



User-designed disclosure, whether fans or consumers: Signaling innovation across technological vs. non-technological contexts

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ABSTRACT

Firms increasingly disclose the authorship of their product designs, highlighting when offerings are “*fan-designed*”. Yet existing research has focused almost exclusively on firm-level outcomes of such disclosures, leaving unclear whether they also shape product-level perceptions, how authorship cues translate into purchase intention, whether fan-specific wording outperforms more generic consumer-designed labels, and whether these effects vary across product categories. This research investigates the communicative and perceptual consequences of such fan-designed disclosures defined as public statements that assign authorship of design decisions to fans. Drawing on signaling theory and heuristic processing, three experiments examine whether, how, and when these disclosures shape market responses. Across studies, attributing authorship to fans rather than the company elevates both perceived firm innovativeness and perceived product innovativeness, the latter mediating effects on purchase intention. This is a pathway not previously demonstrated in the user-designed literature. Disclosing that products were designed by *fans* rather than *consumers* produces equivalent outcomes when credibility and process rigor are held constant, indicating that user authorship (not the specific user subtype) is the operative cue, thereby challenging predictions implied by lead-user research. Furthermore, the effects of user-designed disclosure are stronger in technological categories, where product performance is harder to evaluate ex ante and design cues become more diagnostic, connecting the user-designed literature to classic work on processing routes and cue diagnosticity. We refine theory on user-designed disclosure and offer managers concrete guidance on what to say, how specific to be, and where such messages most effectively signal innovation.

1. Introduction

Around the world, firms now publicly credit “users” as product designers, treating them as part of the launch message. LEGO has institutionalized this practice through LEGO Ideas,¹ where community submissions that reach 10,000 votes can be produced as official sets, and the packaging and launch stories explicitly spotlight the fan designer (e.g., the Vincent van Gogh Starry Night set was introduced with an interview of the fan behind it). Kobo,² a reading-technology company, similarly addresses its core audience as booklovers and, in multiple communications, frames its e-readers as “designed with the help of real

booklovers.” This practice extends well beyond creative industries. Xiaomi, one of the world's leading consumer electronics companies, has built its entire product development strategy around its fan community (MIUI forum), explicitly involving them in design decisions for smartphones and smart devices and making user authorship a central part of its market communications, illustrating how user-designed disclosure operates in highly standardized, technologically complex categories where performance is difficult to evaluate before purchase (Li et al., 2019). These visible authorship cues (e.g., “fan-designed,” “designed with booklovers”) illustrate how firms make fan authorship part of the product's identity in the moment of market introduction.

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¹ <https://www.lego.com/en-us/categories/adults-welcome/article/fan-designer-lego-ideas-starry-night>.

² <https://www.kobo.com/news/announcing-kobo-aura-one-a-breakthrough-waterproof-e-reader-designed-with-the-help-of-real-booklovers>.

Scholars have increasingly examined how disclosing user authorship shapes market responses (see Appendix 1). Research shows that when firms sell user-designed products, observers infer higher innovativeness relative to the company; in other words, firms are viewed as more innovative organizations overall (Schreier et al., 2012; Dahl et al., 2015). Moving from perception to marketplace outcomes, field experiments demonstrate that marketing crowdsourced products as such (explicitly labeling their design origin) can yield commercial advantages, indicating that design disclosures act as effective marketplace cues (Nishikawa et al., 2017). Research also shows that user-generated ideas often score higher on novelty and customer benefit than professional designs, clarifying why user authorship can be read as content-diagnostic (Poetz and Schreier, 2012). Research also demonstrates that co-creation claims themselves (statements asserting that a product was developed with consumer involvement) can shape brand evaluations and behavioral intentions (van Dijk et al., 2014). Such findings underscore that the mere communication of user authorship can act as a persuasive signal, aligning with the broader evidence that design disclosures influence perceived firm innovativeness and consumer choice. These findings indicate that the appeal of outsider authorship is not uniform but shaped by consumer beliefs about authority and expertise. In addition, studies on communicating the creative process further show that the way firms describe how ideas emerge (e.g., insight vs. effort) systematically shifts evaluations, reinforcing the broader point that succinct production-origin messages guide judgments when product attributes are hard to appraise *ex ante* (Miceli et al., 2020).

However, although prior work contrasts *user-designed* versus *company-designed* disclosures, it rarely distinguishes among user subtypes. As a result, we do not yet know whether identifying contributors as fans—a highly engaged, identity-proximate subgroup (Fuschillo, 2020)—produces stronger persuasion than a more generic consumer-designed disclosure, or whether observers interpret both simply as equivalent signals of user authorship. Studying fan-designed products is relevant because fans constitute an engaged and knowledgeable subgroup whose contributions differ from generic consumer input. Fans often possess deep experience and domain expertise, consistent with lead-user research showing that highly involved users generate particularly novel and need-driven ideas (Urban and von Hippel, 1988; Poetz and Schreier, 2012). Their strong identification with and commitment to the brand can also make their creative input appear more authentic and culturally resonant (Fuschillo, 2020; Preiksaitis and Pearson, 2025). As firms increasingly spotlight fans in product launches (from LEGO Ideas to entertainment, gaming, and lifestyle brands) understanding whether fan-designed disclosures systematically shape perceptions of product and firm innovativeness, and whether they differ from broader user-designed claims, addresses an important gap in the literature on innovation signaling and co-creation communication (Paharia and Swaminathan, 2019; Song et al., 2021; Zhang and Jeong, 2023).

At the same time, the effects of user-designed products on consumer perception appear contingent on consumers' belief systems. Research shows that individuals high in power distance beliefs tend to prefer products attributed to experts, whereas those low in power distance respond more favorably to user-designed products (Paharia and Swaminathan, 2019; Song et al., 2021). In addition, research also suggests that the effectiveness of co-creation or authorship signals depends on the extent to which consumers are personally involved in the focal domain. Zhang and Jeong (2023) show that co-created green initiatives are more persuasive among highly involved consumers, who interpret co-creation claims as meaningful indicators of authenticity and innovativeness, whereas low-involvement consumers show weaker responses. This evidence highlights that consumer characteristics, not only message format, shape how design disclosures are processed.

However, research has yet to identify a clear product-category boundary condition for the effectiveness of design disclosures, and this gap may be particularly pronounced in the context of fan-designed products, for which no prior work has examined whether their

persuasiveness varies across categories. It remains unknown whether fan-designed disclosures exert stronger influence in technological domains, where performance is difficult to judge *ex ante* and consumers rely more heavily on heuristic cues, compared to non-technological domains, where product attributes are more transparent and easier to evaluate. This distinction is theoretically important because the evaluability of product attributes differs systematically across these domains, shaping how much weight consumers place on authorship cues. In technological categories, product performance is more complex and harder to assess, which increases consumers' reliance on heuristic signals such as design disclosures (Chaiken, 1980; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Under these low-evaluability conditions, external cues become more diagnostic (i.e., more influential in guiding judgments) because consumers cannot easily infer quality from intrinsic attributes alone (Feldman and Lynch, 1988). In contrast, non-technological products offer more familiar and transparent attributes that reduce uncertainty, enabling consumers to evaluate them with less dependence on authorship information. This evaluability asymmetry implies that fan-designed disclosures should have a stronger impact in technological contexts, where such cues provide meaningful information, and a weaker impact in non-technological contexts, where diagnosticity is lower because consumers can rely on direct attribute assessments instead.

In addition, although design disclosures are increasingly used in practice, existing research offers only a partial account of how they shape consumer evaluations. Prior studies examining user-designed products focus primarily on perceived firm innovativeness, showing that attributing authorship to external contributors can enhance impressions of a firm's creativity and exploratory capability (Schreier et al., 2012; Liljedal, 2016; Meißner et al., 2017; Costa and Coelho do Vale, 2018). However, this literature has not examined whether design disclosures also influence perceived product innovativeness, leaving unclear whether audiences infer that the product itself is more novel or original when fans are credited for its design. Moreover, although perceived innovativeness is often proposed as a key cognitive mechanism, prior work has not isolated the indirect pathway from design disclosure to purchase intention, meaning that the psychological process linking authorship cues to behavioral responses remains empirically untested.

These gaps converge on three connected questions: what does a user-designed disclosure communicate to consumers, does it matter whether the credited users are described as fans or as consumers, and under what conditions does the disclosure carry weight? Signaling theory (Spence, 1973) frames the first two. A disclosure is informative only insofar as it conveys a quality consumers cannot otherwise verify, which raises the question of whether that quality is the firm's innovation process, the design embodied in the product, or both. The same logic bears on how the contributor is named: a signal separates senders only where it is costly to produce, so crediting fans rather than consumers should carry incremental meaning only if the fan label rests on something a firm cannot costlessly assert. Heuristic processing and evaluability (Chaiken, 1980; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Feldman and Lynch, 1988) frame the third, since a credible cue carries weight only where consumers cannot appraise performance directly, which locates the conditions of interest in the product category rather than in the disclosure itself.

