Aesthetic Reflections on Organizational Identity: A Study of Universities in Istanbul

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As the authors, we did not receive any specific grant for this research from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. Thus, following all the ethical and professional standards, we declare that we have no conflict of interest with regard to the research presented in the article. Also, we are grateful to the participants, the anonymous reviewers, and the editors of the journal for their valuable contributions.

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Abstract

Aesthetics can be the core of organizational identity as an inviting style can motivate individuals to work together and satisfy their needs for belonging and identity. Universities are special organizations as they bring thousands of individuals together across a broad time span, provide space for individuals to blend their ideas, and spread graduates to the world with further individual influences. Conceptualizing universities as organizational actors on the higher education stage, we interview university managers to explore the relationship between aesthetics and representations of organizational identity. We ask managers to point out the symbols and metaphors that are aesthetic demonstrations of their organizational identity, and to elaborate the ways they communicate their organizational vision. We also ask them to characterize their university using aesthetic categories from the literature. While most managers believe “graceful” is the category that best captures the essence of their organizations, there is diversity with respect to subject, genre, and style in how they choose to express this quality. The managers also report that they mainly employ conventional channels such as social or mass media to communicate their organizational identity. Overall, although managers’ answers indicate isomorphism in some organizational practices, we discover a refreshing amount of heterogeneity with respect to organizational aesthetics in universities.

Keywords: Empirical aesthetics, organizational aesthetic performance, organizational aesthetic identity
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Organizations serve many purposes through innumerable functions, although frequently this is achieved without unanimity among individual members over the relative importance of specific purposes or functions. As other artefacts do, organizations have corporeality enabling their functions. The tangible components of organizations include buildings, machinery, symbols, and human members. However, while most other artefacts reflect the personalities, preferences, and circumstances of their specific producers and users, organizations are built and changed collectively by communities of individuals who arrive at and leave the organization at different times. The interaction of these individuals gives rise to the identity of the organization—the central and enduring attributes that distinguish it from other organizations (Whetten, 2006) which is maintained as individuals come and go.

Notwithstanding such lasting organizational outcomes, however, members frequently use the organization in line with their short-term fragmentary individual interests, while they make contributions according to their specified organizational roles. Additionally, as a natural result of their inhabitance, individual members bring to the organizational space their particular ideas, emotions, values, and intentions, through their actions, the artefacts they bear, or simply their bodily presence. Such assemblages of personal tangibles and intangibles naturally occur in all organizations, insofar as members have some individual liberties. A university, though, is a sphere explicitly dedicated to the creation, accumulation, and sharing of knowledge. Considering the number and diversity of members, variety of academic or extracurricular experimentation and communication methods, and availability of facilities and infrastructure, one can appreciate that universities have almost infinite potential regarding the knowledge that can be created and shared.

Universities gain and sustain legitimacy and reputation in society mainly by producing and publishing scientific knowledge—objective, universal, logical. Progress of knowledge, however, involves two complementary areas: aesthetic-intuitive (subjective) and logico-scientific (objective) knowledge (Gagliardi, 2006). Aesthetic knowledge is created from our sensory experiences, including the thoughts, feelings, and reasoning around those experiences (Taylor and Hansen, 2006). Being legal entities and thus organizational actors, one can say that universities also have self-knowledge, a unique self-view which “allows actors to take themselves seriously as creators of meaning and as reflexive beings capable of self-assessment” (King et al., 2010). Well-defined self-knowledge implies a strong sense of identity. Self-knowledge and sense of identity can be expected to evolve. It is not evident, though, whether universities’ abundant capacity for creating and sharing any knowledge translates directly to a high level of self-knowledge. An example to the endless possibilities of improved self-understanding for universities can be the change of perspective from “aesthetics of organization” to “aesthetics as organization” discussed by Witz et al. (2003). The authors maintain that aesthetics of organization, in line with a rationalist paradigm, is used to design artefacts such as products, symbols, or architectural elements as instruments serving towards prescribed organizational goals. On the other hand, aesthetics as organization is about understanding organizations through the lens of aesthetics and appreciating that “organization is aesthetic” (Witz et al., 2003).

