

The power of plain: Intensifying product experience with neutral aesthetic context

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Abstract Product packaging aesthetics can be the first observable signal of a product's underlying traits. Two experimental studies examine the impact of package aesthetics on consumers' evaluations of sensory hedonic products. The studies show that when paired with inferior or superior product quality, neutral package aesthetics can serve to intensify the negativity or positivity of product experience. Results indicate that surprise and disappointment mediate the relationship between package aesthetics and product evaluation. These findings provide evidence that an aesthetic, which serves to neutralize expectation states and in turn intensifies experience through contrast, may be as important of a contextual factor to consider as aesthetics that bias perceptions via a halo effect.

Keywords Aesthetics · Packaging · Affect · Expectations

Previous research has shown that individuals have heightened expectations for and ascribe more favorable traits to targets with attractive versus unattractive exterior appearances (for a review see Eagly et al. 1991). So the common wisdom is that highly attractive or unattractive aesthetic contexts should serve to bias consumer experience via the positive or negative halo of such expectations. For many products, packaging serves as a key aesthetic context that could impact experience because the purchase environment is disconnected from product experience. Yet some marketers opt for unassuming package exteriors. For example, expensive jewelry is often delivered in an understated box. One explanation for such tactics is that for certain product categories that are highly experiential, hedonic or sensory, aesthetics that serve to neutralize expectations for the product encounter may help to intensify subsequent reactions to actual product experience.

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There is ample evidence that visual aesthetics can bias consumer perceptions (e.g., Hagtvedt and Patrick 2008; Hoegg et al. 2010) and aesthetic contexts such as packaging bias perception because of attention to salient physical properties (e.g., Deng and Kahn 2009; Raghbir and Krishna 1999; Wansink and Van Ittersum 2003). Although an aesthetic cue may be nondiagnostic relative to quality, reactions to that cue may actually serve to bias more diagnostic sensory cues. In fact, the visual cue of a brand label or color of a product has been shown to impact consumers' ability to discriminate quality, even when product evaluation is based on actual taste (Hoegg and Alba 2007; McClure et al. 2004).

However, contextual cues need not always be assimilated into a target but have the potential to serve as a contrast. Unexplored in previous research is the role that aesthetic context may play in actually neutralizing expectations if that context is non-distinct. In the next section, we discuss the role of aesthetic context cues and characterize packaging as an aesthetic context that is able not only to enhance or denigrate experience but also to neutralize expectations for an experience. We develop a set of hypotheses regarding the impact of neutral aesthetics on hedonic experience and identify potential mediators of the effect. In the third section, we report a set of pre-tests and two experiments to test our predictions that product experience may be enhanced or denigrated by aesthetic contexts that neutralize expectations. In the final section, we conclude with a summary and discussion relating to the implications, boundary conditions and contributions of our work.

1 Packaging as aesthetic context

Aesthetics impact product expectations (Calkins 1927; Postrel 2003) and affect consumers' initial liking judgments (Page and Herr 2002). When consumers do not have prior knowledge of a product's qualities, *packaging* aesthetic may be a key marketing action that impacts consumers' expectations. Just as an individual's appearance is the first information that can be used to infer personal traits, packaging is the first observable direct signal of a product's underlying traits and sets consumers' expectations accordingly.

1.1 Positive and negative expectations

Positive and negative expectation states shape experience through confirmatory processing (Hoch and Ha 1986). The valence of expectations is simply assimilated into the experience; evaluation shifts in a direction consistent with that state (Sherif and Hovland 1961). For instance, when an individual views a series of pictures of vacation spots that generate positive affect, and then she is presented with a picture of a car, if the positive affect elicited by the vacation spots is assimilated it can serve to enhance her evaluation of the car (Raghunathan and Irwin 2001). Marketing actions can also serve to activate negative expectancies that impact consumption experiences and product efficacy. For instance, Shiv et al. (2005) show that consumption of the exact same product differently impacts performance when the product is purchased at a discount versus at regular price. Consumers who paid a discounted price for a product derived less actual performance benefit from consuming the product than consumers who

purchased and consumed the exact same product but paid its regular price. The negative expectations generated by the discount created a negative placebo effect for the product.

