The Influence of Art Infusion on the Perception and Evaluation of Consumer Products

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This research investigates the phenomenon of art infusion, in which the presence of visual art has a favorable influence on the evaluation of consumer products via a content-independent spillover of luxury perceptions. In three studies we demonstrate the art infusion effect in both real-world and controlled environments, using a variety of stimuli, in the contexts of packaging, advertising, and product design.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A great deal of evidence exists of the widespread use by marketing practitioners of visual art as a tool (Hoffman 2002; Martorella 1996). However, virtually no research has been conducted to provide insight and understanding regarding the strategic use of this tool to meet marketing objectives (Margolin 1992). The current research represents an initial step to systematically analyze the influence of visual art on evaluations of consumer products. With three studies, we investigate the phenomenon of art infusion, which we define as the influence that the presence of art has on consumer perceptions and evaluations of products with which it is associated. In this research we theorize that perceptions of luxury spill over from art, creating more favorable evaluations of these products.

What is Art?

We adopt a consumer-focused perspective, namely that art is that which is categorized by the viewers as such (Bourdieu and Darbel 1997; Dewey 1989). This definition is particularly relevant, as it is the viewers’ or consumers’ perception that matters in this context, irrespective of scholarly debates about what does or does not constitute art. Evidence supporting the notion of a general schema was also found in a descriptive survey conducted by the authors. Based on these self-reports, on extant research (Hagtvedt, Hagtvedt, and Patrick 2007), and on a review of art history (e.g., Tansey and Kleiner 1996), artworks may be identified as works perceived as embodying human expression, where a perceived main feature of the work is the manner of its creation and/or execution rather than just a concept, idea, or message underlying it or conveyed by it, and where this manner is not primarily driven by any other contrived function or utility. Although there appears to be virtually no restriction on what may be successfully marketed as art in the contemporary art market, the average consumer nonetheless appears capable of distinguishing between works characterized by the creativity and skill of an artist and works characterized primarily by marketing efforts. While training presumably enhances this ability in viewers, it seems reasonable that with the emergence and development of visual art through the millennia of prehistory, perhaps tied to aesthetics as a pre-linguistic form of communication (e.g., Averill, Stanat, and More 1998; Lindgaard and Whitfield 2004), even untrained viewers are able to identify visual art as a distinct category of human expression.

The Art Infusion Phenomenon

Several theoretical perspectives shed light on how the properties of art may spill over on products, including classical conditioning (Gorn 1982), halo effects (Balzer and Sulsky 1992), and contagion (Rozin, Millman, and Nemeroff 1986). In line with such perspectives, we propose that visual art may influence consumer evaluations of the products with which the art is associated, while the type of influence will follow from how art itself is perceived. At a general level, art is associated with a heritage of culture, it has connotations of luxury, and it may provide a sense of social distinctiveness. In this study, we theorize that perceptions of luxury fully mediated the influence of art on product evaluation.

Study 1

The objective of this study was to demonstrate that the presence of visual art leads to enhanced evaluation of consumer products via a content-independent spillover of luxury perceptions. A deal was contracted with a local restaurant to survey 100 of their patrons in exchange for conducting a customer satisfaction survey. One hundred people participated in the study (53% male, 47% female; M_age=43 years; average family income=$5,600 per month). The product to be evaluated was a typical set of silverware (a set of a spoon, fork, knife, teaspoon, and steak knife), exhibited in custom-made black velvet boxes with white satin lining. The top of the box had a print of either Van Gogh’s Café Terrace at Night (art image) or a photograph of a café at night (non-art image). Participants were fleetingly exposed to the front face of the box before it was opened and then answered a set of questions about the silverware. Results revealed significantly higher product evaluations and perceptions of luxury for the art condition. Further, perceptions of luxury fully mediated the influence of art on product evaluation.

Study 2

In this study, 107 participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: an advertisement for bathroom fittings featuring the painting Girl with a Pearl Earring by Johannes Vermeer, a photograph of Scarlett Johansson posing as the Girl with a Pearl Earring, or no image. Thus, content was matched for the two visual images. Results revealed that product evaluation and perceptions of luxury were significantly higher for the art image, and that the perceptions of luxury fully mediated the influence of art on product evaluation.

Study 3

Seventy-six undergraduates participated in this study, using a soap dispenser as the stimulus with three experimental conditions (one of three images on the front face of the soap dispenser: artwork pre-tested to elicit positive affect vs. artwork eliciting negative affect vs. decorative non-art image, with same content as the positive artwork). The art-conditions of differing valence were incorporated to control for the alternative explanation that the content of the artwork could be driving the results rather than the general connotations of art. The non-art image was also included to demonstrate that the art, not the content of the image, was driving the results.

Results revealed that for both product evaluation and perceptions of luxury, the two artworks caused significantly higher ratings than did the non-art image, while there was no difference between the two artworks. Further, the perceptions of luxury fully mediated the influence of art on product evaluation.

References


