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# A LOGO SELECTION METHOD

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Many companies and sports teams have revised their logos over time in efforts to reposition their brand image. Still, the need for establishing a reliable method to guide this important decision still persists. This study offers an empirical method for selecting logos for companies and/or brands by testing the perceptions of consumers using 16 bi-polar personality traits adapted from the literature. The data were collected from undergraduate marketing students for demonstration purposes. The paper proposes that the perceptions for a logo of multiple samples from the same target population will be the same. The findings support the proposition. Implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Selecting or designing a logo involves creating a universally recognizable symbol for a company and it is a rigorous process that involves time, money, and psychological factors. Although logos are simply symbols and letters, for a logo to be effective, consumers must be able to easily recognize it, assign a meaning to it, and distinguish the symbol from similar ones. “In order to understand how people emotionally react to symbols in the environment, one must gain an understanding of the shared meanings of various signs” (Girard 2005, p.5). The study of semiotics provides insight in the logo selection process and guidelines for creating the optimal logo. Understanding the meaning behind symbols and how consumers react to such stimuli is critical for marketers to keep in mind during the logo creation process.

A logo can be thought of as a stimulus that jumpstarts a person’s memory at two different levels: correct and false recognition. “First, consumers must remember seeing the logo”, and then remember the brand or company name (Henderson and Cote, 1998, p. 15). The second response to the stimulus is false recognition which occurs “when people believe they have seen the logo when they really have not” (Atkinson and Juola, 1972; Jacoby and Dallas, 1981). The extent that these two levels of recognition occur is influenced by the initial design of the logo (Luo, 1993; Underwood, 1965; Whittlesea *et al.*, 1990). By this time, “the company will have made its first impression” (Goforth, 2003). Therefore, in order to avoid a false recognition, companies need to pay close attention to the method(s) they use in selecting their logos.

Receiving positive reactions from consumers are critical for a logo’s success because the consumer’s perception of the logo can transfer to the company’s perceived personality and products. A logo should create a positive and consistent image, “and also build brand recognition

to increase familiarity and trust among customers” (CMP Information Ltd. 2005). The selection of the graphics for a logo will influence public perception (Cohen, 1986). Without testing their perceptions, customers are left to make their own interpretation of the image. To insure that this interpretation is consistent with the intent of the company, logo designs must be tested for the perceptions, which in turn must be compared for consistency with the company’s goals, strategies and values.

Many companies (e.g., Wal-Mart, Holliday Inn, BP) and sports teams (Everson, 2009) have revised their logos over time in efforts to reposition their brand image. Still, the need for establishing a reliable method to guide this important decision still persists. The published articles offer insights and suggestions for designing logos, however, empirical studies testing the logos on the perceptions of target markets scientifically are sparse (Girard, 2006). The findings of these studies use scales that are limited to either positive, neutral, or negative perceptions of the consumer (Omar and Williams, 2005) or degree of pleasingness of a logo (Pittard *et al.*, 2007). Prior studies have not yet offered the understanding of personality traits of a logo by testing them on consumers. Therefore, the objective of this study is to offer an empirical method for selecting logos for a company and/or brand by first testing the perceptions of consumer markets on three logos using 16 bi-polar personality traits adapted from the literature to discover exactly what the logos represent and mean to the customer.

## **BACKGROUND**

Prior research has used semiotic approaches and theory to explain symbolism, the relationship between sign and meaning. Semiotics gained its identity especially after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the “independently developed works of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce” (Mick, 1986, p.197). Semiotics has been used to analyze the structure of verbal and non-verbal meanings of events. While the sign is the fundamental concept, semiotics attempt to explain the sign systems that are essential to all types of communication for the abstract rules that “facilitate sign production and interpretive responses” (Mick, 1986, p. 197).

Most of the time, meaning is not something tangible or can directly be measured (Harman, 1981). However, according to Umberto Eco (1976), the correct approach to developing a unified semiotic theory should be to provide a method of investigating how sign-vehicles (i.e., the form in which the sign appears) may function as signs and to provide a means of understanding how sign-vehicles may be produced and interpreted. Whereas Saussure theorized “dyadic” relations, Charles Sanders Peirce (1960) has theorized “triadic” relations among the three elements of signs: the sign-vehicle (i.e., the form of the sign), interpretant (i.e., the meaning made of the sign), and the referent (i.e., what the sign stands for (its object)) (Chandler, 2009; Mick, 1986). The sign itself can be a quality, an individual thing, or something general that can represent an object by resembling it iconically or by being existentially connected to it.

