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The Aesthetics of Giving: The Role of Product Aesthetics in the
Gift-Giving Market - An Experimental Study

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the role of product aesthetics in shaping consumer decision-making within the context of gift-giving, a topic with limited attention in existing research. It examines how visual product aesthetics influence purchase intentions through two key psychological mechanisms: perceived quality and self-expressive benefits. Additionally, the study explores how individual preferences, more specifically the centrality of visual product aesthetics, and the social distance between giver and recipient moderate these effects. Through a 2x2 between-subjects online experiment, the findings demonstrate that high aesthetics significantly increase purchase intention for gift-giving, as these are seen as an opportunity to express the giver's identity, especially for consumers who attach great importance to the visual aesthetics of products. Perceived quality also plays a critical role in this process, as aesthetically pleasing products are perceived to be of higher quality, further driving purchase intentions. Interestingly, contrary to expectations, social distance between giver and recipient does not significantly influence decision-making. This thesis contributes to the consumer behavior literature by emphasizing the symbolic and emotional significance of aesthetics in gift-giving and offers valuable insights for marketers looking to target consumers in this context.

Keywords: *Visual Product Aesthetics, Gift-Giving, Perceived Quality, Self-Expressive Benefits, CVPA, Social Distance*

Abstract (German Version)

Diese Arbeit untersucht den Einfluss von Produktästhetik auf Konsumententscheidungen im Kontext des Schenkens, ein Thema, das in der bisherigen Forschung nur begrenzt berücksichtigt wurde. Es wird analysiert, wie visuelle Produktästhetik Kaufabsichten über zwei zentrale psychologische Mechanismen beeinflusst: die wahrgenommene Qualität und die selbstexpressiven Vorteile. Zudem wird untersucht, inwiefern individuelle Präferenzen, wie die Zentralität der visuellen Produktästhetik, sowie die soziale Distanz zwischen Schenkendem und Beschenktem diese Effekte moderieren. Mithilfe eines 2x2 Between-Subjects Online-Experiments zeigen die Ergebnisse, dass hohe Ästhetik die Kaufabsicht für Geschenke signifikant erhöht, da diese die Identität des Schenkenden widerspiegeln, insbesondere für Konsument:innen mit einer hohen Zentralität der visuellen Produktästhetik. Auch die wahrgenommene Qualität spielt eine entscheidende Rolle in diesem Prozess: Ästhetisch ansprechende Produkte werden als qualitativ hochwertiger wahrgenommen, was die Kaufabsicht zusätzlich stärkt. Interessanterweise beeinflusst die soziale Distanz zwischen Schenkendem und Beschenktem die Entscheidungsfindung nicht signifikant. Diese Arbeit leistet einen Beitrag zur Konsumentenverhaltensforschung, indem sie die symbolische und emotionale Bedeutung von Ästhetik im Schenkkontext hervorhebt und bietet wertvolle praktische Implikationen für das Marketing in diesem Bereich.

Keywords: *Visuelle Produktästhetik, Geschenke, wahrgenommene Qualität, Vorteile für die Selbstdarstellung, CVPA, Soziale Distanz*

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List of Abbreviations

CLT	Construal-Level Theory
CVPA	Centrality of Visual Product Aesthetics
SEB	Self-Expressive Benefits
SoD	Social Distance
PI	Purchase Intention
PQ	Perceived Quality
VPA	Visual Product Aesthetics

1. Introduction

"The physical [...] design of a product is an unquestioned determinant of its marketplace success". This statement by Peter Bloch (1995, p.16) emphasizes the critical role of a product's appearance. In today's markets, where product functionalities are often overlapping (Reimann, Schilke, et al., 2010), aesthetic differentiation increasingly drives consumer preference (Zolli, 2004). Visual appeal often plays a greater role than functionality in attracting attention to a product and shaping consumer appreciation (Bloch, 1995; Haug, 2016). This trend extends beyond visually driven products like furniture and clothing to everyday items, tech gadgets and household appliances, which are now marketed not only for their functionality but also for their decorative appeal (Bloch et al., 2003; Haug, 2016; Y. Liu et al., 2017; F. Wu et al., 2017). Companies like Apple and Dyson have set themselves apart through distinctive, visually appealing designs, emphasizing the strategic value of aesthetics in competitive industries (Haug, 2016). The importance of product aesthetics has been further magnified by the emergence of "Instagrammable products", designed to be photogenic and shareable on social media (Lin & Chang, 2021, p. 459). The field of product aesthetics has also sparked academic interest (Bloch, 2011). In recent years, a growing body of research has examined the impact of product aesthetics on consumer behavior (Crolic et al., 2019). Findings show that aesthetically pleasing designs can evoke immediate purchase desires, justify price premiums (e.g., Bloch et al., 2003; Mumcu & Kimzan, 2015), and elicit pride of ownership and greater care (Bloch, 1995). However, the literature remains somewhat fragmented (F. Wu et al., 2017). On the one hand, studies underline strong positive effects of aesthetics on consumer behavior (e.g., Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2014). On the other hand, some research suggests that aesthetic attributes may become less relevant or even detrimental when functionality is prioritized or when designs are perceived as excessive (e.g., Chaouali & Souiden, 2023). Furthermore, the psychological mechanisms through which visual appeal shapes consumer decision-making are still not fully explored. Moreover, there is a lack of research on product aesthetics in different contexts (Lin & Chang, 2021). Importantly, most of the existing literature focuses on personal consumption, overlooking the significant gift-giving market, which records substantial spending, particularly during the holiday seasons (Cavanaugh et al., 2015). For example, Germans planned to spend an average of €533 on Christmas gifts in 2024 (FOM, 2024). On a broader scale, gift-related expenditures account for approximately 3-4% of an individual's annual income, underlining the economic relevance of this domain (Prendergast & Stole, 2001). Although we know

aesthetics matters, how it affects gift choices, and for whom, remains underexplored. This thesis addresses this research gap by examining how aesthetic preferences shape consumer choices in gift-giving. It investigates not only whether product aesthetics affect purchase intentions when buying for others, but also through which psychological mechanisms these effects unfold and under what conditions they become more or less pronounced. The present research is guided by the following research question: *How do product aesthetics influence consumer choice in gift-giving? What factors influence their decisions?*

Academically, this thesis aims to advance the understanding of product aesthetics by examining its role in socially meaningful, interpersonal decisions. From a managerial perspective, this thesis highlights the strategic value of aesthetic design in gift-giving contexts. Marketers can use these insights to position visually appealing products as meaningful gifts and target design-sensitive consumers through benefit-based segmentation. In the following the thesis begins by establishing the conceptual and theoretical foundation. Since the research is situated within the context of gift-giving, the next chapter opens with a brief introduction to this domain.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Foundation

2.1. The Context of Gift-Giving

Recently, consumer research has shown growing interest in how people make decisions on behalf of others (P. J. Liu et al., 2019). One crucial field of interest is thereby gift-giving. It goes beyond the mere exchange of items, combining economic, social, and symbolic values (Belk, 1982). While gift-giving may initially seem like a simple economic transaction, it is deeply embedded in social norms and personal identity. In terms of social value, the act of giving gifts serves to establish, reinforce, or maintain connections between individuals (Bell, 1991). It involves choosing gifts for others in both personal (e.g., family, friends, neighbors) and professional (e.g., colleagues, bosses, clients) settings, often under conditions of uncertainty about the recipients' preferences (Cavanaugh et al., 2015). This act carries risks, as an ill-chosen gift can leave unfavorable impressions (Sherry et al., 1993). Consequently, selecting a gift for someone else is often more complex than choosing a product for oneself, due to potential negative social consequences (J. Lee et al., 2024). Research has demonstrated that people frequently experience stress (Sherry et al., 1993) or anxiety (Wooten, 2000) during the gift selection process. This discomfort is particularly pronounced when the gift does not align with the recipient's identity (Ward & Broniarczyk, 2011). Furthermore, anxiety is heightened when purchasing for more distant or elderly relatives,

compared to more familiar recipients, like friends of the same gender (Otnes et al., 1993; Wooten, 2000). When purchasing for others, consumers tend to focus on different attributes than when buying for themselves, often prioritizing quality (P. J. Liu & Baskin, 2021; L. Wu & Lee, 2016). Additionally, givers often favor physical gifts, such as a watch, over experiences, like opera tickets. This is because tangible items are perceived as safer choices, since they typically require less personal knowledge of the recipient's preferences (Givi et al., 2023).

Surprisingly, the intersection of product aesthetics and gift-giving remains underexplored in the literature, especially given the significant economic value and symbolic importance of gifts. The closest relevant study is by F. Wu et al. (2021), who investigated aesthetic preferences in the context of gift cards. Their findings suggest that givers are attracted to aesthetically pleasing gift cards, especially when the design and packaging create a visually harmonious presentation. Interestingly, when the aesthetic appeal of a gift card is expected to deteriorate upon use, consumers often opt for less attractive options to avoid the negative contrast. The underlying mechanisms driving this preference will be explored in subsequent chapters.

Given the lack of literature directly addressing product aesthetics in gift-giving, the following sections will predominantly review literature on self-purchases, to establish a broader theoretical and conceptual foundation. However, it is important to note, that the hypotheses in this study focus exclusively on purchase intention in the context of gift-giving. For simplicity and consistency, the term *purchase intention* (PI) is used throughout the hypotheses to refer specifically to the intention to purchase a product as a gift for someone else.

2.2. Visual Product Aesthetics

Aesthetics has long been recognized as a fundamental personal value. Vernon and Allport (1931) identified it as one of six core values, asserting that, while people may prioritize these values differently, aesthetics remains universal to everyone (C. Townsend & Sood, 2012; Vernon & Allport, 1931). Historically, aesthetics has been closely linked to art (Haug, 2016). But since the 1990s, scholars have expanded the concept to encompass a broader range of sensory experiences beyond art (Folkmann, 2010). Today, aesthetics is interpreted in multiple ways (D. Townsend, 1997). First, aesthetics refers to sensory experiences associated with visual forms of art, such as painting or crafts, and with performing arts, such as music (Holbrook & Zirlin, 1985 as cited in Venkatesh & Meamber, 2008; Schroeder & Borgerson,

2002). Second, it also covers sensory experiences evoked by everyday objects (Forty, 1986 as cited in Venkatesh & Meamber, 2008). Third, aesthetics can describe abstract concepts used to define aesthetic experiences, such as beauty, harmony, symbolism, taste, and emotion (Carroll, 2001 as cited in Venkatesh & Meamber, 2008). Each of these dimensions has shaped consumer research in various ways (Venkatesh & Meamber, 2008).

C. Townsend and Sood (2012) identified three key reasons why aesthetics matters in consumer behavior: First, aesthetics is innately valued, as people are born with a preference for beauty (e.g., Langlois et al., 1991). For example, research shows that more attractive individuals are often rated more favorably than their less attractive counterparts. This bias towards beauty not only influences preferences but also judgments about intelligence, social skills, and ethics (e.g., Dion et al., 1972). Second, aesthetics has evolutionary benefits (Dutton, 2009), as beauty signals status, resources, and mate attractiveness (e.g., Grammer et al., 2003). In the consumer context, evolutionary aesthetics suggests that owning or appreciating beautiful products signals skill and extra resources (Dutton, 2009). Moreover, owning beautiful products can make people feel more attractive and confident (C. Townsend & Sood, 2012). Third, aesthetics is expressed directly in products. Unlike other values (e.g., religion or politics), beauty is immediately visible in products. Consumers do not need to learn what is beautiful, they just respond to it (C. Townsend & Sood, 2012). Not only visual products but also packaging and even financial products are evaluated based on their aesthetics (Raghubir & Greenleaf, 2006; C. Townsend & Shu, 2010).

However, the term *product aesthetics* lacks a standardized definition, often overlapping with concepts such as *product design* or *product form*. These terms, in addition to aesthetic attributes, also include functional properties like ergonomics and recyclability (Davis, 1987 as cited in Bloch, 1995; Bloch et al., 2003). Similarly, Homburg et al. (2015) proposed that *product design* consists of three interconnected dimensions: functionality, symbolism, and aesthetics. These dimensions are not separate but are all interconnected and present to varying degrees within a product. The aesthetic component, specifically, refers to how visually appealing or beautiful a product is perceived to be (Desmet & Hekkert, 2007). Although some products, like artwork, are purely aesthetic, even utilitarian items, like home appliances, can have aesthetic qualities (Bloch et al., 2003; Charters, 2006; E.-J. Lee, 2022). As a result, aesthetic elements permeate various aspects of daily life, from clothing and consumer goods to activities like shopping, exercising, or decorating one's home (Venkatesh & Meamber, 2008).

Several scholars have attempted to identify specific design features that contribute to a product being perceived as aesthetically pleasing. Elements such as novelty, harmony (Mugge et al., 2018), color (Labrecque & Milne, 2012), shape, aspect ratio and proportionality (Raghubir & Greenleaf, 2006), as well as visual unity and prototypicality (Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998), play a key role in shaping consumer perceptions, influencing aesthetic responses and ultimately PI. In contrast, when designs become too intricate, featuring bold colors, excessive patterns, or flashy details, they can elicit unfavorable impressions, making the product seem cheap, childish, or low-quality (Mumcu & Kimzan, 2015).

This thesis focuses on *visual product aesthetics* (VPA), the visual aspects of products, such as material, color, size, and reflectivity (Lawson, 1983 as cited in Bloch et al., 2003), which influence consumer perceptions of beauty irrespective of functionality (C. Townsend & Sood, 2012). Here high VPA refer to products that are designed with a strong emphasis on aesthetic appeal, characterized by visual harmony, elegance, simplicity, and premium materials. In contrast, low VPA denote products with a more basic, utilitarian, or visually unremarkable appearance, where aesthetic design plays a minimal role.

However, as Reber et al. (2004) note, aesthetic perception arises not only from inherent product features, but also from the viewer's subjective perceptions of the product, or a combination of both. While some scholars argue that aesthetic judgments are based on universal standards (Haug, 2016), aesthetic responses are largely experiential and subjective, shaped by individual psychological mechanisms and contextual factors (Baskerville et al., 2018; Kumar & Garg, 2010). What one person finds visually appealing may not resonate with another. Furthermore, recent studies suggest that aesthetic appreciation should be viewed as a holistic experience, rather than solely judging isolated design elements (Baskerville et al., 2018). Therefore, this thesis focuses on consumers' subjective evaluations of the holistic VPA and examines how these affect consumer PI in the context of gift-giving.

2.3. Psychological and Behavioral Mechanisms of Visual Product Aesthetics

Product aesthetics significantly influence consumer decision-making by shaping both affective and cognitive psychological responses (Bitner, 1992). These responses often occur simultaneously and interact with each other (Schindler et al., 2017), ultimately impacting consumer behavior (Bloch, 1995). The positive impact of aesthetics on consumer preferences is widely recognized (F. Wu et al., 2017). Visually appealing products typically attract consumers early in the decision-making process, particularly during the choice and

pre-consumption stages (Raghubir & Greenleaf, 2006; Reimann, Schilke, et al., 2010; F. Wu et al., 2017). Aesthetically pleasing products can evoke emotions ranging from simple appreciation to intense emotional engagement, similar to reactions to art (Bloch, 1995; Tyan-Yu et al., 2017). For instance, Reimann, Zaichkowsky, et al. (2010) found that exposure to aesthetically designed packaging activates specific affective brain regions associated with emotional processing.

While some scholars argue that aesthetic responses are inherently emotional, others highlight that these responses go beyond mere emotions, extending to evaluative judgments about an object (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Attribution theory suggests that initial emotional reactions to a product's aesthetics are often followed by cognitive processes, where consumers are looking for the source of the perceived beauty (F. Wu et al., 2017). They justify their emotional response to beauty by attributing value to the product's design and the craftsmanship involved (Kelley, 1967; F. Wu et al., 2017). Supporting this, F. Wu et al. (2017) found that consumers interpret aesthetic value as a sign of effort in the design or manufacturing process of the product. This interpretation supports the "what is beautiful is good" heuristic (Dion et al., 1972), where consumers assume that visually appealing products are of higher quality and functionality (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2014). Such judgments may come as no surprise, also given the well-known halo effect, which causes people to make overly positive assumptions about people or objects that are perceived as attractive (Simmonds & Spence, 2017).

In addition to shaping evaluations, aesthetic perceptions can influence concrete behavioral responses throughout the consumption process. The appeal of aesthetics can affect consumer behavior from the pre-purchase to post-consumption stages, enhancing immediate desire (Norman, 2004 as cited in Reimann, Zaichkowsky, et al., 2010), increasing willingness to pay (Bloch et al., 2003), and promoting brand identity, trust, and loyalty (Y. Liu et al., 2017; Raghubir & Greenleaf, 2006). Psychological responses evoked by aesthetics often lead to behaviors in the form of increased product interaction, like viewing, touching, or purchasing the product (e.g., Bitner, 1992; Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990). Moreover, aesthetically pleasing products can reduce price sensitivity, and even make consumers more tolerant of minor product malfunctions (Bloch et al., 2003; Mumcu & Kimzan, 2015), known as the "aesthetic-usability effect" (Baghirov & Zhang, 2024, p. 789). Consumers also enjoy showing off attractive products, reflecting their identity and social roles (Bloch, 1995).

Despite these benefits, the effects of product aesthetics are not always uniformly positive and can sometimes lead to avoidance behavior (e.g., Bitner, 1992; Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990). For instance, the phrase, “If it is pretty, it won’t work” (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2014, p. 519), encapsulates a common prejudice, where visually appealing products are sometimes believed to hide flaws beneath their beauty (Russo & De Moraes, 2003). Negative effects can also include decreased usage due to concerns about potential damage and maintaining the product’s beauty, especially when significant effort is assumed to be involved in its creation (F. Wu et al., 2017). Overemphasis on aesthetics can lead to an “anti-attractiveness bias”, where highly aesthetic designs are less appreciated if they lack functional value or are perceived as excessively costly (Chaouali & Souiden, 2023, p. 505). This can create a “beauty dilemma”, where consumers devalue aesthetic appeal in favor of functionality, especially in utilitarian contexts where beauty is harder to justify, despite generally appreciating it (Diefenbach & Hassenzahl, 2009, p. 1419). While consumers may value aesthetics during the initial stages of shopping, they often prioritize practicality over aesthetics in predominantly utilitarian settings (Chaouali & Souiden, 2023).

However, in the context of gift-giving, a consumer is purchasing for someone else rather than for themselves. This fundamental distinction shifts the decision-making focus. Rather than focusing on long-term usability, givers often emphasize the potential immediate emotional impact of the gift at the moment of exchange (Galak et al., 2016). Consequently, gift-givers tend to prioritize desirable or impressive gifts over practical ones, often neglecting how a gift will be used in the long run and underestimating the recipient’s preference for convenience (Baskin et al., 2014; P. J. Liu et al., 2019). Therefore, concerns that may reduce the appeal of highly aesthetic products in self-use contexts, such as fears of damage, impracticality, or excessive cost, are likely to be less influential in the gift-giving context. Instead, aesthetically appealing products are likely to be favored in contexts, where symbolic value, impressiveness, and hedonic impact take precedence. Supporting this, research has shown that visually appealing products are evaluated more favorably in hedonic settings (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2014), such as gift-giving. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: *Products of high VPA will lead to a higher PI for gift-giving compared to products of lower VPA.*

To understand how and why VPA influence PI, the next chapters will explore two key psychological mechanisms underlying this effect.

