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FACULTY OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION



DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

FIELD OF DOCTORAL STUDIES: MARKETING

THE INFLUENCE OF AESTHETICS ON AUTOMOBILE PURCHASE DECISIONS

-SUMMARY-

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2017

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KEY WORDS

Aesthetics, dimensions of aesthetics, consumer, consumer behaviour, evaluation of alternatives, decision to purchase, automobiles, stimuli, cognitive processing, structural model

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world in which globalization has expanded freely, once most geopolitical barriers were lifted. Consequently, technological development has flourished at a very fast rate. This, in turn, has facilitated the easy replication of product functionalities, as well as the rate at which products are accepted by consumers. Although this makes the consumers' life easier, product differentiation through technical functionalities becomes more and more short-lived. Therefore, marketing specialists are more and more preoccupied with finding efficient ways of differentiating products. Researchers stepped in and focused on hedonism and aesthetics, having found that both play a key role in the process, by offering emotional and experiential value (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000), are intrinsic characteristics (Grewal et al., 2004), refer to fantasy and multisensory experiences (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982), influence the buyer's decision to purchase (Creusman & Schoormans, 2005) and the buyer's perception (Hoegg et al., 2010).

The challenge faced by researchers was finding the way in which product aesthetics influence the decision to buy, more precisely which are the cognitive processing stimuli that are activated by the aesthetic dimensions, which lead to the decision to make the acquisition. Therefore, the primary objective of this paper is to identify the influences (such as shortening response time, likelihood that the individual would pay a higher price, the consumer's perception of an automobile's quality and performance, etc) that the product aesthetics can exert on the consumer's decision to buy a particular automobile, as well as elaborate a model which validates the objective.

The paper we are putting forward is made up of five parts, as follows: the first chapter, "Product Aesthetics in Marketing," is divided into two subchapters– "Defining the Concept of Aesthetics" and "Elements of Aesthetics". The subchapter that sets out to define the concept is a short incursion into the several significances attributed to aesthetics, throughout the years, as well as the connection between aesthetics and design. The second subchapter analyses the dimensions of aesthetics through each one's significance, followed by descriptions of their possible applications in marketing.

Chapter 2, “Theories regarding the influence of product aesthetics on the decision to buy,” is, in turn, made up of two subchapters. Firstly, we delve into the theoretical aspects of the decision making process. Because the model proposed in this paper analyses the impact of aesthetics on the decision to buy, this first subchapter focuses on the stages of “evaluation of alternatives” and “decision to buy.” The second subchapter describes other models that are presented in literature of the field, which also analyze the theme proposed herein and constituted the starting point in elaborating the model presented by this paper. Subchapter 2 also presents all studies that were used in elaborating the model, as well as the conceptual model’s final form.

Chapter 3, “Research Methodology,” describes the research subject, primary objectives, the data collection and variable operationalization methods that were employed, the sample makeup method and sample description, and, for a complete perspective, the research calendar. Chapter 3 also includes two subchapters, one dealing with the qualitative research, the other with the quantitative research.

Chapter 4, titled “Data Analysis and Result Interpretation,” includes the statistical analysis that was done in order to test and validate the model, such as: testing viability of the scale employed, validation of the measurement model, factorial analysis, testing of linearity and multicollinearity, as well as structural model validation.

The final Chapter, “Conclusions,” presents interpretations of the results described in Chapter 4 and conclusions corellated with the theoretical aspects discussed in chapters 1 and 2. These same theories are used to contour managerial implications and formulate the limits of the research that was done, as well as future research directions.

CHAPTER 1

1.1 Defining the concept of aesthetics

The modern word “aesthetics” comes from the Greek “aiesthetikos”, which was the science of sensory perception (Ward, 2010). Starting from this base definition, the concept has been studied and redefined (Munro, 1956; Sibley, 1959; Berlyne, 1974; Bloch, 1995; Holbrook, 1983; Townsend, 1997) until, in the 21st century, “aesthetics” has come to be defined as the “sensible appreciation” by all our five senses (Hoyer & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012).

