



Choosing Beauty and Feeling Good: How Attractive Product Design Increases Self-Affirmation

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The beauty premium /// Good looks make a difference. Studies of interpersonal perception have found a universal and innate bias to equate beauty with goodness in people. Attractive people are, for the most part, rated higher than less attractive people on apparently unrelated positive traits, including intelligence, social skills, ethical behavior or competence at one's job. And just as good looks bestow an unconscious "beauty premium" on people, high aesthetics bestows a benefit on consumer goods as well. Choosing beautiful products not only pleases our senses but also enhances our self-confidence.

Product choice, design and self-assurance /// From consumer research we know that product choice is often related to consumers' perception of themselves. For example, people use brands – and the personality or lifestyle they represent – to express who they are and who they are not. In other words, consumers construct and maintain self-concepts through the use of branded consumer products. But product choice not only *reflects* an actual or desired image of the self; it can also directly *influence* a person's sense of self and even boost self-esteem. The aesthetics of a product is an attribute that has the power to transform how consumers perceive themselves. In a series of experiments we found that the mere act of choosing a beautiful product over a less good-looking one affirmed people's sense of self – who they are and what their values are. The result is that, like other manners of self-affirmation, choosing high aesthetics generally makes people more open – to points of view different from their own and to admitting their own mistakes.

FIGURE 1:
Examples of high and low design versions of
products used in the experiments

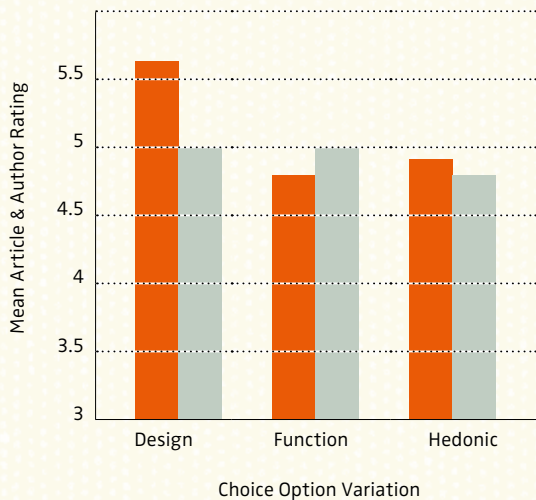


(Note: The high price difference was used for research settings that favored the low design version. In the setting that favored high design, the indicated prices for both versions were the same.)

Beautiful products assure individuals /// In a first study we tested if people with lower and higher levels of prior self-assurance differ in their preference for aesthetic products. The results of the experiment showed that those in a state of lower self-assurance preferred nicely designed products more than others. When an individual's sense of self was affirmed experimentally before the choice task, they were less likely to select the highly aesthetic option. It seems that part of the motivation to select high design is an effort to boost one's sense of self. Interestingly, there was no such effect for price variations or variations in functionality. The drive for self-affirmation was specifically directed at the more aesthetically pleasing option.

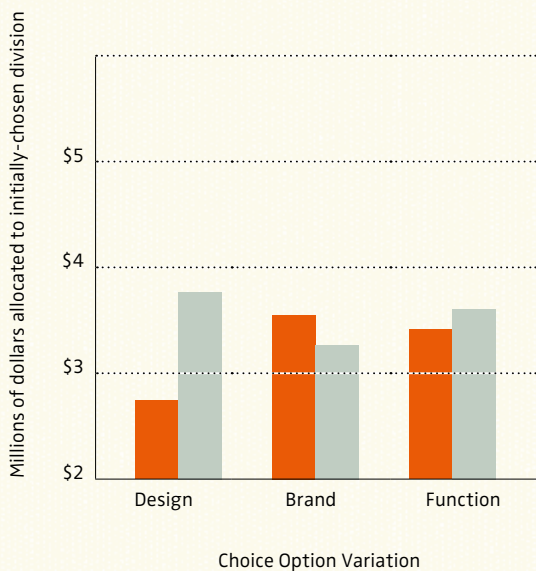
High design fosters open-mindedness /// While our first study tested the connection between self-affirmation and the choice of products with high design, the next experiment examined the psychological impact of choosing high design on subsequent attitudes. When individuals do not feel secure in themselves, they tend to be biased against information or people who disagree with them. Psychologically it is easier to see the argument or presenter as wrong than to admit that one's point of view may not be right. However, when people feel more assured in themselves, they are more open to new information that might differ from their own point of view. Thus, we assumed that if choosing high aesthetics can affirm a person's sense of self, such a choice should lead to

FIGURE 2:
Openness to counter-attitudinal argument after choice



greater acceptance of counter-attitudinal arguments. To test this, first, participants were presented with a choice between two products that varied in design, price, function and other pleasure-related, hedonic attributes. Then the participants stated whether they were for or against the use of animals for medical testing and research. After explaining their view, they were asked to read a half-page argument against their position. They were then asked to evaluate the article and its author in an effort to measure how open they were to the argument presented against their own point of view. Specifically, respondents indicated how convincing, valid and reasonable the article was perceived to be and how intelligent, informed and biased they found the author. The results were amazing: Those who selected the more aesthetic option rated the counter-attitudinal article as more convincing and reasonable (Figure 2). Moreover, choice of a preferred product on function or brand did not have the same effect. Only choice of the more beautiful product had an impact, and that impact was comparable to more explicit manipulations like positive feedback for affirming the self.

