

Aesthetic taste versus utility: the emotional and rational of the individual

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Abstract. This article explores the development of an aesthetics framework that aims to provide designers with parameters to understand emotion, taste, and aesthetic judgment under their own cultural influence. This framework will equip designers with tangible criteria for judging cultural influences that have an impact on industrial design while preventing designers from adopting subjective options or being “followers of the current trend.” To address the complexity of the topic, a systemic approach is taken so as to be able to capture its several elements. Therefore, the aesthetics framework adopts a systemic approach, which enables its constituents to be compared and the interplay or “links” between these different elements to be identified.

Keywords: aesthetics, utility, individual emotion, individual reason

1. Introduction

The diversity of aesthetic taste is a fact recognized by philosophers and, more generally, by anyone who considers the topic. Given such evidence, this paper seeks to go further and to explore in greater depth some of the numerous reflections on the issue of aesthetics in design, and shall endeavour to present the ergonomist designer with tangible answers by developing tools for analyzing users’ and consumers’ behaviour. From a practical viewpoint, this paper seeks to fill a current gap in terms of knowledge of, and methods and tools for analyzing aesthetic taste. Our ambitious aim is to bring about a more objective and transparent discussion of aesthetics as an interface between the user and the product, while taking the individual's rational and emotional being into consideration.

This paper fits within the field of ergodesign with a view to making the individual's perception vis-à-vis various products more tangible.

2. Problem

If aesthetics is important in the design world, it should be dealt with in a much broader way than in the art world, because in design it also covers use and its value includes the relationship of the body linked to action and movement.

NORMAN [15], LIU [12], DEHIL[3], HEKKERT [5] are among the authors who stress the importance of aesthetics and culture in design and show the influence of the environment on the taste and judgment of the individual when faced with objects. However, these issues are often left on the subjective plain and subject to random decisions and even arbitrary ones.

The functional aspect of the object cannot be neglected nor can one forego the aesthetic aspect, because the goal of design is to respond to the needs and forms of usability, among other issues. Therefore, the designer should seek to coordinate both aesthetic and functional aspects. We can even speak of an aesthetic function which is aesthetics

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functioning as an important element of the interface with the user.

3. Hypothesis

It is believed that it is possible to construct a benchmark in design so as to situate individuals' aesthetic taste with regard to various products, by taking the influence of the cultural context into consideration.

4. Methods and techniques

The conceptual end-purpose is to understand the individual's behavior vis-à-vis their aesthetic or utilitarian/functional judgment of objects from different cultural sources.

Through the systemic model and its interrelationships of the individual's taste and culture, the conclusion can be drawn that individuals have their own way of feeling and/or judging; culture is always represented in the universe of the individual; the individual's characteristics that arise from human nature are a bridge of equality among all individuals, because they are hereditary and universal.

4.1 Survey of structuring elements for constructing a schematic representation

Let us start by introducing the synthetic representation of two central elements - the rational and the emotional of the individual - regarding taste. This first step enables knowledge of "the individual's emotional taste" and "the individual's rational taste" to be examined in greater depth vis-à-vis the perception of the beauty and the utility of a product.

4.1.1 The individual's emotional taste

David HUME [8] states that "the objectivity of the beautiful, if it exists, will not be sought outside human nature, it can only consist of a concrete universality of feelings". He also says that "The feelings of men differ constantly in relation to beauty and deformity of every kind, even when the discourse as a whole is the same" (...) "every feeling is just, because the feeling has no reference outside itself; it is always real, whenever a man is conscious of having it". HUME [8] also says that trying to define a real beauty or deformity real is fruitless because "beauty is not in things, but is in the spirit of whomsoever contemplates them".

Emmanuel KANT [9] simplifies the issue by writing that "a beautiful object pleases us". The judgment of taste expresses this pleasure which we experience when an object is before us. Any other judgment is a judgment of knowledge: "The judgment on the beautiful reveals the analysis of this thing that makes an impression on us: it is a universality that is not conceptual but rather aesthetic; not objective, but subjective".

In the contemporary references on design, NORMAN [15] considers that "attractive things make working better '- they produce positive emotions, by prompting a mental process that does not become more creative, but more tolerant given the difficulties.

