Applying Art Theory to Logo Design: the Impact of Incomplete Typeface Logos on Perceptions of the Firm

Henrik Hagtvedt, Boston College, USA

This research investigates the impact of incomplete typeface logos on consumer perceptions of the firm. In these logos, parts of the characters are intentionally missing or blanked out, engendering a form of perceptual ambiguity. Four studies demonstrate that while logo incompleteness has an unfavorable influence on perceived firm trustworthiness, it has a favorable influence on perceived firm innovativeness. The former (latter) influence is tied to the logo’s perceived clarity (interestingness). Further, logo incompleteness has an unfavorable influence on overall attitude toward the firm, but only for consumers with a prevention, rather than promotion, focus.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The various influences of ambiguous visual communication stemming from marketing stimuli such as incomplete logos represent a gap in the consumer behavior literature and in our understanding of how consumers interpret visual stimuli. This topic of investigation is also important from a practical standpoint, given the vast amounts of resources that firms expend on logos as a marketing tool. Drawing on extant literature in aesthetics, art theory, psychology, and marketing, the current research investigates the influence of incomplete typeface logos on consumer perceptions of the firm. Four studies demonstrate that although incompleteness has an unfavorable influence on perceived firm trustworthiness, it has a favorable influence on perceived firm innovativeness. The former (latter) influence stems from the perceived clarity (interestingness) of the logo. Further, incompleteness has an unfavorable influence on overall attitude toward the firm, but only for consumers with a prevention (vs. promotion) focus.

The logos used in this research are representations of firm names without additional pictorial elements. Each complete logo is spelled out with complete characters, while each incomplete logo is styled such that parts of the characters appear to be missing or blanked out and must therefore be filled in by the consumer via a perceptual act. Extant literature suggests that this perceptual act causes consumers to perceive the logo as interesting and creative, a perception which subsequently spills over onto the firm. However, the perceptual ambiguity engendered by the incompleteness also connotes a lack of clarity, which leads to perceptions of low trustworthiness. Further, ambiguity connotes uncertainty, which signals either opportunity or risk, depending on one’s point of view. Thus, the influence of logo incompleteness on overall attitude toward the firm depends on the regulatory focus of the consumer. For consumers with a prevention focus, the risk associated with ambiguity leads to a less favorable attitude toward the firm, but this is not the case for promotion focused consumers.

In the pilot study, participants were given an incomplete or complete version of the same logo. They described their impression of the firm in their own words, and independent coders coded the data for perceptions of firm innovativeness ($M_c = .16$ vs. $M_i = -.12$, $F(1, 83) = 6.29$, $p < .05$) and firm trustworthiness ($M_c = -.12$ vs. $M_i = .31$, $F(1, 83) = 10.18$, $p < .05$).

Study 1 consists of three experiments, with participants drawn predominantly from a US population (44% male, $M_{age} = 45$ yrs). In each experiment, participants were randomly assigned to one of two versions (incomplete vs. complete) of the same logo. Participants (71, 67, and 69 participants in experiments 1a, 1b, and 1c, respectively) viewed the logo and then responded to a battery of questions. Results revealed that for each incomplete (vs. complete) logo, the firm was perceived as more (less) innovative ($M_c = 4.36$ vs. $M_i = 3.67$, $F = 5.33$, $p < .05$; $M_i = 3.77$ vs. $M_c = 3.18$, $F = 3.16$, $p < .10$; $M_c = 3.93$ vs. $M_i = 3.34$, $F = 4.09$, $p < .05$), but less (more) trustworthy ($M_c = 3.93$ vs. $M_i = 4.53$, $F = 4.13$, $p < .05$; $M_i = 3.18$ vs. $M_c = 3.87$, $F = 4.67$, $p < .05$; $M_i = 3.61$ vs. $M_c = 4.49$, $F = 7.57$, $p < .05$).

In study 2, 185 respondents (59% male, $M_{age} = 46$ yrs) participated in a 2 (completeness: incomplete vs. complete) x 2 (focus: promotion vs. prevention) between-subjects experiment designed to investigate the influence of these variables on overall attitude toward the firm. The latter manipulation was effected via type of firm (entertainment vs. insurance). Results revealed the expected incompleteness x focus interaction ($M_{i(promotion)} = 3.85$ vs. $M_{c(promotion)} = 3.98$ vs. $M_{i(prevention)} = 3.13$ vs. $M_{c(prevention)} = 4.47$, $F(1, 131) = 6.63$, $p < .05$).

In study 3, 120 respondents (56% male, $M_{age} = 45$, modal income = $50,001 - $75,000) participated in a 2 (completeness: incomplete vs. complete) x 2 (focus: promotion vs. prevention) between-subjects experiment online. The latter manipulation was effected with a standard procedure from the literature. Results revealed the expected main effect of incompleteness on perceived firm innovativeness ($M_i = 4.18$ vs. $M_c = 3.39$, $F(1, 116) = 9.30$, $p < .05$) and trustworthiness ($M_i = 3.29$ vs. $M_c = 3.80$, $F(1, 116) = 5.07$, $p < .05$). Bootstrap estimation (Preacher and Hayes 2004) with 5,000 resamples, as well as a Sobel test, demonstrated that logo interestingness mediates the influence of incompleteness on perceived firm innovativeness ($M = -3.1$, SE = .10, 95% CI = [-5.0, -1.2]). Sobel test: $z = -3.08$, $p < .05$. A similar procedure demonstrated that logo clarity mediates the influence of incompleteness on perceived firm trustworthiness ($M = 23$, SE = .11, 95% CI = [.03, .46]). Sobel test: $z = 2.50$, $p < .05$. Finally, a 2 (incompleteness) x 2 (focus) ANOVA with the overall attitude index as the dependent variable revealed the expected incompleteness x focus interaction ($M_{i(promotion)} = 4.01$ vs. $M_{c(promotion)} = 3.66$ vs. $M_{i(prevention)} = 3.24$ vs. $M_{c(prevention)} = 4.04$, $F(1, 116) = 5.67$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$).

REFERENCES


