

The Allure of Design: Factors Affecting Consumer Purchasing Decisions on Aesthetic Products

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary consumer markets, product aesthetics have transcended mere decoration to become a primary driver of consumer purchasing behaviour. Product aesthetics have evolved from superficial adornments to primary drivers. This conceptual paper reviews the psychological, cognitive, and environmental factors that influence how consumers evaluate and purchase highly aesthetic products. By synthesising current literature on visual processing, cognitive biases, and behavioural paradoxes, this paper explores the mechanisms through which design catalyses impulse buying, the aesthetic-usability effect, and the contrasting motivations of hedonic versus utilitarian consumers. Research indicates that highly aesthetic product trigger rapid, emotionally driven cognitive processing successfully. Consumers consistently rely on visual beauty as an extrinsic cue for functional superiority and premium quality. Also, effectiveness of these aesthetic cues is heavily moderated by consumer orientation, with hedonic consumers embracing visual appeal while the utilitarians exhibit scepticism. Furthermore, this paper examines the "too pretty to use" paradox, wherein excessive aesthetic appeal inhibits consumption. Managerial implications for product design and marketing strategies are discussed as achieving long-term commercial success requires a strategic balance between captivating design and approachable functionality.

Keywords: Aesthetic product, Impulse buying, Hedonism, Heuristic, Perceived quality



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1 INTRODUCTION

In today's hyper-competitive marketplace, a product's functionality is rarely enough to guarantee its success. Consumers are increasingly driven by visual and sensory appeal, transforming product aesthetics from an afterthought into a primary driver of purchasing decisions. The way a product looks, feels, and is presented can bypass logical evaluation, triggering emotional responses that lead directly to the checkout counter. Understanding the psychological and environmental factors that govern these decisions is crucial for modern marketers and designers.

The modern commercial landscape is characterised by hyper-competition and functional parity among products. Consequently, utilitarian value is no longer sufficient to guarantee market success. Firms increasingly rely on product aesthetics defined as the visual, tactile, and sensory properties of an item—to differentiate their offerings, capture consumer attention, and stimulate sales.

Aesthetics bypasses deliberate, analytical evaluation, communicating value through emotional and sensory channels. The purpose of this paper is to systematically unpack the mechanisms that drive consumer behaviour regarding aesthetic products, ranging from immediate neurological responses to complex cognitive biases and behavioural paradoxes.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Cognitive Processing and Impulse Buying Behaviour

Visual aesthetic has become a critical strategic tool in marketing. It can deeply influence consumer purchasing decisions. Visual aesthetic also gives subsequent impact on impulsivity. Visual aesthetics of a product encompassing colour, shape, texture, and form are often the very first stimuli a consumer processes. Visual appealing products easily elicit positive emotional responses and excitement, which can bypass deliberate decision making and catalyse impulsive buying. Because the aesthetic process is rapid and implicit, a beautiful product quickly generates sensory pleasure that strongly incentivises immediate acquisition (Shi et al., 2021). This aligns with findings by Megat Zambri et al. (2026), who highlighted that structured visual arrangements can strongly act as physical stimuli that provoke sudden consumer buying impulses.

The acquisition of highly aesthetic products is frequently characterised by impulse buying, driven by the rapid processing capabilities of the human brain. When a consumer encounters a visually harmonious or striking product, the brain's reward pathways are stimulated, resulting in an immediate release of dopamine (Tariq et al., 2025). In their research, it was shown that the propensity towards impulsive buying is further enhanced by visual product aesthetic. This research was done for online commerce purchases. The research tries to look at online purchases where multiple tactics used by physical stores are absent. They explained further through the Dual-Process Theory.

In system 1 Activation, the aesthetic stimulus engages the fast, automatic, and emotionally driven cognitive system. The consumer experiences sudden excitement and a desire for acquisition. Meanwhile in system 2 Suppression, the powerful emotional arousal creates cognitive friction, suppressing the slow, analytical system that typically evaluates practical utility, budget constraints, and long-term needs. Consequently, the purchase is executed not to fulfil a functional deficit, but to capture and sustain the positive emotional state generated by the product's design. Tariq et al. (2025) concluded that visual product aesthetics can intensify purchasing and can offer a strategic advantage when company designs online shopping environments.

2.2 The Aesthetic-Usability Effect and Perceived Quality

A fundamental cognitive bias influencing purchasing decisions is the aesthetic-usability effect. Consumers unconsciously associate visual beauty with functional superiority and overall quality. (Baghirov & Zhang, 2024). Megat Zambri et al. (2026) analysed how visual merchandise factors can predict consumer purchasing decisions. Their findings suggested that emotion responses by consumers at retail store can be evoked by visual appeals in store. This in return may enhance customer interactions with the products and their readiness to purchase.

In the absence of technical expertise or prior brand familiarity, design serves as a critical extrinsic cue. When a product features a premium, highly aesthetic exterior, consumers extrapolate that the internal mechanics, durability, and performance are of an equally high standard (Shi et al., 2021). This bias directly influences price elasticity; consumers demonstrate a higher willingness to pay for visually appealing products due to elevated value expectations. This concludes Shi, Huo, and Hou (2021) research establishing that consumers rely heavily on design aesthetics to form price expectations and assess value when they lack the technical expertise to objectively evaluate product intrinsic quality.

