



Introduction to the special issue on aesthetics, images and vision

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In contemporary marketing the production and consumption of images challenges the production and consumption of products, profoundly influencing marketing practice, transforming marketing theory, and shifting appropriate areas of research. Variously referred to as the aesthetic economy, the attention economy, and the experience economy, this visual turn in marketing calls for new perspectives and approaches. What does the production and consumption of images mean for marketing theory and practice? How does the handling of images in the disparate fields of brand management, art history, consumer research, and visual studies shed light on the relationships between aesthetics, images, vision and marketing theory?

Clearly, visual issues are being recognized as important issues in marketing research. Many battles of the brands take place within the visual domain. Design, in particular, depends upon visual understanding and aesthetic expertise. The Web mandates visualizing almost every aspect of corporate strategy, operations and communication; web design has brought visual issues into the mainstream of strategic thinking, and spurred research and thinking about perception and preference of visual displays. Images – including brand images, corporate images and websites – constitute much corporate communication about products, economic performance and corporate identity (e.g. Dowling, 1993; Park et al., 1986; Stern et al., 2001).

Today's visual information technologies of television, film and the Internet are directly connected to the visual past (Schroeder, 2005). Research on information technology (IT) or information and communication technology (ICT) usually focuses on complex, sophisticated systems such as mass media, the Internet, telecommunications, or digital satellite transmission arrays. These constitute the basic building blocks of the information society – where information is a crucial corporate competitive advantage as well as a fundamental cultural force. The World Wide Web, among its many influences, has put a premium on understanding visual consumption.

From the consumer perspective, visual experiences dominate the Web, as they



Figure 1

Image magazine, Ireland, courtesy IMAGE publications © 2003

navigate through a computer-mediated environment almost entirely dependent upon their sense of sight. Photography remains a key component of many information technologies – digital incorporation of scanned photographic images helped transform the Internet into what it is today. Photography, in turn, was heavily influenced by the older traditions of painting in its commercial and artistic production, reception and recognition (e.g. Albus and Heine, 2004; Cotton, 2004).

I have argued that visual consumption constitutes a key attribute of an experience economy organized around attention, in which strategic communication –



including advertising, promotion, Websites, retail environments and mass media – incorporates visual images designed to capture attention, build brand names, create mindshare, produce attractive products and services, and persuade citizens, consumers and voters (Schroeder, 2002). Acknowledging that products, services, brands, politicians and ideology are marketed via images, and that consumers consume products symbolically, implies rethinking basic notions of marketing theory. For example, visual images exist within a distinctive socio-legal environment – unlike textual or verbal statements, such as product claims or political promises, pictures cannot be held to be true or false – images elude empirical verification. Furthermore, products no longer merely reflect images – the image often appears prior to the product, which is then developed to fit the image (Rosa et al., 1999). Many products and services are designed to fit a specific target market; they conform to an image of consumer demand, exemplifying a seismic economic shift towards experience, towards images, towards attention (Lash and Urry, 1994).

Research on visual consumption has gone through several phases. In the first phase, sociologists such as Erving Goffman (1979) and Howard Becker (1981) deployed photographs as data, evidence and illustrations within research projects and scholarly reports documenting visual aspects of society. In the second phase, visual images in advertising, branding and corporate identity were seen to reveal and reflect strategic as well as social issues, as researchers began to focus on the representational power of images via visual analysis, subject-generated images, and photo-elicitation techniques (van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001). In the current phase, visual images themselves have assumed central importance, drawing from cultural studies' and visual studies' disciplines that emerged to interrogate popular cultural forms, and later, visual culture. Within this phase, a typical study might investigate how the television sports channel ESPN covers the Olympics, emphasizing the visual technologies that structure information and ideology, or bring a visual perspective to corporate leadership, utilizing an interdisciplinary approach beyond the interests of aesthetics or visual studies (Guthey and Jackson, 2005).

Each phase contains several streams of research, including those that focus on image interpretation from various perspectives, such as psychoanalysis or semiotics (Hall, 1997; van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001). Others emphasize image-making as a social psychological act of representing and communicating, drawing on traditional anthropological and sociological theories and methods. Another approach utilizes photographs, or other visual artifacts, as stimuli for research, for photo-elicitation, akin to projective measures within psychology that investigate deeper meanings and associations that people bring to images. An additional related practice concerns visual presentation of research, documentary films and videos, as well as more filmic treatments of consumption topics such as rituals, subcultures, or tourism.

This selection of articles provides a good glimpse of the scope and sophistication of research into aesthetics, images and vision within marketing. Together, they signal a growing interest in basic research and theory building by marketing scholars that view marketing and consumption as basic cultural institutions, rather than purely managerial initiatives. The articles range from theoretical dis-



courses on cultural production to experimental studies on colour preference, united by an overarching interest in aesthetic issues and their intersection with consumption and market processes. They contribute to marketing theory by mapping the intersections of culture and commerce, and providing much needed theoretical and conceptual tools for research into aesthetics, images and vision.