1.2 Neutral expectations

Depending on a consumer's reaction to actual product experience, certain products may be better served or at greater risk if a consumer's expectations are neutralized. The more neutral a consumer's expectation state, the more room there is for initial product exposure and experience to have impact. If a context does not generate a positive or negative response but instead serves to neutralize a consumer's expectation state, and then an object itself generates a strongly valenced response, in theory, this contrast could influence reactions to the object (Parducci 1984; Richins 1991; Schwarz and Bless 1992; Tversky and Griffin 1991).

The more specific or extreme an experience and the more ambiguous the context, the greater the likelihood that the context will serve as a contrast to experience (Herr et al. 1983). The uncertainty intensification hypothesis suggests that when uncertainty is limited to a "feeling of not knowing" as opposed to an aversive state associated with a lack of information, uncertainty during an emotional event makes unpleasant events more unpleasant and pleasant events more pleasant (Bar-Anan et al. 2009). We contend that something like a product package, if neutral in terms of aesthetics, is generally ambiguous (non-distinct) relative to the potential product experience. If the feeling of not knowing or neutral expectation state generated by the package is contrasted to a product experience that is sensory or hedonic (relatively distinct or unambiguous because there is a palpable reaction to the product experience), evaluation of that experience may be impacted by how that experience compares to the initial expectation state.

1.3 Context, affective expectations, and product experience

If product experiences are discrepant with consumer expectations this disconfirmation may generate surprise (e.g., Rust and Oliver 2000; Westbrook 1987). Oliver et al. (1997) found that an unexpected high level of performance from a product or experience pleasantly surprises the consumer. In particular, the consumption of a product with *superior hedonic benefits* evokes a contrast to initial expectations, enhancing consumer delight (Chitturi et al. 2008). Likewise, the consumption of a product with *inferior hedonic benefits* should also evoke a contrast to initial expectations, and if initial expectations were not appropriately tempered, the consumer may be left feeling let down and disappointed.

This suggests that when the positive event of exposure or consumption is contrasted to the neutral affective expectation¹ state generated by an aesthetically neutral package, the resulting positive disconfirmation will pleasantly surprise the consumer. Specifically, when aesthetics neutralize affective expectations but a hedonic

¹ Given package aesthetics can create *affective expectations* (beliefs about the likely pleasure or positivity associated with a consumption experience) (Horsky and Honea 2009) the terminology *neutral affective expectation* connotes the absence of strong beliefs about the likely positivity or negativity of a consumption experience.

product experience is superior, the contrast between the initial state and the positivity of the actual product experience is *surprisingly* positive and serves to enhance consumer's evaluations. Likewise, when the consumption experience is inferior and is contrasted to the neutral affective expectation state generated by a package, the disconfirmation will *disappoint* the consumer and decrease the consumer's evaluation.

In summary, we propose that aesthetics, such as product packaging, engender an affective expectation state regarding hedonic product experience. Actual product experience is contrasted to this expectation state. Neutral aesthetics, such as plain or non-distinct packaging, engender a neutral expectation state regarding a hedonic product. Product experience is contrasted to this neutral state, and this contrast serves to intensify the experience. We limit our predictions to experiential hedonic or sensory products consumed directly from a package and that elicit immediate reaction based on consumption or exposure. This is because if the time frame for evaluation completely separates product experience from aesthetic context then the neutralizing impact of that context on expectation is less likely. Further, hedonic or sensory products elicit a palpable reaction that represents a reasonable contrast to the more ambiguous neutral expectation state created by the package.