This study provides a base for comprehensive empirical studies addressing the aesthetics of organizational identity of universities. With this research, we try to acquire aesthetic knowledge related to the organizational identities of universities in Istanbul, by interviewing their top managers. First, we question how universities vary with respect to manifestations of
organizational aesthetics. Second, we try to understand the roles of aesthetics and art-based practices in the communication of organizational identity of universities.

Top managers play crucial roles in organizations: They make decisions on behalf of others; they represent their organizations; that collect and distribute information concerning their organizations (Mintzberg, 1971). When we speak of organizational actors and their actions on a day-to-day basis, it usually refers to managers’ decisions, actions, and communications albeit within a frame of organizational identity. Even though they do not always emphasize their personal aesthetic at work, managers, like all organizational members, are individual wholes who have rational analytical abilities, ethical and aesthetic values, as well as emotions and subconscious. In their various organizational roles, they employ mental (cognitive and sensory) maps (Gagliardi, 2006). They act out their organizational roles, similar to masked actors on stage whose real face we cannot see. However, they are still there, under the mask as themselves, to make or break the role – just as the powerful character of Darth Vader cannot be explained only by the costume or the script. Actors add substance and meaning to their role by “being themselves” as unique individuals, and that entails coming home to oneself (Adler, 2010).

The aesthetic knowledge we can obtain from managers contains parts from their individual identities, the organizational identities, and their positional roles. By nature of their position, they are required to perceive and act upon their organizations with a holistic viewpoint and are accustomed to doing so. We look at organizational aesthetics through the cognitive and sensory maps of these individuals. It may be analogous to looking into a room from a keyhole. What we can see is certainly limited and partial, but it can be meaningful, even significant.

The field of higher education is a big stage that includes innumerable actors, both individual (such as students or professors acting independently) and organizational (such as universities, government agencies, or student clubs, managed by individuals making decisions on behalf of others). These actors compete and collaborate every day on that stage. They experience and make sense of the world, craft strategies, tell stories, organize and break up, transform themselves and others. These parties can benefit from aesthetics research, in addition to other sources of knowledge, to re-elaborate their thoughts and visions (Strati, 1992) informing their decisions. We hope that this piece of work may also serve as a mirror, reflecting a humble feedback.

**Literature review**

Researchers mainly study the aesthetics of universities in the context of cultural identity. Steiner et al. (2013) develop an analytical identity-image-reputation (IRR) model that will enable university executives to analyze internal and external factors influencing their organizational identity and reputation. In the model, they view image as the lens through which a university communicates its strategic activities, and explain how it translates both organizational and symbolic identities into reputation, and vice versa. Complementing past studies that analyze text-based expressions of university identity, Drori et al. (2016) examine university logos reflecting visual and symbolic forms of organizational identity. In their study, employing an impressionist approach, they decipher the logos of 826 universities from 22 countries and identify four different identity narratives, namely guild-like classic narrative, professional scientific narrative, localized narrative and organizational narrative. Concentrating on two English business schools, Naidoo et al. (2014) investigate how the construction, communication and control of organizational identity through branding activities are perceived by their key internal stakeholders, in terms of allocation of institutional power and resources. To intervene with the aesthetics of organizational life in a business school, Biehl and Reynolds (2018) employ an art-based, guerrilla approach. They covertly place hand
knitted rags to the handles of office and restroom doors, and conduct in-depth interviews with people in the organization to understand how and why they react to such an art-based, guerilla activism. They find that stimulation of visual and tactile perceptions not only evokes feelings of caring and empathy, but also reminds people of the bodily connection in organizations by drawing attention to issues such as blended fluids and hygiene. Considering faculty offices as the complex expression of personality and organizational identity, Ruth (2015) conducts an ethnographic study to explore the way academics arrange, decorate and furnish their offices. Specifically, by observing faculty offices and interviewing with their inhabitants, he investigates the relationships among space/place, stuff/things and identity. He also likens organizational life to a “spaghetti junction of power lines” and discusses the issues of visibility, accessibility, privacy, identity formation and protection at work.