2.3.1. The Role of Perceived Quality

Perceived quality (PQ) plays a critical role in shaping PI, particularly at the pre-consumption stage. When buying for others, people often tend to prioritize quality over quantity (P. J. Liu & Baskin, 2021). For instance, individuals tend to serve higher-quality tea to guests, than they would consume themselves (Livesey & Lennon, 1978). These difference in choices can be partly attributed to self-presentation concerns, where individuals aim to appear thoughtful and avoid the perception of poor taste when making choices for someone else (Goffman, 1959; P. J. Liu & Baskin, 2021). It is important to distinguish PQ from a product's actual, objective quality. While the latter refers to measurable characteristics, such as durability, reliability, and functionality, PQ is a cognitive evaluation of the product's overall excellence (Bagozzi & Khoshnevis, 2023). This judgment is based on a subjective, holistic assessment that encompasses individual expectations, personal taste, and contextual factors, all of which can sometimes override or contradict objective assessments (Baghirov & Zhang, 2024).

Aesthetics plays a crucial role in influencing PQ. A visually appealing design can enhance a consumer's evaluation of a product, leading them to perceive it as being of higher quality, which in turn increases PI (F. Wu et al., 2017). However, overly elaborate designs featuring excessive patterns, colors, or flashy elements can evoke negative emotions, causing products to appear low-quality, childish, or cheap (Mumcu & Kimzan, 2015). In contrast, clean and simple aesthetics are often associated with premium quality and luxury, conveying confidence in the product's inherent value. Simplicity in design can signal a manufacturer's confidence in the product itself, suggesting to consumers that quality is prioritized (Baghirov & Zhang, 2024). Apple's minimalist design approach, for example, has redefined consumer expectations by emphasizing simplicity over decorative complexity. In addition, people with a hedonic orientation tend to perceive aesthetically pleasing products as higher in quality, while those with a utilitarian orientation may judge them more critically or even negatively (Baghirov & Zhang, 2024).

Based on evidence that higher product aesthetics can enhance PQ (e.g., Bloch, 1995; Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2014; E.-J. Lee, 2022) and the emphasis on quality in gift purchasing (Das et al., 2020; L. Wu & Lee, 2016), it is expected that consumers will prefer products with higher aesthetic appeal in the context of gift-giving. Thus:

H2: *The effect of VPA on PI is partially mediated by PQ. Higher VPA are expected to increase PQ, which in turn leads to higher PI.*

2.3.2. The Role of Self-Expression

Consumer behavior is deeply intertwined with identity (Kleine et al., 1993; Rifkin et al., 2021). According to identity-based motivation theory, individuals are driven to behave in ways that are congruent with their identity (Oyserman, 2009; Shavitt et al., 2009). This motivation is strongly evident in consumption choices. Through the consumption and display of material possessions, individuals express who they are (Aaker, 1999; Belk, 1988; Kleine et al., 1993). Many even view their possessions as extensions of themselves (Belk, 1988). The act of making one's otherwise hidden personal values, beliefs, and traits visible to others is known as self-expression (Bellah et al., 1985 as cited in Gal, 2015). Self-expressive products are often marketed with messages that emphasize what the product communicates about the person who buys or uses it (Shavitt & Nelson, 2000). Furthermore, unique (Lynn & Harris, 1997) or personalized items, such as those designed by local artists, are particularly self-expressive because they reflect individual taste and are less likely to be owned by others (Steinhart et al., 2014). The benefits derived from these self-expressive efforts are known as utilitarian *self-expressive benefits* (SEB) (Morgan & Townsend, 2022).

Recent research suggests a shift in how self-expression is understood in consumer behavior. While it was previously viewed mainly as a means to fulfill other psychological needs, such as the need for self-consistency, newer findings suggest that self-expression, in itself, is a fundamental human need (Morgan & Townsend, 2022). People are intrinsically motivated to express themselves, and the act of doing so can be pleasurable (Gal, 2015; Morgan & Townsend, 2022). This emotional reward is referred to as a hedonic SEB (Morgan & Townsend, 2022). Therefore, consumers may choose products not only to reinforce their identity, but also because the act of self-expression itself feels rewarding.

Consumers do not just use products to reflect their identity; they also actively shape it through their consumption choices. Research shows that consumers often engage in extreme experiences, such as skydiving or plastic surgery, to craft a new self-image (e.g., Celsi et al., 1993; Schouten, 1991). Especially the latter, demonstrates how aesthetic experiences can influence the self. Even non-experiential products, such as those with highly aesthetic packaging, can have psychological effects on self-perception (Reimann, Zaichkowsky, et al., 2010). Aesthetics can affirm one's self-image simply through the act of choosing (C. Townsend & Sood, 2012). In similar vein, Willis (2000) (as cited in Venkatesh & Meamber, 2008) sees aesthetics as central to how people create meaning and build their identities. Identity, in his view, is shaped by individuals' aesthetic preferences and personal

experiences (e.g., the consumption of art or aesthetic everyday objects), which serve as a means to build and express their self-concept (Willis, 2000 as cited in Venkatesh & Meamber, 2008). This notion is supported by self-affirmation theory, which suggests that individuals seek to maintain a positive image about themselves by affirming core aspects of their identity. When their self-image is threatened, affirming a central personal value can help restore a sense of integrity and mitigate the impact of the threat (Steele, 1988). Aesthetics has long been recognized as a fundamental personal value (C. Townsend & Sood, 2012; Vernon & Allport, 1931). Even in the absence of immediate threats, such as in everyday life, or if the threat is unrelated to beauty, choosing or buying beautiful products can act as a form of self-affirmation. From an evolutionary perspective, beauty signals status, resources, and mate attractiveness, which is why connecting with a beautiful product can make people feel more attractive and confident (Grammer et al., 2003; C. Townsend & Sood, 2012).

More conspicuous product features, such as strong visual appeal, are more effective at conveying messages about identity and status (Sirgy et al., 1986). Therefore, another reason why aesthetics is especially powerful in the self-affirmation and self-expression process is its innate visibility and universal appeal. Unlike other values, such as religion or politics, beauty needs no explanation and is innately understood and appreciated, as humans are born with a natural preference for it (C. Townsend & Sood, 2012).

Research further shows that people make inferences about a person's characteristics and values based on what they own and consume (Belk, 1978; Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibañez, 2012). This suggests that consumption also has a social signaling function (Ross, 1971). As such, individuals are more likely to engage in signaling in public or conspicuous contexts, such as gift-giving, than in private or less visible ones (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Gal, 2015). According to self-verification theory (Swann, 1983), individuals prefer to be perceived by others in ways that align with their self-view. Thus, the act of giving a gift is not solely about the recipient but also reflects how the giver wishes to be perceived. For the giver, the act involves self-expressive motivations (Belk, 1982). Products can aid this process by serving as symbolic cues that convey meaning (Solomon, 1983). As Schwartz (1967) notes, gifts help develop and maintain identity, symbolically embodying aspects of the giver's identity and transmitting part of it to the recipient (Sherry, 1983). Thus, gifting inherently involves an identity ascription on both sides: by accepting the gift, the recipient implicitly accepts the giver's identity (Schwartz, 1967). Consequently, the giver's self-identity can be reinforced

by expressing it to others through the tangible form of a gift (Belk, 1979 as cited in Ward & Broniarczyk, 2011). Self-presentational concerns, where individuals seek to be viewed positively by others and avoid negative judgments (Baumeister, 1982; Leary et al., 1994), play a critical role in identity signaling. When choosing gifts, individuals are more concerned about how their choice reflects on them (P. J. Liu & Baskin, 2021). Deviations from one's self-presentational ideals can evoke embarrassment, a self-conscious emotion experienced when self-presentation is threatened (Keltner & Buswell, 1997; Tangney, 1999). This is because the implied presence of the recipient and the anticipation of subsequent social interactions amplify the social risks associated with the choice (Ratner & Kahn, 2002).

In sum, consumers are motivated to express their identity because doing so provides both utilitarian and hedonic benefits (Morgan & Townsend, 2022). Visually striking products are particularly effective for self-expression (C. Townsend & Sood, 2012), making them especially attractive as gifts. Moreover, the public nature of gifting further enhances the possibility for identity expression (Gal, 2015). Therefore, it can be assumed that the anticipated SEB of giving aesthetically pleasing products will increase consumers' PI. Thus:

H3: *The effect of VPA on PI is partially mediated by expected SEB. Higher VPA are expected to increase expected SEB, which in turn leads to higher PI.*

2.4. Moderating Factors of Consumer Responses to Visual Product Aesthetics

Consumer responses to product visuals are not isolated phenomena but are moderated by a variety of individual and contextual factors (Bloch, 1995). Given the inconsistent effects of product aesthetics on consumer responses observed across studies, research has sought to identify the conditions under which aesthetic products elicit favorable reactions. These moderating factors include usage context, individual dispositions, cultural background, product involvement, and social dynamics.

A core distinction lies in the type of consumption context. Aesthetic products tend to be more favorably perceived in hedonic contexts, such as leisure activities, where pleasure and emotional responses are prioritized. In contrast, in utilitarian settings, functionality typically dominates product evaluations (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2014). In contrast, Chaouali and Souiden (2023) found that in primarily utilitarian service contexts, the relationship between design aesthetics and behavioral intention follows an inverted U-shaped pattern, meaning that moderate levels of aesthetics are most effective. In predominantly hedonic service contexts, this relationship is more linear, with higher aesthetic appeal consistently leading to

stronger intentions. Similarly, consumer mindset can significantly influence product assessment. An abstract mindset, which emphasizes broader concepts and emotional responses, enhances the appreciation of aesthetic design, even in utilitarian domains. On the other hand, a concrete mindset, which focuses on practical, immediate concerns, leads consumers to prioritize functionality over aesthetics (Lin & Chang, 2021). The level of consumer involvement in a product category also affects responses to aesthetics. Highly involved consumers, who are focusing on intrinsic qualities like functionality, may find aesthetics less compelling than less involved consumers, who may place more weight on visual appeal in their purchasing decisions (Candi et al., 2017; E.-J. Lee, 2022). This indicates that when the primary consideration is utility rather than enjoyment, functionality becomes a more critical factor in product judgments compared to aesthetics.

Because product aesthetics relate to the non-functional, largely subjective aspects of consumption, their influence can vary significantly across individuals and situations (Baskerville et al., 2018; Kumar & Garg, 2010). Consumers generally respond more positively to products that align with their personal tastes and cultural standards (Bloch, 1995). While aesthetic judgments are often shaped by dominant cultural norms (Alexander, 1979 as cited in Bloch, 1995), they are also influenced by individual factors such as design expertise, personal experience, and personality. In addition to these personal factors, situational contexts also matter. For instance, in gift-giving, the social relationship between giver and recipient is a crucial determinant of how product aesthetics are evaluated. The following subchapters examine two key moderating variables, *Centrality of Visual Product Aesthetics (CVPA)* and *Social Distance (SoD)*, to further explain when and for whom product aesthetics have a stronger influence on purchase decisions.

2.4.1. The Centrality of Visual Product Aesthetics

One important individual factor influencing the effect of VPA is personal preference. Consumers differ in how much they value a product's visual appearance (Schnurr & Stokburger-Sauer, 2016). A key advancement in this area was made by Bloch et al. (2003), who developed a scale to assess individual differences in what they termed the *Centrality of Visual Product Aesthetics* (Mowen et al., 2010). CVPA is defined as “the level of significance that visual aesthetics hold for a particular consumer in his/her relationship with products” (Bloch et al., 2003, p. 551). CVPA represents a general individual trait that reflects how interested consumers are in product aesthetics, regardless of the specific product category (Schnurr & Stokburger-Sauer, 2016). It influences the importance consumers place on

aesthetics in their purchase decisions, as well as their preferences for brands and products that satisfy aesthetic desires. Additionally, CVPA affects how consumers display products, share information about them, and care for them (Bloch et al., 2003; Mowen et al., 2010).

CVPA consists of three core components: (1) the importance a consumer places on high-quality product design, (2) a consumer's ability to appreciate and critically assess visual design, and (3) a consumer's emotional or cognitive reaction to a product's aesthetic appeal. Mowen et al. (2010) identified two fundamental personality traits that serve as antecedents to CVPA: *materialism* and *openness to new experiences*. They also found that the compound trait *need for uniqueness* significantly predicts CVPA, suggesting that individuals who seek to distinguish themselves through unique possessions are more attuned to visual design. These findings extend the earlier research by Bloch et al. (2003), who reported positive correlations between CVPA, materialism, and a preference for unique products. The connection is theoretically well-grounded, as materialistic individuals tend to assign greater symbolic and emotional value to possessions, making them more responsive to aesthetically pleasing products. Similarly, those high in openness to experience or uniqueness-seeking are particularly drawn to design elements that signal novelty, creativity, or personal expression (Mowen et al., 2010).

Compared to consumers with low CVPA, individuals with high CVPA exhibit higher PI for aesthetic products and prioritize visual aesthetics in product evaluations across various categories (Bloch et al., 2003; Mowen et al., 2010). In the context of gift-giving, a product's aesthetic appeal can help the giver to express his/her self-concept to the recipient. Conversely, purchasing an identity-contrary gift, such as an aesthetically unappealing item as someone who highly values aesthetics, can threaten one's own identity. This results in physical distancing from the offending item (Gao et al., 2009; Ward & Broniarczyk, 2011). Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H4: *The effect of VPA on PI is moderated by the CVPA. Individuals with high CVPA will have a higher PI for aesthetically appealing products than individuals with low CVPA.*

Individuals with a strong appreciation for aesthetic design are more emotionally responsive to a product's visual appeal (Kumar & Garg, 2010; Schnurr & Stokburger-Sauer, 2016). Compared to individuals with lower aesthetic sensitivity, they tend to experience stronger feelings of delight or fascination when encountering visually attractive products (Bloch et al., 2003). As discussed earlier, such emotional responses can influence expectations, leading consumers to infer that visually appealing products also possess higher quality (Baghirov &

Zhang, 2024). Research supports this notion, as individuals high in CVPA are more likely to base their quality judgments on a product's design (Orth et al., 2010) and tend to evaluate design elements more critically (Bloch et al., 2003). In other words, individuals with high CVPA are more likely to interpret their positive emotional reactions to a product's aesthetics as an indicator of its quality. The stronger their emotional response, the higher they perceive the product's quality to be.

H5: *The effect of VPA on PQ is moderated by the CVPA. Individuals with high CVPA will attribute greater product quality to aesthetically appealing products than individuals with low CVPA.*

In the previous chapter, it was argued that people generally have an intrinsic need to express themselves. However, this need varies between individuals. Some people consistently value or seek self-expression, while others are more influenced by situational factors (Rifkin et al., 2021). These differences may stem from differing personal traits (Pagani et al., 2011; Saenger et al., 2013). For instance, individuals differ in their need for differentiation (Kampmeier & Simon, 2001) and their need for uniqueness (Tian et al., 2001). Since Mowen et al. (2010) demonstrated that a strong need for uniqueness significantly predicts CVPA, it can be assumed that these traits are closely related. These individual differences influence how people respond to opportunities for self-expression. Those with a stronger desire for uniqueness are more likely to consume in ways that express their identity (Saenger et al., 2013). Consequently, this tendency should also apply to individuals with high CVPA, who also place greater emphasis on the symbolic value of products (Hunt et al., 2013). They are drawn to distinctiveness through visually striking items and assign more personal meaning to aesthetically pleasing possessions (Bloch et al., 2003; Mowen et al., 2010).

Consequently, visually aesthetic products are particularly impactful for individuals with high CVPA, as these products not only align with their personal taste but also serve as a tool for self-expression. Moreover, because gift-givers often project their own identity and preferences onto the recipient (Ward & Broniarczyk, 2011), those with high CVPA are particularly likely to select aesthetically appealing gifts. Therefore, the potential for self-expression through VPA is especially relevant for individuals with higher CVPA.

H6: *The effect of VPA on expected SEB is moderated by the CVPA. Individuals with high CVPA will expect greater SEB from aesthetically appealing products than individuals with low CVPA.*

For other consumers, the importance of self-expression may be more situational and become especially salient in specific contexts (Rifkin et al., 2021). For example, in social settings, such as gift-giving, the desire to express oneself can become more relevant. This dynamic will be explored in greater detail in the following chapter.

2.4.2. The Social Context

Social surroundings play a crucial role in moderating the psychological and behavioral responses elicited by a product's form (Bloch, 1995). As gift-giving is inherently a social act, the influence of product aesthetics on gift purchasing decisions must be considered through the lens of the relationship between the giver and the recipient. Prior research has demonstrated that this relationship significantly affects gift selection (Givi et al., 2023). Factors such as social distance (Cavanaugh et al., 2015; Ward & Broniarczyk, 2011), differences in status (Caplow, 1982) and power levels (Choi et al., 2018), and the nature of the relationship (e.g., romantic partner, friend, or relative) shape not only the types of gifts chosen but also the motivations and the psychological mechanisms involved (Givi et al., 2023). Belk (1982) found that a closer relationship between the giver and recipient increases involvement in the gift-giving process, leading to greater attention to quality and a higher financial investment. People are generally attuned to the needs and preferences of others, but this sensitivity is particularly heightened in close relationships. In such context, the other person is often integrated into the self and plays a key role in shaping one's self-concept (Ward & Broniarczyk, 2011). This idea is supported by Maslow (1967, p. 103), who noted that "beloved people can be incorporated into the self", emphasizing how individuals in close relationships often internalize aspects of the other. E. N. Aron and Aron (1996) expanded on this notion, suggesting that individuals in close relationships perceive the self as encompassing the other's resources, perspectives, and characteristics. As a result, they may allocate resources less discriminately between themselves and others, vicariously share the other's traits, and think about the other as frequently as they do about themselves (A. Aron et al., 1991). These dynamics can lead individuals to perceive themselves as more similar to their close others than they actually are (Gershoff & Johar, 2006). Furthermore, individuals are generally motivated to align with those they care about and may experience discomfort when disagreements arise (Zajonc, 1968). When confronted with discrepancies in a close relationship, individuals often feel a stronger identity threat than when facing internal contradictions (Priester & Petty, 2001). To resolve this discomfort, they are motivated to reconcile these differences and reaffirm their self-concept. In addition, identity-driven

motivations become particularly salient in close relationships, and individuals are more motivated to present themselves authentically in ways that reflect their true identity (A. Aron et al., 1991). Choosing a gift becomes not only about pleasing the recipient but also a means of reinforcing or expressing one's own identity. Consequently, consumers may feel a stronger need to choose gifts that are highly representative of themselves. The discomfort or identity threat arising from a mismatch between the gift and the giver's self-concept, is especially pronounced when the giver and recipient share a close relationship (Ward & Broniarczyk, 2011). As a result, self-expression becomes more salient and more important in these contexts. In line with this, P. J. Liu and Baskin (2021) found that when choosing products for close friends, people are more concerned with how their choices reflect on them, prioritizing quality over quantity. They also showed that self-presentation concerns are reduced when the recipient is seen as nonjudgmental or socially distant. Therefore, gifting aesthetically appealing products may feel especially self-expressive in close relationships. Thus:

H7: *The effect of VPA on expected SEB is moderated by the SoD between giver and receiver. When giver and receiver are socially close, the giver will expect greater SEB from aesthetically appealing products than when SoD is high.*

While SEB tend to be experienced more strongly in close relationships, this does not always directly translate into PI. Although givers may experience discomfort when choosing a gift inconsistent with their own identity, they are still often willing to prioritize the preferences of close friends instead (Ward & Broniarczyk, 2011). When giving gifts to close others, givers tend to have greater ability and motivation to adopt the recipient's perspective, largely due to familiarity, shared experiences, repeated interactions, and a history of past gift exchanges (Cavanaugh et al., 2015). Indeed, individuals are often more likely to take the perspective of close others, which further enhances feelings of psychological closeness (Cialdini et al., 1997). As a result, gift choices for close others are often guided by more concrete, context-specific knowledge about the recipients' preferences, emphasizing gifts that fulfill practical or material needs over symbolic or aesthetic features.

