

Beyond the Pretty Face: Unmasking the True Power—and Limits—of Design Innovation

Egbert Amoncio and Gaétan de Rasenfosse

Abstract

Design innovation is often linked to aesthetics and function, but it may also send symbolic signals—of credibility, emotion, and social status. Drawing on signaling theory, we ask how these signals embedded in design innovation shape product use value—and when they lose salience. We link 903 Amazon product listings to their design patents and analyze 86,098 customer reviews using few-shot prompting with a large language model to score for credibility, emotional response, and social-status signals. We find that design innovation is positively associated with use value (Amazon star ratings), and this relationship is partially mediated by credibility and fully mediated by emotion. Contra our expectations, social status plays no meaningful mediating role. The effect weakens in high-tech categories, but we find no consistent pattern in crowded markets. These findings reveal how symbolic signals from design innovation shape consumer response across contexts.

Keywords: Design innovation, Symbolic Signals, Credibility, Emotion, Social status

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