From “aesthetic” to aestheticization: a multi-layered cultural approach

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ABSTRACT
This article synthesizes previous literature on consumption, surrounding matters of aesthetic deliberation to offer a conceptual discussion of consumer-cultural aestheticization processes. Our main argument is twofold. First, we seek to re-orient the discussion of “the aesthetic” (i.e. something that is aesthetic) toward the processes that render something aesthetic (i.e. how something is made aesthetic). Second, on this basis, we conceptualize three groups of interrelated processes that cut across past research on aesthetics and elucidate how aestheticization permeates consumption, brand, and market processes. We discuss theoretical and empirical implications of this conceptualization in terms of (re-) enchantment, mythmaking, and aesthetics for future work on the nexus of consumption, brands, and markets.

INTRODUCTION
Aesthetics—here understood as the particular quality of being beautiful, sublime, or moving or interesting—permeates contemporary consumer culture to such an extent that it is difficult to think of any consumer cultural context in which aesthetics do not at least partly matter. It is thus unsurprising that aesthetics is a recurring concept in research at the intersection of consumption, markets, and culture (Hebdige 1979; Baudrillard 1983; Bourdieu 1986; Cova and Svanfeldt 1993; Featherstone 2007; Reckwitz 2017) and that there are recent calls for studying aestheticization in consumer culture to understand how consumer-cultural actors form and operate in specific symbolic universes (Rokka 2021). Prior literature on consumption and marketing portrays aesthetics as a foundation for many current market activities (Brown, Hirschman, and Maclaran 2000; Björkman 2002; Holt 2004; Dion and Arnould 2011; Fillis 2014; Pomiès, Arsel, and Bean 2020) and discusses aesthetics as a central element in the reinvention, revalorization, and appropriation of symbolic resources (Reckwitz 2017; Andersen 2019). Moreover, the aesthetic matters deeply for the creation of special experiences and for performing symbolic-creative works (Willis 1990; Goulding, Shankar, and Elliott 2002; Kates 2002; Borghini et al. 2009; Hewer and Brownlie 2010; Brown 2018).

Featherstone (2007, 64) defined the term aestheticization as “the effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life, the collapse of the distinction between high art and mass/popular culture, general stylistic promiscuity, and playful mixing of codes,” arguing that the increased synchronization of art and commodity explains consumption in postmodernity. This idea suggests a process of aestheticization—here understood as the rendering of a material or immaterial object into something moving, beautiful, or sublime—that seeks to produce a synthesis among art, artistic works, and daily life activities. From this perspective, aestheticization entails particular shifts in...
values represented in high art and popular culture. Most of the present discourses that employ the concept of aestheticization energize from Featherstone’s thinking, such as the research that explores phenomena, whereby art and branding intersect, as in the case of art ornamenting branded products or brands exhibited in museums (Szmigin 2006; Negrin 2015). Likewise, in aestheticized markets, taste is often at the forefront of object evaluation (Arsel and Bean 2013). Consequently, consumption literature that focuses on taste captures the activities among consumer cultural actors when a market becomes aestheticized. As such, the process of aestheticization is a substantial phenomenon that has been studied from complementary perspectives (micro, meso, macro), emphasizing different actors and processes from a marketing and consumption perspective.

For instance, aestheticization is a recurrent analytical subtext in prior work on taste formation in aestheticized markets, emphasizing mutual cooperation and a complex mixture of intellectual and sensory pleasures as well as the learned response involved in aesthetic experiences (Arsel and Bean 2013; Maciel and Wallendorf 2017; Maciel and Fischer 2020). Likewise, other studies imply that the processes of aestheticization reframe symbolic resources around subcultures and collective performances (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Kates 2002; Kozinets 2002; Goulding and Saren 2009); branding practices (Holt 2002; Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Wu, Borgerson, and Schroeder 2013); and markets enshrined by authenticity, craft, artisanship, and “the handmade” (Brown, Hirschman, and Maclaran 2000; Campbell 2005; Fillis 2014; Ulver 2019). Furthermore, aestheticization resonates in studies that analyze consumption contexts of retro consumption and marketing (Belk and Costa 1998; Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Brown 2018; Brunk, Giesler, and Hartmann 2018) and spectacular environments (Maclaran and Brown 2005; Marrewijk and Broos 2012; Nuttavuthisit 2014). These are examples of studies that capture how consumers are encouraged to enjoy aesthetic experiences and consumption at the same time, while producers blend aesthetic effects and commercial endeavors in new and innovative ways that are acceptable to markets that re-engage with certain concepts (Reckwitz 2017).

Consequently, previous literature in consumption and marketing has touched upon a variety of aestheticized consumption experiences and their configurations (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Bach 2002; Belk and Costa 1998; Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Borghini et al. 2009; Goulding and Saren 2009; Arsel and Bean 2013; Ocejo 2014; Buschgens, Figueiredo, and Rahman 2020), suggesting two issues. First, “the aesthetic” does not simply happen; rather, it involves a variety of processes. Second, such aestheticization processes include a comprehensive range of actors in a variety of levels. Both issues will be the focus of attention in this conceptual article.

We follow Featherstone’s (2007) argument that everyday life has been increasingly aestheticized. That is, commodities are increasingly consumed for the lifestyle that they represent. Our conceptualization also builds on Reckwitz’s ideas about how aestheticization builds on existing symbolic resources, which can be understood as the context of context (Askegaard and Linnet 2011), to create new and/or innovated symbolic resources. For example, aestheticization may involve the recycling and innovation of cultural imaginations of the past in retro branding and nostalgia-framed markets and ultimately become an essential aspect in the creation of re-enchantment (Hartmann and Brunk 2019). In markets, specialists’ inventive techniques and methods tend to become more and more precise and particular, expanding the selection criteria and thus increasing the number of aestheticization processes available (Wallendorf 1980; Reckwitz 2017). From this perspective, we understand aestheticization as a social process, which renders material or immaterial objects into an aesthetic category. An aesthetic category is defined as a form linked in a specific way to a judgment based on the feelings our perception of the form elicits (Ngai 2012). Aestheticization hosts a mutual relation between aesthetic properties and nonaesthetic properties. Aestheticization also deals with how objects, experiences, and/or concepts are rendered as a specific “form” that appeals to the senses. In other words, aestheticization shapes objects, experiences, and/or concepts by indexing a particular quality of these objects, experiences, and/or concepts.

