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Brand Visualization: Effects of 'Product Shape-Typeface Design' Congruence on Brand Perceptions and Price Expectations

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This research addresses effects of congruence of symbolic meanings connoted through product shape and typeface design on brand perceptions and price expectations. Based on processing fluency accounts, it is predicted that shape-typeface congruence, as opposed to shape-typeface incongruence, positively affects perceptions of brand credibility, brand aesthetics, and product value, the latter reflected in higher price expectations. These predictions were tested in two studies in which shape and typeface of a fictitious brand of bottled waters were manipulated. Findings from both studies were in line with our predictions. Moreover, study 2 indicates that perceived brand aesthetics mediates the effect of shape-typeface congruence on price expectations.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research indicates that congruence, as opposed to incongruence, of symbolic meanings connoted across or within marketing mix elements positively affects consumer response (Bottomley and Doyle 2006; Erdem and Swait 1988, 1994). However, controlled studies addressing congruence effects of visual product features are non-existent. Since products comprise multiple visual 'channels' (e.g., shape and typeface) through which symbolic meanings are communicated, and considering that a product's visual appearance is the most important determinant of consumer choice (Bloch 1995), such studies are called for. Hence, two studies were conducted addressing effects of congruence of symbolic meanings connoted across shape and typeface of a fictitious brand of bottled waters on brand perceptions and price expectations.

In accounting for effects of various forms of congruence on consumer response, recent theorizing on processing fluency is insightful. According to such accounts, stimuli that can be easily processed are generally evaluated in positive terms and inspire favorable attitudes (Lee and Labroo 2004; Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman 2004). The basis for these effects can be traced to the finding that fluent processing is experienced as positive (Reber et al. 2004). Of particular relevance for the present context is the finding that fluent stimuli are experienced as more credible or true (Reber and Schwarz 1999; Unkelbach 2007) and aesthetically pleasing (Reber et al. 2004) than non-fluent stimuli.

As for product appearance, perceived congruence of symbolic meanings connoted across visual product features is expected to facilitate processing. Arguably, products high in congruence facilitate impression formation, as opposed to products low in congruence. In line with the claim that fluent processing generally inspires favorable product evaluations (Lee and Labroo 2004), and the finding that symbolic qualities expressed through product appearance steer brand perception (Childers and Jass 2002), shape-typeface congruence, as opposed to shape-typeface incongruence, is expected to positively impact perceptions of the corresponding brand.

In line with processing fluency accounts, a particular type of brand perception that should benefit from fluent processing concerns perceptions of brand credibility, i.e., the believability of the product information contained in the brand. Hence, products high in shape-typeface congruence should elicit ratings of the corresponding brand as more credible than products low in shape-typeface congruence. Elsewhere, it has been proposed that brand credibility is an important determinant of consumer-based brand equity (Erdem and Swait 1998), defined as the value of a brand to consumers (Keller 1993). Since product- or brand value is, among others, reflected in product price, it is expected that shape-typeface congruence positively affects price expectations via perceptions of brand credibility. These predictions were tested in study 1.

Study 2 tested the proposed relation between congruence and perceptions of brand aesthetics. Based on the finding that processing fluency positively affects aesthetic responses (Reber et al. 2004), it is expected that congruent, as opposed to incongruent, products trigger perceptions of the corresponding brand as higher in aesthetic value. In addition, study 2 sought to replicate the effect of shape-typeface congruence on price expectations using another set of stimuli.

In study 1, two shape variants and two typeface variants of a fictitious brand of bottled waters connoted either *luxury* or *casualness*, effects confirmed by a pretest. Cross pairing the two shapes with the two typefaces resulted in two congruent variants (shape and typeface both connoting *luxury*, or shape and typeface both connoting *casualness*) and two incongruent variants (product shape connoting *luxury* and typeface connoting *casualness*, or vice versa). One hundred and forty-four undergraduate students were randomly presented with a congruent or incongruent product variant, after which they filled out a measure of brand credibility. Price expectations were assessed by prompting participants to indicate what they thought would be the average price of the product presented (in Euro-cents) at supermarkets. Results showed that the two congruent product variants induced, as expected, higher perceptions of brand credibility and higher price expectations than the two incongruent variants. The expected mediation of the latter effect by perceived brand credibility was not confirmed.

In study 2, the proposed relation between shape-typeface congruence and perceived brand aesthetics was tested. In addition, study 2 sought to replicate the effect of shape-typeface congruence on price expectations with another set of stimuli. This time, the two shape and the two typeface variants (again using the same fictitious brand of bottled waters) either connoted *masculinity* or *femininity*. Similar to study 1, two congruent product variants and two incongruent variants were created by cross pairing the two shape and the two typeface manipulations. One hundred and twenty-six undergraduate students were randomly presented with a congruent or incongruent product variant, after which they filled out a measure of perceived brand aesthetics. As in study 1, price expectations were assessed by prompting participants to indicate what they thought would be the average price of the product presented (in Euro-cents) at supermarkets.

Although congruence effects were stronger for the feminine typeface variant than for the masculine typeface variant (indicating that the feminine typeface induced higher price expectations and higher ratings on perceived brand aesthetics than the masculine typeface), results showed, as in study 1, overall positive effects of congruence on both measures. Mediation analysis showed that congruence affects price expectations via perceived brand aesthetics, indicating that aesthetic value is not just an important determinant of consumer choice (Creusen and Schoormans 2005), but may also contribute to commercial success by shaping price expectations.

In addition, the findings presented suggest that shape-typeface congruence facilitates processing. Future research should incorporate more direct measures of processing fluency (e.g., reaction speed), and establish how fluency can be related to 'design principles' other than shape-typeface congruence. To further elucidate the described mediation, measures of brand aesthetics and brand credibility should be incorporated in the same study. Finally, future research should address effects of variations in product design on perceptions of existing brands characterized by a relatively stable brand image, usually the resultant of many more factors besides product appearance. Awaiting research addressing these issues, in the meantime, our results underscore the importance of controlled studies addressing effects of product design on consumer response.

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