Hypothesis 1a: A superior product experienced in the context of an aesthetically neutral package will generate a more positive evaluation than a superior product experienced in the context of an aesthetically attractive package.

Hypothesis 1b: The disconfirmation of expectations resulting when a superior product is experienced in the context of an aesthetically neutral package surprises the consumer. This positive reaction mediates the relationship between aesthetic and evaluation.

Hypothesis 2a: An inferior product experienced in the context of an aesthetically neutral package will generate a more negative evaluation than an inferior product experienced in the context of an unattractive package.

Hypothesis 2b: The disconfirmation of expectations resulting when an inferior product is experienced in the context of an aesthetically neutral package disappoints the consumer. This negative reaction mediates the relationship between aesthetic and evaluation.

To examine the preceding hypotheses two experiments test our predictions and determine whether packaging aesthetics will differentially interact with a product of superior or inferior product quality to impact consumer perceptions. We investigate the effects of package aesthetics on actual sensory (gustatory) experiences. The experiments manipulate aesthetic context by varying attractiveness of the package pattern on a box of chocolate.

2 Pretests

An initial set of pretests were conducted to select the package pattern and the chocolates to be employed in the two studies. A series of label patterns were presented to participants who rated the labels as 1=Unattractive to 7=Beautiful and 1=Ugly to 7=Pretty. These items were combined to form a single measure of package pattern aesthetic attractiveness; aesthetic index (ugly/pretty, unattractive/beautiful)

($r(42)=-.79$, $p<.01$). The label patterns all had identical text that read “Morgan’s Chocolates” but varied in terms of the images present. Some images were decorative sketches, and others featured unknown characters’ facial sketches (characters were included to identify a label that was consistently rated as unattractive). For consistency, all labels included some type of pattern or image to rate. Across the three labels selected for the studies, label attractiveness ratings varied by type of label ($F(2, 64)=91.8$, $p<.001$). The label selected as attractive had a detailed and relatively elaborate sketch pattern and received a significantly higher aesthetic index rating ($M=5.00$) than the label selected as neutral that had a more basic sketch design ($M=3.96$) ($F(1, 40)=9.35$, $p<.01$). Both of these labels were rated as significantly more attractive than the label selected as the unattractive pattern which had a sketch of an ugly character ($M=1.24$) ($F(1, 42)=345$, $p<.001$); ($F(1, 46)=78.2$, $p<.001$). The labels and boxes employed in the following experimental studies were special ordered from a label manufacturer so the actual box, all text, and information on the labels was identical between conditions. The only difference between the boxes’ exterior was the pattern present.

Different varieties of chocolate and carob were selected for a taste pre-test. Carob, a chocolate substitute lacking some of the flavor and texture of chocolate, was included in the test to identify a tasting option that would consistently be rated as a low quality chocolate experience. During the pretest subjects were told they were sampling chocolate when they were sampling carob. A debrief confirmed that all subjects believed they were sampling chocolate even when they sampled carob.

During the taste test participants were asked a series of questions regarding their overall evaluation of the chocolate taste (1=bad to 7=good, 1=unsatisfactory to 7=satisfactory, 1=unfavorable to 7=favorable, 1=did not like taste to 7=liked taste) that were averaged to form a taste evaluation index ($\alpha=.98$). Subjects had water available to cleanse their palettes as they sampled. The average rating for the chocolate selected for the superior product stimuli ($M=5.52$) was significantly higher than the carob selected as the inferior product stimuli ($M=1.73$) ($F(1, 60)=132.01$, $p<.001$).

3 Experiment 1

Study 1 examines the role neutral aesthetics may have in enhancing product experience evaluations. Participants’ post-taste responses were measured to assess whether positive feelings of surprise played a role in enhancing evaluations of product experience. A between-subjects experimental design was employed, with product package (high attractive versus neutral attractive) and identical very high (superior) quality product in both packages.