Our research addresses these questions by (a) directly comparing fan-designed with consumer-designed disclosures to test whether subtyping matters; (b) modeling two levels of effect, on perceived firm innovativeness and on product innovativeness that, in turn, carries purchase intention; and (c) locating a theoretically grounded technology/evaluability boundary where the disclosure is most diagnostic. These three advances yield distinct theoretical contributions. First, no prior research had directly compared fan- and consumer-designed disclosures to determine whether the specific user subtype matters for consumer inferences. By making this comparison, the present research reveals that the operative cue is user authorship, thereby resolving a tension between lead-user research, which implies that more engaged or

expert contributors should strengthen consumer responses, and signaling logic, which predicts that audiences apply a coarser user-authorship heuristic when subtype-specific competence is not explicitly signaled. Second, isolating authorship attribution as the operative cue, distinct from broader co-creation or participation language, and modeling its effects at both the firm and product levels sharpens the conceptual content of what user-designed disclosures actually communicate, while also establishing perceived product innovativeness as the psychological mechanism linking authorship cues to purchase intention. Third, testing whether the disclosure effect varies across technological versus non-technological categories connects the user-designed literature to classic work on processing routes and cue diagnosticity, establishing evaluability as a boundary condition that has not previously been examined in this literature. Beyond clarifying theory, these advances are managerially and policy relevant: they indicate what to say, how specific to be about the user group (fans vs. consumers), and where such disclosures are likely to be consequential (technological categories), thus informing innovation communication and market-response forecasting.

In the following section, we present the theoretical framework and hypotheses development. This is followed by the methodological approach and the study results.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. User-designed disclosure

A user-designed disclosure is a public statement that assigns authorship of product design to external users, operationalized in marketplace and lab contexts as firms stating that products were designed by users and rendered in concise phrases such as “designed by our users,” “user-designed,” “fan-designed” or “consumer-designed” in external-facing materials (e.g., launch communications, packaging, product pages) (Dahl et al., 2015; Schreier et al., 2012). The disclosure's semantic core is authorship attribution for design decisions: non-employee users are credited with substantive contributions to the design solution (including the selection, configuration, or creation of key features) consistent with user-innovation accounts of users as originators of product solutions (Schreier et al., 2012; Urban and von Hippel, 1988). By contrast, this notion excludes ancillary roles such as testing and feedback often described under broad co-creation framings, as well as idea voting, user-generated content, or endorsement, none of which attribute design authorship.

While user-designed disclosure is defined by the attribution of authorship to external users, the conditions under which such disclosures arise vary considerably across firms and product categories. From an open innovation perspective (Chesbrough, 2003), firms are more likely to draw on external contributions in industries where valuable knowledge is widely distributed and where fast-moving technology makes internal sources insufficient on their own, conditions that are especially pronounced in technologically complex categories. The process through which contributions are invited, evaluated, and selected also varies, from internal expert review to community voting or hybrid mechanisms, and shapes the perceived legitimacy of the resulting designs and, by extension, the credibility of the disclosure itself. Furthermore, the boundaries of user-designed disclosure are not always clearly drawn: firms do not always distinguish explicitly between products that are fully user-authored and those that are merely user-inspired, leaving consumers uncertain about the actual degree of user involvement. Understanding these contextual conditions is therefore important for appreciating both the scope and the limits of user-designed disclosure as a market communication practice (Lin et al., 2022).

2.2. Fans as particularly relevant users in design disclosures

Although design disclosures generally attribute authorship to

external users, fans represent a distinctive subgroup whose involvement may be interpreted differently by observers. Fans are defined here as consumers who are strongly attached to a brand, follow its product developments closely, and are willing to contribute ideas for its improvement or renewal (Fuschillo, 2020; Preiksaitis and Pearson, 2025). Fans typically exhibit unusually high levels of engagement, domain knowledge, and identification with the brand or product category (Fuschillo, 2020; Fuschillo et al., 2025; Preiksaitis and Pearson, 2025), characteristics associated with advanced users and early-need identifiers in the user-innovation tradition (Urban and von Hippel, 1988; Poetz and Schreier, 2012). Because such users are often more experienced, more motivated, and more culturally embedded (Fuschillo et al., 2025), their involvement can signal that the firm has drawn on particularly competent contributors—potentially strengthening inferences of authenticity, creativity, and need-driven insight. Prior work shows that user-designed products can enhance perceptions of a firm's innovativeness (Schreier et al., 2012; Dahl et al., 2015), and research on co-creation and value creation similarly demonstrates that involving committed consumers can improve evaluations when consumers perceive the process as genuine and competence-enhancing (Zhang and Jeong, 2023). Past studies also highlight that firms increasingly orchestrate user communities as sources of ideas and ongoing innovation (Lin et al., 2022) and that relevant lead users contribute disproportionately to disruptive innovation trajectories (Roy, 2018), underscoring the strategic importance of deeply involved user segments.

At the same time, expectations about the persuasive advantage of fan involvement are not straightforward. Research on consumer–firm identification and cultural belief structures shows that responses to user-designed outputs depend on audience characteristics: for instance, consumers with high power distance beliefs tend to prefer expert- over user-designed offerings (Paharia and Swaminathan, 2019; Song et al., 2021). These findings suggest that even if fans possess greater engagement and expertise, such attributes will translate into stronger persuasion only under conditions in which audiences view user authorship as credible and relevant. Despite the theoretical salience of fans, however, prior research has not examined whether consumers interpret fan-designed disclosures differently from more generic consumer-designed disclosures, nor whether fan authorship becomes more meaningful in domains where evaluability is low and diagnostic cues carry greater weight. This absence of empirical evidence motivates the present investigation of fans as a specific and theoretically consequential user subgroup in design disclosures.

To account for these dynamics, the present research draws on two theoretical frameworks. Signaling theory (Spence, 1973) explains why user-designed disclosures are credible at the firm level: by satisfying the conditions of observability and costliness, such disclosures function as separating signals that consumers can trust as indicators of genuine exploratory capability and external knowledge integration. However, signaling theory alone does not explain why the disclosure effect varies across product categories, nor does it fully specify the cognitive mechanism through which authorship cues shape product-level evaluations. Heuristic processing and evaluability theory (Chaiken, 1980; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Feldman and Lynch, 1988) address this gap by explaining when and why compact cues carry more diagnostic weight: in technological categories, where pre-use performance is hard to assess, consumers rely more heavily on heuristic signals such as design disclosures, making these cues more influential than in non-technological categories where attributes are more transparent. Together, we believe these two frameworks provide a coherent and non-redundant theoretical architecture.

2.3. Signaling theory and user innovation

A foundational assumption of signaling theory is the presence of information asymmetry between two parties (Spence, 1973). In the context of user-designed disclosure, this asymmetry is straightforward:

the firm (the signaler) has private knowledge of the true nature of its innovation process, whether it is genuinely open, exploratory, and capable of integrating external knowledge, but observing consumers (the receivers) cannot directly verify this before purchase. Consumers must therefore rely on observable cues to form inferences about the firm's innovation capabilities and the quality of its products. For a signal to be effective under this asymmetry, [Spence \(1973\)](#) identifies two necessary conditions. First, the signal must be observable: it must be visible and interpretable by the receiver. Second, the signal must be costly: it must be sufficiently difficult or expensive to produce that low quality senders cannot profitably mimic it. It is precisely this cost differential that gives the signal its credibility and separating power. Only firms with genuinely open and exploratory innovation processes can bear the costs of a fan-designed disclosure without it becoming counterproductive.

Public acknowledgments of user authorship are plainly observable in market communications, appearing on packaging, product pages, and launch narratives ([Schreier et al., 2012](#); [Dahl et al., 2015](#)). They are also costly: orchestrating a genuine fan-design process requires identifying contributors, screening ideas, integrating outside designs, and bearing reputational exposure if the resulting product underperforms. A firm with a weak or closed innovation process could not easily mimic such a disclosure without incurring disproportionate costs related to the payoff. Consumers have reason to treat the disclosure as diagnostic of exploration and external knowledge integration, not merely as promotional language ([Spence, 1973](#)).

