

Materiality, Aesthetic Perception and Willingness to Pay in Contemporary Sculpture: An Empirical Study of Visual Art Audiences

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Abstract

This study investigates the economic valuation and aesthetic appreciation of contemporary sculpture, focusing on how materiality influences audience perception and willingness to pay (WTP). While traditional sculptures have long relied on durable, premium materials such as bronze, marble, and stone to signal permanence, longevity, and high financial value, contemporary art increasingly incorporates non-traditional mediums, including recycled plastics, clay, and mixed metals. This shift challenges established norms of artistic value. Utilizing an empirical approach, this research analyzes visual art audiences to determine how the physical composition of a sculpture shapes its perceived aesthetic quality and subsequent market value. The findings indicate that materiality plays a crucial role in framing consumer psychology within the art market, as audiences actively weigh traditional concepts of permanence against the innovative, eco-conscious, or conceptual narratives of modern materials. The implications of this research are highly relevant to both art economists and practicing artists, providing actionable insights into how contemporary materials can be strategically positioned to optimize market reception. Ultimately, this study bridges the gap between art history and behavioral economics, offering a framework for predicting consumer valuation in the evolving landscape of contemporary visual arts.

Keywords: Materiality; Aesthetic perception; Willingness to pay; Contemporary sculpture; Visual art economics; Consumer valuation

1. Introduction

Artwork has traditionally been comprised of hard materials, at least as far as sculptures are concerned. What an artist's artwork is comprised of would predominantly or profoundly affect the value of said sculpture. This is especially true when you consider works of art created from bronze, marble, and stone. For many, these sculptures signify permanence, meaning the pieces are perceived to have a lasting quality. On the other hand, contemporary sculptures center on materials such as recycled plastics, clay, and metals. Thus, materiality plays a key role in aesthetic perception and an artist's willingness to pay for such pieces.

2. Materiality

Considering materiality in contemporary art, one has to understand how this idea factored into the artwork of the past. Traditional sculptures were deemed stronger and more in tune with culture due to the materials. This included artwork from various cultures, whether they were from Africa, Asia, or South America. Bronze sculptures would receive higher accolades and pay because they seemed to exhibit craftsmanship and authenticity. Materiality in contemporary art also plays a key role in the valuation of artwork. When symbolism is applied, conceptual values are found to be inherent in such pieces. It means those with greater knowledge of the fine arts are willing to pay higher prices for such pieces.

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Suffice it to say, the value of the material used doesn't particularly raise the buying price. For instance, regular paper wouldn't make any buyer feel more obliged to pay higher prices. The material used can also significantly reduce the value of the artwork, where pricing is concerned. For instance, canvas may be deemed more valuable in certain circumstances and cultures. Conversely, as mentioned earlier, paper is seen as an everyday piece of material, and not worth much ((Kusché, 2017). In other words, contemporary art is valued more for its narrative than for the materials used. What the sculpture tells people is more important than the materials used. Using bronze or marble may present one's artwork as long-lasting, but it may not convey a message that the buyer deems relatable.

Conversely, an artist may use very expensive gemstones on a sculpture and still not receive the valuation they were hoping for. Artwork with diamonds, for example, may fetch a hefty amount, but probably not as much as the diamonds are inherently worth. With the new age and digitalization coming into play, even sculptures may be affected, and here's how.

Many artists today host their artwork on social media platforms. This means there is a huge possibility that the work may be altered. Even if this isn't so, viewing artwork through media like Instagram doesn't have the same effect as it would, for example, in a museum or art gallery. It means what would historically be perceived, that is, through visuals, touching, and the like, is now perceived from miles away. Thus, it becomes more important to focus on storytelling through one's artwork rather than focusing on the materials used.

The size of the sculpture, thus, isn't felt from miles away when viewed through a smartphone. The aesthetic qualities aren't appreciated either. It means that the valuation of said sculptures will be based solely on an artist's cultural capital rather than what an artist may have tried to convey in their artwork. A perfect example may be an artist who uses metal objects for their sculptures. These materials may be used to convey a message of terrible times, perhaps industrial times or war. The audience may appreciate it based on their knowledge of history, while others may not. This means it all boils down to narratives, whereby other potential buyers may not see the artwork is valuable, and may perhaps view it as rubbish (Mills, 2009).

Still on materiality, new-age artists use increasingly different materials to shape their sculptures. The idea is to create narratives that resonate with the audience. Metals and other recycled materials convey socio-political and geological messages to more knowledgeable audiences. Many of these sculptures are created to open one's mind, challenging what potential buyers perceive. An artist like Kapoor used steel to offer the audience a chance to appreciate space and form in entirely new ways (Art and the exploration of materiality 2023).