In addition to the aesthetics of cultural identity, some researchers underline the aesthetics of work environment or campus by referring to the architectural elements of academic institutions. Calvo-Sotelo (2001) contemplates on the stylistic evolution of university buildings and architecture depending on religious, political and cultural changes in history. Interpreting this evolution as a social, organic process, he compares the architecture of pre-historical, medieval, modern and contemporary universities from the perspectives of city-university relationship (integrated vs. segregated), inner spatial character (inward looking vs. outward looking) and architectural configuration (homogeneous vs. heterogeneous). He concludes that architecture plays an important role in relation to the function, culture, internal and external image, and personality of universities as it is capable of transmitting subliminal messages that are difficult to convey in words. By focusing on the interdisciplinary area study centers of five U.S. universities, Friedman and Worden (2016) investigate the relationship between the physical design and spirit of a place. Specifically, they interview with the community of five different Middle East Study Centers to understand how a place having interdisciplinary identity is produced from space by interrelated human agents. They recognize that spatial qualities such as location and material form are highly crucial in the diffusion of ideas across disciplines, building a relevant community and gaining legitimacy for interdisciplinary studies.

Some of the researchers who also study the architectural elements of academic institutions concentrate on a single case. Liu and Grey (2018) examine the ways in which spatial features and buildings of an organization relate to its identity and history by putting a historical university building – the Founder’s Building of London’s Royal Holloway College – at the center. They conduct a comprehensive archival study of the college considering its unique, specific and local character since its foundation in 1886. As the college admitted only female students till 1965, they give attention particularly to gender related features and social construction of the building over time. Hancock and Spicer (2011) study the design and aesthetic management of the Saltire Centre Library at Glasgow Caledonian University as a contemporary university building. Through various examples, they illustrate that how the library’s architectural and aesthetic elements serve the cultivation of a new generation of workers that will satisfy the labor requirements of post-industrial economy. They remark that the library plays a significant role in shaping the identity of students as new model workers who are adept at working in dynamic environments and collaborative groups demanded by the new economy. Inspired by urban art projects based on walking tours, Richardson (2014) proposes walking in and observing campus space as a research method to examine the architectural development and aesthetics of universities. She walks in the University of Leeds campus, and analyzes the landscape, buildings, artworks, performances and events enacted in the campus in a critical way, as a case study. Based on her observations, she develops a socio-cultural cartography of the university, providing polyvocality instead of a single dominant voice which is typically presented in the promotional activities of the university.
Finally, aside from the above efforts, a number of researchers study the role of aesthetics in teaching and research activities. Most of them call aesthetics as a pedagogical tool or mediator accompanied with various art forms such as drawing (Gedžūne and Gedžūne, 2015), polyphonic music (Sutherland and Ladkin, 2013), poetry (Jones, 2010), pictorial and verbal humour (Powell and Andresen, 1985), collage (Loads, 2010), and sculpting and installation (Meltzer, 2016). In their studies, Springborg (2012), Lupton (2013), and Chemi and Du (2018) remark that integration of aesthetics and art-based practices into educational activities increases both effectiveness and productivity. Complementing the joint role of aesthetics and art-based practices as a mediator for teaching, some researchers exercise them as a stimulus and research methodology for academic investigation. For instance, Trowler (2013) explores the potentials and challenges of adapting research practices in art and design to the other fields of higher education. Similarly, Wright et al. (2010) examine the research performed as a preparatory work before artistic production and question how artists-academics translate their research into a creative work of art that is respected and rewarded by others. Providing more practical or case-based examples, Burge et al. (2016) and Manathunga et al. (2017) also indicate that while arts-informed research methodologies are beneficial in their research for a deeper understanding of human experience, they also involve some risks such as the lack of interest in art or low artistic self-confidence in the individuals participated and confidentiality of aesthetic data.