This observability is produced rather than given. The origin of a design leaves no trace in the finished product, so a fan-designed offering is indistinguishable from a company-designed one unless the firm elects to disclose the difference and to place that disclosure where consumers will encounter it. This distinguishes the present signal from those in which the signaling act coincides with the observable outcome, as with the credential in [Spence's \(1973\)](#) original account. Here the firm first bears the cost of an open design process and then bears the further cost of making that process visible, in communication space that could have carried other claims and with the reputational exposure that a public attribution creates. The decision to promote the disclosure is therefore part of what makes it costly, and a firm that runs a user design program without communicating it forgoes the signal entirely, however genuine the underlying process.

The channel through which user authorship is organized also varies, and this variation has signaling consequences. Some firms host their own communities, as LEGO does through LEGO Ideas and Xiaomi through its MIUI forum ([Li et al., 2019](#)), whereas others source designs through crowdsourcing platforms that operate independently of any single brand. The two arrangements differ in who bears the cost that makes the disclosure credible. A firm that builds and maintains its own community absorbs the cost of recruiting contributors, sustaining their engagement, running the selection process ([Lin et al., 2022](#)), and exposing itself reputationally if the resulting product underperforms, so the disclosure remains diagnostic of that firm's own innovation process in the sense required by [Spence \(1973\)](#). When designs are sourced from an independent platform, much of that infrastructure cost is borne by the platform, whose services are available to any firm willing to pay for access, which weakens the separating power of the disclosure at the firm level even though the design still originates with external users. Two considerations qualify this expectation. A platform introduces a third party to the claim, and independent involvement may compensate for lower firm borne cost by making the authorship claim easier to verify; and since contributor characteristics that are not accompanied by additional cost or competence cues leave inferences unchanged, the difference between the two channels should reside in the cost structure of the disclosure rather than in the attachment of contributors to the brand. On this logic, disclosures resting on a community hosted by the firm should outweigh those sourced from an independent platform where consumer uncertainty concerns the firm's innovation capability,

whereas the two should converge where uncertainty concerns the design itself, since the inference that the product embodies need-driven insight from experienced users is supplied by user authorship in either case, a proposition on which the present research does not focus, since channel is held constant across conditions, and which we identify as a direction for future research.

These arrangements also bring together actors whose objectives need not coincide. The firm seeks favorable market response and bears the cost of the disclosure; a platform, where one is involved, seeks contribution volume and client retention; contributing users seek recognition and, depending on the governance arrangement, compensation; and observing consumers seek to reduce uncertainty about quality before purchase. Divergence among these objectives bears on the credibility of the disclosure rather than standing apart from it, since a platform that maximizes throughput may relax selection rigor and lower the cost that gives the disclosure its separating power, and contributors who judge the arrangement unfavorable may withhold their best ideas. Signaling theory is nonetheless a two party framework, and the relationship it describes here runs from the firm as signaler to observing consumers as receivers ([Spence, 1973](#)); platforms and contributors enter as conditions on the production of the signal rather than as parties to it. The present research examines the receiver side of this relationship and holds the sender side arrangement constant across conditions. The product classification follows the same boundary: technological and non-technological categories are distinguished by how readily consumers can appraise performance before purchase, an evaluability property defined from the receiver's standpoint, and not by criteria a firm, a platform, or a contributor would apply, such as which categories are strategically core, which briefs attract solvers, or which are rewarding to design for.

Complementing this signal-based interpretation, user or lead-user innovation research provides a content account of what user authorship implies for the artifact itself. Lead users tend to encounter needs earlier and more intensely and accumulate use-experience expertise and tacit solution knowledge that can be translated into workable designs ([Urban and von Hippel, 1988](#)). When authorship is made explicit, observers can infer that the resulting product likely embodies need-driven novelty and superior problem-solution fit ([Urban and von Hippel, 1988](#)). Empirically, marketplace and laboratory evidence shows that communicating user authorship shapes consumers' innovation-related impressions, consistent with this content pathway ([Schreier et al., 2012](#); [Dahl et al., 2015](#)). Related research on user-designed products documents that making outsider authorship visible affects perceived innovativeness and market response ([Nishikawa et al., 2013](#); [Nishikawa et al., 2017](#)).

Complementing evidence that participation claims can move brand responses, recent work on crowdsourced product promotion shows that how firms present co-contributors critically shapes persuasion. Featuring highly attractive co-contributors can backfire, as it activates persuasion-knowledge (skepticism about whether the person is a genuine contributor) and disrupts the perceived similarity that typically underpins the appeal of crowdsourced products ([Cambier et al., 2025](#)). This underscores that communication about user involvement must preserve diagnostic credibility and similarity to remain persuasive. These effects arise from the portrayal of specific contributors, however, and are therefore conceptually distinct from the authorship attribution itself, which is the object of the present framework and whose credibility rests on the observability and cost conditions specified above.

2.4. Heuristic processing and evaluability

Classic work on heuristic processing and evaluability explains when origin information should matter most. When pre-use performance is difficult to appraise, individuals rely more on heuristic or peripheral routes and give greater weight to compact, diagnostic cues embedded in communications ([Chaiken, 1980](#); [Petty and Cacioppo, 1986](#)). As

evaluability decreases, accessible cues exert stronger influence on belief formation and downstream judgments (Feldman and Lynch, 1988). Treating technology as an evaluability context, technologically complex categories should heighten the diagnostic value of user-designed disclosures relative to non-technological categories where attributes are more transparent (Chaiken, 1980; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Feldman and Lynch, 1988).

3. Hypothesis development

Before developing each hypothesis, we specify how the two frameworks divide the explanatory labor. Signaling theory (Spence, 1973) accounts for why a user-designed disclosure is believed: because the disclosure is observable and costly to produce, receivers can treat it as a credible indicator of qualities they cannot verify before purchase, first of the firm's innovation process (H1) and then of the design embodied in the product itself (H2). Heuristic processing and evaluability (Chaiken, 1980; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Feldman and Lynch, 1988) account for how that credible cue is used: they explain why the inference the cue triggers, rather than the disclosure itself, carries the behavioral response (H3), why receivers encode the cue at the level of user authorship rather than user subtype (H4), and why its weight rises as pre-use evaluability falls (H5).

When firms publicly credit fans for product design, the message goes beyond a simple creative flourish. Such disclosures indicate that the firm is willing and able to identify, engage with, and integrate ideas from a highly involved segment of users. Sourcing, evaluating, and incorporating fan contributions entails coordination effort and reputational exposure, particularly if the resulting product underperforms. For this reason, attributing design authorship to fans can operate as a costly signal of the firm's openness to external expertise and exploratory orientation (Spence, 1973). Fans, in turn, are typically described as deeply invested consumers who follow brands closely, accumulate tacit knowledge through repeated use, and often display domain-specific creativity (Fuschillo, 2020). Highlighting collaboration with this group may therefore encourage observers to draw inferences about the firm's underlying innovation routines—its capacity to sense and integrate valuable external inputs—rather than focusing solely on the novelty of a single product (Schreier et al., 2012; Dahl et al., 2015). In this sense, emphasizing fan authorship can signal organizational innovativeness even when the focal product itself is held constant.

H1. . Fan-designed (vs. company-designed) disclosure increases perceived firm innovativeness.

At the product level, labeling an offering as fan-designed may shape how consumers interpret the origin and quality of the design, an attribute they cannot verify before purchase and which therefore constitutes a second information asymmetry (Spence, 1973). Research on fans portrays them as unusually attentive and knowledgeable participants who actively engage with products, narratives, or technologies and develop nuanced understandings through repeated use and experimentation (Preiksaitis and Pearson, 2025; Fuschillo, 2020). From a lead-user perspective, fans often resemble early-need identifiers: they monitor product developments closely, experiment with alternatives, and build tacit insight into which features matter and why (Urban and von Hippel, 1988; Wang et al., 2023). Because the disclosure remains observable and costly at this level as well, a firm could not credibly attach it to a product developed without such input, and consumers may therefore infer that the product incorporates need-driven ideas and reflects a closer fit between problems and solutions than designs attributed solely to the firm. Building on prior evidence that disclosing user authorship increases perceptions of innovativeness even when the underlying artifact is unchanged (Schreier et al., 2012; Dahl et al., 2015), which is the condition our design imposes, we expect that identifying fans as designers elevates perceived product innovativeness. In this context, fans are not only seen as knowledgeable but also as intrinsically motivated contributors, which

can further reinforce the perception that their creative input is experientially grounded rather than commercially driven (Preiksaitis and Pearson, 2025).

H2. . Fan-designed (vs. company-designed) disclosure increases perceived product innovativeness.

