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Beyond form and function: Why do consumers value product design?☆

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ABSTRACT

Product design is often the first point of contact between the product and the buyer in retail aisles and search results on the Internet. Researchers and managers understand that product design is important in consumer and buyer behavior, yet they may not clearly and fully grasp the broad values that product design creates for consumers. Based on an extensive qualitative study that integrates previous value typologies, this research shows that product design can create not only “form” and “function” related value but also a self-expressive dimension (social and altruistic value) that is communicated through the design’s holistic properties. After developing and testing a reliable and valid scale for this value typology, this research demonstrates that consumers who have higher design acumen tend to perceive aspects of self-expressive value more than consumers with low design acumen. Finally, the implications for research and practice are considered here.

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1. Introduction

Product design and its influence on buyer behavior have become a significant area of interest for both academics and practitioners in business (e.g., Bloch, 1995; Nussbaum, 2004) including this journal (e.g., Giese, Malkewitz, Orth, & Henderson, 2014; Rosa, Qualls, & Ruth, 2014) because it is often the first point of contact between the buyer and the firm through internet search results, advertisements, or on retail aisles. Despite the increased interest and empirical evidence in the field that consumers value some designs more than others (e.g., Landwehr, Labroo, & Herrmann, 2011; Luchs & Swan, 2011; Norman, 2004; Orth & Malkewitz, 2008; Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998), little seems to be known about how buyers interpret product designs and convert them into perceptions of value to apply in consumption situations.

A value-based perspective is probably one of the most pervasive views on what drives buyer decision-making and has traditionally been conceptualized as a highly cognitive evaluation of equity in an exchange (Bolton & Drew, 1991). This way of understanding value perceptions in relation to design may be particularly problematic because it does not include the kind of instantaneous, subconscious and

visceral response consumers often experience when encountering a well-designed product on a store shelf or web page (Kumar & Garg, 2010; Norman, 2004). In marketing, one perspective on product design has considered it in a disaggregated way, reflecting in part a conjoint-analysis-driven perspective on the functionality of product designs (e.g., Giese et al., 2014; Green & Srinivasan, 1978; Shocker & Srinivasan, 1979) or, alternatively, design has been equated to product form, focusing on its esthetic characteristics. This approach has generally found that these attributes are related to hedonic value (e.g., Hirschman & Holbrook, 1980; Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998). While this largely attribute-based perspective on design is informative, it seems to offer an incomplete view of the value gained from the more holistic design properties of, for example, a MacBook Air computer, a Ferrari automobile, or similarly compelling products (Luchs & Swan, 2011; Noble & Kumar, 2010). Given this gap in understanding product design in both its aggregated and disaggregated properties, studies that better explore the true nature and power of design have been increasingly called for in the literature (Noble, 2011).

Given the need to better understand the interpretation of design through a value-based lens, the primary questions that this research addresses are: *Why do consumers value product design when they first interact with it? What is the nature and potential dimensionality of product design value to the consumer, and how can each dimension be measured?*

Since prior research has not directly addressed these fundamental questions about product design, the goal of this research will be to use existing theory and combine it with empirical work to identify the nature and dimensionality of consumer value for product design. Further, we will develop measures for the dimensions, and test the usefulness of the measure in the context of a marketing study. The results will show

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that the value consumers discern from product design is more complex and diverse than merely form and function and that value discernment depends on consumer characteristics too.

2. Theoretical perspectives on product design value

Prior literature has classified the value of product design as being two-fold; form (hedonic) and function (utilitarian) based (Chitturi, Raghunathan, & Mahajan, 2007, 2008; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1980). This dichotomous classification of the value types appears limiting not only because the domain and definition of product design encompasses more than just form and function related issues (Luchs & Swan, 2011; Noble & Kumar, 2010) but also because consumer value for products in general is more diverse (Holbrook, 1999).

After an extensive historical review, Holbrook (1999) developed a well-accepted typology that reconciles the different perspectives on consumer value. Holbrook classified consumer value for a product, which he defined as an *interactive, relativistic preference experience*, along three continuous dimensions: (1) intrinsic–extrinsic, (2) self-oriented–other oriented, and (3) active–reactive. These dimensions lead into eight value types: efficiency, excellence, play, esthetics, status, esteem, ethics and spirituality.

In the initial exposure to a product (typically in internet search results or in retail aisles), consumers make value judgments based on the cues provided by its design (Bloch, 1995). This process may be less cognitive and less information rich than a more comprehensive evaluation of value that Holbrook's typology is based upon. Therefore, it is important to empirically investigate if Holbrook's typology applies to value discerned from product design alone.

