The Exciting Asymmetry Effect: the Interplay of Logo Design and Brand Personality on Brand Equity

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Four experimental studies and the analysis of a large-scale field dataset (n=15,000), demonstrate that an asymmetrical (vs. symmetrical) logo boosts the customer-, company-, and financial-based equity of brands which possess an exciting personality. Commercial designers, however, were found to prefer using symmetrical logos for such brands, harming brand equity.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A unique and favorable brand personality (Biel 1993; Sung and Kim 2010), and the good visual design of logos (Cian, Krishna, and Elder 2014; Henderson and Cote 1998) can both contribute to the development of a strong brand. However, research investigating these two brand elements has advanced in parallel, and how they may jointly affect brand equity is not well-understood. We seek to fill this gap in the literature, and address the pressing need to determine whether and how the integration of brand elements contributes to brand equity (Keller and Lehmann 2006).

First, we propose that asymmetrical (vs symmetrical) visual designs may evoke excitement-related notions. We build this proposition on research showing that asymmetrical visual stimuli are more stimulating and arousing because they require additional visual exploration (Krupinski and Locher 1988). Since arousal is not affectively loaded (Barrett and Russell 1998;1999), and since most people feel at least mildly positive most of the time (Diener and Diener 1996), the arousal following the visual exploration of asymmetrical designs is likely to result to feelings of excitement—a high arousal and positively valenced affective state (Russell 1980;2003). Lastly, as specific affective states may cue affect-consistent judgments (Pham 2004), consumers should judge asymmetrical (vs. symmetrical) visual stimuli as more exciting. Second, we propose that if asymmetrical logos are judged as exciting, they should positively influence the equity of brands with exciting personalities. We refer to this effect as the exciting asymmetry effect. Third, we control for an alternative explanation arguing that excitement may be associated with all visually disfluent stimuli, rather than specifically with asymmetrical ones. Three experiments and a large-scale field study support our propositions.

Is logo asymmetry associated with excitement? In study one, participants (n=306) were randomly shown four asymmetrical and four corresponding symmetrical logos. For each logo, participants were asked to select from a list of fifteen personality traits (three per personality dimension; Aaker 1997), the three that would best characterize the logo. Indicating that asymmetry (vs. symmetry) is associated with excitement, we found that the number of exciting traits selected for asymmetrical logos was higher than the number selected for symmetrical ones (Masymmetrical=.83 vs. Msymmetrical=.71; t(305)=10.84, p<.001).

Can logo shape and brand personality jointly impact attitudes? Study two was a 2x2 between-participants experiment. Participants (n=210) were shown the logo (symmetrical vs. asymmetrical) and tagline (exciting vs. sophisticated) of a brand of women’s apparel. Brand attitude was measured on 7-point scales. Analyses revealed a significant logo shape×brand personality interaction (F(1,206)=4.94, p≤.03). For the exciting brand, attitude was significantly higher for the asymmetrical than for the symmetrical logo (Masymmetrical=4.53 vs. Msymmetrical=3.74, p≤.001). This difference was not significant for the sophisticated brand (p>.10).

Is the exciting asymmetry effect caused by asymmetry-excitement associations? If it were the case, the interaction found in study two would reverse for individuals who associate symmetry (vs. asymmetry) with excitement. Study three was a 2x2 between-participants experiment. Participants (n=155) were shown the description (exciting vs. sincere) and logo (symmetrical vs. asymmetrical) of a juice manufacturer. Brand attitude was then measured. Subsequently, in a seemingly unrelated study, we measured participants’ propensity to associate asymmetry with excitement (A-E-score). Participants were asked to select from ten personality traits (five per brand personality manipulated), the five that would best characterize each of four asymmetrical and four corresponding symmetrical logos. We calculated A-E-score as the difference between the number of exciting traits selected for asymmetrical logos and for symmetrical ones. Analyses revealed a significant logo shape×brand personality×A-E-score interaction (β=.96; t(147)=1.98, p≤.05). Conditional effects revealed that participants who associated asymmetrical logos with excitement had more favorable attitudes when the exciting brand had an asymmetrical logo (p≤.02). The opposite result was found for participants who associated symmetrical logos with excitement (p<.01).

Does the asymmetrical logo effect hold in the marketplace? In study four, we merged three field datasets pertaining to the year 2011. The first, obtained from Interbrand, contains our dependent variable, a measure of company-based and financial-based equity called FBV (Financial Brand Valuation), which is the dollar value of the 100 brands listed on the 2011 Interbrand’s Best Global Brands Ranking. The second, obtained from Young & Rubicam involves approximately 15,000 US customers, and contains our mediating variable, a measure of customer-based equity called BAV (Brand Asset ValuatorTM). It also contains brand personality evaluations and numerous control variables (e.g., purchase intentions) for the same 100 brands. Finally, logo asymmetry ratings were obtained via a panel of US customers (n=202) who evaluated the asymmetry of these 100 brands’ logos. They also evaluated the logos on visual properties known to cause perceptual disfluency (e.g.; complexity).

A moderated mediation analysis revealed that the logo asymmetry×exciting brand personality interaction on BAV was positive and significant (β=.35; t(88)=2.36, p≤.05), and that higher BAV resulted in higher FBV (β=1.20; t(87)=3.37, p≤.001). The index of moderated mediation excluded zero [.02;1.24], and confidence intervals indicated that the combination of an asymmetrical [29.2.85], but not of a symmetrical logo [-.01;1.29], with an exciting brand personality led to more FBV through BAV. Second, similar moderated mediation analyses ruled out the possibilities that an asymmetrical logo would boost the equity of brands with any other brand personality, or that logos’ perceived disfluency interacted with exciting personality ratings in a fashion similar to perceived asymmetry. Third, a regression indicated that logo asymmetry was not predicted by brand excitement (β=−0.4; t(95)=−1.08, p>.10), suggesting that those involved in logo design have not designed more asymmetrical logos for more exciting brands, as the exciting asymmetry effect would suggest.

These findings have important implications. First, although these two brand elements have been studied in isolation, our results demonstrate that brand personality and logo interact to affect consumers’ behavior and brands’ financial valuations. Second, they demonstrate that symmetry, a property which typically characterizes “good design”, harms the equity of exciting brands. Third, they demonstrate that consumers’ reactions to marketing visual stimuli...
(e.g., logos) do not exclusively hinge on visual design properties, but depend also on the extent to which the notions with which they are associated diverge from, or converge with, other brand elements such. Finally, they establish that brand aesthetics and sensory marketing have a concrete effect on brands’ financial performance.

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