When Good Looks Kill: an Examination of Consumer Response to Visually Attractive Product Design

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In a time when companies are able to match each other on dimensions of quality and price, superior design is seen as a key to winning customers. But while design has been an area of growing concern, it remains unclear whether superior design should be a goal sought after by all. The present paper examines the effect of visually attractive design upon consumers’ perceptions of quality and argues that in the absence of external cues (such as brand or country-of-origin information) companies might be adversely impacted in pursuit of highly attractive visual design. I develop and empirically test a model of visual information processing based on the implicit personality theory (Bruner and Tagiuri 1954; Cronbach 1958) and a parallel implicit product theory (Pinson 1986). It is shown that under normal circumstances, an inverted U-shaped relationship exists between visual attractiveness and perceived performance but that this relationship is moderated by both brand information and access to processing capabilities. By understanding the boundary conditions and mechanisms involved in this process of performance-related trait inference, we can begin to outline implications for when and how to use a product’s visual design as a competitive tool.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

"Welcome to the esthetic economy: Idealogues may call beauty a myth, intellectuals may insist that the thought is all that counts, corporate managers may squirm at dealing with artists-but beauty appeals to us all. Ignore it at your peril." (Postrel, 1999, p.88)

In the past several years, the issue of design and its role as a strategic tool for marketplace success has received considerable attention by corporate America (Crozier 1994; Schmitt and Simonson 1997; Nussbaum 2000; Coates 2003; Scott and Batra 2003; de Monthoux 2004; Postrel 2004). In a time when companies are able to match each other on dimensions of quality and price, superior design is seen as a key to winning customers. Design elements such as size, color, shape, and texture are widely recognized as a means for differentiation in increasingly competitive and cluttered markets. A product’s visual design is often among the first pieces of information consumers encounter and thus plays a front-line role in the success of a product (Kotler and Rath 1984). The importance of innovative visual design is an issue that has received a great deal of attention across a broad spectrum of industries, as consumers increasingly demand elegant products that meet both appearance and functionality as a priority.

Based on the research and managerial evidence thus far, we might be tempted to conclude that pursuit of high design is always a good thing but my goal is to understand whether or not this is in fact true. Specifically, the state of design literature today does not inform us with an understanding of how consumers interpret and respond to increased visual attractiveness in product design. While anecdotal evidence suggests that more attractive design should render more positive consumer reactions, we currently lack a theoretical understanding of this phenomenon. What we do know is that a product’s visual appearance is vested with psychological meaning and communicates information to consumers and that tangible attributes of a product, such as size, shape, and style, are pieces of information that consumers use to draw inferences about unobservable attributes such its functional and ergonomic qualities (Friedmann and Lessig 1987; Crilly, Moultrie et al. 2004; Creusen and Schoormans 2005). However, as Bloch urges, “research is needed to determine which product form elements trigger particular cognitive responses among consumers.” (Bloch, 1995, p.25) The present paper focuses on a specific type of product form- visual attractiveness- and examines its impact upon consumers’ perceptions of performance.

Social psychological research in the domain of person perception has shown us that individuals readily make inferences of intellectual capabilities and competence of others based on their physical attractiveness (for a review see Eagly, Ashmore et al. 1991). While physically attractive people are thought to be more competent and intelligent than their unattractive counterparts, there appears to be a limit to this halo effect. Highly attractive individuals seem to conjure negative inferences such that they are thought to be less intelligent than those who are moderately or slightly above attractive. Using these theories from person perception literature as a starting point, this paper examines the impact of visual attractiveness upon consumers’ perceptions of product performance and argues that under certain circumstances, consumers generate negative inferences regarding the performance and quality of highly attractive products.

The results of two laboratory studies suggest that design as a strategic tool might not be the most appropriate means of success for certain firms. In fact, it seems as if not only can the rewards from good design be diminishing, but in fact can be detrimental for some firms. In Study 1, we demonstrate that void of external information, such as brand reputation, consumers tend to inherently doubt the efficacy of products with extremely high levels of visual attractiveness as compared to those of moderate levels of visual attractiveness. In the case of two different product categories- toasters and hand vacuums- when brand information was not present, participants rated moderately attractive designs as being of the highest performance. Furthermore, an analysis of their open-ended responses indicated that the formation of these performance-related judgments were predicated on belief structures about the relationship between a product’s appearance and its performance. Whereas for low and moderately attractive products consumers were shown to utilize a “what is beautiful is good” belief structure the same was not true for highly attractive products. In the case of highly attractive products, a significant number of participants indicate skepticism regarding the probable performance of the products and instead relied upon a belief structure which we call “too beautiful to be good,” in which high levels of attractiveness were equated with lower efficacy. However, this base effect was shown to be moderated by access to external information such that the second belief structure was deactivated in the presence of strong brand information and the relationship between product attractiveness was positive and linear.

The results of Study 2 demonstrate that the effects observed in the previous study are also moderated by access to processing capabilities, indicating that the process of drawing upon belief structures of attractiveness and performance is largely a cognitive one. Under conditions of high cognitive load in Study 2, participants engaged in an affect-based processing such that more attractive products are always thought to be of higher quality and performance. In both the unbranded condition, as well as in the weak-brand conditions, participants still favored highly attractive products over moderately attractive products. Further evidence for an affect based process is offered by the fact that brand information was discounted all together. The lack of interaction between brand and attractiveness demonstrates that unlike Study 1, participants are not elaborating upon their implicit theories and are not adjusting their inferences to incorporate external information. Instead, they are using affective information drawn from the product’s attractiveness to make inferences of its performance.

The results of this study speak widely to the diverse community involved in product design decisions. By understanding the boundary conditions within which this effect operates, we can work toward informing both marketers and designers of the possible perils of an excessive detail to design.

REFERENCES
New York.