To explore aestheticization, we synthesize the previous approaches to aesthetics in marketing and consumption literature by focusing on consumer cultural aestheticization processes. To do
so, we offer an integrative framework (see Table 1) that delineates main actors, processes, and resources pertinent across extant research on the topic. Our approach to aesthetics is not concerned with definitions of objects as being aesthetic according to aesthetic criteria but with how and under what circumstances objects, concepts, and experiences become aesthetic. This requires examining the broader selection of articles concerning discernible “constituent processes” of aestheticization. Here, we examined literature that focuses on aesthetics in consumption and marketing per se; prior work that pinpoints the strong sense of taste and aesthetic appreciation of consumers, past research that details the narratives of brand actors used for creating brand aesthetics, and literature on how markets grow aesthetically. We looked for articles that analyze the main consumer cultural processes revolving around particular aesthetic understandings. After reflecting on the foundational works on aestheticization (Hebdige 1979; Featherstone 2007; Reckwitz 2017), we turned back to the business field and reviewed articles published in the Journal of Business Research, Journal of Consumer Research, European Journal of Marketing, and Advances in Consumer Research, along with book chapters that involve aesthetics, e.g. through taste formation, brand experiences, myth-markets, consumer experiences, spectacular retailing, and consumption subcultures. Consequently, we zoomed into the literature that examines the many everyday situations that incorporate aesthetic elements (Venkatesh and Meamber 2006). Our focus here lies on how object–subject relations achieve an aestheticized status, imbue the material with symbolic dimensions, and how, in turn, the aestheticized subject–object relations can give rise to specific experiences. By reviewing and synthesizing prior literature that has dealt with aestheticization, we offer a conceptual model to discuss how and in what ways aestheticization constitutes a useful theoretical and empirical lens through which to explore the various consumer cultural processes that shape contemporary markets. Our main conceptual argument is twofold.

First, we seek to reorient the discussion of the aesthetic (i.e. something that is aesthetic) toward the processes that render something aesthetic (i.e. how something is made aesthetic). As Holt (2002, 79) argues, “the market continues to form the symbolically charged arena with which consumers form their identities … resisting the market’s cultural authority in order to enact localized meanings and identities produces a new consumer culture in which identity projects are aligned with acts of consumer sovereignty.” From this perspective, then, prior research indicates that aestheticization is embedded in this recursive relation of consumer, brand, and market processes, thereby permeating various processes spanning from the micro to the macro level.

Second, as a consequence of this shift in focus, we suggest three main processes of aestheticization. The first of these relates to the animation of object-subject relations that are considered to be aesthetic by looking at consumer processes. The second concerns how aestheticization is performed by brands and branding. The third concerns market processes and how market actors respond to aestheticization processes, focusing on actors and processes that facilitate and promote the emergence and perpetuation of aestheticized subject–object relations. Consequently, we propose to understand aestheticization as a multilayered process, which transforms subject–object relations, brands, and markets into something beautiful, sublime, moving, or interesting.

This article is organized as follows. Based on our synthesis of previous research, we introduce our conceptual model of aestheticization as pertaining to several interrelated processes (Table 1). We then discuss each of these processes in detail and offer illustrative discussions. Finally, we discuss the usefulness of this conceptualization and offer new research avenues.

**Conceptualizing aestheticization as a multilayered process**

Although it is a central concept in consumption and market studies, the notion of aesthetics is not unproblematic. It holds a variety of meanings, including sensory experiences relating to art or concerning everyday objects; there also exists a wide range of conceptual categories that define aesthetics, such as form and expression, harmony and order, symbolism and imagery, beauty, taste, and feelings (Venkatesh and Meamber 2008).
| Table 1. Synthesis of layers of aestheticization. |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| **Layer** | **Description and Main Processes** | **Main Actors** | **Illustration in Prior Literature** |
| Consumer Processes | Consumers imbue market objects, experiences, and practices with aesthetic significance whereby the aesthetic becomes a certain quality, detail, and property of an object, experience, or practice serving consumption of other experiential values. | Consumers | • Fernandez and Lastovicka (2011): Consumers utilize magical thinking to imbue replica instruments with aura, thus transforming them into fetishes.  
  • Hewer and Brownlie (2010), Hewer and Brownlie (2007): Consumers creatively appropriate marketplace sources (marketer-based meaning) to consolidate group identity.  
  • Kozinets (2002): Consumers re-enchant consumption experiences by relating experience in discourse and practice to art; various products and services are effectively disarticulated from market logics and rearticulated onto communal ethos and subcultural ideologies.  
  • Hartmann and Brunk (2019): Consumers valorize past themed marketplace sources as style-based playgrounds.  
  • Dolbec and Maciel (2018): Consumers align existing resources to converge, extend, and normalize taste regimes in style consumption.  
  • Maciel and Wallendorf (2017): Consumers expand their own taste evaluations through learning practices that tie sensory and discursive dimensions.  
  • Arsel and Thompson (2011): Vested consumers use aesthetic discrimination to create symbolic boundaries between an identity-relevant field of consumption and an imposed marketplace myth that threatens the value of their identity investments.  
  • Schouten and McAlexander (1995): Consumers collectively perform branded co-optation of the outlaw biker myth by sensorial and material aesthetic qualities on the object-subject relationships that leads to authentication of membership through unique, homologous styles, specific dress, and acts, thus partaking in the outlaw biker myth.  
  • Goulding and Saren (2009): Goths reified the vampire myth and in a visual aesthetic materiality as a form of self-expression that turns deviant into an aesthetic, semi-ironic pose.  
  • Belk and Costa (1998): Consumers collectively re-enact fur trade rendezvous through primitive aesthetics. Aestheticization works as a way to achieve a romantic inversion of the civilized over the primitive. |
| Brand Processes | Brand actors create, appropriate, amplify, materialize, and communicate specific brand ideals and discourses to facilitate and shape aestheticized consumption and consumer valorization | Brand Managers, Brand Architects, Design Firms, Ad Agencies | • Borghini et al. (2009): The American Girl brand store creates anchoring points with aesthetic elements, tying brand ideology into brand myth experience. |

