

The Aesthetic Experience of Product Design: A Case Study of the Consumption of Earphones in Hong Kong

'The iPod and iPhone have made it possible for each of us to have a portable and personal music-listening experience.... But for a truly immersive listening experience, you need an earphone with a comfortable fit that keeps out the background noise and lets you hear music as the artists intended.'

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Introduction

The design discipline has recently recognised the potential of a human-centred approach, and acknowledged that users (consumers of products) are significant sources of insight and innovation (Bayazit, 2004; Bredies *et al.*, 2010; McDonagh and Thomas, 2010). The development of this approach has not been limited to an engineering or technological perspective that incorporates only physical ergonomic data for product design and technical advancement (Nickpour and Dong, 2011; Peebles and Norris, 2003). Rather, it has extended to the social sciences and to cognitive science, where it is used to shed light on the social context in which users are situated and the subjective experiences that they have had with various products (Bredies *et al.*, 2010; McDonagh and Thomas, 2010; Miesler, 2012; Whitfield and Fels, 2013). In this paper, we follow the latter approach by addressing the link between product design and the bodily experiences of consumers from an aesthetic perspective (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2010). We empirically investigate how the meanings that consumers infer from product designs reveal their personal notion of the 'aesthetic' in everyday life and how this notion affects the aesthetic judgement of consumers and their preferences for product designs.

Previous studies on design and consumers have found a link between how consumers judge and evaluate the features of a product design and their personal notion of aesthetics (Venkatesh and Meamber, 2008; Venkatesh *et al.*, 2010; Walker, 2009). The sense of aesthetic judgement, or the reception of aesthetics, is central to the feeling and sensory perceptions that consumers have bodily experienced, and the subjective meanings that they have assigned for instructing identity in their 'life project' (Meyers-Levy and Zhu, 2010; Venkatesh and Meamber, 2008; Venkatesh *et al.*, 2010). However, the link between sensory perceptions, bodily experiences, and the reception of

aesthetics has not been adequately studied in the field. For the present research a typical experiential-type product, earphones, was selected as a case study for exploring underlying themes of aesthetics in everyday life consumption, as these themes emerged from the narratives of consumers.

With the impressive technological advancements in personal stereo systems in recent decades, a wide range of personal audio devices, such as tablets, MP3 players, smart phones, and portable amplifiers, have emerged. These devices not only offer high sound quality, but have also changed the habits of consumers with regard to listening to music, from home entertainment to everyday and everywhere enjoyment (Hammershøi *et al.*, 2008). The demand for accessories such as headsets and earphones has grown considerably over the past few years. This is especially the case in Southeast Asia, where the market recorded a 22 per cent growth rate and was worth US\$15 million in 2011 (GfK Retail and Technology Asia, 2011). To capitalise on the consumer excitement in obtaining better sound from their portable players or smart phones, traditional branded labels of 'custom in-ear monitors' for on-stage musicians and sound engineers have also expanded their portfolio of digital audio products by offering more options for popular in-ear consumer earphones for listening to portable music. The designs of these earphones differ from those of conventional earphones (see Figure 1).

With a high-performance two-way, 'custom in-ear' design originally intended for stage monitoring, these earphones provide consumers with a higher level of sophistication and performance than was previously available, going over and beyond the primary function of sound to offer other design stimuli such as appearance (visual), comfort for the in-ear canal (tactile), and detailed specifications (visual). The earphones trigger a multi-sensory, emotive, hedonic experience in music, and thus direct consumers towards the pursuit of a consumer fantasy (Martin, 2004): consumers become on-stage musicians and professional sound engineers who share the same sound monitoring needs in everyday life. We selected the consumption of earphones as a case study not only because of the potential size of the market, but also because the narratives of the consumers' multi-sensory perceptions relating to bodily experiences and aesthetic judgements can provide crucial insights for the design and innovation of technological and electronic devices. Yet current discussions on the design of earphones still revolve around the following three aspects: measurements of physical apparatus and their impact on the human

ear and brain; the relationship between objective parameters and the sensation of loudness; and the necessary definition of high-quality earphones (Hammershøi *et al.*, 2008). We attempt to contribute to knowledge of other sensory stimuli apart from sound through an examination of the subjective narrative of bodily experiences relating to the aesthetic judgements that consumers make in their everyday life.

Literature Review

We review recent work on consumption aesthetics and sensory marketing in both design and consumer research (Hultén *et al.*, 2009; Hultén, 2011; Krishna, 2012; Venkatesh and Meamber, 2008; Venkatesh *et al.*, 2010; Walker, 2009). Before presenting the theoretical background of our study, we should have a clear definition of the link between ‘aesthetic’ and sensory experiences. According to Venkatesh and Meamber (2008), aesthetic consumption is defined as ‘those aspects of sensory experiences that are made manifest in the consumption of everyday objects that are presumed to have aesthetic qualities, as well as those experiences relating to art and art-like objects and artistic events’ (p. 48). This definition implies that the notion of what is ‘aesthetic’ is primarily subject to sensory experiences in the domains of both everyday life and the arts (Dickie, 1974; Meyers-Levy and Zhu, 2010; Venkatesh *et al.*, 2010; Walker, 2009). Yet, for our discussion in this paper, we only pay attention to the sensory experiences in everyday life consumption, and reveal how consumers negotiate personal meanings of ‘aesthetics’ with prevailing tastes and cultural dispositions through their lived experiences and consumption practices.

The Aesthetic Experience of Consumption: Reception of the Aesthetic and the Body

The aesthetics of consumption in everyday life have been broadly discussed in previous studies using different research paradigms. The present study does not follow a positivist’s direction concerning how design elements would influence aesthetic responses, or investigate the stimuli that drive aesthetic impressions after consumers objectively process and evaluate product information (Hoegg *et al.*, 2010; Silvera *et al.*, 2002). Rather, we follow a phenomenological account to study the subjective sensory experiences of consumers as they relate to the notion of aesthetics in their consumption practices in everyday life.

In proposing a model of aesthetic consumption, Venkatesh and Meamber (2008) reviewed Carroll's (2001) work and identified four major approaches to the study of aesthetic experiences, namely, the traditional, critical, minimalist, and pragmatic (p. 47). Drawing inspiration from these different approaches, they deduced that aesthetic experience is 'part of the everyday experience of the aesthetic object, but is a particular quality of emotional experience that is specific to the individual' based on cultural deposition and his/her actions (p. 48). The study of aesthetics and art no longer only focuses on how aesthetic objects bring emotional enjoyment and feelings of pleasure in people's lives as discussed in imitation theory and expression theory (Carroll, 2001; Townsend, 1997), but also on the role of aesthetic experiences in consumers' identity formation and personal meaning creation.

