

The Influence of Brand Type on Product Choices: The Mediating Role of Need for Uniqueness

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how brand type (luxury vs. non-luxury) influences consumer product choices between attractive and ugly designs. We propose that for non-luxury brands, consumers exhibit a stronger preference for attractive products, while for luxury brands, choices between attractive and ugly products show no significant difference. Need for uniqueness serves as a mediator in this relationship. Drawing on Customers' need for uniqueness theory and aesthetics literature, we develop a theoretical framework and hypotheses. The findings contribute to understanding aesthetic paradoxes in luxury consumption.

KEYWORDS

Brand type; Luxury; Need for uniqueness; Product choice; Aesthetics

1. INTRODUCTION

In consumer markets, product aesthetics significantly shape preferences, with attractive designs generally commanding higher appeal due to associations with quality, pleasure, and positive affect [1]. This "beauty premium" is well-documented across everyday purchases, where visually attractive options dominate choices. However, the luxury sector presents a notable deviation: designs that deviate from conventional beauty—sometimes deliberately ugly or provocative—can achieve substantial commercial success, rivaling or even surpassing traditionally attractive counterparts [2]. A prominent example is Balenciaga's collaboration with Crocs, featuring platform clogs priced at \$850. Despite widespread criticism for their unconventional, often described as "ugly" appearance, these items generated immense buzz and sold out rapidly upon pre-order release in 2017, with similar enthusiasm for related ugly designs in subsequent collections.

To date, both mass media and academic research have paid scant attention to why consumers purchase ugly luxury fashion items. Therefore, based on the Customers' need for uniqueness theory, this study aims to analyze how brand types (luxury versus non-luxury) influence consumers' choices between attractive and ugly designs. It not only offers a novel theoretical perspective on non-mainstream aesthetic strategies within the luxury market but also provides practical guidance for formulating brand marketing strategies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Brand Type: Luxury vs. Non-Luxury

Luxury brands are differentiated from non-luxury (mass-market) brands through multidimensional contrasts in product attributes, value logic, and social signaling functions [3].

Luxury brands typically exhibit scarcity and uniqueness, realized via limited editions, artisanal techniques, or unconventional design choices that foster exclusivity. They command substantial price premiums supported by superior materials, exceptional craftsmanship, and continuous innovation, delivering elevated perceived value [4]. Many possess deep historical and cultural heritage, with brand narratives serving as core assets that build authenticity and emotional resonance [5]. Consumption is driven by symbolic and identity benefits, allowing consumers to signal status, affirm self-concept, or derive psychological rewards beyond functionality. Strict control over distribution, production, and access preserves exclusivity and prestige [6].

Non-luxury brands, conversely, prioritize functional utility, accessibility, and affordability. Pricing reflects scale economies, targeting broad segments with practical, convenient products lacking strong symbolic or status value [3].

2.2. Product Choice: Attractive vs. Ugly

Although no universally agreed-upon definition of beauty exists, ugliness is frequently conceptualized as its conceptual counterpart, often characterized by deviation from harmonious or pleasing visual properties [7].

Empirical investigations in aesthetics have pinpointed several low-level perceptual features—such as contrast, color saturation, clarity, symmetry, order, and compositional unity—that shape aesthetic judgments [8]. A well-established pattern emerges: moderate or balanced levels of these attributes tend to elicit favorable evaluations of attractiveness, whereas pronounced extremes in one or more dimensions frequently result in perceptions of ugliness [9]. This inverted-U or quadratic relationship suggests that both under- and over-stimulation in perceptual processing can undermine aesthetic appeal, leading to negative valence.

Although perceptions of beauty and ugliness are inherently subjective, we adopt an operational definition grounded in established marketing literature on aesthetic evaluation. Specifically, products are classified as ugly when they receive mean attractiveness ratings below the sample midpoint (or grand mean) on validated attractiveness scales, reflecting a relative departure from normative aesthetic standards. Conversely, attractive products are those that score above this midpoint, thereby exhibiting greater alignment with prevailing preferences for visual harmony, proportion, and appeal [2].