FIGURE 3:
Escalation of commitment after choice



Choosing design reduces escalating commitment ///

Like willingness to accept new and contradicting information, opting not to escalate commitment requires an individual to admit that they may be wrong. However when considering commitment, not only attitudes but also actions are involved. Individuals often allow previous actions to motivate future ones even if there is evidence that the first action might have been a failure. Such escalation of commitment to a failing course of action has been interpreted as an attempt to affirm the appropriateness of the first investment. Changing one's course requires admitting to oneself that the original action may have been flawed. Again, this is psychologically difficult to do. In the past, overt manipulations that bolstered a person's sense of self helped them to be open enough to admit the pervious action may have been a mistake and refrain from throwing "good money after bad" or "staying the course." In our experiments we tested if high aesthetics have a similar benefit of decreasing escalation to a failing course of action. We compared how choice of higher and lower versions of design, function and brand affected escalation of commitment. While there were no significant effects for choice of a well-known brand compared to a generic brand or a functionally superior product against an inferior version, choosing a high design product made respondents significantly less likely to escalate commitment to something shown to be flawed (Figure 3).

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How good design differs from other attributes /// But why does design assure people whereas superior functionality and other qualities do not? Aesthetics is, indeed, a universal value common to all of us. While other basic values such as economic, social, political or religious values differ among individuals, beauty is innately appreciated by all. Also, aesthetics has a direct expression in consumer products. Without inference or learned response, a product can be aesthetically pleasing. In contrast, for a product to be symbolic of a religion or a political view, the consumer must have learned an association or meaning behind a symbol. The creation, acquisition and appreciation of beauty have always been considered demonstrations of virtuosity and surplus resources. Just like a peacock's beautiful tail feathers attract mates but also predators owning a product that looks nice regardless of whether it helps or hinders functionality may make us more attractive to others and similarly boost our sense of self. Therefore, without being aware of it, we value beauty, and the mere choice of a more attractive product can lead us to feel better about ourselves and, in turn, act in a less biased manner.

The consumption of beauty is more than personal image management /// We have known for a while that goods provide consumers with more than just fulfillment of their apparent functionality and, moreover, that aesthetics, even without function, is incredibly important. Consumers construct and maintain their images through buying and using products and their features. However, the choice of a beautiful product goes beyond personal image building and self-presentation; its impact is also turned inwards. The mere choice of a pretty product over another seems to affect security in one's self. Choice of high design works as a unique form of affirmation. Purchasing an attractive item causes a person to feel better about themselves. In contrast to more typical ways to assure people, it does not directly involve feedback or motivate thoughts about themselves, their performance on a task, or their values. It works unconsciously. High design may

even be a particularly powerful form of affirmation precisely because its relationship to the self and one's values is not obvious. And design is more powerful than other features in this respect. Comfort and ease of use, taste and brand do not have the same self-affirming quality as design. It is not simply that "treating" oneself or going for the pleasurable option has an affirming effect; it is specific to the choice of aesthetics.

Benefits of the beauty premium effect /// While consumption as a response to negative emotions is – at least in its extreme forms – considered unhealthy behavior, our research offers a more optimistic perspective. Consuming aesthetics can bolster self-esteem and reduce the need to affirm oneself by further action. Our findings suggest that "retail therapy" may, in fact, be beneficial. Specifically, if consumers focus on selecting one or a few beautiful products rather than binging on multiple purchases, they may be able to reap the benefits identified in this research without inflicting too much damage to their bank accounts. The implication is that choosing beautiful products might not only be helpful in everyday situations but also in extreme behavior as well.

Decision-making is another application and it goes beyond the field of marketing and consumer behavior. Choosing high design was shown to increase a person's openness to counter-attitudinal arguments and to reduce their propensity to invest in failing courses of action. It frees them up, mentally, to admit errors in their ways. Therefore, it should improve the quality of decision-making. Be it politics, public policy or organizational behavior, the implication is that aesthetics and the general look of a choice option are capable of affecting the outcome of both current and subsequent decisions.

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