A Moderated Perceptual Model of Product Aesthetic Evaluations

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We propose that consumers’ product aesthetic evaluations reflect the interactive relations between consumers’ individual characteristics and their aesthetic perceptions of the product category ideal and the product category stereotype. We test this perceptual model in one lab and two field experiments. Results support the notion that aesthetic evaluations arise from (1) the perceptual distance between the product and the stereotype (novelty) and (2) the perceptual distance between the product and the ideal (concinnity). The relative weight that consumers place on each distance is moderated by their aesthetic “expertise,” as measured by the Centrality of Visual Product Aesthetics.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Researchers in marketing and consumer behavior have begun to develop a theoretical base and a body of evidence pertaining to consumers’ evaluations of product aesthetics. However, statistical effects that are generalizable across products or settings have proven elusive. Although it could be argued that this reflects a pervasive idiosyncrasy in aesthetic evaluations, it may also be the case that existing models have not yet identified or accounted for “meaningful heterogeneity” in design evaluations (Holbrook 1986). We examine the potential for interactions between product and consumer characteristics to capture such meaningful heterogeneity.

In this research, we take a contingency perspective, where aesthetic preferences are seen as the result of systematic interactions between consumers’ and product designs’ characteristics. We propose that consumers hold mental models for each product category they consider and that products share aesthetic features that individuals can interpret in fairly consistent ways. For example, most consumers would tend to agree that an Apple iPod has a “unified, balanced and simple look,” yet they may disagree on how desirable each of these aesthetic properties is, and how much variation around each one they may enjoy or tolerate. We develop and test an integrative model that provides a more comprehensive account of how aesthetic evaluations are formed.

The model is built on four vectors of data: (1) consumers’ perceptions of a target product’s aesthetic characteristics, (2) consumers’ perceptions of the aesthetic characteristics of the self-identified “stereotypical” product in the category, (3) consumers’ perceptions of the aesthetic characteristics of their “ideal” product in the category, and (4) consumers’ own characteristics (in particular as measured by the Centrality of Visual Product Aesthetics, CVPA, Bloch, Brunel and Arnold 2003). Extending the existing conceptualization of the first three elements (Coates 2003), we undertake algebraic formalization of the relationships therein. Through the model, we build an aesthetics perceptual space for the product and category at hand. For a given product in a specific category, we can measure perceptual evaluations (using semantic differential scales) for a relevant series of aesthetic dimensions for the product, the category stereotype, and the category ideal. We can use these vectors of data to compute several perceptual distances and then locate each object in a perceptual space. The first distance of interest is the perceptual distance between the object and the stereotype ($DS_o$), and it can be conceptualized as a measure of novelty. The second measure of interest is the perceptual distance between the object and the ideal ($DI_o$), and can be conceptualized as a measure of design concinnity (i.e., harmony, beauty). Further, we can conceptualize the distance between the stereotype and the ideal as a measure of design potential.

Although previous conceptualizations have struggled to explain why different consumers place different weights on design characteristics that evoke stereotypicality versus novelty, we suggest that much of the variation arises from differences in CVPA. Briefly, the Centrality of Visual Product Aesthetics scale (CVPA; Bloch, Brunel, and Arnold 2003) measures the salience of visual design in a consumer’s relationships with products, specifically, it captures the extent to which a consumer (1) values design, (2) responds to design, and (3) evaluates design with skill (acumen). CVPA has been shown to moderate the effect of product design on aesthetic evaluations, product attitudes, purchase intentions, and willingness to pay (Bloch et al. 2003), yet no research has yet examined skill-related outcomes of CVPA.

To assess our conceptualization, we analyzed two national field experiments as well as a controlled laboratory experiment. The field experiments were carried out in conjunction with a major automobile manufacturer and involved nationally representative samples of sport utility drivers. The lab experiment involved university students who participated in return for course credit. Across these three studies, we find consistent empirical support for the notion that product aesthetic evaluation systematically varies with $DS_o$ and $DI_o$, and interacts with CVPA. This suggests that consumers’ aesthetic evaluations are not purely idiosyncratic but rather are a function of previous exposure to the category (as represented by the perceived category stereotype) as well as idealized notions of the category (as represented by the perceived category ideal).

Additionally, we find that the visual information conveyed in a product design is differentially available to consumers and that CVPA scores are predictive of this heterogeneity. Of course, it is important to keep in mind that consumers’ ability to recognize and categorize designs can be (but is not necessarily) independent of their design attitudes and preferences. Still, variations in skills may lead to variations in the informational inputs to attitudes and preferences, and we can expect consumers with greater skills to have greater attitude certainty, lower attitude ambivalence, and more precisely defined preferences. An important area for future research is to determine the reasons for differences in design evaluation skills. Candidate factors include differences in the way product shapes are stored in memory (e.g., verbal, visual), in knowledge structure (e.g., quantity, density, accessibility), and in visual acuity (e.g., bandwidth, resolution, resources).

REFERENCES


