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Evaluation of product consumption understandings of interior architecture students in terms of sustainability

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Abstract

In the study, interior architecture students who are decision-makers in the selection of products and materials for interior design were questioned about the role sustainability plays in their choice of products. The survey also explored their views about short-lived products dictated by trends and fashion. Despite their sensitivities to recycling issues, it was determined that interior architecture students are not informed about sustainable consumption. The study also showed that the students were anxious about not following trends or choosing fashionable innovations, an important motivation behind their choices.

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1. Introduction

Today, consumption is gradually rising all over the world as population growth requires greater consumption to meet even basic needs. Resources that promote consumption symbolically – social media, media, advertising, etc. – have also been growing, many of which foster interest in showy consumption. According to the Report of UN Human Development (1999), private and public consumption expenditures totaled \$24 trillion in 1998. This figure is six times and two times more than the values of 1950 and 1975 respectively. The same report draws attention to the type of the consumption (1999:69-70): "...human life is ultimately nourished and sustained by consumption. The real issue is not consumption itself but its patterns and effects. Consumption patterns today must be changed to advance human development tomorrow."

Today, an increase in symbolic consumption is undeniable. Interior architecture is an area where this type of consumption is prevalent because designed spaces can significantly contribute to the status of users. Not only does this pattern affect individual spaces, such as residential space, but it also includes commercial spaces, such as hotels, restaurants, shops, cinemas, cruise ships, theme parks, etc., where users spend leisure time. Users identify with these leisure spaces, feeling that they not only express their personality, but also determine their status. The interior architecture that goes into creating these spaces, including residences, is a selective process where, many times, conspicuous consumption plays an important role in the selection of products and materials. Thus, the consumption that occurs during the design of these spaces can be evaluated in the context of conspicuous consumption (Bourdieu, 2009; Ritzer, 2001; Veblen, 1934).

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In this context, it is vitally important for education curriculums to evaluate consumption patterns and promote sustainable consumption whenever possible. However, first, sustainable consumption must be defined. It is often thought to refer to the consumption of products that have been produced by ecological or ethical means, such as those produced from recycled materials and/or can themselves be recycled after their life span. This understanding of sustainable consumption is a start, but it needs to be expanded to include the prevention of unconscious consumption. As emphasized by Connolly and Prothero (2003), even consumers who claim to have environmental consciousness often contradict their own values with their conspicuous and ostentatious consumption patterns. Many are not aware of these contradictions and neither are their interior architects. It is imperative for universities and other educational institutions to raise these professionals' levels of awareness if consumption in interior architecture is to become more oriented to sustainable requirements.

The objective of this study is to determine how much a product's sustainability features are considered in the selection of electronic products and furniture. It also evaluates the importance of fashion and trends in interior design product selection. Interior architecture students at Istanbul Halic University were the selected data set for this study. This group was selected because interior architects not only direct their customers in making selections, but, in most cases, become the actual decision makers themselves. In this context, a questionnaire was developed to assess two factors: the role played by the architects' fear of not being up-to-the-minute in technology, fashion or trends, and their sensitivities about damaging the environment.

The study sets forth the goal of helping to renew the interior architecture curriculum by promoting an understanding of sustainability through its training programs. Instructing students about consumption culture issues will help ensure that they question their behaviors when it comes to making symbolic and conspicuous consumption choices in their careers.

2. Interior architecture and sustainable consumption consciousness

Accelerating rates of degradation of the natural environment and social inequality are ensuring that the concept of sustainability is here to stay. Therefore, it is important that interior designers become informed about environmentally friendly factors, such as low energy use in production and transportation, using local materials, recyclability and renewability, plus lack of toxic content. For sustainability, these all need to be taken into account along with the selected products' or materials' user-applications. Stephenson and Frankel (2001:131) explain the expanding role of the designer today, saying: "The extraordinary developments in the world of technology, the evolving changes in the sociology of place, and the increased expectations for the role of the built environment in supporting human activity provided the platform for an expanded role of the designer." Thus, candidates for interior architecture degrees should be trained as designers who are able to integrate present choices with the future's mandate for greater sustainability. Keane and Keane (2001) expressed that interior architecture training should develop design leaders who are able to imagine and implement innovations, instead of simply raising technicians.

Stephenson and Frankel (2001) emphasize the importance of flexible solutions and multi-function products instead of single-function and spatial solutions in the new economy. It is important for a product to allow for flexible solutions and be oriented to different uses within the framework of sustainability. However, even with recent economic conditions, dominant production-consumption cycles are not aligned with these values. Economic conditions should support production, and therefore consumption, of products with long lives instead of short lives. But today, constant change is the norm for many interior spaces, including not only places such as stores, which are affected by fashion, but also houses. Design and decor magazines, exhibitions and technology products all promote continuous change, which means brands, trends and advertisements are constantly changing. This inevitably affects both the user and the designer. Myers and Kent (2004:124) describe the effectiveness of advertising: "...consumers are further influenced by advertising to the tune of 450 billion dollars per year worldwide (as much as half of it in the United States alone, almost \$800 per American)."

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