# The Consequences of Beautiful Products: Sacredness, Awe and Forgiveness

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**CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT**

Prior research on brand failures has identified four categories of factors that influence whether consumers will forgive a firm: characteristics of the failure (e.g., Trump 2014), the nature of the consumer-brand relationship (e.g., Umashankar, Ward and Dahl 2017), traits of the company (e.g., Aaker, Fournier and Brasel 2004) and the consumer (e.g., Monga and Roedder John 2008), and characteristics of the recovery effort (e.g., Smith, Bolton and Wagner 1999). In the present research, we identify product beauty as a novel driver of forgiveness (even after controlling for people's pre-failure attitudes toward the product) and, in doing so, we make several theoretical and practical contributions.

First, in focusing on how a characteristic of the product itself (i.e., its beauty) affects consumer forgiveness, we introduce a novel class of forgiveness drivers to the brand failure literature. Additionally, our approach offers several practical implications for marketers looking to mitigate negative consumer responses when product errors and mistakes occur.

Second, we contribute to prior literature on aesthetics (e.g., Townsend 2017; Hoegg, Alba and Dahl 2010; Hagtvedt and Patrick 2014), which has shown both positive and negative effects of beauty on product evaluations. In examining the effects of product beauty in a brand failure context, our work contributes to the existing research on the downstream consequences of product aesthetics. Moreover, in demonstrating that product beauty affects forgiveness through enhancing perceptions of sacredness and consequently feelings of awe, we identify a novel consumer response to beauty, and distinguish our effect from a mere positivity halo.

Third, we contribute to the relatively small body of literature on product sacredness. While prior work has noted that consumers can imbue their consumption experiences with a sense of sacredness (e.g., Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989), our work introduces product beauty as one important antecedent to that process.

Finally, we contribute to research on emotions by enhancing our understanding of the antecedents and consequences of awe, a relatively understudied but powerful emotion that has been primarily considered with respect to nature, art and religion (e.g., Shiota, Keltner and Mossman 2007). In linking product beauty to feelings of awe (via perceived sacredness), we demonstrate a process through which relatively mundane objects can spark a sense of awe. We also introduce a new consequence of awe, forgiveness, to the emotion literature.

**ABSTRACT**

How do the characteristics of products, as opposed to the often-studied characteristics of firms and consumers, influence consumer likelihood to forgive a brand's failures? In this research, we examine how beauty, as one key product characteristic, influences forgiveness. Across six studies, we demonstrate that product beauty uniquely enhances forgiveness by evoking a sense of sacredness and subsequent feelings of awe. We rule out several alternative accounts, including those related to effort and general positivity, and replicate our results across a variety of products and failures. We also demonstrate that the sacredness of a firm's articulated values provides a boundary condition for our effects. When corporate values are aligned with values that consumers hold sacred, they enhance even the sacredness of less beautiful products, resulting in increased consumer forgiveness. However, when corporate values are misaligned with consumers' sacred values, the sacredness of beautiful products, and consequently consumers' propensity to forgive, are dampened.

**KEYWORDS**

In 2012, Apple introduced a new maps app as part of its latest iPhone operating system, iOS 6. Within days of its release, however, the company was flooded with complaints about the app's inaccuracies (Pogue 2012). As summarized in the Huffington Post: "well-known cities have been wiped from the map, buildings have disappeared… and sometimes, the wrong location data is displayed for *entire countries*" (Fitzgerald 2012). In the months following the iOS 6 release, Apple continued to enjoy a strong share of the smartphone market despite consumer outcry over the flawed app (Jones 2016). The iPhone's resilience in the face of the maps app (and other) mistakes raises an interesting question: what factors influence consumer forgiveness following a product-related failure?

In the present research, we examine product beauty as a novel factor that influences consumers' willingness to forgive a company when product failures occur. While prior research has focused on examining how characteristics of the specific failure, the firm, the consumer and the recovery effort contribute to consumer forgiveness (e.g., Folkes 1984; Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004), we provide a novel perspective by investigating a key feature of the product itself. Contributing to research that finds both positive and negative effects of product beauty on consumers' perceptions (Shu and Townsend 2014; Bloch 1995; Honea and Horsky 2012; Hoegg, Alba and Dahl 2010), we propose that consumers are more likely to forgive a company when a flawed product is beautiful, relative to when it is not.

Across a series of six studies, we find that consumers are more willing to recommend and repurchase from a company when they encounter a beautiful flawed product than a non-beautiful one. Importantly, we trace this forgiveness-boosting effect of product beauty to a unique process. Building on prior research that suggests that products can acquire sacred properties (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989), we find that consumers perceive beautiful products to be imbued

with a sense of sacredness, which then provokes heightened feelings of awe, and subsequently

forgiveness, when product mistakes happen. In linking beauty to specific perceptions of

sacredness and awe, we demonstrate that product beauty contributes to forgiveness in a way that

is more precise than merely providing a general halo of positivity. Specifically, we find that

product beauty enhances forgiveness even when overall preferences for the product prior to the

flaw are equivalent to those of a less beautiful product (i.e., there is no additional positivity

associated with the beautiful product). We also show that our results are not accounted for by

assumptions of greater effort being invested in beautiful goods, or by gratitude for such effort.

In examining how product beauty affects consumer response to a product mistake, we

make several contributions to the marketing literature on brand failures, product aesthetics,

product sacredness and emotion. First, we identify product beauty as a highly relevant and novel

determinant of consumer forgiveness following a brand failure. Thus, we build on the existing

understanding of how consumers react to brand mistakes and why. Second, while prior work has

shown that product beauty can lead to both positive and negative reactions (e.g., Reimann et al.

2010; Townsend 2017), our specific attention to the roles of sacredness and awe allows us to

predict that in certain situations, beauty will be particularly likely to have a positive effect (i.e.,

outcomes that are influenced by sacredness and awe, such as forgiveness, as we later explain). In

doing so, we add a unique mechanism to work that has documented positive effects of product

beauty (e.g., Hoegg and Alba 2008; Townsend and Sood 2012). Third, we demonstrate

empirically across a series of product categories that consumers can perceive ordinary consumer

products to be sacred. As a result, we extend the very limited work that examines the notion of

sacredness within the consumer domain. Finally, in linking product beauty to feelings of awe,

our work is among the first to examine the downstream consequences of awe that is directly

related (integral) to the consumption situation, rather than incidental to it, as in the vast majority of the work on the emotion (e.g., Griskevicius, Shiota and Neufeld 2010; Williams et al. 2017). We also provide initial evidence that awe can stem from more humble antecedents than those typically examined (e.g., Shiota et al. 2007), and can influence an important brand outcome (forgiveness). Next, we review literature on brand forgiveness, product aesthetics, sacredness and awe, and report the results of six studies that support our hypotheses and rule out important alternative explanations.

## BRAND FAILURES AND CONSUMER REACTIONS

Despite brands' best efforts to consistently deliver high quality products and services to consumers, mistakes and failures inevitably occur (Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman 1996). From a firm standpoint, such failures can be costly; not only can brand mistakes result in lost consumers and therefore lost revenue (Grégoire, Tripp and Legoux 2009; Bechwati and Morrin 2003), but dissatisfied consumers may also deter others from patronizing the firm by actively spreading negative word of mouth (Wangenheim 2005). Understanding how consumers react to brand failures, and what factors can mitigate negative reactions, is a critical issue for firms.

Research has identified several factors that influence how consumers respond to brand failures. First, a number of papers have focused on examining how characteristics of the failure itself affect consumer response. For instance, consumers have been shown to be less forgiving of failures to meet ethical standards (versus failures to live up to product performance standards; Trump 2014), and of brand failures that undermine (versus are irrelevant to) the brand's core value proposition (Dawar and Lei 2009). Importantly, consumers' interpretation of specific

brand failures is a critical determinant of how they will respond. For example, attribution theory suggests that consumers' reactions depend on whether they interpret the failure as being the fault of the firm or the consumer (Folkes 1984; Folkes, Koletsky and Graham 1987). Together, this literature converges in demonstrating that consumers' response to a brand failure is at least partly a function of what the failure is, and also their perceptions of the magnitude of that failure.

Second, a substantial body of research has suggested that the relationship between the consumer and the brand is a significant determinant of how consumers will react to a given brand failure. For example, studies have shown that consumer reactions are contingent upon relationship factors such as the tie-strength between the brand and the consumer (Umashankar, Ward and Dahl 2017), self-brand connections (Cheng, White and Chaplin 2012), type of relationship (i.e., exchange versus communal; Aggarwal and Larrick 2012; Wan, Hui and Wyer 2011), attachment style (Thomson, Whelan and Johnson 2012), commitment to the brand (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant and Unnava 2000) and relationship strength (Grégoire, Tripp and Legoux 2012). Across these studies, research generally finds that stronger relationships between consumers and brands lead to less negative reactions following a product or service failure.

Third, research has also examined how characteristics of both the firm and the consumer can affect response to a brand failure. On the firm side, such characteristics include engagement in corporate social responsibility activities (Bolton and Matilla 2015; Klein and Dawar 2004), brand personality (Aaker, Fournier and Brasel 2004) and firm reputation (Hess 2008). On the consumer side, factors such as mode of thinking (e.g., analytic versus holistic; Monga and Roedder John 2008), self-construal (Sinha and Lu, 2016) and emotional attachment to the brand (Fedorikhin, Park and Thomson 2008) have been shown to moderate responses to brand failure. Together, this stream of research suggests that characteristics of the firm and the consumer can

affect reactions to a brand failure, both independently (e.g., Aaker, Fourner and Brasel 2004) and also in concert with other factors (e.g., Bolton and Matilla 2015; Sinha and Lu 2016).

Fourth, work has also studied the role that recovery efforts play in shaping consumer reactions, where recovery is broadly defined as the action(s) an organization takes in response to a failure (Gronroos 1988). Such actions typically include apologizing to the wronged consumer, and/or providing some kind of compensation as a way of making amends. Different types of failures call for different recovery efforts, with consumers responding the most positively to recovery offerings that match the type of failure experienced (Smith, Bolton and Wagner 1999).

In the present research, we use a novel lens to examine what influences consumers' willingness to forgive a company when product failures occur. Whereas past work has focused on examining the role played by specific characteristics of the failure, the company, the consumer or the recovery effort, we examine how a characteristic of the flawed product itself might influence how consumers react when they experience a brand failure. Specifically, we focus on one important factor — the beauty of the product.