4.1.2 The rational taste of the individual

Karlsson [10] wrote that understanding feeling (which comes from reason) is not evident (...) and that a judgment or an opinion may be a desire or an aversion. In other words, the rational side - based on an opinion founded on logic - can generate the desire for or aversion to an object. A rational principle, in particular, a rational objective, can only exist in beings who are endowed with reason. But the question of an emotion which may also have effects on reason should not be neglected.

4.1.3 The influence of the cultural context

Armand MATTELART [13] says that "cultures are a vision of the spirit. Since the dawn of history, of the changes in the world, the cultural and institutional models peddled by hegemonic powers, have come across people and cultures who have resisted their domination and who have been contaminated or have disappeared. In this cultural crusade, forms of syncretism were born".

Genevieve VINSONNEAU [16] considers culture as a human production, directly dependent on the social actors and their interactions.

Culture, then, is anonymous, the fruit of common efforts, but to the extent that the singular individual separated himself/herself from the group and acquires a certain autonomy of thoughts and feelings, he/she expresses an individual identity.

HOFSTEDE [6] sees culture as a kind of mental programming and states that each of us carries within ourselves ways of thinking, potential feelings and actions that are the result of continuous learning.

He presents three levels of human mental programming:

- Personality - unique to the individual and is hereditary and acquired.

- Culture – that is specific to one group or one category and is always acquired.
- Human nature – which is universal and also hereditary.

Of these three categories indicated by HOFSTEDE [7] we will use only two: "culture" and "human nature". The "personality" will not be considered, because it encompasses the individual psychological question which goes beyond the focus of this study. Therefore the construction of the model allows each individual to locate himself/herself in their culture of origin and the emotional and rational tendencies.

Hofstede's statement about continuous learning - "each of us carries within ourselves a way of thinking and potential feelings and actions that are the result of continuous learning" - confirms the force of the culture on feeling and consequently on aesthetic taste based on feeling. But the *mental programming* differs from one group to another and from one category of people to another, in addition to which "every nation is strongly implicated morally in its own dominant mental programming" and the differences between each culture end up being made explicit.

4.2 Graphical formalization of the systemic model

The approach to the systemic model aims to compile the different elements in question and to identify the multiple interrelationships between culture, the rational and the emotional of the individual. The study of a graphical representation of this system is both a tool for reflection and seeks a form of communication to facilitate dissemination and understanding in new horizons. The graphical representation is equally a very common form of communication and reflection for *ergodesigners*.

4.2.1 Presentation of the model and how it works

The taste of the individual, the object of reflection of the user of the model is represented by an ellipse that occupies the center of the figure. The extremes on the left and right represent the emotional and the rational. The superimposed circle represents the culture.

By using the systemic model and its interrelationships of the taste of the individual and of the culture, we can conclude that the individual has his/her own way of feeling and/or judging; culture is always represented in the universe of the individual; the characteristics of the individual originating in human nature are a point of equality between individuals, for human nature is inherited and universal.

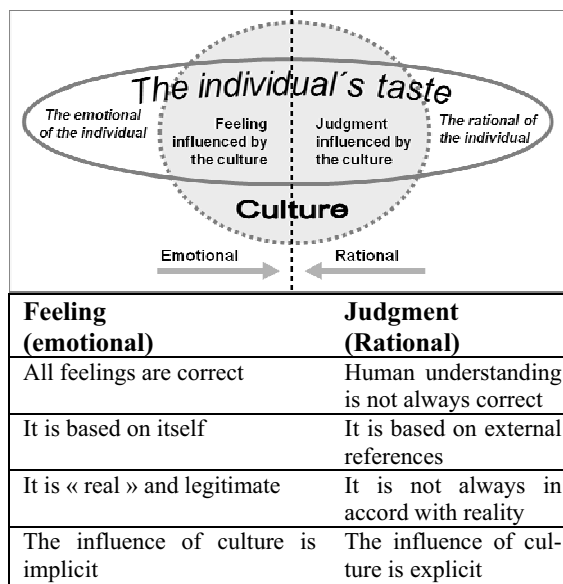


Figure 1: systemic model 'the taste of the individual versus cultural influence, MOURTHÉ [14]

Feeling and judgment are influenced by the culture of the collectivity, but there is also a part of the emotional and rational of the individual which is outside this field of influence. These are the elements which are unique to the individual and which we can associate with human nature.

