Aesthetic Forecasting: Buying Beauty For the Long Run

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We identify a systematic error in consumer preference for aesthetics. When choosing for long-term use versus short-term use, consumers opt for simpler designs (less intense color and pattern). This preference is driven by misguided predictions of faster satiation (greater decrease in liking) for intense design elements over time.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Design elements, such as product color and pattern, are an increasingly important component of the consumer product choice decision (Hoegg and Alba 2008, Patrick and Peracchio 2010). Given that many products are purchased for use over an extended period of time, consumers must not only identify their current preferences, but also predict if and how these preferences may change in the future (Kahneman and Snell 1992). Thus, an important question is whether consumers can accurately predict satiation with different product design elements.

Previous research suggests that consumers are not very adept at predicting future hedonic value (Wilson and Gilbert 2003, 2005) and often have erroneous beliefs about how hedonic value changes after repeat consumption (Snell, Gibbs, and Varey 1995). For example, participants failed to anticipate that repeated consumption would increase tastiness of an unpalatable yogurt and overestimated how quickly they would tire of music over time (Kahneman and Snell 1992).

While it is clear that consumers have difficulty predicting hedonic value, little is known about how consumers predict perceptual satiation and how this might influence consumer decision-making. Furthermore, research comparing predicted and actual liking has not systematically manipulated stimuli characteristics and examined how these influence predicted and experienced hedonic value over time.

We focus on two common product design elements: color and pattern. Both color and pattern are aesthetic characteristics that have been shown to influence complexity and arousal such that intense colors and the presence of patterns lead to greater perceived complexity and higher arousal (Berlyne 1970; Küller, Mikellides, and Janssens 2008; Walters, Apter, and Svebak 1982). Past research in other sensory consumption domains has shown that people believe that high arousal stimuli, such as loud noises, will become increasingly irritating over time (Nelson and Meyvis 2008). We therefore posit that consumers believe they will tire from high arousal product designs more quickly than from low arousal product designs. As a result, they will be more likely to avoid intense product designs when the product is intended for long-term use. Specifically we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1: Usage length (short-term versus long-term) will influence preferences for high arousal design elements of a product such that preference for high arousal design elements (strong colors or patterns) will decrease as predicted usage length increases.

This intuition however, may be misguided. Berlyne (1970) suggested that satiation effects depend on the arousal potential of the stimuli. Consumers experience the greatest hedonic value when arousal potential is at a moderate level (Wundt 1974). While people tire quickly from stimuli with low arousal potential, stimuli with high arousal potential only reach this optimal moderate arousal potential after repeated exposure, thus slowing satiation (Zajonc, et al. 1972).

The broad implication for product preference is that arousing design elements might not be as tiring as consumers expect, but instead yield continued hedonic value. Specifically, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 2: Consumers overestimate satiation from high arousal design elements, leading to errors in predicted utility.

In three studies we investigate how consumers predict satiation to product design elements of different arousal potentials over time and how this influences purchase decisions. In addition, we compare predicted and actual liking to examine the accuracy of consumers' predictions.

Study 1 tested Hypothesis 1 by varying the expected product usage period and examining its effect on product design choice. Participants were assigned to either a short-term or a long-term use condition. They were asked to imagine they had decided to purchase paper cups for use over one weekend (short-term condition) or over the coming year (long-term condition). They were then presented with a choice between two cups, a low arousal cup (a white cup) and a high arousal cup (one of seven high arousal variations: solid bright green, solid bright orange, solid bright blue, green stitch, blue dots, black zig-zags or red checkered). Confirming Hypothesis 1, participants in the long-term use condition were more likely to choose the low arousal cup than participants in the short-term usage condition.

Study 2 tested whether the preference for low arousal design elements when making decision about long-term use results from consumer predicting faster satiation with high arousal design elements. Participants predicted how much they would like one of two products (bedding or plates) with either low or high arousal product design (low arousal [plain white], high arousal pattern [white/striped or white/abstract], high arousal colored [strong green or strong orange]) at various points in the future (ranging from one week to four years). Results revealed that participants expected to grow tired more quickly from high arousal than from low arousal product designs. The pattern was observed for both of the high arousal design elements, color and pattern.

Study 3 tested whether consumers' predicted satiation patterns observed in Study 2 are accurate. The study involved the use of nameplates in class that had either a high or low arousal design (Low [plain white or pale green], high [abstract pattern or bright green]). At the beginning of the semester a group of “forecasters” were told to imagine they were using one of the four nameplates in a class and asked to predicted how much they would like it at three times during the semester. Then separately, at these three points in time during the semester, a different group of “experiencers” rated their liking of these nameplates they were actually using in class. Supporting Hypothesis 2, consumers overestimated satiation from high arousal design elements, leading to errors in predicted utility. Specifically, forecasters underestimated how much they would like the intense nameplates at the midpoint of the semester and at the end of the semester.

In conclusion, we identify a systematic error in consumer preference for aesthetics. We show that consumers are more likely to choose simple (vs. intense) product design elements for long-term use than short-term use because consumers predict they will satiate more quickly on intense product design elements than simple ones. We also show that product design decisions for long-term product
use may be misguided and that consumers overestimate satiation with intense product design elements.

REFERENCES