The role of aesthetic taste in consumer behavior

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Abstract In light of the increasing interest in hedonic aspects of consumer behavior, it is clear that consumer taste plays a critical role in judgment and decision making, particularly for hedonic products and services. At the present time, however, our understanding of consumer aesthetic taste and its specific role for consumer behavior is limited. In this article, we review the literature from a variety of fields such as sociology, psychology, philosophy, and consumer behavior in order to develop a conceptual definition of consumer aesthetic taste. We then explore various issues related to taste and develop a conceptual framework for the relevance of expertise vs. taste in consumer decision-making. Finally, we present an agenda for future research on this important topic.

 $\textbf{Keywords} \ \, \text{Aesthetic taste} \cdot \text{Hedonic consumption} \cdot \\ \text{Consumer expertise}$

Introduction

In the last three decades, research on hedonic products and hedonic consumption has stimulated increasing interest in the marketing and consumer behavior literature (e.g., Babin et al. 1994; Batra and Ahtola 1991; Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Homer 2006; Okada 2005; Steenkamp

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and Geyskens 2006). *Hedonic products* have been defined as products and services¹ that provide more experiential and emotional value than utilitarian products which are mainly instrumental and provide functional value (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000). Utilitarian or functional product aspects (e.g., derived from functions performed by products) are generally seen as a mere extrinsic means to an end, while hedonic aspects of consumption relate to intrinsic factors such as product style and appearance (Grewal et al. 2004).

In today's markets, it is often hard to differentiate products and services by their functional value, and to create differentiation marketers are increasingly turning to affective, hedonic, and symbolic values that offerings deliver to consumers. Indeed, nearly all products contain both functional and hedonic attributes (e.g., Okada 2005). For a number of product categories, however, hedonic aspects, and consequently affective consumer dispositions, play a key role in the decision-making process (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982). As Silverstein and Fiske (2003, p. 51) note, the market calls for those emotional facets, and consumers are now better equipped in valuing these: "Middle-market consumers now have higher levels of taste, education, and worldliness ... show greater emotional awareness"

According to Hirschman and Holbrook (1982, p. 92), hedonic facets in consumer behavior relate to the "multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects" of an individual's consumption experience. This hedonic side of consumption involves aspects of aesthetics and *taste* (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Schmitt and Simonson 1997). Schmitt and Simonson (1997, p. 1) note that "our personal tastes guide our decisions in choosing our neighborhoods, decorating

¹ It should be noted that the term *product* in this paper refers not only to tangible goods but incorporates services as well.



our homes, selecting our clothing, picking our appliances, and buying our cars." While the concept of taste has been intensively studied in a variety of fields such as philosophy, psychology, and sociology, it has unfortunately received little attention in the consumer behavior and marketing literature (exceptions are, for instance, Holbrook 1980, 1983, 1999, 2005). Given the importance of hedonic aspects and taste elements to our understanding of consumer behavior phenomena, this represents a major research void.

A basic definition of taste in popular science (i.e., from Dictionary.com) is "one's personal attitude or reaction toward an aesthetic phenomenon or social situation, regarded as either good or bad" or "the sense of what is fitting, harmonious, or beautiful; the perception and enjoyment of what constitutes excellence in the fine arts, literature, fashion, etc." In consumer behavior, "good taste" has been defined as "that prescribed by professional experts in a particular cultural field," and it has been asked "whether ordinary consumers (nonexperts or members of the mass audience) have "good taste" (Holbrook 2005, p. 75). Here, taste is not per se viewed as having a positive valence, and thus, to give it a direction, the term "good" is added. This is not necessary if one associates taste with aesthetics, as does Sibley (1959), for instance, who synonymously uses the terms "aesthetic concepts" and "taste concepts." Similarly, in psychological aesthetics, taste is viewed as being related to an individual's sense of aesthetics (e.g., Berlyne 1974a). Because aesthetics is considered as something positive that is somehow related to beauty, a positive valence is inherent in this term.² Individuals with a sense of aesthetics are described as having "more sophisticated preferences regarding the design of things" (Bloch 1995, p. 22) and, very generally, as having superior consumer preferences (Kates 2001). As a consequence, a consumer's (superior or good) taste helps in generating hedonic value for a product or service (Holbrook 1983). In terms of antecedents of taste, Bloch (1995) suggests that one's innate design preferences and consumer characteristics are crucial in driving individual tastes.

According to *sociologist* Bourdieu (1984), individuals possess economic resources as well as cultural capital, which comprises aspects such as cultural knowledge, experiences, tastes, and world views. Thus, taste is considered to be part of an individual's cultural capital. Bourdieu (1984) further argues that taste is solely determined by cultural and social status, but that cultural

In the remainder of this paper, we use the terms *consumer* aesthetic taste, aesthetic taste, consumer taste, taste, and good taste synonymously.



capital becomes objectified in consumption objects. The relevance of taste for consumer behavior becomes evident here. Additionally, DiMaggio (1987) views taste as an "identity marker that facilitates interactions" (p. 443) and helps in constructing social relations and understanding group memberships.

In philosophy, Cohen (1998, p. 509) defines (artistic) taste as "the natural capacity to take pleasure in certain artistic and natural objects by means of one's own sensory experience." Overall, taste has a long tradition of study in philosophy, with a widespread discourse in the eighteenth century. Francis Hutcheson, for example, provided one of the most influential works on taste as a sense (Hutcheson 1725 in Leidhold 2004). The relationship between judgment and taste was discussed by David Hume (Hume 1757 in Miller 1985), and Immanuel Kant (1790 in Pluhar 1987) provided an influential work on aesthetic judgment and aesthetic taste. Interestingly, by the middle of the eighteenth century, the concept of taste had largely replaced the concept of beauty as the most important aesthetic term. This was mainly due to its immediacy and its closeness to the senses (Townsend 1997). Townsend (1997) argues that taste, viewed as aesthetic perception, is one sense (and there may be others) that needs to be added to the generally accepted five senses, sight (ophthalmoception), sound (audioception), taste (gustaoception), smell (olfacoception or olfacception), and touch (tactioception). On the other hand, one could argue that taste is not a potential "sixth" sense, but that taste occurs in each of the five senses.

