



“Don't ever call your adolescent 'lazy'.”

Carl E. Pickhardt, Ph.D.

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The Coffee or the Cup: Which is More Important?

On Overcoming Our Hardwired Tendency to Attach Importance to Superficialities

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Good Cup, Bad Cup: Does the Cup Matter?

A video that I recently saw, titled [Life is Like Coffee](#), tells the story of a group of accomplished professionals—all alumni of a particular university—who go back to their alma mater to visit their professor. The alumni soon start complaining about the high levels of stress in their professional and personal lives, at which point the professor offers them coffee. The professor brings out the coffee in various types of cups; some made of plastic, others made of glass, and still others are made of porcelain or crystal. Although the video doesn't spell this out, it becomes clear that the ex-students make a beeline for the

crystal, porcelain, and glass cups, leaving behind the plastic cups for the laggards.

The professor then spells out his theory for why the alumni are stressed: he tells them that they have been chasing superficial things (metaphorically represented by the cup) when they should have been chasing the things that matter more (metaphorically represented by the coffee). Specifically, the professor tells the alumni that they have been chasing money, prestige, and status when, in fact, what matters more in life are things like doing meaningful work and building good quality relationships.

If you have been reading my articles, you know that I am in full agreement with the larger point that the video makes, namely, that a major reason for our unhappiness is that we often sacrifice the true determinants of happiness for the “superficial” things that make us miserable in the long run. However, I am not sure that the analogy that the video uses—of the coffee and the cup—is a good one.

Imagine for a minute that you were at a coffee shop and were offered the option of being served coffee in either a lovely porcelain cup or in a not-so-lovely plastic cup. Which cup should you pick?

According to the video, you should be indifferent between the two cups. But for reasons that Aradhna Krishna outlines in her excellent new book, *Customer Sense*, research findings would suggest otherwise.

According to Aradhna, when we drink coffee—or for that matter, when we eat or drink anything else—we taste it not just with our taste-buds, but also with our other senses. The sense of smell, as most people know, is inextricably intertwined with the sense of taste. (Without being able to smell, for example, some people claim that

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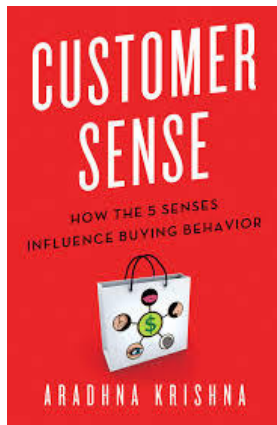
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we cannot distinguish between potato and apple. I've never checked this myself, but after seeing this [video](#)—particularly the latter half—, I have a good mind to try it out on my kids!) Indeed, Aradhna argues, it is not just the sense of smell that is intertwined with taste, but virtually all the other senses, including touch, sound, and sight are too, which is why the texture of chips (soft vs. crisp), the sound that it makes when we bite it (its “crunchiness”), as well as its color (golden yellow vs. white or brown), can all significantly affect our enjoyment of it.

According to Aradhna, the reason all of our senses matter is because all sensory inputs are ultimately combined into one overall evaluation in the part of our [brain](#) called the orbitofrontal cortex. In other words, we literally cannot distinguish the extent to which different sensory inputs contributed to our overall enjoyment of food. This may be one reason why people’s brains light up more—meaning there is evidence at the neurological level that people derive greater enjoyment—when they taste the same wine from a bottle that they think is more (vs. less) expensive.

A question that follows from the perspective of someone who wishes to maximize their pleasure from drinking a cup of coffee, then, is: should one attach importance to the cup? Or, put in more general terms, does “packaging” matter? Does the cover of a book matter for enjoying its content? Does a person’s physical attractiveness matter for enjoying their company?

The answer, according to Aradhna, would be resounding “Yes!” While she points to one reason why we enjoy something more when it is presented in a more pleasing manner—namely, that our brain combines all sensory inputs into one overall evaluation—findings from yet another stream of research, on “halo effects,” reveal another reason why superficialities matter. Halo effect findings reveal that, when something is more pleasing to our senses, we impute a whole bunch of other positive qualities to it. Thus, for example, a good-looking person is thought to be more intelligent, competent, and warm, which is why attractive people earn more money than their less-attractive counterparts. Halo effects seem to apply, within some limits, to inanimate stimuli as well, which is why we enjoy a shopping [environment](#) more when it looks and smells good.