**PRODUCT AESTHETICS**

Though conventional wisdom cautions that we should "not judge a book by its cover," research on product aesthetics suggests that how a product looks can play a critical role in shaping how consumers judge it. Whether intentionally or not, consumers often use a product's appearance as a primary way of evaluating it (Hoegg, Alba and Dahl 2010), even in situations where aesthetics should be irrelevant (e.g., Raghubir and Greenleaf 2006; Townsend and Shu 2010). Research suggests that highly aesthetic products can draw both positive and negative

consumer responses. On the positive side, highly aesthetic products elicit an immediate desire to own the product (Norman 2004), higher purchase intentions and increased willingness to pay (Bloch, Brunel and Arnold 2003), heightened feelings of self-affirmation (Townsend and Sood, 2012; Shu and Townsend 2014) and an increased inclination to display and care for the product (Bloch 1995). Recent work in neuroscience provides additional support for a link between product aesthetics and positive consumer responses: experiencing a highly aesthetic package design triggers activity in the striatum and the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, areas of the brain related to processing reward value (Reimann et. al 2010). On the negative side, however, research also finds that high aesthetics can dampen perceptions of product usefulness or performance (Hoegg, Alba and Dahl 2010; Hagtvedt and Patrick 2014), lower evaluations of a superior quality product relative to a comparable product packaged in a low aesthetic fashion (Honea and Horsky 2012), and reduce consumption and elicit negative affect (Wu et al. 2017).

The current research extends the existing work on product aesthetics to examine the role of product beauty in a brand failure context. Specifically, we propose that consumers are more likely to forgive a company when a flawed product is beautiful relative to when it is not. To best understand this relationship between product beauty and forgiveness, we explore both the underlying cognition and emotion that drives it. We suggest that product beauty will increase thoughts of product sacredness, which then forms the basis for feelings of awe that ultimately lead to greater consumer forgiveness.

**PRODUCT SACREDNESS**

In its original religious context, the term "sacred" is used to refer to entities that are set apart from the ordinary, considered to be holy through a connection to the divine, and therefore deserving of respect and veneration (Pargament and Mahoney 2005). Though the concepts of God and other spiritual powers are by definition sacred, any object can become sanctified by virtue of being associated with, or representing, divinity (Pargament 1999). As an example, crucifixes and yarmulkes are both material items that are commonly considered to be sacred (Pargament and Mahoney 2005). However, religious scholars have suggested that objects do not have to be directly connected to the notions of God or religion in order to be sacred; simply possessing qualities that reflect divine characteristics such as purpose, transcendence and boundlessness (e.g., everlasting, miraculous) is enough to imbue an item with sacredness. Moreover, given that sacredness is not necessarily connected to divinity, even individuals who do not believe in God may see certain items as sacred (Pargament and Mahoney 2005; Pomerleau, Pargament and Mahoney 2016).

Building on this latter conceptualization of sacredness, consumer researchers have suggested that ordinary consumption items can be associated with sacred qualities, and in the process, become sanctified (McGinnis, Gentry and Gao 2012; Samper and Schwartz 2012; Rodas, Torelli and Cheng, 2016). In the realm of consumption, sacred objects have been defined as those that are "more significant, powerful and extraordinary than the self" (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989, p. 13). Central to this characterization is the notion of transcendence; sacred items reflect something bigger than the details of everyday, ordinary life, and have the ability to focus consumers' attention outwards from the self and towards the sacred item (thus transcending the self).

In this research, we examine product beauty as one way in which ordinary consumption items can become sacred. Armstrong and Detweiler-Bedell (2008) conceptualized beautiful objects as those that are set apart by their complexity and/or novelty, and that challenge and elevate the viewer's current level of understanding; thus, beautiful objects may require effort in order to be fully processed and appreciated, pulling attention away from the self and towards the item. Similarly, Belk and colleagues (1989) have suggested that objects, even humble-appearing ones, may be defined as sacred because of their beauty, marking them as inherently non-ordinary. We build on these conceptualizations to suggest that the extraordinary and transcendent properties of beautiful objects should increase the likelihood that consumers will perceive them to be sacred. Lending some support to this notion, past research has documented that beautiful places in nature are often considered to be sacred spaces (Brereton 1987). Importantly, we suggest that as beauty heightens cognitions of sacredness, consumers will experience emotions that are consistent with such cognitions upon seeing beautiful items. Specifically, we expect that feelings of awe will often follow perceptions of sacredness for beautiful objects given that awe is known to be an emotional response to stimuli that are vast or transcendent in nature, and so extraordinary that they require mental accommodation.

## AWE AND FORGIVENESS

Awe has been defined as a positive emotional response to stimuli that defy one's typical frame of reference – it is an emotion of wonder (Keltner and Haidt 2003; Shiota, Keltner and Mossman 2007). As such, individuals experience awe in response to perceptually or conceptually vast stimuli that demand the rearrangement of existing mental schemas in order to accommodate

them, including beautiful products. At the heart of the emotion is a sense of self-transcendence –

during the experience of awe, attention is pulled away from the self and directed toward the

emotion-inspiring object. This outward shift in attention results in a sense of personal

diminishment, or in feeling "small" in the presence of something greater than the self (Campos et

al. 2013; Piff et al. 2015).

Consistent with this sense of there being something that transcends the self, awe is part of

a set of emotions linked to religion and spirituality (Van Cappellen and Saroglou 2012; Keltner

and Haidt 2003). Indeed, prior research suggests that awe can both stem from matters related to

religion and spirituality (Pargament and Mahoney 2005; Pomerleau, Pargament and Mahoney

2016), as well as facilitate them (Saroglou, Buxant and Tilquin 2008). We note that although

both sacredness and awe share themes related to extraordinariness and self-transcendence, they

are distinct constructs, one cognitive and the other affective. We propose a novel process

whereby beauty can imbue a product with a sense of sacredness, and that sacredness can lead to

feelings of awe, which can then shape subsequent consumer responses to that product beauty.

Research has linked feelings of awe to a number of downstream consequences including

greater scrutiny of persuasive messages (Griskevicius, Shiota and Neufeld 2010), an expanded

sense of time, patience and wellbeing (Rudd, Vohs and Aaker 2012), and an increased sense of

connection with others and the world at large (Van Cappellen and Saroglou 2012). Of

importance to the present work, awe also leads individuals to behave more prosocially (Prade

and Saroglou 2016). In a series of studies, both dispositional and incidental feelings of awe

predicted greater generosity towards others, increased endorsement of prosocial values and

greater willingness to help others in need (Piff et al. 2015). Awe has also been linked to an

increased willingness to volunteer time to aid others (Rudd, Vohs and Aaker 2012), and to a

heightened interest in brands that are positioned prosocially (versus luxuriously; Williams et al. 2017). Thus, consistent with its attendant self-diminishment and simultaneous sense of oneness, awe appears to magnify the importance of others' well-being and of behaving prosocially.

The current research explores the linkages between beauty, perceptions of sacredness and feelings of awe. We explicitly link product beauty to perceptions of sacredness and feelings of awe, and we extend the study of awe's downstream consequences to consider its effects in a brand failure context. We reason that because awe enhances prosocial behavior towards others, feelings of awe should increase consumers' inclinations to forgive a firm when brand failures occur. This is consistent with work that has linked feelings of forgiveness to a general prosocial orientation (Karremans, Lange and Holland 2005), and also work that conceptualizes forgiveness as a collection of prosocial motivational changes following an infraction (McCullough 2001). Thus, in proposing forgiveness as a consequence of awe, we extend the suite of prosocial behaviors linked to the emotion, and identify a novel consequence of product beauty.

## CURRENT RESEARCH

In sum, we suggest that one key driver of firm forgiveness is product beauty, predicting that consumers will be more willing to forgive a company when a flawed product is beautiful than when it is not. Importantly, we expect that the effect of product beauty is distinct from that of other positive attributes and should increase brand forgiveness through a unique process. We build on the extraordinary and self-transcending properties of beauty to propose that beautiful products will elicit heightened perceptions of sacredness, and that this increase in sacredness will in turn elicit feelings of awe. Given the links between awe and prosocial responding, we then

suggest that these feelings of awe will lead to greater forgiveness, operationalized in this paper as willingness to recommend and repurchase from the company (Grewal, Roggeveen and Tsiros 2008). Thus, we propose that perceptions of sacredness and feelings of awe will serially mediate the relationship between product beauty and forgiveness.

In six studies, we first demonstrate that beauty enhances forgiveness (Study 1), and that this effect is not driven by perceptions of greater effort (Study 2). Then, we establish that the effect of product beauty on forgiveness is mediated only by perceptions of sacredness and awe in serial, and not by either sacredness or awe alone, the reverse pattern from awe to sacredness, or by other positive emotions or by surprise (Studies 3-4). Finally, we examine whether the (mis)alignment of values held sacred by the company and the consumer can affect perceptions of product sacredness, thus moderating our effect (Study 5), before replicating our basic effect in a real-life situation (Study 6).

## STUDY 1: THE BEAUTY OF CELL PHONES

To provide initial support for our ideas, Study 1 gathers consumers' perceptions of how beautiful their cell phones are, before assessing their reactions to a hypothetical flaw they might experience with it. We expect that consumers who perceive their phones to be more beautiful will be more likely to forgive the brand, even when controlling for the fact that beauty is often associated with more positive brand impressions and also higher perceptions of quality and effort (Dawar and Parker 1994; Wu et al. 2017). We also examine whether beauty is associated with greater forgiveness because it reduces the perceived severity of the flaw or because it changes consumers' perspectives about how hard the company will work to correct the issue.

Method

One hundred and ninety-nine participants (89 women (44.72%); $M_{age}$ = 35.50) on

Amazon Mechanical Turk took part in Study 1 for payment. Participants first specified which

brand of cell phone they owned. They then indicated their overall impression of their phone on

five, 7-point scale items anchored as bad/good, negative/positive, dislike/like,

undesirable/desirable, and unfavorable/favorable as part of an overall impression index ($\alpha$ = .94).

Next, participants rated the extent to which they thought their phone was: 1) beautiful (beautiful,

pretty, aesthetically pleasing, sleek, elegant, and stunning; collapsed to form a beauty index ($\alpha$ =

.94)) and 2) high quality (high quality, and functional; collapsed to form a quality index ($r$ =

.61)), both on 7-point scales where 1 = not at all to 7 = very much so. Participants also indicated

how much effort they believed the manufacturer put into creating their phone (1 = none at all, 5

= a great deal).

Participants were then asked to imagine that their cell phone had suddenly died during a

phone call, and they were unable to restart it (see web appendix). They then indicated their

likelihood of forgiving the brand via four items (1 = extremely unlikely to 7 = extremely likely)

($\alpha$ = .91) (adapted from Grewal, Roggeveen and Tsiros 2008): "How likely would you be to

repurchase a phone of this same brand in the future?," "How likely would you be to recommend

this phone brand to others?," "How likely would you be to write a positive review for

this brand?," and "How likely would you be to continue to shop for this brand's products?"