In general, the streams of thought on taste in various disciplines relate the concept to perception, judgment, and aesthetic experience. The association of taste with the visual sense becomes evident. The term "aesthetics" is derived from the Greek language (aisthetikos) and relates to sense perceptions. Academic work has used the term aesthetics in two ways: first, to refer to a theory of the beautiful, and second, to refer to a person's sensitivity to the beautiful (Stich 2004). The latter is often described as an individual's aesthetic sensitivity and is closely related to an individual's (good) taste (Berlyne 1974a; Child 1964; Frith and Nias 1974; Goetz et al. 1979). Aesthetic sensitivity can be defined as "the extent to which a person gives evidence of responding to relevant stimuli in some consistent and appropriate relation to the external standard" (Child 1964, p. 49). In psychological aesthetic research, this external standard is viewed as that prescribed by experts or a relevant reference group. Similarly, in consumer behavior, "good taste" has been viewed as that prescribed by experts (e. g., Holbrook 2005). Summarizing the essence of the conceptualizations of taste from various academic disciplines, as well as the proposed understanding of aesthetic sensitivity, the following definition of taste can be derived for this research context:

Consumer aesthetic taste constitutes an individual's consistent and appropriate response to aesthetic consumption objects through any of the five senses that is highly correlated with some external standard.

There have also been some discussions regarding the objectivity or subjectivity of taste (Holbrook 1981; Charters and Pettigrew 2003). Similar to other areas, it has been recognized that taste has an important subjective element, but it has also been argued that aesthetic appreciation or taste has an objective dimension (e.g., Ferry 1993) and that these judgments may be quasi-objective (i.e., when experts tend to agree and their judgments are based to some extent on criteria that might be objectively determinable; Solomon et al. 1984).

The findings emanating from research in psychological, empirical, and philosophical aesthetics are highly relevant for consumer behavior research and marketing practice as well. Especially for goods and services with a strong hedonic (e.g., aesthetic) dimension, taste can play a very critical role in consumers' judgment and decision processes. In light of this, the following questions become particularly important and are in need of investigation: What is a consumer's aesthetic taste and can it be (objectively) measured? How does a consumer's taste enter into the consumer decision-making process?

The overall objective of this paper, therefore, is to develop a better understanding of the concept of aesthetic taste and its role in consumer behavior as well as suggest directions for future research. The article proceeds as follows. Next, a variety of issues related to the concept of taste are discussed. The role of taste in consumer decision making, and thus, the evaluation of objects and aesthetic experiences are then examined. The paper closes with implications for marketing theory and practice and with directions for future research.

The concept of taste

Before developing a framework for examining the role of aesthetic taste in consumer behavior, it is first important to explore the nature of this construct in greater detail. Thus, we examine several important questions in relation to the concept of taste in general: (1) How does consumer aesthetic taste relate to individuals' different senses (i.e., sight, sound, touch, smell, and gustatory taste)? (2) How does taste relate to consumption objects? (3) Is taste subjective or is there an objective basis for taste? and (4) How does taste relate to the traditional construct of consumer expertise?

Taste in different senses

As mentioned earlier, a key question has centered on whether taste is an inherent component of one of the five previously mentioned senses or whether it is a sense above and beyond these senses. The multi-sensory view is in line with research on hedonic consumption which "seeks to augment its focus by acknowledging the several sensory channels used by consumers to perceive and experience products" (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982, p. 94). Further, there has been some research into the relevance of each of the five senses for consumer behavior. Studies have examined, for example, aesthetic and design issues in consumer behavior and marketing (e.g., Creusen and Schoormans 2005; Holbrook 1986; Page and Herr 2002; Veryzer and Hutchinson 1998). Veryzer and Hutchinson (1998), in a leading paper on product design in consumer behavior, investigate the influence of two major design principles, unity and prototypicality, on aesthetic responses of consumers. Unity can be understood as the harmonic interplay of elements of a design to form some visual connection beyond mere chance, whereas prototypicality is the degree to which an object is representative of a domain. The authors find that the two principles positively affect aesthetic response; however, other factors are relevant as well (e.g., presentation of visual information solely or in combination with other product information, ease of comparability of product designs).

Additionally, Allen et al. (2008) and Hoegg and Alba (2007) investigate gustatory taste, which is concerned with the taste of food or a beverage and its interplay with visual and verbal cues in product evaluation. Bosmans (2006) examines the effect of ambient scents on product evaluations, and Peck and Childers (2003) research individual differences in haptic information processing. Furthermore, Holbrook (1982, 1999, 2005) investigates taste more generally in the cultural field. Here, *taste* is understood as a concept that deals with the judgment of and preference for aesthetic objects. Holbrook, for example, studied jazz records (Holbrook 1982) and motion pictures (Holbrook 1999, 2005) as sample aesthetic product domains. According to his view, individuals can display aesthetic taste using their senses of sight and sound.

Recently, two special issues of important consumer behavior journals have been devoted to aesthetics and product design. The *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (JCP) published a special issue on aesthetics in consumer psychology in 2010 (e.g., Patrick and Peracchio 2010), and *The Journal of Product Innovation Management* (JPIM) published one on product design research and practice (e.g., Swan and Luchs 2011). In the special issue of JCP, one paper specifically deals with taste in aesthetic product experiences. Krishna et al. (2010) both conceptually and



empirically look into the effect of smell on touch and show that perceived congruence between smell and touch properties of a stimulus positively influences product evaluation. The authors elaborate on sensory perceptions and aesthetics and note that "the full form of appreciation of an experience's beauty of good taste comes from the combination of visual and other sensory inputs" (p. 410). The rest of the special issue papers look into other specific aspects of aesthetics and consumer psychology (e.g., gender differences in the perception of aesthetic stimuli, product judgments based on visual versus verbal information, aesthetics and luxury fashion).