In contrast, when choosing gifts for socially distant recipients, givers typically lack such in-depth knowledge. In the absence of personal insights about the receiver, they are more likely to rely on general strategies, assumptions, or their own thoughts (Cavanaugh et al., 2015). A useful framework to understand this behavior is Construal-Level Theory (CLT) (Trope & Liberman, 2010). According to CLT, psychological distance, such as SoD, influences how

individuals mentally represent others. Socially close individuals are perceived through low-level construals, leading to more concrete and detailed mental representations, while distant individuals are perceived through high-level construals, resulting in more abstract and generalized representations (Liviatan et al., 2008). This means that for socially distant recipients, givers are more likely to focus on broad, desirable features, such as aesthetic appeal or symbolic value, rather than specific, functional needs of the recipient (Lin & Chang, 2021; Liviatan et al., 2008).

Another reason why individuals tend to focus more on the symbolic meaning of a gift when giving to someone they do not know very well, is the belief, that the intentions behind the gift are important for how the recipient will perceive it (Cavanaugh et al., 2015; Zhang & Epley, 2012). Since gift-giving is often used to make a good impression or elicit a positive reaction, givers may place more value on symbolic gifts. This is particularly true when givers feel uncertain or anxious about the exchange, such as when buying for distant others (Wooten, 2000). Since gifts reflect how the giver perceives and values the recipient (Schwartz, 1967), their qualities can influence how givers want to present themselves. From the perspective of evolutionary aesthetics, owning or appreciating beautiful products signals skill, taste, and surplus resources (Dutton, 2009). Consequently, aesthetically pleasing gifts may not only communicate appreciation for the recipient but also carry symbolic meaning by conveying positive personal traits of the giver, such as good taste, generosity, or thoughtfulness. In line with CLT, distant recipients are processed more abstractly, making symbolic qualities, such as those conveyed by high aesthetic appeal, more salient in decision making (Trope & Liberman, 2010). This can lead givers to overvalue these features, assuming they will be interpreted favorably by the recipient. In situations where the giver does not know the recipient well, such symbolic elements can serve as a safe and socially appropriate choice. In line with this notion, P. J. Liu and Baskin (2021) find that concerns about being viewed negatively lead givers to prioritize quality when buying for others, especially when SoD is high.

In sum, although SEB are more likely to emerge when giving to close others, their motivational power on PI appears stronger in distant relationships. In such contexts, where givers lack personal insight and rely more on high-level, abstract construals, they may place greater importance on symbolic aspects conveyed through a highly aesthetic gift. In contrast, in close relationships, where concrete knowledge and low-level construals dominate, givers

tend to make more nuanced, personalized choices that prioritize functionality over symbolism. Thus:

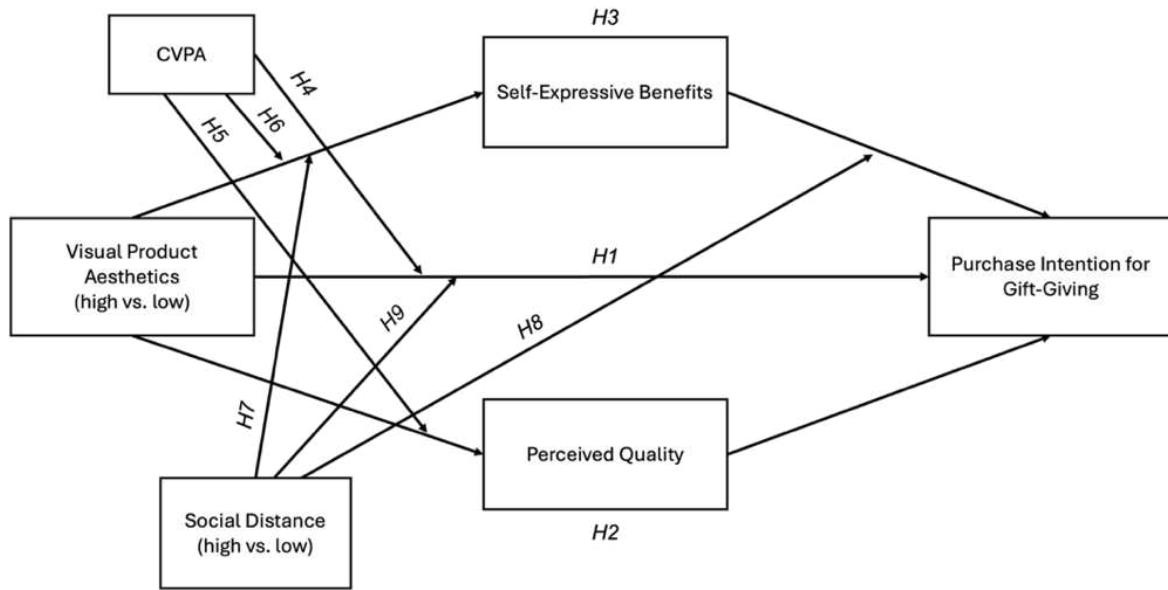
H8: *The effect of expected SEB on PI is moderated by the SoD between giver and receiver. The positive effect of expected SEB on PI is stronger when SoD is high and weaker when giver and recipient are socially close.*

H9: *The effect of VPA on PI is moderated by the SoD between giver and receiver. The positive effect of VPA on PI is stronger when SoD is high and weaker when giver and recipient are socially close.*

2.5. Conceptual Framework

Based on the theoretical and conceptual foundation above, the following framework was developed as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model



(Source: Authors own Creation)

3. Methodology

3.1. Experimental Design and Procedure

The hypotheses were tested using a quantitative research approach in form of an online experiment, implemented through the survey software QuestionPro. The study employed a 2 (VPA: high vs. low) x 2 (SoD between giver and receiver: high vs. low) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions, each

representing a distinct combination of product aesthetics and relational closeness between gift-giver and recipient. This allows for valid causal comparisons between groups (Charness et al., 2012) and helps to minimize spillover effects, such as bias introduced by exposure to earlier questions, thus enhancing internal reliability (Field & Hole, 2014).

To simulate a realistic gift selection process, participants were instructed to imagine purchasing a gift for either a close or a distant social contact. At the beginning of the experiment, they were asked to think of a specific person with whom they share a close relationship (e.g., a partner or a close friend) or a distant relationship (e.g., a casual acquaintance or a colleague). Subsequently, participants were asked to imagine encountering a product while shopping online and to consider it as a potential gift for the person they had in mind. Participants were instructed to carefully examine the product, as they would later answer questions related to it. After a manipulation check regarding aesthetic appeal and perceived social closeness, the second part of the questionnaire included measurement scales for the following constructs: CVPA, SEB, PQ and PI. The operational definition of the constructs, their sources, and their corresponding items are presented in Chapter 3.3. In addition, an attention check and questions regarding the ecological validity, an indicator of the generalizability of findings to the real-world context (Malodia et al., 2023), were included in the questionnaire. The final section encompassed questions about participants' demographics. At the end of the study, participants were debriefed and informed about the true purpose of the experiment (Spilski et al., 2018; Vargas et al., 2017) (see Appendix 4 for full questionnaire).

3.2. Stimulus Development

The chosen product for the experiment was a mug. This decision was inspired by previous research (Candi et al., 2017; Ward & Broniarczyk, 2011) and based on the following criteria: First, mugs are low-involvement products, making them suitable for the gift-giving context. Second, they exhibit high variability in aesthetic design, which allows for effective manipulation of visual appeal (Candi et al., 2017). Third, mugs are universally understood, relatively neutral, and not overly emotionally charged, making them broadly applicable across different recipient types. Fourth, people commonly choose everyday products when buying gifts, as they mostly lack knowledge about the recipient's exact preferences in advance (P. J. Liu et al., 2019).

To generate the visual stimuli for the experimental study, images of ceramic mugs were created using an AI-based image generation tool (ChatGPT with DALL-E integration) (see

Appendix 1 for the exact prompt). This approach allowed for precise control over the aesthetic features of the product images while ensuring consistency across experimental conditions. Two versions of a mug were developed: a low-aesthetic version, characterized by a plain, white design without decorative elements, and a high-aesthetic version, designed in line with contemporary aesthetic principles such as harmony, proportionality, symmetry, and minimalistic color palettes. The high-aesthetic mug had a clean and simple aesthetic and closely resembles the visual style of brands such as Motel a Miio, known for their handmade, intentionally imperfect ceramic designs. Motel a Miio exemplifies the growing consumer demand for handcrafted homewares that combine everyday functionality with emotional and aesthetic value. As noted by Buchwald (2021), the brand has effectively positioned itself as a lifestyle label through strategic use of platforms like Instagram and pop-up stores, emphasizing the relevance and appeal of products with such looks. To simulate a realistic shopping experience, the generated mug images were embedded into a simulated e-commerce website layout. Both mug versions were presented with identical product descriptions and settings, differing only in their visual design, to ensure that observed effects could be attributed solely to differences in VPA. While studies show that people typically spend between \$26 and \$50 on gifts (McCabe et al., 2007), a lower price of €12.99 was set to align more closely with the spending habits of the expected younger, student-based sample of this study. The two mug versions can be found in Appendix 2.

To evaluate the suitability of the experimental manipulations, a pretest with 37 participants was conducted. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental groups and rated the stimuli on established scales measuring aesthetic appeal and perceived social closeness (scale details are outlined in Chapter 3.3.). The group distribution was balanced, with approximately equal allocation across conditions.¹ Independent samples t-tests confirmed that the stimuli were appropriate and aligned with the research objectives. Participants in the high VPA condition rated the stimuli significantly higher in aesthetic appeal ($M = 5.80$, $SD = 1.16$) than those in the low VPA condition ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.08$, $t(35) = -4.82$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.12$). Similarly, those in the low SoD condition perceived significantly lower distance between themselves and the recipient ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 0.77$) than those in the high SoD condition ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 1.54$, $t(35) = 5.70$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.21$). The large effect sizes indicate that both manipulations were effective and robust, supporting the suitability of the stimuli for the main study (Appendix 3).

¹ **Group 1:** 9 participants; **Group 2:** 10 participants; **Group 3:** 9 participants; **Group 4:** 9 participants

3.3. Measurement

The experiment employed established measures from the literature, modified to fit the current context. Since the target sample only consisted of German-speaking participants, wording for the question descriptions as well as the respective original items were translated from English into German. As the scales have been altered for the present research purpose it is essential to make sure that they have high construct validity (Spilski et al., 2018). For reliability analysis, Cronbach's α was calculated to assess the internal consistency of all scales (see Appendix 6). A Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.7$ is seen as acceptable, reflecting consistent measurement of the same construct (Taber, 2018). All scales were measured on a 7-point Likert scale, taking values ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

The aesthetic appeal of the product was measured using four items adapted from F. Wu et al. (2017). The internal consistency for the items comprising aesthetic appeal was above the threshold (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$). Thus, the items were averaged to form the respective construct for *aesthetic appeal* ($M_{VPA} = 4.32$, $SD_{VPA} = 1.41$).

To assess the perceived SoD between the participant and the gift recipient, two items from Liviatan et al. (2008) were adapted. These items measured perceived similarity and closeness to the recipient, both originally phrased to capture social closeness. To ensure higher values reflect greater SoD, both items were reverse coded prior to analysis. The internal consistency of the items comprising SoD was good (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.75$). Hence, the resulting values were averaged to create the composite measure of *social distance* ($M_{SoD} = 3.39$, $SD_{SoD} = 1.66$).

Three items modified from Das et al. (2020) and Steinhart et al. (2014) assessed the participants' intention to purchase the product as a gift. The three items yielded a very high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.96$) and formed the construct of *purchase intention* ($M_{PI} = 3.28$, $SD_{PI} = 1.80$).

Participants evaluated the overall quality of the presented product using three bipolar items based on Sprott and Shimp (2004) (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$). Eliminating the third item would improve Cronbach's α to .92. However, as the scale would then consist only of two items and an $\alpha \geq 0.7$ is seen as acceptable, the third item is not eliminated, forming the construct of *perceived quality* ($M_{PQ} = 4.44$, $SD_{PQ} = 1.30$).

Three adapted items based on Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez (2012) measured the extent to which the gift was perceived as a means of expressing personal taste and identity, measuring *self-expressive benefits* (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.95$) ($M_{SEB} = 3.60$, $SD_{SEB} = 1.69$).

To assess the individual importance of product design, Bloch et al.'s (2003) CVPA scale was used (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$), encompassing its three subdimensions: Value, the degree to which design contributes to self-related meaning; Acumen, respondents' perceptual and cognitive sensitivity to design; and Response, participants' affective responses to visually appealing products. All items were combined into the construct of *CVPA* ($M_{CVPA} = 5.03$, $SD_{CVPA} = 1.05$).

Ecological validity was measured with three self-developed items assessing how realistic participants perceived the product presentation and shopping scenario to be (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$) ($M_{EV} = 5.64$, $SD_{EV} = 1.12$).

To ensure data quality, an attention check was embedded in the questionnaire. Participants were asked to recall for whom they were supposed to choose a gift in the scenario, with three response options. Only participants who correctly answered this question were included in the final analysis. The final section of the questionnaire encompassed questions about participants' gender, age and job (see Appendix 4 for full questionnaire).

The used constructs, their sources, and their translated items are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Indicators of the Constructs

Construct	Indicators
Aesthetic Appeal (F. Wu et al., 2017)	VPA1: Das Produkt ist schön. VPA2: Das Produkt ist künstlerisch gestaltet. VPA3: Das Produkt ist hübsch. VPA4: Das Produkt wirkt ästhetisch ansprechend.
Social Distance (Liviatan et al., 2008)	SC1: Die beschenkte Person erscheint mir sehr ähnlich. SC2: Ich fühle mich der beschenkten Person sehr nah.
Purchase Intention (Das et al., 2020; Steinhart et al., 2014)	PI1: Wie wahrscheinlich ist es, dass Sie das dargestellte Produkt als Geschenk kaufen würden? PI2: Wie sehr sind Sie dazu geneigt, das dargestellte Produkt als Geschenk zu kaufen? PI3: Wie bereit wären Sie, das dargestellte Produkt als Geschenk zu kaufen?
Perceived Quality (Sprott & Shimp, 2004)	PQ1: Alles in allem würde ich sagen, dieses Produkt hat eine... Sehr schlechte Gesamtqualität - Ausgezeichnet Gesamtqualität PQ2: Dieses Produkt hat eine... Sehr schlechte Qualität - Sehr gute Qualität PQ3: Insgesamt ist dieses Produkt... Schlecht - Ausgezeichnet

Self-Expressive Benefits (Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2012)	SEB1: Mit diesem Geschenk kann ich meinen persönlichen Geschmack zum Ausdruck bringen. SEB2: Mit diesem Geschenk kann ich mir und meinen Freunden zeigen, dass ich gutes Design schätze. SEB3: Mit diesem Geschenk nehmen mich meine Freunde als jemanden mit gutem Geschmack wahr.
CVPA (Bloch et al., 2003)	CVPVAV1: Produkte mit herausragendem Design zu besitzen, gibt mir ein gutes Gefühl über mich selbst. CVPVAV2: Ich genieße es, Produktdarstellungen mit herausragendem Design anzusehen. CVPVAV3: Das Design eines Produkts ist für mich eine Quelle der Freude. CVPVAV4: Schöne Produktdesigns machen unsere Welt lebenswerter. CVPVAA1: Die Fähigkeit, feine Unterschiede im Produktdesign zu erkennen, habe ich im Laufe der Zeit entwickelt. CVPVAA2: Ich sehe Dinge im Design eines Produkts, die andere oft übersehen. CVPVAA3: Ich besitze die Fähigkeit, mir vorzustellen, wie ein Produkt zum Design anderer Dinge passt, die ich bereits besitze. CVPVAA4: Ich habe ein ziemlich gutes Gespür dafür, was ein Produkt im Vergleich zu seinen Konkurrenten besser aussehen lässt. CVPVAP1: Manchmal scheint mich das Aussehen eines Produkts regelrecht anzusprechen und zu fesseln. CVPVAP2: Wenn mich das Design eines Produkts wirklich anspricht, habe ich das Gefühl, dass ich es unbedingt kaufen muss. CVPVAP3: Wenn ich ein Produkt mit einem wirklich großartigen Design sehe, verspüre ich ein starkes Verlangen, es zu kaufen.
Ecological Validity (Self-developed)	EV1: Die Darstellung des Produkts erschien mir realistisch. EV2: Das gezeigte Produkt hätte ich auch auf einer echten Webseite erwarten können. EV3: Die Kaufsituation kam mir realistisch vor.

3.4. Sample Characteristics

Respondents were recruited through convenience sampling by embedding the survey link within web services such as SurveyCircle, Survey Swap as well as personal Social Media platforms, such as Instagram and LinkedIn. In addition, snowball sampling was used to recruit more participants. The data was collected from May 18th to June 04th, 2025. After this period a total of 311 responses were collected, of which 184 participants completed the survey. After eliminating 33 participants that failed the attention check, 151 participants formed the final sample used for further analyses. Of the remaining participants, 58% were female, 40% male, 1% diverse and 1% stated no info. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 64 years ($M_{AGE} = 29.34$, $SD_{AGE} = 11.09$). The sample was predominantly young, with 82% of respondents under the age of 35 and 59% being university students. On average, participants in the sample reported a moderately high CVPA ($M_{CVPA} = 5.03$, $SD_{CVPA} = 1.05$). This suggests that the sample had a rather high design affinity and generally placed

substantial importance on the visual design of products in their consumer experience. For detailed demographic information, please see Appendix 7.

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1. Manipulation Effectiveness and Reality Check

To assess the effectiveness of the experimental manipulations, two independent samples *t*-tests were conducted. First, regarding VPA, participants in the low-aesthetic condition ($N = 65$, $M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.22$) reported significantly lower aesthetic appeal than those in the high-aesthetic condition ($N = 86$, $M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.22$, $t(149) = -7.29$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.22$). Second, regarding the manipulation of SoD, participants in the close condition ($N = 77$, $M = 2.27$, $SD = 1.04$) perceived a significantly lower distance to the gift recipient compared to those in the distant condition ($N = 74$, $M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.36$, $t(136.82) = 11.52$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.21$). Taken together, these results confirm the effectiveness of both experimental manipulations. The ecological validity of the stimuli was generally evaluated positively by participants on a 7-point Likert scale ($M_{EV} = 5.64$, $SD_{EV} = 1.12$). Given that the mean exceeds the scale midpoint of 5.0, suggests that participants perceived the scenario and product presentation as realistic (see Appendix 8).