In the logo design strategy literature, several authors stressed that a logo must induce the same intended meaning across individuals (Durgee and Stuart, 1987; Vartorella, 1990; Kropp, French, and Hillard, 1990). Similarly, Keller (1993) contended that a marketing stimulus should

communicate one clear message that is not hard to interpret. According to Shiffman and Kanuk (1994), people use personal or subjective criteria such as taste, pride, desire for adventure, and desire for expressing themselves.

The study of semiotics defines a logo as part of the sign system (Henderson and Cote, 1998). Semiotics can be used in the logo selection process to examine the associations between signs and symbols. It is important for companies or design firms to understand how people react emotionally to symbols, such as logos. A logo in one culture or segment may have a different meaning in another culture or segment. In fact, in an empirical study, van der Lans *et al.* (2009) found three clusters in which responses of consumers located 10 countries to logo design dimensions were different.

Most research on logos focuses on how design elements such as color (Bottomley and Doyle, 2006), proportion, symmetry, and angularity affect consumer perceptions and reactions (Pittard *et al.*, 2007). However, the number of empirical research studies on proper logo selection decision process is limited in the logo strategy literature (van der Lans *et al.*, 2009, Girard, 2006). Henderson and Cote, (1998) examine whether design dimensions of design elaborateness and naturalness, and harmony in pattern exist across different nations, and whether consumer responses to these dimensions are similar. Although these studies provide useful insights for how design elements work in general, they do not specifically test what logos represent in the consumers' mind. To determine whether the logos designed convey the desired traits of the company or brand image to the target market(s), companies need to take a further step and conduct a survey with a representative sample of the targeted market population or current customers (Girard, 2006). In other words, a comparison is necessary to assess the consistency of the perceptions toward a logo. In line with Keller's position, with the proper design, logos will evoke similar responses from individuals who are from the same target market. Therefore, the question, whether the perceptions of logos by multiple independent samples from the same population demonstrate consistency, is investigated.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A company needs to assess whether its newly designed logo is conveying the desired image in the eyes of its target market. This assessment can be achieved by using a survey to cross-check how the logo is perceived across multiple samples of its target market and current customers. Administration of such survey involves displaying logos one at a time, and then asking participants to select the traits they think that the logo is portraying from a list of bipolar adjectives in a rank order (Girard, 2006) (Table 1). After the survey is completed and the answers are tabulated, the management would then have a better understanding of what meanings the logos are conveying to consumers. If the traits perceived by the participants using the bi-polar adjectives are not what the company or design firm intended, the company or design firm should then revise the design, color, or text. After a design has been revised, it is tested again with multiple samples from the target market. Our empirical study qualitatively measures how students perceive certain logos. It offers a methodology using three student samples to demonstrate the aforementioned steps and cross-validate the perceptions of several (actual) logos

to test the proposition that as long as samples are from the same population the perceptions will be the same or similar.




**Table 1:** Bi-polar adjectives

Logo X	
<input type="checkbox"/> Sophisticated	<input type="checkbox"/> Simple
<input type="checkbox"/> Romantic	<input type="checkbox"/> Unaffectionate
<input type="checkbox"/> Successful	<input type="checkbox"/> Unsuccessful
<input type="checkbox"/> Unique	<input type="checkbox"/> Ordinary
<input type="checkbox"/> Expressive	<input type="checkbox"/> Low-key
<input type="checkbox"/> Glamorous	<input type="checkbox"/> Ugly
<input type="checkbox"/> Elegant	<input type="checkbox"/> Inelegant
<input type="checkbox"/> Stylish	<input type="checkbox"/> Plain

### SAMPLES AND DATA COLLECTION

Three independent samples were used that consisted of undergraduate business students enrolled in marketing courses at a large university in the northeastern United States. A total of 205 students participated in the study: 85 students in the first sample and 52 students in the second sample, and 68 in the third sample. Out of 205 students, 72 evaluated Logo 1, 70 evaluated Logo 2, and 63 evaluated Logo 3 (Figure 1). As a part of the class exercise, logos of various inconspicuous companies in Figure 1 were downloaded from the Internet and presented to the students one at a time without identifying the companies' names. Students were instructed to select the adjectives (Table 1) that best describe the logos from a list of 16 bi-polar adjectives adapted from Bhat and Srinivas (1998), and then rank (e.g., 1 being the most representative) the logos by writing the rank number next to the checked adjectives based on how closely the logos represent the selected adjectives.

