Shape Matters: How Does Logo Shape Inference Shape Consumer Judgments

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Four studies show that circular versus angular brand logos can lead consumers to make inferences regarding the product’s “softness”/“hardness”. These inferences impact both specific product attribute judgments and overall product evaluation. The inferences are outside of awareness and impact consumers’ expectations about the brand through a process of misattribution.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Brand logos, are important components of any company’s identity. Previous empirical research on brand logos (e.g., Henderson and Cote 1998; Henderson et al. 2003; Janiszewski and Meyvis 2001) has primarily focused on measures related to its aesthetic appeal (e.g., how beautiful a particular logo is) and on ease of recognition. How different logo shapes influence consumers’ perceptions of the company and its products is still largely unknown. This is the focus of our research.

Broadly speaking, logo designs can be classified as angular, circular, or a combination of the two. Angular shapes are those consisting of straight lines and sharp corners (e.g., a rectangle); whereas circular shapes are curved and without sharp angles (e.g., an oval). According to Berlyne (1976), angular shapes induce confrontational associations such as energy, toughness, and strength. In contrast, circular shapes induce compromise associations such as approachability and friendliness (e.g., Liu and Kennedy 1994). We expect that the associations that a person has with an angular vs. round shape, will transfer to consumers’ perceptions of objects with that shape. Regarding brand logos, we expect the associations to transfer to the brand associated with the logo. Specifically, we predict that circular brand logos have a symbolic meaning of “soft,” and angular brand logos have a symbolic meaning of “hard” and hence that the symbolic meaning of “soft” and “hard” will influence consumers’ perceptions of the brand and its product characteristics. We test this hypothesis in four experiments.

In experiment 1, participants were asked to give us their initial reactions towards a company and its products after viewing either a circular logo or an angular logo. As expected, participants judged the brand using a circular logo to: 1) be less tough/hard than the brand using an angular logo, and 2) more likely to be in an industry associated with softness (e.g., Daycare Center or Pet Shop) than the brand using an angular logo; the brand using an angular logo was perceived to be more likely in an industry associated with toughness (e.g., Construction Company or Law Firm) than the brand using a circular logo.

Several important product attributes are closely connected with the concept of “soft” vs. “hard/tough”. Products made of soft materials are usually perceived to be more comfortable to use, for example. In contrast, products made of hard materials are usually perceived to be capable of lasting longer. Thus the second experiment examined whether different logo shapes can influence consumers’ beliefs about a product’s comfortableness and durability. We also tested whether the observed logo inference effect occurs through a process of misattribution, akin to the HDIF heuristic (Schwarz and Clore 1988). After seeing a shoe ad with either a circular or an angular logo, participants were either asked to explicitly report their logo-shape inferences (e.g., “The logo gave me the impression that the shoe is very comfortable/durable”) before they reported their beliefs of the comfortableness/durability of the shoe, or report the shape inferences after reporting their product beliefs. We found that participants believed the product is more comfortable when the brand had a circular logo, and believed that the product is more durable when the brand has an angular logo. Moreover, consistent with the misattribution hypothesis, the effect of logo shape on product beliefs disappeared when participants were explicitly asked about their logo inferences before measuring their product beliefs.

Experiment 3 built on the first two studies by exploring the relationship between explicit verbal claims and the logo. We examine whether the consistency between the inference drawn from logo and the verbal claims leads to more favorable outcomes than when the logo shape and verbal claims are not matched. Participants were shown a shoe ad with either a circular or an angular brand logo. Also the verbal information contained in the shoe ad focused either on the comfortableness of the shoe or its durability. Consistent with expectations, the results showed a matching effect. Consumers liked the shoe more and were willing to pay more for the shoe if the logo shape inferences were consistent with the verbal information in the advertisement.

Experiment 4 attempted to expand the generalizability of our findings by showing that brand logo shapes not only influence consumer inferences about specific product attributes, but also inferences about general brand characteristics, including the behavior of company employees. Extending the idea that circular logos lead to inferences of softness to the notion that soft also implies caring, we examined whether consumers expected companies with circular logos to be more responsive to consumer needs. Participants were shown a consumption scenario—a passenger has an over-weight luggage when trying to board an airplane operated by an airline company with either a circular logo or an angular logo—and asked how likely the passenger was to be allowed to board without some penalty. As expected, participants predicted that the airline company would be more likely to allow the passenger to bring their bag on board without penalty if the company has a circular brand logo. Participants also thought that the airline company was more willing to respond to consumer needs/demands, and cared more about its customers if the brand used a circular logo.

Summarizing, we find that brand logo shapes impact both specific product attribute judgments and overall product evaluations. We show that this impact is due to a misattribution of the inference elicited by the logo shape and that it is stronger when the explicit claims are in line with the inference elicited by the logo, inferences which seem to be outside the consumers’ awareness. These findings are novel and contribute to our theoretical understanding of how brand logos can influence consumers’ responses to a brand. Our research has practical implications, in suggesting that companies should choose logos that have aesthetic properties that reinforce the desired image of the brand.

REFERENCES

