

Consumer loyalty driven by aesthetics over functionality

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When designing a new car, manufacturers might try to attract consumers with more horsepower, increased fuel efficiency or a lower price point. But new research from San Francisco State University shows consumers' loyalty and passion for an automobile brand are driven more by appearance. Aesthetics that resonate on an emotional level are more responsible for brand loyalty than such factors as functionality and price, the study found.

"In product design, if you focus more on the aesthetics of the product, the connections that you create with the consumer at the brand level will result in more loyalty and a more sustainable relationship," said Minu Kumar, associate professor of marketing at SF State, who co-authored the study.

Kumar's research examined data from more than 700 [consumers](#) about their opinions of 30 small vehicles as related to such factors as styling, workmanship, safety and cost. While consumers of these types of vehicles are typically believed to have utilitarian priorities, the results showed that social and emotional values, such as the perception of sophistication of design and pride of ownership, had a more significant impact on brand affection than functional values, such as the vehicle's price or gas mileage. These results, Kumar said, support the idea that consumers' passion for brands with distinctive, aesthetically pleasing designs—including Apple, the Volkswagen Beetle and Dyson vacuums—leads to loyalty.

"The more you invest in aesthetics, the stronger the relationship outcome," Kumar explained. "If you invest more in the functionality—like providing extra buttons, another cup holder—the result is a more transactional relationship."

Kumar said that this way of thinking might be counterintuitive to some designers, especially those who design products at a lower price point. "You might think that segment [of consumers] wants more functionality, more bang for their buck," Kumar said. "That may not necessarily be true. The customer might forget the functional attributes of the product over time, but they will love the brand if it has beautiful products."

One surprising finding of the study, Kumar said, was that altruistic value—in this case, whether the car was perceived as being environmentally friendly—was not a significant predictor of brand affection, ranking lower than economic value. "In the national sample, people don't seem to give a lot of importance to sustainability," he said. He noted, however, that there were regional differences in this phenomenon, with sustainability found to be more important to consumers on the West Coast.

When developing a product, Kumar said, marketers and designers often find themselves at odds about what is most meaningful to consumers and how that should be reflected in product design, a problem he wants to help fix. "There is a classic fight between marketers and designers," he added. "This research is part of a stream of literature that is developing in the marketing field which is trying to bridge this gap."

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