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Brand New: How Visual Context Shapes Initial Response To Logos and Corporate Visual Identity Systems

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logos and corporate visual identity systems

by

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ABSTRACT

When a new logo is released, it does not have an established meaning in the mind of the viewer. As logos have become more highly scrutinized by consumers and critics, it has become more important to understand consumers' initial response to logos. While other studies have researched the impact of aesthetic choices on viewer reaction to logos, few researchers have attempted to understand the effect of the surrounding visual identity system when a new logo is introduced. This study combines a content analysis of the logo review website *Brand New* with the voting data from their polls to understand how visual context correlates with a viewer's initial response. The study also takes into account the different types of context that can be presented – from logo variations and environmental examples to videos and animation – and their varied effects. Results show that most types of visual context correlate to improved viewer response.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"In the world of identity design, very few designs mean anything when they're brand new" Michael Bierut (2006).

When a new visual identity is released, it does not have a firm meaning in the mind of the consumer. Instead, the logo gains meaning over time as the design is experienced in context (Bierut, 2006). This context helps consumers understand the meaning of the logo and the message it communicates. Current research on logos primarily focuses on consumer response to aesthetic properties, but it often separates the logo from any supporting context (Kim & Lim, 2019). This thesis takes a different approach to studying logos – combining a content analysis with user responses to logo designs – to better understand how the visual context surrounding the logo affects the viewer reaction, expanding the literature by examining this response in a new way. When examining logos, visual context consists of the supporting images and examples which helps viewers understand how the logo was created and how it will be used.

Logos provide visual differentiation for companies, products, and services. These marks have shifted over the years from a simple trademark symbol to serving as the core of an integrated system that is central to corporate marketing efforts (Meggs & Purvis, 2016). Companies invest massive resources in developing these visual identity systems to support their corporate goals and brand objectives. Corporate visual identities are the "tangible and visual element" of a brand's qualities and values and are an important facet

of that company's brand equity (Bolhuis et al., 2018). Corporations brand and rebrand their companies to ensure that the appearance of their company or product is aligned with their strategic objectives and desired brand personality (Baker & Balmer, 1997; Miller et al., 2014).

Logos get all of the attention, but a corporate visual identity is much more than just this single mark. A corporate identity system often includes several logo variations, color palettes, typography, photo and illustration style, and more (Budds, 2016; Phillips et al., 2014). The design system serves as the foundation for everything from social media posts and ads to websites and office signage, ensuring a degree of consistency across every touchpoint for each audience (Gosling, 2019).

As logos have become an increasingly visible aspect of corporate marketing, it is unsurprising that consumers have responded with higher expectations and vocal criticism. Design critic and author Stephen Heller notes that "in a logo-saturated world, these letters, words, and marks do, indeed, have an elevated cultural status for what they represent" (2015). When a new logo is released, a swift — and often negative — reaction comes from the general public. For example, critics panned the Hillary for America logo (Bierut, 2017a), the Gap redesign (Fraikin, 2016) and the London Olympics logo (Alderson, 2012). Angry alumni signed petitions and forced the University of California system to abandon their new logo (Bierut, 2013; *Design Trends of 2013: The Stripped-down Logo*, 2013). The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York replaced their iconic stylized "M" logo much to the disappointment of some patrons (Budds, 2016; Vinh, 2016). Soccer fans have complained loudly about the Premier League's updated lion logo (Watson, 2021).

Criticism comes from all corners. Media and commenters take aim at how well a logo was designed, how much it cost, and what it means, often interviewing designers to get their opinions (Heller, 2015). Social media, of course, allows all interested parties to participate in this public criticism, with resistance finding root on Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit (Budds, 2016). Designer Khoi Vinh noted that the design industry was struggling to adapt to the new "public square for discussion of corporate identities" and added that the new criticism is coming from consumers "who are both poorly equipped to constructively appraise branding *and* who feel more empowered than ever to pass judgment on it" (Vinh, 2016). This process of public criticism of logos has been referred to as "crowdsmashing" (Ford, 2012) and a "spectator sport" (Bierut, 2013). This newfound heightened interest in logo design seems to be here to stay and designers and their clients need to adapt to this new environment (Bierut, 2013; Budds, 2016; Vinh, 2016).

Companies and their design firms — aware of the potential damage this criticism could do to a corporation's long-term brand equity — plan logo rollouts to influence and shape the initial public response (Jimerson, 2019). These logo rollouts attempt to introduce their audience to the new logo through a variety of examples and resources. For example, some companies use examples to provide informational context, demonstrating how professional and expansive their identity system is, showing all of their logo variations as well as their broader corporate visual identity choices like typefaces, color palette, and supporting graphics. Before-and-after images drive home how the visual identity has improved or expanded. Some examples seek to add environmental context by showing how the logo will be used on products or a storefront and specifically putting the

logo into its intended environment. Design firms and their clients produce motion-based context like videos and animations to help stakeholders understand the new look. All of these examples aim to positively influence consumer reaction and soften the critical impulses of viewers (Armes, 2019; Jimerson, 2019). In this study, overall visual context is defined as the total number of examples that are shown when a logo is experienced for the first time. This thesis also looks at the varied types of context – informational, environmental, video, and animated – to understand the impact that the different types of examples may have on viewer response.