3.1 Method

3.1.1 Participants

Participants in the study were 46 (13 males and 33 females) undergraduate students recruited from the Business School at a large North American

university. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two manipulated conditions (high attractive or neutral attractive package) with identical superior quality chocolate used in both conditions. They received course credit for their participation.

3.1.2 Independent variables

Participants entered a laboratory, and placed on their desktop was a box of chocolate with either the neutral or attractive labels selected in the pre-test. Participants in each session had identical box labels so they were not aware the label varied. After participants were seated in front of a box they were presented the following research guise.

A specialty baskets distributor is conducting research on campus. They will be offering their Valentine's baskets online and at college campuses around the country. They have a number of manufacturers that supply products to them, such as wine and chocolate. They are interested in college students' evaluations of their different product lines—and today you have the opportunity to sample some of their chocolates and let them know what you think. As a special treat, all participants will be entered in a lottery to receive *\$50 dollars worth of free chocolate* from this distributor.

As the explanation was presented, participants had the opportunity to view the labels on the chocolate boxes. Then participants were asked to complete a questionnaire containing the dependent measures described in the next section, as well as sample the chocolates. After completing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

3.1.3 Dependent variables

After sampling the chocolate, participants were asked a series of questions regarding their overall evaluation of the chocolate taste. Items were identical to the pre-test (bad/good, unsatisfactory/satisfactory, unfavorable/favorable, did not like taste/liked taste) and were averaged to form a taste evaluation index ($\alpha=.96$). Then participants responded to six semantic differential scales to characterize how they were feeling. To measure surprise (Oliver et al. 1997) an item was embedded in a list of six reactions: unhappy/happy, unexcited/excited, unsurprised/surprised, bad/good, unpleasant/pleasant, distrust/trust—the item of interest was unsurprised/surprised. After responding to these items participants indicated how likely they would be to purchase the chocolate on a seven-point scale (1=would not purchase to 7=would purchase). Finally, participants completed a manipulation check to verify whether the high attractive box pattern was rated as more attractive than the neutral attractive box pattern based on the set of items assessing the box pattern's attractiveness, aesthetic index (ugly/pretty, unattractive/ beautiful) ($r(46)=.70$, $p<.01$). The conclusion of the questionnaire asked participants about their liking and consumption of chocolate as well as to indicate their gender and age. Responses to these items had no effect on the results reported in the next section and are not discussed further.

3.2 Results

Manipulation checks indicated that the box patterns differed in terms of attractiveness (aesthetic index means: high attractive ($M=4.7$) versus neutral attractive ($M=4.02$); ($F(1, 45)=3.57, p<.05$, one-tailed). Participants' overall evaluation of the chocolate taste indicates that the neutral attractive box pattern results in more positive taste evaluations of the chocolate ($M=6.19$) than the high attractive box pattern ($M=5.18$) ($F(1, 44)=8.81, p<.01$). Post-taste purchase intentions indicate that participants are also more likely to purchase the chocolates from the neutral attractive box pattern ($M=5.71$) than the high attractive box pattern ($M=4.68$) ($F(1, 45)=5.03, p<.05$). These results confirm *Hypothesis 1a*, a superior product experienced in the context of a neutral package generates a more positive evaluation than a superior product experienced in the context of an attractive package.

The analysis of the post-taste responses indicates that participants' surprise level was significantly different between the neutral attractive box pattern chocolate ($M=6.54$) and the high attractive box pattern ($M=5.36$) ($F(1, 45)=13.73, p<.001$). Our analyses show that box aesthetics (the independent variable) is a significant predictor of overall taste evaluation ($B=-1.01, p<.005$). In order to test whether surprise mediated the relationship between the experimental condition of package aesthetic and evaluation, two additional regression analyses were run. First, feeling surprise is a significant predictor of positivity of overall taste evaluation ($B=.46, p<.005$). Second, including the surprise measure in the original model predicting taste evaluation caused the box aesthetic measure to decrease in significance ($B=-.618, p=.10$), whereas the surprise measure itself remained significant ($B=.34, p<.05$). The results of a Sobel test (Sobel 1982) were shown to be significant ($t=2.22, p<.05$). Following the criteria set by Baron and Kenny (1986), this is evidence of full mediation. These results confirm *Hypothesis 1b*, the disconfirmation of expectations resulting when a superior product is experienced in the context of a neutral aesthetic package surprises the consumer and this positive reaction mediates the relationship between neutral aesthetic and positive evaluation.

