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Do We Judge a Book By Its Cover and a Product By Its Package? How Affective Expectations Are Contrasted and Assimilated Into the Consumption Experience

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Product packaging can be the first observable signal of a product's underlying traits. Three experimental studies examine the positive impact of this signal on consumers' perceptions. Results indicate that packaging aesthetic is capable of influencing the believability of unverifiable credence claims and actual gustatory experiences. Actual product quality level determines whether reactions to aesthetics are assimilated into or contrasted to consumer perceptions. Perceptions of a low quality product can be enhanced by an attractive package. Perceptions of a high quality product are enhanced by a package with less aesthetic appeal.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Marketing actions can serve to activate expectancies that impact consumption experiences and product efficacy. For instance, Shiv et. al. (2005) show that consumption of the exact same product differently impacts performance when the product is purchased at a discount versus at regular price. They confirm that the impact of consumer perception on performance is mediated by expectations.

When consumers do not have prior knowledge of a product's qualities, a product's visual aesthetic is a marketing action that serves to set consumers expectations. Attractive visual aesthetics generate favorable responses and impact product expectations (Postrel 2003). We propose that attractiveness generates *affective expectations* (beliefs about the pleasure or positivity associated with a consumption experience). In the case of hedonic products, where the benefit of the product is primarily determined by the affect experienced during consumption, affective expectations driven by product packaging may be contrasted to or assimilated into actual consumption beliefs and experiences.

An initial product survey validates the relationship between attractive aesthetics and product expectations. Then three experimental studies test propositions regarding the relationship between expectations set by packaging and consumer perceptions. The studies investigate the effect packaging aesthetics have on actual consumer beliefs and consumption evaluations and examine whether these effects carry through to purchase intentions. To create a context for contrast and assimilative effects, product quality and consumer affective expectations were varied across conditions.

Intuition might suggest that a more appealing packaging would increase consumers' product evaluations, purchase intentions, and beliefs. We show that this is not always the case. A contrast effect was found in the case of high quality product. The high quality product was evaluated more positively when it was paired with a package that was not particularly beautiful. This was due to surprise that was elicited from the incongruence between an individual's affective expectations generated by context and the actual product experience.

Study 1 was conducted to examine the relationship between hedonic product aesthetics and consumer expectations. Five hundred individuals were shown two inch pictures of 44 different hedonic product packages. Brand name was intentionally obscured but the product package was visible in terms of design and color. Participants rated the product on six semantic differential scales anchored by 1 and 7. The scales were Ugly-Pretty, Boring-Exciting, Unattractive-Attractive, Lame-Cool, Unsophisticated-Sophisticated, Unstylish-Stylish. Finally, participants rated their affective expectations of the product on a scale anchored by very low=1 and very high=5. Highly correlated semantic measures were combined. The Pretty and Attractive measures were combined to form a Beauty indicator ($r=0.862$). Cool and Exciting were combined to form a Coolness indicator ($r=0.813$). Sophisticated and Stylish were combined to form a Style indicator ($r=0.851$). Regressing these three indicators on expectation shows that they explain over 70% of the variance in participants' affective expectations for a product.

Having established the relationship between aesthetics and expectations we investigated the effects of aesthetics on the accep-

tance of non-verifiable highly positive credence claims. Study 2 employed a 2x2 between-subjects experimental design with product package (high vs. low attractive) and product quality (high vs. low) as experimental factors was utilized. Packaging aesthetics interacted with product quality to influence belief in credence claims and purchase intentions. When the context for a low quality product is an attractive package, consumers are marginally more likely to accept credence claims. When the context for a high quality product is aesthetically low, consumers are marginally more likely to accept credence claims. Study 2 indicates that expectations are set based on packaging and product quality interacts with expectations. However, affective expectations from the packages were not perfectly contrasted or assimilated into consumer beliefs regarding credence claims. Perhaps credence claims, although positively valenced were not sufficiently affective in nature, therefore contrast or assimilation with affective expectations was imperfect.

We expect that hedonic product experiences are more affective in nature. This leads to specific predictions regarding the interaction between affective expectations and hedonic product experience.

Proposition A: All that Glitters is Gold Effect. Beautiful aesthetics, such as attractive packaging, increase initial positive response to a product. This positive response positively biases hedonic product experiences.

Proposition B: Frogs can be Princes Effect. Lack of aesthetics, such as plain packaging, does not increase initial positive response to a product. When hedonic product experience exceeds expectations generated by the low level product aesthetics, the resulting positive response biases hedonic product experiences.

Study 3 was conducted to determine the implications of packaging on perceptions of verifiable product attributes by examining actual product experience and purchase intentions. A 2x2 between-subjects experimental design with product package (high vs. low attractive) and product quality (high vs. low) as experimental factors was utilized. As predicted packaging aesthetics interacted with actual product quality to influence taste evaluations and purchase intentions. We find that a highly attractive package pattern positively biases taste evaluation in the low product quality case (assimilation)—providing evidence of the *All that Glitters is Gold Effect*. Purchase intentions appear to follow a similar pattern, with increased intention to purchase with low quality product when presented in the context of a highly attractive vs. low attractive package. The contrast bias was not significant with the high quality product in the low attractive package, though the means are directionally consistent with the *Frogs can be Princes Effect*.

Study 4 was conducted to further examine the unique impact low aesthetics and a high quality product to determine whether a contrast effect occurs. Participants' post-taste responses were measured to assess whether feeling surprise played a role in their perceptions and intentions. A between-subjects experimental design was employed, with product package (high vs. low attractive) and identical very high quality product in both packages. We find that if the packaging signal does not generate a positive response

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because of its low aesthetic appearance, then the individual is delighted when she experiences a high quality product. This surprise increases evaluation. Purchase intention follows a similar pattern. Apparently, when an individual kisses a frog that turns out to be a prince, her subsequent assessment is more positive than it would have been if she had expected to be kissing a prince initially. However, this *Frogs can be Princes Effect* appears to come into play only in the case of very high quality product. It seems that a product must be pretty “charming” to be contrasted to the low aesthetics of its package.

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