Participants also indicated how severe they perceived the flaw to be ("How much would you care

about the phone's apparent flaw?" 1 = not at all, 7 = a great deal; "How severe do you think the

phone's flaw is?" 1 = not at all severe, 7 = very severe; collapsed to form a severity index ($r$ =

.77)) and their sense that the brand would be able to fix this problem ("How likely is the brand to

fix the problem?" 1 = extremely likely, 7 = extremely unlikely; reverse-coded so that higher scores meant the company was *more* likely to fix the problem).

Results

*Effects of beauty on overall impression, perceived effort, and overall quality of the phone.* We first assessed beauty's influence on consumers' perceptions of their phone before the flaw. We analyzed responses using a series of separate linear regressions to examine the relationship between perceived beauty and overall impression, perceived effort and quality. Analyses revealed a significant positive correlation between beauty and overall impression ($b = .39$, $SE = .04$, $t(197) = 8.76$, $p < .001$), perceived effort ($b = .22$, $SE = .04$, $t(197) = 5.49$, $p < .001$) and perceived quality ($b = .39$, $SE = .04$, $t(197) = 8.69$, $p < .001$), such that the more beautiful participants perceived their phone to be, the higher they rated their overall impressions of the phone, the perceived effort involved in creating it, and its overall quality.

*Effects of beauty on forgiveness.* Next, to test our focal hypothesis, we ran a linear regression to examine the relationship between perceived beauty and forgiveness. Analysis revealed a significant correlation between beauty and forgiveness ($b = .37$, $SE = .07$, $t(197) = 5.14$, $p < .001$), such that the higher the perceived beauty of the phone, the higher the likelihood that the consumer would forgive the brand. As a further check, we reran the same regression controlling for overall impression ($b = .72$, $p < .001$), perceived effort ($b = .14$, $p = .282$), and quality ($b = -.33$, $p = .031$), to again find a significant correlation between beauty and forgiveness ($b = .18$, $SE = .08$, $t(194) = 2.23$, $p = .027$). We found no significant relationship

between perceived beauty and perceived severity of the flaw, or on perceived recovery effort (severity of the flaw: $b = .02$, $p = .788$; recovery effort: $b = .09$, $p = .290$).

Discussion

Study 1 used a product that consumers actually own – their cell phones – to provide some initial evidence for the effect of product beauty on forgiveness. As predicted, the results revealed a positive correlation between the perceived beauty of the phone and consumers' willingness to forgive the brand following a hypothetical product failure. Importantly, these results held even when controlling for consumers' overall impression of the phone, its perceived quality, and the effort that went into creating it, suggesting that the effect of beauty goes beyond an initial halo of positivity. We will test the proposed role of sacredness and awe in driving this effect of beauty starting in Study 3. First, however, we examine the robustness of our proposed effect.

**STUDY 2: RULING OUT EFFORT**

In Study 2, we build on the correlational findings of Study 1 in two ways. First, we seek to demonstrate the relationship between beauty and forgiveness in an experimental context. To do so, we turn to a different product category: cupcakes. In doing so, we are able to operationalize beauty in a new way (i.e., intricate frosting designs) that is distinct from the streamlined beauty of the cell phones in Study 1. Second, we aim to address a potential alternative explanation for our results. Given that prior research has shown that consumers perceive beautiful products as requiring more effort (time, creativity, patience, money, etc.) than

non-beautiful products (Wu et al. 2017; Townsend 2017), it is possible that they may be more

forgiving of beautiful products as a way of showing appreciation for such effort. To examine

whether the effect of beauty can extend beyond such effort considerations, in Study 2 we

manipulate both a product's beauty and the effort that went into creating it prior to exposing

participants to a flaw in the product. We assign participants to one of four conditions. In the first

condition, participants see a "high beauty cupcake" at baseline, i.e., a beautiful cupcake with no

information about effort provided. We expect that participants in this condition will naturally

assume a relatively high level of effort went into creating the beautiful cupcake, though they are

not explicitly given information about effort. In the second condition, participants see a "low

beauty cupcake" at baseline, i.e., a cupcake lower in beauty with no information about effort

provided. We expect that participants in this condition will naturally assume a lower level of

effort went into creating the cupcake, but as in the first condition, they are not given information

about effort. We expect that between these two baseline conditions, where effort is not discussed,

the high beauty cupcake will lead to greater forgiveness after a flaw than the low beauty

cupcake. However, given that we expect these two conditions to inherently differ in the amount

of inferred effort associated with them, we incorporate two additional conditions to address the

potential role of effort in the relationship between beauty and forgiveness. Specifically, to

address the fact that the high beauty condition may be naturally associated with high effort, we

add a high beauty condition that explicitly involves low effort ("high beauty/low effort

cupcake"). Similarly, to address the fact that the low beauty condition may be naturally

associated with low effort, we add a low beauty condition that explicitly involves high effort

("low beauty/high effort cupcake"). We expect that the high beauty cupcake conditions,

regardless of whether the cupcakes are naturally associated with high effort (i.e., "high beauty

baseline, no effort information") or manipulated to be associated with low effort (i.e., "high beauty with low effort information"), will lead to greater levels of forgiveness than the low beauty cupcakes, irrespective of whether those low beauty cupcakes are naturally associated with low effort (i.e., "low beauty baseline, no effort information") or manipulated to be associated with high effort (i.e., "low beauty with high effort information")[1].

Method

Three hundred and eighty-three Amazon Mechanical Turk participants (200 women (52.22%); $M_{age}$ = 36.80) took part in a four cell between subjects design (high beauty / baseline [no effort information], low beauty / baseline [no effort information], high beauty/low effort information, low beauty/high effort information), for monetary compensation. The scenarios and cupcakes used are reported in the web appendix. The high and low beauty cupcakes were both vanilla with a design in the white icing, but only the design in the high beauty conditions was expected to be viewed as beautiful. We note that in the low beauty/high effort condition, the cupcake featured a design that was expected to be viewed as effortful to create but not beautiful.

After reading the cupcake scenarios, participants rated the beauty of the cupcake ("How beautiful/pretty/aesthetically pleasing is the cupcake?" 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; collapsed to form a beauty index ($\alpha$ = .97)), the amount of effort that went into preparing the cupcake ("How much effort did the bakery put into creating your cupcake?" "How much work was it for the

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[1] Another design we considered for this study was a 2 (product beauty: high beauty vs. low beauty) by 3 (effort: high effort, low effort, neutral effort) fully crossed between subjects design. However, given that our main interests were in replicating our effect, and in demonstrating that high beauty would enhance forgiveness irrespective of associated effort levels, we felt that high beauty / high effort and low beauty / low effort conditions would be extraneous. As a result, we chose to focus on the four conditions that would directly test our research questions: high beauty / baseline (no effort information given), low beauty / baseline (no effort information given), high beauty / low effort and low beauty / high effort.

bakery to create your cupcake?" 1 = none at all, 5 = a great deal; collapsed to form an index of perceived effort, $r = .88$), and completed the overall impression index used in Study 1 ($\alpha = .97$).

Participants were then informed that an employee had rushed over to tell them that their cupcake was mistakenly baked with salt instead of sugar. They finished the study by responding to the measures of company forgiveness ($\alpha = .95$) and flaw severity ($r = .60$) from Study 1.

Results

*Manipulation checks.* A one-way ANOVA showed significant differences across conditions in how beautiful the cupcake was perceived to be ($M_{\text{high beauty\_baseline}} = 5.40$, $M_{\text{low beauty\_baseline}} = 3.29$, $M_{\text{high beauty\_low-effort}} = 6.10$, $M_{\text{low beauty\_high-effort}} = 4.96$; $F(3, 383) = 77.22$, $p < .001$). As expected, both high beauty condition cupcakes were rated as more beautiful than either of the low beauty condition cupcakes. Planned contrasts showed that the "high beauty_baseline" cupcake was perceived as more beautiful than either the "low beauty_baseline" ($F(1, 383) = 93.79$, $p < .001$) or the "low beauty_high effort" cupcakes ($F(1, 383) = 51.26$, $p < .001$). Similarly, the "high beauty_low effort" cupcake was seen as more beautiful than either the "low beauty_baseline" ($F(1, 383) = 74.43$, $p < .001$) or the "low beauty_high effort" ($F(1, 383) = 36.92$, $p < .001$) cupcakes.

A one-way ANOVA also revealed significant differences across conditions in the perceived effort that went into creating the cupcake ($M_{\text{high beauty\_baseline}} = 4.06$, $M_{\text{low beauty\_baseline}} = 2.87$, $M_{\text{high beauty\_low effort}} = 2.79$, $M_{\text{low beauty\_high effort}} = 4.02$; $F(3, 383) = 60.47$, $p < .001$) (see Figure 1). Planned contrasts revealed significant differences in perceived effort between the two baseline conditions, "high beauty_baseline" and "low beauty_baseline" ($F(1, 383) = 86.37$, $p <$

.001), such that the more beautiful cupcake was naturally associated with greater effort.

However, we were able to manipulate the perceived effort associated with the cupcakes. A

significant difference in perceived effort was found between the "high beauty_baseline" and

"high beauty_low effort" conditions ($F(1, 383) = 101.03$, $p < .001$). There was no difference

between the "high beauty_low effort" and "low beauty_baseline" conditions ($F(1, 383) = .36$, $p$

$= .546$). Similarly, a significant difference in effort was observed between the "low

beauty_baseline" and "low beauty_high effort" conditions ($F(1, 383) = 80.20$, $p < .001$). There

was no difference between the "high beauty_baseline" and "low beauty_high effort" ($F(1, 383) =$

$.13$, $p = .715$) conditions. Finally, a significant difference emerged between "high beauty_low

effort" and "low beauty_high effort" conditions ($F(1, 383) = 94.29$, $p < .001$).

**Figure 1. Study 2: Effort Manipulation Checks**
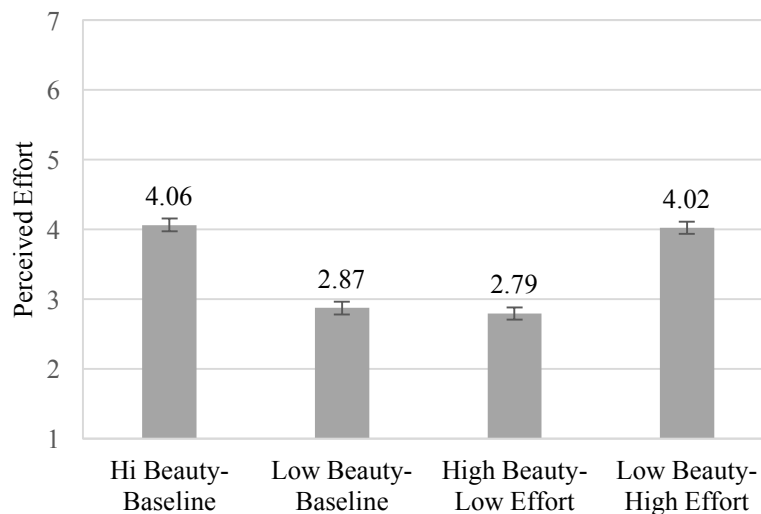


*Overall impression.* A one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of condition on overall

impression of the cupcake ($M_{\text{high beauty\_baseline}} = 6.42$, $M_{\text{low beauty\_baseline}} = 5.37$, $M_{\text{high beauty\_low effort}} =$

6.24, $M_{\text{low beauty\_high effort}}$ = 5.79; $F(3, 383)$ = 15.19, $p < .001$) such that the high beauty conditions generated more positive impressions than the low beauty conditions, irrespective of effort.