With this research, we aim to contribute to the study of aesthetics of universities with respect to organizational identity. As mentioned previously, there are studies in the literature analyzing text-based (e.g., vision or mission statements) or visual (e.g., university logos) expressions of university identity. This study extends previous work by questioning how university managers perceive and express the identity of their organization in a multisensory manner. Specifically, we ask university managers how they aesthetically conceptualize their institutions by creating analogies with certain artefacts and famous artworks involving tactile, kinetic, spatial, embodied and aural dimensions, in addition to textual and visual. We believe that such an approach provides a base for comprehensive empirical studies addressing the aesthetics of organizational identity of universities.

Method and data

We conducted a series of face-to-face interviews with the senior managers of universities in Istanbul region during summer 2017. Interviewing is a prevalent method of qualitative research and can be effective when interviewees can recall and elaborate on sensory experiences and their meanings (Śliwa, 2018). Thus, it is particularly suited to the scope of our study which involves collecting data on organizational aesthetics from high-level managers. The interview employs various types of questions. Some are multiple-choice such as categorization and rating questions. Others are open-ended, including arts-informed metaphors and independent reflection. Arts-informed questions have the advantage to stimulate creative thinking and elicit non-traditional responses (King, 2013; Manathunga et al., 2017).

We randomly selected 28 of the 55 universities in the region (roughly half of total) and contacted their presidential offices via phone or e-mail to ask for an appointment. In advance of the interview, we e-mailed our questions and the approval letter from one of the author's university’s ethics committee, confirming the confidentiality of names and anonymity of answers. Our interview request was accepted by 11 universities, resulting in 39% response rate. Four of these universities were public whereas seven of them were private institutions, and the mean age of participating institutions was 47 years. Also, eight of these institutions had a school of fine arts and/or design. In some cases, the president assigned another senior manager of her/his university to take the interview. Hence, we interviewed five presidents,
five vice-presidents and one dean. While two of the participants were female, nine of them were male, and the mean age of all participants was 55 years. The participants also had a diverse academic background including social sciences (five participants), natural sciences (two participants), engineering (two participants), medicine (one participant), and arts and architecture (one participant).

The average meeting took 47 minutes, while the interview duration was 36 minutes on the average. As the two researchers, we first voice-recorded the interviews and transcribed them. Then, we e-mailed the transcription texts to the interviewees for their confirmation and approval. In two of the cases, the interviewees made minor changes in their statements, such as using a more accurate word to express an idea, instead of a spontaneous informal expression. In all other cases, they didn’t make any alteration and expressed their full agreement with the transcriptions.

We developed the interview questions based on the existing literature, to stimulate contemplation and reflection on the topic, and to answer our research questions. The first group of questions – from (a) to (d) – seek to answer whether and how universities differ with respect to aesthetics.

Question (a) seeks to identify how managers see their organizations with respect to aesthetic categories. There are various categorizations in the literature. We adopt those from Strati (1992) as they are well-established and compact.

   a) i. How much do the following aesthetic categories (graceful, rhythmic, picturesque, sublime, sacred, comic, tragic and ugly) describe your organization? (Rate from 1-Lowest to 4-Highest.)

   ii. Select the aesthetic category that describes your organization best.

Question (b) considers organizations as artefacts and aims to reveal their multi-sensory/experiential aspects by using metaphors. The participant is asked to name any artefact which he/she believes will represent his/her organization best.

   b) Could you give us an artefact that you think could represent your organization?

Question (c) is about exploring the aesthetic style of organizations. The participant is asked to name any specific work of art, which he/she believes will represent his/her organization best.

   c) If your organization were a famous artwork, which one would it be?