Other definitions of aesthetics over time include:

- “The science which studies the laws and categories of art, considered to be the highest form of creating and receiving Beauty; the collection of aspects regarding the essence of art, its report to reality, the methods of art creation, art criteria and types of art” (DEX, 2000).
- The study of individuals’ reactions to non-instrumental qualities of an object or of an event (O’Neal, 1998).
- Critical reflection on art, culture and nature (Kelly, 1998).
- The mechanism by which beauty is perceived (Patton, 1999).
- The theory of beauty or the individual’s sensitivity to that which is beautiful (Stich, 2004).
- A key concept in marketing, because it is produced and consumed by the society within which marketing activity takes place (Venkatesh & Meamber, 2006).

We deemed necessary the correlation of aesthetics and design, as the aesthetic product is the final stage of the design and development process, and can be of great importance to organizations which seek market leader strategies (Trott, 1998).

Design has been defined by certain authors as being the collection of engineering activities and utility functions of a given product (Kohli & Krishnamurti, 1987), while others associate it more closely with form and aesthetics (Bloch, 1995; Kaul & Rao, 1995) and consider it is made up of a functional side, for which the consumer utilizes the product, and an exterior side

(color, form, texture, ornaments) which appeals to the consumer's emotions (Ulrich & Eppinger, 2007).

Moreover, a product's presentation or design affects inferences with regard to the product's quality, functional performance (Garvin, 1984; Zeithaml, 1988; Creusen & Schoormans, 2005), consumer expectations (Calkins, 1927; Postrel, 2003), the individual's initial opinion (Page & Herr 2002) and the aesthetic judgement (Charters, 2006; Ritterfeld, 2002). Superior aesthetics can trigger pleasure in the consumer (Holbrook & Zirlin, 1985) and can boost consumer confidence in the product, by the halo effect (Asch, 1946; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Thorndike, 1920; Luchs et al., 2012). Aesthetics bestows upon the consumer and the product manufacturing company alike a swath of advantages, such as: financial success (Holbrook, 1986; Bloch, 1995), an element of differentiation (Dickson & Ginter, 1987; Ulrich & Eppinger, 2007) competitive advantage (Holt, 1985; Hammer, 1995; Kotler & Rath, 1984).

With regards to the applications of aesthetics in marketing, these fit into three main categories (Petkus Jr. et al., 2011): **product design** (Bloch, 1995; Schmitt & Simonson, 1997; Petkus Jr et al., 2011), **communication design** (Schmitt & Simonson, 1997; Petkus Jr et al., 2011), **spatial design** (Bitner, 1992; Schmitt & Simonson, 1997; Petkus Jr et al., 2011).

1.2 Elements of aesthetics

Aesthetics can be broken down into four categories, which, in turn, include several elements each: visual style (color, lines, shape), auditory style, tactile style and chemo-sensation or flavor style, which combines taste and smell receptors (Schmitt & Simonson, 1997).

A product's visual style is associated to (Tarța, 2014a): **symbolic value** (McCracken, 1986; Murdoch & Flurscheim, 1983; Schmitt & Simonson, 1997, Muller, 2001), **utility value** (Bloch, 1995; Berkowitz, 1987; Dawar & Parker, 1994), **ergonomical value** (Löbach, 1976; Veryzer, 1995; March, 1994), **capacity to attract attention** (Garber, 1995; Garber et al., 2000), **categorization** (Bloch, 1995; Veryzer, 1995; Garber, 1995) and **an element of communication** (Creusen & Schoormans, 2005; Petkus Jr et al., 2011; Schmitt & Simonson, 1997).

Visual style includes the following primary elements: color, shape, line and image (Bloch, 1995; Schmitt & Simonson, 2002; Henderson et al., 2004; Orth & Malkewitz, 2008). Though this four-way characterization can be made for visual style, “image” itself is an aggregate of the other three components, thus a separate description for the fourth element is not deemed necessary.

