



# Perceived Product Sizes in Visually Complex Environments

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## Abstract

Although prior scholarship has demonstrated important effects of visual complexity on product perceptions, the relationship between the visual complexity of a product's environment and that product's perceived size remains unexplored. Because size is such an important product characteristic in many consumer contexts, the lack of exploration of this relationship leaves a significant gap in the literature on size perceptions, especially in relation to the retailing domain. The present investigation seeks to document the relationship between environmental visual complexity and the perceived size of a product. Namely, five studies show that high visual complexity decreases consumer size perceptions of a focal product through a serial mediation process in which high complexity pulls consumer attention away from the focal product. This shifted attention decreases processing fluency and leads consumers to perceptually minimize size to avoid information overload in the processing of a display. Even after ruling out potential influences of referent information (study 5) and alternative explanations of affective processing and perceived depth (study 4), these effects hold. The findings have implications for both theory and practice, shedding light on the relationship between size perceptions of a focal object and its environment.

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## Introduction

Size is an important product characteristic. All of us encounter size information in our daily lives and often use that information to make decisions about purchases and consumption across a variety of contexts. Scholars have documented several important insights into the interpretation, use, and influence of size on consumer behavior, both actual and perceived (Adaval 2013; Aydinoglu and Krishna 2011; Hieke et al. 2016; Prelec, Wernerfelt, and Zettelmeyer 1997; Wansink and Chandon 2014; Wansink and van Ittersum 2005, 2013).

Size perceptions are largely rooted in visual perception. Although verbal size information (labeled sizes, magnitudes, portions, etc.) plays an important role in many contexts, consumers often encounter and attend more to visual information before shifting focus to verbal information. Additionally, in many cases, verbal size information may be absent altogether, necessitating use of the visual domain in the formation of size judgments. Therefore, when forming size judgments of a given product, the environment surrounding that product should play

a key role in the formation of those judgments, warranting investigation into the influence of visual factors surrounding the product on that product's perceived size.

Few environmental visual characteristics affecting consumer perceptions of a product in retail environments are perhaps more salient than visual complexity. Scholars have documented the influence of surrounding visual complexity on consumer perceptions of attractiveness of a product as well as of a retail experience (i.e., Creusen, Veryzer, and Schoormans 2010; Kahn 2017; Orth and Crouch 2014; Orth and Wirtz 2014). Although attractiveness is indeed important to consumer evaluations of a product, package attractiveness is not the only salient evaluative dimension. Consumers often place a great deal of importance on a product's perceived size when making decisions about a product, especially when multiple sizes of the same product are available and require a size-based decision (Aydinoglu and Krishna 2011; Prelec, Wernerfelt, and Zettelmeyer 1997). Thus, if perceived product size indeed varies as a function of visual complexity around the product, then examining and documenting this effect is an important endeavor for scholars and practitioners alike, especially in the retailing domain.

Therefore, the purpose of this work is to investigate the influence of visual complexity in a focal product's environment on

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consumer perceptions of that product's size. Five studies utilizing different retailing-related contexts – a bottled water poster (study 1), a wine display (study 2), a soap display (study 3), a luggage advertisement (study 4), and a depiction of a mug (study 5) – demonstrate that visually complex environments tend to dwarf a focal product's perceived size. This effect occurs through the serial mediation process of shifted attention toward the environment and processing fluency of the display, respectively.

The findings contribute to the literature on visual complexity and perceived size in several important ways. First, prior studies have examined size perceptions in contexts of products in isolation; the present study extends the investigation into size research by demonstrating that a product's perceived size is also a function of the characteristics of its environment. Second, this study finds that visual complexity surrounding a product shifts attention away from the product, validating the emerging evidence that size perceptions are a function of attention and adding a needed layer of understanding to the relationship between attention and size. Namely, while prior scholars have shown that attention focused on a given object can increase that object's perceived size, the present work shows that attention focused elsewhere (i.e., not on the object) can make the object appear smaller. Third, the findings help to explain the discrepancy in the literature regarding the relationship between processing fluency and perceived size. Specifically, processing fluency of a product *itself* may not influence the product's perceived size (Reber, Christensen, and Meier 2014), but the present study shows that the ease with which consumers can process a focal product *and* its environment does influence that product's perceived size. Several implications and future research directions follow from this work, opening several lines of inquiry into the relationship between visual complexity and size.