If a fan-designed disclosure elevates perceived product innovativeness, that perception should serve as the psychological route through which the disclosure affects purchase intention. This mediated form follows from signaling logic itself, since a signal has value to receivers only through the belief it revises about an unobservable quality (Spence, 1973), and should therefore act on intention through the inference it produces rather than alongside it. Under launch-typical conditions (when consumers face limited time, incomplete attribute information, and moderate involvement) they rely on heuristic processing, allowing compact and credible cues to stand in for detailed evaluation (Chaiken, 1980; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Fan authorship provides precisely such a diagnostic cue: because fans are seen as knowledgeable, enthusiastic, and experientially close to the product category (Fuschillo, 2020; Fuschillo et al., 2025; Preiksaitis and Pearson, 2025), their involvement signals that the product is likely to embody novel and well-fitted features, thereby increasing perceived innovativeness. Prior research on user-designed products shows that enhancements in perceived innovativeness reliably translate into downstream choice and behavioral intentions (Schreier et al., 2012; Dahl et al., 2015). Consistent with accessibility-diagnostics principles (Feldman and Lynch, 1988), once perceived innovativeness is accounted for, the direct effect of a fan-designed disclosure on purchase intention should diminish or disappear, indicating that the indirect pathway through perceived innovativeness captures the underlying process.

H3. . The effect of fan-designed (vs. company-designed) disclosure on purchase intention is indirect via perceived product innovativeness.

Specifying “fan-designed” rather than “consumer-designed” does not, in this context, add incremental diagnostic information beyond the attribution of experienced-user authorship when credibility and process rigor are held constant. In signaling terms, both labels rest on the same underlying cost, since what makes either disclosure credible is the expense of orchestrating a genuine external design process rather than the noun used to describe the contributors (Spence, 1973), and a label that is costless to substitute cannot separate firms that user authorship does not already separate. From a diagnostics perspective, observers rely on category-level cues that are informative for judgment; when two labels signal the same underlying property (i.e., the design originates from non-employee users with relevant use experience), they are likely to be treated as functionally equivalent (Feldman and Lynch, 1988). Although fans are often characterized by higher engagement or identity proximity, these attributes do not automatically translate into higher perceived design competence unless explicitly communicated as such, that is, unless the firm bears the additional cost of evidencing vetting, prototyping, or technical screening. In the absence of cues indicating superior expertise, stricter vetting, or exceptional skills, audiences apply a coarse user-authorship heuristic, focusing on whether the designer is a user rather than on finer distinctions within the user category. Consistent with this logic, prior research shows robust differences between user-designed and company-designed products, but provides no evidence that merely subtyping users (without signaling additional competence) systematically alters innovation inferences (Schreier et al., 2012; Dahl et al., 2015). Fan and consumer labels thus converge in meaning at the level relevant for innovativeness judgments, leading to equivalent perceptions of product innovativeness and downstream purchase intention.

H4. . Disclosing fan-designed versus consumer-designed does not change perceived product innovativeness and yields equivalent purchase intentions (via innovativeness).

The persuasive value of design cues may depend on evaluability, and both frameworks converge on this point. The informational value of a signal is proportional to the asymmetry it resolves, so where quality can be assessed directly the signal becomes largely redundant (Spence, 1973). In technological categories, pre-use performance is harder to appraise, so individuals place greater weight on diagnostic cues that economize on processing; in non-technological categories, where attributes are more transparent, the same cue carries less incremental information (Chaiken, 1980; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Feldman and Lynch, 1988). This asymmetry implies that the user-over-company advantage on perceived product innovativeness—and the corresponding indirect effect on intention—will be concentrated in technological contexts and attenuated elsewhere (Schreier et al., 2012; Dahl et al., 2015; Chaiken, 1980; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Feldman and Lynch, 1988).

H5. . The advantage of user-designed (fans or consumers) versus company-designed on perceived product innovativeness, and its indirect effect on purchase intention, is stronger in technological categories and attenuated or absent in non-technological categories.

Through three studies, we examine how design disclosures shape consumer perceptions at different evaluative levels and under varying contextual conditions. Study 1 explores whether attributing the design of a product to fans influences perceptions of the firm's innovativeness, extending prior work that has focused primarily on firm-level outcomes of user involvement. Study 2 analyzes the product-level consequences of fan-designed disclosures by assessing their effect on perceived product innovativeness and by testing whether this perception serves as the psychological pathway to purchase intention. Study 3 further investigates the nature of design disclosures by comparing fan-designed with consumer-designed labels to determine whether user subtyping matters, and by testing whether the effectiveness of design disclosures depends on the technological versus non-technological nature of the product category. Together, these studies allow us to build a multi-level and context-sensitive understanding of how design disclosures operate in the marketplace.

4. Study 1

4.1. Method

The study sample consisted of 200 participants residing in France (46.5% aged between 20 and 24 years old, 26.5% aged between 25 and 39 years old; 62.5% male) recruited in December 2017 on Foule Factory, an online panel of residents of France, who received €1 for completing the questionnaire. An experimental design was employed to test the proposed effect. They were randomly assigned to one condition in a 2 (design disclosure: fans vs. company) $\times$ 2 (product domain: utilitarian vs. hedonic) between-subjects design. In the fan-designed condition, participants were first exposed to the fan definition “*The members of the NIKE+ community are passionate and attached to the NIKE brand. They gladly come up with ideas for new products of continuous improvement or radical innovations. They deeply love the NIKE brand that they couldn't wear any other brand of sports shoe! They are called Fans of the NIKE brand.*” The brand NIKE was chosen because of its international presence and because the company is known for releasing innovative products. Also, using this real brand enabled us to strengthen the ecological validity of our research (Morales et al., 2017). Then, after the fan definition, a picture of NIKE's “hyperadapt” shoes model was presented to participants, and it was indicated that this model was designed by the brand's fans: “*THE ‘HYPERADAPT’ MODEL DESIGNED BY NIKE FANS!*”. Below this, the following text was presented to show the particularity of the product model: “*The Nike ‘hyperadapt’ model offers the possibility of tightening the laces according to the morphology of the foot, providing better running comfort. The ‘EARL’ system, which stands for ‘Electro Adaptive Reactive Lacing,’ is made up of two small + and – buttons on the sides for a*

perfect fit.” In the company condition, no definition was presented, and below the model's picture it was indicated that the product was designed by the company “*NIKE INNOVATION: THE ‘HYPERADAPT’ MODEL DESIGNED BY NIKE'S R&D TEAMS!*” Then, the text about the model's particularity was presented (see Appendix 2). All materials were developed and administered in French; the wording reported here and in the appendices is an English translation.

In the utilitarian product condition, below this text, it was added that better lightness, durability, and performance are obtained in this product. In the hedonic one, on the other hand, it was indicated that a light of different colors will allow consumers to be visible when they play sports and that the cushioning of the sole is optimal, providing them with unrivaled sensations. They were also told to imagine themselves with these shoes during their running sessions and were indicated that fun and performance are guaranteed and that varied and original colors would also delight all their senses.

After exposure to one condition, participants evaluated perceived firm innovativeness through the following questions: “*I think Nike's ability to innovate is: not high-very high, not excellent-very excellent*” ($\alpha = 0.868$). A 7-point anchor was used to measure this semantic differential scale.

To check the effectiveness of the *product domain* manipulation, respondents were asked to evaluate (from 1 = utilitarian to 7 = hedonic) to what extent the product proposed is utilitarian (good technical qualities) or hedonic (good aesthetic qualities). Indeed, the results revealed that respondents in the hedonic condition perceived greater hedonic qualities than those in the utilitarian condition ($M_{hedonic} = 4.26$, $SD = 1.39$ vs. $M_{utilitarian} = 3.37$, $SD = 1.57$, $F(1, 198) = 16.4$, $p < .001$). Regarding the fan-designed (vs. company designed) manipulation of design disclosure, since the expected outcomes of the manipulation are well understood (Grujters, 2022), we decided not to check it. In fact, we added a whole page explaining the collaboration with the brand fans. Therefore, we expected that participants would really perceive it.

4.2. Results and discussion

To test H1, an ANOVA was performed that included *design disclosure* and *product domain*, both as the fixed factors, perceived firm innovativeness as the dependent variable, and age as the covariate. Bringing support to H1, results showed a significant effect of design disclosure on perceived firm innovativeness. In other words, there is a significant difference between the fan-designed condition and the company-designed condition regarding perceived firm innovativeness ($M_{fans} = 5.51$, $SD = 0.76$ vs $M_{company} = 5.19$, $SD = 1.01$; $F(1, 193)^3 = 4.101$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = 2.1\%$). The results also showed no main effect of product domain ($p > .05$) or interaction effect of design disclosure and product domain ($p > .05$). Regarding the covariate, it has a direct effect on perceived firm innovativeness ($F(1, 193) = 11.177$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = 5.5\%$). Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for Study 1.