4.2. Preliminary Analysis

Model testing and data analysis were conducted using the PROCESS Macro in SPSS developed by Hayes (2022), a widely recognized and established method for analyzing moderated mediation effects (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017; Spilski et al., 2018). Since PROCESS does not test assumptions of multiple regression, the required assumptions (independence, linearity, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity, and normality) were evaluated prior to the main analysis (Clement & Bradley-Garcia, 2022; Hayes, 2022). These checks indicated that the assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity and normality were not fully met (see Appendix 9). To address issues of homoscedasticity and normality, heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors (HC4) and bootstrapping with 5000 samples were used within PROCESS to generate confidence intervals for all estimates (Clement & Bradley-Garcia, 2022; Hayes, 2022). Regarding the linearity assumption, results will be interpreted with some caution, and potential limitations will be discussed in the respective chapters. Finally, CVPA and SoD were mean-centered ($M_{CVPAc} = 0$, $SD_{CVPAc} = 1.05$; $M_{SoDc} = 0$, $SD_{SoDc} = 1.66$) to reduce collinearity between the interaction terms and main effects and to facilitate the interpretation of the results (Hayes, 2022; Shieh, 2011).

4.3. Main Analysis

The first six hypotheses were tested using PROCESS Model 8, which examines a moderated parallel mediation model. In this model, the indirect effects of VPA on PI, via SEB and PQ, are moderated by CVPA. The entire moderated parallel mediation model was statistically significant and explained 48.23% of the variance in PI ($F(5,145) = 34.88, p < .001$).

4.3.1.1. *Direct Effect of Visual Product Aesthetics on Purchase Intention*

First the direct relationship between VPA and PI was explored. Results revealed a significant positive direct effect of VPA on PI ($B = 0.68, p = .0078$), supporting that the more visually aesthetic mug generated a higher PI as a gift compared to the less aesthetic one. Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported. However, the interaction between VPA and CVPA in predicting PI was not significant ($B = 0.14, p = .5302$), indicating that CVPA does not moderate the direct relationship between VPA and PI. This finding does not support Hypothesis 4.

4.3.1.2. *Indirect Effect via Perceived Quality*

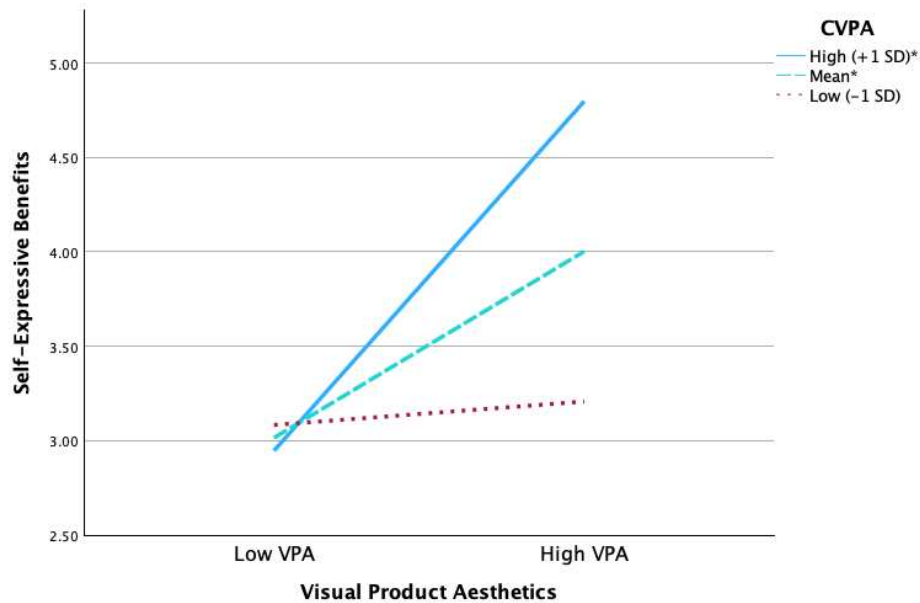
The analysis continued to explore whether PQ mediates the relationship between VPA and PI. The model predicting PQ was statistically significant and accounted for 12.14% of the variance in PQ ($F(3, 147) = 6.33, p < .001$). In line with Hypothesis 2, VPA indirectly influenced PI through their effect on PQ. Participants who were shown the aesthetic mug, perceived it to be of higher quality compared to participants seeing the less aesthetic one ($B = 0.79, p < .001$). In addition, participants who perceived the mug to be of higher quality had a stronger intention to buy it as a gift ($B = 0.22, p = .0534$). Thus, Hypothesis 2 is supported. However, there was no evidence that this mediation is moderated by CVPA. The interaction between VPA and CVPA in predicting PQ was not significant ($B = 0.30, p = .1948$) and the index of moderated mediation included zero ($[-.0259, .2085]$), indicating no significant moderated mediation effect. Thus, Hypothesis 5 is rejected. This suggests that while PQ mediates the effect of VPA on PI, this mediation is not dependent on CVPA.

4.3.1.3. *Indirect Effect via Self-Expressive Benefits*

Next the mediating role of SEB was investigated. The model predicting SEB was statistically significant and explained 21.09% of the variance in SEB ($F(3, 147) = 11.23, p < .001$). Expected SEB were higher among participants who saw the more aesthetic mug compared to participants seeing the less aesthetic one ($B = 0.99, p < .001$), and these heightened SEB increased the PI as a gift ($B = 0.56, p < .001$), offering support for Hypothesis 3.

Importantly, the interaction between VPA and CVPA in predicting SEB was also significant ($B = 0.82$, $p = .0016$), indicating that CVPA moderates the relationship between VPA and SEB. This interaction accounted for 6.43% of the variance in SEB beyond the main effects. The index of moderated mediation was significant and entirely above zero ($[0.1855, 0.7717]$), confirming that the indirect effect of VPA on PI via SEB is conditional on CVPA. Thus, Hypothesis 6 is supported. Figure 2 illustrates this interaction, showing how SEB varies depending on the giver's CVPA. When CVPA was low, the effect of VPA on SEB was not significant ($B = 0.12$, $p = .7230$). However, the effect was significant at the mean level of CVPA ($B = 0.99$, $p < .001$) and even stronger at one standard deviation above the mean ($B = 1.85$, $p < .001$). This suggests that individuals perceived the aesthetically designed mug as more self-expressive, and this increased with higher CVPA, thereby enhancing their intention to purchase the product as a gift.

Figure 2: Conditional Effects of CVPA on the Relationship between VPA and SEB



Note: CVPA is mean-centered with a standard deviation of 1.05 (* $p < .001$) (Source: Authors own Creation)

4.3.1.4. The Moderating Role of Social Distance

To examine the moderating role of SoD in shaping responses to VPA, a separate moderated mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 59 was conducted (Hayes, 2022). The entire model was statistically significant and explained 46.72% of the variance in PI ($F(5.145) = 34.65$, $p < .001$).

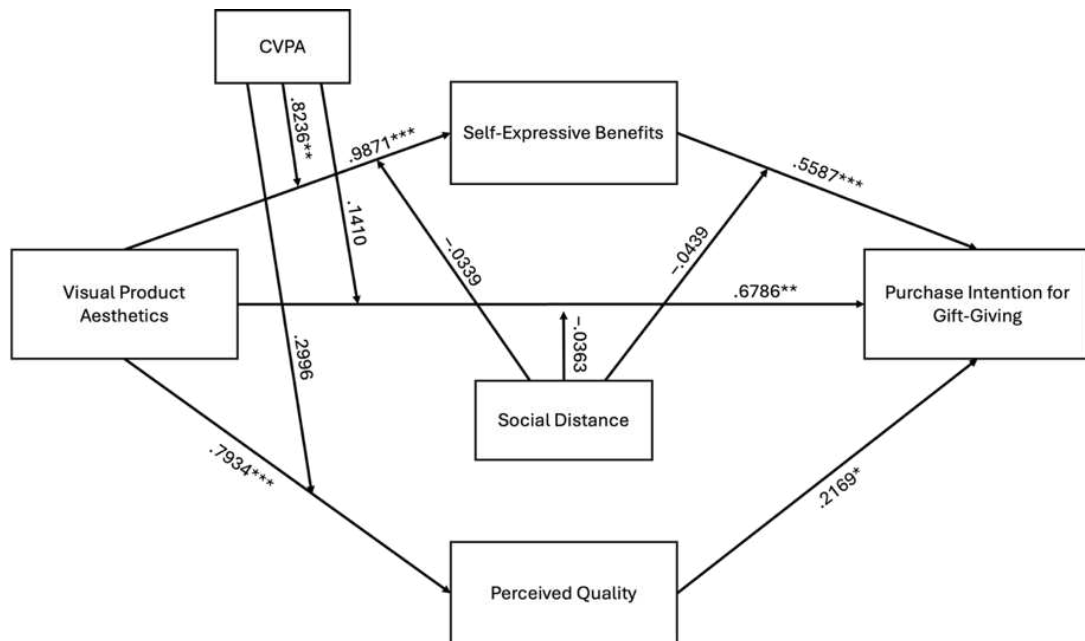
Following Hypothesis 7, it was examined whether the effect of VPA on SEB is moderated by SoD. Consistent with the findings from PROCESS model 8, the results from Model 59 indicated a significant and positive main effect of VPA on SEB. The model predicting SEB was statistically significant and explained 11.6% of the variance in SEB ($F(3, 147) = 5.99$, $p < .001$). However, the interaction between VPA and SoD on SEB was not significant ($B = -0.03$, $p = .8362$). This means SoD did not significantly change the effect of VPA on SEB. Thus, Hypothesis 7 is not supported.

To test Hypothesis 8, it was examined whether the effect of SEB on PI is moderated by SoD. The interaction between SEB and SoD was not significant ($B = -0.04$, $p = .3100$). Therefore, there is no evidence that the effect of SEB on PI differs across levels of SoD and Hypothesis 8 is not supported.

Lastly, it was assessed whether SoD moderates the direct effect of VPA on PI. The interaction between VPA and SoD was not significant ($B = -0.04$, $p = .8076$), indicating that SoD did not significantly moderate the indirect pathway. Thus, Hypothesis 9 is rejected. These findings suggest that consumers' responses to aesthetic gift options may be less dependent on the social proximity to the recipient than initially theorized.

All path coefficients are summarized in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Path Coefficients for the Relationship between VPA and PI via SEB and PQ, moderated by CVPA and SoD



Note: Coefficients for all paths were estimated using PROCESS Model 8, except for the coefficients related to SoD, which were estimated using PROCESS Model 59. ($***p < .001$, $**p < .01$, $*p < .05$)

(Source: Authors own Creation)

5. Discussion

To advance the literature on product aesthetics and consumer behavior, this thesis aims to answer how VPA influence consumer choice in gift-giving, and what factors shape these decisions. Specifically, it explores the psychological mechanisms of perceived PQ and expected SEB, while examining the moderating effects of CVPA and SoD.

5.1. Summary and Discussion of the Main Findings

As Andersson et al. (2014) emphasize, statistical interactions should be interpreted not only based on significance but also in light of their theoretical meaning and relevance (Spilski et al., 2018). Accordingly, the present findings are interpreted in the context of established theories of consumer behavior and prior research outlined in the conceptual part of this thesis. The results reveal a significant positive effect of VPA on PI (H1). This is consistent with prior research showing that aesthetically appealing designs can trigger immediate PI (Bloch et al., 2003). While some studies report negative effects when designs are perceived as excessive or impractical, particularly in utilitarian contexts (Chaouali & Souiden, 2023; Mumcu & Kimzan, 2015), the present study supports the view that in pre-consumption stages and hedonic contexts, such as gift-giving, the positive effects of aesthetic appeal dominate. In contrast to utilitarian contexts, where consumers focus on functionality, the focus in gift-giving shifts to the immediate emotional impact and social meaning of the gift (Galak et al., 2016). The findings thus underscore the importance of context, showing the strong influence of aesthetics on early purchase decisions in gift-giving situations, where hedonic considerations outweigh utilitarian concerns (Baskin et al., 2014; P. J. Liu et al., 2019). This also supports the view that gift-giving is not only an economic exchange but also a social and symbolic act (Belk, 1982).

Further, the study supports the hypothesized psychological mechanisms. First, perceived PQ was found to mediate the effect of VPA on PI (H2), suggesting that aesthetically pleasing gifts may enhance perceived craftsmanship or value (F. Wu et al., 2017). This is consistent with the “what is beautiful is good” heuristic (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2014). However, this mediation was relatively weak and not moderated by CVPA (H5). This contradicts earlier findings that aesthetic-sensitive consumers infer greater quality from design (Orth et al., 2010). Moreover, it challenges assumptions of a uniform influence of CVPA and suggests that its role is more closely linked to the symbolic and emotional value of design, such as identity expression, than to purely cognitive evaluations like quality inference. However, one possible explanation for the non-significant moderation effect is the high CVPA mean

in the sample, which limits variance and may have reduced the power to detect interaction effects. Another explanation could lie in the gift-giving context, so that even consumers with lower CVPA may prioritize social impressions and choose aesthetically appealing gifts to not appear thought- or tasteless (Goffman, 1959; P. J. Liu & Baskin, 2021). This is consistent with evolutionary aesthetics, which suggests that beautiful objects signal competence and resources (Dutton, 2009).

In contrast, the mediation through SEB was robust. SEB significantly mediated the relationship between VPA and PI (H3), and this indirect effect was moderated by CVPA (H6). For individuals with higher CVPA, visually appealing gifts were more strongly associated with the ability to express personal identity and taste, which in turn increased PI. This is consistent with self-affirmation and identity signaling theories (Belk, 1988; Morgan & Townsend, 2022) and supports the view that products serve as vehicles for personal meaning in social exchange (Aaker, 1999).

Interestingly, none of the hypotheses related to SoD were supported. The direct and indirect effects of VPA did not differ between socially close and distant recipients. This contradicts previous work rooted in construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010), which predicts greater emphasis on symbolic attributes, like aesthetics, at higher levels of SoD. One possible explanation for this deviation from theory is that aesthetic considerations in gift-giving are universally valued due to their perceived thoughtfulness and symbolic meaning. In both close and distant relationships, uncertainty about the recipient's preferences may lead gift givers to make aesthetically safe choices (Cavanaugh et al., 2015; Sherry et al., 1993). The mug used as a stimulus may also have been perceived as suitable for both social conditions, as physical gifts are also perceived as safer choices (Givi et al., 2023). Here, too, the above-average CVPA in the sample may have amplified aesthetic preferences across all participants, thereby reducing the moderating role of SoD. Since the feeling of discomfort is particularly pronounced when a gift does not match the recipient's perceived identity (Ward & Broniarczyk, 2011), it is plausible that in the present study, in which many participants had a high CVPA, identity-related motivation may have outweighed the influence of SoD, and therefore the aesthetic mug was perceived as equally suitable in both conditions.

Taken together, the findings answer the research question of how product aesthetics influence consumer choice in gift-giving and what factors influence their decisions, by demonstrating that aesthetic appeal matters strongly in gift selection, particularly when the giver is high in CVPA and when self-expression is a relevant motivation. While product

quality perception plays a role, the symbolic and expressive value of gifts appears more influential in shaping PI. In gift-giving, emotional and identity-related meanings attached to visual design can outweigh functional considerations, such as quality, underscoring the importance of aesthetics in consumer choice.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

This thesis makes several important contributions to the literature on consumer behavior. First it combines two important research streams, namely relational consumption, specifically gift-giving, and product aesthetics. By doing so, it addresses the gap highlighted by Lin and Chang (2021). While prior studies have predominantly examined product aesthetics in self-purchase contexts, this study is among the first to explore its role in interpersonal consumption. The findings build on previous research by showing that aesthetic appeal plays a distinct and meaningful role not only in self-purchases but also when choosing for others. The findings provide empirical support for several existing theories and heuristics. The positive effect of VPA on PI aligns with prior research suggesting that aesthetically appealing products are generally preferred, supporting the “what is beautiful is good” heuristic, where consumers associate visual appeal with higher quality (e.g., Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2014; F. Wu et al., 2017). The findings also support the fact that when purchasing for others, consumers tend to focus on quality (P. J. Liu & Baskin, 2021; L. Wu & Lee, 2016). However, the present study not only supports the role of aesthetics as a medium for conveying quality but also extends existing knowledge by demonstrating that product aesthetics play an additional, previously little-researched role, namely as a medium of social communication. This supports the idea that visual design functions as a symbolic and evaluative cue in interpersonal consumption contexts. It highlights the need to broaden aesthetic research beyond individual-level consumption.

Second, the findings support theories of identity-based consumption (Belk, 1982; Morgan & Townsend, 2022) and reinforce the notion that consumers use gift-giving as a form of identity signaling. This contributes to existing identity research by showing that gift choices are not solely recipient-oriented, but also reflect the giver’s desire to express values, taste, and self-concept.

Third, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of CVPA as a boundary condition in aesthetic evaluations. While CVPA significantly moderated the mediation via SEB, it did not moderate the PQ pathway. This selective pattern challenges prior assumptions of CVPA’s uniform influence and suggests that CVPA is more closely linked to the symbolic and

emotional value of design than to cognitive judgments like quality. These insights enrich the gift-giving literature by illustrating how internal values, like aesthetic centrality, interact with visual cues to shape decisions in interpersonal contexts. This distinction offers a clearer direction for how CVPA should be conceptualized in future research.

Fourth, the study challenges the assumption based on Construal-Level Theory, that SoD significantly influences gift-giving behavior. Contrary to prior research (e.g., Cavanaugh et al., 2015; Ward & Broniarczyk, 2011), the assumption that distant recipients would trigger more abstract processing and lead to stronger reliance on symbolic cues such as aesthetics was not supported. This suggests that aesthetic preferences in gift selection may be more stable across social contexts than previously assumed, especially among consumers who are already aesthetically oriented. This offers a basis for reevaluating the role of psychological distance in gift-giving behavior.

5.3. Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer several actionable insights for professionals in marketing, product design, and retail, particularly when targeting consumers shopping for gifts.

Given the significant effect of VPA on PI, brands should strategically enhance and promote the visual appeal of products when targeting consumers shopping for gifts, especially in product categories where symbolic value and visual presentation are central, such as home décor, fashion, accessories, and personal care items. Referring to an earlier example, retailers known for their design-oriented products, such as Motel a Miio with their distinctive ceramics, could position their offerings more explicitly as gifts. Creating curated gift sets or packaging that enhances visual presentation may further increase purchase likelihood.

To translate aesthetic value into consumer action, marketers should also highlight design elements across all touchpoints. This includes using high-quality product imagery, stylistic descriptions, and immersive visual storytelling, especially in digital retail, where tactile experience is lacking. Prior research supports this by showing that stylistic descriptions enhance perceived aesthetics and product evaluation (Schnurr & Stokburger-Sauer, 2016).

