Shaping Product Perceptions

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In this research we investigate how product shape impacts decision-making, and whether apart from conscious visual aesthetic preferences for certain shapes, there are nonconscious impacts of aesthetically pleasing shapes on perceived functionality, or whether there is nonconscious rationalization of visual pleasure by awarding higher importance to other functional aspects.

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Academic researchers reiterate the importance of product design and aesthetics as an opportunity for differential advantage in the marketplace (Creusen and Schoormans 2005, Bloch 1995). There has been a recent upsurge in academic interest in product design aesthetics, and some of this work includes studying how aesthetic stimuli are processed (Reimann et al 2010), how aesthetics impact perceived functionality (Hoegg, Alba and Dahl 2010) etc. In the current research we attempt to isolate and investigate the impact of product shape, arguably a more subtle component of product design. We firstly investigate whether people have preferences for certain kinds of shapes for different types of products for which shape is not related to product functionality. We then try to establish whether there is transference of the positive attitude towards aesthetically appealing shapes to perceived functional and/or hedonic benefits of the product. We finally investigate how product shape influences perceptions, and whether the influence of shape occurs at a conscious or non-conscious level.

Preference for specific shapes. Given that a vast majority of products and packages in the marketplace are rectangular (Raghubir and Greenleaf 2006) a question that naturally arises is whether consumers in general prefer products with angular shapes as opposed to curvaceous shapes, despite evidence from psychology that people tend to prefer curved objects to angular objects (Bar and Neta 2005). Photographs of various common hedonic (examples: car, mp3 player) as well as utilitarian products (examples: teapot, external hard drive, sports bottle) that are typically available in both curvilinear and angular forms, were converted into outline diagrams using a software so that there were no obvious differences in design other than the outer shape of the products. These line drawings were evaluated by subjects, as part of a “Product Prototype Evaluation study”. The angular and curvilinear versions of each product were pretested to be equivalent on prototypicality (Reber, Schwarz and Winkielman 2004). We find that across the range of products we tested, the curvilinear form is preferred over the angular by a vast majority of respondents. “Visual pleasure” is the most common spontaneous reason provided for the preference, and in an upcoming study, response times will be measured to see whether higher perceptual fluency for curvilinear shapes drives this preference (Reber, Schwarz and Winkielman 2004).

Shape and perceived functionality. There is a fair amount of research evidencing that shape of a container can impact perceived quantity perceptions and consumption (Raghubir and Greenleaf 2006, Yang and Raghubir 2005, Wansink and Ittersum 2005), but the specific role of aesthetically pleasing shape(s) in influencing product perceptions has received limited attention. We study whether superior functional and/or hedonic benefits are attributed to aesthetically preferred shapes, for products where shape should not be associated with functionality. We have evidence that visually appealing shapes are associated with perceived superior functional benefits (example: a curvilinear car is perceived to be more fuel-efficient than a more angular (boxy) car, a curvilinear external hard drive is perceived to have more capacity than an angular shaped one), and/or perceived superior hedonic benefits (example: curvilinear teapot perceived to be “better suited for party”). This will be further explored with a larger range of utilitarian and hedonic products.

The nonconscious role of shape. In a third study we set out to investigate whether the influence of product shape may be at a less conscious level than we imagine. We showed subjects two prototype products belonging to the same category, one curvilinear in shape and the other angular. The products shared one common attribute specification, were individually superior to the other product on a second attribute, and were individually inferior on a third attribute. (The latter two attributes were pretested to be equally important). A control group evaluated the same pair of products with the same attribute specifications but without any pictures (no difference on visual appeal). Subjects were asked to evaluate the importance of the three given attributes for the purchase decision-making process for that category. The hypothesis was that the attribute on which the aesthetically appealing shaped (curvilinear) product is superior would be deemed to be of higher importance as compared to the control group. We find preliminary support for our hypothesis in several product categories, and are currently working on generalizing these results to different kinds of product categories.