Research into corporate visual identity is almost solely focused on logos without this context. Many scholars have run experiments with sample logos for fictional companies (Huang et al., 2008; Kim & Lim, 2019; Luffarelli, Mukesh, et al., 2019; Luffarelli, Stamatogiannakis, et al., 2019; Sharma & Varki, 2018; Walsh et al., 2011). These studies aim to answer questions about whether consumers prefer a particular color or construction but teach us little about how a logo works within a larger visual system. Case studies delve into specific corporate examples, but those lessons are often tailored only to a specific industry or company type (Kim & Lim, 2019). The study of consumer reaction to logos is multidisciplinary and as a result, a solid theoretical understanding has not been built around logo reaction. Studies that have attempted to apply a theoretical foundation rely primarily on semiotics and process fluency (Janiszewski & Meyvis, 2001; Skaggs, 2019) while many marketing studies are not rooted in any particular theoretical foundation. Finally, with the changing media environment, many assumptions about how visual systems were used in a print-first world may no longer be valid in a world dominated by digital media channels (Gosling, 2019).

The design industry's perspective in the literature is important and massively underrepresented. Traditionally, design educators focus on object-level, practice-driven problems. That research tends to be focused more on producing "an artifact or environment that solves a problem" (Davis, 2008). This focus on personal research, coupled with the lack of Ph.D. design programs in the United States, means that the literature surrounding larger complex systems is unexplored from the viewpoint of design (Davis, 2008). Instead, research is coming from other corners of academia — social sciences, engineering, and marketing — to address the design issues they see present in society (Cash, 2018).

This thesis uses a quantitative content analysis of the branding review site, *Brand New*, to better understand the connection between visual context and consumers' initial reaction to logos and visual identity. When companies launch new identities, *Brand New* shares not just the logos, but additional visual context including informational, environmental, animated, and video examples. At the bottom of the post, viewers are able to rate the visual identity and provide comments. These responses tell us not just about how viewers react to logos, but how the context surrounding the logo shapes viewer reaction. An advantage of this approach is that it allows the study of real visual branding examples for real companies within a larger visual identity complex, a perspective that is largely missing within the broader literature.

The first section of the literature review will examine the history of logo and corporate identity scholarship. The next section will explore how logos serve both long- and short-term functions. The following sections detail the power of context to shape meaning and how logos have been traditionally studied from the perspective of

aesthetics. Finally, the literature review looks at how the impact of motion-based context like videos and animations may differ from static example.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Logos and corporate visual identity

Logos have been around for centuries when craftsmen would use trademarks to identify their work. During the Industrial Revolution, differentiating products from competitors became even more important, as mass production became easier. But our current understanding of logos and corporate visual identity starts to take shape after World War II when modernist designers like Paul Rand, Massimo Vignelli, and Saul Bass began building minimalist logo systems for large corporations that emerged in the post-war period (Meggs & Purvis, 2016). In 1978, English branding consultant Wally Olins recognized the importance of the emerging corporate visual communications and wrote "The Corporate Personality: An Inquiry into the Nature of Corporate Identity" which started to define this new emphasis on corporate visual identity.

Since then, corporate visual identity scholarship has proceeded in several directions. Some research has attempted to clearly define the language we use to describe corporate visual identity, breaking down the systems into their component parts — logos, wordmarks, icons, and more — so that they can be more easily studied and understood. Most of these studies define a logo as a symbol that represents a company, product, or service and typically consists of an icon and a wordmark (Foroudi et al., 2017; Kim & Lim, 2019). Logos are viewed as the key element in a company's larger corporate visual identity system and are used consistently across a company's communications to

represent the company's personality and align with a company's goals and objectives (Baker & Balmer, 1997; Gregersen & Johansen, 2018; Olins, 1978).

Corporate visual identity is just one element that contributes to a company's brand equity. Brand equity is the value that a company holds in the mind of the consumer, "including awareness, perceived quality, loyalty, and associations" (Aaker, 1996, p. 104). As consumers interact with companies or products, their relationship with these brands can be positively or negatively affected by a range of factors including customer service, product quality, and advertising. Positive brand equity can lead to consumer loyalty, an increased likelihood to recommend products to friends, and a deep connection to a company's values and personality (Aaker, 1996). A corporate visual identity serves as the tangible manifestation of this brand equity, helping frame and shape the relationship between consumers and corporate entities. Because of the perceived importance of brand equity, research has focused on identifying ways that a visual identity can shape a consumer's perception of a company (Aaker, 1996; Airey, 2014; Balmer, 2008).

From time to time, companies need to update or change their visual branding to align with a new corporate strategy, to target new consumers, or simply to appear more contemporary. If consumers are connected to an existing brand, this rebranding can be challenging, alienating customers and harming brand equity. Because of this danger, large companies carefully manage the rebranding process, coordinating with internal stakeholders and promoting the new brand to existing customers and other external audiences (Airey, 2014; Bolhuis et al., 2018; Merrilees & Miller, 2008; Miller et al., 2014; Stuart, 2002; Williams & Omar, 2014)

Previous studies have sought to understand how a corporate visual identity is developed and used. Researchers have tried to gain insights into which design elements are well received by consumers (Kim & Lim, 2019) and, for the most part, these studies on corporate visual identity focus primarily on logos. Logos are considered the centerpiece of a visual identity system and so much of the research assumes that reactions to a single logo can predict how a person might react to the entire visual identity (Skaggs, 2019). However, contemporary visual identity systems are evolving beyond their print-based origins to meet the needs of modern communications tactics like social media and video. Newer visual identities often feature multiple logos that work in a variety of sizes, animated logos, custom typefaces, and bespoke illustrations (Armes, 2019; Jimerson, 2019). These newer systems help provide visual context for consumers, far beyond what can be interpreted from a logo alone.

