Innovation Aesthetics: the Relationship Between Category Cues, Categorization Certainty and Newness Perceptions

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We investigate the capacity of innovative visual aesthetics to inhibit a consumer’s objective appreciation of a product’s newness. Findings from three studies indicate that if consumers are not certain of a new product’s categorization, as can happen with innovative aesthetics, a product’s newness will be surprisingly underappreciated.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15921/volumes/v38/NA-38

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Research suggests a disconnect between what marketers deem to be new and innovative versus what consumers actually perceive (Gourville 2006). Many factors may contribute to this, however, we investigate the factor that has significant potential to first attract a consumer to a new product, the product’s visual aesthetic design. Despite the capacity for innovative product design to elevate a company’s success in the marketplace, there has been little attempt to determine how this may influence newness perceptions. It is acknowledged that “product newness is a vital selling point,” (Bloch 1995) and “widely respected” (Moreau and Dahl 2005), and visual design is often a central focus of new product managers; yet when considered together, there is limited insight into the factors that underlie their relationship. While research on innovation adoption has identified factors that influence consumer preferences, the majority of the studies assume product newness to be objectively perceived and appreciated by participants. In contrast, we introduce a unique perspective of consumer response to new products by examining newness perceptions as a dependent variable that is inherently comparative, highly subjective and dependent on the certainty of underlying categorization processes. By utilizing a categorization framework to examine the relationship between innovative visual aesthetics and newness, we are also able to provide support for the role of categorization certainty, a type of certainty that may account for the somewhat surprising subjectivity of newness perceptions.

The relation between innovative visual aesthetics and newness perceptions has not been well defined. There are at least two reasons for this. First, studies on new products have typically made visual product information non-essential in the evaluation of an innovation by not providing product pictures and focusing participants explicitly on written descriptions of a product’s non-visual features, functionality, and benefits (e.g., Alexander et al. 2008; Castano et al., 2008; Hoeffler 2003; Lajos et al. 2009). Second, research investigating consumer response to design has used products that do not deviate visually in any substantial way from typical category members (Cox and Cox 2002; Page and Herr 2002; Veryzer and Hutchinson 1998). In contrast, our focus is on innovative visual aesthetics. When the exterior of a product differs significantly from known category members, identifying the product’s category may be difficult, uncertain or impossible. With the innovative Roomba vacuum, for example, even if consumers were provided with the product’s category, uncertainty in the vacuum label may arise because its design is drastically different from that of a prototypical vacuum. It is this uncertainty in a new product’s categorization that we predict will explain the influence of innovative aesthetics on newness perceptions.

We define categorization certainty as the level of confidence an individual has in their categorization of a product. This parallels a construct in attitude persuasion, thought confidence ( Petty, Brinol, and Tormala 2002). Similar to how thought confidence is proposed to influence attitudes, we propose that how certain a consumer is in the categorization of a product will influence newness perceptions. The source of categorization uncertainty may vary. For instance, Gregan-Paxton et al. (2005) and Lajos et al. (2009) explored categorization uncertainty associated with products that possess features and functionality from different categories. We build on this, by explicitly defining and measuring categorization certainty and its independent effect on newness perceptions in response to innovative aesthetics. Specifically, we predict that when categorization certainty is low (high), an aesthetically innovative new product will be rated as less (more) new (hypothesis 1).

When faced with innovative product design, consumers will first seek to identify the new product’s category. Innovative aesthetics may make categorization difficult and reliance on all available category cues will be necessary to identify a product’s category with certainty. In our attempt to isolate the effect of innovative visual aesthetics on newness perceptions, we treat product function and brand name as additional sources of category information or cues, as these may be processed in addition to visual aesthetics to confirm a product’s categorization. Thus, we anticipate that when additional diagnostic category cues are available, the more certain consumers will be in a product’s categorization and the newer they will perceive an innovative product. We predict that categorization certainty will mediate the influence of category cues on newness perceptions (hypothesis 2).

In studies 1 and 2, we manipulated the availability of supplemental category cues, during exposure to a new product, to examine how additional category information affects the relation between categorization certainty and newness perceptions. In study 1, the number of category cues available to participants was manipulated through the presence or absence of a brand name on the product’s exterior. In study 2, category cue level was manipulated by having participants either view a picture of a new product or a video demonstration. Support for both hypotheses was found in studies 1 and 2. In study 3, we contrasted two products from the same category, through a manipulation of design prototypicality, to further demonstrate that innovative visual aesthetics exacerbates the negative effect of categorization uncertainty on newness perceptions.

Prior investigations have not defined or isolated the effect of categorization certainty on judgements, like newness perceptions, that occur early in the new product adoption process, nor examined the role of visual aesthetics and availability of category cues as antecedents to categorization uncertainty. We demonstrate that if a consumer cannot categorize a new product with certainty, as can happen with innovative aesthetic design, a product’s newness is likely to be underappreciated. Our findings do not imply that product designers should be conservative in the visual design of their new products. In fact, Verganti (2006) points out that radical innovations actually tend to have longer commercial success, higher margins and increased consumer receptivity. Rather, our findings suggest that there is a potential danger in letting consumers self select and validate a new product’s category membership. Consistent with Verganti (2006), our research emphasizes the importance of “preparing the public” for “ground-breaking products”. When introducing new products with innovative visual aesthetics, this preparation should come through the careful and deliberate disclosure of a product’s category membership.

REFERENCES