**Figure 1:** Logos tested

Logo 1	Logo 2	Logo 3
		

### RESULTS

The data from the three samples were tabulated in order to analyze whether the perceptions of each logo (Figure 1) were consistent across the three samples. Tables 2, 3 and 4 present the frequencies and percents of student perceptions for each logo. A content analysis through comparisons of the frequencies of perceptions revealed that the adjectives ranked as the most representative were similar across three samples for each logo.

More specifically, the perceptions of Logo 1 were consistently negative across the three samples. Out of 72 students who evaluated Logo 1, a total of 29 negative associations such as simple, unsuccessful, plain, inelegant, ordinary, low-key, ugly, and only 3 positive associations such as unique were observed from sample 1 (Table 2). From sample 2, a total of 15 negative and 2 positive associations (stylish and sophisticated) were observed. Similarly, a total of 23 negative and no positive associations were observed from sample 3.

**Table 2.** Comparisons of Perceptions of Logo 1

Adjective	Sample 1 Freq. (%)	Sample 2 Freq. (%)	Sample 3 Freq. (%)
<b>Simple</b>	<b>11 (34.4)</b>	<b>7 (41.2)</b>	<b>13 (56.5)</b>
<b>Unsuccessful</b>	<b>2 (6.3)</b>	<b>1 (5.9)</b>	<b>5 (21.7)</b>
<b>Plain</b>	<b>2 (6.3)</b>	<b>4 (23.5)</b>	<b>3 (13.0)</b>
<b>Inelegant</b>	<b>2 (6.3)</b>	<b>1 (5.9)</b>	<b>1 (4.3)</b>
Ordinary	4 (12.5)	0	1 (4.3)
Low-key	2 (6.3)	2 (11.8)	0
Ugly	4 (12.5)	0	0
Unaffectionate	2 (6.3)	0	0
Sophisticated	0	1 (5.9)	0
Stylish	0	1 (5.9)	0
Unique	3 (9.4)	0	0
Total negative	29 (90.6)	15 (89.2)	23 (100)
Total positive	3 (9.4)	2 (11.8)	0
Total	32 (100)	17 (100)	23 (100)

Conversely, Logo 2 received consistently positive perceptions across three samples. Out of 70 students who evaluated Logo 2, a total of 28 positive and 1 negative associations were observed from sample 1. From sample 2, a total of 16 positive and 2 negative, and from sample 3, a total of 22 positive and 1 negative associations (ordinary, unaffectionate, simple) were observed (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Comparisons of Perceptions of Logo 2

Adjective	Sample 1 Freq. (%)	Sample 2 Freq. (%)	Sample 3 Freq. (%)
<b>Unique</b>	<b>7 (24.1)</b>	<b>7 (38.9)</b>	<b>8 (34.8)</b>
<b>Sophisticated</b>	<b>7 (24.1)</b>	<b>1 (5.6)</b>	<b>3 (13.0)</b>
<b>Expressive</b>	<b>6 (20.7)</b>	<b>2 (11.1)</b>	<b>6 (26.1)</b>
<b>Stylish</b>	<b>6 (20.7)</b>	<b>6 (33.3)</b>	<b>3 (13.0)</b>
Ordinary	1 (3.4)	0	0
Elegant	1 (3.4)	0	0
Successful	1 (3.4)	0	2 (8.7)
Unaffectionate	0	1 (5.6)	0
Ugly	0	1 (5.6)	0
Simple	0	0	1 (4.3)

Total negative	1 (3.4)	2 (11.1)	1 (4.3)
Total positive	28 (96.6)	16 (88.9)	22 (95.7)
Total	29 (100)	18 (100)	23 (100)

The perceptions of Logo 3 were consistently bi-polar across the three samples. Out of 63 students who evaluated Logo 3, 16 positive (unique, ugly, expressive, simple, inelegant) and 8 negative associations were observed from sample 1. A total of 8 positive and 9 negative associations were observed from sample 2. From sample 3, 13 positive and 9 negative associations were observed (Table 4). The proposition that the perceptions of logos by multiple independent samples from the same population will demonstrate consistency appears to be supported by the findings.