Initial reaction

The most well-known logos — from companies like Nike, Target, IBM, Apple — have decades of meaning and brand equity behind them. Consumers have used their products, visited their stores, and seen their ads so their opinions of their logos and surrounding visual identities are assumed to be heavily influenced by a customer's previous experiences with the company (Aaker, 1996; Airey, 2014).

Building this brand equity takes time and the process has to start somewhere. This initial reaction occurs whenever a consumer experiences a logo for the first time. How is the logo received by the viewer? If a consumer does not have a long history with a logo, how do they process or understand the logo to shape an initial response? Is their response based solely on the aesthetic properties of the logo?

Designers are skeptical that there is any value in judging a logo so quickly arguing that a logo and visual identity system should be judged by its long-term success (Watson, 2021). Branding designer Paula Scher notes that "identity systems have to live in the public. That's why I'm very much against people who do instant criticisms on blogs on identities" (Miles, 2016). Beirut agrees, noting that instantly judging a logo is like reviewing a three-act play based on what they see when the moment the curtain goes up" (Bierut, 2017b, p. 207). In the long process of building a corporate identity, focusing too much on uninformed initial reaction might be counterproductive.

So why study initial reaction at all? Design has become a more important part of modern society and logos – for better or worse – are the most high-profile thing that designers create. Logos and the surrounding identity systems attract attention from media outlets and consumers on social media. *Brand New*'s Vit acknowledges the shift:

> The other thing that's changed is how the public acknowledges design. When we started *Brand New*, no one covered logo changes. It was just *Brand New*, and that was it. And now *The New York Times*, *Vanity Fair* and *Wired* covers it (Hadlock, 2020).

Media often interview designers to get their opinions on new controversial logos, who typically dissect the logo with little regard for the process, client limitations, or project objectives. This critical media coverage can impact the brand relationship between a company and its loyal customers, but a larger issue might be the relationship between design firms and their clients (Budds, 2016; Heller, 2015). If companies receive negative criticism from media and social media, they may lose trust in their design partners and become less likely to make more ambitious design decisions for fear of a negative response (Budds, 2016; Vinh, 2016).

While corporate visual identity and branding efforts are most common with large companies, these strategies are now commonplace among companies of all sizes. Consultants routinely advise small businesses that a strong logo and visual identity is a key part of their success, too (Antonelli, 2016; *Small Business Guide to Branding and Development*, 2021). In the introduction to his book "Logo Design Love," David Airey stated the importance of logos today: "Brand identity design. Who needs it? Every company in existence" (Airey, 2014). Large companies have budgets and resources to commit to building long-term brand equity, smaller companies don't always have that luxury. The visual appearance of a small local company may be what brings a customer in the door. In that case, initial reaction to logos may have a lasting impact on the success of a business.

Most quantitative research on visual identity has attempted to understand how people respond to logos in experimental settings, using logos for fictitious companies (Kim & Lim, 2019; Luffarelli, Mukesh, et al., 2019; Luffarelli, Stamatogiannakis, et al., 2019). These studies make determinations about initial reaction and then try to extrapolate their findings to determine which type of logo will improve consumer response or add brand equity (Kim & Lim, 2019). But this approach is potentially flawed. Experimental logos are presented with no supporting examples, separating them from any visual orientation that would help a viewer understand the meaning of a logo. Logos outside the experimental environment are rarely presented alone in a white square. They are shown on packaging, in advertisements, or within the context of store signage. Even when a new logo or brand is rolled out on social media, companies often provide a series of mock-up images to show the context of how the logo — and its supporting visual

identity — will be used (Airey, 2014; Armes, 2019; Jimerson, 2019). Recognizing that logo response occurs in two distinct phases will help scholars understand how logos and identity systems work on multiple levels and better study their effects. The typical experimental study provides only a limited understanding of initial response of consumers to logos.

When consumers are first reacting to a logo, does the overall visual context that is presented with the logo influence viewer opinion?

RQ1a. Does the amount of overall visual context presented with a logo correlate with the initial response from consumers?

Since designers have been facing a more critical public on social media, have companies and design firms changed the way they have shared visual context over time? What trends are present when it comes to how companies are communicating logo changes at the point of an initial rollout?

RQ1b. How has the visual context surrounding the initial launch of a logo changed over time?

Brand equity has been a major factor in previous studies about logos. If there is a correlation between visual context and initial response, does that relationship extend to companies with established brand equity?

RQ1c. How does the overall visual context surrounding a logo correlate with the initial response for companies with established brand equity?