(Continued)
| Layer | Description and Main Processes | Main Actors | Illustration in Prior Literature |
|-------|-------------------------------|-------------|----------------------------------|
| Market Processes | Market aesthetics develop by i) refinement (supra-firm actors create, reframe, or expand markets aesthetically through symbolic, material and discursive communication in turning pre-existing symbolic and material resources (e.g. national myths, cultural contradictions, institutional logics, and new technologies) into aestheticized versions) and ii) accumulation (relevant actors coordinate and orchestrate the refinement process of the market by accumulating resources for brands and consumers). | State Actors, Cultural Intermediaries, Supra-firm Entities (Peer Firms, Trade Associations), Activists, Subcultures | - Dion and Arnould (2011): Luxury brands radiate an aura of artistic creator to branded goods and clients through contamination of similarity, contiguity and deployed-apparatus of museum display.  
- Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry (2003): Revived brands recall the past style to reanimate the brand’s mojo.  
- Holt (2004): In the process of iconization, brand actors utilize charismatic aesthetics organic to the brand’s populist world to epitomize the authenticity of the brand’s raw materials (populist worlds).  
- Buschgens, Figueiredo, and Rahman (2020): Brand owner’s cultural dispositions and past experiences can help construct imagined worlds (Middle Easternness) in designing connections to markets and spaces with visual aesthetics.  
- Hartmann, Brunk, and Giesler (2018): Retro brand owners script and animate brands and their mythical dimensions.  
- Skou and Munch (2016): New Nordic design shows that the image and ideals of Scandinavian Modern as a subtle version of Scandinavian retro, a re-imagination of the lifestyle and values of Scandinavian modern.  
- Maciel and Fischer (2020): Peer firms’ collaboration fosters collective market aestheticization.  
- Brunk, Giesler, and Hartmann (2018): Mythmakers capture tensions around national ideology as a consumable past in the form of the Ostalgie retro market.  
- Thompson and Tian (2008): Commercially oriented celebration of Southern architecture, landscape and history shape popular memories related to Southern culture.  
- Molander and Östberg (2015): The state interventions are designed to capture the affective undergirding of practices in areas of Swedish design aesthetics.  
- Ocejo (2014): Learned techniques and sensory considerations of butcher shops aestheticize meat, elevating the craft of butchery.  
- Rao, Monin, and Durand (2003): Nouvelle Cuisine energizes from identity movements that arise when activists construct institutional gaps and cultural intermediaries popularize rationales around the aestheticization of cuisine.  
- Smith-Maguire (2018): The aesthetic regime of provenance draws on both the legitimacy of wine terroir and the reflexive contemporary notion of good taste. |
Previous literature on aesthetic consumption examines the individual framing processes of aesthetic consumption and delineates characteristics of aesthetic (consumption) experiences and objects (Joy and Sherry 2003; Charters 2006; Venkatesh and Meamber 2008; Nuttavuthisit 2014). For example, Charters (2006, 240) explains that “responding to an aesthetic product is an active, learned process engaging with and interpreting its symbolic significance rather than passively relating an image to the natural world.” From this perspective, the pre-given aesthetic qualities of the object are central to explaining aesthetic consumption experiences. Other research in this area on aesthetic experiences foregrounds the spatial dimension that hosts the aesthetic interaction between object and subject (Joy and Sherry 2003).

Moving beyond the idea of understanding aesthetic experiences solely for their own sake, Joy and Sherry (2003) examined the subject as an important and active agent in the creation of aesthetic experiences. Furthering this thought, Venkatesh and Meamber (2008) foreground how consumers can also become aesthetic subjects; for example, when they incorporate aesthetics into everyday consumption experiences. Parallel to this, Nuttavuthisit (2014) shows that consumers can go beyond the sensory perception of the aesthetic experiences to create intuitive perception that further results in an idiosyncratic meaning of experiences. Hence, individuals may develop and adopt multiple selves as they repeatedly negotiate aesthetic meanings via consumption experiences.

We approach aesthetics as “the study of the feelings, concepts, and judgments arising from our appreciation of the arts or of the wider class of objects considered moving, or beautiful, or sublime” (Blackburn 2016, 8). While this definition builds on consumers’ individual and subjective appreciation of a “wider class of objects,” thereby constituting an individual-level perspective (feelings and judgments), it simultaneously also indicates the involvement of a collective process of aesthetics. This leads to the following question: how can the wider class of objects be considered “moving,” “beautiful,” or “sublime”?

We argue that objects or concepts must be animated as being aesthetic in order to be considered aesthetic. Consequently, we look for the underlying processes through which objects or concepts become aestheticized. In other words, unlike an atomistic understanding of the aesthetic qualities and elements in consumption experiences, we foreground the consumer cultural processes that animate symbolic and material repertoires and how these symbolic and material repertoires are then valorized through consumer involvement, aesthetic appreciation, and taste evaluation of market actors. For instance, previous research on market formation illustrates how previously mundane, insignificant, or stigmatized objects can become the focus of aesthetic appreciation, become identity markers for both consumers and brands, and play a prime role in market formation (Merkel 2006; Brunk, Giesler, and Hartmann 2018; Ulver 2019). Therefore, our conceptualization moves away from an essentialist understanding of aesthetics. Instead, we argue that there are processes within a variety of layers that animate something (e.g. subject–object relations, brands, markets) to become aesthetic. Table 1 offers an overview of these ideas and synthesizes past research.

Let us begin with the first layer, namely, consumer processes. We know that sensorial and material manifestations of a specific aesthetic sensibility on objects and experiences evolve with the intention of a subject (here, consumers) to see, perceive, or relate to something as aesthetic. Charters (2006) analysis of aesthetic products offers a continuum of aesthetics. It ranges from products with a minimal aesthetic component to those with a highly aesthetic component, such as high art. When Charters discusses aesthetic products, he considers products that have an aesthetic function as their primary purpose (e.g. high art, food, wine, clothing, and traditional crafts).

We extend this range to also include products, brands, and experiences that are not predefined as being aesthetic per the definition above but, rather, are rendered aesthetic through animation and manifestations of a specific aesthetic sensibility. Aesthetic sensibility is what promotes a given material or immaterial object to take on a particular kind of beauty and worthiness of appreciation at a specific time. Specifically, marketing efforts are more often than not about the very creation, encouragement, and fostering of “moving, beautiful, or sublime” brand and consumption experiences. Consequently, we can extend aesthetic sensibilities to include most, if not any, object or
experience in a market context. Following this thought, several other processes of making aesthetic extend beyond the consumer. Brand processes also partly design and contribute aestheticization in which these subject–object relations are designed and rendered aesthetic. Furthermore, markets facilitate and promote the emergence and perpetuation of the aestheticized subject–object relations. In other words, we also need to consider other important actors outside professional art and design work, including subcultures, brands, cultural intermediaries, and nation states that have a material and/or discursive effect on the market.

Thus, the process of rendering subject–object relations in a consumption context into something beautiful, sublime, moving, or interesting, which we call “aestheticization,” points to the methods through which sensory dimensions, aesthetic qualities, and sensibilities operate as a function of aestheticization (i.e. something is made aesthetic) rather than an essential quality (i.e. something is inherently aesthetic). Consequently, we understand aestheticization as a multilayered consumer cultural process that involves consumers, brands, and markets.

For example, the increased articulation of myth markets (Peñaloza 2000; 2001; Holt 2004; Thompson and Tian 2008), expressing the ideological disruptions in an increasingly globalized world, illustrates that such disruptions are rendered aesthetic through the collective efforts of a variety of market actors. Here, commercial mythmakers aestheticize myths and their underlying ideologies as elevated, “moving, beautiful, or sublime” brand and consumption experiences. Further, subcultures also play with communal aesthetics qualities for identity performances (Kates 2002; Goulding and Saren 2009). They animate myths by aestheticizing consumption moods, practices, commercial and noncommercial objects, and experiences (Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2002; Sergina and Weijo 2017). These are manifestations of aestheticization processes in contemporary consumer culture driven by actors who are not necessarily linked to professional art and design work. Consequently, in this paper, we seek to reorient the hitherto dominant interest in aesthetics—as the study of an appreciation of something “moving, or beautiful, or sublime”—to also include the study of how and why something is rendered aesthetic.