Question (d) also tries to describe aesthetic style by focusing on the time orientation of the organization. The participant is asked to pick one among four style orientations suggested by Schmitt et al. (1995).

   d) Which time period’s aesthetic style (classical/traditional, modern/contemporary, futuristic/avant-garde and classic/timeless) do you think that your organization reflects?

The second group of questions – (e) and (f) – investigate the role of aesthetics and art-based practices in communication and development of organizational identity.
Question (e) seeks to elicit introspection and self-evaluation about organizational communication, placing vision and mission at the center.

   e) How do you communicate your organizational vision and mission to others?

Question (f) explores the inter-relations among organizational aesthetics, art-based practices, and organizational identity. The participant is asked to reflect on whether and how such inter-relations arise.

   f) How do aesthetics and art-based practices affect your organizational identity?

**Findings**

   a) i. How much do the following aesthetic categories (graceful, rhythmic, picturesque, sublime, sacred, comic, tragic and ugly) describe your organization? (Rate from 1-Lowest to 4-Highest.)

   ii. Select the aesthetic category that describes your organization best.

Table 1 summarizes the participants’ answers. With an average rating of 3.27, most executives believe graceful is the aesthetic category that best describes their organization. Rhythmic, picturesque, and sublime form a second tier.

On the other hand, sacred and comic are not used much to identify the universities. Tragic and ugly were removed from the list, as the majority of respondents did not want to provide a rating for these categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aesthetic Category</th>
<th>Average rating (1 = Lowest, 4 = Highest)</th>
<th>Number of times mentioned as the best descriptor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graceful</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhythmic</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picturesque</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sublime</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacred</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comic</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1. Aesthetic categories describing universities**

   b) Could you give us an artefact that you think could represent your organization?

The participants mentioned a diverse set of artefacts, all of which are not necessarily employed as typical organizational memorabilia. These range from abstract things such as music to animals such as a bee. The answers are sorted into several groups as provided in Table 2. The groups do not represent a pre-established classification, but they are formed based on subjective interpretation of the researchers according to attributes and functions of the artefacts mentioned, using the framework offered by Crilly (2010).
Artefact group | Specific artefact mentioned | Number of times mentioned
--- | --- | ---
Social artefacts | University's graduates or students | 3
Animals | Bee | 1
 | Technological butterfly | 1
Music | Music piece composed for this university | 1
 | Baroque music | 1
Architectural elements | Specially decorated cafe area in this university | 1
 | This university's main building | 1
 | A strong building by architect Calatrava | 1
Instruments | Microscope or similar research instrument | 1

Table 2. Artefacts representing universities

c) If your organization were a famous artwork, which one would it be?

Similar to the previous question, the participants mentioned a variety of artworks which can be grouped under different art disciplines as presented in Table 3 and Figures 1-4. Although we group them based on art disciplines, it should be noted that they can also be interpreted based on historical period, philosophical movement, or art movement.

Discipline | Specific artwork mentioned
--- | ---
Paintings | Mona Lisa (Da Vinci, 1503)
 | Girl with a Pearl Earring (Vermeer, 1665)
 | The Scream (Munch, 1893)
 | Rhythm Rising on Halic (Coker, 2008)
Music and dance | Yine bir Gulnihal (Dede Efendi, 1830)
 | Turkish March (Mozart, 1783)
 | A tango performance conducted as part of the university's anniversary (e.g., Ayala, 2017)
Architectural elements | That university's building/campus (Mehmed Ali and Agaton, 1891)
 | Blue Mosque and surrounding area (Sedefkar Aga, 1616)
 | An example of modern architecture (e.g., Calatrava, 1998)
Poetry | An idyllic poem resembling the campus landscape (e.g., Hikmet, 1956)

Table 3. Artworks representing universities

d) Which time period's aesthetic style (classical/traditional, modern/contemporary, futuristic/avant-garde and classic/timeless) do you think that your organization reflects?