The special issue of JPIM is concerned mainly with product design. Nevertheless, the taste concept appears in Luchs and Swan's (2011) review and summary of articles that appeared in the eight leading journals important to marketing thought in the years from 1995 to 2008. They discuss Bloch's (1995) model of consumer responses to product form in which individual tastes and preferences enter the model as moderators of the relationship between product form and psychological consumer responses. Interestingly, Bloch (2011) calls for research that investigates whether design elements only pertain to the visual sense or are also relevant for other senses.

Even though two special issues of journals were concerned with topics related to taste, namely aesthetics and product design, only a few empirical papers that study taste specifically can be identified. It can be concluded that although research on aesthetics is very often limited to visual aesthetics (due to its obvious association with and perception of beauty), sense perceptions per se are related to all five senses. Thus, this current paper's understanding of aesthetic taste involves not only visual aesthetics, but it also encompasses taste in all five senses. Consider the example of automobiles. Car designers are concerned with taste in more than just the visual sense. The design of an automobile involves the design of the car body, the sound and feel of the engine (especially when accelerating), and the smoothness and quietness of the ride as well as the car's interior design and the fabric and feel of the car seats. Further, consumers often express how they "love that new car smell." Thus, in addition to visual aesthetics, sound, touch, and smell aesthetics are relevant.

The interrelations between the different senses can be demonstrated when investigating the drivers of sense perceptions. Although gustatory taste and a general perception of taste have a very different focus, both have similar antecedents. It has been found, for instance, that gustatory tastes are partly driven by biological or innate preferences for particular flavors (e.g., Germov and Williams 1999), past experiences (e.g., Eertmans et al. 2001), and cultural context (e.g., Germov and Williams 1999). Similar antecedents of taste as a general sense are suggested in the literature.



In consumer behavior, it has been widely recognized that individuals use consumption objects to express their individual and social identity to their environment (e.g., Ahuvia 2005; Laverie et al. 2002; Richins 1994; Rindfleisch et al. 2009; Sirgy 1982). The reason is that by using certain products and services, consumers can indicate their social class, occupation, lifestyle, status, etc. (e.g., Solomon 1983). Bourdieu (1984) additionally argues that social class and cultural capital (i.e., family upbringing, formal education, and occupational culture) are the drivers of taste expressed in consumption choices. Thus, taste is understood as manifested preferences and becomes objectified in consumption objects.

Taste as manifested preferences can be viewed as an expression of social competence that seems to be socially constructed and determined by culture. Individuals very often follow taste conventions that are, to a certain extent, driven by inherited cultural values, such as ethnic and religious aspects, or social class. Bourdieu (1984, p. 56), for example, notes that "taste is the basis of all that one has—people and things and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others," which indicates the effect of social class (as one expression of cultural influences) on taste. Similarly, Gronow (1997) proposes that taste is an ideal measure for distinguishing between those who belong to "good" society and those who do not. This suggests that social class (or as Gronow (1997) puts it, "good" society) and taste are highly correlated, and thus, that the belonging to a certain social class and "consuming via aesthetic and interactional styles that fit with cultural elite sensibilities and that are socially scarce" (Holt 1998, p. 4) are a good indicator of an individual's taste. Finally, Zeitgeist, as the spirit and mood of a time or era, plays an important role for taste judgments (Ammann 2007).

The relationship between products and the relevance of product aesthetics in a consumer's life was investigated by, for instance, Bloch et al. (2003), who developed a scale that measures individual differences in the centrality of visual product aesthetics (CVPA). CVPA is "defined as the level of significance that visual aesthetics hold for a particular consumer in his/her relationship with products" (p. 551). While the concept of CVPA is subjective in nature (self-reported consumer measure), the authors show that high CVPA versus low CVPA individuals evaluate highly aesthetic products as more pleasing and have a more positive attitude toward and a higher purchase intention of these products than of products with a lower aesthetic appeal.

Taste and its subjective versus objective basis of assessment

It is important to note that there has been a considerable debate as to whether there is an external standard for



judging taste, and thus, whether taste is subjective or objective. On the one hand, taste is viewed as something very personal or individual. Charters (2006, p. 247) argues that "taste is a personal judgment and that aesthetic experience relies on an individual emotional response." Under this view, taste has no externally valid, universally agreed upon reference points on which to base aesthetic judgments, and it is therefore a subjective phenomenon. In other words, the appraisal of a product's quality is generally "perceived" and therefore is subjective (e.g., Charters 2006; Zeithaml 1988). Taste judgments are ultimately based on what feels good in terms of both what is right and beautiful (Gronow 1997). This is consistent with general wisdom as well as the old proverb "every man to his taste" or "de gustibus non est disputandum." Under this view, everyone has his/her own, individual taste, and there is no disputing about one's taste. For example, in judging a specific piece of furniture, two individuals might have different and idiosyncratic assessments as to whether one likes this certain piece of furniture, but neither one is correct. Both have the right to their own taste.

On the other hand, this viewpoint cannot account for the fact that there is general agreement in society that some aesthetic objects are "better" than others. In other words, some of the general principles of taste or aesthetic pleasure are uniform in nature. Otherwise people could not enjoy the same items of beauty that others do and that former generations did. For example, there is a general widespread agreement that some pieces of furniture are more "tasteful" than others. For product design in general, there have been design principles (i.e., attributes of "good" design) established that were mostly derived from the arts, such as unity, proportion, symmetry, complexity, color, or prototypicality (e.g., Creusen and Schoormans 2005). There are also works of art that are generally agreed upon as "masterpieces."

In line with this view, Berlyne (1974b) believed in an objective measurement of aesthetic taste and searched for general principles to account for that (i.e., to identify specific or general aesthetic criteria). The presumption is that some individuals have more aesthetic taste or sensitivity than others (Berlyne 1971). Thus, while individuals might focus on the same dimensions in judging aesthetic objects, some individuals might be better able to perceive subtle differences in these dimensions than others, pointing to a higher aesthetic sensitivity or taste. Thus, it is obvious that generally acceptable "standards of taste" have been developed over time (Hume 1757; Cohen 1998). A clear influence on these standards are the judgments of people who have received a certain level of training through education and socialization.

