The influence of the visual design principles complexity and symmetry on consumer product preference was investigated. Existing literature mostly focuses on aesthetic value. However, as the design of a product also influences the perception of functionalities, quality, and ease of use, these product aspects were also taken into account. Indeed, the preference for complexity and symmetry in a design depends on the product aspect that is most important to the target group of consumers. Differences in aspect importance between age, gender and educational groups are identified.

[to cite]:

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There is widespread recognition that design offers a potent way to position and differentiate products, as competition intensifies and technological differentiation becomes more difficult. Some argue that “design is the factor that will often give a company its competitive edge” (Kotler, 2003). Researchers have made important advances into understanding the cognitive and emotional processes underlying consumers’ reactions to product design (e.g., Bloch 1995; Cox and Cox 1994; Creusen and Schoormans, 2005; Holbrook 1986; Sewall 1978; Veryzer and Hutchinson 1998); however, many fundamental questions still require study in order to advance the study of consumer research on design response.

One aspect of product design is product appearance. Product appearance is often ignored in consumer research. However, the appearance of a product is salient in many purchase situations, and even influences decisions for industrial products (Yamamoto and Lambert, 1994). This means that a better insight into the effect of product appearance on consumer product choice is highly relevant. This session hopes to make consumer researchers and practitioners more aware of the importance and influence of product appearance in consumer product choice and increase interest in investigating issues in product appearance as related to consumer behavior. In addition, insight into the influence of product design on consumer preference expands our insight into product preference formation. For practitioners, the session gives some insight into the influence of design characteristics on consumers’ perception of aesthetics, functions, quality and usability.

The papers in this session try to give some guideline to attain the design (appearance) of a product to consumers (all studies are completed). The first paper shows that visual complexity and symmetry in a design influence consumer preference, but that this relation depends on the product aspect that is important to consumers—esthetic attractiveness, number of functions, quality impression or ease of operation. For product appearance can influence the perception of all of these aspects (Bloch, 1995; Creusen and Schoormans, 2005). The product aspect that is most important to the target group of consumers should therefore be the starting point in design. This study is an addition to existing research, which mostly focused on the influence of design characteristics on aesthetic value. In the second paper, the influence of another kind of variables—namely design novelty and prototypicality—on aesthetic preference is investigated. The unequivocal results about the relationship between typicality and aesthetic preference in the literature is explained by the effect of another variable: design novelty. Typicality and novelty are both found to have an independent effect on aesthetic preference, even though the two constructs are highly negatively correlated. This means that products with an optimal combination of typicality and novelty will be preferred aesthetically. This optimal combination may depend on the target group of consumers and the kind of product. The third paper stresses that design should not discriminate against certain groups of people. This philosophy is called “Universal Design” and leads to products that can be used, to the greatest extent possible, by everyone. Designers have been interviewed, and many are found to have the ambition not to distinguish between disabled people or others diverting from the norm (e.g., children, elderly) and ‘normal’ people. For some designers, Universal design also implies a criticism of the trend that design is treated as a superficial activity, concerned only with the aesthetics of the product’s surface. On the other hand, a too strong focus on people’s ability runs the risk that the aesthetic design aspect is neglected, even though it might be equally important to consumers.

In conclusion, this session gives insight into design characteristics that influence aesthetic product value, and other types of product value such as (perceived) quality and ease in use. Some attention should be paid to all of these aspects—esthetic attractiveness, functions, quality and ease of operation—in designing a product and its appearance. Specifically concerning ease in use, no consumers (e.g., elderly, disabled people) should be excluded beforehand from using the product. However, focus on usability should not result in neglecting other aspects important to consumers, such as aesthetics.

**LONG ABSTRACTS**

Mariëlle E.H. Creusen, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute  
Robert W. Veryzer, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute  
Jan P. L. Schoormans, Delft University of Technology

While consumer researchers have made advances into understanding consumers’ reactions to product design, many consumer psychology questions remain with regard to this marketing variable. Empirical evidence indicates that design principles such as “complexity,” “unity,” and “symmetry” influence aesthetic judgments for artificial stimuli (Arnheim, 1974; Berlyne, 1971; Murdoch and Flurscheim, 1983; Veryzer, 1993). A study into the effects of these design principles for “real” products would provide critical advances in consumer research on design response. Furthermore, product appearance (form) may also influence judgments about function, such as the number of functions, ease of operation, and product quality (Bloch 1995; Creusen and Schoormans, 2005). Therefore, not only the influence of design principles on aesthetic judgments should be assessed, but also on other judgments that are partly based on product appearance, such as quality and ease of use. We investigated the influence of two design principles (symmetry and complexity) on the preferences for real products. More specifically, we investigated the extent in which the influence of these two design principles depends on the product aspects that consumers consider in their preference judgments; aesthetic attractiveness, number of functions, ease of operation, or product quality. In addition, we assessed whether the importance of these aspects differed with age, gender and educational level.

In order to investigate our research questions, we selected black-and-white pictures of the front side of existing video recorders (VCR’s). We needed stimuli that scored either high or low on each principle so that we could fill each of four cells in an orthogonal factorial design. In order to fill the four cells with two VCR’s each (a total of eight), the VCR’s were judged on their amount of symmetry and visual complexity in a pilot study. In additional pilot studies, we tested, digitally changed and tested these VCR’s until all cells were filled. In the main study, 422 members of a consumer household panel indicated their preference for the eight VCR pictures on a seven-point scale ranging from ‘low