Developing meaning: Environmental context

When discussing logos, design practitioners tend to focus on how a successful logo develops meaning in the minds of consumers. Paul Rand, one of the most influential

logo designers of the 20th century created iconic logos for companies like IBM, UPS, and ABC (*Famous Logos by Designer Paul Rand*, 2018). He wrote that a logo "is less important than the product it signifies; what it means is more important than what it looks like" (Rand, 1991). Bierut noted in his essay, *The Mysterious Power of Context* (2006), that meaning is developed over time as a logo is experienced by consumers, stating that logo designers have little control over what meanings consumers will form in their minds. Design educator Meredith Davis noted the importance of a supporting brand strategy, commenting that "we now understand that logos do not mean much if they are not nested within a branding strategy" (Davis, 2008). Designer Jennifer Kinon from Original Champions of Design has tackled complex identity systems ranging from the Girl Scouts to the WNBA. She stressed that a good logo alone could not solely guarantee success in the minds of the consumer. "Identity design is an ecosystem that will fail if even one element is out of balance," she said. "A logo is not enough to make a brand successful, but a bad logo is absolutely enough to sink one" (Butler, 2014). Designers view the logo as one element of the corporate visual identity. And that identity system works over time — in concert with consumer experience — to develop meaning in the mind of the consumer.

While these design practitioners did not specifically refer to semiotic theory, their observations largely reflect how semiotics attempts to explain how people understand the signs and symbols around them. In Fire Signs (2017), Steven Skaggs connects the practice of graphic design and semiotic theory. Semiotics provides a relevant perspective through which to understand how logos develop meaning in the mind of the consumer. In semiotics, signs are grouped into three types: Icon, index, or symbol. Icon signs are what

they represent. For example, when a viewer sees an apple, they know that it is a fruit. And index is a sign that indicates another concept, like how the presence of smoke can communicate the concept of fire. A symbol sign requires a learned meaning. Logos often fall into this category, where the meaning is learned and has to be formed over time. Meaning is developed not just from the logo itself, but from the network of symbols surrounding it. This visual context surrounding the logo works together to form a semiotic system to help shape meaning in the mind of the consumer (Aiello, 2006; Manning, 2010; Skaggs, 2017, 2018)

Another theory used to explain how logos work is processing fluency, a theory from psychology that seeks to understand how people encounter, process, and recall stimuli. When applied to the study of logos, the theory suggests that consumers learn to understand what a logo stands for and then are able to more quickly process communications from that brand (Janiszewski & Meyvis, 2001; Kim & Lim, 2019). This fluency is developed through repetition over time, and it explains how branding functions in the traditional sense of clearly identifying a company and its products. Processing fluency is largely viewed as a way that people recall a logo and connect it to a particular brand, but one particular facet of the theory, conceptual fluency, looks at the idea that consumers "create a meaning-based representation of a stimulus" (Kim & Lim, 2019). So not only do they learn to recognize a logo, but they also learn the qualities and personality that the mark represents. Processing fluency, when applied to logo reaction, seeks to understand how people's ability to recall changes over time, so it may be difficult to apply the theory to initial response to logos and visual identity systems.

Recent studies have attempted to apply processing and conceptual fluency in different ways. One study trained a neural network with over 500,000 logos to ascertain which traits influence memorability and likeability (Hu & Borji, 2018). A different approach tried to determine the difference in likeability and recall between image-based logos and wordmarks, finding that consumers who were less familiar with a company preferred wordmarks (Morgan et al., 2021).

In 2019, a series of experiments based on processing fluency found that more descriptive logos were positively perceived by viewers and likely led to increased brand equity. For example, a logo for a coffee shop should include a cup of coffee, or at least the word coffee. The study acknowledges that many well-known logos do not feature descriptive logos (i.e. Nike, Starbucks, and Apple), but posits that the marks have evolved as they have become well-known (Luffarelli, Mukesh, et al., 2019).

Designers tend to disagree with this literal approach to descriptiveness and are quick to argue that no one solution is right for every company or situation (Airey, 2014; Hadlock, 2020; Smith, 2019). Airey tells designers to "keep in mind that a logo doesn't need to go so far as to literally reveal what a company does" (2014). Armin Vit advises designers that abstract logos are best because "you can build more meaning into them as well as allow the audience to interpret it" (*Q&A*, 2020).

Even though the theoretical mechanisms vary, basic conclusions seem consistent across the literature regardless of the theory being applied. Meaning is a critical factor in understanding consumer response to logos and that meaning changes over time. The change in meaning can be sparked by added context — either visual or experiential.

Even though the context surrounding logos is important to understanding a consumer's initial reaction, most logo research looks only at a logo in isolation, assuming that elements of the logo can represent the entire visual identity system. Can viewing a logo within the surrounding framework of a visual identity system help form meaning and improve response? Can the added presence of sample images and examples of logos in use spark meaning in the minds of consumers and improve perception?

RQ2. How does showing the logo with environmental context correspond to initial user reaction?

Professional execution: Informational context

In the 1980s, the desktop publishing revolution made the tools of design available to a much wider audience. Today, the software needed to create a logo is available to anyone with a computer. As a result of this increased knowledge and interest, consumers evaluate the professionalism of a design solution as part of their initial reaction (Beegan & Atkinson, 2008; Lowry et al., 2014).

Designers have long worried about the impact of technology on their profession because the software and automated tools make it possible for anyone to create a logo or any other graphic design. Some feel like their credibility is at stake. Heller expressed this concern in a conversation with Ellen Lupton:

> By making our work so easy to do, we are devaluing our profession. I like democracy as much as the next person, but because of new technologies, the definition of "amateur" in fields like graphic design, photography, film, and music, among others, is being redefined. With everything so democratic, we can lose the elite status that gives us credibility (Lupton, 2006).