*Forgiveness.* A one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of condition on intentions to forgive the bakery ($M_{\text{high beauty\_baseline}}$ = 4.01, $M_{\text{low beauty\_baseline}}$ = 2.51, $M_{\text{high beauty\_low effort}}$ = 3.92, $M_{\text{low beauty\_high effort}}$ = 2.99; $F(3, 383)$ = 17.13, $p < .001$) (see Figure 2), whereby participants in the high beauty conditions were more likely to forgive than those in the low beauty conditions, irrespective of effort. Planned contrasts revealed a significant difference in intentions to forgive between the "high beauty\_baseline" and "low beauty\_baseline" conditions ($F(1, 383)$ = 36.08, $p$ < .001), replicating the results of Study 1. This difference held when comparing the baseline high beauty condition to the low beauty condition that was associated with high effort ("high beauty\_baseline" vs. "low beauty\_high effort" ($F(1, 383)$ = 17.02, $p < .001$)). Similarly, product beauty led to higher forgiveness even when high beauty was associated with low effort and low beauty was either at baseline ("high beauty\_low effort" vs. "low beauty\_baseline" ($F(1, 383)$ = 32.10, $p < .001$) or associated with high effort ("high beauty\_low effort" and "low beauty\_high effort" ($F(1, 383)$ = 14.21, $p < .001$). We note that controlling for overall impressions ($p < .001$) does not significantly influence forgiveness intentions ($F(4, 380)$ = 9.23, $p < .001$), and that a one-way ANOVA on perceived severity of the flaw did not reveal differences across conditions ($F(3, 381)$ = 1.58, $p = .195$). These results are consistent with the idea that the forgiveness-boosting effect of beauty goes beyond a mere halo effect, and suggest that the results are not driven by changes in perceptions of flaw severity.

**Figure 2. Study 2: Effects of Beauty/Effort on Forgiveness**
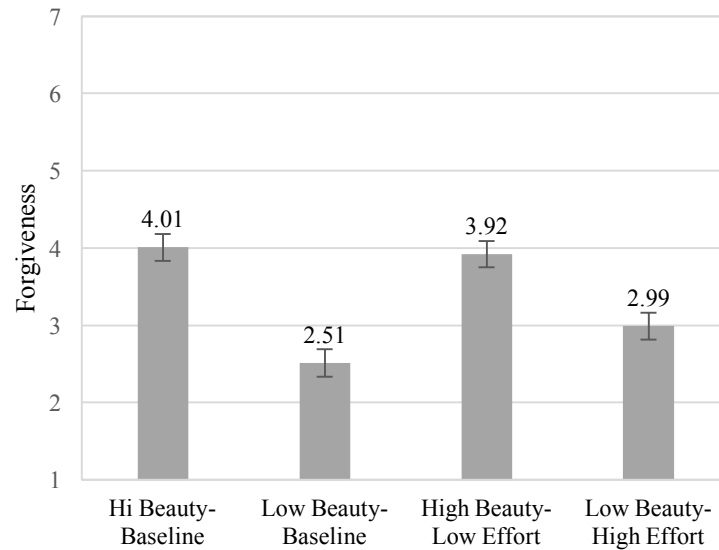
Discussion

Participants in Study 2 exhibited greater willingness to forgive a firm for a product-related failure when the product was highly beautiful than when the product was less beautiful, supporting the results of Study 1 in a controlled experimental setting. Of note, this pattern of results held even when controlling for consumers' initial product impressions, highlighting that the forgiveness-enhancing effect of beauty goes beyond merely boosting initial impressions of the product. Importantly, participants who encountered a highly beautiful product expressed higher forgiveness regardless of the levels of effort required to create the item. In doing so, these findings suggest that the effect of beauty on forgiveness is independent of perceived effort.

**STUDY 3: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF SACREDNESS AND AWE**

Although studies 1 and 2 provided support for the idea that product beauty enhances forgiveness, they did not explore the proposed underlying role of sacredness and awe. In Study 3,

we measure the extent to which beautiful products evoke perceptions of sacredness and feelings of awe in order to provide process evidence through mediation. We expect to find that the relationship between product beauty and forgiveness is serially mediated by heightened perceptions of sacredness and feelings of awe, and that this effect will hold even when controlling for differences in overall impressions, perceived quality and expensiveness. To enhance generalizability, we also examine our effects in a new product context, manipulating the beauty of cappuccinos, rather than cupcakes.

Method

Two hundred participants (77 women (38.50%); $M_{age}$ = 35.64) on Amazon Mechanical Turk participated in a 2 (product beauty: high versus low) by 2 (failure type: milk versus caffeine content) between subjects design, for payment. First, all participants imagined that they were considering a visit to a new café. After reading a set of reviews (to establish identical perceptions of quality and expensiveness across conditions; see web appendix), participants imagined that they decided to visit the café and order a cappuccino. Participants in the high beauty condition then received a cappuccino with beautiful foam art, while those in the low beauty condition received a cappuccino with plain foam (see web appendix). We then measured participants' sense of awe ("To what extent do each of the following words describe how the cappuccino feels to you personally?" awe, amazed, astonished; 1 = not at all appropriate, 7= very appropriate; collapsed into an awe index ($\alpha$ = .94); adapted from Shiota, Keltner and Mossman 2007) and perceptions of sacredness (sacred, divinely influenced; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much so; collapsed into a sacredness index ($r$ = .78)). Participants then indicated their overall impression of the

cappuccino as in the prior studies ($\alpha$ =.95) and rated the extent to which they viewed the cappuccino as beautiful, functional, high quality and expensive (1 = not at all, 7 = very much so)[2].

Participants were then told, between subjects, about one of two product failures: their cappuccino was mistakenly made with skim milk instead of whole milk, or their cappuccino was decaffeinated instead of caffeinated. As no significant differences by failure type emerged on any of our main dependent measures, we note that we collapse across flaw type in the analyses reported below. Finally, participants completed the same forgiveness index as in prior studies ($\alpha$ =.87) and reported demographic information (e.g., age, gender, etc.).

Results

*Manipulation checks.* A one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences in the perceived beauty of the cappuccinos ($M_{\text{High Beauty}}$ = 5.75 vs. $M_{\text{Low Beauty}}$ = 4.23; $F(1, 198) = 49.46$, $p < .001$) and in their perceived quality ($M_{\text{High Beauty}}$ = 5.84 vs. $M_{\text{Low Beauty}}$ = 5.18; $F(1, 198) = 12.46$, $p = .001$). There were no significant differences in the functionality of the cappuccinos ($M_{\text{High Beauty}}$ = 4.98 vs. $M_{\text{Low Beauty}}$ = 4.94; $F(1, 198) = .03$, $p =.850$) or in perceived expensiveness ($M_{\text{High Beauty}}$ = 4.50 vs. $M_{\text{Low Beauty}}$ = 4.20; $F(1, 198) = 1.83$, $p =.180$).

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[2] To verify that perceptions of sacredness, feelings of awe and overall impressions were conceptually and empirically distinct, we ran a series of Pearson's correlations. Overall, the correlation between sacredness and awe was .34 (significant at $p < .01$), the correlation between sacredness and overall impression was not significant (.05, $p = .474$), and the correlation between awe and overall impression was .49 (significant at $p < .01$). This supports our theorizing that even though there are some commonalities, the concepts are distinct.

*Overall impression.* A one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of beauty condition on the overall impression of the cappuccinos ($M_{High Beauty}$ = 6.24 vs. $M_{Low Beauty}$ = 5.50; $F(1, 198)$ = 21.86, $p < .001$), such that participants in the high beauty condition evaluated the product more positively than those in the low beauty condition.

*Sacredness and awe.* A one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of beauty condition on both perceived sacredness ($M_{High Beauty}$ = 2.72 vs. $M_{Low Beauty}$ = 2.23; $F(1, 198)$ = 3.79, $p$ =.05) and on feelings of awe ($M_{High Beauty}$ = 5.10 vs. $M_{Low Beauty}$ = 3.20; $F(1, 198)$ = 71.26, $p < .001$). As expected, the high beauty cappuccino condition led to higher perceptions of sacredness and stronger feelings of awe compared to the low beauty condition.

*Forgiveness.* Collapsing across failure type, a one-way ANOVA on forgiveness revealed a significant main effect of beauty condition ($M_{High Beauty}$ = 5.51 vs. $M_{Low Beauty}$ = 4.62; $F(1, 198)$ = 25.38, $p < .001$). Participants in the high (versus low) beauty condition were more likely to forgive the café. Including perceived quality, expensiveness and overall evaluation in the main model as covariates did not significantly change the results ($F(4, 195)$ = 9.02, $p = .003$).

*Mediation.* Next, we performed a mediation analysis to test whether perceptions of sacredness and feelings of awe serially mediate the effect of beauty on forgiveness (Model 6, PROCESS, Hayes 2013; see Figure 3). The resulting 95% bias-corrected confidence interval of the indirect effect via both mediators excluded zero ($CI_{95}$: .004; .109), suggesting that perceptions of sacredness and feelings of awe mediate the effect of beauty on intention to forgive the café (see Figure 4). We also ran the same serial mediation analysis reversing the mediators (awe → sacredness). The resulting 95% bias-corrected confidence interval of the indirect effect included zero (-.007; .070), supporting our theorizing that it is more likely to be cognitions of sacredness arising from beauty that lead to feelings of awe, and not vice versa.