### Conceptual Background

#### *Visual Complexity in Retail Environments*

Consumers' attention is constantly drawn to multiple features in retail environments (Clement, Kristensen, and Gronhaug 2013). As shoppers scan products on shelves, in displays, and online, they face a range of visual cues that influence perceptions of both products and the environment in which those products are housed. Indeed, marketers strive to provide both product satisfaction as well as entertainment in the shopping experience, as evidenced by the heightened focus on larger assortments and sensory marketing efforts (Eroglu, Machleit, and Chebat 2005; Hermann et al. 2013; Krishna 2012; Roschk, Correia Loureiro, and Breitsohl 2017). As a result, retail environments can easily become saturated with both product and sensory information, which can have negative consequences for consumer responses if that information exceeds desirable limits (Chernev, Bockenholt, and Goodman 2015; Ma 2016; Messner and Wanke 2011; Orth and Crouch 2014; Orth and Wirtz 2014; Orth, Wirtz, and McKinney 2016; Sohn, Seegebarth, and Moritz 2017; Wang, Minor, and Wei 2011). In an era of product and sensory overload, retailers must be careful to avoid such negative consumer responses while balancing consumer desires for larger product

assortments (Townsend and Kahn 2014; Tang, Hsieh, and Chiu 2017).

A chief concern that arises from this trend toward informational inundation is that of visual complexity, defined as the degree to which a stimulus exhibits visual richness, including the number of features, the degree of similarity among those features, and variations in characteristics such as color (i.e., Creusen, Veryzer, and Schoormans 2010; Orth and Crouch 2014). Findings on the influences of visual complexity indicate a general negative influence on consumer outcomes, especially in relation to processing. Indeed, visual complexity often consumes processing resources, requiring additional allocation of attention to make sense of visually complex stimuli and contributing to a feeling of information overload (Orth and Crouch 2014; Orth and Wirtz 2014; Townsend and Kahn 2014). In such cases, the reduced processing fluency associated with visual complexity leads consumers to react negatively to the relevant stimuli, including perceptions of attractiveness and pleasure (Orth and Crouch 2014; Orth and Wirtz 2014).

Although prior scholars have demonstrated that visual complexity dampens affective judgments of a given product, the relationship between visual complexity and size perceptions of a product remains unexplored. In fact, direct links between visual complexity and size perceptions have not been established in prior literature, but size-related research provides important clues about the potential influence of surrounding visual complexity on the perceived size of a product. Namely, because a more complex visual environment generally consumes processing resources, and given the consumer's lack of ability to concentrate as heavily on processing the product itself in such environments, one such judgment affected should be the perceived size of that product.

#### *Visual Complexity and Size Perceptions: Shifted Attention and Processing Fluency*

Consumers tend to rely on surrounding information to form size perceptions, including anchoring points and comparative size judgments (i.e., Aydinoglu and Krishna 2011; Cornil et al. 2014; Ordabayeva and Chandon 2016; Prelec, Wernerfelt, and Zettelmeyer 1997; Van Ittersum and Wansink 2012, 2013; Van Ittersum and Wansink, 2012). Therefore, environmental information around a product has been shown to contribute to the product's perceived size. By extension, visual complexity should play a role as an environmental characteristic in the formation of size judgments.

A key mechanism of this effect may be attention. Prior scholarship has demonstrated that attention can increase a focal product's perceived size when that attention is turned to the focal product itself (Janiszewski, Kuo, and Tavassoli 2013; Hagtvedt and Brasel 2017). In environments of high visual complexity, the consumer's attention is likely to move away from a focal product and toward the product's surroundings. Therefore, in a logical extension of the literature, if a consumer's attention shifts away from a focal product and to surrounding stimuli, the focal product may in fact appear *smaller*.

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