The tension between the professional design community and amateur artists has been further exacerbated by the crowdsourcing movement, which aims to allow a wider

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community to contribute to design projects (Massanari, 2012). Allowing amateur creators to compete directly with trained professional designers strikes right at the heart of Heller's fears. While some designers are concerned about amateur creators, other designers are concerned that the design thinking movement is attempting to move the process of creation from the domain of the artist and toward business consultancies (Inc, 2017; Vinh, 2018).

No project is considered as challenging among designers as a logo and supporting visual identity system. Author David Airey discusses the difficulty of balancing a range of priorities when tacking a logo project:

> Anyone can design a logo, but not everyone can design the right logo. A successful design may meet the goals set in your design brief, but a truly enviable iconic design will also be simple, relevant, enduring, distinctive, memorable, and adaptable" (Airey, 2014, p. 22).

Because of this perceived complexity, designers tend to hold logos to a higher standard than other forms of graphic design. Designers – like the general public – tend to be critical of logo designs. One frequent social media comment when a new logo is unveiled is that a four-year-old could have done that (Bierut, 2013). And while that statement is typically intended sarcastically, designers (and the company that hired them) often want to ensure stakeholders and interested consumers that their visual identity was handled professionally and that the company has made a wise investment.

To address the perception of professionalism, as part of the rollout of a corporate identity, designers often share details of the supporting design system, logo variations, illustrations, type, and even process drawings to demonstrate how well-thought-out and extensive their system is. This type of context is different than simply showing the

system in use. It seeks to show the details of the logo system and impress more knowledgeable consumers.

Does this type of informational context behave differently than other types of context? Can showing background information like logo variants, typefaces, color palettes, illustrations, and process sketches help shape initial response?

RQ3: How does the amount of informational context presented correspond to initial response from consumers?

Aesthetic preference in context

Most of the quantitative research on logo reactions is based on aesthetics. These studies have attempted to identify what effects aesthetic features have on consumer response to logos. Researchers have looked at how color (Huang et al., 2008; O'Connor, 2011), shapes (Walsh et al., 2011), fonts (Childers & Jass, 2002; Grohmann et al., 2012), proportion (Pittard et al., 2007), structure (Chen & Bei, 2019), white space (Sharma & Varki, 2018) and complexity (Grinsven & Das, 2014; Janiszewski & Meyvis, 2001; Miceli et al., 2014) influence a viewer's opinion of a company. Several studies have tried to connect these experimental results to the brand equity of corporations (Luffarelli, Stamatogiannakis, et al., 2019; Walsh et al., 2011).

One feature that has been studied widely – symmetry – demonstrates the challenges of this type of experiment. Many studies have tried to determine whether consumers prefer symmetry or asymmetry in logo designs and what effects that preference has on their reaction. (Bajaj & Bond, 2018; Bettels & Wiedmann, 2019; Luffarelli, Stamatogiannakis, et al., 2019; Marsden & Thomas, 2013). Collectively, these studies have failed to find a definitive answer. One study found that preference for

symmetry depended on a viewer's own self-perception (Bettels & Wiedmann, 2019) while a different study found that preference for a logo depended on the personality of the company (Luffarelli, Stamatogiannakis, et al., 2019). One study even found that political affiliation was a factor in determining a preference for symmetrical logos (Northey & Chan, 2020).

The conflicting research surrounding symmetry demonstrates the challenges of applying this type of aesthetic research. Different consumers have different personal preferences about color, shape, and other aesthetic features. Cultural differences are hard to account for between regions or countries (Pittard et al., 2007). Trends change from year to year indicating that these aesthetic preferences can change over time (Gardner, 2020). Perhaps the biggest issue is applying the results of the experiment to real-world logos. It is trivial to design experimental logos that are perfectly symmetrical or are presented in a certain color combination, but harder to apply the lessons to existing marks. Since logos are used to differentiate companies from competitors, all logos cannot follow the recommendation of the experimental advice, and a single design direction will not be right for all companies (Smith, 2019).

In most of these studies, logos are viewed without even a company name. When a logo is placed in the context of a larger visual identity system — surrounded by additional colors, fonts, and imagery — do the aesthetic features still have the same impact?

RQ4. Does overall visual context impact initial reaction to logos with different aesthetic properties?

Examples in motion: Video and animated context

Online media is an increasingly important part of communication a brand's identity and companies often use animations and videos to introduce their new logos and identity systems on websites and through social media. Vit feels like video can "tell a compelling story in 30 seconds instead of a long press release no one is going to read" (Hadlock, 2020) and that an animation can "bring to life an entire concept in 2 to 3 seconds" (*Q&A*, 2020). These elements range from longer videos that introduce a brand system to shorter animated elements to engage the viewer. While video and animation seem similar, users interact with them in different ways. Animations typically autoplay, while videos need to be clicked on (Amini et al., 2018; Appiah, 2006; Yoo et al., 2004). One study looked at how users interacted with video and animation in ads, finding that low involvement users tended to prefer animation while high involvement users were more likely to click on and watch a video (Yoo et al., 2004). A recent study looked at different types of animated logos and found the style of animation could influence viewer response for certain types of companies (Brasel & Hagtvedt, 2016).