**Figure 3. Study 3: Mediation Analysis**



Indirect Effect via Sacredness and Awe: $CI_{95}$ [.004; .109]
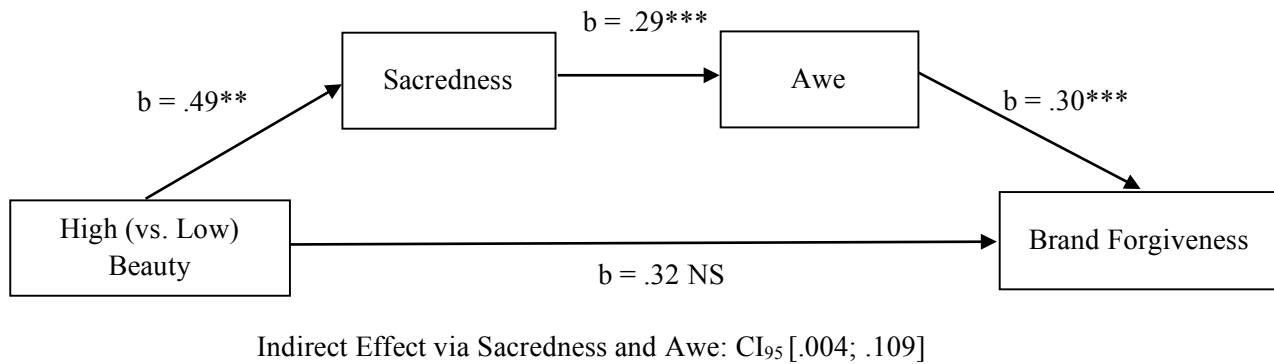
Notes: Mediation analysis with 10,000 bootstrap samples (Model 6 in PROCESS; Hayes 2013). Coefficients significantly different from zero are indicated by asterisks (*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; *** $p < .001$).

Discussion

The results of Study 3 replicate those of our prior studies in demonstrating that consumers are more likely to forgive a company when a flawed product is beautiful relative to when it is not. Importantly, the results also revealed the predicted pattern of serial mediation, in which product beauty heightened forgiveness via increased perceptions of product sacredness and feelings of awe. This finding supports our proposed mechanism that attributes novel consequences to beauty beyond a simple "what is beautiful is good" halo effect. In Study 4, we build on these results and rule out several potential alternative explanations.

**STUDY 4: RULING OUT OTHER POSITIVE EMOTIONS AND**

**UNEXPECTEDNESS**

Although the results of Study 3 provide initial evidence that product beauty enhances forgiveness through eliciting perceptions of sacredness and awe, they do not establish that these effects are unique to sacredness and awe. Study 4 addresses this issue in two ways. First, as an additional step in exploring the degree to which a sense of sacredness is critical to the relationship between beauty and forgiveness, we measure individuals' ability to see sacredness in everyday things (Doehring et al. 2009). Though people are indeed often able to see sacredness in ordinary items (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; Pargament and Mahoney 2005; Pomerleau, Pargament and Mahoney 2016), they vary in the extent to which they are naturally inclined to do so (Doehring et al. 2009). If beauty enhances forgiveness by first sparking sacredness, the effect should only exist among those willing and able to perceive sacredness. Thus, we expect to see that our effect is moderated by individuals' ability to perceive sacredness.

Second, we have reasoned that the effect of beauty on forgiveness is driven by specific associations with sacredness and awe, and not by just any general positive affect. In order to address a potential alternative explanation that evoking any positive emotion would lead to the same results as beauty, we examine the effect of associating a low beauty product with positive affect. Specifically, in addition to manipulating product beauty, we also add a "surprise" condition, in which participants see the low beauty product and are told they will receive a 30% purchase discount for being new customers. We then measure a variety of positive emotions (including awe, our target emotion) to examine a potential role for these emotions. To confirm that the surprise manipulation indeed elicited feelings of surprise, and to rule out such feelings driving the observed effects on forgiveness, we measure feelings of surprise. We also examine feelings of gratitude, as it is possible that consumers might feel grateful for a beautiful product, and therefore more forgiving (we note, however, that levels of gratitude are also likely to be high

in the low beauty surprise condition, and thus unlikely to explain any differences on forgiveness). Finally, we measure more general positive emotions to examine a possible role for these. Overall, we expect that while the high beauty condition and the low beauty + surprise condition will evoke equally high levels of positive emotions (and higher than the low beauty condition), they will differ in perceptions of sacredness. We expect that only the awe that is derived from sacredness will contribute to higher levels of forgiveness.

Method

One hundred and fifty two female participants ($N = 152$; $M_{age} = 36.40$) on Amazon Mechanical Turk took part in a single factor (product beauty: high beauty, low beauty, low beauty + surprise discount) between subjects design in exchange for payment. In this study, we again extend our examination of product beauty into a new category: watches. First, all participants imagine searching online for a watch. Depending on condition, participants then viewed a watch that was either high or low in beauty (see web appendix).

Next, participants in the high and low beauty conditions imagined that they had decided to purchase the watch. Participants in the low beauty + surprise condition also imagined that they had decided to purchase the watch, but they received a surprise 30% off for being a new customer when paying for the watch.

Participants then rated how the following emotions described their reactions to the watch (in random order) on a 1 = not at all appropriate to 7 = very appropriate scale: awe, amazed, astonished (collapsed to form an awe index, $\alpha = .89$); happy, pleased, excited (collapsed to form an index of general positive affect, $\alpha = .90$); thankful, appreciative (collapsed to form a gratitude index, $r = .72$); and surprise, unexpected, caught off guard (collapsed to form an index of felt

surprise, $\alpha = .83$). Participants then completed the same measures of sacredness ($r = .74$), overall impressions ($\alpha = .98$) and the beauty manipulation check from previous studies.

All participants were then asked to imagine that their watch had suddenly stopped working (see web appendix). They then completed the measures of forgiveness from previous studies ($\alpha = .94$), nine items from the Perceiving Sacredness in Life Scale[3] (Doehring et al. 2009; $1 = $ never, $5 = $ very often; $\alpha = .96$, e.g., "I see the sacred in all of life"; see web appendix), and their religious affiliation.

Results

*Manipulation checks.* A one-way ANOVA with product beauty condition as the independent variable revealed that the high beauty watch condition indeed evoked greater perceptions of beauty than the other conditions ($M_{high\ beauty} = 5.94$, $M_{low\ beauty} = 3.86$, $M_{low\ beauty\ +\ surprise} = 4.44$; $F(2, 149) = 20.47$, $p < .001$). More specifically, planned contrasts revealed significant differences in perceived beauty between the high and low beauty watches ($F(1, 149) = 38.40$, $p < .001$), and between the high and low beauty + surprise watches ($F(1, 149) = 20.31$, $p < .001$), but a marginally significant difference between the low and low beauty + surprise watches ($F(1, 149) = 3.07$, $p = .082$). The same one-way ANOVA on feelings of surprise showed that the low beauty + surprise condition led to the greatest feelings of surprise ($M_{high\ beauty} = 3.30$, $M_{low\ beauty} = 1.86$, $M_{low\ beauty\ +\ surprise} = 4.06$; $F(2, 149) = 25.79$, $p < .001$). Planned contrasts revealed significant differences between the high and low beauty + surprise watches ($F(1, 149) = $

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[3] Items selected were those that did not explicitly mention "God" as we did not want to unintentionally alienate those who may see sacredness in life, but are uncomfortable with traditional "God" constructs.

5.96, $p = .02$), between the low and low beauty + surprise watches ($F(1, 149) = 50.18$, $p < .001$), and between the high beauty and low beauty watches ($F(1, 149) = 21.13$, $p < .001$).

*Overall impression.* A one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of product beauty condition on overall impression of the watch ($M_{high\ beauty} = 6.06$, $M_{low\ beauty} = 4.92$, $M_{low\ beauty + surprise} = 5.62$; F(2, 149) = 6.55, $p = .002$). Planned contrasts revealed significant differences in overall impressions between the high and low beauty watches ($F(1, 149) = 12.87$, $p = .001$), between the low and low beauty + surprise watches ($F(1, 149) = 4.95$, $p = .028$), but no differences between the high and low beauty + surprise watches ($F(1, 149) = 1.95$, $p = .164$). These results suggest that the high beauty watch and the surprise discounted watch generated similarly positive overall impressions among participants.

*Sacredness and awe.* A one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of condition on both perceived sacredness ($M_{high\ beauty} = 3.93$, $M_{low\ beauty} = 2.02$, $M_{low\ beauty + surprise} = 2.20$; $F(2, 149) = 27.31$, $p < .001$) and on feelings of awe ($M_{high\ beauty} = 3.77$, $M_{low\ beauty} = 2.31$, $M_{low\ beauty + surprise} = 2.70$; $F(2, 149) = 17.23$, $p < .001$). Planned contrasts revealed significant differences in sacredness between the high and low beauty watches ($F(1, 149) = 44.61$, $p < .001$), and between the high and low beauty + surprise watches ($F(1, 149) = 37.23$, $p < .001$), but no differences between the low and low beauty + surprise watches ($F(1, 149) = .41$, $p = .522$). These results suggest that it is indeed the beauty of the product that increases perceptions of sacredness and not simply any positive occurrence related to a low beauty product, such as a surprise discount. Planned contrasts also revealed significant differences in awe between the high and low beauty watches ($F(1, 149) = 17.23$, $p < .001$), and between the low and low beauty + surprise watches ($F(1, 149) = 15.83$, $p = .001$). Interestingly, there was no difference between the high and low beauty + surprise watches, as participants were "amazed" by the surprise discount ($F(1, 149) = $

.05, $p = .831$). However, as mediation analyses will later demonstrate, only the awe that is derived from the enhanced sacredness of the beauty condition leads to forgiveness (versus the broader connotations of awe in the low beauty + surprise condition).

*Other emotions*. A one-way ANOVA on feelings of gratitude revealed a significant main effect of product beauty condition ($M_{\text{high beauty}} = 4.74$, $M_{\text{low beauty}} = 4.06$, $M_{\text{low beauty + surprise}} = 5.43$; $F(2, 149) = 8.04$, $p = .001$). Planned contrasts revealed significant differences in gratitude between the high and low beauty watches ($F(1, 149) = 3.87$, $p = .051$), between the high and low beauty + surprise watches ($F(1, 149) = 4.10$, $p = .045$), as well as differences between the low and low beauty + surprise watches ($F(1, 149) = 16.08$, $p < .001$).

Similarly, a one-way ANOVA on general positive affect also revealed a significant main effect of product beauty condition ($M_{\text{high beauty}} = 5.49$, $M_{\text{low beauty}} = 4.60$, $M_{\text{low beauty + surprise}} = 5.82$; $F(2, 149) = 9.27$, $p = .001$). Planned contrasts revealed significant differences in positive emotion between the high and low beauty watches ($F(1, 149) = 9.15$, $p = .003$) and between the low and low beauty + surprise watches ($F(1, 149) = 17.42$, $p < .001$).

*Forgiveness.* A one-way ANOVA on forgiveness revealed a significant main effect of product beauty condition ($M_{\text{high beauty}} = 2.42$, $M_{\text{low beauty}} = 1.77$, $M_{\text{low beauty + surprise}} = 1.72$; $F(2, 149) = 4.83$, $p = .009$). Planned contrasts revealed significant differences in forgiveness between the high and low beauty watches ($F(1, 149) = 6.60$, $p = .011$) and between the high and low beauty + surprise watches ($F(1, 149) = 7.88$, $p = .006$), but no differences between the low and low beauty + surprise watches ($F(1, 149) = .05$, $p = .83$). As a further check, the same ANOVA controlling for overall impressions again confirmed the main effect of watch condition ($F(3, 148) = 3.80$, $p = .025$) and the same pattern of significance across the planned contrasts. The same ANOVA controlling for gratitude, surprise and general positive affect also yielded the same results. These

findings suggest that it is indeed the beauty of the product that leads consumers to be more forgiving of a brand failure, and not just any positive emotion.