Study 1 establishes that fan-designed disclosures enhance perceived

Table 1
Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) — Study 1.

Descriptive statistics		Overall	Fan-designed condition	Company-designed condition
Study 1	Perceived firm innovativeness	5.27 (0.96)	5.51 (0.76)	5.19 (1.01)

Note: Standard deviations in parentheses.

³ 2 individuals who did not provide their age were excluded from data analysis.

firm innovativeness relative to company-designed claims, but it does not clarify how these disclosures shape consumers' evaluations of the product itself or how such product-level inferences translate into behavioral intentions. Moreover, Study 1 relies on a real brand (Nike), which, despite its ecological validity, introduces the possibility that pre-existing brand associations could influence participants' responses. To address these gaps, Study 2 shifts the focus from firm-level perceptions to product-level innovativeness and adopts a fictitious brand (Company X) to eliminate brand-specific associations and strengthen internal validity, ensuring that any observed effects can be attributed solely to the design disclosure manipulation. Study 2 also explicitly tests the psychological process proposed in H3 by examining whether perceived product innovativeness mediates the influence of design disclosure on purchase intention. In doing so, Study 2 provides a more granular understanding of how fan authorship cues operate at the consumer decision-making level.

5. Study 2

5.1. Procedure, sample, and measures

Data collection was conducted online through Foulé Factory in April 2021. A final sample of 190 participants residing in France was retained after excluding respondents who failed the recall check. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four scenarios that manipulated *design disclosure* (fan-designed vs. company-designed) and *product type* (cars vs. smartwatches). In each scenario, participants were initially informed that company X (whose firm name was concealed to preserve its anonymity) specializes in cars (vs. smartwatches). They were also informed that they would be presented with some of the company's most recent products and some information regarding their new product development strategy. Then, participants were informed that the company exclusively relied on its community of brand fans (vs. its internal team of product designers). They were also informed that the fans (vs. company professionals) were responsible for the design of the new products, and the company ultimately selected the best ideas to continuously market them as new 'designed by fans' products (vs. new products only) to the general public (see **Appendix 3**).

After having been exposed to one condition, participants were asked to evaluate purchase intention and perceived product innovativeness, in this order. All measures were drawn from prior research. Purchase intention was measured through an adaptation of [Dodds et al.'s \(1991\)](#) scale. Participants were first asked to imagine that they wanted to buy a product in this category and then whether they would consider purchasing products of the company. Participants evaluated their purchase intention through the following two items: "I would seriously consider purchasing products from this company" and "I would actively seek out this company." A 7-point Likert scale was used to measure this construct. Perceived product innovativeness was measured using a three-item measure adapted from [Ma et al. \(2014\)](#). Participants were asked if they thought that the product is "not innovative-innovative," "old-new," and "classical-original" ($\alpha = 0.828$). A 7-point anchor was used to measure this scale.

To check the effectiveness of the design disclosure manipulation, a procedure of attribute recall was also used. Twenty-seven respondents who failed to remember the design disclosure (fan-designed or company-designed) were excluded from the sampling process. Unlike Study 1, a manipulation check was required due to the limited information on the type of design disclosure given. However, regarding the manipulation of product type, we chose not to include a manipulation check, since the expected outcome of this manipulation is well understood. In fact, we highly anticipate that individuals can easily differentiate a car from a watch.

5.2. Results and discussion

To test our hypothesis, a MANOVA was performed that included *design disclosure* and *product type* both as the fixed factors; purchase intention and perceived product innovativeness as the dependent variables, and age as covariate, as in Study 1. Bringing support to H2, results showed a significant main and direct effect of design disclosure on perceived product innovativeness, but not on purchase intention. In other words, there is a significant difference between the fan-designed condition and the company-designed condition regarding perceived product innovativeness ($M_{fans} = 5.24$, $SD = 1.19$ vs $M_{company} = 4.83$, $SD = 1.27$; $F(1, 185) = 5.072$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = 2.7\%$), but not regarding purchase intention ($M_{fans} = 3.83$, $SD = 1.54$ vs $M_{company} = 3.95$, $SD = 1.26$; $F(1, 185) = 0.309$, $p > .05$). The results also showed no main effect of product type ($p > .05$) nor interaction effect of design disclosure nor product type ($p > .05$). Also, the results show that age does not have a significant effect on perceived product innovativeness or on purchase intention (all $ps > 0.05$). **Table 2** presents the descriptive statistics for Study 2.

Then, the mediating effect of design disclosure on purchase intention through perceived product innovativeness was tested. To test this indirect effect, the PROCESS macro (Model 4; 10,000 bootstrap samples) was used. Specifically, purchase intention served as the dependent variable, perceived product innovativeness as the mediating variable, and the design disclosure conditions as the independent variable (1 = fans, 0 = company). Age served as a covariate. Results revealed a significant indirect effect of design disclosure on purchase intention through perceived product innovativeness (Indirect effect = 0.155, 95% CI = 0.015, 0.348), bringing support to H3. Specifically, and in line with H2, design disclosure exerts a positive effect on perceived product innovativeness ($\beta = 0.414$, $t = 2.247$, $p < .05$, 95%CI = 0.050, 0.777), which in turn positively affects purchase intention ($\beta = 0.375$, $t = 4.542$, $p < .001$, 95%CI = 0.212, 0.538). **Table 3** presents the regression coefficients for the mediation analysis.

Study 2 shows that fan-designed disclosures increase perceived product innovativeness and that this perception indirectly carries purchase intention. However, this study compares only fan-designed with company-designed products, leaving two important questions unresolved. First, it remains unknown whether consumers differentiate between fan-designed and consumer-designed disclosures, which is an unanswered question given the theoretical debate about user subtyping. Second, Study 2 does not examine whether the effectiveness of these disclosures varies across product categories that differ in evaluability. Study 3 therefore extends the investigation by (a) incorporating a consumer-designed condition to test the equivalence prediction in H4, and (b) contrasting technological with non-technological products to evaluate the boundary condition specified in H5.

6. Study 3

6.1. Procedure, sample and measures

A final sample of 228 participants residing in France (50.4% female, $M_{age} = 40.25$, ranging from 18 to 74) was retained after excluding respondents who failed a check provided in the questionnaire (to verify if

Table 2
Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) — Study 2.

Descriptive statistics		Overall	fan-designed condition	company-designed condition
Study 2	Perceived product innovativeness	5.09 (1.23)	5.24 (1.19)	4.83 (1.27)
	Purchase intention	3.88 (1.44)	3.83 (1.54)	3.95 (1.26)

Note: Standard deviations in parentheses.

Table 3
Regression coefficients — Study 2.

	Regression coefficients	Unstand. β	t	95% CI
Study 2 (fans vs the company)	Design disclosure → Perceived product innovativeness	0.414	2.25*	[0.050; 0.777]
	Perceived product innovativeness → Purchase intention	0.375	4.54***	[0.212; 0.538]
	Design disclosure → Perceived product innovativeness → Purchase Intention	0.155	–	[0.015; 0.348]

* $p < 0.05$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

they remembered the condition to which they were exposed) and those whose completion duration was over 1 h, which is unfeasible for an experiment (Arndt et al., 2022). They also participated in an online experiment using the platform Foule Factory, conducted in February 2022. The setting retained for this study resembled that of Study 2; however, the consumer-designed condition was included in the design disclosure variable, and the product types studied were cars (technological product) versus cereals (non-technological product). The consumer-designed condition was constructed in parallel to the fan-designed condition, attributing the design to the company's consumers rather than to its community of brand fans, with all other wording held constant, so that the two conditions differed in whether the products were described as 'designed by fans' or 'designed by consumers'. A total of six scenarios were created using a 3 (design disclosure: fan-designed vs company-designed vs consumer-designed) $\times$ 2 (product type: cars vs cereals) between-subjects design (see Appendix 4).

Following exposure to one of the scenarios, participants were first asked to rate their intention to purchase a product from this company, using the identical material as in Study 2. Subsequently, they assessed perceived product innovativeness, which was, however, measured with a single item (Matthews et al., 2022). We contend that the item "not innovative-innovative" encapsulates the notion of innovativeness comprehensively. Furthermore, we chose to include involvement as a covariate. Given the significant differences between the two product categories, we assert that involvement may elucidate purchase intention. Involvement was assessed using the following two items: "Cereals/cars mean a lot to me." "I attach particular importance to cereals/cars" ($\alpha = 0.896$). All the items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale.