In the first article, 'Arts and aesthetics: Marketing and cultural production', Alladi Venkatesh and Laurie Meamber offer one solution to the perennial commerce vs. culture debate – they argue that marketing provides the context for aesthetics and cultural production. They discuss the nature of cultural production – including the roles that producers, cultural intermediaries and consumers play in the process – and introduce new epistemologies concerning post-modernism and post-humanism. By presenting a systematic, integrative model of the marketing and aesthetics literature, they offer a useful framework for marketing scholarship into aesthetics, images and vision. They conclude by drawing out implications of the cultural production processes for the marketing aspects of cultural industries.

The Internet profoundly transforms cultural life, corporate operations, and organizational identity. In 'Bringing the market to life: Screen aesthetics and the epistemic consumption object', Detlev Zwick and Nikhilesh Dholakia argue that the new 'visuality' of the Internet aestheticizes and transforms the stock market into an epistemic object – an always changing and unfolding entity. They suggest that the visual logic of the computer-mediated Web screen alters the market ontologically, opening users up to potential shifts in identity, knowledge, experience and relationships. In their study of online investors, Zwick and Dholakia find consumers mediating between markets, aesthetics and visions, and draw out intriguing implications for online behaviour, investment markets and marketing theory.

The basic building blocks of computer displays include colour, brightness, movement and shape. Colour forms industries: paints, dyes, textiles, industrial production, printing, photography and branding all rely upon colour, yet colour remains under-studied within marketing and branding research (Delamare and Guineau, 2000). Paul Bottomley and John Doyle explore the role that colour can play to build brand meaning in their contribution 'The interactive effects of colours and products on perceptions of brand logo appropriateness'. In two experimental studies they show how appropriate brand colours contribute inherent and immediate value to brands. They look at how congruity of brand and colours contributes to brand meaning and conclude that colours and products have shared connotative meanings that produce systematic preference patterns.

The Baroque painter Caravaggio mastered the colour palette. His paintings remain powerful testaments to the allure of colour, properly proportioned and applied. In Kent Drummond's article, 'The migration of art from museum to market: Consuming Caravaggio', Caravaggio provides raw material for developing a five-stage model of the movement of aesthetic products from studio to museum to broader cultural and commercial spheres. Drummond draws upon several cultural theorists – as well as a few pop culture producers – to theorize how one artist's work is transformed into a system of objects available for contempo-



rary consumption. He places Caravaggio's high art firmly within the context of cultural production to reveal the complex process of commercialization and consumption that unites aesthetics and marketing.

The last article, 'The aestheticization of consumption: An exploration of 'brand.new' and 'Shopping', by Isabelle Szmigin, continues to probe the interconnections between cultural production and consumption via a study of two popular recent museum exhibitions. She argues that the 'Brand.new' show at London's Victoria and Albert Museum, and 'Shopping: A Century of Art and Consumer Culture' at the Tate Liverpool, exemplify the collapse of many of the historical boundaries and distinctions between art and life – the aestheticization of everyday life. 'Brand.new' both celebrated and critiqued the brand in modern society, and brought together numerous artists' interpretations and responses to consumer culture. She concludes by assessing the nature of the convergence of art and consumption, arguing that consumers are encouraged to integrate consumption and aesthetic experience, while producers blend aesthetic concerns and commercial products in new and innovative ways acceptable to the market and willingly integrated by eager consumers.

This collection of articles affords new perspectives and generates novel concepts and theories for research on issues such as branding, cultural consumption, information technology and marketing communication. Greater awareness of the associations between the traditions and conventions of visual history and the production and consumption of images helps to position and understand marketing as a global representational system. Research that extends previous work on visual representation into past, cultural and art historical realms, may provide an essential bridge between visual meaning residing within producer intention or wholly subsumed by individual response, and between aesthetics and ethics. In other words, along with brand identity and brand image, the realm of brand culture serves as a necessary complement to understanding brand meaning (Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling, 2006).

To more fully understand images, researchers must investigate the cultural, historical and representational conventions that shape aesthetic consumption. Future marketing research in aesthetics, images and vision must acknowledge images' representational and rhetorical power both as cultural artefacts and as engaging and deceptive bearers of meaning, reflecting broad societal, cultural and ideological codes. Research focused on the political, social and economic implications of images, fuelled by an understanding of the historical conditions influencing their production and consumption may require cross-disciplinary training and collaboration. Key questions remain about the relationships between vision and value – why certain images are successful, superfluous, or sacrosanct. Understanding the role that visual consumption plays in consumer preference, cultural production, and representation signals a step toward understanding how aesthetics, images and vision informs and influences basic marketing issues of attention, branding and communication.



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