*Mediation.* Next, we examined whether perceptions of sacredness and feelings of awe serially mediated the influence of beauty on forgiveness (Model 6, PROCESS, Hayes 2013). To replicate the results from Study 3, we first compared the high and low beauty conditions only: the resulting 95% bias-corrected confidence interval of the indirect effect, via both mediators, excluded zero ($CI_{95}$: -.703; -.147), suggesting that perceptions of sacredness and feelings of awe serially mediated the effect of beauty on intention to forgive the brand. We then ran the same serial mediation analysis comparing the high beauty and low beauty + surprise conditions: the resulting 95% bias-corrected confidence interval of the indirect effect via both mediators also excluded zero ($CI_{95}$: -.199; -.012). When the order of the mediators was reversed, both confidence intervals included zero (high beauty vs. low beauty, $CI_{95}$: -.177; .082; high beauty vs. low beauty + surprise, $CI_{95}$: -.043; .015), suggesting once again that perceptions of sacredness that arise from beauty lead to feelings of awe and not vice versa.[4]

*Moderation by dispositional sacredness.* Finally, we examined whether dispositional differences in the capability to see sacredness in life moderated the effect of beauty on forgiveness. Regression analyses on forgiveness, between product beauty condition (d1 = low beauty; d2= low beauty + surprise; reference = high beauty) and perceptions of sacredness (mean-centered) highlight the significant main effect of product beauty condition previously discussed (d1: $t(146) = -2.33$, $p = .021$; d2: $t(146) = -2.54$, $p = .012$), but also a significant main

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[4] To rule out alternative explanations, we ran mediation analyses comparing high vs. low beauty and high vs. low beauty + surprise with gratitude or general positive affect as mediators. In both cases the confidence intervals *included* zero, thus ruling out these other emotions as drivers for our effects. As a further check, we ran the same serial mediations with perceptions of sacredness, using either gratitude or general positive affect (rather than feelings of awe). In all cases, the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals *included* zero, thus also ruling out these other emotions as alternative explanations for our effects.

effect of dispositional sacredness ($t(146) = 3.95$, $p = .001$), and an interaction between product

beauty and dispositional sacredness (d1 interaction: $t(146) = -3.16$, $p = .002$; d2 interaction:

$t(146) = -3.22$, $p = .002$) (see Figure 4). Spotlight analyses (Spiller et al. 2013) reveal no main

effects of watch condition at -1 SD ($M_{\text{high beauty}} = 1.58$, $M_{\text{low beauty}} = 1.83$, $M_{\text{low beauty + surprise}} = 1.76$;

d1: $p = .492$; d2 = .617), but main effects of watch conditions at the mean ($M_{\text{high beauty}} = 2.34$,

$M_{\text{low beauty}} = 1.76$, $M_{\text{low beauty + surprise}} = 1.72$; d1: $p = .021$; d2 = .012) and +1 SD ($M_{\text{high beauty}} = 3.09$,

$M_{\text{low beauty}} = 1.69$, $M_{\text{low beauty + surprise}} = 1.68$; d1: $p = .001$; d2 < .001). Replicating the mediation

results noted previously, this effect of beauty on forgiveness at and above the mean of

dispositional sacredness is serially mediated by perceptions of sacredness and feelings of awe

(high vs. low beauty confidence interval, $CI_{95}$: -.632, -.083; high vs. low beauty + surprise

confidence interval, $CI_{95}$: -.333, -.059). These results suggest that while seeing a beautiful

product leads consumers to be, on average, more forgiving of a brand failure, consumers who

have a higher chronic disposition to see sacredness are especially likely to forgive a product

failure when exposed to a beautiful product.

**Figure 4. Study 4: Effects of Beauty x Dispositional Sacredness on Forgiveness**



Finally, given that the concept of sacredness is often tied to religion, one might wonder whether individuals' beliefs in God might influence the relationship between product beauty and forgiveness. Results do not show an interaction between belief in God[5] and beauty condition on forgiveness ($F(2, 146 = .94, p = .394$), nor is there a 3-way interaction between belief in God, beauty condition and dispositional sacredness ($F(2, 140) = .72, p = .490$). Interestingly, however, those who believe in God did report higher scores on the dispositional sacredness measure ($F(1, 150) = 29.38, p < .001$, $M_{Believer} = 3.32$ vs. $M_{NonBeliever} = 2.25$). These results suggest that it is the openness to perceiving sacredness that matters as opposed to an explicit belief in God.

Discussion

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[5] Individuals who identified themselves as atheists and agnostics were considered "non-believers" in the analysis. All others were categorized as "believers".

Consistent with the previous findings, participants in Study 4 indicated greater willingness to forgive a firm following a product failure when the product was beautiful than when it was not. Importantly, the results of Study 4 also provided evidence in several ways that this forgiveness-enhancing effect of beauty is uniquely driven by heightened perceptions of sacredness and related feelings of awe. First, mediational analyses revealed that the effect of beauty on forgiveness was uniquely mediated by sacredness and awe in serial; neither feelings of gratitude nor general positive affect mediated the effect. Importantly, the fact that the low beauty + surprise condition did not boost forgiveness, despite eliciting equivalent levels of awe to the high beauty conditions, highlights the essential role of sacredness in this effect; it is only the awe that stems from the enhanced sacredness of beautiful products (versus awe in a more general sense) that leads to feelings of forgiveness. Second, the fact that the effect of beauty on forgiveness was moderated by dispositional sacredness further highlights the importance of sacredness perceptions. Though consumers are generally able to see aspects of everyday life as being sacred (e.g., Pargament and Mahoney 2005), those who are prone to viewing life as sacred are most likely to forgive a product failure when the product is beautiful. Together, the results of Study 4 cohere in suggesting that seeing sacredness in beauty is a key driver of forgiveness, and a reason why beauty is distinct from just any positive stimuli that a brand might present to consumers.

**STUDY 5: BOUNDARY CONDITION – A COMPANY'S SACRED VALUES**

In Study 5, we build upon our prior results in two ways. First, although product beauty consistently leads to heightened forgiveness in response to a product failure in studies 1-4, all of

the product failures in the previous studies had to do with the product's functionality (e.g., phone or watch malfunctions). To examine whether our effects are specific to functional failures, we vary the failure in this study to be aesthetic rather than functional, and examine the effect of product beauty on consumer forgiveness in such cases.

Second, we seek to further our understanding of the role of sacredness in the relationship between beauty and forgiveness by heightening and dampening the levels of sacredness that consumers associate with a product. Prior research suggests that in addition to objects, values may also be considered as sacred (Pargament and Mahoney 2005; Pomerleau, Pargament and Mahoney 2016), and that sacred items can "contaminate" other items, rendering them sacred as well (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989). Building on this, we manipulate the extent to which the company's values are in line with those that the consumer considers to be sacred. This is particularly relevant given the increasing trend for companies to be more transparent in communicating their sacred values, or to take stands on issues that consumers hold dear (Sisodia, Wolfre and Sheth 2003). We expect that when people believe that a company truly holds or reflects one's most sacred values, the products they offer will be imbued with a bit of sacredness, even if they are not beautiful. Thus, we expect that when the values that the consumer and company consider to be sacred are in sync, consumers should be more likely to forgive a product-related failure regardless of beauty. However, when people believe that a company disdains and actually works against one's sacred values, their products should be divested of sacredness, even if beautiful. Consequently, when sacred values are out of sync, we expect that the effect of beauty on forgiveness will be dampened. When sacred values are not manipulated, we expect to replicate the effect of higher beauty on forgiveness seen in the prior studies.

Method

Three hundred and ninety-nine participants (193 women (48.37%); $M_{age} = 35.70$) on Amazon Mechanical Turk participated in a 2 (product beauty: high beauty versus low beauty) by 3 (corporate values: in sync, out of sync, neutral) between subjects design for payment. First, all participants imagined that they were shopping for a watch online and were shown a picture of either a woman's or man's watch (depending on the participant's gender), manipulated between subjects as being either high or low beauty (see web appendix).

Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of the following "corporate values" manipulations. In the "in sync" condition, participants learned from the company's website that it "honors several causes that…represent the values that are most sacred to you." In the "out of sync" condition, participants learned that the company "disdains several causes that… represent the values that are most sacred to you" (see web appendix). In the neutral condition, participants were told that they looked at the company's website; they did not receive any additional information. We then measured participants' feelings of awe (awe index, $\alpha = .86$) and perceived sacredness as in prior studies (sacredness index, $r = .45$), and also the perceived beauty of the watch (1 = not at all to 7 = very much so).

Participants then read that while the watch worked fine, there was a crack on the watch face (see web appendix). Participants then completed the same measures of forgiveness as in previous studies ($\alpha = .94$), and a manipulation check regarding the values of the watch company (1 = not at all, 7 = very much; $\alpha = .94$), with items such as, "To what extent do you think this company has strong morals?" (see web appendix). Finally, participants reported demographic information, including the extent to which they are religious (1 = not at all, 7 = very religious).

Results

      *Manipulation checks.* A one-way ANOVA by product beauty condition indicated that participants in the high beauty condition perceived their watch to be more beautiful than those in the low beauty condition ($M_{\text{high beauty}} = 5.15$ vs. $M_{\text{low beauty}} = 4.33$; $F(1, 397) = 20.70$, $p < .001$). This did not interact with gender ($F(1, 395) = 1.30$, $p = .25$), so the data are collapsed across gender for the remaining analyses. A two-way ANOVA by product beauty condition and corporate values condition revealed significant differences on the perceptions of corporate values, consistent with our intended manipulation[6]. Specifically, while there was no main effect of product beauty condition on the perceptions of corporate values ($F(1, 397) = .010$, $p = .920$), we found a main effect of corporate values condition ($M_{\text{in sync}} = 4.93$, $M_{\text{out of sync}} = 2.60$, $M_{\text{neutral}} = 3.99$; $F(2, 396) = 85.43$, $p < .001$). All planned contrasts ("in sync" vs. "out of sync"; "in sync" vs. neutral; "out of sync" vs. neutral) were significant (all $ps < .001$). Individuals in the "in sync" condition perceived their sacred values to be more in line with corporate values than those in the neutral condition; individuals in the neutral condition perceived better fit between their values and corporate values than those in the "out of sync" condition.