3. Qualitative studies

Two qualitative studies were conducted with related purposes: 1) to develop themes of values that consumers glean from product design, and 2) to compare and contrast these themes with Holbrook's (1999) typology. Given the broad goals of these research questions and the thinly developed state of knowledge in the area, a grounded theory approach seemed appropriate. Grounded theory development is well accepted as a methodology for creating theory, either in areas where theory is not well developed or where theoretical questions have not been answered (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Suddaby, 2006) and has been used widely in the business literature for developmental situations (e.g., Martin, 2007; Woodside, MacDonald, & Burford, 2004). In this method, researchers often combine a broad search for literature-based insights with new perspectives generated from qualitative research to inductively develop theory on the phenomenon of interest (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Two broad schools that have received attention are those employing the "Gioia method" (based on an iterative, thematic coding process) or the "Eisenhardt approach" (generally based on observations from one or a few case studies) (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012; Langley & Abdallah, 2011). This study generally follows the so-called "Gioia method" in ultimately distilling multiple forms and a large quantity of qualitative data into dimensional themes related to design value, while being mindful of existing research findings and theory.

3.1. Method

In the first study, 30 award-winning product designs along with the commentaries on them were examined using popular business magazines and anthologies (Noble & Kumar, 2010). For example, a review of the last five years of Industrial Design Excellence Award winners in *BusinessWeek* proved to be a unique and valuable resource, since these annual issues feature reviews that include rich and detailed descriptions of product's unique product features, as well as commentary on why users would value the designs (IDSA, 2001, 2004).

In the second qualitative study, consumer perspectives on the value of product design were sought. The goal here was to determine how consumers see value in a product's design. To achieve this end, a paper-based survey for class credit was administered to undergraduate and graduate students ($N = 48$) in a New Product Design and Development class from a large public university in the western United States. Demographically, the average age of the participants was 25.2 years; 60% were male; 51% lived in the city, 32% lived in the suburbs and the rest rural. In a task similar to the one employed by Dahl and Moreau (2002), participants were first asked to draw a likeness of their favorite product design (The goal here was to create task involvement and to activate respondents' memory about specific design elements) and then answer a series of questions such as; *Why did you think it was a well-designed product?, What was of value in the design of the product? And, How did the design communicate this value to you?* Participants provided a one-page essay that contained detailed answers. These data were merged with the previously collected data.

Through these methods, a substantial pool of qualitative data was collected. As recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1990), the two authors coded the resulting data independently in a rigorous process using three forms of coding (termed *open*, *axial*, and *selective*). The goals of these coding steps are to reduce a wide range of information into a manageable number of variables or themes. Using sets of index cards, five iterative rounds were conducted in order to solidify, reduce and, where possible, combine concepts. Following recommendations by Weber (1990), interjudge reliability was assessed to ascertain whether the two investigators classified the same words into the same value type over time, resulting in a reliability level of 92% for the study. A constant comparison of the evolving theory and the data was employed throughout the qualitative data collection phases and analysis as new insights were compared against and, when appropriate, used to modify the working model (Suddaby, 2006). Although there were individual differences in the types of values highlighted and the depth of the comments used to describe the values, an individual trait that Bloch, Brunel, and Todd (2003) refer to as design acumen, a consistent set of broad-based value types emerged from this process. The design acumen construct will be revisited later in the article. Because of space constraints, Table 1 provides merely a few examples of the qualitative data, the coding, and the themes that emerged from the data.

4. Results: the SAFETY of value

Through the constant comparison of the qualitative data and existing literature, two value dimensions (functional and esthetic) were found that are consistent with the traditional form and function characterization of product design. However, a third major self-expressive dimension that includes two distinct value sub-dimensions (social and altruistic) also emerged. Thus, four core themes of design-based values emerged: Social, Altruistic, Functional and Esthetic (henceforth termed "SAFE"). Next, these value themes along with the salient theoretical literature for each value type are highlighted.

4.1. Esthetic value

Esthetic value of the product design is defined as the consumer's perception of attractiveness and pleasure derived from its appearance. The esthetic properties of products are primarily hedonic in nature and its value discernment is often sensory at what Norman (2004) calls the "visceral level". As comments A1–A3 (see Table 1) imply and neuroaesthetics research show, these appraisals are often automatic or subconscious and happen milliseconds after exposure to the design (Cela-Conde et al., 2013). Nevertheless, these visceral assessments of esthetic value have implications for the more deliberate latter stages (cf. Leder, Belke, Oeberst, & Augustin, 2004).

Consumer reactions to esthetics have been widely investigated in marketing and product development literature (cf. Luchs & Swan,

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