Given that SEB mediate the effect of aesthetics on PI, particularly for consumers high in CVPA, brands should develop messages that connect product aesthetics to the gift-giver's identity, style, and values. Marketing narratives could frame the act of giving, as a form of self-expression: "Give something that reflects your taste" or "Show them who you are with the perfect gift". Interestingly, as the study found that SoD did not significantly impact

purchase decisions, gift campaigns do not need be heavily personalized based on the closeness of the giver-recipient relationship. Instead, marketers can develop broader campaigns that emphasize universal values, like elegance, thoughtfulness, or beauty, that resonate across different relationship types and display them especially during gift-heavy seasons like Christmas.

Building on the idea to segment consumers by benefits rather than demographics (P. J. Liu et al., 2019), this research suggests that consumers high in CVPA, who are particularly responsive to aesthetic cues through the lens of self-expression, can be reached through specific strategies that align with their interests, values, and lifestyle. Personalized recommendations that frame gift choices as expressions of style, highlighting what the product communicates about its user (Shavitt & Nelson, 2000), such as “A gift that reflects your identity” or “Curated for your taste”, can increase relevance and engagement. These messages directly speak to the consumer’s self-concept and make the gifting process feel more meaningful.

Similarly, aesthetic shopping tools such as visual gift guides, quizzes, or mood-based selectors could help consumers navigate options based on their visual preferences rather than just product categories or prices. These tools simplify the decision-making process while maintaining a strong focus on visual and symbolic fit.

Finally, content strategies that center the gift-giver, not just the recipient, can enhance the self-expressive function of the gift. Marketing campaigns, user-generated content, or testimonials that highlight how the gift reflects the giver’s thoughtfulness, taste, or personal values emphasize the emotional role of aesthetics in the act of giving. By adopting these approaches, brands can more effectively connect with design-sensitive consumers and create more personalized, aesthetically driven customer experiences.

Ultimately, this study reinforces that visual product design is not merely decorative, it plays a central psychological role in consumer decision-making, especially in socially meaningful contexts like gift-giving. Brands that understand and leverage the emotional and symbolic dimensions of aesthetics can better position their products, differentiate from competitors, and craft more compelling marketing strategies.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights into the role of VPA in the gift-giving context, several limitations must be acknowledged that also present avenues for future research.

The most obvious limitation of this study concerns violations of the linearity assumption. Preliminary analyses suggested non-linear relationships among variables, yet linear models were applied. As Hayes (2022) notes, the critical question is not whether assumptions like linearity are violated, but how such violations affect conclusions. While PROCESS models support interpretability, the linear models used may not have fully captured the complexity of the effects. Future research should explore non-linear or alternative modeling approaches to better capture the influences of VPA.

In addition, although SEB and PQ emerged as significant mediators, this does not imply exclusivity (Kane & Ashbaugh, 2017). Gift-giving behavior is multifaceted, influenced by overlapping psychological drivers. Future work should explore additional mediators and moderators, such as emotional arousal, uniqueness perceptions, or specific gifting motivations, to build a more comprehensive explanatory model. The study further assumed that givers in close relationships have knowledge of the recipients' preferences. This, however, was not tested. Measuring givers' actual knowledge about recipients' tastes, and incorporating recipient perspectives, could clarify whether aesthetic gifts function effectively as symbolic communicative acts.

SoD was effectively manipulated as relational closeness, yet this construct may also include dimensions such as hierarchy, emotional intimacy, and culture. Exploring more nuanced relationship types and additional social variables would deepen understanding of how social context shapes aesthetic gift-giving. Moreover, gift-giving is just one form of choosing-for-others. Future studies should explore broader choosing-for-others contexts (P. J. Liu et al., 2019).

As digital technology continues to shape how people shop, they also bring changes that are relevant when buying for others. Nowadays recipients can easily share what they want through online wish lists or product links, making it easier to buy what someone wants, but also taking away from the personal touch or emotional meaning of giving a gift (P. J. Liu et al., 2019; Ward & Broniarczyk, 2016). Thus, future research should look into how these digital changes are affecting how people choose for others. Moreover, it may also be worth investigating how product type moderates the role of design in gift choices. The present study focused on mugs, a neutral, low-involvement category. Aesthetic evaluations may vary for products with higher symbolic or functional value (e.g., luxury items or tech gadgets).

Measurement adaptations also present challenges. Several established scales were adapted and translated for this study. While these adjustments were contextually necessary, they may

have compromised validity and reliability of the scales (Spilski et al., 2018). Future research should use original scales where possible. Furthermore, conducting the study in an uncontrolled online setting may have reduced internal validity. Distractions, multitasking, or inattentive responses are common risks (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017; Shank, 2016). Although attention checks were applied, future studies could increase robustness through controlled environments or mixed methods.

As the sample was drawn only from German-speaking countries and consisted mainly of young adults and university students, the generalizability of the results is limited. Cultural and generational differences likely influence perceptions of aesthetics and gift-giving behavior (Chaouali & Souiden, 2023). Additionally, the sample showed relatively high CVPA levels, possibly inflating aesthetic sensitivity. Future studies should recruit more diverse, cross-cultural samples to increase the generalizability of the results of the present study.

Finally, while realistic stimuli were used and participants rated the scenario as realistic, the product and context were fictional. As participants imagined rather than enacted decisions, ecological validity is limited, and the intention–behavior gap (Sheeran, 2002) remains unaddressed. Field experiments or behavioral data in real-world gifting situations could offer stronger evidence of actual behavior, as authentic gift-giving contexts, such as in-store shopping, are essential to capture genuine perceptions and actions (Otnes et al., 1993; Sherry, 1983).

In sum, while the current research provides a solid foundation for understanding how and why VPA influence gift-giving behavior, there is substantial scope for further theoretical refinement and empirical expansion. Addressing these limitations can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of aesthetic consumption in interpersonal contexts.

6. Conclusion

This thesis shows that VPA significantly influence gift purchase decisions, primarily through their symbolic and self-expressive value. While PQ plays a role, SEB are the stronger driver, especially for consumers with a high sensitivity for design. Contrary to expectations, SoD between giver and recipient had no moderating effect. These findings expand research on aesthetics into the interpersonal domain and highlight the strategic importance of design in gift marketing. Aesthetics, in this context, are not just decorative, but communicate identity and meaning.

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Appendix

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Appendix 1 Prompt for Stimuli Design

For the planned experimental study, which utilizes a 2 (visual product aesthetics: high vs. low) $\times$ 2 (social distance between giver and receiver: close vs. distant) between-subjects design, two visual stimuli are required. Specifically, two images of mugs should be generated: one representing a product with high visual aesthetics and one representing a product with low visual aesthetics.

The mugs should appeal to a broad and diverse target group. Therefore, the high-aesthetic version should feature a minimalistic and unisex design, using simple and neutral colors, and should incorporate recognized principles of aesthetic perception such as harmony, closure, and symmetry, which have been shown in prior research to enhance perceptions of beauty.

The low-aesthetic version should be characterized by a very basic, plain white appearance without distinctive design features, ensuring minimal visual appeal.

The stimuli should be designed in a way that allows their use in an online shopping context to enhance ecological validity for participants.

Appendix 2 Pretest Questionnaire

Introduction:

Liebe Teilnehmerin, lieber Teilnehmer,

im Rahmen meiner Masterarbeit am Institut für Marketing der Universität Wien führe ich eine Umfrage zum Thema Konsumentenverhalten und Geschenke durch.

Zur Beantwortung des Fragebogens benötigen Sie ca. 2 Minuten. Bei den folgenden Fragen geht es um Ihre persönliche und vor allem ehrliche Meinung. Es gibt keine richtigen oder falschen Antworten.

Einige Fragen oder Antwortmöglichkeiten werden Ihnen sehr ähnlich erscheinen. Bitte lassen Sie sich dadurch nicht irritieren.

Die Befragung findet vollkommen anonym statt. Ihre Antworten werden streng vertraulich behandelt und nicht an Dritte weitergegeben.

Bei Rückfragen wenden Sie sich gerne an: Eva Prasnjak (a12214720@unet.univie.ac.at)

Vielen Dank im Voraus für Ihre Unterstützung und Ihre Zeit!

Informationen für Handynutzer: Falls Sie Schwierigkeiten haben sollten, den Fragebogen auf Ihrem Handy hochkant zu beantworten, drehen Sie dieses bitte.

Scenario Group Low SoD:

Bitte versetzen Sie sich nun in die folgende Situation:

Eine Person, zu der Sie eine sehr enge Beziehung haben – zum Beispiel ein(e) enge(r) Freund(in), ein Familienmitglied oder Ihr(e) Partner(in) – hat bald Geburtstag.

Sie möchten ein passendes Geschenk für diese Person finden.

Bitte denken Sie kurz an eine konkrete Person in Ihrem Leben, auf die diese Beschreibung zutrifft.

Scenario Group High SoD:

Bitte versetzen Sie sich nun in die folgende Situation:

Eine Person, zu der Sie eine eher entfernte Beziehung haben – zum Beispiel ein(e) Bekannte(r) oder ein(e) Kolleg(in), den/die Sie nicht sehr gut kennen – hat bald Geburtstag.

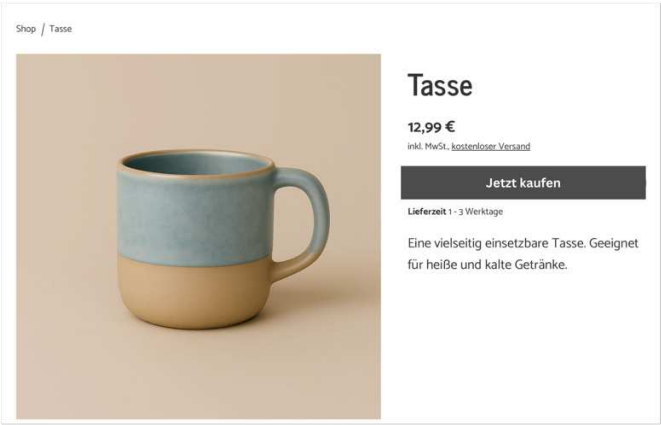
Sie möchten ein passendes Geschenk für diese Person finden.

Bitte denken Sie kurz an eine konkrete Person in Ihrem Leben, auf die diese Beschreibung zutrifft.

Scenario Group High VPA:

Beim Online-Shopping stoßen Sie auf das folgende Produkt.

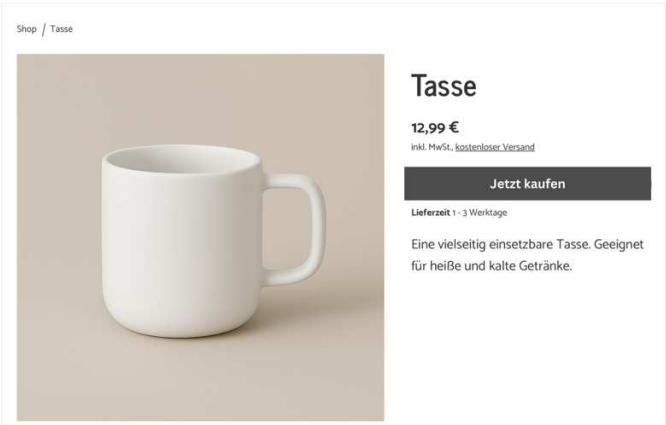
Bitte stellen Sie sich vor, dass Sie dieses Produkt als mögliches Geschenk für diese Person in Betracht ziehen.



Scenario Group Low VPA:

Beim Online-Shopping stoßen Sie auf das folgende Produkt.

Bitte stellen Sie sich vor, dass Sie dieses Produkt als mögliches Geschenk für diese Person in Betracht ziehen.



Manipulation Check VPA:

Bitte beantworten Sie auf einer Skala von 1 (= stimme überhaupt nicht zu) bis 7 (= stimme voll und ganz zu), inwieweit Sie folgenden Aussagen zustimmen.

	Stimme überhaupt nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Stimme teilweise nicht zu	Weder noch	Stimme teilweise zu	Stimme zu	Stimme voll zu
Das dargestellte Produkt ist schön.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Das dargestellte Produkt ist künstlerisch gestaltet.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Das dargestellte Produkt ist hübsch.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Das dargestellte Produkt wirkt ästhetisch ansprechend.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Manipulation Check SoD

Erinnern Sie sich nun an die Person für die Sie das Geschenk suchen.

Bitte beantworten Sie auf einer Skala von 1 (= stimme überhaupt nicht zu) bis 7 (= stimme voll und ganz zu), inwieweit Sie folgenden Aussagen zustimmen.

	Stimme überhaupt nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Stimme teilweise nicht zu	Weder noch	Stimme teilweise zu	Stimme zu	Stimme voll zu
Die beschenkte Person ist mir sehr ähnlich.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ich fühle mich der beschenkten Person sehr nah.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Feedback

Gab es an irgendeiner Stelle Unklarheiten oder Feedback?

Appendix 3 Pretest Output

Figure 4: Frequency Tables for Pretest Groups

Group					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	9	24.3	24.3	24.3
	2	10	27.0	27.0	51.4
	3	9	24.3	24.3	75.7
	4	9	24.3	24.3	100.0
	Total	37	100.0	100.0	

VPA Group					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Low	18	48.6	48.6	48.6
	High	19	51.4	51.4	100.0
	Total	37	100.0	100.0	

SD Group					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Low	19	51.4	51.4	51.4
	High	18	48.6	48.6	100.0
	Total	37	100.0	100.0	

Figure 5: Pretest Check for Visual Product Aesthetics

Group Statistics					
	VPA Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
VPA	Low	18	4.0278	1.08088	.25477
	High	19	5.8026	1.15644	.26531

Independent Samples Test											
Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	One-Sided p	Two-Sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
VPA	Equal variances assumed	.105	.748	-4.816	35	<.001	<.001	-1.77485	.36851	-2.52297	-1.02673
	Equal variances not assumed			-4.825	34.995	<.001	<.001	-1.77485	.36782	-2.52157	-1.02813

Independent Samples Effect Sizes					
		Standardizer ^a	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Interval	
VPA	Cohen's d	1.12038	-1.584	-2.319	-.832
	Hedges' correction	1.14512	-1.550	-2.269	-.814
	Glass's delta	1.15644	-1.535	-2.336	-.707

a. The denominator used in estimating the effect sizes.
Cohen's d uses the pooled standard deviation.
Hedges' correction uses the pooled standard deviation, plus a correction factor.
Glass's delta uses the sample standard deviation of the control (i.e., the second) group.

Figure 6: Pretest Check for Social Distance

Group Statistics					
	SD Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
SD	Low	19	2.2105	.76948	.17653
	High	18	4.4722	1.53845	.36262

Independent Samples Test											
Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Significance		Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						One-Sided p	Two-Sided p			Lower	Upper
SD	Equal variances assumed	9.163	.005	-5.702	35	<.001	<.001	-2.26170	.39663	-3.06690	-1.45649
	Equal variances not assumed			-5.608	24.702	<.001	<.001	-2.26170	.40330	-3.09282	-1.43057

Independent Samples Effect Sizes

		Standardizer ^a	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
SD	Cohen's d	1.20587	-1.876	-2.646	-1.087
	Hedges' correction	1.23250	-1.835	-2.588	-1.064
	Glass's delta	1.53845	-1.470	-2.266	-.647

- a. The denominator used in estimating the effect sizes.
 Cohen's d uses the pooled standard deviation.
 Hedges' correction uses the pooled standard deviation, plus a correction factor.
 Glass's delta uses the sample standard deviation of the control (i.e., the second) group.

Appendix 4 Final Questionnaire

Introduction:

Liebe Teilnehmerin, lieber Teilnehmer,

im Rahmen meiner Masterarbeit an der Universität Wien führe ich eine Umfrage zum Thema Konsumentenverhalten und Geschenke durch.

Zur Beantwortung des Fragebogens benötigen Sie ca. 5 Minuten.

Bei den folgenden Fragen geht es um Ihre persönliche und vor allem ehrliche Meinung. Es gibt keine richtigen oder falschen Antworten. Einige Fragen oder Antwortmöglichkeiten werden Ihnen sehr ähnlich erscheinen. Bitte lassen Sie sich dadurch nicht irritieren.

Die Befragung findet vollkommen anonym statt. Ihre Antworten werden streng vertraulich behandelt und nicht an Dritte weitergegeben.

Bei Rückfragen wenden Sie sich gerne an: Eva Prasnjak (a12214720@unet.univie.ac.at)

Vielen Dank im Voraus für Ihre Unterstützung und Ihre Zeit!

PS: Nutzer von SurveyCircle.com & SurveySwap.io erhalten für ihre Teilnahme Punkte, mit denen sie kostenlos Studienteilnehmer rekrutieren können.

Informationen für Handynutzer: Falls Sie Schwierigkeiten haben sollten, den Fragebogen auf Ihrem Handy hochkant zu beantworten, drehen Sie dieses bitte.

Scenario Group Low SoD:

Bitte versetzen Sie sich nun in die folgende Situation:

Eine Person, zu der Sie eine sehr enge Beziehung haben – zum Beispiel ein(e) enge(r) Freund(in), ein Familienmitglied oder Ihr(e) Partner(in) – hat bald Geburtstag.

Sie möchten ein passendes Geschenk für diese Person finden.

Bitte denken Sie kurz an eine konkrete Person in Ihrem Leben, auf die diese Beschreibung zutrifft.

Scenario Group High SoD:

Bitte versetzen Sie sich nun in die folgende Situation:

Eine Person, zu der Sie eine eher entfernte Beziehung haben – zum Beispiel ein(e) Bekannte(r) oder ein(e) Kolleg(in), den/die Sie nicht sehr gut kennen – hat bald Geburtstag.

Sie möchten ein passendes Geschenk für diese Person finden.

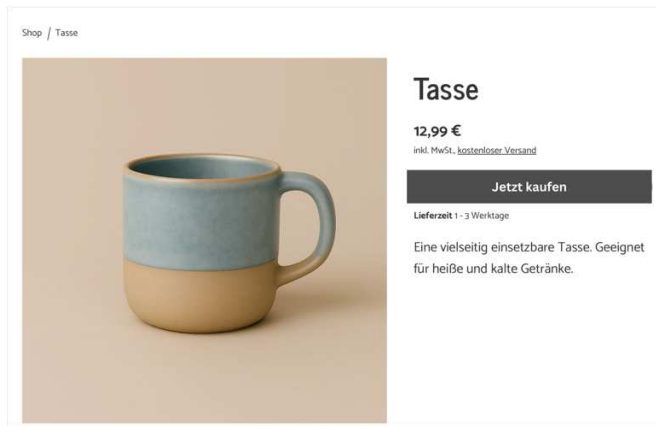
Bitte denken Sie kurz an eine konkrete Person in Ihrem Leben, auf die diese Beschreibung zutrifft.

Scenario Group High VPA:

Beim Online-Shopping stoßen Sie auf das folgende Produkt.

Bitte stellen Sie sich vor, dass Sie dieses Produkt als mögliches Geschenk für diese Person in Betracht ziehen.

Bitte schauen Sie sich das Produkt genau an, Ihnen werden im Folgenden Fragen dazu gestellt.

