The Unexpected Consequences of Beautiful Products: Sacredness, Awe and Forgiveness

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We extend the literature on beauty in consumer behavior by examining the degree to which ordinary, but beautiful, products can evoke perceptions of sacredness and feelings of awe relative to functional alternatives. Importantly, we find that such perceptions of sacredness and awe increase consumers’ propensity to forgive a company transgression.

Past literature on aesthetically pleasing, beautiful products has demonstrated that they lead to more favorable attitudes, higher purchase intentions and increased willingness to pay (Bloch et al., 2003); they can reaffirm a consumer’s sense of self, core values and qualities (Townsend and Sood, 2012); and when chosen for their hedonic rather than functional benefits, can lead to downstream emotional responses of either cheerfulness and excitement, or guilt and anxiety (Chitturi et al., 2007). We extend existing research by examining how beautiful products (versus ordinary exemplars of the same product category) evoke perceptions of sacredness and the discrete emotion of awe, while also identifying a novel downstream consequence associated with those feelings, specifically the heightened willingness to forgive a company transgression.

Beautiful products can create appraisals of sacredness, being perceived as inherently non-ordinary, special and unique (Clark, 1986; Mick and Demoss, 1990; Belk et al., 1989), even if they are humble, everyday objects (Morris, 1948). Prior literature has demonstrated that products deemed to be sacred are revered (Eliade, 1959), spark an emotional attachment (Mol, 1976), and are believed to possess infinite or transcendental significance (Tetlock et al, 2000; Samper and Schwartz, 2013). These perceptions of transcendence in turn lead to feelings of awe.

Awe is a positive, self-transcendent emotion associated with feelings of wonder, astonishment and surprise, elicited by experiences such as exceptional beauty and exemplary human actions or abilities (Haidt, 2003, Shiota et al. 2007). Feelings of awe produce a sense of a “diminished self,” wherein one perceives the world as vaster than oneself and one’s usual frame of reference, and facilitate religiosity and a propensity for spiritual behaviors (Keltner and Haidt, 2003; Schneider, 2009; Van Cappellen and Saroglu, 2012). Awe seems to evoke one’s best self, with individuals who feel awe being more likely to donate time (Rudd et al, 2012), engage in ethical decision making and act according to prosocial values (Piff et al., 2015). Consistent with this diminishment of the self and this orientation toward generosity, we expect that when consumers feel awe in response to beautiful products, they will be more likely to forgive any transgressions or flaws associated with the products.

Past literature on brand transgressions has examined factors that influence a consumer’s willingness to forgive a company following a transgression. These include consumer-brand relationships in terms of attachment (Fedorikhin et al., 2008), commitment (Ahluwalia et al., 2000), self-relevance (Johnson et al., 2011) and the strength of the relationship (Aaker et al., 2004), such that the more attached, self-relevant and strong the consumer-brand relationship, the less likely are consumers to forgive a company transgression; trust in the company (Chung and Beverland, 2006; Xie and Peng, 2009); customer expectations about the firm’s capability to manage the transgression (Dawar and Pittutla, 2000; Chandrashekararan et al., 2007).

Individual’s self-construal (Sinha and Lu, 2016) and transgression type (higher forgiveness for product, but not ethical, transgressions; Trump, 2014).

In four studies, we find that beautiful products are perceived as sacred, unique, special and divinely influenced, and that these perceptions evoke feelings of awe. Importantly, we find that these perceptions of sacredness and feelings of awe lead consumers to be more forgiving of transgressions associated with beautiful products.

Study 1: Beautiful Products lead to Perceptions of Sacredness and Feelings of Awe

In study 1, lab participants (N=192) were randomly assigned to describe a recent experience with a product that was extraordinarily beautiful or functional. Then, participants reported which emotions (e.g., awe, amazement, astonishment, love, excitement) described a “beautiful” product saw it as more Sacred (M_B = 3.41; M_F = 2.77; M_S = 2.27; F(1, 190) = 11.53, p=.001) and perceived more vastness (M_B = 2.77; M_F = 2.27; F(1, 190) = 8.34, p = .004) than participants in the functional condition. In addition, participants who described a “beautiful” product saw it as more Sacred (M_B = 3.41; M_F = 2.78; F(1, 190) = 11.427, p = .001). A mediation analysis (Preacher and Hayes, 2004, 2008; Process Model 4, 10,000 bootstrap samples) found that beautiful products increased perceptions of awe via sacredness (95% bias-corrected confidence interval did not include zero; .157-.689).

