Fragile Products and Conspicuous Conscientiousness

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This research examines the consumer preference for fragility. Fragility is widely accepted as a negative product characteristic and opposite, durability, is considered a critical component of product quality. The results of three studies demonstrate that consumers value fragility as a costly signal of conscientiousness, a desirable personality trait.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Durability refers to “the amount of use one gets from a product before it physically deteriorates” (Garvin 1984a, p. 31) and is widely regarded as a desirable product characteristic (Cooper, 2004; Garvin, 1984a; Verbeeck and Kockelkoren, 1998). Consequently, durability has been classified as an essential component of product quality (Reeves and Bednar, 1994; Juran, 1992, p. 10) and products that are capable of resisting wear and breakage are viewed as offering both long term benefits for consumers and strategic value for producers (Tellis and Wernerfelt, 1987; Garvin, 1984b). Furthermore, conventional wisdom holds that if consumers spend their limited resources on a product, they should not want that product to break. In sum, there is no shortage of research to suggest that consumers value durability and that firms should thus strive to produce products that are increasingly durable.

Despite the high value placed on durability, consumers nevertheless purchase products that are known to be frail or fragile. Even when it comes to functional products such as smartphones, where durability is invested in and sought after (Panzerin, 2013; Bachman, 2014; Gardiner, 2012), consumers continue to purchase products that are easily damaged. For example, Apple Inc. has been noted as producing some of the most breakable consumer electronics on the market (Sparkes, 2014). Despite this, Apple continues to report record-setting revenues and profits (Apple, 2015).

A simple explanation for this is that fragility communicates social status and, more specifically, wealth. By owning something that can easily break, a consumer may be signaling to others that the costs associated with replacing the fragile product are of little concern to them. Furthermore, consumers infer that delicate products are expensive (Orth and Malkewitz 2008), suggesting a correlation between high-end, luxury products and fragility. However, the products people consume disclose far more about them than their access to financial resources (Holt, 1998; Berger and Ward, 2010, Wang and Griskevicius, 2014). Miller (2009) speculated that consumers may purchase fragile products as an act of conspicuous conscientiousness. Consistent with Miller’s initial conceptualization, we define conspicuous conscientiousness as the act of consuming for the purpose of signaling an ability to effectively care for and/or maintain one’s personal property. Although this concept has yet to be empirically demonstrated, the proposition is noteworthy because it suggests that fragility may be desirable in everyday products, not only in expensive luxury goods.

Using costly signaling theory (Smith and Bird 2000; Zahavi and Zahavi 1997), we test and find support for the premise that owning fragile everyday products represents a costly signal of conscientiousness. In study 1, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (product: fragile/durable) × 2 (context: public/private) × 2 (fragility) between-subjects factorial design. Participants imagined buying a vase for either a public context (their dinner party) or a private context (their home work space). They then viewed an advertisement for a $34.95 vase that was noted as being either delicate or durable (the image was constant). Participants then stated their willingness to pay for the vase and completed wealth and status signaling confound check items and a manipulation check. When the vase was fragile, willingness to pay was significantly higher in the public context relative to the private context. However, willingness to pay did not differ between contexts when the vase was durable. An analysis of the confound checks suggest that the preference for fragility cannot be explained by perceptions that the fragile vase would signal that one is wealthy or of high social status.

In study 2, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (motive: mating/control) × 2 (product: fragile/durable) between subjects factorial design. Participants were randomly assigned to read either a mating motive prime or a control story taken directly from Griskevicius, Cialdini, and Kenrick (2006). As part of an ostensibly separate study participants evaluated an advertisement for a smartphone that was noted as being either delicate or unbreakable due to being made of a fictional material called Xilex. Participants rated how desirable they felt the smartphone was (Griskevicius, Shiota, et al., 2010) and completed the same confound check and manipulation check items as in study 1. Our results indicate that in the mating motive condition, the fragile smartphone was more desirable relative to the durable smartphone. However, in the control condition, the durable and fragile smartphones did not differ in terms of their desirability.

Study 3 examined how signal recipients interpret the signal in order to gain insights into what exactly is being conveyed. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions in a between subjects main effect design. Participants read a short vignette about an individual who recently purchased a few vintage cameras which were either durable or delicate. In the control condition, no mention was made of durability or fragility. All participants then rated the target individual using the 20-item Mini-IPIP five factor personality scale (Donnellan, Oswald, Baird, and Lucas, 2006). Participants then rated the status signaling, wealth signaling, and fragility of the cameras using the same measures as in the previous studies. The target individual was perceived to be more conscientious when the cameras were fragile compared to when they were durable and also compared to the control condition. Perceived conscientiousness did not differ between the durable and control condition. Furthermore, the confound checks supported our previous findings that fragility does not signal wealth or high social status.

In this work, we make several theoretical contributions. Most importantly, our findings suggest that consumers value fragility when it can serve as a costly signal of conscientiousness. Although some firms strive to make their products progressively more durable (Rubin, 2014), our findings suggest that this effort may be contrary to what consumers actually want. However, further research is required to investigate boundary conditions to our findings. More specifically, our studies did not explore whether certain categories are incapable of signaling conscientiousness by way of fragility. For example, fragility may never be appealing in non-signaling categories such as tools.

REFERENCES


Miller, Geoffrey (2009), Spent: Sex, Evolution, and Consumer Behavior: Penguin.