When video and animated examples are included with the surrounding context of a logo unveiling, how does that influence viewer response? Do video and animation have a different impact on the viewer?

RQ5a: How does the presence of video context correlate with initial viewer reaction?

RQ5b: How does the presence of animated context influence initial viewer reactio

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Brand New

The blog, *Brand New*, offers a unique insight into how people respond to logos. Founded in 2006, the site has reviewed thousands of logos and allowed readers to provide their opinions through voting and commenting. *Brand New* covers more than just the largest and highest-profile rebranding project from New York agencies. Instead, they highlight everything from a small brewery in midwestern America to a large bank in Israel.

Over the last two decades, *Brand New* creators Armin Vit and Bryony Gomez-Palacio have become influential figures within the branding and graphic design community. As experienced designers, they recognized the potential for blogs to drive conversation about design and founded their first online publication, *Speak Up,* in 2002 as an online forum to spark discussion. Eventually, they spun off several other design-focused blogs including the logo-focused *Brand New*, a menu design blog *Art of the Menu,* and a site to cover high-quality printed work, *FPO*. And while they have discontinued their other blogs, *Brand New* has continued to thrive, becoming their most popular blog and growing to an audience of over 1.8 million readers a month (*About Under Consideration*, 2019; Paget, 2018). *Brand New* has been called "one of the most-read, most-respected, and most-feared design blogs on the Internet" (Hadlock, 2020).

Vit and Gomez-Palacio's influence has extended beyond just their design practice and their online writing. In 2010, they started an annual *Brand New* Conference highlighting the best of branding and corporate visual identity, eventually adding multiple events across the United States and in Europe (*In Conversation with Armin Vit Of…*, 2021; Paget, 2018). They have co-authored several books about design and branding (*About Under Consideration*, 2019; Paget, 2018; Steiner & Potts, 2016) and were invited to curate an exhibit on modern identity design at the Walker Art Center in New York (Bierut, 2013).

In August of 2020, amid the Coronavirus pandemic, Vit and Gomez-Palacio shifted their business model and converted *Brand New* to a subscription-based site. With events canceled and advertising revenue sagging, monetizing *Brand New* was the best option to allow them to continue publishing (Vit, 2020).

Several qualities of *Brand New* make it an attractive site to study viewer reaction to visual context. Their longevity means that they have thousands of logos featured on their site. Unlike many other sites, they do not focus on just the major corporate rebranding news. Their coverage expands to companies of all sizes and located across the world providing two advantages for this study. It presents a more realistic data set to study, reflecting a full range of branding design and not just focusing on the high-profile branding from New York identity firms. More importantly, featuring smaller businesses from a wider geographic area lessens the systemic impact of brand equity on logo reaction. Viewers are more likely to have a true initial opinion of a logo for a company they have never heard of.

Since 2013, *Brand New* has featured three review types: Reviewed, Noted, and Spotted. While all three start by showing a logo at the top of the post, the articles differ in the degree of detail and type of examples they provide. All three post types end with an opportunity for the reader to vote in a poll and comment.

Reviewed posts are the longest and most comprehensive. These posts typically feature more well-known brands or exceptionally crafted design work. Reviewed posts feature numerous visual examples interspersed with commentary from Vit. Reviewed posts typically have the largest number of votes and comments.

Noted posts have a consistent structure. They begin with some detail on the company from a press release or branding launch site. What industry is the company in and what were the goals of the new brand identity? Then the post contains a range of examples — from a single logo to a full identity system. Vit provides a short paragraph of commentary. Noted posts feature a wide range of company types and the number of votes and comments vary widely.

Spotted posts provide a single logo before and after with no added visual context or commentary. *Brand New* publishes two spotted posts each weekday, but these posts normally have the lowest number of votes and comments.

A poll with one to three questions is on the bottom of each post. The poll allows viewers to vote Great, Fine, or Bad. The results of the poll are hidden until someone votes or clicks the "View Results" button. The results are presented as a bar chart with the number of votes and percentages. Viewers do not always vote on every question. An example of the poll question is shown in Figure 3.1.

This content analysis looks exclusively at the Noted posts. The structure of the Noted posts is consistent except for the type and number of visual examples. Figure 3.2 shows an example post with the basic structure of a Noted post with three examples. Furthermore, the wide range of companies, industries, and locations lowers the likelihood that a viewer has seen the visual identity before, lessening the potential impact of established brand equity.

Sample

Brand New averages one Noted post per weekday so the total sample of posts continues to grow. However, to ensure consistency across the sample, this study analyzed posts published between July 2013 when the current Noted format began through August 2020 when the site switched to a subscription model. During that timeframe, a total of 1,535 Noted posts were published. A random sample of 355 posts was taken from that subset for analysis. The sample size ensured a confidence interval of 5 and a confidence level of 95%. All data was collected in January and February of 2021.

From the sample of 355, twenty posts were excluded from the analysis. Five posts were follow-ups and provided additional details for a previous post. Four reviews did not feature a logo in the primary image. One post was an announcement and did not include a logo review. Since this study looks primarily at the initial response to logos, these types of posts were not included in the final data set. In addition, 10 posts contained examples, but no voting or comment data. These errors were only present in posts published from 2017 and earlier and the posts were excluded from analysis because viewer reaction could not be gauged. The final sample consisted of 335 Noted posts.