2.3 Hedonic versus Utilitarian Consumer Orientations

Based on Baghirov and Zhang (2024), the efficacy of product aesthetics is heavily moderated by the consumer's psychological orientation toward shopping. Consumer are said to view products as status symbols or source of pleasure. Consumer orientation is segmented into hedonic and utilitarian categories. Utilitarian consumers are those who prioritise practical functionality. They may view overly complex aesthetic with scepticism, suspecting that the design masks inferior structural quality. Driven by practicality and efficiency, utilitarian buyers evaluate products based on functional merit. If an aesthetic design appears overly complex, flashy, or detrimental to the product's primary function, utilitarian consumers may exhibit resistance, perceiving the design as a superficial mask for inferior quality.

Compared to hedonic consumers, they are driven by emotion, sensory pleasure, value and gratification in overall experience of purchasing. These individuals are primarily motivated by sensory pleasure, emotional fulfilment, and social signalling. For hedonic buyers, elaborate aesthetics are positively correlated with perceived quality and self-expression (Baghirov & Zhang, 2024). This emotional gratification is often maximised when the visual components are deliberately developed around consumer psychology and sensory delight (Wang & Ab. Gani, 2022).

3 The “Too Pretty to Use” Paradox

Consensus in literatures indicate that enhanced aesthetics drive sales. In addition, counter-narrative explores how extreme aesthetics appeal can actively inhibit consumption.

Chen et al. (2023) emphasised the “too pretty to use” paradox identified by Wu et al. in 2017. This paradox confirms that highly aesthetic products cause consumers to perceive a massive investment of effort and craftsmanship in the item's creation. This paradox concludes that product aesthetics is psychologically re-categorised from a functional tool to a piece of art. Some consumers may experience anticipatory guilt for using the product, leading them to avoid using the product entirely to preserve its inherent beauty.

Based on Wu et al., while enhanced aesthetics generally accelerate purchasing decisions and elevate perceived value, a unique behavioural anomaly occurs at the extreme end of the design spectrum. Highly aesthetic products can inadvertently inhibit consumption. Several intersecting psychological mechanisms drive this paradox. The first one being the effort heuristic. Here, consumers naturally estimate a product's value based on the perceived human labour required to create it. Intricate, flawless designs trick the brain into perceiving massive artisanal effort, even in mass-produced goods. Next is categorical shift. As perceived effort increases, the item transitions in the consumer's mind from a functional "tool" to an admired piece of "art". Lastly, anticipatory guilt. Because consumption inherently involves the destruction or degradation of the product (e.g., burning a sculpted candle, writing in a pristine journal), using the item induces guilt over destroying perceived artistic labour.

Furthermore, perfectionist tendencies exacerbate this issue. When aesthetics is the primary value proposition, consumers become hyper-sensitive to minor flaws or superficial damage, which can severely diminish purchase intentions (Chen et al., 2023). Chen et al. (2023) further nuanced the paradox by examining the role of consumer perfectionism. It was indicated that when aesthetics is the primary driver of value, products become highly vulnerable to superficial flaws. These types of consumers show a stark decline in purchase intentions if an aesthetic product or even when its packaging suffers from minor defect. This highlights a unique fragility in visual driven markets.

4 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Understanding the dual nature of product aesthetics is critical for contemporary marketers and industrial designers.

1. **Balancing Emotion and Function:** Designers must leverage the affect heuristic to capture attention while ensuring the design does not alienate utilitarian consumers. Aesthetics should communicate, rather than obscure, the product's functional purpose.
2. **Mitigating the Usage Paradox:** To overcome the "too pretty to use" paradox, marketers can employ specific strategies, such as providing a less aesthetic "everyday" version alongside a premium version, or framing the destruction of the product (e.g., the melting of a candle) as part of the intended aesthetic experience.
3. **Contextual Presentation:** In digital and live-streaming environments, high-quality visual presentation is paramount to reducing perceived risk and accelerating the cognitive transition from visual processing to purchasing action (Zhang, 2023). This visual acceleration is particularly vital when attempting to engage modern audiences through digital showcases or motion graphic elements where attention spans are limited (Abdul Rahim, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Aesthetic products possess a powerful dual nature. The effectiveness of product aesthetics depends entirely on who is buying. Hedonic consumers seek out and happily pay for emotional pleasure while utilitarian may view excessive aesthetics with scepticism. The psychology and behaviour behind purchasing aesthetic products is fundamentally an emotional and cognitive event rather than a purely rational calculation.

The purchasing decision for aesthetic products represents a complex interplay between neurology, cognitive biases, and consumer identity. While beautiful design serves as a powerful catalyst for impulse buying and elevates perceived functional quality, it also introduces unique psychological barriers to consumption. By acknowledging the power of the aesthetic-usability effect and the risks of over-design, firms can better optimise their product development and marketing strategies to meet both the emotional and functional needs of the modern consumer. For long term market success, product design must be carefully balanced, it must be beautiful enough to trigger emotional purchase, yet approachable and functional enough for consumers to use it.

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Farah Merican Isahak Merican as the main author played a role in collecting information, literature review, analysis of literature and conclusion, while Nizar Nazrin as the corresponding author is responsible for references, formatting and language review. In addition, is the primary point of contact during the manuscript submission, peer review, publication process and communication tasks.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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