Logo Symmetry: A Content Analysis of U.S. Charitable Organizations

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Abstract

This paper is adds to the current stream of research in the area of logo design by conducting a content analysis of logos used by U.S. charitable organizations. Specifically, we evaluate the use of symmetrical versus asymmetrical logos. The results of the analysis show that almost 42 percent of the logos were either very or mostly asymmetrical. Given that asymmetrical logo designs have been associated with perceptions of unethicalness, their use appears inconsistent with the philanthropic mission of charities. Managerial implications and directions for continued research in this area are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Logos represent the graphic design element of a brand and serve numerous important functions. In perhaps the most basic sense, logos serve as a 'shorthand way of identifying a brand" [14, p. 195]. Logos also help communicate the *personality* of the brand (or organization) to the target audience [16]. Logos can act as a mark of quality and as a way to increase a company's reputation [8]. Logos also help differentiate the brand from competing alternatives [12] [9] [10].

Given that logos represent a meaningful part of the brand management process, it is not surprising that a considerable body of research has been devoted to understanding how consumers respond to them. In this regard, preliminary research found that while *symmetrical* logo designs evoked perceptions of greater *corporate ethicalness* and *socially desirable behavior* (i.e., elicited a positive affect), *asymmetrical logo designs* did just the opposite (i.e., elicited a negative affect). As the authors note: "Rationally or not, people associate symmetrical logos with more ethical, socially desirable behavior." [18, p. 30]

The results from this study are consistent with other research showing that symmetrical designs tend to elicit a more positive respondent affect than asymmetrical designs. [4] [7] [14] [15] [10] As a result, it is reasonable to propose that organizations should utilize logos and part of their communication strategy would tend to emphasize symmetry in the design.

The purpose of the current research, therefore, is to conduct a content analysis of logos in an area where perceptions of ethicalness and socially responsible behavior are be considered particularly salient; that is, charitable organizations. [19] [20]. The selection of charitable organizations is relevant given

evidence demonstrating that *ethicality* has been shown to be significantly related to intentions to donate time and money to a charity. [11]. Additionally, perceptions of *trust* have been considered a particularly important factor in the success of a charity. As one industry observer noted "Trust is a vague notion on which to depend and is conditional upon a perception by the public that charities are good as well as doing good." [13, p. 12] Hence, anything that might detract from this perception could be considered suboptimal. The use of asymmetrical designs would seem to qualify as a something that could serve to detract from the ability to elicit a positive reaction from individuals. This study, therefore, is intended to explore the extent to which charitable organizations use either asymmetrical versus symmetrical logo design.

Literature Review

At the fundamental level, good logos are: (1) easily recognized, (2) convey the same meaning to members of the intended target audience, and (3) evoke positive feelings [6]. These general guidelines are intended to assist brand managers with a useful template for developing an appropriate logo. This review focuses on the third guideline with an emphasis on the relationship between design symmetry and positive affect.

In this regard, the graphic design literature has long argued that symmetry serves to increase positive affect [2] [3]. More recent research, however, has provided clarification by showing that the positive effect of symmetry may depend on what is being measured. In this context, research has found that asymmetrical logo designs were rated higher by respondents than asymmetrical designs in terms of 'artistic quality' [1]. Conversely, asymmetric designs were rated higher in terms of 'energy'. The important implication to be taken from this research is that the decision to use either a symmetrical or asymmetrical design should be based on the objective at hand. In other words, symmetry is but one factor to be considered in the design of a logo.

That said, the overall evidence linking symmetrical designs to positive affects is relatively strong. For example, iit has been argued that symmetry "is the primary determinant of pattern 'goodness,' which produces positive affect" [6]. A review of synonyms for 'goodness' include such terms as *decency*, *morality*, *integrity*, *virtuousness* while antonyms include such terms as *badness*, *evil*, and *immorality*. suggests that the notion of 'goodness' implies elements of ethical and socially desirable behavior. (http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/goodness). It would appear, therefore, that logo designs that reflect symmetry are more likely to be viewed from the perspective of 'goodness', a positive affect.