Color, a visual style element that can influence a consumer’s emotions, perceptions, reactions and behavior (Valdez & Mehrabian, 1994) can have several marketing applications: **product and wrapping** (Garber et al., 2000; Aslam, 2006; Hagtvedt, 2014; Kolenda, 2015), **differentiation** (Garber et al., 2000; Parmar, 2004; Aslam, 2006; Buechner et al., 2015), **brand and corporate identity** (Schmitt & Simonson, 2002; Kerfoot et al., 2003; Moser, 2003; Aslam, 2006; Abril et al., 2009; Shi, 2013; Kolenda, 2015), **publicity messages** (Berg-Weitzel & Laar, 2001; Aslam, 2006; Puzakova, 2016), **ambiance** (Bellizi & Hite, 1992; Kerfoot et al., 2003; Singh, 2006; Aslam, 2006; Lee et al., 2016), **self-image** (Madden et al., 2000; Kaufman-Scarborough, 2001; Kolenda, 2015) and **websites** (Simon, 2001; Pieters et al., 2002; Pelet & Papadopoulou, 2012; Pelet, 2015; Abdallah & Jaleel, 2015).

Line is the connection between two points, which goes on to form a dynamic space referred to as “shape” (Hostleter, 2011). Thus, applications of “line” and “shape” can be grouped as follows: **products and wrapping** (Charters et al., 1999; Bender & Derby, 1992), **differentiation**, and **brand and identity**.

The third dimension of aesthetics is sound. *“Sound is created by the movement or vibration of an object. This movement generates and sends outward sound waves through the air to ear canal, where they continue until they reach the ear drum”* (Lindstrom, 2009, p. 40). The importance of studying auditory style in marketing is dictated by the influence that it has on the consumer’s decision to make an acquisition (Tarța & Plăiaș, 2014). The marketing applications of sound include: **creating a certain atmosphere – background music in retail spaces** (Areni & Kim, 1993; Mattila & Wirtz, 2001; North et al., 2004), **creating brand and identity** (Klink, 2000; Lowrey & Shrum, 2007; Klink & Athaide, 2012), **product development – functional characteristics** (Lageat et al., 2003; Zeitler et al., 2004; van Egmond, 2008; Özcan & van Egmond, 2012), **in advertisements** (Schmitt & Simonson, 2002; North et al., 2004)

Tactile style is a relatively new area of research (Jansson-Boyd, 2011; Peck & Childers, 2003b) which is studied far too little, for the high importance it presents (Peck, 2010). During the past few years, 30% of large companies have shifted focus towards sensory branding strategies, having found that tactile interaction with the product wrapping offers new opportunities (Johnson, 2007). Advantages of employing tactile style in product marketing include: giving the consumer a sense of ownership (Brasel & Gips, 2014; Saqib et al., 2010; Reb & Connolly, 2007) which could persuade the individual to pay more for the product and to make more spontaneous purchases/impulse-buys (Peck & Shu, 2009; Peck & Childers, 2006) as well as convincing the individual of a product's quality and triggering a positive product evaluation (Grohmann et al. (2007).

Smell is a chemical sense that is defined as „*A collection of receptor cells located inside the nose, which convert chemical information into electrical impulses. These, in turn, travel along the olfactory nerves towards the olfactory bulbs in the cranial cavity. The bulbs feed information into the cerebral cortex, where associations are created, and the electrical impulses are decoded as the smell of the favourite rose or the musky warning of an ill-disposed skunk*” (Lyall Watson quoted in Lindstrom, 2009, p. 44). Smells can change the consumer's state of mind (Baron, 1990; Ehrlichman & Bastone, 1992; Knasko, 1992) and can influence an individual's judgement (Baron, 1990; Fitzgerald & Jantrania, 1992; Spangenberg et al., 1996).

„*Taste is detected by specialized structures called taste buds. There are four types of taste buds, which react separately to sweet, salty, sour and bitter substances*” (Lindstrom, 2009, p. 49 – 50). Taste is an important marketing element, because it can cause approach/avoidance behaviors to go either way, it can change an individual's emotional state, and can influence cognitive processes and elaboration (Schmitt & Simonson, 1997).

The marketing applications of smell and taste include: **creating brand and identity** (Schmitt & Simonson, 2002; Stephens, 2007; Lindstrom, 2009; Biswas et al., 2014), **product** (Scholder & Bone, 1998; Wadhwa et al., 2008) and **atmosphere** (Schmitt & Simonson, 2002; Lindstrom, 2009; Biswas et al., 2014).