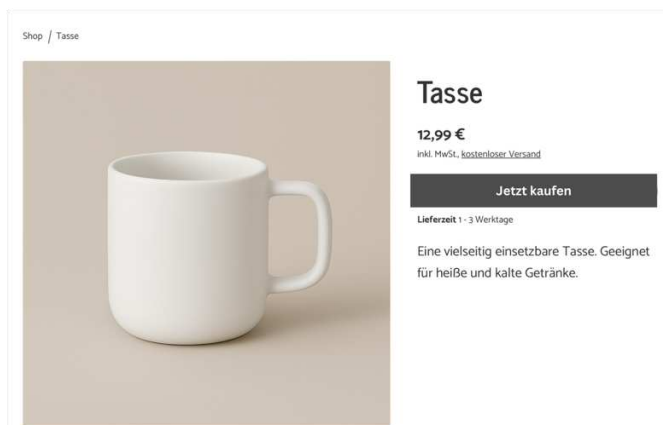


Scenario Group Low VPA:

Beim Online-Shopping stoßen Sie auf das folgende Produkt.

Bitte stellen Sie sich vor, dass Sie dieses Produkt als mögliches Geschenk für diese Person in Betracht ziehen.

Bitte schauen Sie sich das Produkt genau an, Ihnen werden im Folgenden Fragen dazu gestellt.



Manipulation Check VPA:

Bitte beantworten Sie, inwieweit Sie folgenden Aussagen zum gezeigten Produkt zustimmen.

	Stimme überhaupt nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Stimme teilweise nicht zu	Weder noch	Stimme teilweise zu	Stimme zu	Stimme voll zu
Das dargestellte Produkt ist schön.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Das dargestellte Produkt ist künstlerisch gestaltet.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Das dargestellte Produkt ist hübsch.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Das dargestellte Produkt wirkt ästhetisch ansprechend.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Manipulation Check SoD:

Erinnern Sie sich nun an die Person für die Sie das Geschenk suchen. Bitte beantworten Sie, inwieweit Sie folgenden Aussagen zustimmen.

	Stimme überhaupt nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Stimme teilweise nicht zu	Weder noch	Stimme teilweise zu	Stimme zu	Stimme voll zu
Die beschenkte Person ist mir sehr ähnlich.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ich fühle mich der beschenkten Person sehr nah.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Purchase Intention:

Bitte beantworten Sie, inwieweit Sie folgenden Aussagen zum gezeigten Produkt zustimmen.

	Stimme überhaupt nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Stimme teilweise nicht zu	Weder noch	Stimme teilweise zu	Stimme zu	Stimme voll zu
Es ist wahrscheinlich, dass ich das dargestellte Produkt als Geschenk kaufen würde.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ich bin dazu geneigt, das dargestellte Produkt als Geschenk zu kaufen.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ich wäre bereit, das dargestellte Produkt als Geschenk zu kaufen.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Perceived Quality:

Alles in allem würde ich sagen, dieses Produkt hat eine...

	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	
Sehr schlechte Gesamtqualität	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Ausgezeichnete Gesamtqualität

Dieses Produkt hat eine....

	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	
Sehr schlechte Qualität	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Sehr gute Qualität

Insgesamt ist dieses Produkt...

	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	
Schlecht	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Ausgezeichnet

CVPA:

Bitte beantworten Sie, inwieweit Sie folgenden Aussagen zustimmen.

	Stimme überhaupt nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Stimme teilweise nicht zu	Weder noch	Stimme teilweise zu	Stimme zu	Stimme voll zu
Produkte mit herausragendem Design zu besitzen, gibt mir ein gutes Gefühl über mich selbst.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Ich genieße es, Produktdarstellungen mit herausragendem Design anzusehen.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Das Design eines Produkts ist für mich eine Quelle der Freude.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Schöne Produktdesigns machen unsere Welt lebenswerter.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Bitte beantworten Sie, inwieweit Sie folgenden Aussagen zustimmen.

	Stimme überhaupt nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Stimme teilweise nicht zu	Weder noch	Stimme teilweise zu	Stimme zu	Stimme voll zu
Die Fähigkeit, feine Unterschiede im Produktdesign zu erkennen, habe ich im Laufe der Zeit entwickelt.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ich sehe Dinge im Design eines Produkts, die andere oft übersehen.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ich besitze die Fähigkeit, mir vorzustellen, wie ein Produkt zum Design anderer Dinge passt, die ich bereits besitze.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ich habe ein ziemlich gutes Gespür dafür, was ein Produkt im Vergleich zu seinen Konkurrenten besser aussehen lässt.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Bitte beantworten Sie, inwieweit Sie folgenden Aussagen zustimmen.

	Stimme überhaupt nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Stimme teilweise nicht zu	Weder noch	Stimme teilweise zu	Stimme zu	Stimme voll zu
Manchmal scheint mich das Aussehen eines Produkts regelrecht anzusprechen und zu fesseln.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Wenn mich das Design eines Produkts wirklich anspricht, habe ich das Gefühl, dass ich es unbedingt kaufen muss.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Wenn ich ein Produkt mit einem wirklich großartigen Design sehe, verspüre ich ein starkes Verlangen, es zu kaufen.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Self-Expressive Benefits:

Bitte beantworten Sie, inwieweit Sie folgenden Aussagen zustimmen.

	Stimme überhaupt nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Stimme teilweise nicht zu	Weder noch	Stimme teilweise zu	Stimme zu	Stimme voll zu
Mit diesem Geschenk kann ich meinen persönlichen Geschmack zum Ausdruck bringen.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Mit diesem Geschenk kann ich mir und meinen Freunden zeigen, dass ich gutes Design schätze.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Mit diesem Geschenk nehmen mich meine Freunde als jemanden mit gutem Geschmack wahr.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Ecological Validity:

Bitte beantworten Sie, inwieweit Sie folgenden Aussagen zustimmen.

	Stimme überhaupt nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Stimme teilweise nicht zu	Weder noch	Stimme teilweise zu	Stimme zu	Stimme voll zu
Die Darstellung des Produkts erschien mir realistisch.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Das gezeigte Produkt hätte ich auch auf einer echten Webseite erwarten können.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Die Kaufsituation kam mir realistisch vor.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Attention Check:

Für wen sollten Sie in diesem Szenario ein Geschenk auswählen?

1. Eine(n) enge(n) Freund(in), ein Familienmitglied oder Ihre(n) Partner(in)
2. Eine(n) entfernte(n) Bekannte(n) oder eine(n) Kollegin/Kollegen
3. Weiß ich nicht mehr

Age:

Wie alt sind Sie? (Bitte geben Sie Ihr Alter in Jahren als Zahl an)

Gender:

Mit welchem Geschlecht identifizieren Sie sich?

1. Männlich
2. Weiblich
3. Divers
4. Möchte ich nicht angeben

Job:

Bitte geben Sie Ihre Haupttätigkeit an.

1. Schüler / Schülerin
2. Student / Studentin
3. Berufstätig (Vollzeit)
4. Berufstätig (Teilzeit)
5. Selbstständig / Freiberuflich
6. Arbeitsuchend
7. In Elternzeit / Pflegezeit
8. Rentner / Rentnerin
9. Sonstiges

Appendix 5 Descriptive Statistics all Variables

Figure 7: Descriptive Statistics all Variables

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
PI	151	1.00	7.00	3.2781	1.79729
VPA	151	1.00	7.00	4.3179	1.41124
SD	151	1.00	7.00	3.3907	1.66222
SEB	151	1.00	7.00	3.6060	1.69186
PQ	151	1.00	7.00	4.4393	1.29750
CVPA	151	1.73	7.00	5.0337	1.04794
Valid N (listwise)	151				

Appendix 6 Reliability Analysis for all Scales

Figure 8: Reliability Analysis for Aesthetic Appeal

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.878	.880	4

Item Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
VPA1	4.40	1.584	151
VPA2	3.82	1.759	151
VPA3	4.26	1.647	151
VPA4	4.79	1.603	151

Inter-Item Correlation Matrix				
	VPA1	VPA2	VPA3	VPA4
VPA1	1.000	.557	.829	.698
VPA2	.557	1.000	.600	.495
VPA3	.829	.600	1.000	.708
VPA4	.698	.495	.708	1.000

Item-Total Statistics					
	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Squared Multiple Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
VPA1	12.87	18.382	.808	.715	.817
VPA2	13.45	19.396	.605	.377	.898
VPA3	13.01	17.613	.835	.738	.804
VPA4	12.48	19.225	.717	.545	.851

Figure 9: Reliability Analysis for Social Distance

Reliability Statistics					
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items			
.745	.750	2			

Item Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
SD1reversed	3.6026	1.71689	151
SD2reversed	3.1788	1.99695	151

Inter-Item Correlation Matrix		
	SD1reversed	SD2reversed
SD1reversed	1.000	.600
SD2reversed	.600	1.000

Item-Total Statistics					
	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Squared Multiple Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
SD1reversed	3.1788	3.988	.600	.360	.
SD2reversed	3.6026	2.948	.600	.360	.

Figure 10: Reliability Analysis for Purchase Intention

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.956	.957	3

Item Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
PI1	3.14	1.866	151
PI2	3.15	1.863	151
PI3	3.55	1.893	151

Inter-Item Correlation Matrix			
	PI1	PI2	PI3
PI1	1.000	.922	.843
PI2	.922	1.000	.875
PI3	.843	.875	1.000

Item-Total Statistics					
	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Squared Multiple Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
PI1	6.70	13.227	.911	.856	.933
PI2	6.69	13.016	.936	.884	.915
PI3	6.28	13.365	.876	.774	.960

Figure 11: Reliability Analysis for Perceived Quality

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.883	.881	3

Item Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
PQ1	4.42	1.490	151
PQ2	4.44	1.513	151
PQ3	4.46	1.315	151

Inter-Item Correlation Matrix			
	PQ1	PQ2	PQ3
PQ1	1.000	.855	.642
PQ2	.855	1.000	.640
PQ3	.642	.640	1.000

Item-Total Statistics					
	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Squared Multiple Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
PQ1	8.89	6.562	.835	.747	.776
PQ2	8.88	6.466	.832	.745	.778
PQ3	8.86	8.361	.665	.443	.922

Figure 12: Reliability Analysis for Self-Expressive Benefits

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.951	.951	3

Item Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
SEB1	3.59	1.795	150
SEB2	3.61	1.783	150
SEB3	3.62	1.760	150

Inter-Item Correlation Matrix			
	SEB1	SEB2	SEB3
SEB1	1.000	.885	.837
SEB2	.885	1.000	.874
SEB3	.837	.874	1.000

Item-Total Statistics					
	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Squared Multiple Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
SEB1	7.23	11.760	.889	.800	.933
SEB2	7.21	11.605	.918	.842	.911
SEB3	7.20	12.067	.881	.782	.939

Figure 13: Reliability Analysis for CVPA

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.899	.900	11

Item Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
CVPAV1	4.98	1.553	149
CVPAV2	5.46	1.435	149
CVPAV3	5.44	1.435	149
CVPAV4	5.52	1.487	149
CVPAA1	4.81	1.464	149
CVPAA2	4.23	1.615	149
CVPAA3	5.23	1.495	149
CVPAA4	4.71	1.543	149
CVPAR1	5.34	1.339	149
CVPAR2	4.74	1.509	149
CVPAR3	4.85	1.544	149

Inter-Item Correlation Matrix

	CVPAV1	CVPAV2	CVPAV3	CVPAV4	CVPAA1	CVPAA2	CVPAA3	CVPAA4	CVPAR1	CVPAR2	CVPAR3
CVPAV1	1.000	.656	.644	.534	.489	.247	.383	.409	.432	.321	.430
CVPAV2	.656	1.000	.805	.647	.550	.398	.482	.487	.519	.349	.427
CVPAV3	.644	.805	1.000	.671	.468	.315	.428	.433	.562	.343	.438
CVPAV4	.534	.647	.671	1.000	.367	.242	.315	.387	.500	.318	.387
CVPAA1	.489	.550	.468	.367	1.000	.639	.577	.606	.513	.200	.253
CVPAA2	.247	.398	.315	.242	.639	1.000	.616	.715	.523	.172	.249
CVPAA3	.383	.482	.428	.315	.577	.616	1.000	.650	.513	.234	.287
CVPAA4	.409	.487	.433	.387	.606	.715	.650	1.000	.532	.179	.319
CVPAR1	.432	.519	.562	.500	.513	.523	.513	.532	1.000	.406	.459
CVPAR2	.321	.349	.343	.318	.200	.172	.234	.179	.406	1.000	.772
CVPAR3	.430	.427	.438	.387	.253	.249	.287	.319	.459	.772	1.000

Item-Total Statistics

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Squared Multiple Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
CVPAV1	50.33	111.114	.636	.533	.890
CVPAV2	49.85	109.505	.758	.724	.883
CVPAV3	49.87	110.477	.723	.717	.885
CVPAV4	49.79	112.913	.608	.519	.891
CVPAA1	50.50	111.779	.660	.569	.888
CVPAA2	51.08	112.129	.573	.636	.894
CVPAA3	50.07	112.096	.632	.524	.890
CVPAA4	50.60	110.296	.668	.635	.888
CVPAR1	49.97	112.546	.704	.527	.886
CVPAR2	50.57	117.301	.452	.617	.900
CVPAR3	50.46	113.561	.559	.659	.894

Figure 14: Reliability Analysis for Ecological Validity

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.809	.819	3

Item Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
EV1	5.65	1.181	150
EV2	5.87	1.208	150
EV3	5.41	1.542	150

Inter-Item Correlation Matrix

	EV1	EV2	EV3
EV1	1.000	.645	.498
EV2	.645	1.000	.664
EV3	.498	.664	1.000

Item-Total Statistics

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Squared Multiple Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
EV1	11.27	6.307	.616	.424	.784
EV2	11.06	5.587	.755	.572	.649
EV3	11.52	4.694	.641	.449	.784

Appendix 7 Demographics Output

Figure 15: Frequency Table for Gender

GEN					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	61	40.4	40.4	40.4
	Female	87	57.6	57.6	98.0
	Diverse	2	1.3	1.3	99.3
	No info	1	.7	.7	100.0
	Total	151	100.0	100.0	

Figure 16: Frequency Table for Job

JOB					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	University Student	89	58.9	58.9	58.9
	Employed (Full-Time)	44	29.1	29.1	88.1
	Employed (Part-Time)	12	7.9	7.9	96.0
	Self-Employed / Freelancer	2	1.3	1.3	97.4
	Unemployed / Seeking Employment	2	1.3	1.3	98.7
	Else	2	1.3	1.3	100.0
	Total	151	100.0	100.0	

Figure 17: Frequency Table for Age

Statistics		
AGE		
N	Valid	149
	Missing	2
Mean		29.34
Median		26.00
Std. Deviation		11.093
Variance		123.051
Minimum		18
Maximum		64
Percentiles	25	24.00
	50	26.00
	75	29.00

Figure 18: Frequency Table for Age under 35

Age < 35					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	25	16.6	16.8	16.8
	1.00	124	82.1	83.2	100.0
	Total	149	98.7	100.0	
Missing	System	2	1.3		
Total		151	100.0		

Appendix 8 Manipulation & Reality Check

Figure 19: Manipulation Check for Visual Product Aesthetics

Group Statistics										
	VPA_gr	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean					
VPA	Low	65	3.4885	1.21709	.15096					
	High	86	4.9448	1.21474	.13099					

Independent Samples Test										
Levene's Test for Equality of Variances					t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	df	Significance One-Sided p	Significance Two-Sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper
VPA	Equal variances assumed	.015	.904	-7.288	149	<.001	<.001	-1.45631	.19981	-1.85114 -1.06147
	Equal variances not assumed			-7.286	137.825	<.001	<.001	-1.45631	.19987	-1.85151 -1.06110

Independent Samples Effect Sizes					
	Standardizer ^a	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Interval Lower Upper		
VPA	Cohen's d	1.21575	-1.198	-1.546	-.847
	Hedges' correction	1.22191	-1.192	-1.538	-.842
	Glass's delta	1.21474	-1.199	-1.565	-.827

a. The denominator used in estimating the effect sizes.
Cohen's d uses the pooled standard deviation.
Hedges' correction uses the pooled standard deviation, plus a correction factor.
Glass's delta uses the sample standard deviation of the control (i.e., the second) group.

Figure 20: Manipulation Check for Social Distance

Group Statistics					
	SD_gr	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
SD	Close	77	2.2727	1.04361	.11893
	Distant	74	4.5541	1.36132	.15825

Independent Samples Test										
Levene's Test for Equality of Variances					t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	df	Significance One-Sided p	Significance Two-Sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper
SD	Equal variances assumed	9.828	.002	-11.584	149	<.001	<.001	-2.28133	.19693	-2.67047 -1.89218
	Equal variances not assumed			-11.524	136.824	<.001	<.001	-2.28133	.19796	-2.67278 -1.88987

Independent Samples Effect Sizes					
	Standardizer ^a	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Interval Lower Upper		
SD	Cohen's d	1.20974	-1.886	-2.268	-1.499
	Hedges' correction	1.21587	-1.876	-2.256	-1.492
	Glass's delta	1.36132	-1.676	-2.091	-1.254

a. The denominator used in estimating the effect sizes.
Cohen's d uses the pooled standard deviation.
Hedges' correction uses the pooled standard deviation, plus a correction factor.
Glass's delta uses the sample standard deviation of the control (i.e., the second) group.

Figure 21: Reality Check for Ecological Validity

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
EV	151	1.67	7.00	5.6347	1.12344
Valid N (listwise)	151				

Appendix 9 Preliminary Analysis

The following assumption checks were based on Clement & Bradley-Garcia, 2022; Flatt & Jacobs, 2019 and Kane & Ashbaugh, 2017.

To test assumptions, the different regression models as included in the two PROCESS models were recreated in SPSS:

- *Model 1*: Moderated a1-path PROCESS Model 8 - linear regression of VPA, CVPA and the interaction term of VPA and CVPA on SEB.
- *Model 2*: Moderated a2-path PROCESS Model 8 - linear regression of VPA, CVPA and the interaction term of VPA and CVPA on PQ.
- *Model 3*: Full model PROCESS Model 8 - linear regression of VPA, CVPA, SEB, PQ and interaction term of VPA and CVPA on PI.
- *Model 4*: Moderated a-path PROCESS Model 59 - linear regression of VPA, SoD and the interaction term of VPA and SoD on SEB.
- *Model 5*: Full model PROCESS Model 59 - linear regression of VPA, SoD, interaction term of VPA and SoD and the interaction term of SEB and SoD on PI.

Independence

The assumption of independence was tested using the Durbin-Watson statistic. The Durbin-Watson statistic tests for autocorrelation in residuals, with values between 1.5 and 2.5 indicating that the independence assumption is met (Clement & Bradley-Garcia, 2022). The Durbin-Watson statistics of all models fall within this range, which suggests the assumption of independence of residuals is met.