Putting aesthetic experiences back into consumers' everyday life, this phenomenological direction emphasises that aesthetic consumption and experiences contribute to consumers' identity construction, providing consumers with personal and social meanings (Thompson *et al.*, 1989; 1990; Venkatesh and Meamber, 2008; Walker, 2009). While those researching consumers have long known that consumption choices and brands provide symbolic resources for consumers to construct their self-identity under a given socio-cultural context (Belk, 1988; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Kirmani, 2009; Oyserman, 2009), Venkatesh and Meamber (2008) have argued that consumers do not simply experience and manipulate these symbols when constructing their self-identity through symbolic consumption, but they become aesthetic subjects who are 'constituted aesthetically in the consumption of objects that have an aesthetic appeal' (p. 52). Thus, the notion of aesthetics held by aesthetic subjects and their related experiences are linked with the subject's bodily discourse and identity formation through symbolic consumption.

The aesthetic of the body is central to one's identity formation (Joy and Sherry, 2003; Venkatesh *et al.*, 2010). The notion of the reception of the aesthetic builds largely on a dialogical relationship between the body and the subject. It pays special attention to how consumers appropriate the meanings of objects into their lives (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2010). In other words, it refers to the bodily discourse and identity formation that take place when consumers aesthetically perceive and derive meanings from the culturally constituted world, and how they ascribe their own personal meanings and notion of aesthetics to the

objects (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). Using music as an example for our research on the consumption of earphones, we note that previous studies have found that consumers infer two kinds of meaning when listening to music (Meyer, 1994). The first is called 'referential meaning' and refers to those descriptive ideas that music may bring to the human mind; the second is known as 'embodied meaning', which is purely hedonic in nature. It arises from a level of simulation provoked by the structural properties of music (Meyers-Levy and Zhu, 2010). Individual consumers, with a deep cultural disposition as they are exposed to the world, may develop their own notion of aesthetics through bodily discourse and identity construction in everyday life. This constitutes a kind of aesthetic knowledge of cultural capital as embodied in the consumer (Bourdieu, 1998). Thus, such knowledge influences a consumer's impressions, attitudes, and judgement of a product. In studying the relationship between product design and aesthetic judgement, Walker (2009) ascertained that the embodied aesthetic knowledge, as a form of taste, would guide the consumer to decide if the product design supports his/her idea of self-identity within a specific socio-cultural context and social group. Here, we discuss how the sensory perceptions and feelings of consumers are central to aesthetic judgement, and how this also makes the body central to any discussion of aesthetics (Meyers-Levy and Zhu, 2010). The question now becomes to what extent our discussion is relevant to our current situation in the fields of practical design and marketing.

From Sensory Marketing to Multi-sensory Design

As an aesthetic perspective has been linked to the fields of practical marketing and product design and development, the growing concern over the sensory experience of consumers has been extended to the field of marketing. Philosophically, the aestheticisation of everyday life is a notable feature of our postmodern age, when technological innovation is taken for granted and is gradually being substituted by societal innovations emphasising the importance of aesthetic appeal, and meaning and values in marketing and design activities (Cova and Svanfeldt, 1993; Featherstone, 1988). A new discipline, sensory marketing, has been proposed in recent years to acknowledge the growing importance of consumer sensory experiences in the formulation of marketing strategies, product design and development, and brand management (Hultén *et al.*, 2009; Hultén, 2011; Krishna, 2012; Raz *et al.*, 2008).

An unprecedentedly close relationship has developed between product design and marketing, as marketers are utilising product design as a point of differentiation and product design is serving as a source of competitive advantage in today's highly competitive and fast-changing market environment (Page and Herr, 2002; Raz *et al.*, 2008). Companies have begun to shift their attention to triggering consumer sensory experiences through labelling, packaging, advertising, and design attributes. They are introducing various sensorial marketing strategies and providing consumers with a multi-sensory brand-experience (Hultén, 2011). Related research on sensory marketing has ascertained that triggering the senses of consumers with the sensorial attributes of a product can affect their perceptions, judgement, and behaviour towards the product (Kirshna, 2012; Mueller and Szolnoki, 2010; Raz *et al.*, 2008). In addition, the power of sensory experiences often extends to delivering to customers the sense of a personal touch through 'brand soul' – a brand with emotional, sensual, and value-based features (Ackerman, 1990; Hultén *et al.*, 2009). Researchers in the discipline of design and innovation have also identified the significance of how the appearance of a product triggers our sensory perceptions, and affects our judgement and consumption preferences, which in recent years has led to an emphasis on a human-centred design approach (Raz *et al.*, 2008; Walker, 2009). Such researchers have found that different product categories require special sensory offerings in design attributes. The categorisation of products includes ordinary/common, complex/technological, and hedonist/identity (Giboreau and Body, 2007). For high-performance products like earphones or other technological devices, it has been found that if these products have an attractive design, this may create the expectation among consumers that such products are also functionally superior, even if the design does not communicate any specific information about functionality (Creusen and Schoormans, 2005; Hoegg *et al.*, 2010).

The above discussion is centred on the relationship between consumer sensations and perceptions. It is known that sensation and perception are two linked stages in the processing of the senses. Sensation is neurological in nature as it refers to 'the stimulus impinging upon the receptor cells of a cell organ'; while perception is related to the subjects' apprehension and mind as 'the awareness and understanding of sensory information' (Krishna, 2012: 333). Yet the unresolved problem here is that consumers will ascribe different personal meanings in their perception according to their embodied notion of

aesthetics, given that they encounter the same sensorial stimulus from a product. Most existing studies have focused only on sensorial components such as vision, touch, audition, smell, and taste. These elements of sensation have been examined only in terms of how consumer perceptions have been affected with regard to brand recall and mood manipulation (Krishna, 2012). By stressing the importance of a cognitive understanding of consumer perceptions, emotions, learning, preferences, choices, and evaluations in relation to the sensory stimuli of products (Hultén *et al.*, 2009; Kirshna, 2012; Raz *et al.*, 2008), very few of these studies regard the sensory experience as part of aesthetic consumption. That is made up of the meaning creation process, and involves aesthetic embodiment and perception in symbolic consumption in everyday life. In proposing a sensory design methodology drawn from sensory marketing, Raz *et al.* (2008) supported our claim that research on sensory design should also pay attention to the 'unconscious symbolic strength of the proposed concepts, brand and imagined usage of the product' since 'the congruent combination of sensory properties is immediately recalled from the symbolic values of the concepts' (p. 725). In our case, this refers to the notion of aesthetics held by consumers.