Study 2: Ruling Out the Effect of Other Positive Experiences on Sacredness and Awe

In study 2, we sought to replicate the findings from Study 1 with a more controlled stimulus, while also ruling out the possibility that any positive experience related to the product (such as receiving a surprise coupon) could be responsible for evoking feelings of sacredness and awe. Given that participants in Study 1 mostly recalled beautiful food and beverage products (cappuccinos, cakes, cupcakes and chocolates), in Study 2, we chose cappuccinos as the stimuli. Participants (N=202) from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (beautiful, regular and surprise) where they were shown photos and asked to imagine consuming either a beautiful or ordinary cappuccino; participants in the surprise condition saw the same ordinary cappuccino but were told they received a surprise $1 coupon for their next visit. Participants then reported which emotions they felt when they received the cappuccino (e.g., awe), how sacred they believed it to be (four-item index) and how much they were willing to pay for it. Results show that participants in the beautiful cappuccino condition felt more awe (M_B = 4.52; M_F = 5.00; M_S = 3.23; F(2, 199) = 20.460, p <.001) than consumers receiving either a regular or surprise-coupon cappuccino, and that they perceived it as more sacred (M_B = 2.74; M_F = 1.83; M_S = 2.27; F(2, 199) = 20.460, p <.001) than consumers receiving either a regular or surprise-coupon cappuccino.
= 2.19, $F(2, 199) = 10.753, p < .001$. Furthermore, participants were more willing to pay for the beautiful cappuccino relative to both regular and surprise-coupon cappuccinos ($M_r = $4.54; $M_s = $3.52; $M_{BH} = $3.08; $F(2, 199) = 12.621, p < .001$). This second study not only confirms our prediction of the effects of beauty on sacredness and awe, but also offers support that it is indeed the beauty of the product, and not any positive experience related with a product, driving these effects.

**Study 3: Beautiful Products lead to a Higher Willingness to Forgive**

Study 3 examines how perceptions of awe and sacredness affect consumers’ propensity to forgive beautiful products following a transgression. Participants from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (N=182) viewed either the beautiful or regular cappuccino scenario from Study 2. They then responded to the same DVs before learning their cappuccino contained a flaw: it was either a decaf (when they asked for a regular), or it contained whole milk (when skim milk was requested). Participants again evaluated the cappuccino and indicated their willingness to forgive the company, operationalized as (consistent with previous failure recovery research: Grewal et al., 2008) their likelihood to repurchase from the café and recommend it to others. Results show that participants in the beautiful cappuccino condition felt more awe ($M_B = 5.16; M_r = 2.84, F(1, 180) = 87.250, p < .001$) than consumers receiving the regular cappuccino, and they perceived it to be more sacred ($M_B = 3.77; M_r = 2.29, F(1, 180) = 52.642, p < .001$). In addition, participants in the beautiful condition were more likely to forgive the café (repurchase and recommend) after the flaw occurred, compared to participants in the regular condition ($M_B = 5.53; M_r = 4.67, F(1, 180) = 16.245, p < .001$). A serial mediation analysis (Preacher and Hayes, 2004, 2008) tested whether the beautiful products increased consumers’ intention to forgive the café via sacredness and awe. Results (Process Model 6, 10,000 bootstrap samples) demonstrate this was the case, as the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval did not include zero [.187; .612]. These findings provide initial evidence for our proposed conceptual model, demonstrating that beautiful products evoke a sense of sacredness and feelings of awe, which lead to greater likelihood to forgive.

