Effects of Design Symmetry on Perceptions of Brand Personality

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We focus on the influence of symmetry in visual design on consumer inferences regarding brand personality. Grounding our approach in aesthetics and visual perception, we argue that symmetry and asymmetry, respectively, enhance perceptions of brand sophistication or excitement, and we trace this to the aesthetic interpretation of symmetric imagery.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
In the classification of visual stimuli, a fundamental dimension utilized by laypersons, artists, and researchers alike is symmetry – i.e., the extent to which an object can be divided into matching halves by drawing a line through the center. In the realm of aesthetics, it is well established that symmetry has a widespread and robust influence on stated preferences for both real-world and abstract objects (e.g., Pinker 1997; Etcoff 1999; Reber et. al 2004). Given this influence, it is not surprising that marketing research has focused on the benefits of symmetric design, particularly for attracting consumer attention and instilling favorable attitudes (Veryzer and Hutchinson 1998). In the present research, we argue that symmetry in visual brand elements plays a role beyond that of aesthetic preference. Specifically, we demonstrate that the presence or absence of symmetry is assimilated into impressions regarding the brand itself. To capture these effects, we draw on Aaker’s (1997) five-factor model of brand personality (sincerity, competence, excitement, ruggedness, and sophistication).

Based on principles from visual processing, aesthetics, and design, we propose two complementary hypotheses relating visual symmetry to brand perceptions. First, seminal work by Berlyne (1971, 1974) and others has shown that complex visual patterns elicit uncertainty in perceivers, which in turn contributes to heightened arousal. Given that asymmetry is a key driver of visual complexity, we speculate that the inclusion of asymmetrical visual elements will bolster perceptions of brands as exciting (i.e., daring, trendy, or up-to-date). Second, a common theme in artistic and visual design is the value of symmetry for enhancing perceptions of beauty and aesthetic pleasure (Reber et al. 2003); e.g., symmetry in classical art is employed to convey harmony, beauty, perfection (Weyl 1951). Extending this logic to brand imagery, we speculate that the inclusion of symmetrical visual elements will tend to bolster perceptions of brands as sophisticated (i.e., luxurious, prestigious, and tasteful).

We tested the predictions of our model with three laboratory experiments. Study 1 incorporated a within-subjects design with visual artwork as the target stimuli. In a cover story, participants were told that they would be selecting imagery for use by a sunglasses manufacturer in launching two new brands: one positioned as ‘exciting,’ and the other positioned as ‘sophisticated.’ For each of the two brands (counterbalanced), participants were presented with 14 pairs of artwork, each containing one symmetric image and one asymmetric image. They were asked to select from each pair the artwork that they would be selecting imagery for use by a sunglasses manufacturer in launching two new brands: one positioned as ‘exciting,’ and the other positioned as ‘sophisticated.’ For each of the two brands (counterbalanced), participants were presented with 14 pairs of artwork, each containing one symmetric image and one asymmetric image. They were asked to select from each pair the artwork that they considered most appropriate for the brand. Consistent with predictions, analyses revealed that symmetric artwork was chosen more often for the sophisticated brand (M=7.94) than the exciting brand (M=6.64, t (118) = -4.264, p < 0.01).

A second study utilized a between-subjects design similar to that of Study 1, with two primary differences. First, target stimuli included logos instead of artwork; the key advantage of this approach was that symmetry could be manipulated directly, while holding other design characteristics constant. Second, as an initial exploration of underlying process variables, we added a questionnaire assessing participants’ interpretations of various characteristics of the logos. As before, analyses of participant choices revealed that symmetric logos were chosen more often for the sophisticated brand (M=7.21) than for the exciting brand (M=4.25 t (103) = 5.890, p < 0.01). Follow-up examination of potential process variables suggested that the observed effects of symmetry on perceptions of sophistication and excitement were triggered by impressions of aesthetic quality and arousal. Specifically, symmetric logos were assigned higher values than asymmetric logos for ‘artistic quality’ (M = 5.36 vs. 4.81, t (103) = 4.09, p < 0.01), but asymmetric logos were assigned higher values than symmetric logos for ‘energy’ (M = 5.21 vs. 4.64, t (103) = -5.35, p < 0.01).

Our third study extended the investigation to a less structured setting. The cover story was similar to that of studies 1-2; however, instead of choosing between pre-existing brand imagery, participants were asked to actually create their own logos for both the sophisticated brand and the exciting brand. As the primary dependent measure, we coded the degree of symmetry present in the participant-created logos for each brand, using a 4-pt scale. Consistent with our framework, analyses revealed that participants produced more symmetric logos for the ‘sophisticated’ brand (M=2.9) than the ‘exciting’ brand (M=2.6, t (179) = 3.93, p < 0.01). Moreover, follow-up analysis of open-ended items indicated that the effect was strongest among participants who specifically mentioned utilizing symmetry in their drawings.

Consumer researchers have long emphasized the importance of design in conveying brand personality (Johar et al. 2005). Our work contributes to this area by presenting evidence for a heretofore unexplored connection between symmetry, a fundamental dimension of visual imagery, and consumer inferences regarding brand personality. We improve upon existing understanding by providing a theory-based rationale for the effects of visual symmetry on consumer response. At a more pragmatic level, our findings provide straightforward implications for marketers seeking to utilize visual design as a means of strengthening brand personality, differentiating their offerings, and enhancing brand equity.

REFERENCES