We address aestheticization with a focus on three main processes: i) consumer processes; ii) brand processes whereby a range of brand actors shape and craft aesthetics of brands and of consumption moods; and iii) market processes composed of cultural and institutional elements and structures that shape how meanings emerge through an aestheticization of specific concepts, objects, and experiences. From that perspective, nothing is originally and essentially aesthetic; rather, things are made aesthetic by consumer cultural processes to which various actors (and practices) contribute (see Table 1). In the following sections, we present and discuss these processes.

**Aestheticization as consumer process**

The first process concerns subject–object relations connected to the aestheticization of consumption objects, experiences, and practices. In this first layer, we trace how a wider class of objects, experiences, and practices emerge to be considered as being aesthetic by consumers. Here, the focus is on the relationship between subjects and material or immaterial objects, including practices and experiences surrounding matters of taste, immersion, and aesthetic deliberation. In other words, from a consumer perspective, objects, experiences, and practices can be valorized and performed as being aesthetic. That is consumers imbue market objects, experiences, and practices with aesthetic significance whereby the aesthetic becomes a certain quality, detail, and property of an object, experience, or practice serving consumption of other experiential values.

On the level of consumers, aestheticization concerns how consumers valorize and appropriate objects, experiences, and practices as aesthetic as consumers develop knowledge, experience, and literacy in a specific consumption context. Culturally codified, aesthetic and nonaesthetic properties within a particular consumption context help consumers valorize an object, experience, or practice with regard to specific aesthetic meanings, elements, and sensibilities.
perspective, then, the “looks” and the “forms or materials” become symbolic resources for judgment in a temporally and spatially defined context.

This includes the symbolic articulation and rearticulation of meaning, along with the disarticulation of countervailing meaning by incorporating this articulation/rearticulation/disarticulation into authenticated identity narratives. In the literature, this is evident in a variety of consumer experiences and subcultural performances, such as customization practices (Hewer and Brownlie 2007; 2010), co-opting subcultural aesthetics (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), or symbolic inversion (Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2001, 2002; Gouding, Shankar, and Elliott 2002; Kates 2002; Gouding and Saren 2009; Arsel and Thompson 2011).

For instance, in Hewer and Brownlie’s (2007; 2010) study of car customization, consumers use vernacular creativity to appropriate marketplace resources, in their case badges, whereby consumers shape the specific car scene’s aesthetic. In this form of aestheticization, aficionados imbue local identity projects with personal authenticity, thereby consolidating group identity. These consumers also improvise ways to articulate market adjustments. Here, Kozinets (2002) informs us how festival-goers attempt to enchant production and consumption activities by relating them to the discursive field of art rather than the realm of commercial markets. Consequently, various products and services can be subjected to such a disarticulation from a market logic, being instead re-articulated with an emphasis on communal ethos and specific subcultural ideologies—a process that often goes hand-in-hand with consumers emphasizing a retrospective sense of togetherness or other common interest (Merkel 2006). Here, consumers often find a shared nucleus and cohesion by opposing and resisting more mainstream cultural forces.

In the Harley-Davidson subculture, for example, consumers valorize and animate sensorial and material aesthetic qualities of outlaw biker myths to experience and authenticate their membership through homologous styles in dressing and acting. They do so by disarticulating undesirable and distasteful images connected to the rebel and outlaw into a rearticulated aestheticized status as a shared passion for the look, feel, and sound of the objects and heightened self-definition. Similarly, consumers re-enact past practices around primitive or outlaw aesthetics, in turn accomplishing a romantic inversion of the civilized over primitive (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Belk and Costa 1998). Consumers in the indie consumption field use aesthetic discrimination to create symbolic boundaries between imposed marketplace myths and identity-relevant fields of consumption (Arsel and Thompson 2011). Goulding and the others’ (2002) demonstration of the (re-)articulation of the vampire myth as an aesthetic materiality further demonstrates this point. By articulating and turning “deviant” into an aesthetic, aestheticization also contributes to the symbolic inversion of gender performances.

These issues underline the creative agency of consumers that is indispensable in aestheticizing subject–object relations. Because the aesthetic status of this relationship is an important part of consumers’ identity projects, consumer-level aestheticization is a critical building block in the quest to establish a desired identity position and cohesion. Likewise, these studies dramatize how consumer collectives should be thought of as cultural producers and the importance of aestheticization as an aspect of that cultural production. According to Willis (1990), these consumers are engaged in what he calls acts of grounded aesthetics, where the stuff of everyday life, from clothes to music, is transformed, appropriated, and recontextualized. In turn, subcultures involve innovators creating markets, products, and experiences of these markets.

When a market has been subjected to aestheticization, taste often remains at the forefront of product evaluation. For instance, in the craft beer market, consumers expand their own taste evaluations by learning practices that help to bind sensory and discursive dimensions together, emphasizing the mutual cooperation involved in building consensus around ambiguous sensory and aesthetic experience (Maciel and Wallendorf 2017). Likewise, Arsel and Bean (2013) show how coordinated activities (e.g. exchanging information, offering advice, reflecting upon products and producers, arranging and repairing) among enthusiasts of soft modernism home aesthetics form taste; as such, consumers are shaped to act as specific aesthetic regimes. Ulver (2019)
demonstrates how foodies mythologize their social field through aesthetic refinement and symbolic resignification. Consumers also actively extend and normalize taste regimes in aestheticized markets by aligning existing resources to style consumption (Dolbec and Maciel 2018). These studies highlight how connoisseurs and prospective experts, including those with commercial motivations, aestheticize consumption via collective experimentation, discussion, questioning, and debate.

The object or experience acquires its aesthetically elevated character through the material and sensory investments that animate the object or experience with a specific aesthetic value. As seen in the experiences of foodies, Star Trek aficionados, Chicago Cubs fans, or guitar players (Holt 1995; Kozi-nets 2001; Fernandez and Lastovicka 2011; Ulver 2019), it is crucial for this animation that consumers ascribe aesthetic qualities and sensibilities to objects and experiences, thereby performing object–subject aestheticization. For instance, Fernandez and Lastovicka (2011) show how guitar players utilize magical thinking to imbue replica objects, in their case electric guitars, with a certain aura, thereby transforming mass-produced replicas into meaningful aesthetic objects. Thus, standard objects can achieve an uplifted, aestheticized status when consumers ascribe such a magical value and aura to them. Similarly, in retro markets, consumers valorize retrofied objects, concepts, and experiences as identity markers or style-opted ironic consumption resources (Hartmann and Brunk 2019). By doing so, consumers appreciate this relationship in terms of style and imbue objects of the past with an aestheticized status, thereby consuming them as a source of enchantment (Hartmann and Brunk 2019). In this process, the original meaning of the object can be transformed into depoliticized signifiers of lifestyle. The specific aesthetic qualities of retro consumption, involving an appropriation of bygone culture, therefore create the specific subject–object relations that become beautiful, moving, sublime, or interesting. In this way, consumers’ appreciation of a hitherto dull object as an aesthetic transforms the relationship into a captivating consumption experience.