Additional support for the relationship between symmetry and positive affect was provided by Huang (2004). He found that 'symmetrical communication' resulted in perceptions of greater ethicalness on the part of the organization. Symmetrical communications occur when the organization's messaging takes into account the public's opinion on a matter of importance.

The influence of symmetry was also found to be positively related to perceptions of *attractiveness* [4]. The notion of attractiveness can be considered a positive affect considering its definition: 'the qualities in a person or thing that as a whole give pleasure to the senses' (http://www.merriam-

). Additionally, one synonym for attractiveness is *fairness*, a positive term.

Using attractiveness as the outcome variable, Enquist and Arak found that respondents perceived symmetrical patterns more attractively than asymmetrical ones. Furthermore, they posited that the preference for symmetrical designs may result from a universal need to to recognize objects; as indidivuals learn to recognize objects, 'preferences can develop for particular forms that have no objective existance in nature' (17, p. 21].   This explanation is consistent with suggestions that good logos should be easily recognized [6]

Symmetrical designs have also been shown to be processed more efficiently as well, a desirable trait [14] [15]. They argued that symmetrical designs generate better processing fluency because symmetrical designs can be elaborated on more efficiently. Similarly, it has also been argued that symmetrical designs are more easily processed because they have less information than asymmetrical ones [5].

This review suggests that symmetrical designs, in general, are viewed more favorably than asymmetrial ones. It seems reasonable to propose, therefore, that in the absence of evidence to the contrary, brand managers should consider symmetry as the default design option for logos.

Method

The sample was derived from Forbes list of 50 largest U.S. charitable organizations. (http://www.forbes.com/top-charities/list/). Based on guidelines established by in the literature [6], three coders were trained to distinguish between symmetrical and asymmetrical design shapes. Working independently, the researchers coded the graphical representation in the logo using a four-point rating scale ranging from symmetrical to asymmetrical (symmetrical, more symmetrical than asymmetrical, more asymmetrical than symmetrical, and asymmetrical).

Once each coder completed the analysis, the results were compared and any differences in interpretation discussed and resolved as a group. Organizations where the symmetry could not be readily conducted (i.e., because the presentation was language-based) were excluded from the analysis.

Results

Of the 50 charities in the sample, two were considered not amenable to the analysis and were therefore excluded, thereby leaving an effective sample of 48. The results indicate that 58.4 percent of the charitable organizations utilized logos designs that were either symmetrical (n= 15 or 31.3 percent) or 'more symmetrical than asymmetrical' (n=13 or 27.1 percent). Conversely, 41.6 percent of the logos were either asymmetrical (n=10 or 20.8 percent) or 'more asymmetrical than symmetrical' (n=10 or 20.8 percent).

Discussion

We have argued that, based on evidence showing that asymmetrical designs are not typically viewed as favorably as symmetrical ones, organizations in general (and charitable organizations, in particular) may want to consider a more symmetric design unless there is a valid reason for using a more asymmetric one. In essence, the evidence suggests that in the absence of compelling rationale to the contrary, symmetrical design should be the default option.

The results of the analysis also suggest that additional research is warranted. In particular, research on symmetry has typically measured the concept as a binary event (either symmetrical or asymmetrical). We argue that symmetry is a matter of degrees and identifying the precise level of symmetry can be open to individual interpretation. That is one reason this study utilized a 4-point response scale and even then, the determination of symmetry can be somewhat illusive and subject to individual interpretation. Additional research is needed to better understand at which point along the continuum that asymmetry creates a more negative affect (and vice versa). Such research would provide further clarification on the influence of symmetry.

The results of this study also beg the question of whether symmetric designs are preferred for all types of organizations. An extension of this research, therefore, could provide additional insights into the extent of symmetrical designs in other domains. Consequently, such a repository of information may be useful to researchers in determining why such variance exists within and between organizational segments (e.g., within charitable organizations, charitable organizations compared to sporting goods manufacturers).

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