**Good From Far But Far From Good: the Effects of Visual Fluency on Impressions of Package Design**

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Consumers often make initial judgments about brands based solely on the package, and the accuracy of these impressions influences brand selection and evaluation. This paper examines the accuracy of meaning (brand personality and quality impressions) derived from package design. The results of two studies show 1) some holistic package designs convey meaning across subjects more accurately (consensual accuracy), 2) holistic package designs differ in meaning when packages are viewed from different distances (spatial accuracy), and 3) individual differences in design acumen and in product category involvement affect spatial accuracy. Implications focus on package effects and implications for brand design decisions.

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Good from Far but Far from Good: The Effects of Visual Fluency on Impressions of Package Design

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers often make initial judgments about brands based solely on the brand’s packages, and the accuracy of these impressions influences brand selection and evaluation. This paper examines the accuracy of meaning (brand personality and quality impressions) derived from package design (Bloch 1995). More specifically, we examine three areas where there are gaps in our knowledge concerning the effect of package design on impressions, the areas of consensual accuracy, spatial accuracy, and individual differences in spatial accuracy.

The first area concerns the consensual accuracy of brand impressions which are derived from the design of packages. Brand managers, designers, consumers and other stakeholders have a vested interest in having consumers form similar impressions from their packaging. This provides a consistency in impressions, allowing managers to more accurately convey information, and allowing consumers to receive more accurate knowledge. The second area concerns spatial accuracy. Many situations exist where consumers see marketing stimuli from more than one distance. For example, a billboard viewed from a distance may result in different impressions than the same billboard viewed from up close, and a wine bottle in a retail store might evoke one set of brand impressions from a distance, and yet another set of impressions when held in the hand. A third area where we have little knowledge is the influence of interpersonal differences on impressions formed from packages, specifically brand and quality impressions. Individuals who are highly involved in a product category, or those whom have a great deal of acumen in the design of packages, may process package information differently than those who are less involved or those who have less design acumen.

We designed and conducted two studies to examine these three gaps in our knowledge, specifically 1) consensual accuracy, 2) spatial accuracy, and 3) the affect of individual differences in involvement and design acumen on spatial accuracy. In our first study, we examine fifty examples from five different types of holistic package designs identified in prior research (massive, contrasting, natural, delicate, and non-descript packages, Orth and Malkewitz 2008), and we examine the influence of the five package designs on brand personality (Aaker 1997) and quality impressions. We find that the five designs significantly differ in their ability to generate the consistent impressions needed for consensual accuracy. Natural and delicate designs had more consensual accuracy, and massive, contrasting, and delicate designs had less. These differences are thought to be due to differences in the perceptual fluency of the stimuli (Janiszewski 1993; Reber, Winkelmann, and Schwarz 1998).

Study 2 was conducted to examine the spatial accuracy of the five types of package designs, the situation where a package is viewed from more than one distance, as if approaching a package on a shelf in a retail environment. Subjects were shown smaller and larger package images, and the differences in brand and quality impressions was examined. Consumer also provided additional information on their level of involvement with their level of involvement in the category (Zaichkowsky 1985) and their design acumen (Bloch, Brunel, and Arnold 2003). Changes in brand personality (independent of design) were found for “exciting” brand personality impressions (packages rated more exciting for the smaller “seen at a distance” packages), while ruggedness, competence, and sophistication brand impressions were stronger for the larger “seen up close” packages. Quality ratings were also higher for larger “seen up close” packages.

The influence of the five holistic package designs was also significant, Massive and contrasting designs had significantly greater changes in personality and quality impressions, while changes in the natural and delicate designs were not as great. There was little change in non-descript designs. Additionally, there were several situations where there were differential impressions of brand personality due to package design. For example, massive designs gave the impression of being more sophisticated when viewed from a distance, while delicate designs gave the impression of being more sophisticated when viewed up close.

We also found that being more involved in the product category, or having more design acumen, resulted in a decreased spatial accuracy of these individuals. The addition of more information to the process of evaluating packages results in significant differences in the brand personality evaluations.

The implications of this research are of interest for all brand and package stakeholders. We provide evidence that package design has an influence on the consensual accuracy of the brand and quality impressions formed by consumers, that certain package designs are more (or less) consistent in the impressions that they generate when viewed at different distances, and we show that consumers high in involvement and design acumen form package impressions that are different from those with less involvement or less acumen. This evidence suggests that brand managers should more closely examine their packages to insure consumers form consistent impressions from their packages (consensual accuracy), to insure consumers form consistent impressions regardless of viewing distance (spatial accuracy), and to insure that their packages are appropriate for consumers differing in levels of acumen and involvement.

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When Good Looks Kill: An Examination of Consumer Response to Visually Attractive Product Design
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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 beliefs 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 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 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.

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