CHAPTER 2

2.1 Analysis of the purchase decision making process, through its integration of aesthetics and the cognitive processing stimuli involved

The purchase decision making process has five stages (Hawkins et al., 2003): need recognition, research, evaluation of alternatives, purchase, and post-purchase evaluation (Pride & Ferrell, 1993; Kotler, 1997; Plăiaș, 1997; Popescu, 2002; Cătoiu & Teodorescu, 2004; Solomon et al., 2006; Yang et al., 2012).

Each consumer will prize stages differently, and few are those who will attribute equal importance to all five. This is why the different decision-making styles were conceived/categorized (Sproles & Kendall, 1986; Cowart & Goldsmith, 2007). The most frequently used approach to decision-making styles is that of Sproles & Kendall (1986), which divides individuals into eight categories: the perfectionist, the brand-aware, the innovator, the shopping aficionado, the weigher of quality/value versus price/cost, the impulsive individual, the confused individual, and the loyal individual (Sproles & Kendall, 1986; Venkatraman & Pret, 1990; Bayle & Nancarrow, 1998; Palumbo & Herbig, 2000; Leo et al., 2005; Leek & Kun, 2006; Correia et al., 2011). In order to simplify this structure, Shinn (1996) groups these eight types into three directions: (1) utilitarian, which includes the perfectionist and the weigher of quality/value versus price/cost, (2) social, which includes the brand-aware, innovator, shopping aficionado, and the loyalist, and (3) undesired, which includes the impulse-buy and the confused decision-making style.

The model proposed in this paper seeks to analyze the impact that an automobile's aesthetics can have on the decision to buy, while also accounting for cognitive processing stimuli. Therefore, the author's focus was on detailing stages three and four ("evaluation of alternatives" and "purchase"), as these are the stages of the purchase decision making process where cognitive processing stimuli manifest and can be observed.

Evaluation of alternatives is the stage during which the individual assesses the viable alternatives identified during the "research" stage, and selects those which he or she

considers to be more important/better suited (Hawkins et al., 2003; Solomon et al., 2006; Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015).

After selecting the desired alternative, the individual moves on to the *purchase* stage, during which the intention to buy is formed and the decision of which product to purchase is made (Hawkins et al., 2003; Solomon et al., 2006). There are several types of purchases, depending on the amount of planning that went into it: fully planned purchase, partially planned purchase, and an unplanned purchase/impulse-buy (Hawkins et al., 2003; Solomon et al., 2006). Schiffman et al. (2008) classified the types of purchase by the level of commitment demonstrated by the consumer, as follows: attempt, repeated, and long-term (Schiffman et al., 2008).

Of course, in the case of an automobile purchase, it is most likely that the purchase was fully planned and involved long-term consumer commitment, rather than it being a partially-planned purchase. It is even more rare that an individual will walk into a dealership and buy an automobile in the spur of the moment.

2.2 Elaboration of the conceptual model

The model put forward in this paper seeks to analyze and demonstrate the impact of product aesthetics on making a purchase decision, while also identifying the cognitive processing stimuli that lead to said decision. Therefore, we seek to observe the effect of product aesthetics during the “evaluation of alternatives” “and purchase” stages.

While there are studies which demonstrate that product aesthetics will ellicitg a behavioral response (Mehrabian & Russel, 1974; Csikszentmihaly & Robinson, 1990; Ridgway et al. 1990; Baisya & Das 2008; Malhotra et al. 2012; Ranscombe et al. 2011), they do not analyze in detail the cognitive processing stimuli. Moreover, researchers have proposed several models which observe a behavioral response of the type approach/avoid, most notably Bloch (1995), Ward (2010) & Wang et al. (2013).

And while cognitive processing stimuli have been analyzed (Bloch, 1995; Khaslavsky & Shedroff, 1999; Bloch et al., 2003; Creusen & Schoormans, 2005; Kreuzbauer & Malter,

2005; Norman, 2005; Orth et al., 2010; Reimann et al., 2010; Hoegg & Alba, 2011), they have not been included together in the same model.

The novelty element of the conceptual model proposed in this research paper is its complexity, given by: analysis of each dimension of aesthetics, study of each cognitive processing stimulus and integrating all of them within one comprehensive model, which concludes with a purchase decision.