In support of this perspective, a number of studies in experimental aesthetics have asked respondents to judge the aesthetic value of selected (usually visual) aesthetic stimuli and/or indicate their stimuli preference (e.g., Child 1964). The extent to which the respondent agrees with an external standard such as "what experts think is most aesthetic or what the average judgment in a reference group considers as most aesthetic" (Stich 2004, p. 8) is used to judge the respondent's degree of aesthetic sensitivity. Those respondents with a larger degree of overlap are judged as having higher aesthetic sensitivity than those with a lower degree of overlap. Additionally, highly aesthetically sensitive individuals are expected to consistently perceive stimuli with higher aesthetic value (e.g., more beautiful stimuli) as more aesthetically pleasing (Child 1964). Examples of experimental tests to examine aesthetic taste in psychological aesthetics are the Meier Art Tests (judgment, aesthetic perception) (1941, 1967), Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Test (e.g., Goetz et al. 1979), and the Aesthetic Judgment Ability Test (Bamossy et al. 1983, 1985).

Also, in sociology, Bourdieu (1984) argues for an objectified form of cultural capital, and quantitative empirical studies have tested Bourdieu's theory by measuring taste in its objectified form, using individuals' preferences for particular categories, genres, or types of cultural objects (e.g., DiMaggio 1987; Peterson and DiMaggio 1975). This objectified form of taste has strongly been criticized, because, among others, "objectified cultural capital can operate effectively only within a stable cultural hierarchy ... as cultural hierarchies have dramatically blurred in advanced capitalist societies, objectified cultural capital has become a relatively weak mechanism for exclusionary class boundaries" (Holt 1998, p. 5). In response to this criticism, Holt (1997, 1998) in an interpretative study investigates if cultural capital leads to systematic differences in tastes and consumption practices for mass cultural categories (e.g., food, clothing, home decor and furnishings, music, movies, reading, socializing, and hobbies). He suggests a number of taste dimensions that distinguish individuals low and high in cultural capital and concludes that consumption today as in former times helps in the reproduction of social class.

Taking all this together, it would appear that taste is neither fully objective nor is it fully subjective. Kant (1790) reflected this stance by considering aesthetic or taste concepts as subjective, rooted in personal feelings of (dis)pleasure, but with a degree of objectivity in these feelings as being universal responses. He postulates a sensus communis, a communal sense, a community of feeling and taste (Gronow 1997). In both cases (i.e., taste as purely subjective phenomenon versus one that also has some degree of objectivity), taste serves as a basis for normative judgments of beauty and/or artistic excellence. Thus, although "beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, there seems to be an objective basis for aesthetic taste" (Eaton 1998, p. 56).



Summing up, researchers seem to agree that *there are both subjective and objective elements of taste*. Clearly, research is needed to more precisely define the construct and develop valid operationalizations of it. However, given that there is at least some degree of objectivity, it does appear possible to develop a measure of taste. In addition, it is important to compare and contrast the concept of taste to another interesting and highly studied construct: consumer expertise.

The relationship between consumer taste and consumer expertise

Historically, consumer behavior researchers have been strongly interested in studying the phenomenon that some consumers have more knowledge and experience in making product decisions than others do. In these investigations, the cognitive construct of consumer expertise has been primarily employed to describe and understand these more knowledgeable consumers. Expertise is generally understood as a "temporary stable outstanding performance in a particular domain" and "it is assumed to be based on extensive specialized knowledge" (Augustin and Leder 2006, p. 136). Consumer expertise is usually defined in a very broad sense to include both cognitive structures (e.g., beliefs about product attributes) and cognitive processes (e.g., decision rules for acting on those beliefs) that are required to perform product-related tasks successfully (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). Consumer expertise is domain specific, and a product-class expert is viewed as a consumer who has more domain knowledge and whose content and organization of this knowledge is superior to that of non-experts or product novices (e.g., Chi et al. 1982).

Interest in this construct has stemmed from the fact that expert consumers engage in qualitatively different kinds of decision processes than do non-expert consumers. Research has further shown that product experts are superior information processors (e.g., Beattie 1983; Fiske and Kinder 1980) and decision makers (e.g., Becker 1976; Bettman and Sujan 1987). Specifically, expertise improves performance by reducing cognitive effort, developing more differentiated cognitive structures, isolating and elaborating on the most important information, and increasing memory for product information (Alba and Hutchinson 1987).

Studies on consumer expertise can be divided into two research streams. Whereas the first group of researchers is mainly concerned with the refinement of the construct's content (e.g., Alba and Hutchinson 1987; Kleiser and Mantel 1994), the vast majority of studies attempt to establish the construct as an instrument for classifying consumers according to their expertise into groups of experts and novices (e.g., Maheswaran and Sternthal 1990; Sujan 1985). Although a fair amount of research has been

conducted in this area, there are still major uncertainties concerning the conceptualization and operationalization of the construct (e.g., Kleiser and Mantel 1994).

Experts are generally viewed to have extensive knowledge of product attribute/performance relationships and to possess a lot of product attribute information stored in memory (Beattie 1983). While in some studies expertise and knowledge are used interchangeably "to mean any stored information relevant for solving a product-related task" (Selnes and Troye 1989, p. 412), in other research, expertise is viewed as a combination of product knowledge and experience (e.g., Yale and Gilly 1995). The focus of all major consumer expertise definitions, however, is on cognitive components.