Variables

Based on the research questions, variables were identified that appeared consistently through the Noted posts. Independent variables were related to the quantity and types of visual context presented within the post. Dependent variables took into account how viewers responded to the posts.

Independent variables

Year. The date of the post was recorded. The data set spans seven years. The year of the post was captured from the top of the post so annual trends could be evaluated.

Logo Type. Logos were coded as "New," "Rebrand," "Not Logo," or "Follow Up." Each *Brand New* post includes a header image that shows the logo that is being reviewed. If the logo is entirely new, then a single logo is shown in the header and the logo was coded as "New." If the logo is a rebranding, then the header image includes before and after versions of the logo and was coded as "Rebrand." Posts that did not feature a logo in the header image were coded as "Not Logo." Follow Up posts include additional examples from a prior post, were identified in the header image and coded as "Follow Up." Note that both "Not Logo" and "Follow Up" were excluded from the final data set.

Symmetry. Logos were coded as "Symmetrical," "Not Symmetrical," or "Wordmark/Not Applicable." To judge the effect of context on aesthetic qualities, the icon portion of the logo was coded based on its symmetry. Symmetry is straightforward to code and was chosen because there has been a significant amount of previous research. For this project, symmetry was defined as bilateral symmetry, meaning that the right and left halves of the icon are identical. If an icon was completely separate from the word

mark and was symmetrical, then the post was coded "Symmetrical." If the icon was asymmetrical, then the post was coded as "Not Symmetrical." Not all logos contain an icon, so those were coded as "Wordmark/Not Applicable."

Amount of Overall Visual Context. The total number of visual examples in the body of the post was counted and recorded. In addition to the post image, each review features examples of the brand, either as an image or a video, grouped in the "Images" section of the post. To count the number of images consistently, an example is defined as an image that spans the whole width of the post and is divided from other images by a gap, caption, or dividing line. The image at the top of the post was not included in this count.

Overall Visual Context Groupings. Based on the Number of Examples variable, posts were separated into three segments based on the total number of examples included on each post: three or fewer examples, four to seven examples, and more than eight examples.

Amount of Environmental Context. The total number of examples showing environmental context was counted. Some of the images in the post feature the logo in use. For example, an image may show how a logo will appear on a storefront, packaging, website, or social media post. These logos may be images of real applications or hypothetical uses rendered in Photoshop. The key factor is the intent of the image. If the image is intended to show realistic usage, it is included in this count.

Amount of Informational Context. The total number of examples showing informational context was counted. Posts include examples showing how the system works or how the visual identity was created. This is different from environmental

context because these aim to show the craftsmanship and thought process behind the logo design. Examples include logo variations, typeface standards, illustration and photography style, icon designs, and before-and-after comparisons. If the image is intended to show how a system was created or how it should be used, that example is included in this group.

Amount of Video Context. The total number of videos was counted and recorded. The images section of Noted posts sometimes includes video examples. Videos are hosted through an outside service like YouTube or Vimeo and do not autoplay when the page is loaded. While the videos may show examples of the brand in use or address the creation of the brand, videos are counted in their own category since the coder cannot tell if the viewer clicked the play button. On occasion, a video link is shown, but the video itself is no longer available on the hosting service. These videos are included in the count since it can be assumed that the video was live when the vast majority of voting and commenting was done.

Presence of Video Context. Based on the Number of Videos variable, posts were coded as "Yes" if they featured any video examples and "No" if they had none.

Amount of Animated Context. The total number of animations was counted and recorded. Animations differ from video in that the example autoplays on the loading of the web page. These animated GIFs are counted with either Environmental or Informational context since a viewer sees the full context of the animation. Animated context is counted separately here, since they may shape the viewer's response.

Presence of Animated Context. Based Number of Animations variable, posts were coded as "Yes" if they featured any animated examples and "No" if they had none.

Voting Percentages and Viewer Score. At the bottom of the post is a poll containing one, two, or three questions. Each question can be answered Great, Fine, or Bad. From the results, the percentage of respondents for each answer is recorded. As part of the analysis process, this data is weighted, combined, and averaged to create a rating. The resulting viewer score ranged from 100 - 300 and was then mapped to a 100-point scale where 0 was the lowest possible score and 100 was the highest.

Number of Votes. The number of votes cast on each question is recorded. For a post to be used in the analysis, there had to be at least one question. If there were not subsequent questions, those data fields were left blank.

Number of Comments. The number of comments is located in two places in the page layout: at the top under the banner and at the bottom by the comments. For this study, the number of comments is taken from the stated amount at the bottom of the page that is integrated with the Disqus commenting section.

Voting averages. From the voting data that was captured, the mean was calculated per post for total, Great, Fine, and Bad votes.

All coding for the content analysis was conducted on a computer running macOS 10.15.4 and Safari 13.1. Data collection was conducted through a Google Form and was analyzed using Jamovi.

Intercoder reliability was calculated using a 10% random sample (n=34). The Krippendorf's alpha ranged from 0.928 to 1.0. A full list of the reliability is included in table 3.1.