The product category for which the model is tested and validated is automobiles. This product category was chosen because authors who have previously studied cognitive processing stimuli (Bloch, 1995; Khaslavsky & Shedroff, 1999; Bloch et al., 2003; Creusen & Schoormans, 2005; Kreuzbauer & Malter, 2005; Norman, 2005; Orth et al., 2010; Reimann et al., 2010; Hoegg & Alba, 2011) have tested various product categories, and have mentioned as either a research limitation or a future research direction, that the results they obtained be further tested and validated on other product categories, to ensure a rate of application as high as possible. Furthermore, academic research carried out for this product type either shows that automobile aesthetics leads to the decision to purchase, or shows the importance of aesthetics in relation to other criteria (Kreuzbauer & Malter, 2005; Baisya & Das, 2008; Ranscombe et al., 2011; Malhotra et al., 2012) that the individual takes into consideration during the “evaluation of alternatives” and “purchase” stages, but there was no clear focus on cognitive processing stimuli. Not least, this product category was also chosen due to the author’s affinity towards automobiles.

This research paper also seeks to analyze the presence or lack of moderation effect. Because the model has not been previously tested in this manner, we propose a separate conceptual model, which analyzes the effect of various moderating factors on the relation between aesthetics and cognitive processing stimuli. This approach was justified and inspired by the proposition put forward by Bloch (1995), to analyze the moderation effect of consumer characteristics, situational influences, and innate preferences, as well as cultural and social context.

CHAPTER 3

Defined as “*an approach to the research process*” (Collis & Hussey, 2009, p. 73) by which, starting from an identified issue and fulfilling a series of steps, the issue is eventually resolved (Jonker & Pennink, 2010), research methodology can be either deductive or inductive (Saunders et al., 2009).

3.1 Qualitative research

The research subject: *Which are the elements of aesthetics that Romanians take into account when purchasing an automobile?*

The research objective is to identify the elements that Romanian individuals evaluate as being part of each element of aesthetics (color, shape, texture, sound).

For data collection, we have composed an interview, which was structured under a positive paradigm, as all questions were formulated before the interview and each interviewee was addressed the questions in the same order (Collis & Hussey, 2014). The duration of each interview was of between 10 and 15 minutes, and the length was of six questions.

Each interview was recorded with the use of a smartphone. The chosen sample method was non-probabilistic convenience sampling, to which was added criterion sampling, as interviewees were limited to individuals who own a category B driver’s license and who have acquired an automobile during the previous year or wished to acquire an automobile during the coming year. Moreover, the answers were also validated through quantitative research. The sample size was 20 individuals (10 de female and 10 male).

3.2 Quantitative research

The research subject was formulated as follows: *What is the influence of automobile aesthetics on the consumer’s influence to buy?*

This study's primary objective is to develop a conceptual model which brings forth the influences that aesthetics can exert on the decision to purchase an automobile. The secondary objectives seek to observe: (1) the relation between the dimensions of aesthetics and the decision to buy, (2) the connection between the dimensions of aesthetics and the beliefs that individuals harbor with regard to the relationship between aesthetics and the processing phase stimuli, (3) the relationship between the beliefs that individuals harbor with regard to the relationship between aesthetics and the processing phase stimuli, and the decision to buy, and (4) the degree to which moderating factors can affect the connection between the dimensions of aesthetics and the beliefs that individuals harbor with regard to the relationship between aesthetics and the processing phase stimuli.

The primary method of data collection was investigation. In order to compile the data base, we resorted to both snowball sampling, and convenience sampling. The instrument used was the questionnaire, which was administered both by self-interview and by researcher-conducted interview. Data was collected between February 1st 2016 and April 30th 2016.

In calculating the sample size we opted for a 99% confidence interval and a 1% standard deviation, therefore compiling a sample of minimum 200 respondents. Of the 415 administered questionnaires, 388 were validated. The research sample is made up of individuals aged over 18 years, who own a category B driver's license and who have purchased an automobile in the previous five years. In evaluating the socio-demographic sample profile, we analyzed the following characteristics: age, income, last graduated education grade, marital status, background and gender.

