



Too new or too complex? Why consumer's aesthetic sensitivity matters in product evaluation

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Superior designs enable products to gain prominence in a competitive market and differentiate themselves from competitors (Bloch, 1995). Consumers develop an initial connection with a product's appearance and aesthetic value has become increasingly important across both hedonic and utilitarian product categories (Bloch, Brunel, & Arnold, 2003). Yet, consumers differ in their aesthetic sensitivity, with superior forms or designs evoking more positive responses in some consumers than in others (Bloch et al., 2003). Differences in centrality of visual product aesthetics (CVPA) may explain why different consumers place different weights on good design characteristics (Brunel & Swain, 2008). CVPA is defined as "the overall level of significance that visual aesthetics hold for a particular consumer in his/her relationships with products" (Bloch et al., 2003, pp. 552). Despite the important role of aesthetic sensitivity, little is known about how consumers with high versus low CVPA respond to collative design principles such as complexity and novelty, which are critical determinants of aesthetic response to objects (Berlyne, 1974). Bloch's (1995) model helps to provide deeper insights regarding the role of aesthetic sensitivity in consumer responses to product form.

Expertise in the arts affects aesthetic experience, hence experts are more capable than amateurs in comprehending complex and challenging works due to their experience and knowledge (Silvia, 2012). Consumers high in aesthetic sensitivity place more importance on product design and have a conviction that the designed environment affects the quality of life for all (Bloch et al., 2003). Hence, this study proposes that high CVPA consumers will have a more positive aesthetic response to: 1) high than low complexity apparel designs (H1a); and 2) high than low novelty apparel designs (H2a). Low CVPA consumers will have a more positive aesthetic response to: 1) low than high complexity apparel designs (H1b); and 2) low than high novelty apparel designs (H2b).

The hypotheses were tested through a 2 (CVPA: Low/high) X 2 (Complexity: low/high) X 2 (Novelty: low/high) mixed-factorial experimental design, with complexity and novelty as within-subjects factors. Three pretests were conducted to develop apparel stimuli representative of low vs. high novelty (N) and complexity (C). Eight stimuli (4 for each N and C level) were selected based on pretest results. A convenience sample of 352 female undergraduate students enrolled at a Southeastern University was recruited for the Internet experiment. A total of 265 students took the survey (75% response rate), and 260 completed entries were used for data analysis. The order of stimulus presentation was randomized to control for order effects. Scales measuring aesthetic response (3 items), perceived complexity (2 items) and novelty (3 items) appeared after each stimulus, followed by CVPA (11 items) and demographic items. All measures were culled from existing scales and rated on either 7-point semantic differential scales or a 5-point Likert scale (CVPA). Median split method was used to group consumers based on mean CVPA scores ($N_{CVPAhigh} = 119$, $N_{CVPALow} = 141$).

H1 and H2 were tested through a three-way repeated measures ANOVA with CVPA as the between-subjects factor, complexity and novelty as the within-subjects factors and aesthetic response as the dependent variable. The main effect for complexity [Wilk's $\lambda = 0.55$, $F(1/258) = 213.4$, $p = 0.000$] and novelty [Wilk's $\lambda = 0.97$, $F(1/258) = 8.68$, $p = 0.007$] on aesthetic response was significant, with complex and novel apparel designs receiving more positive aesthetic response. However, the interaction effect for complexity and CVPA on aesthetic response was not-significant [Wilk's $\lambda = 0.994$, $F(1/258) = 1.456$, $p = 0.229$]. High CVPA consumers have a more positive aesthetic response to high complexity than low complexity apparel designs [$M_{CVPAhigh}^{*Chigh} = 5.132$, $SE = 0.112$, $M_{CVPAhigh}^{*Clow} = 3.744$, $SE = 0.092$, Mean Difference = 1.388 , $p = 0.000$], as do low CVPA consumers [$M_{CVPALow}^{*Clow} = 3.691$, $SE = 0.085$, $M_{CVPALow}^{*Chigh} = 4.867$, $SE = 0.103$, Mean Difference = 1.176 , $p = 0.000$]; hence supporting H1a while rejecting H1b. There was a significant interaction effect for novelty and CVPA on aesthetic response [Wilk's $\lambda = 0.979$, $F(1/258) = 5.463$, $p = 0.020$]. Specifically, high CVPA consumer have a more positive aesthetic response to high than low novelty apparel designs [$M_{CVPAhigh}^{*Nhigh} = 4.648$, $SE = 0.101$, $M_{CVPAhigh}^{*Nlow} = 4.228$, $SE = 0.097$, Mean Difference = 0.420 , $p = 0.000$]; but low CVPA consumers did not demonstrate significant differences in aesthetic response to low or high novelty apparel designs [$M_{CVPALow}^{*Nlow} = 4.255$, $SE = 0.089$, $M_{CVPALow}^{*Nhigh} = 4.303$, $SE = 0.093$, Mean Difference = -0.048 , $p = 0.653$]; hence supporting H2a, while rejecting H2b.

Findings of this study exhibit that consumers who are sensitive to visual aesthetics were more distinguishing with respect to the collative variable of novelty in apparel designs. However, regardless of the level of aesthetic sensitivity, consumers had more positive aesthetic responses to complex compared to simple apparel designs. This study suggests that firms need to be aware that complexity is crucial for all consumers when judging apparel designs. The finding that consumers who are sensitive to visual aesthetics have a greater concern for novel products indicates that companies need to account for their target market's CVPA in order to increase sell-through by assuring accurate sales forecasts and avoiding underspending on a novel apparel range offering. Further research is warranted to identify differences in responses to visual aspects of product design (typicality, harmony etc.), through a concurrent examination of CVPA.

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