As seen in Table 4, the majority of participants, all from private and relatively new institutions, think that their organization reflects modern/contemporary aesthetic. This finding may be seen as an effort to appear modern/contemporary in the current competitive environment of higher education and/or it may just be a consequence of the organization’s newness.

| Time orientation of style | Number of times mentioned |
--- | ---
Classical/Traditional | 2 (public and private institutions) |
Modern/Contemporary | 6 (all private institutions) |
Futuristic/Avant-garde | 1 (private institution) |
Classic/Timeless | 3 (all public institutions) |

Table 4. Aesthetic time orientation of universities
Figure 1. Paintings representing universities

- a) Monna Lisa (Da Vinci, 1503)
- b) Girl with a Pearl Earring (Vermeer, 1665)
- c) The Scream (Munch, 1893)
- d) Rhythm Rising on Halic (Coker, 2008)
Figure 2. Music and dance representing universities

a) Yine bir Gülñihal (Dede Efendi, 1830)

b) Turkish March (Mozart, 1783)

c) A tango performance (e.g., Ayala, 2017)
a) That university’s building and campus (Mehmed Ali and Agaton, 1891)

b) Blue Mosque and surrounding area (Sedefkar Aga, 1616)

c) An example of modern architecture (e.g., Calatrava, 1998)

Figure 3. Architectural elements representing universities
A Snowy Birch Forest (e.g., Hikmet, 1956)
In a snowy birch forest
I am walking in the night
I am full of sorrow, so full of sorrow
Give me your hand
Give your hand to me
The stars, my homeland, or my youth?
Which is farthest away?
Among the birches
A window glows yellow and warm
What if, as I go by
Someone says “uncle come inside?”
And if I go in and greet those inside with a bow?
In my city of seven hills
I left my rosebud
There is no shame in fearing death
Nor even in thinking of death
(e.g., Aniszewski, 2019)

Figure 4. Poetry representing universities

e) How do you communicate your organizational vision and mission to others?

As summarized in Table 5, although a few participants refer different means of communication to convey organizational vision and mission, they all stick conventional channels such as ceremonies and social or mass media.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Number of times mentioned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Events organized (e.g., a graduation ceremony) and products designed (e.g., invitation letter to the ceremony) on behalf of university</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social networks, mass media and university website (Usually, visual content is preferred than text.)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students publicize vision and mission.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduates publicize vision and mission.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University management (president, deans, department heads) acts as a role model.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviors and attitude of academic and administrative personnel reflect vision and mission.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any type of activity, attitude or situation in relation to university is a message or tool to communicate vision and mission.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Means of communicating organizational vision and mission

f) How do aesthetics and art-based practices affect your organizational identity?

Based on their convergence, we grouped the answers in two rather complementary viewpoints. One viewpoint is that aesthetics and art-based practices provide the organization a competitive advantage through differentiation. The participants having this view indicate that they invest in aesthetics and art-based practices because emphasizing aesthetics and art in addition to technical aspects increases organizational value. Hence, this viewpoint seems to focus on economic interest by considering aesthetics and art as a marketing tool for the
organization. The second viewpoint proposes that aesthetics and art-based practices enable to build collaborative relationships with stakeholders and strengthen a shared identity. The participants who support this viewpoint note that investing in aesthetics and art-based practices is a part of their social responsibility. Further, these participants mention that they emphasize common tastes and ideas in organizational aesthetics and art-based practices, in order to avoid destructive conflict, improve harmony, and increase participation.

Discussion

Our empirical findings provide limited but potentially valuable ideas about how university managers aesthetically conceptualize their organizations. First, we find that among various aesthetic categories, graceful is the most favored by university managers to describe their organizations. Similarly, among alternative organizational time orientations, modern/contemporary is clearly the most preferred one. However, we also find that there is diversity with respect to how managers symbolize their institutions, demonstrated by the scope of artefacts and artworks they mention. In addition, we see that the executives use aesthetic/artistic elements at a minimum level in communicating their organizational identity, vision, and mission to their internal and external stakeholder groups such as faculty, students, administrative staff and general public. Finally, we also observe that managers find aesthetics and art-based practices valuable both for economic and social purposes.