2.3. Need for Uniqueness

Consumers' need for uniqueness (CNFU) represents a stable personality trait motivating individuals to pursue dissimilarity from others through consumption choices, thereby enhancing self-identity and differentiation [10].

In consumer contexts, elevated CNFU fosters preferences for novel, counter-conformist items, including those deviating from mainstream aesthetics [11]. This trait particularly influences luxury consumption, where distinctive or unconventional designs—such as boldly ugly aesthetics—serve as signals of exclusivity and rarity, appealing to uniqueness-seeking consumers who value status differentiation over conventional attractiveness [2].

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Direct Effects of Brand Type on Product Choice

The direct effect of brand type (luxury vs. non-luxury) on product choice (attractive vs. ugly) primarily reflects differences in the signaling value and social costs of aesthetic choices:

Non-luxury brands: Consumers strongly prefer attractive/beautiful products over ugly ones. Ugly products incur a general “ugliness penalty” because attractiveness is a universal and low-cost heuristic for quality and desirability in ordinary consumption contexts [12].

Luxury brands: Consumers show no significant preference difference between distinctively ugly and attractive products (or even a slight preference for distinctively ugly ones in some cases). Distinctive ugliness functions as a costly signal of luxury status: deliberately forgoing universal appeal demonstrates that the brand is powerful enough not to rely on conventional beauty to attract customers [2].

3.2. Mediating Role of Consumers’ Need for Uniqueness (CNFU)

The influence of brand type on preference for ugly vs. attractive products is mediated by consumers’ need for uniqueness (CNFU), which reflects an individual’s desire to differentiate from others and avoid excessive similarity:

Non-luxury context and CNFU: High-CNFU consumers still prefer attractive products because ugly designs rarely provide effective differentiation or positive signaling value in everyday brands. Uniqueness needs are more safely satisfied through other low-risk means (e.g., color, minor style variations) rather than counter-normative ugliness, which risks social disapproval without sufficient status payoff [2].

Luxury context and CNFU: Distinctive ugliness becomes a particularly effective vehicle for satisfying high uniqueness needs. Choosing an unpopular or counter-conventional (ugly) design from a luxury brand signals strong individuality, exclusivity, and resistance to mass taste — core dimensions of CNFU (especially the “avoidance of similarity” and “counter-conformity” facets) [4]. Because luxury inherently carries high social and economic cost, ugly luxury items amplify perceived distinctiveness and status without the same social punishment as in non-luxury settings [5].

3.3. Theoretical Model and Hypotheses

The conceptual framework guiding this research is presented in Figure 1.

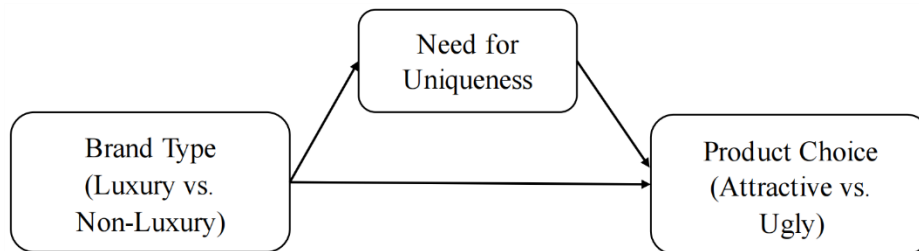


Figure 1. Conceptual model

H1: For non-luxury brands, consumers exhibit a stronger preference for attractive products over ugly ones; for luxury brands, there is no significant difference in choice between ugly and attractive products.

H2: Consumers’ need for uniqueness (CNFU) mediates the relationship between brand type and product choice.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

4.1. Experimental Design

This study proposed an experimental design to test the theoretical model:

Manipulation of brand type: Well-known luxury brands and non-luxury brands (e.g., LV and Zara) were selected.

Measurement of need for uniqueness: Likert-scale items were used to assess participants' need for uniqueness.

Product choice (attractive vs. ugly): Simulated shopping scenarios recorded participants' selections between attractive and ugly products.