Consider, for instance, the Trabant car produced in the Cold War socialist state of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). At the time, the Trabant was considered an inferior alternative to Western cars, perceived as purely functional, mundane, and dull (Brunk, Giesler, and Hartmann 2018). In contrast, contemporary Trabant aficionados appreciate and valorize the object’s specific design, thus appropriating the past cultural item and transforming it into a novelty (Reckwitz 2017), so that the subject–object relation takes on a different meaning than it had in the past. In these aestheticized consumption experiences, consumers may seek nostalgic feelings, authenticity, or identity markers. As Holbrook (1999) in Charters (2006) points out, aestheticized consumption experiences can have a variety of aspects: “Multiple types of value may be ‘compresent’ in one aesthetic encounter, including both aesthetic and nonaesthetic types of value”; as such, retro aestheticization on the level of subject–object dimension reflects diverse types of values.

**Aestheticization as brand processes**

The second group of processes concerns brand-driven processes that aestheticize brands and their consumption. The main actors we consider here are brand managers and other creative actors such as brand architects, design firms, and ad agencies who play key roles in the creation of the aesthetics of brands. Through aestheticization, brand actors create, appropriate, amplify, materialize, and communicate specific brand ideals and discourses to facilitate and shape aestheticized consumption and consumer valorization. We discern two subprocesses, namely, scripting and brand animation, which we discuss below.

**Scripting**: The first brand process of aestheticization refers to the rendering of a brand as beautiful, sublime, moving, or interesting through scripting. In scripting, brand actors engage in designing a brand experience to define the symbolic and material coordinates of a brand in a mythological landscape. Here, brand actors draw on a cluster of images or symbols (cultural movements, iconic periods, people, or subcultures) to promulgate an affinity for brands. This vision of a brand’s beautiful, sublime, moving, or interesting properties becomes an aesthetic script. Giving a brand a
certain look, feel, sound, smell, touch, and meaning is at the heart of many branding efforts. Accordingly, brand actors work on aesthetic qualities that epitomize these certain feelings, looks, and moods resembling myths that they want to convey. Scripting then becomes a prime process for brand-driven aestheticization. Through scripting, brand actors can nest their brands within a specific mythological landscape. Following the idea that brands create and compete in myth markets (Holt 2004; Thompson and Tian 2008), brand actors calculate aesthetic scripting to reify brand myths for consumer involvement. They do this, for example, by epitomizing cultural movements, iconic periods, objects, people or groups to create a space for consumer processes of aestheticization (Holt 2003; Arsel and Thompson 2011). Brand managers, marketers, advertising agencies, and consultants design brand and consumption aesthetics that render a specific myth as well as the connected brand as beautiful, moving, sublime, or interesting.

By scripting, brands create a source of sensibility to rework or transcend collective national identity (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008; Buschgens, Figueiredo, and Rahman 2020). Marketplace actors reapropriate previously profane content and reframe it in seemingly nonideological terms, like when the material is updated or purified to shared iconic symbols (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008; Brunk, Giesler, and Hartmann 2018). From a cultural branding perspective, scripting processes are intent to play with brand meanings and values in the marketplace (Schroeder, Borgerson, and Wu 2016) through assessing cultural codes in brand aesthetics. In many cases, brand actors aim to reconcile conflicting value systems by reframing insignificant brands in nostalgic terms (Brunk, Giesler, and Hartmann 2018; Beverland et al. 2020). For instance, brand actors leverage popular brands for cultural effect by triggering a sense of we-ness amongst displaced communities, stitching brands to collective memory (Thompson and Tian 2008; Brunk, Giesler, and Hartmann 2018; Beverland et al. 2020) or through a range of practices that inscribe iconic elements into brand experiences (Dion and Arnould 2011).

Previous research highlights this aestheticized dimension of myth-making by showing how brand actors essentially convey myth not only through verbal stories but through an aesthetic sensibility (Peñaloza 1998; Kozinets et al. 2002; Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Kniazeva and Belk 2007; Hollenbeck, Peters, and Zinkhan 2008; Borghini et al. 2009; Dion and Arnould 2011; Buschgens, Figueiredo, and Rahman 2020). We focus on this “making aesthetic” dimension of commercial mythmaking. To Holt (2002; 2003; 2004), the role of the aesthetic in myth nesting is an essential element of transforming brands to make them relevant in society and speaking to specific ideological infrastructures regarding what and how to consume. In this transformation, brand actors initiate the aestheticization process by scripting their offerings into the form of aesthetic manifestations. Aestheticized expressions and manifestations of a myth can transform a new product, space, or concept into a societal innovation (Cova and Svanfeldt 1993; Reckwitz 2017).

Actors such as brand managers, brand architects, design firms, and ad agencies create and cater to market myths by creating specific aesthetics of brands and their elements. Brands can package spectacular subcultural aesthetic elements with a concern for authenticity (Alexander 2009); for example, the mythical structure of Harley-Davidson as a rebel within outlaw manhood is manifested through particular modes of dress, tattoos, grooming, object customization, and the sensory design of the brand’s products. Here, importantly, these sensory experiences include differentiating the bikes’ engine sound design as a collectively shared manifestation of myths connected to manliness and outlaw status. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) show how Harley-Davidson’s subcultural consumption activities and products serve consumers to manifest identity positions around specific mythical dimensions, which are then transferred to brand aesthetics. This aestheticization borrows symbols of the biker ethos while creating a more sanitized and softened version of the biker-from-hell myth. In other words, Harley-Davidson renders specific myths beautiful, moving, and sublime and manifests those myths as branded, consumable identity positions.

Thus, consumers can express identity positions around the aestheticized branded objects while at the same time reinforcing the mythical qualities of these identity positions. These processes are also particularly pertinent in past-themed brands that the brand actors nest them in aestheticized
versions of a mythic past by designing consumable manifestations of this shared affinity toward the past (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Brunk, Giesler, and Hartmann 2018; Hartmann and Brunk 2019).

**Animation:** The second brand-driven process of aestheticization refers to the rendering of brand myths as beautiful, sublime, and moving through brand animation. This process concerns the manifestation and amplification of the scripted vision of a brand’s aesthetic aura by substantial staging. Through brand animation, a brand comes to life, symbolically speaking, via material, discursive, and atmospheric staging of the brand and its narratives (myths).

Literature revolving around themed retail environments pinpoints to the aesthetic animation of brands not only in terms of narratives but also through manifestations in space. For instance, the American girl brand store creates anchoring points with aesthetic elements that ties brand ideology into brand myth experience (Borghini et al. 2009). Consequently, brand aestheticization through a retail format, such as a concept store, transfers brand myth into an experienceable atmosphere and embodied performance (Böhme 1993). This animates the brand through aesthetic sensibilities. In the case of the American Girl brand, for example, Borghini et al. (2009) show how brand ideology is turned into a branded aesthetic experience. This process blends cultural elements with brand-driven aesthetics that can be seen as celebratory to heritage, authenticity, and the local or can serve to update and expand brand meaning that resonates in specific markets (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003). Consequently, brand animation involves the spatialization of concepts, consumption modes, and experiences (Hollenbeck, Peters, and Zinkhan 2008; Borghini et al. 2009; Dion and Arnould 2011; Hamilton and Wagner 2014; Brown 2018; Figueiredo, Larsen, and Bean 2020).