While this stream of research has made important contributions to our understanding of consumers with superior abilities, a key gap is that it has ignored the hedonic side of consumption, which involves aesthetics and taste (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Schmitt and Simonson 1997). Consider the product domain "music." Product category expertise (e.g., about music theory or how to play musical instruments) is not the same as having good taste in music. This illustrates the need to distinguish between and examine both of these two components. For example, a person could be continuously told that s/he has great taste in music by others; however, s/he possesses very little knowledge about music theory and other technical aspects. Thus, in this case, consumer expertise and consumer taste are clearly distinct as this person is high in aesthetic taste but low in knowledge. Likewise, one could possess a lot of technical knowledge about aspects of music theory but not necessarily have good taste in music. Finally, there are consumers that are either both low or both high in music knowledge and taste. Likewise in making purchases for products such as wine, clothing, cars, or furniture, a consumer could theoretically possess a great deal of category-specific expertise but not necessarily possess good taste when making the decision. Other consumers may have a high level of product expertise as well as a strong sense of taste. In addition, even though these are distinct constructs, it is also possible that there is a relationship between the two. It would therefore be interesting to examine whether there is a correlation between expertise and taste (i.e., does superior knowledge lead to higher levels of taste or vice versa).

To the best of our knowledge there are only a few studies that analyze the association between expertise and taste in the consumer context (e.g., Holbrook 1999; 2005; Schindler et al. 1989). In a study that best relates to the research question in this paper, Holbrook (2005, p. 75) views "good taste as that prescribed by professional experts in a particular cultural field." In the motion picture domain, he investigates the relationships of expert judgment understood as



"assessments of excellence by professional critics" and what he calls "ordinary evaluation" understood as "assessments of excellence by non-expert consumers" and popular appeal understood as "expressions of liking by non-expert consumers" (Holbrook 2005, pp. 76–77). The author empirically shows that there is a strong positive relationship between expert judgments and ordinary evaluations and a significant but weak positive relationship between ordinary evaluation and popular appeal. No significant relationship is found between expert judgment and popular appeal. The author concludes that (ordinary) consumers in this particular cultural field possess only "little taste" because the fairly strong relationship between expert judgment and ordinary evaluations is diluted by the much weaker relationship between ordinary evaluations and popular appeal which results in an overall positive, but weak relationship between expert judgment and popular appeal. These findings confirm what he calls the "little taste" phenomenon. While Holbrook (2005) provides some guidance with respect to the relationship between taste and expertise, there are no in-depth explications of what taste actually is. Rather, a strong correlation between expertise and taste is assumed ("good taste as that prescribed by professional experts in a particular cultural field," p. 75). Additionally, as the research is done across objects (i.e., motion pictures) rather than across consumers, taste is viewed on a collective rather than an individual level.

Both knowledge and taste are, however, important elements for consumer preference formation and decision making on an individual level. Examining both knowledge and taste has the potential to provide a richer and more complete understanding of consumer behavior, particularly in product and service categories where there are strong elements of aesthetics. This view is in line with a current stream of research on the importance of hedonic aspects in consumption (e.g., Babin et al. 1994; Batra and Ahtola 1991; Homburg et al. 2006). Batra and Ahtola (1991), p. 159), for example, note that "consumers purchase goods and services and perform consumption behaviors for two basic reasons: (1) consummatory affective (hedonic) gratification (from sensory attributes), and (2) instrumental, utilitarian reasons concerned with 'expectations of consequences' (of a means-end variety, from functional and nonsensory attributes)." Also, Holbrook (1983) notes that epistemic and emotional responses tend to correspond, respectively, to utilitarian and aesthetic value judgments. Aesthetic (intrinsic) value primarily results from an emotional response to the product that can be appreciated for its own sake. Additionally, Ratchford and Vaughn (1989) view "sensory" (i.e., the desire for pleasure to any of the five senses which help in satisfying affective motives) as one component of the feeling (as opposed to the cognitive) dimension of consumer behavior. Transferred to the current context, a consumer's aesthetic taste is a main driver of hedonic value while his or her knowledge is a main driver of utilitarian value.

The role of taste in the consumer decision-making process

Based on the principles uncovered in the literature review, we now develop a framework that can be used to understand the role of aesthetic taste in consumer behavior. In developing this framework, it is first important to introduce the central notions of the utilitarian/hedonic distinction and a person X product interaction.

While all products and services contain both utilitarian and hedonic elements, there are some products that are richer in the one or the other element. The literature provides a few examples of schemes that help in categorizing products according to their inherent utilitarian and hedonic value. The Foote, Cone and Belding (FCB) Grid, for instance, classifies products into a fourdimensional space with the underlying axes of think versus feel and low versus high involvement (e.g., Ratchford 1987; Rossiter et al. 1991). The think-feel axis corresponds with utilitarian/functional and hedonic/emotional elements. For example, consider the product domains of cameras, family cars, sports cars, and wine. The FCB-Grid classifies cameras and cars as highinvolvement products. However, while thinking and economic considerations prevail for cameras, family cars possess both thinking and feeling aspects; and feeling aspects dominate for sport cars. Wine is considered a "feel product" with a medium to high involvement level. Similarly, Dhar and Wertenbroch (2000) name sports cars, luxury watches, and designer clothes as hedonic products, while minivans, personal computers, and microwaves are classified as utilitarian goods.

Hirschman and Holbrook (1982, p. 95), who initiated research on hedonic consumption in the 1980s, took a much narrower view back then and note: "hedonic consumer research investigates performing arts (opera, ballet, modern dance, legitimate theater), the plastic arts (painting, photography, sculpture, crafts) and the corollaries of these high culture products within popular culture (movies, rock concerts, jazz music, fashion apparel)." Charters (2006) refines the aesthetic product terminology in a review of aesthetic products and aesthetic consumption and proposes a continuum of aesthetics in consumer goods and services ranging from a minimal aesthetic dimension (e.g., own label detergent) to aesthetic design (e.g., car) to substantially aesthetic (e.g., haute cuisine) to almost entirely aesthetic aspects (e.g., chamber music).