Figure 22: Durbin-Watson Statistic for Model 1

Model Summary ^b					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.459 ^a	.211	.195	1.51812	1.762

a. Predictors: (Constant), Int_VPA_CVPA, CVPA, VPA_gr
b. Dependent Variable: SEB

Figure 23: Durbin-Watson Statistic for Model 2

Model Summary ^b					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.348 ^a	.121	.103	1.22855	2.094

a. Predictors: (Constant), Int_VPA_CVPA, CVPA, VPA_gr
b. Dependent Variable: PQ

Figure 24: Durbin-Watson Statistic for Model 3

Model Summary ^b					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.694 ^a	.482	.464	1.31530	1.937

a. Predictors: (Constant), PQ, CVPA, VPA_gr, SEB, Int_VPA_CVPA
b. Dependent Variable: PI

Figure 25: Durbin-Watson Statistic for Model 4

Model Summary ^b					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.341 ^a	.116	.098	1.60687	1.846

a. Predictors: (Constant), Int_VPA_SD, SD, VPA_gr
b. Dependent Variable: SEB

Figure 26: Durbin-Watson Statistic for Model 5

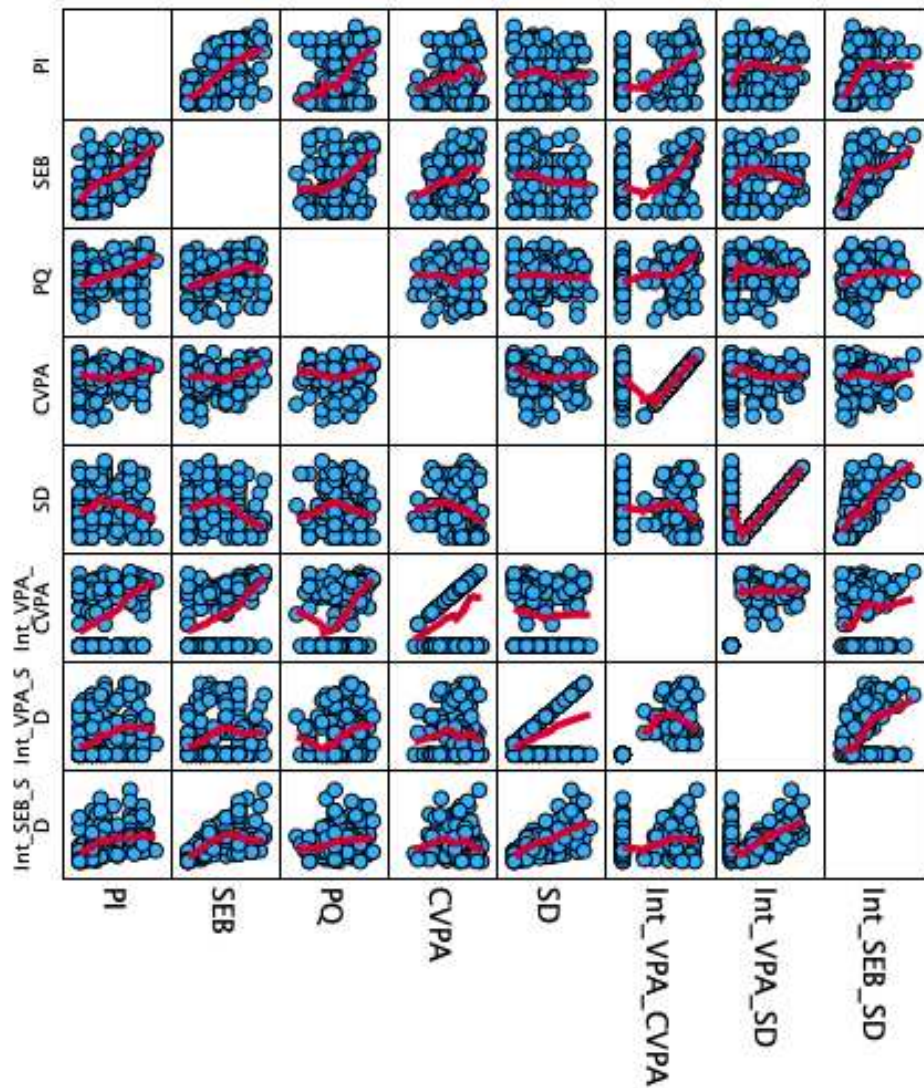
Model Summary ^b					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.684 ^a	.467	.449	1.33431	1.968

a. Predictors: (Constant), Int_SEB_SD, VPA_gr, SEB, SD, Int_VPA_SD
b. Dependent Variable: PI

Linearity

To assess whether the assumption of linearity was met, three complementary approaches were employed: visual inspection of scatterplots with smoothing lines (Loess), examination of residual-versus-predicted plots, and correlation analyses between predictors and outcome variables. First, a matrix of bivariate scatterplots was generated for all continuous variables included in the regression models (see Figure 27). Loess curves were overlaid to further visualize the relationships. Several predictor–outcome pairs, most notably the relationship between SEB and PI, and between PQ and PI, exhibited a generally linear upward trend. However, some interactions involving the moderator CVPA (e.g., Int_VPA_CVPA) and SoD showed mild curvilinear patterns, suggesting slight deviations from linearity. For the purpose of this thesis these deviations were not considered severe but were noted in interpreting the moderated relationships.

Figure 27: Scatterplots of the Continuous Variables with Loess Line



Second, to further examine linearity at the model level, standardized residuals were plotted against standardized predicted values for each regression model and a Loess curve was fitted to each scatterplot (Figure 28 to Figure 32). Ideally, in a linear model, the residuals should be randomly scattered around the horizontal zero line without systematic patterns (Kane & Ashbaugh, 2017). However, in some of the present models, the Loess curves do not remain flat and centered around zero across the full range of predicted values. Instead, they show mild deviations, suggesting that the assumption of strict linearity may be violated. These deviations are viewed as not extreme, and the overall distribution of residuals appears sufficiently random to support the continued use of linear regression for the purpose of this thesis.

Figure 28: Standardized Residuals vs. Standardized Predicted Values for Model 1

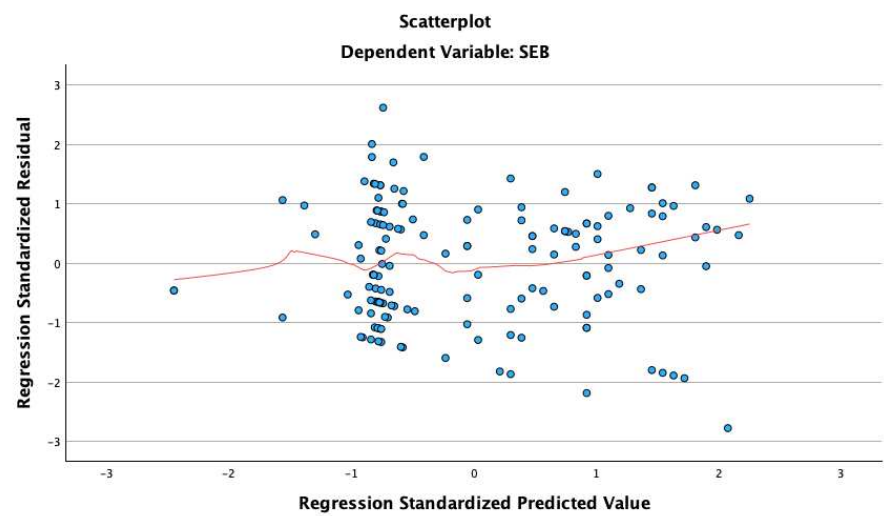


Figure 29: Standardized Residuals vs. Standardized Predicted Values for Model 2

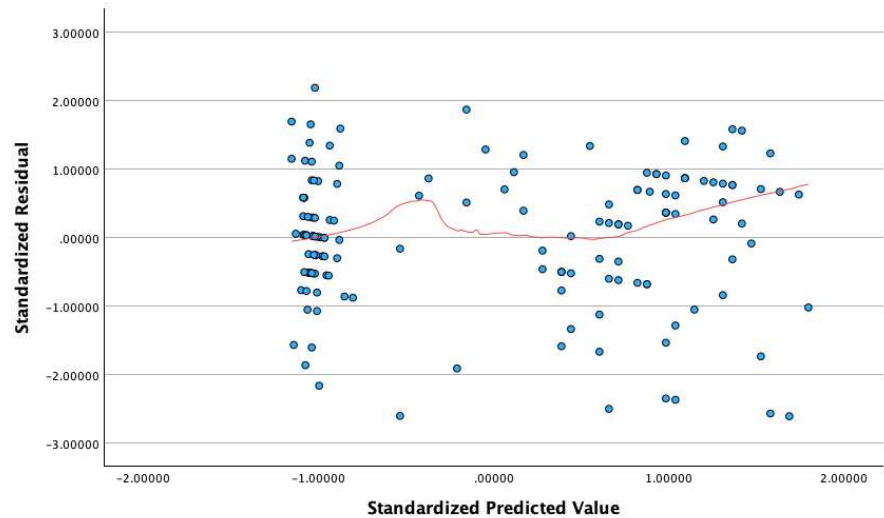


Figure 30: Standardized Residuals vs. Standardized Predicted Values for Model 3

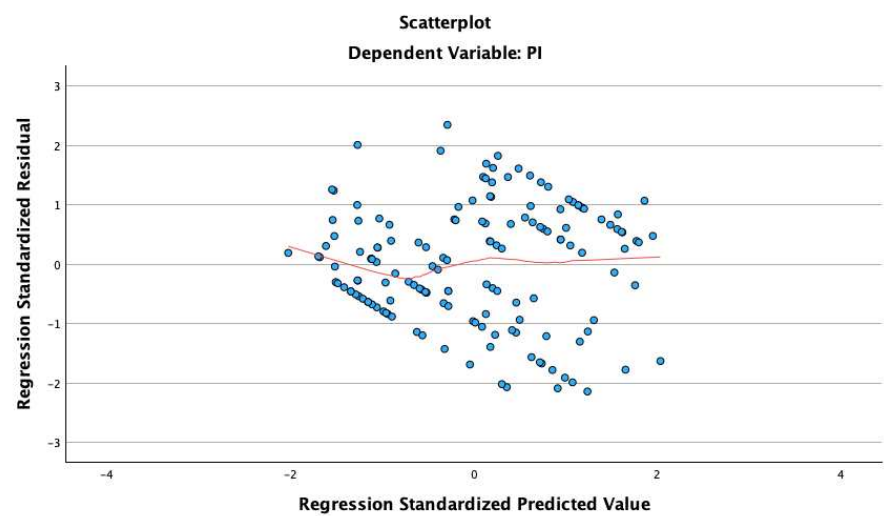


Figure 31: Standardized Residuals vs. Standardized Predicted Values for Model 4

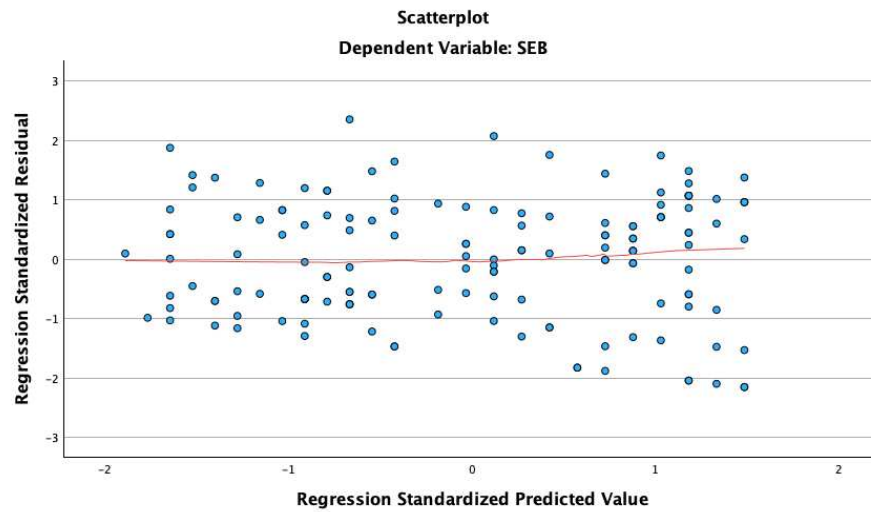
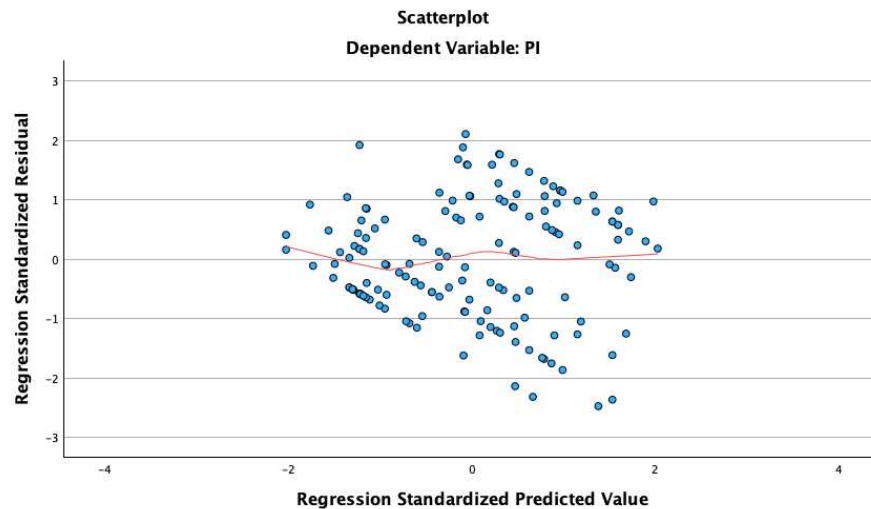


Figure 32: Standardized Residuals vs. Standardized Predicted Values for Model 5



Third, Pearson correlations were calculated to quantify the strength and direction of the bivariate relationships. The Pearson correlation matrix reveals that VPA was positively correlated with PI ($r = .39, p < .001$), SEB ($r = .30, p < .001$), and PQ ($r = .31, p < .001$). SEB ($r = .65, p < .001$) and PQ ($r = .40, p < .001$) also showed a strong positive correlation with PI, supporting their proposed roles as mediators. CVPA was weakly but significantly associated with PI ($r = .16, p = .046$). In contrast, SoD showed no significant association with PI ($r = -.05, p = .533$) but was negatively correlated with SEB ($r = -.16, p = .045$), suggesting that greater SoD may reduce perceived self-expressive value. The interaction of VPA and CVPA (Int_VPA_CVPA) ($r = .44, p < .001$) and the interaction of VPA and SoD (Int_VPA_SoD) ($r = .28, p < .001$) correlated with PI. The interaction between SEB and SoD (Int_SEB_SoD) was also significantly associated with PI ($r = .38, p < .001$). As expected,

strong correlations were observed between interaction terms and their constituent variables. An overview of all correlation coefficients is given in the following Table 2. While correlations alone do not establish linearity, low or near-zero values may indicate nonlinearity or no relationship at all (Flatt & Jacobs, 2019). Given that most bivariate correlations were statistically significant and of meaningful magnitude, the assumption of linearity appears plausible for key constructs.

Taken together, the visual, diagnostic, and statistical evidence suggests that the assumption of linearity was sufficiently met. Although certain interaction effects displayed minor nonlinear tendencies, they were assumed to be not substantial violations for the purpose of this thesis and were unlikely to bias the interpretation of the main regression models.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
(1) VPA	1								
(2) PI	.394**	1							
(3) SoD	-.021	-.051	1						
(4) SEB	.302**	.645**	-.163*	1					
(5) CVPA	.067	.163*	-.130	.255**	1				
(6) PQ	.309**	.398**	-.041	.340**	.127	1			
(7) Int VPAXCVPA	.957**	.444**	-.047	.389**	.278**	.342**	1		
(8) Int VPAXSoD	.803*	.280**	.427**	.166*	-.001	.253**	.746**	1	
(9) Int SEBxSoD	.210**	.377**	.650**	.553*	.026	.204*	.240**	.493**	1
	** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).								
	* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).								

Homoscedasticity

To test the assumption of homoscedasticity, the same standardized residuals versus standardized predicted values plots used to assess linearity were re-examined, this time focusing on the consistency of the spread of residuals across the full range of predicted values. Homoscedasticity is supported when the spread of residuals along the Y-axis remains relatively constant across values of the predicted outcome, forming a roughly rectangular pattern with no discernible funneling, clustering, or curvature (Clement & Bradley-Garcia, 2022; Flatt & Jacobs, 2019). In Model 1 (Figure 28), the residuals are distributed fairly symmetrically around the zero line with a relatively consistent vertical spread across the entire range of standardized predicted values, indicating that the assumption of homoscedasticity is largely met. Model 2 (Figure 29) exhibits a similar pattern, though the data appear slightly more dispersed at higher predicted values. However, the variation

remains within an acceptable range and does not display a pronounced funnel or cone shape. Model 3 and 5 (Figure 30 and Figure 32) appeared to have a slight funnel shape. Model 4 shows a perfect rectangular shape with residuals consistently spread across the full range of predicted values (Figure 31). Issues of heteroscedasticity were met by using heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors in PROCESS (Hayes, 2022). Therefore, the HC4 robust method (Hayes, 2022) was applied in the analysis to minimize potential distortions caused by heteroscedasticity. Moreover, bootstrapping is fairly robust against violations of homoscedasticity as well.

Multicollinearity

Collinearity diagnostics were conducted for all models (Figure 33 to Figure 37). The value of tolerance should not be below 0.1 and the value of VIF should not be above 10 (Clement & Bradley-Garcia, 2022). In Model 1, 2 and 3, the interaction term VPA×CVPA showed VIF values exceeding 10 and tolerance values below 0.1. Similarly, the variable VPA_gr also exceeded the recommended thresholds in these models. These inflated values are common when including interaction terms in a regression model, as those new variables often end up strongly correlated with the original variables (Hayes, 2022; Shieh, 2011). Given strong theoretical justification for the interaction, the analyses proceed by mean-centering CVPA and SoD in PROCESS ($M_{CVPAc} = 0$, $SD_{CVPAc} = 1.05$; $M_{SoDc} = 0$, $S_{DSoDc} = 1.66$).