Making myths continuously come to life in a branded format involves aestheticizing both myths and brands. This has particularly been found to be the case in the literature on retro brands and other past-themed brands, which recall aesthetics of the past to make a brand transcend categories such as old/new and past/present to animate a brand’s mojo (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003). In this process, brand actors tie an aesthetic vision onto various branding and marketing activities related to staging a brand to appear alive and well in order to radiate or recover an aura (Böhme 1993; Björkman 2002; Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003). Thus, brand animation processes include diverse practices of brand actors using the palette of tools offered in the branding and marketing toolbox, not least advertising and store design, thereby producing a symbolically and materially charged aestheticization of that brand (Hartmann, Brunk, and Giesler 2018). Such animation processes create a sensibility and aesthetic aura around the brand (Björkman 2002). Aura is defined as a cover that surrounds a brand with feelings and experiences of beauty, exclusiveness, uniqueness, and authenticity that the brand produces in consumption (Björkman 2002). Such aestheticization helps brands, for example, to express, produce, and reproduce certain ideologies by causing charismatic power to become tangible (Dion and Arnould 2011).

The animation of scripts can take place through juxtaposing aestheticized modes of production (often more romantic and more like craft production that draws on singularity, distinction, superiority) and ways of consumption that are often framed as more responsible, ethical, sustainable, and honest (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Hartmann and Östberg 2013; Brunk, Giesler, and Hartmann 2018; Hartmann, Brunk, and Giesler 2018; Hartmann and Brunk 2019). Through such brand aestheticization, branded objects are rescued from anonymity and instead placed in the biographical or cultural context of their inventors and designers (Merkel 2006; Hollenbeck, Peters, and Zinkhan 2008; Dion and Arnould 2011).

**Aestheticization as market processes**

The third group of processes comprises market-level processes that promote the emergence and perpetuation of aestheticized subject–object relations and brand aestheticization, which not only shape but also build on and refine existing market aesthetics. Supra-firm actors such as journalists,
magazines, museums, trade associations, and blogs as well as the national state can help to legitimize aesthetics as an essential attribute in particular markets.

Markets often acquire specific “market aesthetics” as in the case of the German Ostalgie market (Bach 2002; Merkel 2006), the electric guitar market (Fernandez and Lastovicka 2011; Östberg and Hartmann 2015) or the Viking heritage market (Gradén and O’Dell 2018). These markets, together with their larger institutional structures, operate largely through aestheticization (Pomiès, Arsel, and Bean 2020). To understand market-level aestheticization, it is important to understand that markets are embedded in larger institutional structures, which themselves can also be understood as aestheticized. For instance, Östberg and Hartmann’s (2015) analysis of the electric guitar’s iconicity showcases brand actors and consumers (here, guitarists) put substantial effort into, for instance, the material arrangement of objects (e.g. guitars, amps, speakers, effects), aspiring to find the right tone and look to mirror some particular personal style and stage persona. Aestheticization therefore requires that the specific subject–object relations receive an ever-stronger symbolic charge by means of circulating sensuous experiences, symbols, and emotions (Reckwitz 2017) and their reproduction by diverse market actors, such as bands, music producers, magazines, music videos, audiences, and music critics.

Such market-level aestheticization processes build on Reckwitz’s (2017) idea of newness as a prescription and description of aestheticization. To approach this newness, Wallendorf’s (1980) discussion of the creation and use of aesthetic criteria is useful. She suggests that the introduction of an aesthetic object creates a new dimension for evaluation. When we examine the main actors and practices in markets, this formation of aesthetic criteria can take place in various ways (Wallendorf 1980). From the previous literature, we discern two main processes by which market actors encapsulate and create specific market aesthetics—namely, refinement and accumulation, which we discuss below.

Refinement. In this process, a diverse range of supra-firm actors such as supportive institutions, states, cultural intermediaries, and activists create, reframe, or expand markets aesthetically through symbolic, material, and discursive communication in turning pre-existing symbolic and material resources (e.g. national myths, cultural contradictions, institutional logics, and new technologies) into aestheticized versions (Miele and Murdoch 2002; Rao, Monin, and Durand 2003; Ocejo 2014; Smith-Maguire 2018). In other words, markets can grow aesthetically by modifying and enhancing what is currently circulating in the market.

Consider, for instance, Smith-Maguire’s (2018) analysis of the wine market, which highlights the aesthetic regime of provenance. She suggests that the aesthetic regime provides the basis for taste to work as a market action device. The aesthetic regime of provenance draws on the well-established legitimacy of wine terroir along with reflexive contemporary notions of what is considered to be good taste—in this case, “the authentic, transparent, traditional, and sincere” (Smith-Maguire 2018, 80). Likewise, in artisanal production, aesthetics works as form and function simultaneously (Ocejo 2014). Consider how upscale butchery shops aestheticize meat by elevating the craft of butchery through the interweaving of cultural production and material production. In this aestheticization of meat, gustatory taste (function) and the “neat” appearances of the object (form) are related to a butchery shop’s philosophy. As such, the product is endowed with certain qualities that are combined with a clean, natural, and pleasing presentation as well as gustatory taste and ease of preparation for the consumer.

Market aestheticization can be energize by identity movements that arise when activists construct and/or flag institutional gaps and show how an existing dominant logic cannot be an effective guide for action (Rao, Monin, and Durand 2003). In the literature, this process can be exemplified with the conversion of classical French cuisine into Nouvelle cuisine (Miele and Murdoch 2002; Rao, Monin, and Durand 2003). Here, classical French cuisine includes a set of culinary rhetorical devices such as names of dishes, rules of cooking, conventional ingredients, and a shared understanding of the role of the chef as well as menu organization. Nouvelle cuisine builds on a conversion of the dominant logic of the classical cuisine by adding new and unconventional techniques,
simplified and glamorized menus and ingredients, an elevated role of chefs, and a sensorially elevated menu organization.

The market aesthetic of Nouvelle cuisine thus builds on reinterpretation of the elements circulating in the existing market, and this reinterpretation largely builds on the aestheticization of these elements into a specific aesthetic genre that coexists with the traditional classic market aesthetic. Culinary journalists have played an important role in this aestheticization by propagating Nouvelle cuisine, popularizing its virtues, advancing various rationales for its adoption, and chronicling success stories of conversion and innovation (Rao, Monin, and Durand 2003; Gyimóthy 2017), thereby substantiating the idea of Nouvelle cuisine as something beautiful, sublime, and moving. This mythologizing through aesthetic refinement provides the cultural contents that guide market actors to understand what should be included in the market (Ulver 2019), thus mobilizing consumers through symbolic and emotional fuel.