Like Study 2, an attribute recall approach was used to assess the efficacy of the design disclosure manipulation. Concerning the product type manipulation, like Study 2, we opted not to include a manipulation check, since the anticipated result of this manipulation is well comprehended. We expect that people will readily distinguish a car from cereals.

6.2. Results

To test our hypotheses, as in Study 2, a MANOVA was performed that included *design disclosure* and *product type* both as the fixed factors, purchase intention and perceived product innovativeness as the dependent variables, and age and involvement as covariates. In addition, gender was included as a covariate, given evidence of gender differences in consumer information processing and response (Meyers-Levy and Loken, 2015).

Bringing support to hypothesis H2, results showed a significant main effect of *design disclosure* on perceived product innovativeness ($F(2, 219) = 3.189, p < .05, \eta^2 = 2.8\%$) but not on purchase intention ($F(2, 219) = 0.719, p > .05$). To identify in which groups we find differences regarding perceived product innovativeness, we conducted a pairwise comparison analysis. Results show a significant difference between the

fan-designed condition and the company-designed condition ($M_{fans} = 5.15, M_{company} = 4.62, p < .05, CI = 0.081; 0.991$), and between the consumer-designed condition and the company-designed condition ($M_{consumers} = 5.09, M_{company} = 4.62, p < .05, CI = 0.014; 0.922$). However, no significant effect was found between the fan-designed condition and the consumer-designed condition ($M_{fans} = 5.15, M_{consumers} = 5.09, p > .05$), in support of H4. To move beyond the absence of a significant difference, we conducted an equivalence test (TOST; Lakens, 2017) on the fan-designed versus consumer-designed contrast, setting the smallest effect size of interest at $d = 0.38$, which is the magnitude of the fan-versus-company effect observed in this study, on the rationale that a subtype advantage smaller than the user-authorship effect itself would be theoretically negligible. The test indicated statistical equivalence, $t(150) = -2.06, p = .021$, with the 90% CI of the difference $[-0.32, 0.44]$ falling entirely within the equivalence bounds, providing positive support for H4 rather than merely a failure to detect a difference. Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for Study 3.

Regarding the interaction effect of *design disclosure* and *product type*, our results show that there are significant differences only for technological products (i.e., cars, see Fig. 1). For this type of product, there is a significant difference between the fan-designed condition and the company-designed condition ($M_{fans} = 5.49, M_{company} = 4.78, p < .05, CI = 0.053; 1.361$) and between the consumer-designed conditions and the company-designed condition ($M_{consumers} = 5.45, M_{company} = 4.78, p < .05, CI = 0.007; 1.331$), in support of H5. This important result will be discussed in the next section.

Then, as in Study 2, we tested the mediating effect of design disclosure on purchase intention through perceived product innovativeness. The PROCESS macro (Model 4; 10,000 bootstrap samples) was also used to test this indirect effect. However, since the independent variable is multicategorical, we used the *indicator* coding to identify differences between the company-designed condition and the two others. The results show that there is a significant mediating effect of perceived product innovativeness when comparing the fan-designed condition and the company-designed condition (Indirect effect = 0.190, 95%CI = 0.031, 0.389) and between the consumer-designed condition and the company-designed condition (Indirect effect = 0.080, 95%CI = 0.009, 0.173), which replicates our previous results. Table 5 presents the regression coefficients for the mediation analyses.

The results also showed a main effect of product type on perceived product innovativeness ($M_{cereal} = 4.69$ vs $M_{cars} = 5.22$; $F(1, 219) = 9.207, p < .05, \eta^2 = 4\%$) but not on purchase intention ($p > .05$). Also, the results show that involvement has a positive effect on both perceived product innovativeness ($F(1, 219) = 9.764, p < .01, \eta^2 = 4.3\%$) and purchase intention ($F(1, 219) = 17.280, p < .001, \eta^2 = 7.3\%$) and age has a positive effect on perceived product innovativeness ($F(1, 219) = 3.893, p < .05, \eta^2 = 1.7\%$). However, age does not have a significant effect on purchase intention, and neither does gender on perceived product innovativeness nor purchase intention (all $ps > 0.05$).

Together, the three studies provide convergent evidence across firm-level, product-level, and category-level perspectives. Study 1 demonstrates that fan-designed disclosures elevate perceived firm innovativeness; Study 2 shows that these disclosures enhance perceived product innovativeness and influence purchase intention indirectly; and Study 3 clarifies that fan-designed and consumer-designed cues produce equivalent effects while also revealing that these effects are concentrated in technological categories. The General Discussion integrates these findings to articulate their theoretical and managerial implications.

7. General discussion

Across the three studies, the present research both aligns with and diverges from past findings on user authorship and design-related communications. Consistent with prior work showing that user-designed products can enhance perceptions of a firm's innovativeness (Schreier et al., 2012; Dahl et al., 2015), Study 1 demonstrates that a fan-

Table 4
Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) — Study 3.

	Descriptive statistics	Overall	Fan-designed condition	Company-designed condition	Consumer-designed condition
Study 3	Perceived product innovativeness	4.95 (1.41)	5.15 (1.40)	4.62 (1.41)	5.09 (1.42)
	Purchase intention	4.15 (1.26)	4.06 (1.25)	4.08 (1.26)	4.28 (1.26)

Note: Standard deviations in parentheses.

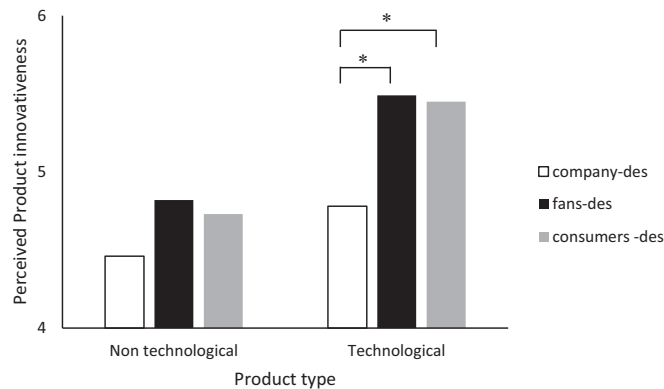


Fig. 1. Perceived product innovativeness as a function of design disclosure and product type. * $p < .05$.

Table 5
Regression coefficients — Study 3.

	Regression coefficients	Unstand. β	t	95% CI
Study 3 (fans vs. company)	Design disclosure → Perceived product innovativeness	0.567	2.49*	[0.116; 1.017]
	Perceived product innovativeness → Purchase intention	0.336	4.70***	[0.194; 0.477]
	Design disclosure → Perceived product innovativeness → Purchase intention	0.190	—	[0.031; 0.389]
Study 3 (consumers vs. company)	Design disclosure → Perceived product innovativeness	0.258	2.24*	[0.030; 0.485]
	Perceived product innovativeness → Purchase intention	0.309	4.94***	[0.186; 0.433]
	Design disclosure → Perceived product innovativeness → Purchase intention	0.080	—	[0.009; 0.173]

* $p < 0.05$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

designed disclosure increases judgments of firm innovativeness relative to a company-designed disclosure. This convergence suggests that audiences continue to interpret user authorship as a credible indicator of a firm's exploratory capability, much as earlier studies proposed. However, Study 1 also raised an important question that prior work had not addressed: if fan-designed disclosures elevate perceptions of the firm, do they also shape how consumers evaluate the product itself? The firm-level effect documented in Study 1 does not speak to whether the product is perceived as more novel or original when fans are credited for its design, nor does it illuminate how such product-level perceptions translate into behavioral intentions. Study 2 was therefore designed to address these gaps directly. Unlike prior work, which has taken perceived firm innovativeness as the focal innovation related outcome (Liljedal, 2016; Meißner et al., 2017; Costa and Coelho do Vale, 2018; Vaquero Martín, 2021), our results show that design disclosures also

shape product-level perceptions. Study 2 reveals that fan-designed products are seen as more innovative, a finding not previously reported in research on design disclosures, which has not measured perceived product innovativeness directly. Yet Study 2, by comparing only fan-designed with company-designed disclosures, left two further questions unresolved: whether the label 'fans' carries incremental persuasive value over the more generic label 'consumers,' and whether the disclosure effect is equally strong across all product categories or concentrated in specific contexts. Study 3 was designed to address both questions simultaneously, by adding a consumer-designed condition and contrasting technological with non-technological product categories.

