Consumer Responses to the Mass-Customization of Product Aesthetics

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This research investigates the psychological processes underlying consumer responses to the mass-customization of product aesthetics. Respondents were presented with a website that allowed for different extents of functional and aesthetic mass-customization. Also, we manipulated the social setting in which the product was used. Our findings suggest that customizing a product’s functional features enhances its functional value, whereas aesthetic mass-customization increases the product’s self-expressive value. Both the product’s functional and self-expressive value positively affect purchase intention, whereas the perceived complexity of the task has a negative effect. Finally, public consumption enhances the self-expressive value of visually customized products.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Mass-customization strategies allow consumers to create individualized products that match their personal needs. Although mass-customization can appeal to broad audiences and is becoming more available in the marketplace, research on this topic has been somewhat limited (Hauser, Tellis, and Griffin 2006). Specifically, we have an emerging body of evidence on the processes that determine consumers’ evaluation of the mass-customization of functional elements (e.g., Dellaert and Stremersch 2005), but lack a complementary understanding regarding the mass-customization of product aesthetics. Although there are some similarities between mass-customization of functional features and aesthetics, we believe that there are unique aspects to aesthetic mass-customization as well. An important difference is that aesthetic mass-customization has a strong affective and symbolic nature. Hence, different constructs might drive consumers’ reactions to these mass-customization configurators. This paper explores the value of aesthetic mass-customization for self-expression and identity management. Specifically, we investigate the importance of the extent of mass-customization and the public consumption of the mass-customized product for realizing the full potential of aesthetic mass-customization.

Mass-customization configurators differ in the extent of customization that is offered. In some configurators, the extent of mass-customization is narrow, because consumers are only offered a small number of choices, whereas in others they can make selections amongst an immense number of options. Research on functional mass-customization demonstrated that increasing the extent of functional mass-customization allows consumers to achieve greater functional value, because the product can be better customized to fit one’s technical requirements (Dellaert and Stremersch 2005). Similarly, to match consumers’ individual aesthetic preferences, consumers should be offered a great extent of aesthetic mass-customization. Then, the product can be aesthetically customized to fit one’s unique taste and reflect one’s identity. In contrast, the importance of functional mass-customization for self-expression will be limited, because functional components are often internal, and therefore, less visible than aesthetic elements. Furthermore, consumers’ aesthetic preferences are heterogeneous, whereas functional preferences are often uniformed within consumer segments, and thus, less effective in supporting one’s unique identity. Accordingly, we hypothesize that the extent of aesthetic mass-customization positively impacts the mass-customized product’s self-expressive value (H_{1a}), whereas the extent of functional mass-customization positively affects its functional value (H_{3a}).

Increasing the extent of functional and/or aesthetic mass-customization may also have a negative effect on consumer responses. Consumers may become overwhelmed by the great number of possibilities at their disposal (Huffman and Kahn 1998). Accordingly, we hypothesize that the perceived complexity of the mass-customization process is positively affected by the extent of aesthetic (H_{1b}) and functional (H_{3b}) mass-customization.

Based on the former, two opposing effects are expected for consumers’ purchase intention of mass-customized products. Whereas the mass-customized product’s functional (H_{3a}) and self-expressive value (H_{3b}) will enhance purchase intentions, perceived complexity (H_{4}) will reduce these.

Nevertheless, we expect that consumers’ perceptions of the self-expressive value of mass-customized products are impacted by more than just the extent of aesthetic mass-customization. People derive their identity more from social interactions with others than from internal, psychological forces (Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993). Consequently, a product’s self-expressive value depends on its visibility to others. Accordingly, we propose that for aesthetic mass-customization the benefit of self-expressiveness is enhanced if the mass-customized product is publicly consumed (H_{2}). Because the value of functional mass-customization for self-expression is limited, public consumption will not affect this type of mass-customization.

In Study 1, 364 undergraduate students were presented with one of the eight generated mass-customization configurators for a laptop. For the manipulation of functional mass-customization, the breadth (4 vs. 8 technical aspects) and depth (2 vs. 4-6 options for each aspect) of functional mass-customization choices was varied. Extent of aesthetic mass-customization was manipulated by offering a choice among four colors or the possibility to personally create a product for realizing the full potential of aesthetic mass-customization. Then, the product can be aesthetically customized to fit one’s unique taste and reflect one’s identity. In contrast, the important of functional mass-customization for self-expression will be limited, because functional components are often internal, and therefore, less visible than aesthetic elements. Furthermore, consumers’ aesthetic preferences are heterogeneous, whereas functional preferences are often uniformed within consumer segments, and thus, less effective in supporting one’s unique identity. Accordingly, we hypothesize that the extent of aesthetic mass-customization positively impacts the mass-customized product’s self-expressive value (H_{1a}), whereas the extent of functional mass-customization positively affects its functional value (H_{3a}).

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In conclusion, our research shows that aesthetic mass-customization is different from functional mass-customization, because it provides symbolic value through the product’s ability for self-expression. In contrast, functional mass-customization is valued because it provides a better fit to individual technical requirements. Consequently, different antecedents may drive the two types of mass-customization, which is supported by the effect of public/private consumption on the evaluation of aesthetic mass-
customization. Finally, our findings show that increasing the extent of aesthetic mass-customization has a positive (through the self-expressive value) as well as a negative (through perceived complexity) effect on the intention to purchase the mass-customized product. These opposing effects have to be carefully managed when offering mass-customization configurators.

REFERENCES