In refinement, supra firm actors reinforce the market by addressing quilting points of mythic narratives in their communications (Thompson and Tian 2008: Brunk, Giesler, and Hartmann 2018). Here, various actors are involved in turning pre-existing symbolic and material resources (e.g. national myths, cultural contradictions, institutional logics, and new technologies) into aestheticized versions. Through the aestheticization of markets, particular myths are made tangible, graspable, and experientable—not only on the level of brands but as a market genre (Fillis 2014). This is particularly evident in Celtic craft markets, Ostalgie retro markets, and Nordic food markets (Fillis 2014; Gyimóthy 2017; Brunk, Giesler, and Hartmann 2018; Ulver 2019), which interweave object-focused experiences with cultural myths by tying specific cultural narratives to consumption experiences that are specific to market genres.

Such aestheticization is, for example, evident in the reconstruction of popular memories and counter-memories through the market. Thompson and Tian (2008), for example, showcase how commercial actors’ representational strategies related to the southern United States shape popular memories concerning their desired goals. These strategies entail, for instance, the commercially oriented celebration of Southern architecture, landscape, and history. Here, refinement serves to leverage this process by updating existing cultural myths to conveying new mythic ideals (Thompson and Tian 2008), thereby valuing and devaluing the representation of popular memories.

Let us consider once more the example of market-level aestheticization within the German Ostalgie marketplace, which has developed a particular retro market aesthetic (Brunk, Giesler, and Hartmann 2018). Here, mythmakers seek to conciliate some of the mythical tensions and contradictions in the country’s political climate by transforming them into an aestheticized Ostalgie market. This market then acts as a political playing field, which can convert politicized tensions into pleasurable and enchanting consumption experiences by creating aestheticized subject–object relations (Brunk, Giesler, and Hartmann 2018; Hartmann and Brunk 2019).

Accumulation: The second market-driven process of aestheticization refers to rendering the market as aesthetics by accumulating refined resources and infrastructures. Accumulation is about manifesting a specific market aesthetic regime, i.e. a regime of sensibilities for the market. Relevant actors coordinate and orchestrate the market’s refinement process by accumulating resources for brands and consumers. Consequently, consumers and brand actors learn to weave together, mimic, and cite resources, moods, and experiences. Through accumulation, aestheticized markets can connect separate actors with another through a specific genre.

For instance, Östberg and Hartmann’s (2015) analysis of the iconicity of the electric guitar showcases the development of an aesthetic system around the electric guitar that eventually turns unwanted clean noise into a core element of the rock genre that symbolizes youth rebellion against conservative values. Thus, a series of alterations of the object allows for new musical roles to emerge. The manifestation and marketization of aesthetics around the electric guitar (i.e. audio, visual, onstage performances) insert this core element as an aesthetic quality into a market, which then becomes a tool for enchanted, fetishized consumptive and productive moments, and, ultimately, a new market (genre). In other words, such aestheticized markets host both the
consumer and brand-driven processes discussed earlier, which introduce aesthetics as a genre in a market system.

Elsewhere, Maciel and Fischer (2020) show how the collaboration between producers and consumers fosters collective market aestheticization. In their work, the development of the craft beer market constructed from a sense of collective identity of vested consumers and recognition of constraints (i.e. resource limitations). Likewise, when we examine the electric vehicle market, seemingly all market players subscribe to the distinct design looks and sound engineering, which altogether creates market aestheticization. As designers work on things like a “calm and responsible” sound signature (The New York Times, April 16, 2020), they engage in building the physical representation of the market through aesthetic manifestations of market activities. The development of a futuristic look (even through elements as simple as a bright yellow logo, blue patch, or particular type of front grille), which set electric cars apart from conventional combustion-engine cars, relate to Reckwitz’s (2017) “newness” and thus expand Wallendorf’s (1980) aesthetic criteria and introduce a new dimension for evaluation. The sound engineer aiming to arm electric cars with an artificial magnetic sound, which also differentiates the car sonically from conventional cars, adds a sonic aesthetic dimension to the object. In this way, technological innovation and new market players often redefine market offerings by adding sensorial and material compositions to be integrated into subject–object relations, which can, in turn, redefine the mythical structures of the marketplace (e.g. combustion = old, dull; electric = new, cool).

The aestheticization of the new Nordic food market, developed by Nordic industry professionals, is a good example of accumulation processes as well. Here, the aestheticization of the new Nordic food market, by turning “dull into cool,” has created a distinct grammar in the practices of “foodies” (Gyimóthy 2017; Ulver and Marcus 2018; Ulver 2019). This revitalization of foodie culture is essentially manifested in the appreciation of local culinary traditions and the myth-inspired portrayed superiority of raw materials from the Nordic terroir. The new Nordic food aesthetic includes dark color palettes in materials, raw food, and dark-colored ingredients packaged as a specific taste regime to differentiate and create the Nordic terroir as an authentic alternative to the dominant culinary terroirs. The main players in disseminating the new Nordic food market and a specific interior design aesthetic championed by Michelin-star restaurant NOMA are manifested on its webpage as “honest, simple, and not over-designed.” The restaurant’s space combines the history of the warehouse through the natural look and worn walls with avant-garde techniques, aiming to create a sensation of authentic Nordic life. The new Nordic food market aesthetic thus manifests a market formation based on uplifting and differentiating products, practices, and techniques that are otherwise used and performed by a wide variety of actors (Rao, Monin, and Durand 2003; Gyimóthy 2017; Ulver 2019), and associating them with an idea of Nordicness. This idea can also be seen in other cultural fields, such as the emerging “Nordic noir” crime genre, which draws on crime fiction, as well as television dramas and sports with a distinctive “Nordic” aesthetic focusing on a bleak regional mood and grim appearance (Stougaard-Nielsen 2016).

Market-level aestheticization through accumulation (here, Nordic market aesthetics) provides sensory and material resources and outlooks for market players (Molander and Östberg 2015) and turns the aesthetic into a market regime that enables commercial actors to stand out from the existing market system, which in turn becomes the “Other” market. For instance, heritage museums try to implement new Nordic construction encompassing imaginations around sustainability and innovation (Gradén and O’Dell 2018), whereby the Nordic is reimagining its past to legitimize its role in present society. The aestheticization of Nordicness—that is, making something that becomes a part of the Nordic look—serves to legitimize the role of specific actors in present society. The presence of a certain market aesthetic, here exemplified with literature on the Nordic market aesthetics, can then serve as platform for market actors to tap into aspirations to make institutions and fields more contemporary (Andersen et al. 2019).
Interaction of the layers

Consumer, brand, and market processes of aestheticization are related, interacting in terms of processes and actors. For instance, when consumers are aestheticizing consumption practices, they can also reinforce market aesthetics and contribute to the aestheticization of those brands they consume in practice performances. Also, brand-driven aestheticization processes serve not only to aestheticize brand universes but also govern the communal interaction and market process that foster aestheticization.