Methodology

As a pilot study of a larger project on the sensory consumption experiences of young Chinese consumers in Hong Kong, this interpretive study followed a naturalistic tradition (Belk *et al.*, 1988). We employed phenomenological techniques to attain a first-person description of multi-sensory experiences relating to bodily concepts and aesthetic judgements in everyday life (Thompson *et al.*, 1989). The aim of this research was to investigate, through a case study of the consumption of earphones in Hong Kong, the sensory experiences and bodily concepts guiding the aesthetic judgement of consumers and their attitudes on specific product designs and preferences. Here, we would like to address the following research questions.

1. What are the general consumption patterns and aesthetic preferences for high performance in-ear earphones among young music enthusiasts?
2. How do consumers infer meanings when they bodily experience the earphones and how does that reveal their personal notion of the 'aesthetic' in everyday life?

3. What are the implications for product designers who seek to embody a lived aesthetic discourse in new media technologies such as earphones?

Phenomenological interviewing as suggested by Thompson *et al.* (1989) was the major data collection instrument used in this research. Thus, interpretation and analysis were handled through a phenomenological account (Thompson *et al.*, 1989; Spiggle, 1994). Phenomenological interviewing was adopted in order to obtain an in-depth understanding of personalised cultural meanings towards sensory experiences and aesthetic judgements of a specific product design in everyday consumption. In this way, we hoped to achieve a rich understanding of key perceptual concepts, consumer phenomena, and product preferences (Mick and Demoss, 1990; Thompson *et al.*, 1989; 1990).

We interviewed a group of young music enthusiasts aged between 17 and 28, who consume professional in-ear-canal earphones (see Table 1). These participants were chosen through a purposive sampling technique to seek out people who had specialist knowledge in listening to music and in the consumption of earphones (Belk *et al.*, 1988; Elliott and Fankel-Elliott, 2003). Six males and one female informant were recruited in the entire research. Four of them were teenagers aged 17, while the others were young adults aged above 20. We expected to find more male than female consumers of high-performance earphones. Although the low male-to-female ratio also highlighted a gender difference between female and male consumers, this is a preliminary study exploring consumer narratives of their bodily experiences and aesthetic judgements on product design and usage. We aim to provide a comprehensive and detailed discussion on the narratives of aesthetic experiences rather than comparing gender or age differences in the earphone consumption experience. We asked the informants to bring to the interviews any earphones that they were using or that meant something to them. Since the participants could see, touch, and feel, their ear-phones during the interviews, the purpose of this arrangement was to allow visual elicitation to uncover rich descriptions of the contexts and product designs that the consumers had experienced (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2010). The individual interviews lasted for around two to three hours each. The long interviews were semi-structured, non-directive, and designed with a life-history approach (Atkinson, 1998; McCracken, 1988). Questions were asked only to encourage

more extended, detailed, and comprehensive descriptions of the participants' experiences, thoughts, and feelings regarding their aesthetic judgement and attitudes towards the design and use of their earphones in their everyday life (Thompson *et al.*, 1990). In recalling their consumption experiences with these high-performance earphones, the young informants did not merely revel in the enjoyment of sound, but also had a unique listening experience integrated with other sensory triggers, and that ultimately led them to construct the notion of a personalised and emotional attachment, and of preferences.

All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Photographs were taken whenever possible to enhance inspiration and exploration during the interviews. Since the knowledge that they were wearing the earphones was seen as important cultural capital by the informants (Bourdieu, 1998), we made a short video of each participant to demonstrate and analyse every movement and step of the action. All of the collected data were thus used for analysis and interpretation. Analysis involved a close reading of the transcripts, including identifying central and meaningful themes as they emerged. A triangulation analysis technique was adopted to achieve more accurate results through the comprehensive reviewing and cross-checking of data collected from interviews, observations, field notes, media, and other documents (Belk *et al.*, 1988). The themes were refined until we were satisfied that they had been captured in the quotations (Spiggle, 1994). The organisation of the theme integrated with the interpretation was the notion of the aesthetics of the body through perceptions of product design.

Findings and discussions

With reference to our analysis and interpretation of the data, we identified three aesthetic themes as related to the bodily concept of earphone consumption experiences among our informants. The underlying themes of aesthetic consumption thus addressed how design objects, in their material dimension, were constituted in the imagination of consumers. The consumers' notion of aesthetics was also revealed through an in-depth investigation of the imaginary meanings in the consumers' narratives (Folkmann, 2011). Before presenting the aesthetic themes that we identified in this pilot study, a brief description of earphone consumption patterns and preferences for earphone designs will give a better understanding of the phenomena of the aesthetic consumption of earphones among the informants in their everyday lives.

Brief Descriptions of the Informants' Earphone Consumption Patterns and Preferences

All of the young informants claimed that they were music enthusiasts who placed a high priority on music in their life. Listening to music was important, and the high performance in-ear earphones ensured high-quality enjoyment of music, everywhere and anytime. The earphones became important in their daily lives when the informants spent most of their travelling time listening to music. Most of our informants were willing to spend more time and money shopping for personal audio devices for enjoying music than many other people. For example, Kula (M, 28, programmer) and Mick (M, 25, graduate student) purchased many audio devices such as portable MP3 players, earphones, and amplifiers for listening to music on the street. Our student informants, like Sam (M, 17, student) and Danny (M, 17, student), loved lingering in audio shops after school and spending time on online forums where they could search for new personal stereo accessories and high-performance earphones. They recently learned how to braid and customise personal earphone cables to achieve better sound quality (see Figure 3). Henry (M, 22, social worker), Becky (F, 17, student), and Ken (M, 17, student) claimed that they felt uneasy when travelling without music, and could not forgive themselves for not bringing their earphones with them.

Consuming a pair of professional earphones for the daily enjoyment of music may be considered something of a luxury to many non-music enthusiasts, and also to students who are being financially supported by their families. However, our informants, including the students, spent a lot of money on listening to music, using a pair of earphones that cost them from several hundred to thousands of Hong Kong dollars (see Table 1). Without any hesitation, the informants enjoyed spending such a large amount of their savings on enjoying music. Sam (M, 17, student) and Danny (M, 17, student) saved most of their pocket money for several months in order to obtain custom-made earphones that cost them more than \$4,000 Hong Kong dollars (i.e., around £320 or US\$510) (see Figure 4). A typical case was Ken (M, 17, student), who did not have lunch for two months in order to save his pocket money to buy the earphones.