CHAPTER 4

“Data Analysis and Result Interpretation” encompasses hypothesis testing and validation of the proposed conceptual model. The chapter has two subdivisions, the first of which presents the results obtained through qualitative research, while the second subchapter details the results obtained through quantitative research. For the interpretation of quantitative research results, we employed the IBM SPSS 20 and the AMOS 24 statistical softwares. In order to maintain a high level of data accuracy, we performed tests and analyzed coefficients such as:

factorial analysis, the Cronbach Alpha coefficient, the KMO test, the Bartlett sphericity test, the Sig coefficient, the VIF coefficient, the CR & AVE indices, the NFI & CFI comparative indices, the PRATIO, PNFI, PCFI, and RMSEA indices, the χ^2/df coefficient, etcaetera.

4.1 Qualitative research

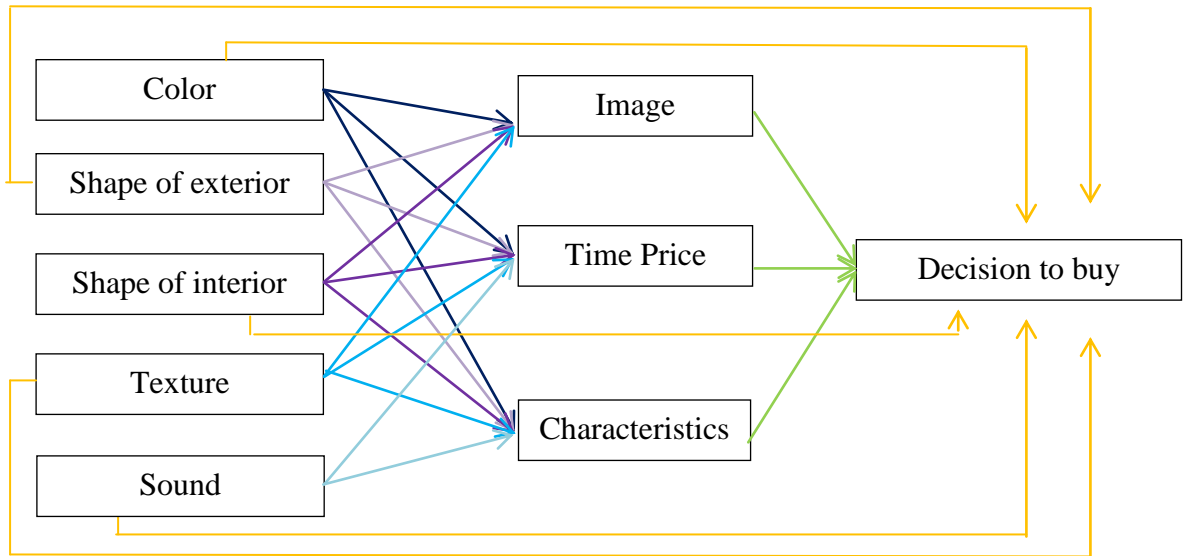
Qualitative research results show that, when interviewees were asked which elements they take into account when deciding on which automobile to purchase, most female individuals indicated aesthetics, and 7 out of 10 male individuals indicated the same. However, most male individuals interviewed gave answers pertaining to technical characteristics of the product. Overall, we validate that Romanian individuals employ a similar set of criteria as validated by the studies of Baisya & Das (2008), Ranscombe et al. (2011) & Malhotra et al. (2012).

Of the results obtained through interview, the elements that were selected to be further analyzed through quantitative research were:

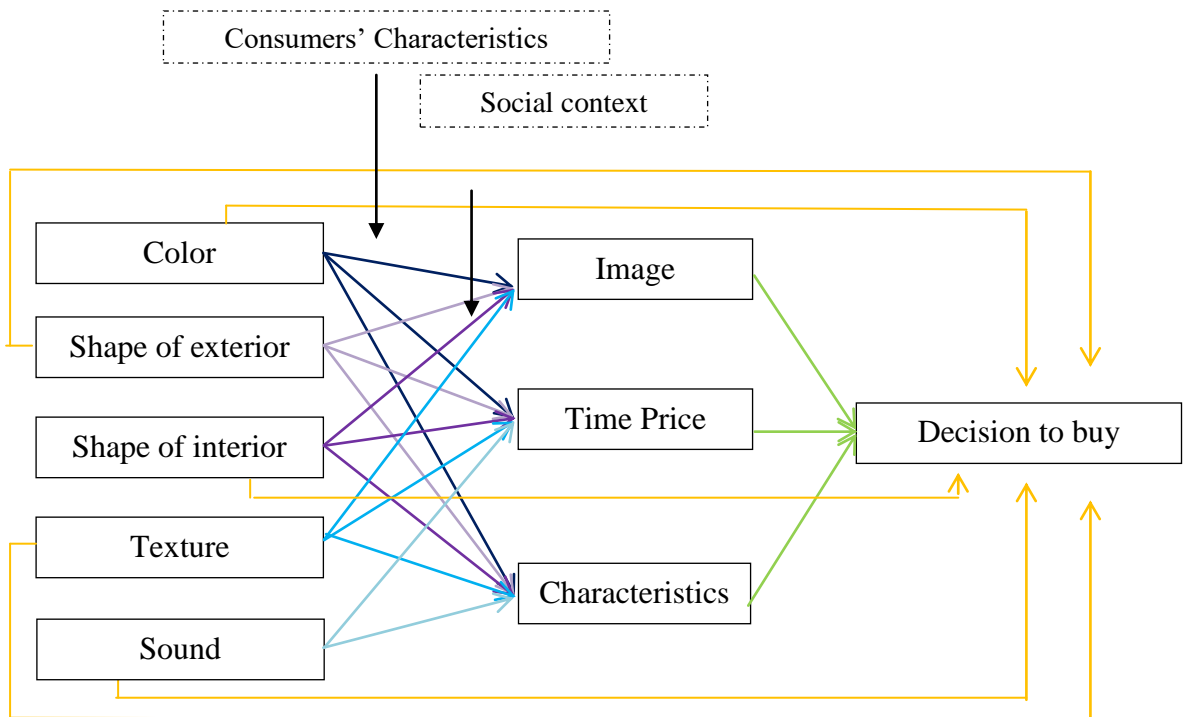
- Color of exterior, color of interior, color of seats, color of rims, color of dashboard
- Shape of car, shape of rims, shape of headlights, shape of seats, shape of steering wheel, shape of gear stick
- The type of material used for the seats, the type of materials that the rims are made of, the type of material used for the dashboard,
- Sound of engine, sound of audio system, sound of the car doors.

4.2 Quantitative research

Based on results obtained after the verification of the validity of scales used, after analysis of [primary components, after validation of the measurement model, and testing of linearity and multicollinearity, the structural models were constructed, both without moderating factors taken into account (A) and with moderating factors taken into account (B).



Scheme no. 1 – Measurement model A



Scheme no. 2 – Measurement model B

Following the statistical analysis necessary to validate the proposed structural model, only measurement model A remained in play. The model analyzing the impact of moderating factors on the relationship between the dimensions of aesthetics and the beliefs that individuals harbored with regard to the relationship between aesthetics and cognitive processing stimuli did not meet the necessary acceptance criteria. The table below illustrated the hypotheses status.

Table no. 1 – Hypotheses

Ipoteză		Status
<i>Each of the dimensions of aesthetics exerts a positive and significant influence on the individuals' beliefs regarding the relationship between aesthetics and cognitive processing stimuli</i>		
H1	Color	Image ✓
		TimePrice x
		Characteristics x
	Shape of interior	Image x
		Timeprice x
		Characteristics ✓
	Shape of exterior	Image ✓
		TimePrice ✓
		Characteristics ✓
	Texture	Image x
		TimePrice x
		Characteristics x
Sound	Image x	
	TimePrice ✓	
	Characteristics ✓	
<i>The beliefs that individuals harbor with regard to the relationship between aesthetics and each cognitive processing stimulus has a positive and significant influence on the purchase decision</i>		
H2	Image ✓	
	TimePrice ✓	
	Characteristics ✓	
<i>Each dimension of aesthetics has a positive and significant influence on the decision to buy</i>		
H3	Color ✓	
	Shape of interior x	
	Shape of exterior ✓	
	Texture x	
	Sound ✓	
H4	<i>Moderating factors have a significant influence on the relationship between each dimension of aesthetics and the beliefs that individuals harbor with regard to the relationship between aesthetics and each cognitive processing stimulus</i>	x
Legend: ✓ - hypothesis confirmed x – hypothesis rejected		

CONCLUSIONS

Starting from conceptual models that were identified, tested and validated by previous studies, yet not among Romanians, we this research paper proposes two completely new models, specific to the automobile industry:

- The first proposed model (conceptual model A) observes a multidimensional perspective of aesthetics and, in addition to previously proposed conceptual models, Model A offers a more complex approach to processing stimuli.

