When Good Looks Kill: an Examination of Consumer Responses 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 under certain circumstances, firms benefit from investing in superior visual design while in other circumstances companies might be adversely impacted in pursuit of highly attractive visual design. We develop and empirically test a model of visual information processing based on theories assimilation-contrast and implicit personality. It is shown that a 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
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. In the past several years the issue of design and its role as a strategic tool for marketplace success has been pursued by manufacturers of consumer goods from small appliances to automobiles. 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 under certain circumstances, firms benefit from investing in superior visual design while in other circumstances companies might be adversely impacted in pursuit of highly attractive visual design. We develop and empirically test a model of visual information processing based on theories assimilation-contrast and implicit personality. It is shown that a under normal circumstances, a 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.

At the root of this model lies Helson’s (1964) adaptation-level theory. Person perception research from social psychology has already demonstrated that individuals maintain adaptation levels of acceptance around cues such as physical attractiveness of others. Whether or not the person’s attractiveness falls within a latitude of acceptance, people are either shown to assimilate information to a “what is beautiful is good” stereotype or to make a contrasting judgment. In the present study, this finding is extended to the domain of product design and consumers are similarly thought to have a latitude of acceptance around a product’s visual attractiveness. In the case that processing capabilities are unconstrained, individuals first consider the extent to which the product being evaluated falls within an acceptable range of attractiveness. Depending on whether or not they deem the product to fall within this range, different belief structures are drawn upon.

In Study 1, we demonstrate that depending on the level of attractiveness—either within or beyond one’s latitude of acceptance—individuals draw upon different belief structures. We show that in absence of other information, when a product’s level of attractiveness is low or moderate, consumers draw upon a “what is beautiful is good” structure such that more attractive products are rated as being of higher quality than less attractive products. However, when a product’s level of attractiveness exceeds a threshold, consumers draw upon a “too good to be true” belief structure such that highly attractive products are be rated as being of lower quality than moderately attractive products. But when consumers have access to external information, such as brand reputation of the manufacturer, they adjust their initial judgments to accommodate this information. In the high brand reputation condition, evaluations of products at all three levels of attractiveness are enhanced, resulting in suppression of the “too good to be true” belief. However, in the poor brand reputation condition the belief remains in tact.

While in Study 1 we show that individuals process visual information in a cognitive manner under conditions of unconstrained processing ability, the same is not true under conditions of low processing ability. In Study 2, when individuals are faced with limited processing capabilities they engage in perceptual processing of visual information based on an affect-transfer process. In absence of other information, regardless of whether or not a product falls within latitude of acceptance, consumers process visual information through a process of affect transfer such that more attractive products are preferred to less attractive products. Thus, perceived performance is thought to increase monotonically with increased attractiveness and brand information is not shown to interact with product attractiveness.

The findings of this research hold interesting implications for product designers and brand managers in helping assess when investment a product’s visual design is beneficial and when this investment might backfire. Although the present paper makes progress toward outlining visual design and positioning guidelines for managers, there are still question that might be pursued by future researchers. For example, the model described in this paper accounts for the possibility that product category might moderate the impact of attractiveness upon perceptions of quality found in high processing capability conditions. Different product categories (e.g. primarily functional products versus primarily hedonic products) are thought to have different latitudes of acceptance around what is considered acceptable in terms of attractiveness and might have different belief structures associated with each level of attractiveness.

REFERENCES