The young informants were fascinated with the sound quality and the appearance of the earphones. They were also knowledgeable about the technical specifications and the design attributes, even though none of them

were professionals working in the music or entertainment industry. Although the earphones owned by the informants were of different brands or were custom-made, the designs had several common characteristics, and were very different from conventional types of earphones. Their high-performance earphones often had an in-ear canal design, with either silicone or foam sleeves, which fitted an individual's in-ear canals to reduce noise and improve bass response. Second, the over-the-ear design was also favoured by our informants since it technically reduced the problem of microphonics. More importantly, when wrapping the earphone cables up and over the ear, so that they fell behind the head, the informants found that they looked very professional and fashionable, since the look was different from that achieved by wearing headphones with a conventional design. For example, Mick (M, 25, graduate student) and Ken (M, 17, student) claimed that the over-the-ear design was the design attribute that they favoured most.

Mick (M, 25, graduate student): 'The quality of sound in the earphone is very important. Yet it is the over-the-ear design that appeals to me a lot. I look like a professional, at least a kind of person who is enthusiastic about music. The way I look like definitely tells something about my personality and identity ... that is, as a music fan. Without that design, I don't think I would be willing to pay that much money.'

The young music enthusiasts agreed that the sophisticated design of the earphones provided great comfort while listening to music. In describing their notion of 'comfort' with earphones, some of the informants claimed that 'I can't feel that my earphones are on' and 'the earphones have become part of my body'. We ascertained that this sense of comfort is constituted by three factors: 1) weightless; 2) the excellent fit on the ears; and 3) no disturbance when moving. Unlike traditional earphones, which have the earbuds hanging on the ears, the over-the-ear design scatters the weight of the cables from the position of the intertragic notch to around the helix. As Sam (M, 17, student) and Becky (F, 17, student) noted, wrapping the earphone cables up and over the ears not only helped to reduce the microphonics, but the earphones weighed less and people do not feel tired when listening to music for a prolonged period when travelling. Second, the fit was another major advantage, since the informants saw a close fit between the body and the earphones as providing a great sense of comfort and security. Apart from the high sound quality provided by the earphones, Mick (M, 25, graduate student) stressed the

importance of the tactile sensation that his earphones provided with their perfect fit on his ears. The in-ear canal design and the over-the-ear design held the earphones securely at a position close to the ears, which are very sensitive to external objects. The ergonomic design of this type of high-performance earphones with a great fit, together with the use of soft plastic materials, often caused consumers to feel that the earbuds were part of their body. The customers felt comfortable with the earphones when they fitted the contours of their ears without bulging or causing discomfort and pain. Third, the informants often associated the notion of comfort with the extent to which the over-the-ear design provided convenience in their daily lives. With the cables resting at the back rather than at the front, the informants claimed that the over-the-ear design did not hinder their physical movements. Mick (M, 25, graduate student) mentioned his experience of running with his earphones. He could hardly feel the presence of the earphones during the exercises, and felt that the music was being 'injected' into his body rather than coming from his earphones. Without the disturbance of cables during his guitar practice, Ken (M, 17, student) also imagined himself to be a professional on-stage musician when he was playing the guitar with the background music coming from his earphones. We argue that the notion of comfort is part of the holistic experience of earphone consumption. It is not limited to the experience of listening to music and the pursuit of better sound quality; rather, consumers pay great attention to the tactile sensation of the product and the active experience of the earphones affecting different parts of their body. Consumers further expressed these feelings using different aesthetic judgements and with varying emotional content (Leblebici-Başar and Altarriba, 2013).

Apart from the appearance of the earphones, most informants also paid attention to the specifications and technology. The design specifications often included great speaker technology, and either dynamic or balanced armature, which provided high sound performance in terms of the level of accuracy and noise isolation. Since listening to music is a very subjective and emotional experience, some of the informants paid a great deal of attention to technical terms such as the number of drivers in the earphones, frequency range, sensitivity, and impedance, in order to evaluate and rationalise their choice of expensive earphones (Elliott, 1998). It was not uncommon to hear the informants talk about how many drivers they had in their earphones or which combination of driver technologies was best. Informants like Danny (M, 17, student) and Sam (M, 17, student) had done lot of research and tried on many

earphones with different specifications. While believing that more drivers would give better sound quality, they admitted that they could not tell the difference between six drivers or eight drivers in the earphones, even if they had tried them before. This extends the discussions of Creusen and Schoormans (2005) and Hoegg *et al.* (2010), and indicates that it is not only the attractive design of high-performance products that can create an expectation among consumers that the products are also functionally superior; but also that the technical specifications and information about functionality, which go beyond the perceptions of the consumer, can be strong emotional cues for consumers to believe that the products have high performance and functionality.

Three Themes in the Aesthetic Consumption of Earphones

The above description of the informants' earphone consumption patterns and preferences should be enough to facilitate a further discussion of the three aesthetic themes as identified in the earphone consumption project. We turn our attention to how consumers infer meanings when they bodily experience the earphones, and how that reveals their personal notion of 'aesthetics' in everyday life. The narratives of the consumption experience in everyday discourse manifested how consumers infer personal meanings in their usage and attitude towards design attributes.

Private Meanings versus Public Discourses: Listening and Touching: Using professional earphones with an in-ear canal design turned the experience of listening to music into a truly hedonistic and emotional one (Meyer, 1994). We argue that the private meanings that a consumer infers from music are inseparable from the discussions of his/her bodily and sensual experiences with the design attributes of the product, and from the public discourses as manifested in a consumer's narratives.

The informants that we interviewed favoured the in-ear canal design since it gave great sound isolation performance by reducing most of the external noise from the environment. Since most of the informants used their earphones in daily life while travelling to school, work, or back home, putting on earphones with great noise reduction gave a sense of 'space isolation', where they felt as if they were sitting inside a 'private personal studio' and listening to their favourite songs even when they were physically located in a public area. Yet using earphones for listening to music outdoors does not only trigger emotions,

memories, and thoughts (Hultén, 2011; Krishna, 2012) and send a person to another space; for our informants it also facilitated the process of creating meanings and thus enriched the meaningfulness of their everyday life experiences. Our finding extends the work of Leblebici-Başar and Altarriba (2013), who found that consumers actively interpret the meanings embedded in design forms and associate them with the discourse of everyday life, rather than passively perceiving the emotional and abstract concepts embodied by product designers in a design. For instance, Danny (M, 17, student) and Ken (M, 17, student) enjoyed listening to music while travelling, and imagined themselves as music directors in their everyday lives. While travelling and listening to music, they usually looked around and dubbed in background music for every situation that they saw during the journey.