While, until now, stimuli were either studied individually or studied in pairs, all nine were not studied together. Furthermore, the majority of researches who focused on the stimuli, set out from one dimension of aesthetics and not from the whole construct. Therefore, besides integrating all nine processing items into one comprehensive model, the proposed conceptual model also brings novelty by the fact that, while previous researchers who have analyzed aesthetics multidimensionally, they focused on directly analyzing the elaboration of the decision to buy, without analyzing the cognitive processing stimuli, as well.

- The second proposed model (conceptual model B) completes the first model, by also analyzing the moderating effect exerted by situational factors, social context, and consumer characteristics, on the relationship between aesthetics and the cognitive processing stimuli. By including the moderating factors, the research seeks to eliminate the possible influence exerted by the individual's subjective nature, as this is a matter of interest both in academia and on a managerial level.

Through qualitative research the study obtained the items which make up the dimensions of automobile aesthetics, in the perception of Romanian consumers, items which were proposed by Baisya & Das (2008) & Malhotra et al. (2012), but which respect the grouping proposed by Schmitt & Simonson (1997).

Through the analysis conducted, the cognitive processing items were grouped as three stimuli: Image, TimePrice and Characteristics. These results confirm the proposition put forward by Bloch (1995), which groups the two items of cognitive processing stimuli into characteristics. However, the present research paper brings novelty by grouping the nine items into three components.

The validation process of conceptual model A also led to a change in the structure of aesthetics: the authors who have previously analyzed the aesthetic concept have considered shape to be a unidimensional construct (Schmitt & Simonson, 1997; Baisya & Das 2008). After analysis of the primary components, shape has been broken down as “shape of the exterior” and “shape of the interior.” Consequently, individuals were able to identify the

items of shape and, furthermore, distinguish between the “shape of the exterior” and the “shape of the interior.”

Companies come across various challenges every day. The technological changes that are sweeping across the telecommunication industries allow the consumer access to a wide array of information, thus keeping up to speed with all novel breakthroughs. For a company, detailed knowledge of the pressure points (the aesthetic dimension) is a key element in any strategy. Aesthetics rises to meet the business medium, as it offers advantages to companies and consumers alike.

Aesthetics has the capacity of activating consumer emotions and to trigger a pleasure response (Holbrook & Zirlin, 1985; Hoyer & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012). Living in a technology-ridden world, individuals seek out sensory experiences. Through focused study, the dimensions of aesthetics have been identified. This gives companies the chance to differentiate products either through a single-dimension strategy, or using aesthetics as a complex-defined.

The results of this study show which dimensions of aesthetics activate the cognitive processing stimuli and lead to a purchase decision. Using aesthetics in their strategy, companies can gain competitive advantage, improving their position and, at the same time, providing the consumer with a multisensory experience. Therefore, aesthetics should be integrated as early as the product concept design stage, carried through the development stage and further into the communication strategy.

Limitations and future directions

Given the novelty of variables like: breaking down automobile shape into shape of the exterior and shape of the interior, as well as the grouping of cognitive processing stimuli, one future research direction is validating them through further data collection.

Due to the moderating effect of factors like „consumer characteristics”, „situational factors” and „social context” having been rejected, an additional future research direction is detailing knowledge of previous studies that focused on moderating factors, further collection of data and retesting of the presently proposed model.

Another limitation of the research conducted for this study was lack of access to specific resources (direct access to specialized technology, or a sufficient budget to develop a research center equipped with specialized neuromarketing technology), which led to the decision to test the model through qualitative and quantitative research methods described above. Given that this study included two subjective entities – aesthetics and the individual – based on the knowledge accumulated throughout the process, we propose as a possible future research direction the neuromarketing testing of this model by researchers who have access to the necessary specialized technology.

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