In summary, in this research we investigate in what manner product shape impacts decision-making, and whether apart from conscious visual aesthetic preferences, there are nonconscious impacts of aesthetically pleasing shapes on perceived functionality, or whether there is nonconscious rationalization of visual pleasure by awarding higher importance to other functional aspects.


The Relationship between Brand Personality and Self Construal

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This paper examines the sincere and exciting dimensions of brand personality and individual differences which prior work on consumer-brand relationship has overlooked. The aim of this research is to provide insight in the previously stated question about consumer–brand relationships. The major question is how individual difference affects consumer-brand relationships by attaching to different kinds of brand personalities. This research examines the extent to which Aaker’s (1997) structure of personality attributes is associated with individual difference (either independent or interdependent individual).

This study defines brand personality as the set of human personality traits that are both relevant and associated with brands (Aaker, 1997). Thus it includes such characteristics as gender, age, socioeconomic class and human personality traits as warmth, concern and sentimentality (Aaker, 1996). For example, Coca Cola is classic but Pepsi is young; Victoria’s Secret tends to be feminine and sexy in comparison to Jockey; Disney tents to be young and fun when compared to Yellow Stone National Park.

Brand personality is a vehicle for the consumer to express different aspects of self (Aaker 1997; Belk 1988; Escalas and Bettman 2005; Johar, Sengupta, and Aaker 2005). Previous research suggested that a person’s personality could influence consumer behavior, and consumer’s personality traits could influence their shopping styles or strategies (Horton 1979). Furthermore, researchers have suggested that brand personality could help differentiate brands (e.g., Crask and Laskey 1990), identify personal meaning for the consumer and to determine brand equity (Aaker 1991). But little research is known about how individual difference influences consumer-brand relationship by attaching to different kinds of brand personalities. This study tries to fill up the gap between individual difference and brand personality.

This study will focus on capturing exciting and sincere brand personalities. Among Aaker’s five dimensions of Brand Personality Scale, exciting and sincere brand personalities appear to capture much of the variance in personality ratings of brands (Aaker, 1997). Exciting and sincere brand personalities are particularly important because they map onto the key three ideals that Fletcher et al. (1999) note as being important in interpersonal relationships: warmth, vitality, and status (Swaminathan & Stilley, 2009). Exciting brand personalities try to achieve differentiation through unique and irrelevant advertising (e.g., Dr. Pepper and BMW). Sincere brand personalities have been pursued by companies which wish to build a warmer, trustful and responsible brand image (e.g., Coca-cola and Ford).

Independent individuals regard themselves as independent from others in order to express their unique attributes (Johnson, 1985; Marsella et al., 1985). This view of the self derives from the belief that each person’s configuration of internal attributes are whole and unique (Johnson, 1985). Interdependent individuals view the relationship between the self and others features the person not as separate from the social context; they view themselves as part a group. Individuals with an interdependent self-construal are motivated to find a way to “fit in with relevant others, fulfill and create obligation”, and in general to become part of various interpersonal relationships (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

Consumers are known to form a strong relationship with their brands to express their identities (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Reed, 2004). Therefore, we hypothesize that individuals would have different motivations to be attached to a certain brand. An independent individual should be motivated by an exciting brand that allow expression of his important self-defining, and validate his inner attributes. In contrast, an interdependent individual should be motivated to those actions that enhance or foster one’s relatedness or connection to others, maintain harmony with social context and adjust oneself to the social group. Sincere brands fit interdependent individuals’ needs by allowing one to be connected to the social context and convey a sense of belonging.

Across two studies we test the overall hypothesis that consumers with an independent self construal are more likely to have a higher brand attachment and brand attitude toward exciting brands than sincere brands. We also tested how brand information type influences the consumer brand relationship.

In study 1, 119 participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in a 2 (brand personality: sincere vs. exciting). Instead of manipulating self construal, we used Singels’ (1994) Independent Self-Construal scale to measure independent and interdependent self construal. Participants were asked to view a Win detergent ad which manipulated the brand personality and provide their reactions to it. We chose Win detergent because based on the pretest, it is not a very exiting or sincere brand, and participants have a very low familiarity with