Ken (M, 17, student): 'I used to listen to music while travelling.... If I look at things without my earphones (no music), there is nothing special – a tree is still a tree.... However, when I watch the world with my earphones (with music), it seems like there is background music for the world ... maybe there is also a story for the tree.... You may think that I'm funny ... yet using earphones to listen to music embellishes the world with colours.... My daily life becomes colourful and artistic ... it provides you with moods and feelings ... just like a piece of candy that makes you sweet ... and it is definitely different from listening to music with a Hi-Fi at home, since that is only for the sake of music itself (personal enjoyment).'

The above discourse shows that consumers would actively engage in the construction of meaning and in the aestheticisation of their everyday life experiences (Cova and Svanfeldt, 1993). More importantly, the muting of sound from the external environment was facilitated by the noise isolation feature of the in-ear canal design, thereby bringing background music to the construction of meaningful discourses in everyday life. Hence, our informants claimed that better sound performance with noise reduction were key factors in earphone design. Apart from the space isolation that earphones provided, the informants also subjectively felt that boring moments in travelling were shorter when they were immersed in their favoured music and tempos (Bergadaá, 1990).

Becky (F, 17, student): 'I bring my earphones and listen to music whenever I go out.... I spend an hour (on travelling).... Music makes me feel comfortable and relaxed.... Time flies quickly as you listen to something you like ... and my earphones just keep me away from this boring world and time for an hour.... When the music plays, I start thinking about my emotions and things that are happening to me in my daily life ... sometimes what I feel merges with the songs ... and things remain unresolved during the journey.... Yet they've all gone by the time I arrive.'

While listening to music with their earphones, consumers infer many personal meanings that beautify their everyday lives. More importantly, it is the power of sound isolation in the design of the earphones that stimulates the imaginations of the consumers and the process of creating meaning (Martin, 2004). This further inspires some ideas for an inclusive design approach (Whitfield and Fels, 2013). That specific design forms and features can trigger the five senses and deliver images and emotional concepts has been well studied (Leblebici-Başar and Altarriba, 2013). However, previous studies have been limited to addressing the importance of designing a holistic consumption experience that encourages in consumers the process of learning and creating meaning. To be specific, the experience of wearing the earphones can further elaborate our claim of designing a holistic experience with product features from the inclusive design perspective. The in-ear-canal design with a concha cover, which enables such sound isolation to happen, sometimes made the users feel uneasy and uncomfortable, since the in-ear-canal is very sensitive to sounds and objects. Most of the informants recalled that they were not comfortable the first time that they wore those earphones. Mick (M, 25, graduate student) felt uneasy having something plugged into his ears, and he found the over-the-ear design quite troublesome at first. Here, we discuss how the earphone design attribute of touch stimulated the consumers' aesthetic imagination in everyday life.

Mick (M, 25, graduate student): 'It is not easy to wear this kind of earphone at first. The feeling is quite strange when something gets plugged inside your in-ear-canal. Yet, after a few seconds, the foam sleeve expands and they fully fit your ears. It is absolutely amazing when you feel something growing in your body and fitting it. Lastly, you

can't really hear much noise from the external environment even when someone talks next to you.'

Mick's description was a common one among the informants. That the in-ear-canal design provides a fitted feeling and isolates users from the external space is something important to earphone consumers. One of the informants, Becky (F, 17, student), described a pair of earphones as something that should be 'snug with your body', that brings 'comfort, protection, and weightlessness' to the users. This implies that the bodily, sensual feeling of the earphones touching the ears is part of the consumers' imagination and aestheticisation of everyday life, in the process of creating meanings while listening to music.

However, what constitutes the meaning creation process while listening to music with these high-performance earphones is how the design features are embodied with a set of knowledge and practices that help to ritualise the whole experience of consumption and usage (Cook, 1985). Although the in-ear-canal design with a concha cover and foam sleeve provides a fitted feeling that triggers a tactile sensation, the informants initially felt uneasy and uncomfortable wearing the earphones. However, the consumers were able to overcome and get used to the design of the product by learning how to wear and experience the benefits of sound isolation while listening to music. The design of ritualising consumption experiences engages the consumers into taking an active role in learning and acquiring knowledge about the design forms and attributes and, more importantly, into feeling, practicing, and embodying those design concepts and meanings in their imagination and in the aestheticisation of everyday life. The high-performance earphones promotes a holistic experience, since wearing the earphones in a proper manner involves some components of consumer learning, including the steps of putting the earphones on (i.e., practices), understanding the rationale and functions behind the design attributes (i.e., knowledge), and feeling and getting used to the earphones once they fit perfectly with the body (i.e., sensual feeling). Adapting to the new design form of earphones, consumers actively acquire knowledge about the product that they are using, leading to a new definition of sound quality and a new preference based on a knowledge of the products. They also develop specific tastes in the lifestyle of enjoying music (Bourdieu, 1998). Sharing the same interest in and knowledge of consuming earphones and enjoying music, these music enthusiasts form a specific

consumer tribe that regards knowledge and specific preferences in sound quality and high-performance earphones as cultural capital that they can adopt to differentiate themselves from other non-music enthusiasts (Cova, 1997). Thus, the design of these high-performance earphones sheds light on the inclusive design perspective, since specific design concepts and forms not only trigger a sensual response and the creation of meanings that result in a bodily experience while using the product, but product designers can also ritualise the usage and consumption experience by embodying a series of practices, comprehensive product knowledge, and specifications, and even some descriptive vocabularies for consumers to learn and understand the design elements and features, and adopt these knowledge and taste preferences as symbolic cues to express to others their own aesthetic values and lifestyle. Hence, the design engages the consumers into actively taking part in experiencing the design with their imagination immersed in the creation of aestheticisation in everyday life. We argue that the experience of learning and understanding the product after the purchase is as important as the acquisition of knowledge prior to the making of any consumption decision. The design of ritualising the consumption experience is not limited to tactile sensations, but also applies to other sensual stimuli. Here, we shift to another sensual experience – vision. We examine how it relates to our discussions of aesthetic consumption in everyday life.

