

CULTURAL EFFECTS ON PERCEIVED AFFORDANCES OF VISUAL BRANDING

ABSTRACT

Designers encode desirable values into brands and products by using distinctive visual design features such as colours, shapes, materials, etc. Consumers' perception of design features is governed by inference mechanisms rooted in experience and culture. With few exceptions, scant research has focused on cultural biases in consumer responses to visual branding. This dissertation examines how cultural factors influence perceived affordances of visual design features in brand logos and products. Through two empirical essays, this dissertation examines the influence of two distinct cultural factors on perceived affordances of two distinctive design features. The first essay (Chapter 2) illuminates the impact of interstitial space—a fundamental element of visual design—on consumer inferences regarding safety and autonomy. Six studies in the lab and field demonstrate that interstitial space in brand logos, characterized by separation of elements, potentially signals both vulnerability and autonomy. We find that for safety-(autonomy-) oriented products, interstitial space decreases (increases) brand preference. Furthermore, consumer responses to interstitial space in logos is moderated by cultural tightness. While interstitial space signals autonomy in loose cultures, it signals vulnerability in tight cultures. Cultural tightness therefore moderates the effect of high (vs. low) interstitial space in logos on brand preference, such that this influence is negative in tight cultures (mediated by decrease in brand safety) but positive in loose cultures (mediated by increase in brand autonomy). Most prior research has shown positive effects of white- or interstitial space on brand perceptions,

whereas, this research indicates that interstitial space in a brand logo encourages alternative metaphorical meanings of vulnerability and autonomy, thereby contributing to the growing literature on visual space and conceptual metaphor theory. The current findings illustrate that the outcome of branding efforts such as logo design may differ dramatically, depending on regional differences in cultural tightness. The second essay (chapter 3) uses the theory of magical thinking and conceptualizes the cultural lay belief of evil eye (known as *huri nazar* or *dhurшти* in Indian languages) as perceived affordance of *gaze-based contagion*. Through five experiments, this essay empirically demonstrates that evil eye belief increases the preference for inconspicuous product designs, mediated by attention-avoidance motive. Through a series of moderation effects, this essay demonstrates that evil eye is (i) relevant to enviable target objects because the influence of evil eye belief holds only when the product is framed as enviable to onlookers, (ii) rooted in public gaze because the influence of evil eye belief holds only in public (vs. private) consumption context, and (iii) fostered by a contagion effect because the influence of evil eye belief holds only among consumers who are high on sensitivity to contagion. This research makes important advances to the emerging literature on non-touch based contagion by introducing a unique form of gaze-based contagion with substantial effects in the marketplace. The current findings illustrate that consumer choices of products may dramatically be influenced by perceived affordances of design features, shaped by specific cultural beliefs. Both essays suggest that a systematic understanding of cultural effects on consumer perception can provide marketers with the insight and power to design visual branding stimuli that culturally resonate with consumers.