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## **Nonfunctional Self-Customization Enhances Product Performance**

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This research provides evidence that nonfunctional self-customization enhances performance. When a product is infused with a person's unique personality, performance is enhanced independent of product efficacy beliefs. Five studies show that the effect is robust across different types of tasks (e.g., putting, anagrams, dart throwing, ping pong ball game).

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# Nonfunctional Self-Customization Enhances Product Performance

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Self-customization occurs when consumers self-design products that are subsequently manufactured by a firm. Self-design can be used to improve functional product attributes, and enhance performance, or nonfunctional product attributes, and enable self-expression (Dellaert and Stremersch 2005; Franke and Schreier 2008; Moreau, Bonney, and Herd 2011; Moreau and Herd 2010). This research provides evidence that nonfunctional mass customization also enhances performance.

The value of mass customization is exemplified by the premium consumers will pay for these products – mass customized products can sell for up to twice as much as off-the-shelf products (Franke, Schreier, and Kaiser 2010; Norton, Mochon, and Ariely 2011). Prior research has focused primarily on how mass customization imbues design utility into the product. For example, researchers have investigated how the fit between product attributes and consumer needs enhances product valuations (e.g., Dellaert and Stremersch 2005; Randall et al. 2007). Less studied is the utility that comes from the usage of the product itself (i.e., performance utility). Although one might expect that some types of design utility (e.g., shaft length or head weighting of a customized golf club) would influence performance utility, the same does not hold for other types of design utility (e.g., grip color of a customized golf club). Yet, challenging this expectation, there is anecdotal evidence that people believe the customization of nonfunctional product attributes will enhance their performance. For example, many professional athletes believe they will perform better when wearing a jersey with their preferred number.

In this research we propose that the customization of nonfunctional product attributes allows a person to imbue a product with personal qualities which, in turn, increases the efficacy of the product. The belief that a product expresses one's individuality (i.e., "this product is uniquely me") increases a person's affinity with the product. Affinity with a product should facilitate goal pursuit on any task where the product is a viable tool given the goal. The implication is that products expressing an owner's individuality (e.g., a customized putter that is "me") should motivate performance independent of the owner's belief that the product can achieve the goal (e.g., "my customized putter is more effective at making putts"). This claim is novel, as the amount of motivation to pursue a goal has been shown to depend on goal activation, goal desirability, and expectations of goal attainability, but not on the expression of individuality afforded by a means (van Osselaer and Janiszewski 2012).

We use four studies to provide evidence that the customization of nonfunctional product attributes increases a user's motivation to pursue goals for which the product is instrumental. Study 1 shows that customization of a pen's nonfunctional attributes increases performance on an anagram task completed with the pen. The increased performance is a result of increased persistence at the task, a motivational effect. Yet, the increased performance cannot be attributed to beliefs about how the customized pen might improve performance, suggesting it is the individuality expressed by the customized pen (i.e., "this pen suits me") that is motivating. Study 2 shows that it is the use of the customized pen, not the act of customization that enhances performance. Study 3 shows that a product must be customized for oneself in order for it to be motivating. Finally, Study 4 (darts) shows that the motivational consequences of customizing

nonfunctional attributes depend on goal desirability. When a customized product expresses individuality, and the goal that is pursued with the product is desirable, there is more motivation to pursue the goal. No competing explanations (e.g., determination, satisfaction, feelings of accomplishment, mood) could be found to account for the pattern of results.

The studies contribute to the emerging literature on mass customization. Extant research has mostly tried to identify and quantify the design utility derived from customization. An exploration of the other sources of utility has been mostly neglected. Little is known, for example, about how consumers use their customized products once they are delivered. The empirical work presented here advances our understanding of customization in a major way; customization is not only an effective strategy for delivering incremental design utility, but it also boosts performance utility. On a more general note, the research contributes to the literature on goal pursuit. In the goal pursuit literature, there are three sources of motivation to pursue a goal, namely goal activation, goal desirability and expectations of goal attainability. We add the expression of individuality afforded by the means as a fourth, additional source of the motivation to pursue a goal.

Our findings are also of managerial interest. Brands offering mass customization typically promote design utility to potential customers (e.g. Adidas Eyewear: "Millions of combinations", Salvatore Ferragamo: "Your own shoe to reflect your personal style"). Our results suggest that performance utility might be another way to market mass customization. For example, why not say, "compete better with custom Nike sneakers", "score lower with Callaway customized clubs," or "drive better with your custom Mini"? Interestingly, these ideas are not far-fetched. Nike recently advertised its customization site with slogans like "customize for fit, style, and performance" and "put your personal goal on your shoe and stay motivated." It would be interesting to determine how the "customization as a source of motivation" framing affects consumers' purchasing, usage, and performance.

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