Part of the Body versus External to the Body: The Aspect of Vision:

The appearance of these professional earphones, often with an over-the-ear design with a concha cover, is seen as an important attribute by our informants. The over-the-ear design (see Figure 2) was originally aimed at providing convenience and comfort for on-stage musicians and sound engineers. Since the earphones' cables fell behind the user's head, they would not disturb a person working at the front of a stage, such as someone playing musical instruments on a stage, or controlling the sound panels during a stage performance, mixing and recording songs. The design also offers better sound quality, as it reduces the thudding noises that occur when the earphone cables are tapped or rubbed.

During the interviews, most of our informants understood the above advantages of the over-the-ear design. Although none of them were professionals in the music and entertainment industries, all of them had learned to play some musical instruments in their daily life, while some of them

engaged in regular music band practices with their friends. For instance, Sam (M, 17, student) and Danny (M, 17, student) enjoyed playing rock music. They customised their earphones by ordering a mould tailored to the shape and size of their in-ear-canal and concha (see Figure 4). Apart from the high performance in sound quality (with six micro-drivers) and the superior fit of the earphones, which gave noise isolation when listening to music in the street, the two immersed themselves in imagining that they were true music professionals, as they possessed these professional earphones.

Sam (M, 17, student): 'Yes, it is important to have the over-the-ear design and a customised body of earphones to cover your concha and in-ear-canal.... It gives you good sound quality and isolation from the noisy public environment.... More than that, I feel like I am a professional in the music industry ... an identity that I admire ... or even just someone who is fascinated with music and audio devices!'

Danny (M, 17, student): 'I feel like someone is always eyeing my customised earphones when I'm listening to music while travelling.... I love my customised earphones very much; as they were uniquely designed and tailored for me ... they only fit me! I feel like a professional musician ... someone great and cool! Using these professional earphones with great sound definition motivates me to work harder in my music practices.'

The two young informants stressed that their customised earphones provided a superior fit and snugness with the body. Danny (M, 17, student) stressed that they were designed with reference to physical ergonomic data. They fit his ears and became part of his body. Sam (M, 17, student) agreed with Danny (M, 17, student) and stated that this was what was perfect about customised professional earphones.

Sam (M, 17, student): 'They become part of your body and you don't realise that you are wearing a pair of earphones while listening to music.... They are weightless and comfortable!'

However, when referring to 'part of your body', the informants did not mean that they preferred a design that is totally invisible and blends into body parts such as skin and organs (Coupland, 2005). They were consciously aware of a

distinction between their real body and objects of design. Danny (M, 17, student) felt 'disgusted' when the researcher mentioned whether it might be possible in the future for earphones to be designed to have the same colour as skin or to be tiny enough to put into the in-ear-canal, so that they might not be noticed by others.

Danny (M, 17, student): 'That's something disgusting! And it is not something artistic or a good product design. What I meant by body part is not equivalent to being a real part of the body.... Take a look at my customised earphones ... the body of the earphones covers my concha but with different colours (blue and red).... I wouldn't like skin colour, as people should recognise that I am wearing earphones! I prefer earphones to be designed with a translucent body and colour shaping, so that I can look into the details of my high-performance earphones, even if I may not understand what they are about.'

It is known that consumers often perceived visual design attributes as communicating something relating to the superior functionalities of the products, especially with regard to high-level technological devices (Creusen and Schoormans, 2005; Hoegg *et al.*, 2010). Our findings support the above claims and suggest that product design should balance the perceptions that consumers have of their bodies and the body's relationship with the product. This further extends our current discussion of anthropomorphic design, on whether consumers favour product design features that mimic human shapes and trigger their innate, biological preferences (Miesler, 2012). We point out that consumers assess a product's value not only by considering the consumption context, their consumption goals, and future interaction with the products, but also through their unconscious perception of the dialogical relationship between an artificial, technological device and their natural body. Although the informants often regarded the earphones as part of their body, they were reluctant to accept design features that fully integrate into their bodies. They simply viewed their earphones as a material object external to their body, and preferred design features that can be aesthetically recognised by a clear boundary between the natural body and the artificial object. Product designers should be concerned about the extent to which design features can communicate functional and aesthetic goals in accordance with consumer perceptions. They should also keep in mind the consumers' desire to maintain a distinction between body and object through symbolic cues such as different

colours and partly visible features. In our case, apart from earphones with a translucent body, detailed visual material such as product specifications often provide symbolic cues for consumers to support functionality, even if they might not fully comprehend these specifications.

Drug Addiction Versus Condiments in Everyday Life: Tasting and Practicing:

With reference to the informants' narratives of their experiences of listening to music with their earphones in everyday life, the third aesthetic theme of bodily consumption experiences is related to a seemingly irrelevant description of earphone consumption – taste. During the interview, it was not uncommon to hear that music worked like a condiment, adding 'flavours' and 'tastes' in the informants' everyday life. Mick (M, 25, graduate student) claimed that watching the world while listening to music made everything he saw emotive and tasty – 'everyday life has its moment of sweetness (happiness), sourness (helplessness), bitterness (sadness), and spiciness (anger) as triggered by the background of music coming from the earphones.' As discussed above, listening to music while travelling triggered emotions in the informants and affected the way that they looked at the phenomenological world in which they live (Thompson *et al.*, 1990). This does not only constitute the meaningfulness of everyday life experiences, but also keeps consumers constructing and sustaining their fantasies and imaginations (Martin, 2004).

Sharing the same design and appearance as earphones used by professionals in the fields of music and entertainment, the earphones allow consumers to imagine themselves as idols and music professionals working in the music industry (Martin, 2004). Even though none of them had the experience of using their earphones to perform on stage, informants like Sam (M, 17, student), Danny (M, 17, student), and Ken (M, 17, student) hoped that they would one day be able to use their earphones and play their own rock concerts.

Ken (M, 17, student): 'When listening to rock music in my earphones, I have imagined myself playing a paragraph of a guitar solo on stage. Having a pair of professional earphones like this motivates me to practice hard to act like a music professional.'

Even though no informant belonged to the circle of music professionals and sound engineers, the informants imagined themselves as professionals who shared and demanded the same quality of sound and lifestyle in everyday life

– as seen from their views on wearing earphones, lifestyle, music listening habits, and pursuit of perfect sound quality. These imaginings of the lifestyle of a musician were shared and adopted as a form of knowledge and a sense of belonging, in the form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1998), and practiced within a new consumer tribe – a group of earphone enthusiasts (Cova, 1997). For example, wearing the earphones became something essential, as it ritualised every step into meaningful actions that one should know. These several steps signified that one belonged to the community of consumers of professional earphones. Sam (M, 17, student) and Becky (F, 17 student) often kept an eye on the earphones worn by other people on the street and searched for those who were also using the same kind of professional earphones in daily life. Becky (F, 17, student) once met someone on a train who was also using similar professional earphones. They spent the whole journey discussing topics related to the earphones, even though they did not know each other. This shows that the earphone design not only facilitates the personal enjoyment of music, but has also become a symbol of identification, benchmarking ‘members’ of the earphone consumer tribe in everyday life (Cova, 1997).