In the world of design, the tendency is to associate emotion to beauty. Although not the central element of the discussion in ergonomics, aesthetics is one of these components, such as the usability and the practical character of a product.

This result led us to a two-level approach, which considers the perception of the product and its interpretation with indices and variations as per the context to which the individual belongs.

4.3. Method of research on the recognition of the value of the 'beautiful' and the 'useful' being attributed to objects

This development considers that a central element is the opposition between the rational and emotional developed in the analysis model. Given this principle, two aspects were considered in relation to individuals' perceptions about the objects: the first concerns the products that people consider 'beautiful'; the second, those that individuals consider 'useful'. The 'rational' and 'emotional' aspects of individuals are at the base of the structure of the method for analysis that was developed.

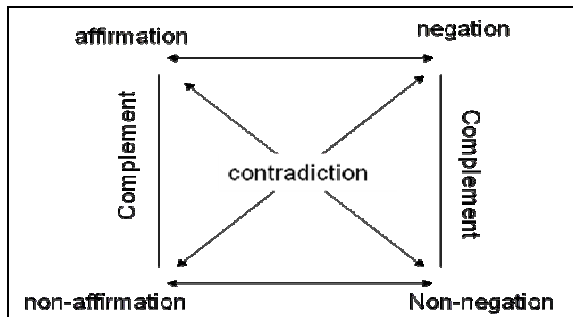


Figure 2. GREIMAS [4] and CHANDLER [2]

To achieve a more thorough and detailed analysis, a method was developed that presents the results graphically in a clear and understandable way. This tool is based on the principle of the semiotic square of opposition put forward by GREIMAS [4].

4.3.1 Exploitation of the model

We present a method of analysis and measurement of aesthetic taste, which takes the culture into account the culture and can be used to evidence cultural differences and similarities. This tool built from the perspective of design addresses the subjects from uncommon angles that belong neither to marketing nor to sociology, nor to philosophy, but have a little of each of these disciplines. For example, we take into account not only the individual's preference, but also the best-selling products (marketing) and the perception of usefulness and beauty. As we have already seen, pleasure is associated with the perception of beauty of objects and the perception of usefulness of an object is associated with familiarity, which allows its utility to be more clearly perceived.

The method was developed to bring the 'beautiful' and the "useful" face to face, thus enabling the status that the individual gives the product design to be perceived. The objective is to control the relationship between (culturally different) individuals when in the presence of objects / products (from various sources). The purpose of the method is to help designers, ergonomists and even marketing professionals to better understand the individual and what attracts him/her.

4.3.2 Recognition of the values of « beautiful » e « useful » attributed to the objects

As a central element, this procedure places the opposition between the emotional and the rational model developed in the first model – by applying this

principle to the relationship between the individuals and the objects while considering two aspects: the first corresponds to the products that people regard as beautiful; the second corresponds to the products that people regard as useful. The rational and emotional aspects of the individual are at the base of the structure of the method.

To achieve a thorough and detailed analysis, which gives evidence of the nuances between the perception of the object as beautiful and/ or useful and the preference for these objects in a clear and objective way, this tool is based on the principle of the opposition of the semiotic square.

Greimas [4], Chandler [2], Klinkenberg [11] and others claim that the opposition structures the semiotic universe. Thus we work on this aspect of opposition between the 'beautiful' versus the 'useful' and also the 'beautiful and useful' versus 'neither beautiful nor useful'. Using these considerations, we present all the variables that we managed to identify.

4.3.3 Analysis square of the principle of the opposition of the Beautiful and the useful.

This model is intended for organizing the field work carried out on products by asking respondents to classify from (0) to (3) what they considered beautiful and useful. The answers appear in the corresponding square. Example: utility "two" and beauty "one". So we have a mapping of the perception of the object.