**Table 4.** Comparisons of Perceptions of Logo 3

Adjective	Sample 1 Freq. (%)	Sample 2 Freq. (%)	Sample 3 Freq. (%)
<b>Unique</b>	<b>7 (29.2)</b>	<b>3 (17.6)</b>	<b>6 (27.3)</b>
<b>Ugly</b>	<b>3 (12.5)</b>	<b>5 (29.4)</b>	<b>2 (9.1)</b>
<b>Expressive</b>	<b>2 (8.3)</b>	<b>2 (11.8)</b>	<b>3 (13.6)</b>
<b>Simple</b>	<b>1 (4.2)</b>	<b>1 (5.9)</b>	<b>4 (18.2)</b>
<b>Inelegant</b>	<b>1 (4.2)</b>	<b>2 (11.8)</b>	<b>1 (4.5)</b>
Successful	2 (8.3)	0	1 (4.5)
Low-key	2 (8.3)	0	1 (4.5)
Unaffectionate	1 (4.2)	0	0
Elegant	1 (4.2)	0	1 (4.5)
Sophisticated	2 (8.3)	2 (11.8)	0
Stylish	1 (4.2)	0	1 (4.5)
Romantic	1 (4.2)	1 (5.9)	0
Unsuccessful	0	1 (5.9)	0
Glamorous	0	0	1 (4.5)
Plain	0	0	1 (4.5)
Total negative	8 (33.3)	9 (52.9)	9 (40.9)
Total positive	16 (66.7)	8 (47.1)	13 (59.1)
Total	24 (100)	17 (100)	22 (100)



## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The three logos tested in this study revealed consistent results. When selecting logos, companies should seek consistency in the perceptions of two or more samples from the same target market (Girard, 2005; 2006). The first logo tested revealed negative associations whereas the second logo revealed consistently revealed positive associations across the three samples. The third logo revealed consistently both positive and negative associations across the three samples. The implication is that if the logo tested consistently evokes positive perceptions and reactions by two or more samples from the target market, the logo can be considered appealing and conveying a positive company image. It is also important to note that a logo that evokes negative, or even mixed emotions, associations, and reactions, like in the case of logo 2 and 3, in one target market

may evoke positive associations in another. For example, the first logo tested in this study was originally designed for executives who would seek a formal and professional image in a business setting. Naturally, the younger student segment might find the same logo ordinary, low-key, simple, and inelegant. If logo 1 were tested on executives, the results might have been the positive perceptions rather than negative. Similarly, the third logo evoked mixed emotions across the student samples, the split between the negative and positive associations might have resulted from other characteristics of the samples than the similar age groups in the student population. Gender may be an influential factor; however, testing this relationship is not one of the objectives of this study. The results are consistent with those in Keller 1993, Pittard *et al.* (2007), van der Lans *et al.* (2009), Girard (2006), and Henderson and Cote (1998). These studies found similar responses toward a logo across multiple samples or a universal preference across different cultures. As Keller (1993) suggested, a marketing stimulus should communicate one clear message that is difficult to misinterpret. However, if the logo is tested on a different segment than what is meant to be targeted, it may result in a misguided logo selection decision.

In conclusion, although this study tests only three logos on three student samples, the results demonstrate that companies need to test the prospective logos on multiple samples from their target markets or current customers before they adopt their logos. A company should ascertain what image it desires to portray with the logo. It may desire to create easy recognition of the product, establish a new company image, or improve the image of an older company. Following the design choice, a company should test the positioning created by the graphics and text using samples selected from its targeted segment. A survey should then be administered to samples of target markets or current customers to ensure that the desired traits are being conveyed. Finally, a company should periodically test its logo to ensure that the logo remains relevant as the organization continues to grow and change. Over time, sports teams and big companies have revised their logos. Although the comparison of the differences in perceptions of selected logos by the three samples of business students were performed based on a content analysis, a statistical t-test for percentages could have been performed if the sample sizes were of adequate size. Future research based on a quantitative testing method would be beneficial. Nevertheless, this paper provides not only guidance to companies for logo selection, but offers entrepreneurship, management, and marketing instructors a pedagogical method to teach tomorrow's managers how to select logos.

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