In addition to the utilitarian/hedonic distinction, there are individual differences in terms of what the consumer brings into a particular product evaluation situation. Some individuals can apply a great deal of knowledge of the product (i.e., expertise as discussed earlier) while others may apply more hedonic or emotional capabilities. For example, an accountant or stock broker can apply a great deal of knowledge and experience in making a financial decision. Others might rely more on a "gut feel" to make the same decision. Even within the same category, individuals can make judgments in a different manner. In the category of fine arts, for example, an art history professor has a high level of knowledge of history and technical details regarding what makes a particular artwork a "masterpiece." Others may possess little knowledge regarding these details and base their judgment of a particular work only on their taste. Still other individuals such as an art critic may possess both expertise and a strong element of taste which could be employed to make the same judgment.

To sum up, it is proposed that developing a framework or understanding of how expertise and taste are employed in consumer behavior must recognize that this involves a person X product interaction. In other words, product and service categories can be placed on a utilitarian-hedonic continuum, but there will also be individual differences in terms of how consumers employ cognition and affect across these different categories. Based on these considerations, we propose a framework or classification that focuses on the relevance of affect and taste in the judgment and decision making process of consumption objects (see Table 1). On a general level, this framework identifies three broad categories that are placed on a continuum ranging from the heavy use of cognition to the heavy use of affect. The key principle is that the importance of taste in the

judgment process increases from Category II to Category III. Further, this approach recognizes that the categories should reflect a person X product interaction because the categories vary with respect to the product and the person involved in the judgment process. Therefore, the use of cognition versus affect and expertise versus taste varies across products and people.

In *Category I*, cognitions are the main driver of judgment. These are more likely to involve products, but keeping in line with the notion of a person X product interaction, there are also individuals who possess knowledge and expertise toward products that are more hedonic in nature. Individuals in Category I strongly apply their expertise in making judgments and decisions for these products. Examples might include automobile engineers, art history professors, and tailors.

Category II contains consumption situations where both cognition and affective/sensory processing are heavily employed. Here, individuals possess a certain degree of knowledge in the category but do not base their judgment solely on expertise; rather they inject an element of taste as well. Thus, both cognition and affect are important for these judgments. Examples would include art critics and fashion designers who possess extensive expertise in art and fashion respectively, but also need and possess a certain level of good taste.

Category III represents situations where products and services are more hedonic or sensory in nature and individuals rely predominantly on a "gut feel" or sensory aspects in making judgments. Again consistent with the principle of a person X product interaction, this can vary across individuals. For example, an art connoisseur may not know much about the technical details of a particular work, but s/he would be able to judge the piece based on his or her sense of good taste.

Table 1 Framework for the relevance of expertise and taste in consumer decision-making

	Taste Category I	Taste Category II	Taste Category III
Main drivers of judgment:	Cognition	Cognition and affect	Affect and "gut feeling"
Importance of taste vs. expertise:	Expertise is important	Both expertise and taste are important	Taste is important
Sample product categories and persons related to it (product x person interaction):	-Writer/author of literature	-Literature critic	-Literature connoisseur
	-Film maker	-Film critic	-Film connoisseur
	-Fine art artist, art history professor	-Fine art critic	-Fine art connoisseur
	-Music recording engineer	-Music artist	-Music connoisseur
	-Tailor	-Haute couture and fashion designer	-Fashion connoisseur
	-Automobile engineer	-Automobile producer	-Automobile connoisseur
		-Wine maker/expert	-Wine connoisseur
		-Interior/product designer	-Interior design connoisseur
Type of judgment/decision-making process:	-Compensatory and non compensatory models -Cost-benefit analysis	-Both cognitive and affective processing	-Emotions -Experiences -Imagery



It is important to note that our use of the term *taste* in this framework is meant to reflect the concept of "good taste" as defined by Holbrook (2005). As mentioned previously, good taste is possessed by certain sophisticated members of the population, and not everyone possesses good taste. Thus, not every individual who is making an affective judgment has the ability to apply aesthetic taste. As mentioned earlier, Holbrook (2005) identified the phenomenon of "little taste" where ordinary consumers (members of the mass audience) show a positive, but only weak, relationship with expert judgments. These ordinary consumers with only "little taste" are not included in Category III; rather it is only consumers with good taste. We label these consumers as connoisseurs (e.g., fashion or literature connoisseurs).

We further follow Holt's (1998, p. 15) notion that "applying a highly nuanced, often idiosyncratic approach to understand, evaluate, and appreciate consumption objects, connoisseurs accentuate aspects of the consumption object that are ignored by other consumers. Thus, personal style is expressed through consumption practice even if the object itself is widely consumed." In support of this notion, Schindler et al. (1989) investigate the relevance of such connoisseurs in new product development processes in order to predict mass tastes. They find that judgments of connoisseurs are helpful in predicting the judgments of novices after they have been exposed repeatedly to aesthetic objects (i.e., mere exposure effect; Zajonc 1968).

Category I-Cognition and expertise

In psychological experimental aesthetics, the cognitive side of judgment and decision making has been heavily studied. One of the most influential conceptual models of aesthetic experiences in this stream of literature has been presented by Leder et al. (2004). In their five-stage model of aesthetic experience, taste (among other individual difference variables, such as expertise), however, seems to only play a minor role. An aesthetic experience is viewed "as a complex cognitive process, the nature and outcome of which depend upon the perceiver's concepts and expertise" (Augustin and Leder 2006, p. 135). The five stages proposed by Leder et al. (2004) are (1) perceptual analyses, (2) implicit processing, (3) explicit classification, (4) cognitive mastering, and (5) evaluation. Mainly in stage 3, explicit classification, and stage 4, cognitive mastering, expertise, taste, and interest are assumed to affect the process of aesthetic judgments.

Thus, Leder et al. (2004, p. 492) view *aesthetic judgment* ("a result of the Evaluation of the Cognitive Mastering-stage") and *aesthetic emotion* ("an emotional reaction which is a by-product of the processing stages") as outcomes and by-products, respectively, of the processing stages in their model of aesthetic experiences. Although

some affective elements enter into this process (e.g., what the authors call personal taste) and are one of the outcomes of the processing, namely aesthetic emotion (in addition to aesthetic judgment), the model is very cognitive in nature. Although at first quite illogical because aesthetics are strongly associated with hedonic properties, this cognitive focus might have resulted from the researchers' major focus on fine arts when investigating aesthetic stimuli. In psychological aesthetics, it is assumed that individuals tend to process art in a very systematic, cognitive manner (even though the outcome—the aesthetic experience—can be both cognitive and affective).

