



What makes a destination beautiful? Dimensions of tourist aesthetic judgment



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The beauty of tourist destinations is uniquely judged and admired.
- “Experiential” rather than classic dimensions of aesthetic judgment are salient in tourism aesthetics.
- Dimensions are equally prominent in judgment of nature-based and urban destination.
- Destination planners should employ existing aesthetic inventory in strategic planning.

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the literature in environmental psychology, the current study attempted to reveal dimensions of tourist aesthetic judgment in the context of both nature-based and urban tourist destinations. Two-stage analysis of semi-structured interview data from a theoretical sample of 57 individuals yielded 21 aesthetic dimensions that were categorized into nine themes: Scale, Time, Condition, Sound, Balance, Diversity, Novelty, Shape, and Uniqueness. The identified themes were further conceptualized into a two-dimensional plane along Concrete–Abstract and Subjective–Objective continuums. This research posits that tourism allows a unique “appreciator-object” dyad where individuals are fully immersed in a destination in pursuit of a non-routine and oftentimes novel experience. The beauty of tourism destination is uniquely judged, admired, and appreciated, and the assessment of the beauty goes beyond the visual aspects and engages all senses. The findings make a theoretical contribution to the existing aesthetics literature and bear practical implications for destination planning, branding, and management.

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1. Introduction

Tourism experience is a critical concept in tourism marketing and management literature; therefore, researchers have paid increasing attention to this area, exerting efforts in both conceptual deliberations and empirical validations (e.g. Cohen, 1979a; Li, 2000; Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1987; Mkono, Markwell, & Wilson, 2013; Otto & Ritchie, 1996; Quan & Wang, 2004; Sternberg, 1997; Uriely, 2005). Tourism scholars, however, have yet to fully investigate the tourist–environment exchange (Lehto, 2013). The environmental qualities of a destination can impact a tourist experience profoundly (Todd, 2009). Tourists’ interaction with a destination’s overall environment and their internalization of what they see and sense could play a key role in their overall trip satisfaction. When people plan to

travel for pleasure, they seek destinations that, in their opinion, maximize the possibility to receive a pleasurable experience (Lue, Crompton, & Fesenmaier, 1993). One source of such pleasure is the aesthetic qualities of the destination. In tourism management literature, it has been acknowledged that aesthetic characteristics affect tourists’ experience and satisfaction, contributing to their loyalty towards a destination (Lee, Jeon, & Kim, 2011) and thus intention to return (Baloglu, Pekcan, Chen, & Santos, 2004). Destinations’ aesthetic qualities, such as scenery, have been an integral element of many satisfaction and perceived image scales used in tourism research (e.g. Alegre & Garau, 2010; O’Leary & Deegan, 2003).

Despite the fact that numerous studies have recognized the importance of aesthetic qualities of a destination, these qualities have so far been largely reduced to a single dimensional variable such as “the place is beautiful” in destination attribute satisfaction assessment. Although the notion of product aesthetics has been explored in consumer behavior literature in conjunction with

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product choice (e.g. Creusen & Schoormans, 2005), design (e.g. Bloch, 1995; Riemann, Zaichkowsky, Neuhaus, Bender, & Weber, 2010), and overall product evaluation (Yamamoto & Lambert, 1994), the aesthetic component as judged by consumers has yet to be a focus in tourism research. Tourism aesthetics implies multi-sensory “lived experience” which may entail inter-relations not only between a tourist and the surroundings but also among potential dimensions of the interactive experience (Ittelson, 1978). As such, this “lived experience” offers opportunities for phenomenological exploration. Additionally, tourists may use home environment as a reference point in assessing whether the destination is beautiful. For example, interpretation of a destination’s aesthetics may be derived from the similarity or contrast between one’s home environment and the vacation environment. Due to the potentially diverse aesthetic judgments among tourists, it will be of theoretical significance to zoom in on the area of tourism aesthetics for its multi-faceted dimensionality.

The search for the answer to “what do we find beautiful?” is one of the most long-hauled quests in philosophy. Defining beauty as “which gives pleasure when seen,” Plato, Aristotle, and St. Thomas Aquinas asserted that the beauty resides within an object and is not subjected to observers’ biased evaluations (Beardsley, 1975). Hume (1757/2013) and Kant (1790/1987), on the other hand, posited that beauty is in nature subjective. No response to an object is superior because one judges beauty based on personal values such as religious beliefs, cultural background, political views, and other normative values. Thus, aesthetic pleasure is a natural human response, and as such, its extent could be distinct across different individuals (Ginsborg, 2013). Modern philosophers conceptualized aesthetic judgment as “the object-related cognitive part of aesthetic processing” and thus it can be assessed in social science while aesthetic emotion can only be measured by neuropsychological means (Leder, Belke, Oebrest, & Augustin, 2004, p. 503). Moreover, empirical research in art appreciation found that people tend to perceive symmetric and round objects as beautiful (Jacobsen, Schubotz, Höfel, & Cramon, 2006; Silvia & Barona, 2009).