      *Sacredness and awe.* A two-way ANOVA on sacredness by beauty condition and corporate values condition revealed a significant main effect of beauty condition ($M_{\text{high beauty}} = 3.53$ vs. $M_{\text{low beauty}} = 2.87$; $F(1, 393) = 14.48$, $p = .001$). As expected, the high beauty watch evoked greater perceptions of sacredness. A significant main effect of corporate values condition also emerged ($M_{\text{in sync}} = 3.50$, $M_{\text{out of sync}} = 2.84$, $M_{\text{neutral}} = 3.26$; $F(2, 393) = 5.22$, $p = .006$).

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[6] A one-way ANOVA was conducted on the beauty manipulation check because the measure of beauty was taken prior to the values manipulation and thus could not be influenced by the values manipulation.

Planned contrasts revealed significant differences in the perceived sacredness of the watch between the "in sync" vs. "out of sync" conditions ($F(1, 393) = 10.17, p = .002$), and between the neutral vs. "out of sync" conditions ($F(1, 393) = 4.11, p = .043$); there was no difference between the "in sync" and neutral conditions ($F(1, 393) = 1.26, p = .262$). There was no interaction between the product beauty and corporate values conditions ($F(2, 393) = .15, p = .863$) as both beauty and corporate values exhibited strong effects on sacredness, as expected.

The same 2x3 ANOVA on feelings of awe revealed a similar pattern. There was a significant main effect of product beauty condition ($M_{\text{high beauty}} = 3.92$ vs. $M_{\text{low beauty}} = 3.48$; $F(1, 393) = 6.41, p = .012$). There was also a significant main effect of corporate values condition ($M_{\text{in sync}} = 3.96$, $M_{\text{out of sync}} = 3.19$, $M_{\text{neutral}} = 3.96$; $F(2, 393) = 8.88, p = .001$). Planned contrasts revealed significant differences in feelings of awe between the "in sync" vs. "out of sync" conditions ($F(1, 393) = 13.43, p = .001$) and between the "out of sync" vs. neutral conditions ($F(1, 393) = 13.06, p = .001$); there were no differences between the "in sync" and neutral conditions ($F(1, 393) = .00, p = .991$). There was no interaction between beauty and corporate values conditions ($F(2, 393) = .44, p = .645$) as both beauty and corporate values exhibited strong effects on awe, as with sacredness.

*Forgiveness.* A two-way product beauty by corporate values ANOVA on forgiveness revealed a main effect of beauty condition ($F(1, 393) = 3.85, p = .050$), a main effect of corporate values condition ($F(2, 393) = 25.94, p < .001$), and an interaction of the beauty and corporate values conditions ($F(2, 393) = 2.96, p = .053$). The results (see Figure 5) show that, in the neutral condition, we replicate the main effect of beauty on forgiveness ($M_{\text{high beauty\_neutral}} = 3.96$ vs. $M_{\text{low beauty\_neutral}} = 3.14$; $F(1, 393) = 9.40, p = .002$). Furthermore, we do not find an effect of beauty in the "in sync" ($M_{\text{high beauty\_in sync}} = 3.67$ vs. $M_{\text{low beauty\_in sync}} = 3.70$; $F(1, 393) = .01, p =$

.920) or "out of sync" conditions ($M_{\text{high beauty\_out of sync}}$ = 2.52 vs. $M_{\text{low beauty\_out of sync}}$ = 2.42; $F(1,$

393) = .15, $p$ = .699). In the former, the company's sacred values compensate for the lower

beauty of the product, *heightening* consumers' willingness to forgive the less beautiful product

made by a highly "sacred" company; in the latter, the company's lack of sacred values dampens

the effect of beauty on forgiveness, making consumers *less* likely to forgive the company, even

for a beautiful product. We also examined the 3-way interaction of religiosity with the product

beauty and corporate values conditions on forgiveness, but find no significant three-way

interaction ($F(2, 396)$ = .21, $p$ = .81), again illustrating that people can find sacredness in life

irrespective of their explicit religious beliefs.

**Figure 5. Study 5: Effects of Beauty x Corporate Values on Forgiveness**
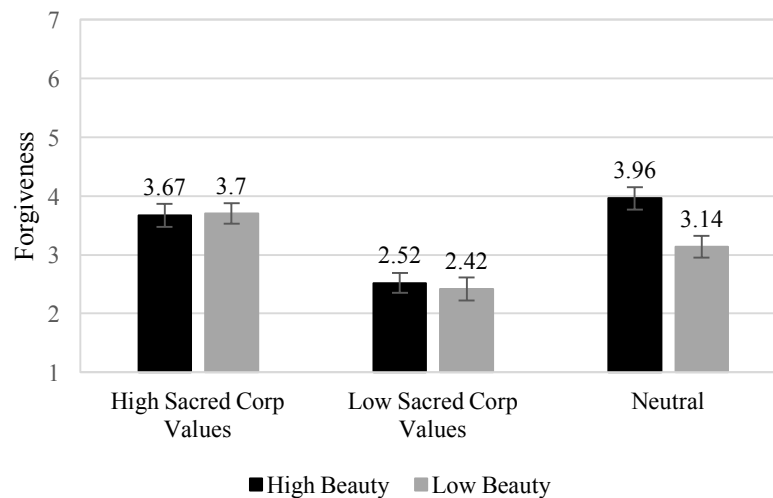


*Mediation.* We performed a serial mediation analysis to test whether perceptions of

sacredness and feelings of awe mediated the influence of beauty on forgiveness (Model 6,

PROCESS, Hayes 2013). Focusing on the neutral condition, the only condition for which there is

an effect of beauty on forgiveness, the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval of the indirect effect, via both mediators, excluded zero (CI$_{95}$: .003; .328), suggesting that perceptions of sacredness and feelings of awe mediated the effect of beauty on intention to forgive the brand following the failure. As in prior studies, when the mediators were reversed (awe → sacredness), the mediation pattern did not hold (95% bias-corrected confidence interval, CI$_{95}$: -.043; .139).

Discussion

Study 5 establishes a boundary condition for the effect of beauty on forgiveness following a product failure. When a company's sacred values are out of sync with the consumer's, the misalignment in values leads to a reduction in the perceived sacredness of the product, dampening the effect of beauty on forgiveness for highly beautiful products. However, when values are in alignment, the sacredness of the company's values rubs off on its products, increasing perceptions of sacredness for less beautiful products and thus increasing consumers' willingness to forgive the brand following a product failure. Together, these results highlight the notion that products can start off exactly the same in terms of beauty (and other traits) and still end up with different levels of forgiveness, depending on the sacredness that is associated with them. They also demonstrate that perceptions of sacredness are a unique and critical driver of forgiveness, and show that the effect of beauty on forgiveness applies to both functional and aesthetic failures alike. Thus, the beauty that generates greater forgiveness at baseline is more than simply a collection of aesthetically pleasing traits; it is intrinsically tied to a sense of sacredness that can be heightened or diminished, depending on external factors such as the alignment or misalignment of sacred company values, respectively.

## STUDY 6: THE BEAUTY OF PRODUCT PACKAGING

Study 6 uses the consumption of an actual product, candy, to extend our investigation from the beauty of a product itself to the beauty of its packaging. This is in line with the growing interest in the effects of packaging appearance by practitioners and academics alike (Reimann et al. 2010; Honea and Horsky 2012; White et al. 2016). We expect that consumers will be more likely to forgive a product failure, operationalized as willingness to place future orders with the company, when a product is beautifully packaged than when it is not.

Method

One hundred and forty-one participants (98 women (69.50%); $M_{age} = 28.70$) took part in a paid laboratory study at a private university in the United States. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (package beauty: high beauty vs. low beauty) × 2 (product failure: failure vs. no failure) between-subjects design. All participants first read that a local candy store, The Sweet Life, delivered a product to the lab for them to sample. Participants were then randomly assigned to either a "failure" condition in which they read that they would be sampling chocolate mints, or a "no failure" condition in which they read that they would be sampling grapefruit sours candy. Next, all participants received either a high or low beauty package with the label of the candy they were supposed to receive (either the dark chocolate dipped mints label or the grapefruit sours candy label; see web appendix). Inside their packages, however, everyone received the grapefruit sours; thus, half of the participants received the wrong candy. That is, half were expecting to receive chocolate mints and received a package that indeed said chocolate mints, but the candies inside the box were actually grapefruit sours. Participants

were then given time to eat the candy. Next, as a behavioral indicator of forgiveness, we measured participants' willingness to sign up to receive a candy order form each week. Specifically, participants read: "The Behavioral Lab is considering placing large orders for The Sweet Life candy on a weekly basis on behalf of participants. You can receive an order form each week with the candies available and the prices you would pay. The candy will be delivered directly to your home. Would you like to sign up to receive an order form each week via e-mail?" The possible answers were "Yes, please send me an e-mail with an order form each week", "No, please do not send me an order form" or "Not right now, but you can contact me again later to ask". Participants then answered questions about the taste of the candy ("How delicious was the candy?;" "How tasty was the candy?" 1 = Not at all delicious/tasty to 7 = very delicious/tasty; $r$ = .89). They also completed manipulation checks for both the beauty of the packaging ("How beautiful was the packaging?" 1 = not at all to 7 = very) and the failure ("To what extent was the candy as you expected?" 1 = not at all to 7 = very much so). We also asked about their attitudes toward different types of candy, including their attitudes toward chocolate mints and grapefruit sours (1 = don't like at all, 7 = like very much), to ensure that grapefruit sours would not be preferred over chocolate mints and thus unintentionally make the 'failure' a welcome surprise. Finally, as we expected the behavioral measure of forgiveness in this study to be influenced by consumers' candy habits, participants answered a question about their candy-eating habits ("How often do you eat candy?" 1 = never to 7 = all the time).

Results

*Manipulation checks.* Confirming the successful manipulation of beauty, there were significant differences across product beauty conditions in terms of the rated beauty of the packaging ($M_{\text{high beauty}}$ = 5.40 vs. $M_{\text{low beauty}}$ = 3.29; $F(1, 137)$ = 60.52, $p < .001$). There was no main effect of failure on perceptions of beauty ($F(1, 137)$ = .50, $p = .482$), nor an interaction between beauty and failure ($F(1, 137)$ = 2.17, $p = .143$). Confirming the successful manipulation of failure, there were significant differences across failure conditions in terms of whether the candy was what participants expected ($M_{\text{failure}}$ = 2.13 vs. $M_{\text{no failure}}$ = 4.04; $F(1, 137)$ = 56.62, $p < .001$), while there was no main effect of beauty on perceptions of failure ($F(1, 137)$ = .021, $p = .648$), or an interaction between failure and beauty ($F(1, 137)$ = 0.35, $p = .554$). Further, when asked about their attitudes toward different types of candy, there was also a clear preference for chocolate mints over grapefruit sours ($M_{\text{chocolate mints}}$ = 4.21 vs. $M_{\text{grapefruit sours}}$ = 3.40; $t(140)$ = 5.14, $p < .001$), suggesting that the failure (receiving grapefruit sours instead of chocolate mints) would be perceived as a failure and not as a pleasant surprise. Importantly though, we find no effects of beauty ($F(1, 137)$ = .01, $p = .905$), flaw ($F(1, 137)$ = 0.58, $p = .449$) nor an interaction ($F(1, 137)$ = .08, $p = .777$) on perceived tastiness of the candy.