4.2. Data Analysis

Mediation analysis: Using structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the mediating role of need for uniqueness.

Group differences: Conducting Analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine the direct effects of brand type on product choice.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Conclusion

This study theoretically examines how brand type (luxury vs. non-luxury) influences consumer product choices (attractive vs. ugly), proposing need for uniqueness as a mediating mechanism. Through literature review and theoretical analysis, we reveal that within luxury brand contexts, ugly products can effectively compete with attractive alternatives—and in some cases even slightly outperform them—unlike in non-luxury settings. This equilibrium (or occasional reversal) arises due to consumers' need for uniqueness.

High-CNFU individuals derive greater differentiation value from counter-conventional (ugly) designs precisely when the luxury context imbues such choices with positive symbolic meaning and protects them from normative social sanctions. In non-luxury settings, ugliness rarely offers credible uniqueness benefits and instead incurs reputational costs, leading consumers to default to safer, attractive options. These results provide converging evidence that aesthetic preferences are not fixed but highly contingent on the interplay between individual motives for differentiation and the signaling architecture of the consumption domain. Overall, the study illuminates how luxury markets can sustain value through strategic aesthetic nonconformity rather than universal beauty alone.

5.2. Theoretical Contributions

This research makes several meaningful contributions to consumer behavior, luxury marketing, and aesthetic literatures.

First, this study makes significant theoretical contributions to the fields of luxury marketing, product design aesthetics, and consumer behavior. It reveals the situational dependence and category specificity of aesthetic preferences, highlighting that luxury consumption does not simply follow universal aesthetic principles but is influenced by unique demands. This provides robust boundary condition evidence for multi-level models of aesthetic judgment. It not only provides a unified theoretical framework for the recent “ugly luxury” phenomenon (such as the extreme designs of brands like Balenciaga and Gucci) but also offers a fresh perspective for understanding the psychological factors influencing consumer preferences.

Second, the findings enrich consumers' need for uniqueness theory by demonstrating that the downstream consequences of CNFU are strongly moderated by product symbolism and social risk. Uniqueness strivings do not uniformly promote counter-normative choices; rather, their expression

is gated by whether the consumption context can transform potential social costs into status-enhancing signals.

5.3. Practical Implications

The results carry direct implications for brand managers, particularly in luxury and premium segments. Luxury brands can strategically employ distinctively ugly or aesthetically polarizing designs—provided the ugliness is purposeful, coherent with brand DNA, and clearly positioned as exclusive rather than defective—to reinforce perceptions of scarcity, boldness, and independence from mass taste. Such designs are especially likely to resonate with high-CNFU consumers, a segment that frequently constitutes the core clientele of aspirational and established luxury houses.

For non-luxury and mass-market brands, the findings underscore the continued importance of investing in attractive, harmonious design. Attempts to imitate luxury's aesthetic risk-taking are likely to backfire, as ugliness in low-symbolic contexts triggers aversion rather than admiration.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the present conclusions rely on hypothetical choice scenarios and well-known brand stimuli; real purchase behavior involving actual monetary outlays and physical product interaction may yield different effect sizes or boundary conditions. Second, this theoretical model lacks empirical data. Third, cultural homogeneity of the sample limits generalizability; aesthetic norms, uniqueness motives, and luxury signaling may vary meaningfully across individualistic versus collectivistic societies.

Building upon the identified limitations, several promising avenues for future research emerge. First, experimental designs incorporating real purchase contexts—with actual monetary transactions and physical product interaction—are needed to validate and extend the current findings. Second, empirical testing of the proposed theoretical model is essential. Quantitative and qualitative studies should be undertaken to examine the model's core constructs and pathways, which would strengthen its explanatory power and practical relevance. Third, cross-cultural comparative studies are recommended to assess the generalizability of the findings. Specifically, research across individualistic and collectivist societies could illuminate how cultural dimensions—such as aesthetic norms, desires for uniqueness, and luxury consumption signals—moderate the proposed relationships.

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