In sum, presentation matters. The cup from which we drink matters, perhaps not as much as the coffee itself, but it can certainly add significantly to, or detract significantly from, our enjoyment of the coffee. Likewise, it stands to reason that we enjoy a book more when its cover is better-designed and a hotel room more when it is more put-together, etc.

If our enjoyment is affected not just by the important—“central”—features of a stimulus, but also by its superficial features, an interesting question arises: why shouldn’t we seek superficial features? In the opening example, why shouldn’t the alumni seek to drink coffee from the porcelain (vs. plastic) cup?

As you have probably guessed, the danger lies not in seeking superficialities but in giving it greater priority over the more important features. That is, the danger lies in giving greater importance to the packaging than the product, and to a potential life-partner’s looks over their [personality](#), etc.

Most of us seem aware of our susceptibility to value superficial things more than we should, which is why the video (Life is Like Coffee) is so appealing to many. But overcoming the tendency to chase superficial things (like money, fame, power, etc.), and giving greater priority to the



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more important things (like meaningful work, and good quality relationships), isn't merely a matter of denying superficial things their rightful place in our lives. Indeed, doing so is likely to make us schizophrenic: we are likely to continue to chase the superficial things (because they do, after all, provide us with enjoyment and pleasure) while outwardly denying their value.

A better way to overcome the tendency to accord greater importance to superficial (vs. central) things is to become aware of why we value the superficial things in the first place. Apart from the fact that they do enhance our enjoyment (as just discussed), another important reason why we seek superficial things is because of their signaling value. When you look good, you are more likely to be respected by others. Likewise, when you drive a prestigious brand of car, you are more likely to be noticed. Findings from a study conducted at a chess competition revealed that chess players preferred to play against those dressed sloppily. Why? Because they felt that sloppily dressed players were less competent than the well-dressed ones! (Mathematicians know, of course, that if anything, the opposite is true.)

Because most of us want to look good in others' eyes—some psychologists claim that the desire to impress others is one of our most important goals—and because we know that people extrapolate from superficial cues to make assessments about our deeper values and traits, we seek to impress others with superficial things. In other words, “showing off” our superficial qualities is an efficient way to convey the quality of our deeper aspects.

Becoming aware of these two reasons for seeking superficial things has two important benefits. First, it makes it easier to accept that we all value, at one level or the other, the superficial things in life. Thus, it makes us less judgmental and more accepting of those who flaunt superficial things—from the hedonists and the gourmards to the pretentious. Second, by becoming aware of the reasons why superficial features matter, we can more easily overcome the tendency to over-value superficial things.

How so?

By recognizing that there are two qualitatively different reasons why we seek superficial things—namely: 1) they enhance our sensory pleasure, and 2) they provide a signaling value—, we can start to become more discerning in identifying the motivations underlying others' (and our own) behaviors. Thus, for example, we can start to tell whether a dinner host is someone who values beautiful things because they are a source of joy to her, or because she seeks to impress—and perhaps even put down—others through them. Thus, we can start to discern differences between the aesthete (someone who appreciates beauty for its own sake) and the pretentious.

More importantly, becoming aware of the reasons why we value superficial things can help us gain deeper insights into our own motivations for pursuing them, and eventually, to greater autonomy over our own self-worth. When we rely heavily on superficial things—wealth, beauty, fame, power, etc.—to impress others, we hand over the keys of our self-worth to them. Conversely, by recognizing that superficial things are merely a convenient means to signal to others our deeper qualities and values, and by recognizing that most people are helplessly trapped in the game of impression management through flaunting superficialities, we become less desperate in our pursuit of superficial things. Instead, we become more capable of stepping back and observing the game as it unfolds.

And when we do that, we notice several useful things that have been documented in research. We notice, for example, that in the game of impression management, everyone is so focused on their own “performance” that it is virtually pointless trying to impress others through one-upmanship. Second, we notice that a better way to make a positive

impression on others is to acknowledge and fulfill their craving for attention; e.g., praising others for their sense of discernment in taste (without coming across as insincere or insecure), rather than trying to outdo them, is a better strategy for impression management. And finally, we notice that, in the long-run, people's deeper qualities and values shine through regardless of their superficial features.

These insights, in turn, not only help us become more self-assured and better at according greater priority to the more important (vs. superficial) things in life—as the professor in the video wants us to—they also help us become better at appreciating the role that superficial things play in enhancing the quality of our life.

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