*Choice.* To test the effects of our manipulations on the main dependent variable (choice to sign up for weekly order forms for candy; 1 = "not right now but you can contact me later to ask), 2 = "no, please do not send me an order form", 3 = "yes, please send me an email with an order form each week"), we ran an ordered logit model with beauty, failure, and their interaction as predictors, and participants' candy-eating habits as a covariate ($\chi^2(1)$ = 18.28, $p < .001$). We found no main effect of beauty ($\chi^2(1)$ = 0.12, $p = .73$), a significant main effect of failure ($\chi^2(1)$ = 3.85, $p = .05$) and a marginally significant interaction between beauty and failure ($\chi^2(1)$ = 3.59, $p$

= .06)[7]. Percentages for each choice option per failure condition are reported in Table 1. Within

the failure condition, we found a marginal main effect of beauty ($\chi^2(1) = 3.51$, $p = .06$) whereby

the high beauty condition led to a greater likelihood of forgiveness than the low beauty

condition; in the no failure condition, there was no effect of beauty ($\chi^2(1) = 0.92$, $p = .337$).

**Table 1. Study 6 percentages for each choice option by flaw condition**

| Choices | FLAW CONDITION – *Incorrectly received Grapefruit Sours* | | NO FLAW CONDITION – *Correctly received Grapefruit Sours* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Beauty condition** | **Plain condition** | **Beauty condition** | **Plain condition** |
| **No** | 66.67 | 80.56 | 68.29 | 67.65 |
| **Maybe** | 23.33 | 16.67 | 29.27 | 20.59 |
| **Yes** | 10.00 | 2.78 | 2.44 | 11.76 |

Discussion

Study 6 further replicates the effect of beauty on forgiveness, this time in a real choice

context and manipulating packaging, rather than product beauty. We find that when consumers

receive candy in beautiful packaging and the brand makes a mistake (the wrong candy is

received), they are more willing to forgive the company and order candy in the future, relative to

participants who received the wrong candy in less beautiful packaging. This is true even when

perceptions of candy quality are equivalent across conditions, and is consistent with past research

that emphasizes the importance of package appearance (White et al. 2016). Further, as our only

study to also assess purchase intent for a non-flawed product (given our focus on forgiveness,

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[7] As a further check, we also ran an ordered logit model looking only at the "yes" and "no" choice options (excluding the "maybe" choice option) to again find no main effect of beauty ($\chi^2(1) = 0.89$, $p = .34$), a significant main effect of flaw ($\chi^2(1) = 5.45$, $p = .02$) and a significant beauty by flaw interaction ($\chi^2(1) = 5.15$, $p = .02$). The covariate remained significant ($\chi^2(1) = 10.43$, $p = .001$).

which necessitates a product failure), this study revealed no differences in preferences toward the non-flawed product as a function of whether it was in the high beauty or low beauty condition. This finding is consistent with prior research that finds that product beauty can have both positive and negative associations for consumers at baseline (e.g., Honea and Horsky, 2012; Hoegg, Alba and Dahl 2010; Townsend and Sood 2012), and suggests that brand failures provide an interesting and unique lens for studying the effects of beauty.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

In the present research, we investigate how consumers' responses to product failures are influenced by a product's beauty. Across a variety of different formats, contexts, failures, operationalizations of beauty and participant populations, we find that consumers are more willing to forgive a company following a brand failure if the product is beautiful than when it is not. In a series of six studies, we rule out several alternate explanations for our results, identify an important boundary condition, and trace this effect to the fact that beautiful products heighten perceptions of product sacredness, which then leads to increased feelings of awe and consequently, greater forgiveness.

*Theoretical Contributions*

In examining how product beauty affects response to a brand mistake, our work makes several contributions to the existing research on responses to brand failure, product aesthetics, product sacredness and awe. First, in finding that product beauty influences consumers' reactions

to a brand failure, our work identifies a highly relevant and novel determinant of consumer forgiveness. Though past research on brand failures has identified a number of factors that influence consumer forgiveness, it has largely focused on examining the role played by specific characteristics related to the failure (e.g., Trump 2014), the company (e.g., Aaker, Fournier and Brasel 2004), the consumer (e.g., Monga and Roedder John 2008) or the recovery effort (e.g., Smith, Bolton and Wagner 1999). In the present research, we take a fresh approach by examining the role played by a characteristic of the flawed product itself. In so doing, our work extends the existing study of how consumers react to brand failures, and also introduces a novel class of moderating factors (characteristics of the flawed products) to that literature.

Second, in examining the effects of product beauty in a brand failure context, our work contributes to the existing research on the downstream consequences of product aesthetics. Importantly, we identify a novel consumer response to products with high aesthetic value: heightened perceptions of product sacredness. Although past work on product aesthetics has documented that consumers often attribute a variety of positive characteristics to beautiful products (e.g., Dawar and Parker 1994; Wu et al. 2017), it has not yet examined the relationship between perceptions of beauty and those of sacredness. Thus, in finding that beautiful products can lead to increased perceptions of sacredness, we extend the existing understanding of how consumers perceive and react to beautiful products. In linking perceptions of sacredness to feelings of awe and subsequently increased forgiveness, our work also suggests that understanding consumers' specific immediate reactions to beautiful products may help marketers to more precisely identify the downstream consequences of highly aesthetic products. This is particularly important in light of work that finds both positive and negative effects of product beauty (e.g., Townsend 2017; Reimann et al. 2010). Moreover, in finding that beauty is an

antecedent of sacredness, our work extends the present understanding of factors that confer perceptions of sacredness.

Third, we demonstrate empirically across a series of product categories that consumers can perceive ordinary consumer products (e.g., a cappuccino or a cupcake) to be sacred. Though past research has posited that everyday consumer goods can become sanctified (e.g. Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989), little research has examined product sacredness empirically. In the very limited research that examines product sacredness in an experimental context, much of it focuses on more extraordinary product classes, such as potentially life-saving medications (Samper and Schwartz 2012; McGraw, Schwartz and Tetlock 2011), rather than more quotidian goods (see McGinnis, Gentry and Gao 2012 for a possible exception). Thus, in showing empirically that consumers can see the sacredness in mundane product classes, we extend the sparse work on sacredness within the consumer domain.

Finally, in linking product beauty to feelings of awe, our work is among the first to examine the downstream consequences of awe that are directly related (integral) to the consumption situation, rather than incidental to it, as in the vast majority of the work on the emotion (e.g., Williams et al. 2017; Griskevicius, Shiota and Neufeld 2010; Piff et al. 2015). In so doing, we also provide initial evidence that awe can stem from more humble antecedents than the grander ones typically examined within the literature (e.g., natural wonders such as the constellations or panoramic views; Silvia et al. 2015; Shiota, Keltner and Mossman 2007), and expand the set of downstream consequences linked to the emotion.

*Marketing Implications and Future Research*

One important practical implication that comes from this work is that beautiful product designs can help firms mitigate negative consumer responses when product errors and mistakes occur. This may be most practical in product categories that have an experiential component to them (e.g., food), and in contexts where high product design is not typically linked to poor performance (Hoegg, Alba and Dahl 2010). Moreover, the results of Study 6 suggest that even in categories where the product itself cannot be made beautiful, marketers may still be able to achieve similar effects by making the packaging that the product comes in beautiful.

Similarly, our work suggests that highlighting respect for the values that consumers consider sacred may offer a second way in which firms can heighten perceptions of sacredness and encourage forgiveness. In line with this, research has suggested that engagement in corporate social responsibility activities (Bolton and Matilla 2015; Klein and Dawar 2004) can mitigate consumer response to a firm failure. To the extent that consumers consider the values underlying given social responsibility activities to be sacred, this work supports the use of corporate values to enhance sacredness. In such a case, it is possible that sacred corporate values may be seen to represent a kind of "inner" beauty, rather than the "outer," more traditional aesthetic beauty associated with a product. As a note of caution, however, marketers may want to carefully consider their target markets in selecting the values that they espouse – what may be sacred to one group of consumers may not be to another (e.g., Hobby Lobby or Chick-Fil-A). In cases where values are strongly divisive, firms may be better off avoiding discussing them altogether, as the results of Study 5 suggest that a mismatch between what firms and consumers consider to be sacred can backfire and dampen sacredness, thus reducing forgiveness.

While our results are consistent in demonstrating that product beauty enhances consumer forgiveness in brand failure contexts, they also raise important questions that have yet to be

answered. For instance, our results do not systematically speak to the type of flaw that product beauty can buffer. In the studies reported in this paper, we varied whether the flaw was functional (e.g., a stopped watch) or aesthetic (e.g., a crack in the watch face), but largely focused on relatively minor flaws that carry minimal long-term consequences. However, brand failures in the real world can vary on a number of different dimensions ranging from severity (e.g., a car window that does not open versus a car airbag that will not inflate), to type (e.g., failures to adhere to moral/ethical standards versus functional or aesthetic failures), to typicality (e.g., a one-off error versus a mistake that affects thousands). Consequently, one question for future research might be to delineate the type of mistakes that beauty can buffer.

As another example, past work on product sacredness has largely focused on the processes that lead consumer goods to become sanctified, on the properties of sacred products, and on the maintenance of sacred status (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989). However, as research on religious sacredness suggests, acquiring sacred status carries a number of important downstream implications, including increasing investment in the object (Pargament and Mahoney 2005). Within the consumer domain, future research might examine the implications of sacredness beyond that of enhancing forgiveness. In one example, it might be interesting to examine how feelings of sacredness might change feelings of self-brand connections. Though the fact that sacredness enhances investment should increase feelings of connection to the brand, sacred items are by definition distant from the self, as they transcend the self and exist on another plane. Consequently, it would be interesting for future research to disentangle these two countervailing forces in order to examine the effects of sacredness on self-brand connection.

*Conclusion*

In our opening example, we hinted at the possibility that Apple's beauty might uniquely account for why it is so readily forgiven after its failures. The results across our six studies suggest that this may be the case, including a supplementary analysis of Study 1 in which we looked at cell phone forgiveness by phone brand. Apple phones were rated as the most beautiful phones and their owners were indeed more likely to forgive the brand after the hypothetical failure than owners of other brands, even after controlling for overall liking (see web appendix). Interestingly, Samsung is thought to have significantly increased its focus on product aesthetics after the Galaxy Note 7 explosion debacle (Martin and Mickle 2017), one the biggest corporate blunders of 2016. Perhaps Samsung predicted what our studies reveal: beauty can help atone for a number of product failures.

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