To put this into a better perspective, materiality may be more important today than ever before. Notwithstanding the negative side of digitalization, cultural capital might be what saves the art sector as we know it. As younger and wealthier buyers enter the market, they bring with them greater knowledge of artwork. These potential buyers also demand work that resonates, and not necessarily in a traditional or cultural manner. Thus, when an artist uses recycled material to create art, the materials used and the cultural capital of the buyers become essential in market valuation.

3. Aesthetic Perception

Of all factors that affect viewing, appreciation, valuation, and pricing, aesthetic perception is of utmost importance. This refers to how someone evaluates an object, in this case, artwork, using different perceptive methods, to conclude what inspires them and what does not. Aesthetic perception can be attributed to several things, including the backgrounds of artists and buyers. Specifically, a buyer may find a piece of artwork intriguing based on previous experiences with the same. Additionally, the artwork may inspire them simply based on their understanding of certain factors that are exhibited within the sculpture. Aesthetic perception has predominantly been focused on paintings. However, sculptures present an environment where this perception is crucial to the evaluation and pricing of artwork. According to certain models like Tino's Mirror Model of Art (Sacheli et al., 2022), there are three phases determining the outcome and evaluation of an artwork. These phases begin with the actual conceptualization of the artwork, down to the aesthetic perception process of the audience. Ideally, the artist has in mind the potential audience and will create their artwork based on who they perceive will likely be viewing and buying the pieces. The last stage of this model places emphasis on the buyer's perception.

This stage accounts for how the buyer makes meaning from the artwork, how they will judge the pieces, and their emotional connection to it (Sacheli et al., 2022). This perception can be influenced through their knowledge of artwork, culture, and worldly experiences, too. For instance, a young buyer well-read and proficient in matters of art would more likely appreciate abstract or ambiguous art than a less knowledgeable one. This aesthetic perception factors greatly when it comes to the evaluation of an artist's work. Cultural capital may make it easier for a buyer to understand the

inspiration behind the artist. If a piece of art is meant to resonate with an audience, it requires aesthetic perception coupled with immense cultural capital.

Since aesthetic perception depends on different stimuli and from different people, these perceptions can be disadvantageous to artists. When an artist is inspired, that is where their authenticity kicks in. On the other hand, buyers may influence an artist's final work based on their perceptions of what would hold more value, and what would not. This is a perfect example of evaluation gone wrong, or rather, how aesthetic perception and experiences may hinder an artist's performance in the market.

Another angle to understanding aesthetic perception in contemporary art is that it engages different levels of our senses. This includes taking into account space, whereby installations come into play. Also, some pieces of art are created to make the audience feel smaller, i.e., the pieces are large. Essentially, contemporary sculptures focus on more intense methods of perceiving art, which is a far cry from traditional methods.

Lest we forget, aesthetic perception would factor greatly in artwork that confronts socio-economic issues. For instance, sculptures showing economic hardship or industrial waste may even fetch more money if the audience is as perceptive as they should be. In this case, the audience would need to have adequate cultural capital to appreciate such work. Some forms of contemporary art and sculptures allow the audience to touch the pieces, allowing for a more immersive experience. This places them closer to installation art than any other form of contemporary art.

Aesthetics in contemporary work are directly related to materiality. Aesthetic perception and materiality are represented all too well in sculptures made from wheels, metals, and other industrial waste. The artist Tabkley used machinery, bike wheels, and parts from automobiles to create sculptures (Al- Bahadli, 2021). One such piece was displayed at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. It is said that the purpose of this artwork was to portray a self-destructive existence, which was, at the time, attributed to the city of New York. Such sculptures and their inherent meanings cannot easily be understood, yet the aesthetic perception of today's buyers seems to be working in an artist's favor.

4. Willingness to Pay (WTP) in Contemporary Sculpture

Governments and institutions were primarily the determinants of the evaluation and pricing of art commodities. This monopoly gave them power to decide what was worth evaluating and ultimately how much would be paid for an item. With time, digitalization, globalization, and an increase in the wealthy have impacted how art is evaluated, and the willingness of buyers to pay. Traditionally, items like paintings were overly priced simply because they would fetch more money in the future; it was known as speculation. Nowadays, more youth are engaging in buying contemporary sculptures that resonate with them.