3.3 Discussion

In Study 1 we investigated the contrast effects of packaging which generated a positive reaction that enhances product experience and purchase intention. We find that if the package does not generate a positive hedonic/affective expectation state because of its neutral aesthetic appearance, then the individual is delighted when she experiences a superior quality hedonic product. This surprise is assimilated into the sensory experience and serves to increase evaluation of that experience and product purchase intention.

4 Experiment 2

Study 2 examines the role neutral aesthetics may have in decreasing product evaluations. Participants' post-taste responses were measured to assess whether

negative feelings of disappointment played a role in their evaluations of product experience. A between-subjects experimental design was employed, with product package (unattractive versus neutral attractive) and identical very low (inferior) quality product in both packages.

4.1 Method

4.1.1 Participants

Participants in the study were 59 (28 males and 31 females) undergraduate students recruited from the Business School at a large North American university. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two manipulated conditions (unattractive or neutral attractive package) with identical inferior quality “chocolate” (carob) used in both conditions. They received course credit for their participation.

4.1.2 Independent variables

Participants entered a laboratory, and placed on their desktop was a box of chocolate with either the neutral or unattractive label selected in the pre-test. Participants in each session had identical box labels so they were not aware the label varied. After participants were seated in front of a box they were presented the same research guise as described in Study 1.

4.1.3 Dependent variables

Generally, the questionnaire for Study 2 followed the same format as Study 1. After sampling the chocolate participants were asked a series of questions regarding their overall evaluation of the chocolate taste as in Study 1 (bad/good, unsatisfactory/satisfactory, unfavorable/favorable, did not like taste/liked taste). These four items were averaged to form a taste evaluation index ($\alpha = .98$). The affect scales participants used to characterize how they were feeling differed from Study 1. Single items anchored by 1 = Not at all to 7 = Very much were used to assess how subjects were feeling. To capture disappointment, the feeling that stems from the comparison of an actual outcome with a better outcome that might have resulted had events occurred differently (Marcatto and Ferrante 2008; Van Dijk et al. 1999), *disappointment* and *let down* were included in a list of 11 items presented to participants. These items were used to form the disappointment index ($r(58) = .80, p < .001$). The distracter items were Happy, Bored, Surprised, Trusting, Delighted, Excited, Hesitant, Bad, and Pleasant. After responding to these items participants indicated how likely they would be to purchase the chocolate on a seven-point scale (1 = would not purchase to 7 = would purchase). Finally, participants completed a manipulation check to verify whether the unattractive box pattern was rated as more unattractive than the neutral attractive box pattern using the aesthetic index (ugly/pretty, unattractive/ beautiful) ($r(58) = .80, p < .001$).

The conclusion of the questionnaire asked participants about their liking and consumption of chocolate as well as to indicate their gender and age. Responses to these items had no effect on the results reported in the next section and are not discussed further.

4.2 Results

Manipulation checks indicated that the box patterns differed in terms of attractiveness (aesthetic index means: neutral attractive ($M=3.6$) versus unattractive ($M=2.0$); ($F(1,57)=17.64$, $p<.001$). Participants' overall evaluation of the chocolate taste indicates that the neutral attractive box pattern results in more negative taste evaluations ($M=2.59$) than the unattractive box pattern ($M=3.90$) ($F(1, 56)=10.34$, $p<.01$). Post-taste purchase intentions followed a similar pattern in the means, and the likelihood of purchase for chocolates from the neutral attractive box pattern ($M=1.87$) was lower than for the unattractive box pattern ($M=2.39$), although the difference was not significant ($p>.10$). These results confirm *Hypothesis 2a*, an inferior product experienced in the context of a neutral package generates a more negative evaluation than an inferior product experience in the context of an unattractive package.