Among our informants, it was not uncommon for earphone enthusiasts to have influenced each other in the listening of music and the pursuit of higher sound quality. They used the term ‘poison’ to describe how they were being persuaded by others to consume professional earphones.

Danny (M, 17, student): ‘Consuming professional earphones seems to be like taking drugs and soon you will be addicted to it. My experience is that one of my best friends asked me to try on his earphones, and I realised how good it sounded when I compared it with what I had at the time. It was totally different and there was no going back! You keep trying and consuming earphones with better sound quality at the expense of a higher price. To me, with ordinary or conventional types of earphones you are “tolerating” listening to music. The only way to know the true enjoyment of music is to buy a pair of professional earphones like mine.’

Sam (M, 17, student) agreed with the above description given by Danny (M, 17, student). He stated that listening to music with high-definition earphones made him feel like the sound was being ‘injected’ into his brain, and it felt exciting

and relaxing. He found himself becoming obsessed with sound quality, and kept spending a lot of money and time on the consumption of earphones and other audio devices. He described himself as being 'addicted' to professional earphone designs and their attributes in sound performance.

The use of taste and flavour in consumer narratives of their experiences of listening to music with earphones thus suggests that consumers see the world and the material objects that they possess as aspects of the aestheticisation of everyday life. The design of earphones constitutes everyday meaningfulness not only in terms of personal immersion in the enjoyment of music, but also in terms of defining and creating a sense of identity for earphone consumers through symbolic consumption practices and everyday usage. Hence, it is important for designers and product developers to consider how design attributes can follow these subjective narratives of consumer experiences and facilitate social grouping in the form of consumption communities (Cova, 1997).

Conclusion

Where two decades ago Cova and Svanfeldt (1993) argued that postmodern consumers now enjoy the aestheticisation of everyday life and individuals are looking for aesthetic appeal, meanings, and values from products rather than simply functional and technical performance, the discipline of design is revitalising human-centred design with much consideration being given to leveraging the development of the functional and aesthetic attributes of products and services. However, still unanswered is the extent to which the meanings and concepts behind aesthetic attributes can be embodied in product form and associated with the everyday lived experiences of consumers (Cova and Svanfeldt, 1993).

Following an aesthetic perspective in this study, we provided a case study of the consumption of professional earphones to illustrate the link between consumer perceptions of product design and the bodily experiences of these consumers as manifested in their everyday life discourses (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2010). Our findings and discussions revealed the importance of product design features not only in stimulating sensual and emotional responses in consumers, but also in creating images and meanings that constitute the aestheticisation of everyday life discourses. We identified three aesthetic themes to describe how consumers infer both personal and social meanings

while listening to music with their professional earphones. We also revealed that consumers would actively engage in the construction of meaningfulness and aestheticisation in everyday life with their personal notion of 'aesthetics' in product design, preferences, and usage (Cova and Svanfeldt, 1993).

Concerning the implications for the discipline of human-centred product design, our study contributes by extending the current discussion on an inclusive design approach and anthropomorphic design. From an inclusive design perspective, the experience of product consumption and usage is seen as a holistic whole. Although product designers traditionally stimulate responses in consumers using unique emotional and functional attributes, we argue that an aesthetic perspective of an inclusive design approach should be about the embodiment of design concepts and meanings that encourage subjective and creative experiences in consumers, and hence stimulate their imagination when they are immersing themselves in the 'world' of listening to music. In a practical sense, we introduced the idea of the design of ritualising the consumption experience, which involves an in-depth understanding of the consumers' narrative of the everyday experience of using and consuming a product. More importantly, product designers are encouraged to enrich the experiences of consumers by designing specific product features and attributes, together with articulating concepts, vocabulary, and product knowledge. We argue that the aim behind the suggested measures of the design process is to create a great deal of comprehensive knowledge behind the design in the form of a story to engage consumers into learning, understanding, and associating their consumption experience with both private and social meanings that constitute the aestheticisation of everyday life. With regard to the anthropomorphic design implications, product designers should be sensitive to how consumers interpret the dialogical relationship between body and objects, and to their bodily perceptions of those high technological devices in their life. From our case study of earphone consumption, the aesthetic appeal of a product design has become a societal innovation that often appears as a non-technological source of innovation. This happened not by the absence of technology, but by reducing the role of technology. The identity of a product is becoming the predominant function in a society saturated with industrial goods (Cova and Svanfeldt, 1993).

Aesthetics is omnipresent in all aspects of our life, and an aesthetic perspective of design concerns the living emotions, feelings, and shared

passions among consumers and designers. As for product design, technological innovation is surpassed by the emergence of a societal innovation in which new types of consumer tribes demand both hedonic and shared aesthetic meanings, values, and appeal through interpreting the unique features and attributes of a product design. Comparing traditional earphones with high-performance earphones, it is not the technical and functional specifications that differentiate the two, but the aesthetic value behind the design that is the subject of consumer fantasy (Martin, 2004). Listening to music with their earphones, consumers infer many personal meanings that beautify their everyday lives. Thus, we suggest that product designers and innovators also pay attention to these subjective narratives of consumer experiences concerning perceptions of design attributes, and the social and personal meanings that consumers infer when using products in everyday life. Since this study was limited to understanding the aesthetic consumption of technological devices such as earphones, we suggest that research be conducted in the future to understand other types of product categories from an aesthetic perspective.

