pleasing package design can activate the brain's reward circuitry [27,28]. We now have evidence that 'good things come in small packages.' Researchers have found that smaller package size increases perceptions of quality, especially when the product is also costlier [29]. Madzharov and Block [30] show that consumers rely on the number of items depicted on the package to determine the quantity of items in the package and also how much they should consume. In a series of studies, Hagtvedt and Patrick [31] investigated how fine art images can be brought into the realm of everyday consumption by placing them on packaging of everyday objects, in what is referred to as 'the art-infusion effect.' They found that the infusion of art can favorably influence the extent to which products are perceived as more luxurious, and also as better products. However, they also caution marketers that the 'specialness' of art can be diminished when it is presented as a mere illustration of product form or features, and not as an art for its own sake [32]. In a novel study, art-inspired food plating (food arranged to resemble a Kandinsky painting) was shown to enhance one's dining experience, providing novel support for the assumption that we often first eat with our eyes [33].

Shape and surface appeal

Research has found that logo shape matters, and that circular versus angular logos can influence consumers' judgments of a product (comfort of a mattress) or a company's attributes (service orientation) [34], as well as taste evaluations and willingness to pay [35]. Product shape completeness (i.e. a full sandwich versus half a sandwich) can influence how consumers evaluate a product and how much of it they choose [36]. Specifically, consumers prefer product completeness (a full sandwich) and evaluate it more favorably, but tend to consume more of incomplete products (half sandwiches). Logo completeness, defined as the extent to which parts of the logo are blanked out or are intentionally missing can inform consumer perceptions of the firm. Incomplete typeface logos result in firms perceived as less trustworthy, but more innovative, than firms associated with complete logos [37]. In terms of packaging appeal, we now know that transparent food packaging influences food consumption [38]. When food is bite-sized and visually attractive, transparency increases consumption. But transparent packaging actually decreases consumption for larger, less visually appealing foods. To understand why people prefer glossy packaging, Meert, Pandelaere, and Patrick [39•] rule out alternative explanations of socialization and visual appeal to show that humans' preference for glossy reflects a deeply ingrained preference for water as a resource. Interestingly, the surface appeal of currency notes — whether crisp or dirty, can influence spending [40]. People are more likely to get rid of worn bills, because they look contaminated and dirty and hold on to crisp bills because of their pristine physical appearance.

Color

Marketers use color in innovative ways, and many researchers have investigated the role of color in fields ranging from biology to psychophysics. A recent review paper on color presents a comprehensive framework that highlights the complexities and nuances of this domain of investigation [41•]. In consumer psychology, we have gleaned insights about the role of color in website design