Figure 33: Multicollinearity Measures for Model 1

Coefficients ^a								
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
1	(Constant)	3.343	.888		3.765	<.001		
	VPA_gr	-3.158	1.220	-.927	-2.589	.011	.042	23.903
	CVPA	-.065	.175	-.040	-.372	.711	.456	2.194
	Int_VPA_CVPA	.824	.238	1.288	3.461	<.001	.039	25.786

a. Dependent Variable: SEB

Figure 34: Multicollinearity Measures for Model 2

Coefficients ^a								
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
1	(Constant)	4.128	.719		5.745	<.001		
	CVPA	-.030	.142	-.024	-.212	.832	.456	2.194
	VPA_gr	-.715	.987	-.274	-.724	.470	.042	23.903
	Int_VPA_CVPA	.300	.193	.611	1.556	.122	.039	25.786

a. Dependent Variable: PQ

Figure 35: Multicollinearity Measures for Model 3

Coefficients ^a								
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	.330	.866		.381	.704		
	VPA_gr	-.031	1.081	-.009	-.029	.977	.040	24.996
	CVPA	-.084	.152	-.049	-.550	.583	.455	2.196
	Int_VPA_CVPA	.141	.215	.207	.656	.513	.036	27.995
	SEB	.559	.073	.526	7.609	<.001	.747	1.338
	PQ	.217	.091	.157	2.390	.018	.832	1.202

a. Dependent Variable: PI

Figure 36: Multicollinearity Measures for Model 4

Coefficients ^a								
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	3.504	.453		7.739	<.001		
	VPA_gr	1.132	.601	.332	1.883	.062	.193	5.184
	SD	-.141	.118	-.138	-1.189	.236	.444	2.253
	Int_VPA_SD	-.034	.159	-.042	-.213	.831	.158	6.340

a. Dependent Variable: SEB

Figure 37: Multicollinearity Measures for Model 5

Coefficients ^a								
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	-.144	.587		-.246	.806		
	VPA_gr	.927	.517	.256	1.793	.075	.180	5.555
	SD	.224	.158	.208	1.424	.157	.173	5.784
	Int_VPA_SD	-.036	.137	-.042	-.265	.791	.147	6.820
	SEB	.754	.142	.710	5.324	<.001	.207	4.842
	Int_SEB_SD	-.044	.042	-.184	-1.057	.292	.122	8.227

a. Dependent Variable: PI

Normality

Normal distribution of error terms was assessed using Q–Q plots of the unstandardized residuals, as these are commonly used to test for normality (Flatt & Jacobs, 2019). The plots of all models (see Figure 38 to Figure 42) show some deviations from the diagonal line at the tails, which may indicate skewness or the presence of outliers. However, points mostly align with the diagonal line, suggesting that the residuals are approximately normally distributed. While some minor deviations from normality are observed, regression analysis is generally robust against non-severe violations of this assumption (Clement & Bradley-Garcia, 2022; Hayes, 2022). Therefore, the data was not transformed, and the analysis proceeded as planned.

Figure 38: *Q-Q Plot of Unstandardized Residuals for Model 1*

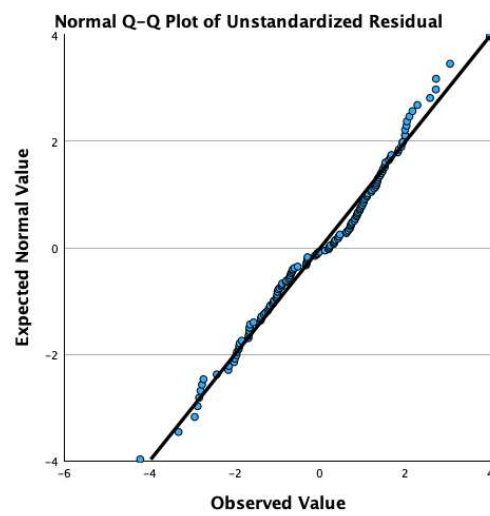


Figure 39: *Q-Q Plot of Unstandardized Residuals for Model 2*

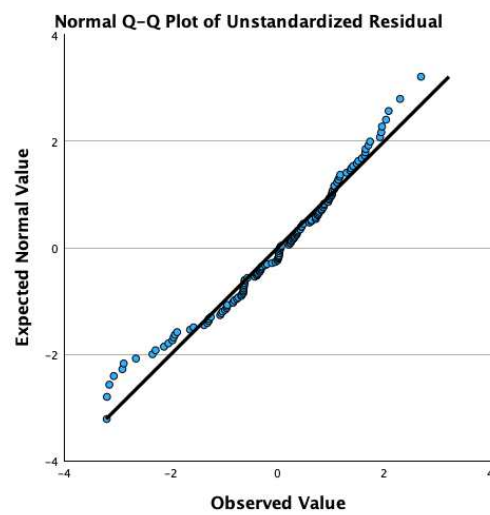


Figure 40: *Q-Q Plot of Unstandardized Residuals for Model 3*

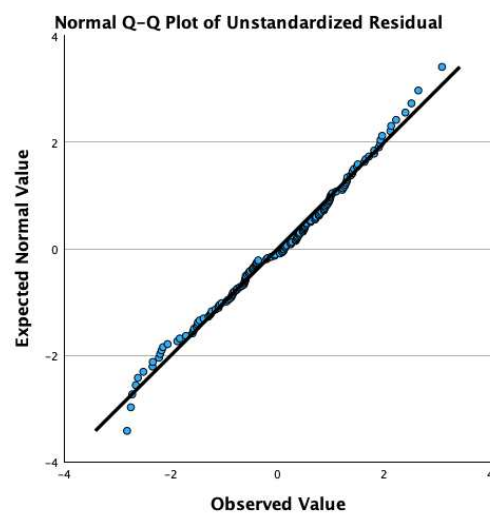


Figure 41: Q-Q Plot of Unstandardized Residuals for Model 4

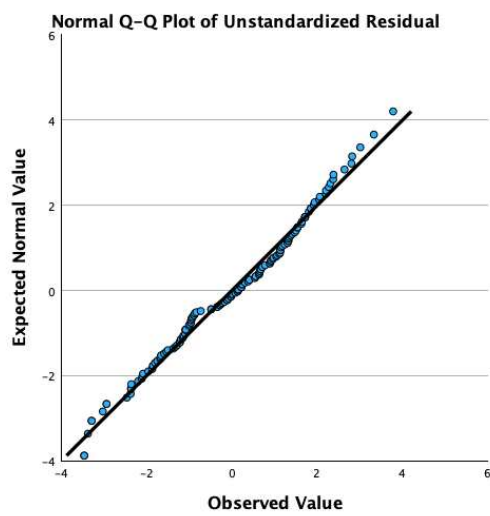
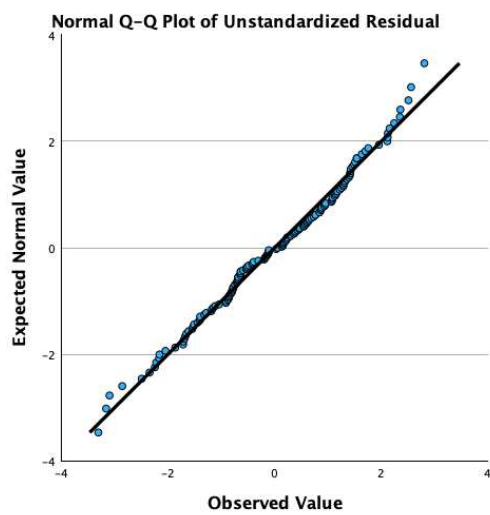


Figure 42: Q-Q Plot of Unstandardized Residuals for Model 5



Appendix 10 PROCESS Model 8 Output

***** PROCESS Procedure for SPSS Version 4.2 *****

Written by Andrew F. Hayes, Ph.D. www.afhayes.com
Documentation available in Hayes (2022). www.guilford.com/p/hayes3

Model : 8
Y : PI
X : VPA_gr
M1 : SEB
M2 : PQ
W : CVPA

Sample
Size: 151

OUTCOME VARIABLE:
SEB

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F(HC4)	df1	df2	p
.4593	.2109	2.3047	11.2337	3.0000	147.0000	.0000

Model

	coeff	se(HC4)	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	3.0153	.1941	15.5345	.0000	2.6317	3.3989
VPA_gr	.9871	.2517	3.9211	.0001	.4896	1.4846
CVPA	-.0651	.1985	-.3280	.7434	-.4574	.3272
Int_1	.8236	.2562	3.2144	.0016	.3172	1.3299

Product terms key:

Int_1 : VPA_gr x CVPA

Test(s) of highest order unconditional interaction(s):

	R2-chng	F(HC4)	df1	df2	p
X*W	.0643	10.3324	1.0000	147.0000	.0016

Focal predict: VPA_gr (X)
Mod var: CVPA (W)

Conditional effects of the focal predictor at values of the moderator(s):

CVPA	Effect	se(HC4)	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
------	--------	---------	---	---	------	------

-1.0479	.1241	.3493	.3551	.7230	-.5663	.8144
.0000	.9871	.2517	3.9211	.0001	.4896	1.4846
1.0479	1.8501	.3858	4.7950	.0000	1.0876	2.6127

Data for visualizing the conditional effect of the focal predictor:
 Paste text below into a SPSS syntax window and execute to produce plot.

```
DATA LIST FREE/
  VPA_gr      CVPA      SEB      .
BEGIN DATA.
  .0000      -1.0479    3.0835
  1.0000      -1.0479    3.2076
  .0000        .0000    3.0153
  1.0000        .0000    4.0024
  .0000      1.0479    2.9471
  1.0000      1.0479    4.7972
END DATA.
GRAPH/SCATTERPLOT=
  CVPA      WITH      SEB      BY      VPA_gr      .
```

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

PQ

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F(HC4)	df1	df2	p
.3484	.1214	1.5093	6.3250	3.0000	147.0000	.0005

Model

	coeff	se(HC4)	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	3.9771	.1356	29.3350	.0000	3.7091	4.2450
VPA_gr	.7934	.1996	3.9744	.0001	.3989	1.1879
CVPA	-.0300	.1542	-.1948	.8458	-.3348	.2748
Int_1	.2996	.2300	1.3024	.1948	-.1550	.7542

Product terms key:

Int_1 : VPA_gr x CVPA

Test(s) of highest order unconditional interaction(s):

	R2-chng	F(HC4)	df1	df2	p
X*W	.0145	1.6962	1.0000	147.0000	.1948

Focal predict: VPA_gr (X)
 Mod var: CVPA (W)

Data for visualizing the conditional effect of the focal predictor:

Paste text below into a SPSS syntax window and execute to produce plot.

DATA LIST FREE/

```
VPA_gr      CVPA      PQ      .
BEGIN DATA.
      .0000      -1.0479      4.0086
      1.0000      -1.0479      4.4880
      .0000       .0000      3.9771
      1.0000       .0000      4.7704
      .0000      1.0479      3.9456
      1.0000      1.0479      5.0529
```

END DATA.

GRAPH/SCATTERPLOT=

```
CVPA      WITH      PQ      BY      VPA_gr      .
```

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

PI

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F(HC4)	df1	df2	p
.6945	.4823	1.7300	34.8786	5.0000	145.0000	.0000

Model

	coeff	se(HC4)	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	-.0907	.3781	-.2398	.8108	-.8380	.6567
VPA_gr	.6786	.2513	2.7001	.0078	.1819	1.1754
SEB	.5587	.0862	6.4779	.0000	.3882	.7292
PQ	.2169	.1113	1.9477	.0534	-.0032	.4369
CVPA	-.0836	.1439	-.5809	.5622	-.3680	.2008
Int_1	.1410	.2240	.6292	.5302	-.3018	.5838

Product terms key:

```
Int_1      :      VPA_gr      x      CVPA
```

Test(s) of highest order unconditional interaction(s):

	R2-chng	F(HC4)	df1	df2	p
X*W	.0015	.3959	1.0000	145.0000	.5302

Focal predict: VPA_gr (X)

Mod var: CVPA (W)

Data for visualizing the conditional effect of the focal predictor:

Paste text below into a SPSS syntax window and execute to produce plot.

DATA LIST FREE/

```

      VPA_gr      CVPA      PI      .
BEGIN DATA.
      .0000      -1.0479      2.9744
      1.0000      -1.0479      3.5053
      .0000      .0000      2.8868
      1.0000      .0000      3.5654
      .0000      1.0479      2.7992
      1.0000      1.0479      3.6255
END DATA.
GRAPH/SCATTERPLOT=
      CVPA      WITH      PI      BY      VPA_gr      .

```

***** DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y *****

Conditional direct effects of X on Y

CVPA	Effect	se(HC4)	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
-1.0479	.5309	.3332	1.5933	.1133	-.1277	1.1895
.0000	.6786	.2513	2.7001	.0078	.1819	1.1754
1.0479	.8264	.3543	2.3322	.0211	.1261	1.5267

Conditional indirect effects of X on Y:

INDIRECT EFFECT:

VPA_gr	->	SEB	->	PI
CVPA	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
-1.0479	.0693	.1871	-.3060	.4540
.0000	.5515	.1733	.2339	.9121
1.0479	1.0337	.2777	.5285	1.5956

Index of moderated mediation:

	Index	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
CVPA	.4601	.1539	.1794	.7849

INDIRECT EFFECT:

VPA_gr	->	PQ	->	PI
CVPA	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
-1.0479	.1040	.0870	-.0232	.3066
.0000	.1721	.0982	.0183	.4034
1.0479	.2401	.1411	.0263	.5820

Index of moderated mediation:

	Index	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
CVPA	.0650	.0611	-.0238	.2146

***** ANALYSIS NOTES AND ERRORS *****

Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output:

95.0000

Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals:

5000

W values in conditional tables are the mean and +/- SD from the mean.

NOTE: A heteroscedasticity consistent standard error and covariance matrix estimator was used.

NOTE: The following variables were mean centered prior to analysis:

CVPA

----- END MATRIX -----

Appendix 11 PROCESS Model 59 Output

***** PROCESS Procedure for SPSS Version 4.2 *****

Written by Andrew F. Hayes, Ph.D. www.afhayes.com
Documentation available in Hayes (2022). www.guilford.com/p/hayes3

Model : 59
Y : PI
X : VPA_gr
M : SEB
W : SD

Sample
Size: 151

OUTCOME VARIABLE:
SEB

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F(HC4)	df1	df2	p
.3406	.1160	2.5820	5.9963	3.0000	147.0000	.0007

Model

	coeff	se(HC4)	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	-.5798	.1910	-3.0357	.0028	-.9573	-.2024
VPA_gr	1.0170	.2616	3.8871	.0002	.5000	1.5341
SD	-.1408	.1205	-1.1692	.2442	-.3789	.0972
Int_1	-.0339	.1637	-.2071	.8362	-.3575	.2896

Product terms key:

Int_1 : VPA_gr x SD

Test(s) of highest order unconditional interaction(s):

	R2-chng	F(HC4)	df1	df2	p
X*W	.0003	.0429	1.0000	147.0000	.8362

Focal predict: VPA_gr (X)
Mod var: SD (W)

Data for visualizing the conditional effect of the focal predictor:
Paste text below into a SPSS syntax window and execute to produce plot.

DATA LIST FREE/

```

      VPA_gr      SD      SEB      .
BEGIN DATA.
      .0000      -1.6622      -.3457
      1.0000      -1.6622      .7277
      .0000      .0000      -.5798
      1.0000      .0000      .4372
      .0000      1.6622      -.8139
      1.0000      1.6622      .1467
END DATA.
GRAPH/SCATTERPLOT=
      SD      WITH      SEB      BY      VPA_gr      .

*****
OUTCOME VARIABLE:
      PI

Model Summary
      R      R-sq      MSE      F (HC4)      df1      df2      p
      .6835      .4672      1.7804      34.6468      5.0000      145.0000      .0000

Model
      coeff      se (HC4)      t      p      LLCI      ULCI
constant      2.7999      .1910      14.6605      .0000      2.4224      3.1774
VPA_gr      .8034      .2548      3.1536      .0020      .2999      1.3070
SEB      .6054      .0734      8.2523      .0000      .4604      .7504
SD      .0661      .1149      .5750      .5662      -.1610      .2932
Int_1      -.0363      .1488      -.2440      .8076      -.3304      .2578
Int_2      -.0439      .0431      -1.0188      .3100      -.1291      .0413

Product terms key:
      Int_1      :      VPA_gr      x      SD
      Int_2      :      SEB      x      SD

Test(s) of highest order unconditional interaction(s):
      R2-chng      F (HC4)      df1      df2      p
X*W      .0003      .0595      1.0000      145.0000      .8076
M*W      .0041      1.0381      1.0000      145.0000      .3100
-----
      Focal predict: VPA_gr      (X)
      Mod var: SD      (W)

Data for visualizing the conditional effect of the focal predictor:
Paste text below into a SPSS syntax window and execute to produce plot.

DATA LIST FREE/
      VPA_gr      SD      PI      .

```

```

BEGIN DATA.
      .0000      -1.6622      2.6901
    1.0000      -1.6622      3.5539
      .0000       .0000      2.7999
    1.0000       .0000      3.6033
      .0000      1.6622      2.9097
    1.0000      1.6622      3.6528

```

END DATA.

GRAPH/SCATTERPLOT=

```

SD      WITH      PI      BY      VPA_gr      .
-----

```

Focal predict: SEB (M)

Mod var: SD (W)

Data for visualizing the conditional effect of the focal predictor:
 Paste text below into a SPSS syntax window and execute to produce plot.

DATA LIST FREE/

```

      SEB      SD      PI      .

```

BEGIN DATA.

```

    -1.6919    -1.6622    2.0342
      .0000    -1.6622    3.1821
     1.6919    -1.6622    4.3299
    -1.6919     .0000    2.2332
      .0000     .0000    3.2575
     1.6919     .0000    4.2818
    -1.6919     1.6622    2.4322
      .0000     1.6622    3.3329
     1.6919     1.6622    4.2337

```

END DATA.

GRAPH/SCATTERPLOT=

```

SEB      WITH      PI      BY      SD      .

```

***** DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y *****

Conditional direct effects of X on Y

SD	Effect	se(HC4)	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
-1.6622	.8638	.3724	2.3195	.0218	.1277	1.5998
.0000	.8034	.2548	3.1536	.0020	.2999	1.3070
1.6622	.7431	.3369	2.2058	.0290	.0773	1.4089

Conditional indirect effects of X on Y:

INDIRECT EFFECT:

```

VPA_gr      ->      SEB      ->      PI

```

SD	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
-1.6622	.7282	.3219	.1703	1.4312
.0000	.6157	.1793	.2918	.9860
1.6622	.5114	.2198	.1318	.9939

Pairwise contrasts between conditional indirect effects (Effect1 minus Effect2)

Effect1	Effect2	Contrast	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
.6157	.7282	-.1125	.2255	-.6060	.2762
.5114	.7282	-.2168	.4067	-1.0554	.5502
.5114	.6157	-.1043	.1832	-.4520	.2793

***** ANALYSIS NOTES AND ERRORS *****

Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output:
95.0000

Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals:
5000

W values in conditional tables are the mean and +/- SD from the mean.

NOTE: A heteroscedasticity consistent standard error and covariance matrix estimator was used.

NOTE: The following variables were mean centered prior to analysis:

SD SEB

----- END MATRIX -----

Appendix 12 Declaration of AI Use

I hereby confirm that AI tools were employed during the preparation of this thesis strictly as assistants to support the writing, editing, and research process. At no point were these tools used as a replacement for my own critical thinking, academic judgment, or authorship. All substantive content, analyses, and conclusions reflect my independent intellectual contributions.

Specifically:

- **ChatGPT** was used for linguistic and editorial support, including grammar, spelling, phrasing, and clarity improvements. Its use was limited to refining the readability of the text without altering or generating original content.
- **ChatGPT** and **CanvaAI** were used to assist in the creation of the visual materials that served as experimental stimuli in the empirical part of this thesis. All stimuli were designed, selected, and critically evaluated by me to ensure they aligned with the research objectives and methodological standards.
- **DeepL** was employed to support the translation of text passages, particularly for translating measurement scales between English and German.
- **Perplexity AI** was used as a supplementary tool for literature search and exploration of academic sources.
- **NotebookLM** was used as an organizational aid to structure literature notes and synthesize previously uploaded academic materials. It served only to assist in managing content I had already selected and reviewed.

All AI tools were used in compliance with academic guidelines, and their application was strictly limited to supportive functions throughout the development of this thesis.