Sometimes the same product can be considered as both beautiful and useful. In this case, take into account the different values are taken into consideration within a scale from 'zero' (nil) to 'three' (maximum) as per the individual's judgment.

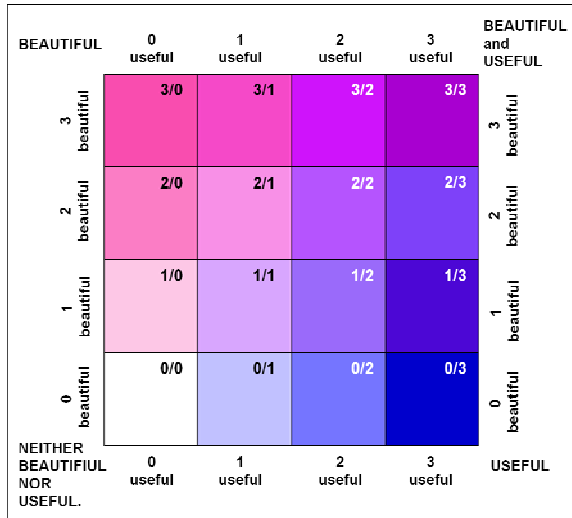


Figure 3 – Shaure of the analysis of the beautiful and the useful by Mourthé [14].

Each internal square illustrates a possibility worthy of note. The colors from pink to blue and violet to white, also illustrate the change of judgment: pink for the ‘beautiful’, blue for the ‘useful’, violet for the "beautiful and useful."

5. Application of the method in surveying handicraft products with a cultural connotation

This is a research field that uses the model to study the perception of handicraft objects sold in stores in three countries with a strong cultural identity which, however, are very different from each other. They are: Thailand, Tunisia and Brazil (with a total of 173 surveys completed).

The procedure adopted in the field research began with the selection of the regions and the stores considered as the most representative ones in cultural terms. The form of data collection occurred similarly in the three countries surveyed, and used the same approach and interview procedures. Those surveyed - small and medium traders and artisans - who served a public of tourists at the international level. Thus, the results led us to reflect on the behavior of the individuals within their own cultural context and having come up against the look and expectations from other countries.

The questions asked for the nomination of the three most beautiful objects, the three most useful objects, and among them the one preferred and most sold in the shop.

The factor of ‘preferred’ was considered the most important one because the answer comes directly from the individual's opinion who spontaneously classifies the object as ‘beautiful’ and/ or ‘useful’ which refer to the emotional and the rational.

Graphs of the ‘best-selling product’ in the three countries surveyed: Thailand, Tunisia and Brazil

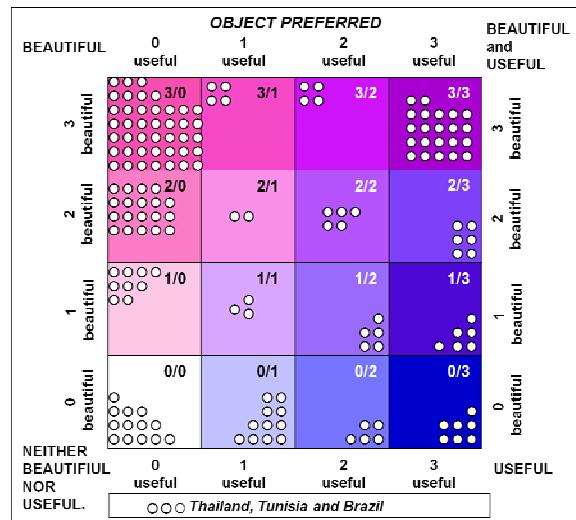


Figure 4: Analysis of the beautiful and useful (preference).

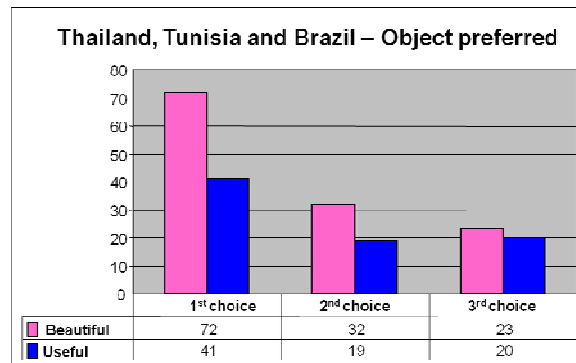


Figure 5: Graph of the interviews.