The work of Augustin and Leder (2006) provides some guidance in explaining processing in Category I. The authors find that experts process artwork more in relation to art knowledge, whereas non-experts refer more to personal feelings. More specifically, experts tend to have developed cognitive abilities that allow more sophisticated interpretations of visual input such as style and historical significance (Leder et al. 2004; Winston and Cupchik 1992). Experts can also evaluate an object in terms of a link between its meaning and the degree of expressiveness or structure and composition (Nodine et al. 1993). Thus, experts have developed more specialized knowledge that allows them to interpret aesthetic stimuli on a higher level.

Judgment and decision making in Category I would involve combining information or knowledge that is possessed. In consumer behavior, there have been many studies over the years that have examined the process. This would include both compensatory and non-compensatory models of decision making (e.g., Grether and Wilde 1984; Sheppard et al. 1988; Wilkie and Pessemier 1973). Basically, researchers have attempted to model the combinatorial rules that consumers use to integrate information in making a decision. In a sense, these models involve a cognitive cost-benefit analysis. Further, researchers have attempted to "decompose" or breakdown the decision process into specific, identifiable steps. Because experts would possess more knowledge, they would be more sophisticated in their ability to combine this information and apply these models.

Thus, to sum up, we suggest that judgments of aesthetic consumption objects of Category I are mainly driven by analytic processing and application of expertise, having in mind standard evaluation criteria for experts. Taste plays a lesser role. Finally, experts engage in high-effort cognitively-based processes and compensatory and non-compensatory decision-making models are employed to make judgments and decisions.

Category III-Affect and taste

In contrast to the highly cognitive Category I, Category III is largely affective and sensory in nature when making



judgments and decisions for aesthetic objects. Specifically, judgments and decisions in this category would be guided by aesthetic taste. As mentioned previously, individual tastes guide decisions in a wide variety of areas including our homes, our neighborhoods, our clothing (Schmitt and Simonson 1997). The key issue is that some individuals possess more sophisticated or superior preferences than others (Bloch 1995; Kates 2001). These individuals would be considered "connoisseurs" (e.g., a wine or fashion connoisseur). Further, these sophisticated and superior preferences generate hedonic value for a product or service (Winston and Cupchik 1992).

Taste is also highly sensory and can be viewed as "the natural capacity to take pleasure in certain artistic and natural objects by means of one's own sensory experience" (Cohen 1998, p. 1998). It can involve all five senses (sight, sound, touch, smell, and gustatory taste), although, as mentioned earlier, most of the research has been done in the context of visual aspects. Unfortunately, our understanding of how taste develops and specifically influences judgment and decision making is at a very low level (e.g., the key motivation for writing this article). What we do know based on the earlier discussion is that taste emanates from both internal as well as social/cultural characteristics. On the one hand, individuals can develop aesthetic taste based on biological or innate preferences (e.g., Germov and Williams 1999). Therefore, certain aspects of taste are "hardwired" and are part of our biological makeup. In this sense, taste is highly individual and is something that is simply "brought to the situation." In addition, as mentioned previously, some individuals can possess a higher level of taste (or aesthetic sensitivity; Child 1964; Frith and Nias 1974; Goetz et al. 1979) than others, which involves responding to relevant stimuli in a manner which is consistent with external standards.

Consumers possess a variety of personal experiences and emotions stored in memory which can also be employed in making judgments and decisions in the current situation. Appraisal theory (Lerner et al. 2007; Yates 2007) explains this process by examining how emotions are elicited in a particular situation. Essentially, individuals "appraise" the nature of a situation and recall experiences and emotions associated with those experiences which are relevant to the situation. Thus, this process is much more "holistic" and not decomposable like the cognitive processes of Category I. Further, individuals with higher levels of taste are likely to have a richer set of experiences and emotions upon which to draw in making judgments and decisions.

On the other hand, taste is also determined by cultural influences and social status. Taste is a means by which one is classified by others (Bourdieu 1984) and is therefore highly influenced by social class and culture. Thus, the social class to which one belongs can be a good indicator of

an individual's taste (Holt 1998). Likewise, consumers can use the consumption of products and services to express or illustrate their level of taste to others in these social groups.

In line with these ideas, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) use a very affective perspective and characterize an aesthetic response as a state of intense enjoyment characterized by feelings of personal wholeness, a sense of discovery, and a sense of human connectedness. Addionally, Bamossy et al. (1985) suggest distinguishing between aesthetic judgment and aesthetic preference. They propose that aesthetic judgment involves the evaluation of objects, whereas aesthetic preference is not about the object per se, but rather about liking or disliking the object. This implies that preference ratings are more closely related to emotions than to aesthetic judgment, which would suggest that consumers in Category III form preferences rather than judgments.

Contrary to Leder et al. (2004) and more in line with Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990), Rozin (1999) proposes a model with a strong hedonic focus. In his framework on pleasure, he presents three major processing elements or stages: sensory, aesthetic, and mastery. Sensory pleasure is a fundamental, automatic response to a stimulus and a precondition for the formation of aesthetic pleasure. For aesthetic pleasure to result, elaboration of the sensory experience is added to sensory pleasure. For example, listening to music can be enjoyed on a sensory level due to the stimulation of the auditory receptors. However, full aesthetic pleasure only occurs when these sensory inputs are deliberated and elaborated on. Further, accomplishment and knowledge in a certain category can result in mastery pleasure.

Taking all this together, Category III involves using taste to make judgments (or preferences; Bamossy et al. 1985) and decisions regarding products and services which are often more hedonic, aesthetic, or sensory in nature. We know that consumers employ innate preferences, emotions and experiences, and social/cultural influences in making these decisions in a more holistic process. However the exact manner in which this occurs has not yet been delineated. Thus, investigations of this topic are greatly needed, and this will be a key point of discussion in the subsequent section on future research directions.