The analysis of the post-taste responses indicates that participants' disappointment level was significantly different between the neutral attractive box pattern chocolate ($M=4.37$) and the unattractive box pattern ($M=3.29$) ($F(1, 57)=6.86$, $p<.01$). Our analyses show that box aesthetics (the independent variable) is a significant predictor of overall taste evaluation ($B=2.59$, $p<.001$). In order to test whether disappointment mediated the relationship between the experimental condition of package aesthetic and evaluation, two additional regression analyses were run. First, feeling disappointment is a significant predictor of negativity of overall taste evaluation ($B=5.92$, $p<.001$). Second, including the disappointment measure in the original model predicting taste evaluation caused the box aesthetic measure to decrease in significance ($B=.33$, $p=.10$), whereas the disappointment measure itself remained significant ($B=-.58$, $p<.001$). The results of a Sobel test (Sobel 1982) were shown to be significant ($t=2.41$, $p<.05$). Following the criteria set by Baron and Kenny (1986), this is evidence of full mediation. These results confirm *Hypothesis 2b*, the disconfirmation of expectations resulting when an inferior product is experienced in the context of a neutral aesthetic package disappoints the consumer and this negative reaction mediates the relationship between neutral aesthetic and negative evaluation.

4.3 Discussion

In Study 2 we investigated the contrast effects of neutral packaging that serve to denigrate product experience. We find that if the package does not generate a negative hedonic/affective expectation state because of its neutral aesthetic appearance, then the individual is more disappointed when she experiences an inferior quality hedonic product. This disappointment is assimilated into the sensory experience and serves to decrease evaluation of that experience. Purchase intentions for the low quality product followed a similar pattern although the effect was not significant. This is not surprising given purchase intentions were generally low for the inferior product.

5 General discussion

Consumer research has not explored the impact of neutralizing a consumer state through marketing variables such as context and packaging. Perhaps the focus on

biasing effects over enhancing the intensity of actual product experience is in part because there are very few marketing levers that are capable of both forms of impact. Aesthetics represent a contextual marketing variable with this flexibility. When consumers do not have prior knowledge of a product's qualities, visual aesthetics may be a marketing action that inflates, deflates, or neutralizes consumers' expectations. Just as an individual's appearance is the first information that can be used to infer personal traits, packaging aesthetic is the first observable direct signal of a product's underlying traits and sets consumers' expectations accordingly. Although improved visual aesthetics in a product's design can provide a competitive edge (Berkowitz 1987; Bruce and Whitehead 1988) we show that depending on the actual product experience, neutral aesthetics (and expectations) may be beneficial or detrimental to product evaluation. This is because the reaction to the disconfirmation of nullified expectation, in the form of surprise or disappointment, powerfully impacts evaluation.

Previous research has shown that salient physical properties can impact consumer perceptions so it is not necessarily intuitive that neutral aesthetics would be meaningful for evaluation. This research provides the unexpected result that the absence of salient attractive or unattractive aesthetics can have important implications for experience. Product packaging is often part of the consumer product encounter, and interestingly the more benign the package the more it may interact with product experience. The biasing effects of packaging aesthetics, however, are dependent on a product's actual quality level. If the aesthetic lowers hedonic/affective expectations and an experience is inferior, product evaluation is actually higher than if a consumer is not prepared for the low quality experience. When aesthetics neutralize expectations, the shock of the undesirable experience is more intense. The unexpected disappointment becomes particularly salient and further diminishes the evaluation of the experience. When an aesthetic context heightens hedonic/affective expectation state, then there is not a significant contrast to highly positive product experience, so that positive experience is not as salient. However, if a neutral aesthetic context serves as a contrast to a superior quality experience, the consumer is pleasantly surprised, and this enhances evaluation of the experience.

