

THE MOTIVATING FORCE OF VISUAL ATTRACTIVENESS IN PRODUCT DESIGN

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INTRODUCTION

Consumer psychology has long recognized that aesthetically appealing objects represent a genuine source of value (Bloch, Brunel and Arnold 2003; Richins 1994) even when the product has no functional use. Nevertheless, what it is that makes beauty such a valuable attribute remains poorly understood (Charters 2006; Patrick and Peracchio 2010).

The current paper addresses this knowledge gap by proposing that beauty creates value by simultaneously fulfilling two distinct needs, an intrinsic (hedonic) and an extrinsic (social) need. The intrinsic value implies that beauty is inherently rewarding in that its ownership fulfills a universal human need for aesthetics (e.g., Maslow 1970). The presence of such need is best illustrated by people's automatic and visceral wanting responses towards attractive objects. This makes beauty similar to other primary reinforcers such as food, drugs, or sex, whose presence is instantaneously craved, even when no actual need for the stimulus can be identified. The extrinsic value of beauty is more cognitive in nature, and suggests that the ownership of beautiful products satisfies esteem needs by enhancing consumers' perceived self-value (e.g., Venkatesh and Meamber 2008). This enhancement is due to products with aesthetic appeal representing extremely effective tools for self-expression and reflecting the good taste of their owners. While the intrinsic value of beauty is accessed automatically upon encountering a beautiful product, the extrinsic value becomes salient when consumers anticipate the experience of owning and consuming the product. We argue that together, these intrinsic and extrinsic benefits best account for why beauty commends such high value in the eyes of consumers.

STUDY 1

To examine this argument, in Study 1, we employed a thought recording procedure to investigate consumers' reactions to product beauty. Participants were shown a range of audio speakers that differed in visual appearance, but were depicted as identical in terms of functionality, quality, brand, and price. They were then instructed to select the product they found the most beautiful, and one they would best describe as neutral in appearance (meaning that it does not elicit any kind of emotions). Each group was subsequently presented with either the beautiful or the neutral product choice and asked to indicate (1) their very first reaction to the product (as a measure of the intrinsic value of beauty) and (2) how they would feel if they were the owner of the product (as a measure of the self-related value of beauty). We find that when consumers are exposed to a beautiful product, the first thought they report is a clear and instantaneous desire to possess the product, without providing any specific reason aside from a positive reaction to the product's appearance. When imagining themselves as product owners, participants anticipate experiencing positive self-related emotions such as pride. In contrast, participants in the neutral group do not report any such instantaneous desire or self-related emotions. Differences between the two groups remain significant even when alternative (such as luxury or novelty) are controlled for. Moreover, we find that consumers report significantly higher perceptions of overall product value in the beautiful than in the neutral condition, and that the frequency of thoughts that capture either the intrinsic or extrinsic benefits of beauty positively correlates with these overall value perceptions. Thus, we find preliminary evidence that beauty is associated with two types of benefits, which in turn are related to the perceived value of beauty.

STUDY 2

Study 2 provides a measurement instrument for the two types of value associated with beauty and demonstrates that the two value sources are distinct from one another. More specifically, we find that the intrinsic benefits of beauty are triggered primarily by a product's sensory characteristics, and do not require successful categorization of a beautiful, yet functionally ambiguous product. On the other hand, consistent with the idea that a product's ability to enhance one's perceived self-value is contingent upon knowing what the product is or does, the extrinsic value of beauty is perceived as higher when the product can be successfully categorized. These results suggest that the intrinsic value of beauty can be automatically perceived and is primarily affective in nature, while the self-related value is influenced by product categorization processes. Moreover, the two sources of value code two distinct types of benefits, such that the experience of one benefit (intrinsic value) can occur independently of the other (self-related value).

STUDY 3

In Study 3, we show that the hedonic and social benefits of beauty can best account for behaviors that point towards beauty representing a source of value, such as engaging in difficult-to-enact product acquisition, or taking particularly good care of the product after purchase. We also address an alternative explanation, namely that, consistent with the “beautiful is good” stereotype, beautiful products automatically evoke expectations or even perceptions of superior functionality, and that these perceived functional benefits may contribute towards the value of beauty. In support of our main argument, we find that functionality benefits can – neither alone nor in combination with any of the other benefits of beauty – explain the value of a beautiful design as effectively as the hedonic and social benefits together can.

DISCUSSION

This research heeds calls for marketing and consumer researchers to engage in a deeper investigation into the psychological responses elicited by visually attractive products and to develop a more comprehensive theory of aesthetics in consumption (e.g., Orth and Malkewitz 2008; Reimann et al. 2010; Patrick and Peracchio 2010). Across three studies, we uncover why a product design’s visual attractiveness has such a powerful influence on consumers, as well as how the motivational power of attractiveness differs from that of other hedonic product attributes.

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