**Study 4: Ruling Out Effort as a Potential Alternative Explanation**

In Study 4, we sought to replicate this finding on forgiveness while ruling out effort as a potential alternative explanation to our effects. Effort is often linked to reduced culpability and rewarded with higher forgiveness following a transgression, and thus we wanted to make sure that it was the beauty, and not the perceived effort in creating the product, that was driving our effects (Morales, 2005). Participants (N=205) from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: beautiful high effort, beautiful low effort or regular high effort. They were shown photos and asked to imagine consuming either a beautiful or ordinary cupcake. They also received a card that described the process necessary to craft their cupcake as either effortful (the pastry chef took 4 hours to prepare it) or effortless (the pastry chef only took 45 minutes). They then responded to the same DVs (emotions, sacredness and willingness to pay) before discovering that their cupcake had a flaw: it had mistakenly been baked with salt instead of sugar. They then indicated how likely they were to forgive the company. To rule out the possibility that beauty simply causes a flaw to be perceived as less consequential, they also indicated how severe they thought the mistake was and how much they cared about the mistake. Results show that participants who received the beautiful high effort cupcake felt more awe than participants who received the regular high effort cupcake ($M_{BH} = 5.24; M_{BLE} = 4.63; M_{RHE} = 4.08; F(2, 202) = 7.590, p < .001$). They also believed the beautiful cupcake, both high and low effort, to be more sacred than the regular high effort cupcake ($M_{BH} = 3.40; M_{BLE} = 3.56; M_{RHE} = 2.31; F(2, 202) = 12.927, p < .001$), and they were willing to pay more for it ($M_{BH} = $4.21; $M_{BLE} = $3.83; $M_{RHE} = $2.25; $F(2, 202) = 13.920; p < .001$). In terms of forgiveness, participants who received the beautiful cupcake, both high and low effort, were more willing to forgive the transgression relative to participants who received the regular high effort cupcake ($M_{BH} = 4.01; M_{BLE} = 4.13; M_{RHE} = 3.35; F(2, 202) = 3.344, p = .034$). These findings help rule out effort as a potential alternative explanation to this effect, while reinforcing the effect of beauty on forgiveness. There were no differences across conditions in how ‘severe’ participants thought the mistake was ($M_{BH} = 4.27; M_{BLE} = 4.51; M_{RHE} = 4.41; F(2, 202) = .304, p = .738$), nor in how much they cared about the mistake ($M_{BH} = 4.33; M_{BLE} = 4.54; M_{RHE} = 4.73; F(2, 202) = .885, p = .414$), suggesting that beauty enhances the likelihood of forgiveness after a flaw, but does not change the perceived severity of the flaw. Finally, we performed a mediation analysis to test whether the beautiful cupcake, both high and low effort, relative to the regular cupcake, increased consumers’ willingness to forgive via sacredness and awe. Results (Process Model 6, 10,000 bootstrap samples) demonstrated that indeed it is the beauty that leads to a higher willingness to forgive via perceptions of sacredness and feelings of awe, as the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for both high and low effort beautiful cupcakes relative to the high effort regular cupcake did not include zero (BHE vs RHE: [.004; .119]; BLE vs RHE: [.052; 402]).

**Discussion**

Previous literature has identified perceptions of sacredness and feelings of awe as responses to exceptional beauty. Sacredness and awe, in turn, engender prosocial behavior and a willingness to forgive. Across four studies, we extend this literature, demonstrating that mundane, everyday products can be beautiful, and that such beauty leads consumers to judge those goods as sacred and to feel a sense of awe in response to them. These perceptions of sacredness and feelings of awe lead consumers to be more forgiving of flaws and errors associated with the products. Future research should expand the effect of beauty on sacredness, awe and forgiveness by: testing it across different, non-food product categories (watches, fitness trackers, vases, etc.), and perhaps by testing whether where the flaw occurs matters. Perhaps consumers are differentially forgiving of flaws that occur in the aesthetics or beauty of the products versus flaws in their functionality. Finally, future research will examine real consumer behavior in a field study.

Together, this work contributes to the literature on beauty, linking perceptions of product beauty to a unique emotional response that is associated with specific positive downstream behavioral consequences. We also contribute to the literature on transgressions and forgiveness, identifying a new factor and process, whereby beautiful products evoke sacredness and feelings of awe, which enhance the likelihood that consumers forgive a product transgression. In addition, we contribute to the literature on emotions in consumer behavior. Awe is a relatively under-researched emotion in consumer behavior. Here we find that consumers feel awe in response to beautiful products, even when those products are in mundane categories such as cupcakes and cappuccinos, and show that these evoked feelings of awe have important downstream consequences for consumer-firm relationships.
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