These findings clarify the manner in which aesthetics and sensory experience interact as well as contribute to the large body of research on assimilation and contrasts effects. However, the conditions for the effects observed in this research are quite specific. First of all, the occurrence of assimilative or contrasting effects for aesthetic relates to the type of context we examined, a package. Packaging is closely associated with a product given it generally precedes initial experience. Without this proximity to experience any neutralizing effect it might have on expectation would likely be wiped out. Secondly, the emergence of a contrast instead of assimilation effect for package aesthetics and evaluation likely stems from the important role sensory input plays for both the interpretation of this context and the evaluation of experience for the product examined.

Based on these conditions we expect assimilative effects if the interpretation of aesthetic context generates a palpable sensory reaction. In this case the reaction to context answers the question "How do I feel about this?" so it should be perceived as relevant to the target and be assimilated into the judgment of the target (Schwarz and

Clore 2007). However, a neutral visual sensory experience is notable relative to a clear or intense gustatory sensory experience. The neutral aesthetic context (which is neither attractive nor unattractive) creates a sense of “not” knowing or “not” feeling anything distinct about the product. This neutral state which precedes experience allows the sensory and hedonic nature of a distinct or extreme product experience to be fully felt. The feelings such as surprise or disappointment that emerge with experience stand out against and are contrasted to the absence of feeling, which in turn intensifies the evaluation of experience.

In summary, the aesthetic contrast effects observed in our research are bounded by: timing of context exposure relative to product experience, product quality, and the aesthetic nature of the context. Context must immediately precede experience to impact expectations and only when the aesthetic is non-distinct does the resulting neutral expectation state provide a clear contrast to a distinct experience. In fact, if experience is not distinct (e.g., moderate quality product) and aesthetics are clearly interpreted as attractive or unattractive, assimilation will occur (Horsky and Honea 2009). In this case aesthetic context helps to create a feeling of knowing about a more ambiguous or non-distinct experience.

Future research opportunities stem from the limitations in our experimental context and methods. The unattractive aesthetic condition and inferior quality product were relatively strong manipulations. Additionally, a single hedonic product was the focus of both the studies. Given these limitations, further examination of the generalizability of the results to other products and situations merits attention. One such opportunity is to investigate whether the impact of packaging aesthetics can be verified in a non-experimental setting or over repeated consumption experiences. Such endeavors will provide insights regarding the power of neutral package aesthetics as a standard of comparison to affective reactions generated by experience. Another research opportunity would be to examine whether such effects are relevant to less sensory hedonic goods, other experiential goods or different types of aesthetic signals. Whether similar effects would be observed with a non-sensory product that generates affective reactions or aesthetics that are neutral on other dimensions than attractiveness would be interesting extensions to this work.

The idea of neutralizing consumers' expectation state has received no attention in the marketing literature. Instead, the emphasis has been to understand the biasing affective and cognitive role for marketing variables. The implications of this work suggest some new considerations for product aesthetics and context. For example, employing generic packaging for low-quality products may be particularly unwise because of the contrast it creates. Alternatively, even though product aesthetics can be a key mechanism for gaining consumer attention when a marketer can be confident in the sensory or affective nature of an experience, they may be best served by employing more benign aesthetic contexts to allow peak experiences to develop. Most importantly, in a world where consumers are overloaded with media, marketing, and environmental stimuli, it may be prudent to begin to understand the contextual factors that neutralize consumer states or “clear the consumer's [emotional] mind.” These insights will allow us to identify those situations where positive reactions such as surprise and negative reactions such as disappointment will emerge; and to determine how contextual factors such as aesthetics that may serve to intensify consumer reaction should be appropriately managed.

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