We interpret these findings as indicating opportunities for universities with respect to aesthetics. Here, we try to demonstrate some of these opportunities with examples and propose an innovative approach that can be used to improve organizational aesthetic performance.

First, sensory experiences within and around a university need managers’ attention, as these are continuously used by internal and external stakeholders as basis of their aesthetic judgements. Aesthetic judgment is a function of many interrelated variables including the attributes of object (in this case, the university), physical distance and duration of exposure to the object, natural and social context, and the level of consciousness and genetic coding of individual; and thus, it has both objective and subjective aspects. As aesthetics stimulates emotions, managers should also consider the emotions evoked in stakeholders through organizational elements such as decoration, costumes, images, scents, tastes, textures, sounds and discourses. However, different contexts may require emphasizing different aesthetic dimensions such that while sometimes “beautiful” motivates stakeholders, other times “fearful” may drive them. This is more apparent in other organizational contexts. For example, insurance companies may try to induce fear in their customers through their advertising messages, while online shopping websites provide a variety of product options to arouse feelings of freedom.

As stakeholders react or respond to such stimuli, they become the co-producers of organizational practices. Aesthetic judgments and moods are thus unconsciously transmitted and shared among them, as further aesthetic experiences are created through the participation of various individuals and groups. In service industries, it is more difficult to satisfy external stakeholders (e.g., local community and general public) without satisfying internal stakeholders (e.g., faculty, students and administrative staff) as their negative mood will be reflected on external stakeholders. In participation of stakeholders, it is necessary to keep a balance between aesthetic consistency and aesthetic variety to prevent destructive conflicts and to align aesthetic preferences with economic and environmental demands. A lack of coherence of aesthetics with social, economic, and environmental conditions is recognizable in certain settings such as misleading ads, and seductive products or situations, degrading moral and ethical values.
Second, in order to communicate effectively with stakeholder groups, university managers can track aesthetic performance of their organization just as they track financial performance. In recent decades, traditional accounting and auditing techniques solely focusing on financial measures have been expanded with the addition of non-financial performance measures (e.g., triple bottom line accounting and auditing). In the same direction, depending on their specific needs, university managers can develop aesthetic measures that will enable them to monitor and evaluate their organization’s aesthetic performance. New concepts such as aesthetic valuation, aesthetic rate of return, cost of aesthetics, willingness to pay for aesthetics and socio-aesthetic capital can be employed as part of such an aesthetic accounting and auditing approach. These can be used to manifest the difference between “It works!” and “It works beautifully!” The latter may demand investment in the aesthetic training of stakeholders. Additionally, aesthetic tracking and investigation can be useful in audit processes and in detecting fraud or manipulations.

Aesthetic accounting and auditing systems can also be integrated with information systems to collect sensory data not only from stakeholders, but also from the physical environment. Information from security cameras, smoke detectors, noise trackers, and thermostats can be saved and used. By creating an inventory of aesthetic forms, styles, and themes, this integration can enable university managers to track the aesthetic performance and mood continuously, observe how they vary over time and space, and make predictions about future trends.

Limitations and future research

This research provides aesthetic knowledge about organizational identities of universities and insights on how university managers view their organizations through an aesthetic lens. However, we cannot make a claim about the generalizability of findings. The scope of the study spans only eleven universities in Istanbul area, and we have a single manager representing each organization. Our findings may just be reflective of idiosyncratic personal views. There may be self-selection bias as the participation in the study is voluntary. Finally, the evaluations and interpretations made by the two researchers contain some subjectivity. Further studies would be necessary to validate and make generalization based on our findings.

To address these limitations in the future, we can augment the scope of the study. As an initial step, we consider collecting additional data from other stakeholder groups including faculty, administrative staff, students and graduates. This may enable us to extend and improve the validity of our findings. Further, if we can expand the geographical scope of the study, we will have the opportunity to make cross-regional and cross-cultural comparisons.

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**About the Authors**

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