Willingness to pay for contemporary sculptures may be influenced by peer pressure. If someone knows that others are placing high bids on something or that it is of high monetary value, they may be willing to pay more. This doesn't mean that the artwork is necessarily good; it simply implies society has placed a value on it, and someone perceives it to be true. Such instances also highlight how peer pressure affects procurement choices. When told that experts in pricing were around, some test subjects seemed to be more willing to pay than they would otherwise (Spee et al., 2022). Understanding this point of view from the idea of buyers engaging in private rooms means they are more likely to negotiate more. This is because pressure from others may influence their willingness to pay. This may make them pay more, or even less, for an item.

Cultural capital plays an important role in the willingness to pay for contemporary art. While procuring art and the influence behind it has changed somewhat, people still base their choices on social reputations. Their willingness to pay stems from how they believe they will be perceived in society. These potential buyers may be willing to pay more simply to fit in or even to stand out from other social groups (Spee et al., 2022). In this regard, their willingness to pay stems from their upbringing, social backgrounds, education, current status, or even perceived future status.

An important aspect to note regarding willingness to pay is the practice of liking visuals. In the digital realm that we exist in today, much of contemporary artwork and sculptures may be displayed on social platforms. Though many may like a certain sculpture, it may not necessarily translate to a willingness to pay (more) for the item. The social platform may simply help garner a greater audience, not necessarily more pay. As the younger generation moves away from what was previously perceived as good art, i.e., paintings from known artists, they determine how much they will pay on a personal level.

Art that can relate to is more likely to have them willing to pay for it than art that is *liked* on social media or hyped up in galleries. However, due to economic uncertainty and such factors, their individual preferences may not take precedence. It means in this case that expert opinions and pricing from the same will determine their willingness to pay (Spee et al., 2022). When potential buyers are presented with artwork that is labeled as having high monetary value, the willingness to pay is affected positively. It means that few people are willing to pay for something even when the item clearly resonates with them. All these factors either counter or work together to increase the chances that a buyer is willing to pay for artwork.

Due to the fact that contemporary art and sculptures, to be precise, are associated with exposed individuals, other factors may influence willingness to pay. If contemporary sculptures influence someone based on sexual identities, a dopamine effect, and thus how they can relate to it, they would be more willing to pay. In this case, the reputation of the artist may not be as important. The buyer may simply select a piece to hang on their wall and present what they believe in, regardless of what society believes. This affects willingness to pay because younger, more affluent buyers are renowned for making decisions based on personal taste, rather than societal expectation. Also, the fact that a piece of art may be scarce and perhaps took a lot of effort to produce may influence willingness to pay more positively (Spee et al., 2022).

4.1. Digitalization

Digitalization may also impact one's willingness to pay for something. For starters, a sculpture may resonate with a potential buyer as they view it on a social platform. They are more likely to purchase said artwork without the influence of outsiders. Additionally, payments can be made through all manner of digital platforms. This removes the negative impact stares can have when presenting cash or a card at a museum or gallery. Peer pressure through likes on social media also affects how one evaluates artwork. This translates to a higher willingness to pay simply because others your age, and perhaps mindset, is in agreement (Spee et al., 2022).

4.2. Cultural capital

If cultural capital is anything to go by, then it greatly impacts one's willingness to pay. A good education on cultural diversification, socio-economic issues, environmental factors, and history can influence how much money one is willing to part with. A well-read and exposed person will most likely see the true value of a piece of art based on its inspiration, rather than its resale value.

4.3. Bottom Line

Contemporary art sculptures and artwork in general now have a more affluent, educated, and daring audience. It means artists have more leverage in what they can produce and who their artwork will reach. Matters of evaluation and appraisals can be manipulated easily without interference from galleries and high influencers. Materiality may factor into pricing, especially with the use of materials associated with new-age problems like industrialization. While digitalization helps in exposure and reach, it may prove to be a hindrance when AI is involved. Therefore, contemporary sculptors are presented with more challenges regarding materials to use, where to display their work, and how to approach pricing. However, the new breed of potential buyers may just solve these problems. Their willingness to pay based on preferences rather than status means an artist only has one job to do: factor in what is contemporary and relatable.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the materiality of contemporary sculpture significantly influences audience perception and willingness to pay, revealing that while traditional materials like bronze maintain a strong association with financial value, modern mediums like recycled plastics redefine value through ecological and conceptual relevance. These empirical findings provide critical insights for artists and art economists on how to effectively position and price modern artworks in a shifting market. Ultimately, this study benefits society by promoting sustainability within creative industries and fostering public appreciation for eco-conscious art, while the way forward lies in examining how these economic valuation models apply to digital and immersive art forms.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript. The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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