The results also diverge from expectations implied in the literature regarding differences among user subgroups. Lead-user research and studies of highly involved consumers suggest that more passionate or expert users may be evaluated differently (Urban and von Hippel, 1988; Poetz and Schreier, 2012), and some work indicates that high-identity groups can enhance consumer reactions (Paharia and Swaminathan, 2019). Based on this, one might predict that fan-designed disclosures would outperform consumer-designed disclosures. Yet Study 3 finds no such difference: fan-designed and consumer-designed labels produce statistically equivalent evaluations. This contrasts with the idea that stronger user involvement necessarily amplifies positive reactions and suggests that the disclosure's effect does not depend on the specific user subtype, at least under conditions where both are perceived as legitimate contributors. This finding has important implications for how firms communicate user involvement: the persuasive value of a user-designed disclosure resides in the attribution of authorship to an external user, not in which subgroup of users the designer belongs to. From a product communication perspective, this means that firms do not need to invest in building or highlighting fan communities specifically. A simpler consumer-designed label is equally effective at signaling product innovativeness. Our findings also complement work showing that audience beliefs moderate responses to user-designed products. Previous studies report that consumers with high power distance beliefs prefer designer-designed over user-designed products (Paharia and Swaminathan, 2019; Song et al., 2021), and that the persuasive strength of co-creation claims depends on consumer involvement (Zhang and Jeong, 2023). Instead of psychological moderators, the present research identifies a category-level factor (technological versus non-technological contexts) that shapes reactions to design disclosures. Study 3 shows that the positive effect of fan- and consumer-designed labels emerges primarily in technological categories, where consumers have difficulty evaluating performance directly and thus rely more on heuristic cues. This pattern aligns with evaluability and diagnosticity theories (Chaiken, 1980; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Feldman and Lynch, 1988), but it has not previously been observed in the literature on user-designed or co-creation-related communications. This boundary condition also has practical implications for platform and process design. Firms operating in technological categories, where products are complex, performance is hard to evaluate before purchase, and digital platforms facilitate user design programs, stand to benefit most from making user authorship explicit in their communications. In contrast, firms in non-technological categories, where product attributes are more transparent and familiar, may find that design disclosures add little incremental value to consumer evaluations and can therefore be treated as optional rather than essential communication elements.

The findings also relate to research on user communities and co-creation. While Lin et al. (2022) show that firms can process user

ideas and convert them into an innovation resource and Roy (2018) demonstrates the importance of relevant lead users for disruptive innovation, these studies do not examine how assigning design authorship to users is interpreted by downstream consumers. Our results complement this work by showing that when fan or consumer authorship is made explicit in design disclosures, observers update both firm- and product-level innovativeness perceptions, particularly in technological categories. Likewise, whereas past studies on value co-creation have emphasized antecedents of co-creation intentions and barriers leading to innovation resistance (Nadeem et al., 2020; Anshu et al., 2022), the present research documents how relatively simple authorship messages shape perceived innovativeness and purchase intention.

To sum up, the three studies establish a cumulative and coherent body of evidence that no single study could provide alone. Study 1 establishes that attributing product design to fans rather than to the company elevates perceptions of firm innovativeness, confirming that the firm-level signal documented in prior work extends to the specific context of fan authorship. Study 2 advances beyond the firm level to show that the same disclosure also elevates perceived product innovativeness and that this perception is the psychological mechanism through which design disclosure influences purchase intention, a mediated pathway that had not previously been empirically demonstrated. Study 3 then resolves two open questions simultaneously: it shows that the operative cue is user authorship rather than user subtype, and that the disclosure effect is concentrated in technological categories where product performance is difficult to evaluate *ex ante*. The three studies thus build progressively on one another, moving from firm-level to product-level outcomes, from a two-condition to a three-condition design (i.e., fan-designed, consumer-designed, company-designed), and from a single product category to a cross-category comparison (technological vs non-technological). This progression yields a multi-level, boundary-conditioned account of how user-designed disclosures operate in the marketplace. One that connects innovation signaling at the firm level, perceived novelty at the product level, and evaluability at the category level into a single integrated framework.

8. Conclusion

8.1. Theoretical contributions

The present findings yield three theoretical contributions that collectively advance the literature on user-designed disclosure. First, the findings sharpen what, exactly, the “user-designed” message communicates. Prior studies examining user-designed products have focused primarily on perceived firm innovativeness, showing that attributing authorship to external contributors enhances impressions of a firm’s creativity and exploratory capability (Schreier et al., 2012; Dahl et al., 2015; Liljedal, 2016; Meißner et al., 2017; Costa and Coelho do Vale, 2018; Vaquero Martín, 2021). However, this literature had not examined whether design disclosures also influence perceived product innovativeness, nor had it isolated the indirect pathway from disclosure to purchase intention. The present evidence supports a two-level architecture: at the firm level, user-designed disclosure functions as a signal of exploration and external knowledge integration; at the product level, it acts as a content cue that the artifact embodies need-driven novelty associated with experienced-user input. Critically, Study 2 provides the first empirical demonstration that perceived product innovativeness mediates the effect of design disclosure on purchase intention, establishing it not as a peripheral correlate but as the psychological mechanism translating authorship cues into behavioral responses. This finding directly extends prior work by closing the gap between firm-level perception research and consumer decision-making outcomes, and aligns with heuristic processing accounts in which compact and credible cues stand in for detailed evaluation under conditions of limited attribute information (Chaiken, 1980; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Empirically, Study 1 demonstrates that fan-designed disclosures significantly

increase perceived firm innovativeness relative to company-designed disclosures ($M_{\text{fans}} = 5.51$ vs $M_{\text{company}} = 5.19$, $p < .05$). Study 2 further reveals that fan-designed disclosures also elevate perceived product innovativeness ($M_{\text{fans}} = 5.24$ vs $M_{\text{company}} = 4.83$, $p < .05$) and that this perception serves as the psychological mechanism translating authorship cues into purchase intention, as confirmed by a significant indirect effect (Indirect effect = 0.155, 95% CI = [0.015; 0.348]).

A second contribution concerns granularity. Lead-user research suggests that more engaged or expert contributors should generate stronger consumer responses, as highly involved users are seen as possessing domain-specific creativity and need-driven insight (Urban and von Hippel, 1988; Poetz and Schreier, 2012). Building on this, one might predict that fan-designed disclosures, by foregrounding a particularly committed and knowledgeable user subgroup, would outperform consumer-designed disclosures. Furthermore, prior work on power distance beliefs implies that the identity of the designer matters for consumer evaluations (Paharia and Swaminathan, 2019; Song et al., 2021), suggesting that subtype distinctions within the user category could carry meaningful persuasive weight. Our tests suggest that, for observing consumers, the disclosure’s persuasive payload is the presence of user authorship, not the specific user subtype, provided both labels are equally credible and do not import additional competence claims. This finding challenges the implied prediction from lead-user and identity research and refines theory by identifying when subtyping is theoretically inert: when no additional competence cues are provided, audiences apply a coarse user-authorship heuristic, focusing on whether the designer is a user rather than on finer distinctions within the user category (Feldman and Lynch, 1988). This has important implications for how firms communicate user involvement. The label’s value lies in signaling external authorship, not in the specific identity of the contributor. Study 3 provides direct empirical support for this conclusion: pairwise comparisons reveal no significant difference in perceived product innovativeness between the fan-designed and consumer-designed conditions ($M_{\text{fans}} = 5.15$ vs $M_{\text{consumers}} = 5.09$, $p > .05$), while both user-designed conditions significantly outperform the company-designed condition ($M_{\text{company}} = 4.62$, $p < .05$). Both user-designed conditions produce significant indirect effects on purchase intention through perceived product innovativeness (fan-designed: 0.190, 95% CI [0.031, 0.389]; consumer-designed: 0.080, 95% CI [0.009, 0.173]).

A third contribution lies in specifying a boundary condition. Prior research on user-designed products has not identified a product-category moderator, and the broader co-creation literature has focused primarily on individual-level moderators such as power distance beliefs (Paharia and Swaminathan, 2019; Song et al., 2021) or consumer involvement (Zhang and Jeong, 2023), leaving open whether category-level factors shape the effectiveness of design disclosures. Treating technology as a proxy for low evaluability, we show that user-designed disclosures are most consequential in technological contexts and attenuated in non-technological ones. This finding directly addresses the gap identified in the introduction and qualifies broad claims about the persuasive power of user design by indicating where design messages are likely to be diagnostic. It also integrates two streams of literature that have often been discussed separately: the user-designed products literature (Schreier et al., 2012; Dahl et al., 2015; Nishikawa et al., 2017) and classic work on processing routes and cue diagnosticity (Chaiken, 1980; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Feldman and Lynch, 1988). By establishing evaluability as the mechanism underlying this boundary condition, the present findings open a new direction for research on when and why innovation communication signals are most effective, particularly in technologically complex categories where consumers face greater uncertainty about product performance. Study 3 provides direct evidence for this boundary condition: in the technological category (cars), both fan-designed ($M_{\text{fans}} = 5.49$ vs $M_{\text{company}} = 4.78$, $p < .05$) and consumer-designed conditions ($M_{\text{consumers}} = 5.45$ vs $M_{\text{company}} = 4.78$, $p < .05$) significantly outperform the company-designed

condition on perceived product innovativeness, whereas no such differences emerge in the non-technological category (cereals). This interaction pattern confirms that design disclosures are most diagnostic in contexts where consumers face greater uncertainty about product performance and cannot rely on direct attribute assessment.