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Figure 1: Professional earphones possessed by the informants



Figure 2: A demonstration of the proper way to wear the earphones

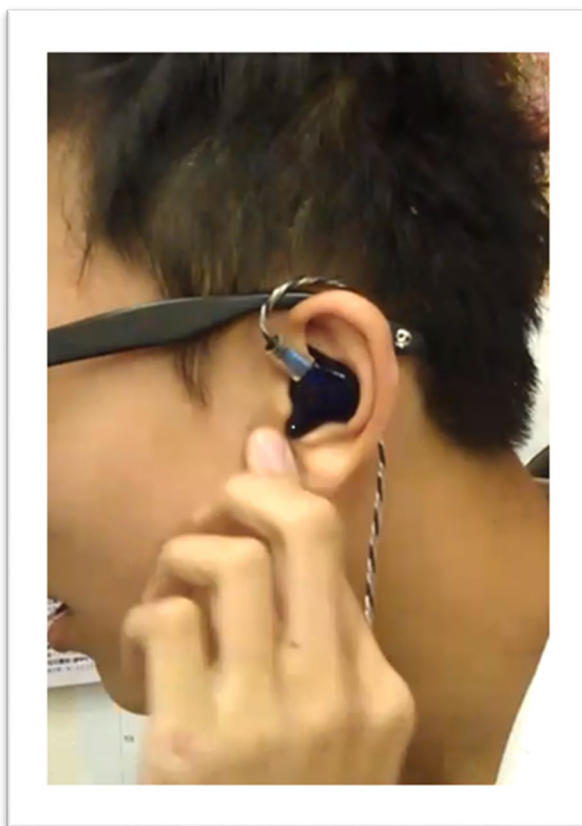


Figure 3: D.I.Y. Earphone Cables



Figure 4: Sam's (M, 17, student) Custom-Made Earphones

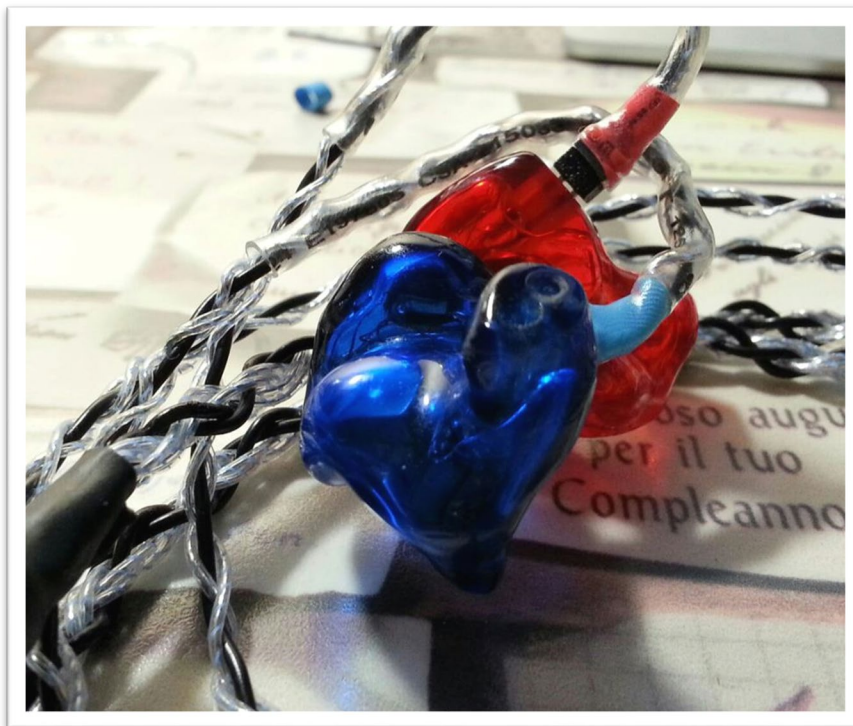


Table 1 Personal Information of the Participants

Name	Sex	Age	Occupation	Some Earphones Previously Owned (UK£)	Current Earphones Used (UK£)
Danny	M	17	Student	Westone UM1 (£54) Ultimate Ear 5 Pro (£120) Ultimate Ear 10 TF Pro (£150)	Custom-made (£356)
Ken	M	17	Student	Ultimate Ear 100 (£16) Ultimate Ear 200 (£16) Ultimate Ear 400 (£48)	Shure SE215 (£68)
Sam	M	17	Student	AKG- K312 (£24) Ultimate Ear 10 TF Pro (£190)	Custom-made (£435)
Betty	F	17	Student	Sony earphone (£13) Apple In-ear (£48) Shure SE215 (Lost) (£68)	Shure SE215 (£68)
Mick	M	25	Student	Sony Earphone (£20)	Shure SE215 (£68)
Kula	M	28	Programmer	Shure SE215 (£68) Shure SE315 (£117)	Westone UM3X (£246)
Henry	M	22	Social Worker	Westone 1 (£68)	Logitech UE900 (£238)

Table 2 Interview Guide (English Version)

- 1 Self-introduction and give reasons for the personal description
- 2 Follow up on demographic background (if not mentioned in the self-introduction)
 - 2.1 Age
 - 2.2 Educational background and field of study
 - 2.3 Present occupation
 - 2.4 Place where you come from / Place where you live now
 - 2.5 Number of people living at home
 - 2.6 Income level (i.e., salary and pocket money)
- 3 Life history
 - 3.1 Divide your life history into different sections and give reasons
 - 3.2 Describe the important events in each sub-division
 - 3.3 Describe important persons in your life
- 4 Social relationships: Family background, peers, and friends
 - 4.1 Describe your relationship with each family member
 - 4.2 Things / values of family members that have significantly affected your consumption practices
 - 4.3 Describe your relationships with your closest/best friends
- 5 Daily life
 - 5.1 Describe your daily schedule/ routine
 - 5.2 Hobbies and interests
 - 5.3 Describe the kinds of entertainment that you favour
 - 5.4 Tell us about the idols that you admire and your reasons for doing so

- 6 Consumption habits and purchase decisions
 - 6.1 Places where you usually shop
 - 6.2 People you usually shop with (or shop alone)
 - 6.3 Frequency with which you shop
 - 6.4 Amount of money that you spend each time
 - 6.5 Channels through which you receive marketing information
 - 6.6 Describe your consumption process and selection criteria
 - 6.7 Describe the people who may influence your consumption decisions
- 7 Experience of consuming earphones
 - 7.1 Define what earphones mean to you
 - 7.2 Name and number of earphones that you have bought and own
 - 7.3 Name your favourite earphones and the reasons why you favour them
 - 7.4 Recall the experiences of shopping for any of your earphones
 - 7.5 Describe any experiences you have had with your earphones
 - 7.6 Describe the importance of having a set of earphones in your life
- 8 Product knowledge and aesthetic requirements
 - 8.1 Define a perfect set of earphones and your reasons for giving this definition
 - 8.2 Describe any product knowledge, specifications, and aesthetic requirements that you may have of earphones
 - 8.3 Describe your emotions and feelings when listening to music with your earphones
 - 8.4 Describe the feeling you have when wearing a set of in-ear earphones

**Note that these questions were asked in Cantonese, and also that the interviews were semi-structured so that these questions were a guide for the interviewers, but that many of the conversations went beyond the scope of these questions.