Unlike the art experience where the appreciator is an outside observer, an individual is immersed in the object of appreciation in environmental aesthetics (Berleant, 2005). Aesthetic qualities of places have been previously explored conceptually in environmental aesthetics (e.g. Berleant, 2005; Carlson & Lintott, 2008) and empirically in environmental psychology (e.g. Kaplan, Kaplan, & Brown, 1989) and urban design (e.g. Daniel, 2001), where both urban and natural landscapes were employed as contexts. Tourism aesthetics, however, could possess its own traits and characteristics in that tourism experience involves the full immersion of an individual into an environment that may be distinct from his/her everyday living surroundings (Volo, 2009). The experience may trigger human senses to become more responsive to outside stimuli and allows more complex human–environment interactions and exchanges. Thus, how and why tourists perceive a destination beautiful could potentially be related or unrelated to, similar to or distinct from the criteria researchers utilize to assess routine (home) environments (Maitland & Smith, 2009). Nevertheless, until now, these areas have been sorely neglected in tourism marketing and management literature. As a pioneering attempt, the current study initiates an inquiry into tourist aesthetic judgment. Specifically, the study aims to examine how aesthetic gratification is provided in both urban and nature-based tourist destinations. Given the scarcity of existing empirical studies in this area and a need for in-depth understanding of tourist aesthetic judgment, the present study employed a qualitative assessment through personal interviews to uncover both theoretical and practical insights.

2. Literature review

2.1. Aesthetics in management literature

Aesthetics has received increasing yet still limited attention in the business management literature with scholarly interest centered on aesthetic products and experiential consumption (Charters, 2006). Generally, aesthetic products are believed to have four essential qualities: 1) the product’s aesthetic considerations must be the primary purpose; 2) the product is constructed to stimulate aesthetic consumption; 3) it is capable of providing intrinsic value; and 4) it strives in highly segmented markets (Charters, 2006). However, as most consumer goods possess the above-mentioned qualities to various degrees, aesthetic products could be conceptualized as a continuum consisting of products ranging from those of minimal aesthetic dimension to those entirely aesthetic (Bloch, Brunel, & Arnold, 2003). Assessment of aesthetic qualities is an important aspect of consumptive experiences (e.g. Baker, Grewal, & Parasuraman, 1994), and the concept of aesthetic product is distinct in the discussion of experiential consumption (Charters, 2006). For instance, *Aesthetics* was proposed as one fundamental dimension in experience by Pine & Gilmore (1999) in their notion of *experience economy*, along with *Entertainment*, *Education*, and *Escapism*. Aesthetics has been also discussed in hedonic consumption as having the capacity to generate strong emotional involvement (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). In his review of the existing literature on the topic, Charters (2006) asserts that “there is a link between the experiential consumption of a product displaying ‘beauty’ and the judgments,” comprised of appreciation, quality evaluation, and taste (pp. 243–244). Such observations imply that aesthetic properties of a product are instrumental not only in stimulating consumption but also in evaluation of the entire consumptive experience.

Aesthetic consumption and consumers’ ability to judge aesthetic qualities of a product are related to the idea of product design. In saturated markets, an aesthetically appealing product is a way of gaining buyers’ attention, communicating information, and providing aesthetic pleasure to both sellers and users (Bloch, 1995). Moreover, aesthetic responses elicited by exposure to sensorial properties of a product rather than its functional characteristics tend to have a long-lasting effect on consumers as the product becomes part of users’ sensory environments (Jones, 1991). Holbrook and Zirlin (1985) argued, however, that the aesthetic component of a product is best realized during the functional use of the product, suggesting that only purely aesthetic products such as classical music or a painting could stand on their own during the consumptive experience.

Such propositions have been well embraced in service management where the significance of aesthetic judgment has been reflected in the theorizations and applications of servicescape or atmospherics (Bitner, 1992; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2004). It has been empirically noted across a variety of service settings that customers’ experience is inevitably influenced by the surrounding aesthetic cues. It was found, for instance, that facility aesthetics affects perceived servicescape quality and thus satisfaction, repatronage intentions, and desire to stay at basketball and football stadiums and casinos (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996). Aesthetically pleasing dining environment attenuates perceived food and service quality and directly influence behavioral intentions (Ha & Jang, 2012). Finally, aesthetic judgment, which may or may not lead to the occurrence of aesthetic pleasure, seems to play an important role in the assessment of overall experience (e.g. Liu & Jang, 2009).

Despite the recognition of aesthetics in business research in general, there has been a paucity of attention on tourism aesthetics in particular. One such effort is noted in the bed and breakfast

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