8.2. Managerial implications

From a managerial perspective, the findings offer guidance on how firms might communicate user involvement in product design. When a product genuinely incorporates user input, explicitly stating that it is user-designed can improve perceptions of both the product and the firm, with corresponding effects on purchase intention. Brand managers across industries can leverage this finding by making user authorship a visible and explicit part of their product launch communication and not just an internal process detail. For instance, Threadless, the online design marketplace, has built its entire brand identity around community-designed products, explicitly crediting its artist community on every product page and launch communication. This approach, applied in a non-technological category, illustrates how authorship attribution can become a core element of brand positioning. This also indicates that the disclosure decision is separable from the design decision. A firm may source designs from users and say nothing, in which case the process yields whatever product benefits it yields but sends no signal to the market. However, the present findings suggest that such disclosures are particularly powerful in technological categories such as consumer electronics, automotive, or software where consumers struggle to evaluate product quality directly. Brand managers in these sectors should therefore prioritize design disclosures in their launch communications, as they are more likely to shift perceptions of innovativeness and drive purchase intention. At the same time, the results suggest limits to how specific firms need to be in their wording. Simply replacing “consumer-designed” with “fan-designed” does not, by itself, generate additional gains unless the fan label conveys something more substantive, such as higher expertise or a more selective design process.

For crowdsourcing platform managers, the findings highlight the strategic importance of how user contributions are communicated to downstream consumers. Platforms such as InnoCentive (now operating as Wazoku Crowd), which connects organizations with a global network of expert problem solvers, already embed user authorship into their value proposition by explicitly crediting solvers and showcasing their profiles and credentials. The present findings suggest that this practice does more than acknowledge contributors. It functions as a credible signal of the quality and innovativeness of the solutions produced. Platform managers should therefore design their communication infrastructure to make authorship attribution easy for client firms to adopt. For instance, by providing standardized disclosure templates, solver credential summaries, and attribution language that client firms can embed directly in their product launch materials. In technological categories especially, such disclosures are likely to improve end-consumer evaluations and accelerate market adoption of platform-sourced innovations. That said, the present studies examine communities hosted by the focal firm, and to the extent the findings transfer to platform contexts, the value of platform sourced attribution may depend on how visibly the client firm (the organizations sourcing designs through the platform) is associated with the design process. Attribution templates that state the client firm's role in inviting and selecting the designs, alongside the credit given to solvers, may therefore preserve more of the signal at the firm level.

Innovation consultants advising firms on open innovation strategies can draw on these findings to guide clients on how to communicate, not just execute, user-driven design processes. A well-known example is Procter & Gamble's Connect + Develop program, which has sourced external innovations globally for over two decades. While P&G has been effective at integrating external ideas into its product pipeline, the present findings suggest that explicitly communicating user authorship

in downstream marketing, rather than treating it as a purely internal process, could further enhance consumer perceptions of innovativeness and purchase intent. Innovation consultants should therefore advise clients to treat design disclosure as a communication asset: once a user-designed product has been developed, the authorship story should be made part of the product's market identity, particularly in technologically complex categories, where consumers cannot easily evaluate product quality on their own.

The findings also speak to forecasting and policy-related concerns. For analysts seeking to anticipate early market reactions to new products, design disclosures can be treated as communication inputs that shape perceived innovativeness and, indirectly, purchase intention. For policymakers and platforms that facilitate collaboration between firms and users, the results highlight the importance of clarity. Clearly attributing design authorship, rather than relying on vague participation language, may help reduce information frictions in markets, particularly those characterized by technological complexity. More broadly, policymakers involved in designing open innovation ecosystems such as public funding bodies, technology transfer offices, and national innovation agencies can use these findings to inform guidelines on how firms should communicate the origins of user-driven innovations. In sectors such as health technology, clean energy, or advanced manufacturing, where product complexity is high and consumer uncertainty is greatest, mandating or incentivizing clear authorship disclosures could accelerate the diffusion of user-driven innovations by reducing the information asymmetry that typically slows adoption. These findings thus connect the micro-level communication decisions of individual firms to the broader policy objective of facilitating innovation diffusion in technologically complex markets.

Finally, the effectiveness of design disclosures appears to depend on the product context. In technological categories, where consumers face greater difficulty evaluating performance, design disclosures are more likely to be useful and influential. In categories with more transparent attributes, such disclosures may play a smaller role and can be treated as optional rather than essential.

8.3. Limitations and future research

As with any research, the present studies have limitations that point to directions for future work. Our manipulations were designed to hold constant the implied rigor of fan-designed and consumer-designed disclosures. In real settings, however, fan-designed claims may be accompanied by additional cues, such as evidence of vetting, prototyping, or technical testing. Under those conditions, fan status might acquire incremental meaning beyond authorship alone. Similarly, our distinction between technological and non-technological products captures evaluability at a broad level. Future research could examine more fine-grained dimensions to better understand when design disclosures are most influential.

In addition, our studies focus on perceptual and intentional outcomes. Although these measures are well suited to isolating psychological processes, future work could link design disclosures to behavioral adoption or market performance data to assess external validity across categories and time horizons. Further research could also explore how the strength and placement of disclosures matter in practice, for example whether disclosures placed prominently on packaging versus embedded in online descriptions, or combined with other signals such as third-party certifications, produce different effects on consumer evaluations. The present research also leaves open several firm-side questions. It examines how user-designed disclosures shape consumer perceptions once such programs exist, but does not address when and for which product types firms choose to establish them, nor the heterogeneity of the selection process, whether designs are judged internally, voted on by buyers, or evaluated through hybrid mechanisms. The three studies likewise hold the channel constant, since each presents a community hosted by the focal firm rather than a platform operating independently

of it, so whether disclosures sourced from independent platforms carry comparable weight remains untested. The boundaries of disclosure are also not always clear in practice, as firms do not always distinguish explicitly between fully user-authored and merely user-inspired products. Finally, questions of IP ownership and contributor compensation, which vary considerably across platforms and may shape contributor participation and disclosure credibility, represent an important institutional boundary condition that future interdisciplinary research could examine. More broadly, the objectives of firms, platforms, and contributors are treated here as aligned by design, and future work could examine what happens to consumer inferences when they visibly diverge.

Study 1 has two specific limitations worth noting. First, it relies on a real brand (Nike), introducing the possibility that pre-existing brand attitudes could influence responses, although random assignment ensures these are equally distributed across conditions. Future research could include brand attitude as an explicit covariate. Second, the utilitarian/hedonic manipulation relied on a product that inherently blends functional and experiential dimensions, which may have attenuated the distinction between conditions. Future research could use product stimuli with cleaner utilitarian and hedonic profiles.

Finally, all three studies have sample-related limitations. They recruited participants residing in France through Foule Factory, which does not constitute a random representative sample of the adult population in France and may skew toward more digitally engaged individuals. Sample sizes were not determined by a priori power analysis, and the observed effects were small, as is common for single cue manipulations in between-subjects designs. We therefore rest the robustness of the disclosure effect on its replication across three independent samples rather than on any single test, and we note that the within category comparisons in Study 3 involve smaller cell sizes and are best read as indicative of the interaction pattern. The data were also collected over an extended period, between December 2017 and February 2022, during which practices of crediting users in product communication became more widespread, so the disclosures may have been less familiar to participants in the earliest study than in the latest.

Participant overlap across studies was not formally controlled for, though the large time gaps between data collections, over three years between Studies 1 and 2 and ten months between Studies 2 and 3, make carry-over effects highly unlikely. Future research could use larger, more diverse, and more systematically sampled populations across multiple cultural contexts, particularly given that prior work has shown that responses to user-designed products can vary across cultures as a function of power distance beliefs (Paharia and Swaminathan, 2019; Song et al., 2021).

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Richard Huaman-Ramirez: Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Stéphane Salgado:** Writing – original draft, Validation, Resources, Project administration, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Aranzazu Gaztelumendi:** Writing – original draft, Formal analysis.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2026.124884>.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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