Category II—Cognition/expertise and affect/taste

Category II represents judgment and decision making situations which involve both cognitive and affective/taste considerations. On the one hand, consumers will bring considerable knowledge and expertise to the situation, but taste (including sensory aspects, innate preferences, and emotions and experiences) will also be important and relevant. Thus, consumers can rely on both aspects to make



judgments and decisions in this category and would involve all of the processes described in the previous sections. Unfortunately, previous theory and research provides little help in understanding how these different processes are combined and integrated. Thus, this represents a fertile area for future research which will be discussed subsequently.

Directions for future research

The goal of the current paper was to review the very broad and varied literature on taste and to suggest a framework for guiding research on this topic in consumer behavior and marketing. Clearly, there are many more questions than there are answers at the present time. The good news is that this area represents a very fertile ground for future investigations. In this section, we outline what we feel are some of the major areas for investigation in consumer behavior and marketing research.

Operationalization of aesthetic taste

One major barrier to research in this area is that there is currently no sound and valid operationalization of the taste construct. Thus, before there can be systematic investigations in this area, it is critical to develop such an operationalization. If a scale was developed, it would need to tap major aspects of taste including emotions and experiences as well as social/cultural influences. This type of scale would need to be constructed at two different levels. First, it would be useful to develop a broad level scale that would capture whether or not a consumer has aesthetic taste. This type of scale could be used to conduct investigations across a variety of product domains and would identify an individual's general predisposition toward having good taste.

As mentioned previously, however, taste is likely to vary across product and service contexts. For example, having good taste in art does not necessarily mean that one has good taste in wine and food. Thus, context-specific scales would need to be developed to investigate particular product situations. The overall scale could be used as a starting point but then be altered or supplemented to account for specific aspects of a particular product.

On the other hand, developing these types of scales will present a major challenge due to their reliance on verbal reports. The problem is that many of the processes related to aesthetic taste may be below a conscious level, and consumers may have a hard time verbalizing these aspects. An alternative way to approach measurement may be offered by the area of neuromarketing, which uses brain scans to identify emotional hotspots in the brain (e.g., Hansen et al. 2010). This technique could be

employed to examine which emotions are activated when making taste judgments and at what intensity they are activated. This would enable researchers to determine what emotions are most important in making certain kinds of taste judgments. It could also be assessed whether individuals with good taste have more highly developed emotional centers in the brain.

Note, however, that while neuromarketing could help us identify the role of emotions, it does not capture the socio-cultural aspects of taste. Thus, it is likely that a combination of verbal reports scales and neuromarketing will be needed to fully capture the taste construct.

Antecedents of aesthetic taste

Another interesting area for future research would be to examine the antecedents of taste. Research studies could investigate which factors play the greatest role in developing aesthetic taste. Specifically, do certain types of experiences or socio-cultural factors lead to higher levels of taste? It is, for example, possible that the children of the parents who have aesthetic taste may also develop aesthetic taste themselves. This could result from genetic factors or the vicarious observation of their parents' behavior. Furthermore, membership in certain types of groups may increase the probability of developing aesthetic taste (particularly certain social classes). It is also possible that certain personality and/or demographic factors could correlate with aesthetic taste.

Aesthetic taste across the different senses

As mentioned previously, taste is a relevant construct across all five senses. A further interesting area for research would involve an investigation of the extent to which taste is consistent or whether it varies across the senses. Thus, just because a person has good taste in art (and other visual stimuli) does not necessarily mean that s/he has good taste in food (and other gustatory stimuli). Major differences are likely to come from variations in innate or biological preferences as well as idiosyncratic experiences and emotions.

On the other hand, since some of the development of aesthetic taste emanates from socio-cultural influences, it is possible that there is some correlation of taste across the five senses. Thus, if an individual is a member of a higher social class, s/he may develop aesthetic taste across different contexts. For example, coming from a higher social class could lead to better taste in clothing, food, music, wine, etc. Taking all this together, it would be interesting to study both the correlation as well as the differences across product categories related to different senses.



Judgment and decision making of connoisseurs versus experts

Another interesting area for investigation would involve a comparison of the judgment and decision-making processes of connoisseurs versus experts. As mentioned previously, experts are more likely to base their judgments and decisions on prior knowledge using a more cognitive approach, while connoisseurs base their judgments and decisions on more hedonic considerations. It would be interesting to examine whether the outcomes of these two judgment and decision processes differ. In other words, would a connoisseur select a different alternative than an expert in the same product category? Do the two groups differ in terms of the effort expended in the decision? Do connoisseurs and experts differ in their level of satisfaction with their decision? Are connoisseurs or experts more likely to engage in word-of-mouth communication and influence others in making decisions?

It would also be interesting to examine whether the use of an individual's expertise versus taste varies across product categories. It is obvious that expertise would be more important for product categories such as financial services and retirement plans. Taste would be more critical in hedonic categories such as food and music. There are many categories, however, where the relative influence of expertise versus taste is not as clear. Thus, it would be interesting to examine the role or importance of expertise and taste across a variety of product categories.

Judgment and decision making in Category II

It would be further interesting to examine how individuals who possess both expertise and taste (Category II; e.g., literature critics, film critics, product designers) combine their expertise and taste to make judgments and decisions. It is this category that we probably know the least about. It is clear, however, that in many situations, individuals bring both knowledge and taste to a consumption situation. Thus, it is critical to develop an understanding of the relative influence of these two factors across situations as well as the process by which they are integrated. Such an investigation would require a combination of different research methods including verbal reports and neuromarketing measures.

Conclusion

In summary, the role of taste in consumer judgment and decision making represents a fertile ground for future theory development and research. Clearly aesthetic taste plays a critical role in determining how (particularly

hedonic) consumption situations are judged and evaluated, yet at the present time, we know little about how this occurs. Hopefully, the current paper will serve to stimulate investigations in this interesting and exciting area.

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