As to the cultural influence, it is important to remember that the trader and the product he chooses belong to the same cultural context.

The factor of ‘most-sold’ can shed light on consumer preference which is based on information relating to the sale of products. In this case we can obtain an estimate of the products most consumed that would represent the preference during purchase.

Graphs of the 'best-selling product' in the three countries surveyed: Thailand, Tunisia and Brazil

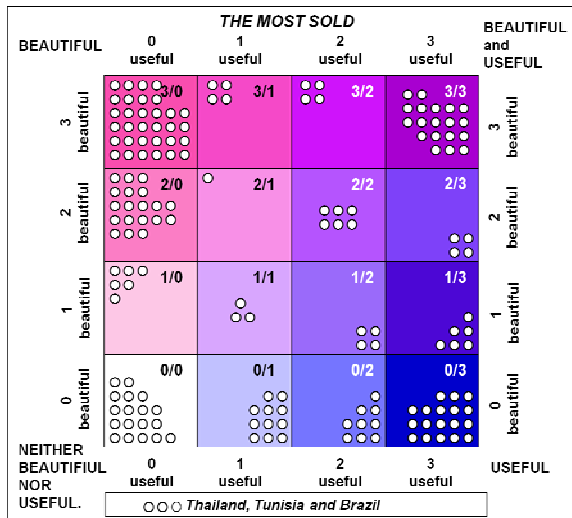


Figure 6: Analysis of the beautiful and the useful (the most sold)

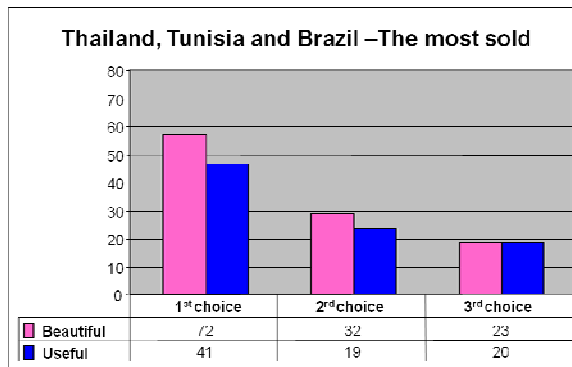


Figure 7: Graph of the interviews.

6. Results

We take into consideration the order of the respondents' answers according to whether it is their own taste - the most beautiful and most useful ones (the first choice = value of three, the second choice = value of two; the third choice = a value of one). If the product was placed first in the choice of the 'beautiful' and in third for the selection of the 'useful', in this case, the value of the beautiful predominates over the useful, because it was chosen first.

During this study, we found logical and expected answers but also revealing answers of surprising facts. The logical answers are proven in discussions on aesthetics and philosophy. In this case, this study obtained results that confirm both the respective

discussions and the validity of the method.

The analysis of the results shows a study at two levels: in the first, it is a question of checking which objects are classified as 'beautiful' and 'useful' by the traders who took part in the survey. Then we will check the preference and the sale as per the classification. The objective is to know if the preference is associated with emotion, through choosing the 'beautiful' or the 'rational', through choosing 'useful'.

In both cases - both in the preference and in the most sold - the products considered the most beautiful are in front. We can then anticipate that the emotional plays an important role in the preference and choice of products.

For the products 'preferred', the preference is expressed more based on beauty than utility but the rational cannot be overlooked.

For the 'best-selling' products, the results confirm that the ones most sold are always the most beautiful ones, but this proportion, the difference between the beautiful and the useful is less representative.

It can also be said that the 'rational' aspect by means of perceiving the utility should also be considered as a non-neglectable factor in the preference and sale of a product.

The analysis square by considering the principle of opposition enables us to visualize all the answers that were classified twice, by also considering the order of choice.

The analysis of the results of each country confirms to us the behavior given the similar judgment in the three cases. That is, the procedure of the individual is universal. Therefore it is associated with the characteristics of human nature, for there is no noteworthy difference between individuals from different cultural contexts.

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