To illustrate this idea, let us once more consider the rich context of retro branding as the aestheticization of pastness. Retro-styling permeates numerous product categories, including motorcycles, coffee makers, watches, online auctions, retail stores, heritage parks, and games, to name but a few (Brown, Hirschman, and Maclaran 2000). The materials in retro markets are mostly valorized and appreciated for their symbolic and experiential dimensions. Previously, “insignificant” objects are also revalorized for their retro significance by both marketers and consumers. If we see “retro” as an aesthetic sensibility, this sensibility enables objects of the past to take on a particular kind of beauty and renders them worthy of an aesthetic framing in various forms by marketers and consumers alike. Retro judgments of taste are connected to a common understanding of brands in general and retro brands in particular as well as a self-reflexive understanding of consumer culture as an arena for self-expression. Here, an appropriation of retro brands creates a specific image of the past. Retro brands blend an old-fashioned design, look, and feel with updated features, functions, and design (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003). It is implicit here that “retro,” as an aesthetic sensibility, cannot easily be defined by form, function, or essential meaning but must be defined through a process. Thus, retro branding can be considered a form of myth-making (Hartmann and Brunk 2015), i.e. an aestheticized dimension of consumer culture. The process of aestheticization often involves juxtaposing creativity and authenticity, as well as the local, and merging them with the new, artisanal, and particular. For instance, brands produce both heritage and myth in a process, whereby history feeds heritage, and heritage, in turn, provides new material for history (Andersen et al. 2019). Heritage becomes charged with symbolic value and meaning for specific groups. In the case of retro branding and other past-themed brands, brands speak, for instance, to conflicts of a past period and its related and idealized aestheticized modes of production (often more romantic and more like craft production) and particular ways of consumption (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Hartmann and Östberg 2013; Brunk, Giesler, and Hartmann 2018; Hartmann, Brunk, and Giesler 2018; Hartmann and Brunk 2019).

We argue that aestheticization is an interactive process spanning across the layers of consumers, brands, and markets. These processes are related to how the market captures and reproduces the gestalt of specific stylized looks and sensory qualities as well as distinct subcultural etiquettes and rhetoric within a marketplace. Such aestheticized markets often then become a platform for the expression of socio-cultural identities.

Aestheticization of markets also serves to translate the market structures into an aesthetic by creating a style, an aesthetic regime around it, and give market structures a “form.” Aestheticization considers translating the meaning of, for example, ethical consumerism into a more refined version of responsibility, which is most often visible if we examine the vegan market or electrified vehicle market. Refinement of the specific consumption objects, moods, and accumulation of the various refined tools materializes the market’s aesthetics and particular ideologies. Distinct sensory qualities of electrified consumption objects, moods arising from experience packages created by branding actors partly shape how we mobilize ideologies as stylistic qualities in expressing consumption.

Concluding discussion

In this paper, we proposed that aestheticization as a process deserves closer attention. Turning something into something beautiful, moving, sublime, and interesting is at the heart of many
consumer, brand, and market processes. We suggest that a focus on aestheticization is helpful to illuminate central phenomena in contemporary consumer culture, which revolve around, in simplified terms, the creation and appreciation of something distinctively beautiful and more or less interesting by and for consumers, brands, and markets. While we have depicted a range of processes at these conceptual levels, it also becomes clear how aestheticization transcends these levels and is a multilayered process, as these consumer, brand, and market processes interconnect. Consumers can ascribe aesthetic qualities to objects, experiences, and practices by assembling specific genres, looks, or logics and by performing, improvising, and evaluating taste scripts in aestheticized or aestheticizing markets. When we look at brand actors, the two main processes we identify are scripting and animation processes, which turn brands and their consumption experiences into meaningful, myth-invested, and identity-laden resources. Zooming out to the market, we identify refinement and accumulation as processes that can create specific market aesthetics, which in turn can fuel consumer and brand processes.

Overall, our synthesis of previous literature and our process-oriented conceptual exploration of aestheticization through the lenses of consumers, brands, and markets also aim to inspire further research. Our attention to aestheticization as a process re-orient a more fine-grained yet integrated approach for the future study of aesthetics and its role in consumer culture, how these making aesthetics can be shaped and marketed by an array of actors, how consumers experience these processes and “the aesthetic,” and how these consumer cultural aestheticization processes shape markets.

Second, our work offers a perspective for analysis of the marketization of aesthetics and its elements, whereby marketers are merely one of the actors. Therefore, brand aestheticization may serve not only to revitalize a given brand but also to govern communal interaction and market systems and structures. Consequently, future research is needed to understand marketing’s role in such processes and the specific tools and tactics marketers use to enact aestheticization. A focus on aestheticization offers a means to conceptually and empirically approach the nexus among consumers, brands, and markets when studying consumer cultural phenomena. We suggest that aestheticization is a useful enabling lens for studying and understanding this nexus, particularly when elucidating how more macro-structural dynamics interact with more micro-level dynamics on the level of consumers. Future research could, for example, examine more closely the social construction of “the aesthetic.” That is, to study aestheticized practices, objects and experiences, and the relationships among taste regimes, myth-making, valorization, and appropriation of the aesthetic. Thus, a focus on aestheticization could yield interesting insights into the dynamics and processes involved and played out when brands aestheticize not only identities but also nationalities, the local, regionalities, ideologies, subcultures, practices, cosmopolitanism, innovation, or certain modes of production (e.g. relating to sustainability issues, craft production, or hand-made products). Embedding an analysis of these aestheticization issues into their market and consumer context may be helpful to elucidate hitherto de-emphasized aspects in the operation of consumer culture.

Third, a focus on aestheticization can contribute to further studying and conceptualizing the shared quest by consumers and marketers alike to seek and create (re-)enchantment. If enchantment can be seen as a project to turn something into something special (Hartmann and Östberg 2013; Hartmann and Brunk 2019), the literature offers several indications that (re-)enchantment partly operates via aestheticization, as discussed above. We suggest that aestheticization offers a
complementary lens to study (re-)enchantment, including how it is orchestrated at the intersection of consumption, brands, and markets; how it may be manifested in taste regimes; its role in the creation of aestheticized markets; and its role in the aestheticization of the subject–object relations, as previously discussed. Moreover, future research integrating aestheticization and (re-)enchantment processes may yield critical insights into the consumer cultural mechanisms related to dealing with but also creating rationalisation (Ritzer 2005). For example, how and in what ways can we understand aestheticized markets as rationalized mechanisms to create (re-)enchantment?

Fourth, the attention to aestheticization can contribute to future studies on myth-making and the operation of myths in consumer culture. If, as Holt (2004, 44) suggests, brands compete in myth markets “to provide the most compelling myth,” then an aestheticization of myths is an important aspect of marketing activity, as our conceptual review and discussion above indicate. However, we do not yet fully understand the role of aestheticization in myth marketing nor the experience of myths as particularly beautiful, sublime, and moving from a consumer perspective. If marketers create and cater to myths, as previous literature indicates, then what is the role of aestheticization in experiencing myth markets and “the compelling” myth?

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