I’Ll Keep the Cuddly One: Effects of Cuteness Versus Elegance on Product Retention

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Three studies show that, compared to an elegant-looking product design, a cute-looking product design induces a higher intent to retain, but not a higher intent to purchase, the product. The advantage of cuteness on product retention is explained by caretaking motivation, and this advantage is reduced for functional products.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Despite the existence of several successful cute-looking products in the marketplace, such as the Volkswagen Beetle or the numerous Hello Kitty accessories, it seems that marketers still prefer striving to create elegant-looking product designs built on aesthetic principles (e.g., symmetry and harmony, Kumar and Garg 2010), and are reluctant to incorporate cuteness into the designs of their products. Such reluctance may reflect an implicit assumption that cute-looking product designs do not have any particular advantage over elegant-looking designs in driving product purchases.

In this research, we argue that the advantage of cute-looking designs emerges when the focus of investigation is shifted from product acquisition to retention. We posit that just as infants’ cuteness is conducive to sustaining their parents’ caretaking behaviors for a long time (Glocker et al. 2009; Morreall 1991), the advantage of cuteness in product design should be manifested in sustaining a close relationship between a cute-looking product and its owner for a long period. We propose that, even when a cute-looking and an elegant-looking product design are perceived as equally attractive, the cute-looking one will induce a higher intention to retain the product.

Study 1 adopted a 2 (Product image: cute-looking versus elegant-looking) X 2 (Mindset: high versus low ownership) between-subjects design to test this hypothesis. As a stimulus, we used a T-shirt featuring a cute-looking (versus an elegant-looking) dog image, and employed a customization (versus a choice) task to induce a high (versus a low) ownership mindset (Shu and Peck 2011). After customizing (versus choosing) a T-shirt, participants (111 undergraduate students, 54 females) indicated their willingness to keep the T-shirt. A product image X mindset interaction emerged ($F(1, 107) = 3.28$, $p = .07$). In the high ownership condition, participants were more willing to keep the cute-looking than the elegant-looking T-shirt ($M_s = 6.22$ versus 5.12; $F(1, 107) = 7.60, p < .01$), whereas in the low ownership condition ($p > .9$). Study 1 hence provided initial evidence that when consumers experience a strong sense of psychological product ownership, a cute-looking product design elicits a higher intention to retain the product than does an elegant-looking design.

Study 2 adopted a 2 (Product image: cute-looking versus elegant-looking) X 2 (Mindset: ownership versus acquisition) between-subjects design. This study used a different product category and a different ownership mindset manipulation to further extend the findings of Study 1 by showing that, compared to an elegant-looking product design, a cute-looking design induces only a higher intention to retain, but not to purchase, the product. Study 2 also aimed to provide evidence for consumers’ caretaking motivation as explaining the retention advantage of cuteness. Participants (199 adults recruited online, 89 females) evaluated either a cute-looking, panda-themed teapot or an elegant-looking, peacock-themed teapot. In the acquisition mindset condition, participants indicated their willingness to buy the teapot. In the ownership mindset condition, participants completed a mental imagery task that simulated psychological ownership (Peck and Shu 2009) and then indicated their willingness to retain the teapot. To test the underlying mechanism, we measured caretaking motivation with two items, “a desire to take care of/protect the product ($\alpha = .93$). There was a product image X mindset interaction ($F(1, 193) = 4.14, p < .05$), with perceived attractiveness and anthropomorphism, which differed across the cuteness and elegance conditions, as covariates. Extending the findings of Study 1, the results showed that participants were more willing to retain the cute-looking than the elegant-looking teapot ($M_s = 4.70$ versus $4.28; F(1, 193) = 10.72, p < .001$), whereas their purchase intentions for the two teapots did not differ ($p > .6$). A bootstrap-based mediation analysis further confirmed that the advantage of cuteness over elegance on product retention was mediated by caretaking motivation (LL 95% CI = .01, UL 95% CI = .22).

In Study 3, we tested product category as a boundary condition for the retention advantage of cuteness. Due to the associations between elegant-looking designs and higher performance expectations (Orth, Campana, and Malkewitz 2010) and between baby-schema and weakness and vulnerability (Gorn, Jiang, and Gita 2008), people might infer low performance from cute-looking designs, which should be particularly detrimental in product categories for which functional performance is the primary attribute used in product evaluations (hereafter referred to as “functional” products). Therefore, we expect that for functional products, the advantage of cuteness over elegance on product retention will be reduced. Study 3 adopted a 2 (Product image: cute-looking versus elegant-looking) X 2 (Product category: functional versus non-functional) between-subjects design, with a focus on intent to retain the product. Participants saw the images of either a cute-looking or an elegant-looking computer speaker. In the functional product condition, the speaker image was shown as is, whereas in the non-functional product condition the same speaker image was printed on a fridge magnet, with participants being told that they received the magnet as a gift from a company manufacturing computer speakers. The procedure was similar to the one used in the ownership mindset condition of Study 2. Eighty undergraduates

### Table 1: A Summary of Empirical Results

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<th>Study</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study 1</td>
<td>T-shirt</td>
<td>A customization task</td>
<td>--Participants were more willing to keep the cute-looking T-shirt than the elegant-looking one only when they experienced a strong psychological product ownership.</td>
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<td>Study 2</td>
<td>Teapots</td>
<td>A mental imagery task</td>
<td>--Participants were more willing to retain, but not more willing to purchase, the cute-looking teapot than the elegant-looking one. --Caretaking motivation mediated the effect of product image on product retention.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study 3</td>
<td>Computer speakers, fridge magnets</td>
<td>A mental imagery task</td>
<td>--For functional products, the retention advantage of cuteness over elegance disappeared.</td>
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(44 females) participated in the study. We found a product image X mindset interaction ($F(1, 75) = 4.15, p < .05$), with affective reaction, which differed across the cuteness and elegance conditions, as a co-variate. When the product was non-functional (i.e., fridge magnets), we obtained the same pattern of results observed in the previous studies—specifically, participants were more willing to retain the cute-looking rather than the elegant-looking product ($M$'s= 4.50 versus 3.21; $F (1, 75) = 4.25, p < .05$). In contrast, there was no difference in willingness to retain the product ($p > .4$) when the product was functional (i.e., speakers). The results support our hypothesis that the effect of cuteness on retention is reduced for functional products.

In summary, we show that although cute-looking product designs enjoy no advantage over elegant-looking designs in stimulating purchase intentions, consumers are more willing to keep cute products when they own them. The cuteness advantage on product retention results from caretaking motivation and is absent in functional products.

REFERENCES