On Logo

- ✓ Great
- – Fine
- ✗ Bad

VOTE   VIEW RESULTS

On Packaging

- ✓ Great
- – Fine
- ✗ Bad

VOTE   VIEW RESULTS

On Other Applications

- ✓ Great
- – Fine
- ✗ Bad

VOTE   VIEW RESULTS

On Logo

- ✓ Great

60.0%   469 VOTES

- – Fine

30.4%   238 VOTES

- ✗ Bad

9.6%   75 VOTES

782 VOTES TOTAL

CLOSE / BACK TO VOTE

On Packaging

- ✓ Great

59.4%   452 VOTES

- – Fine

35.7%   272 VOTES

- ✗ Bad

4.9%   37 VOTES

761 VOTES TOTAL

CLOSE / BACK TO VOTE

On Other Applications

- ✓ Great

54.5%   403 VOTES

- – Fine

38.0%   281 VOTES

- ✗ Bad

7.6%   56 VOTES

740 VOTES TOTAL

CLOSE / BACK TO VOTE

Figure 3.1: Example image of a *Brand New* poll, before voting (top) and after voting (bottom).

Figure 3.2: Example of a *Brand New* Noted post.
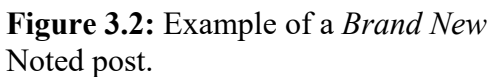
Table 3.1: Intercoder Reliability

Variables	Krippendorff's alpha
Year	1.0
Logo type	1.0
Symmetry	0.95
Amount of visual context	1.0
Amount of environmental context	0.932
Amount of informational context	0.928
Amount of animated context	0.934
Amount of video context	1.0
Viewer score (all components)	1.0
Q1: Number of votes	1.0
Q2: Number of votes	1.0
Q3: Number of votes	1.0
Number of comments	1.0

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The final data set included 335 posts from 2013 - 2020. Within those posts, the mean number of total examples was 6.15 with a range from 0 to 19 examples. The average post had 2.87 examples of environmental context and 2.78 examples of informational context.

Over the entire data set, including every vote from each question, a total of 460,665 votes were counted. A typical post had 673 votes per question. All 335 posts had at least one poll question, while 247 had two questions. Only 103 posts in the data set featured all three questions. The post with the largest number of votes had 7,312. The average viewer score was 49.6, from a low of 8.3 to a high of 87.5. The mean number of comments was 39.5 per post. A breakdown of the example types and viewer response is shown in Table 4.1.

RQ1a. Does the amount of overall visual context presented with a logo correlate with the initial response from consumers? Yes. Consumers tend to respond more positively when provided with a greater amount of visual context. Analysis of the data set shows a strong positive correlation between the amount of context and the viewer score, $r\,(335) = 0.375$, $p < 0.001$. As the number of examples increased, the resulting viewer score also increased.

While analyzing the distribution of the overall amount of context across posts, peaks were apparent for posts with three examples and again at seven. Three similar-

sized groups emerged. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the viewer score for these three groups: posts with zero to three examples ($n = 106$), posts with between four and seven examples ($n = 121$), and posts with eight or more examples ($n = 108$). The example groupings were the independent variable, and the viewer score was the dependent variable. A significant result was noted: $F(2, 218) = 26.5$, $p < 0.001$. A Tukey post hoc test indicated a significant difference between the viewer score for posts with more than eight examples ($M = 58.3$, $SD = 15.2$) and both of the other groupings: four to seven examples ($M = 48.7$, $SD = 17.6$) and three or fewer examples ($M = 41.7$, $SD = 18.7$). In addition, the Tukey post hoc test showed a significant difference between the four to seven group ($M = 48.7$, $SD = 17.6$) and the three or fewer examples group ($M = 41.7$, $SD = 18.7$). Figure 4.1 shows a comparison of the viewer scores for the three groups of examples.

More examples seemed to correspond with a greater number of "Great" votes and a fewer number of "Bad" votes while "Fine" remained steady. Posts with more examples were positively correlated with the mean number of "Great" votes per post, $r(335) = 0.374$, $p < 0.001$, and negatively correlated with the mean number of "Bad" votes per post, $r(335) = -0.352$, $p < 0.001$. Posts with more examples did not significantly correspond with the mean number of "Fine" votes, $r(335) = 0.033$, $p = 0.544$.

In this analysis, the viewer score is not the only way that viewers express their opinions about a design. They can also post a comment. And while an extensive qualitative analysis of the content of the comments is outside of the scope of this study, the number of comments was recorded. There is a significant negative correlation between the number of images and the number of comments, $r(335) = -0.0192$, $p <$

0.001. This indicates posts with a higher number of examples have significantly lower numbers of comments.

RQ1b. How has the visual context surrounding the initial launch of a logo changed over time? Over time, the amount of overall visual context has increased, and the types of context shown in the posts have changed. These changes have not impacted the correlation between overall context and consumer response. The number of examples shown changed over the seven-year sample, from a mean of 2.52 examples in 2013 to 10.40 in 2020. Environmental and informational context has increased steadily over the sample. Video context has become more common in posts over the years and is present in 53.8% of all reviews in 2020. Autoplay animations have increased as well and were present in 43.6% of all 2020 posts. Figure 4.2 shows the yearly increase in examples per post.

To ensure that the lower amounts of examples in the early years were overly influencing the correlation, the test was rerun excluding posts from 2013 and 2014. The result was essentially unchanged, continuing to show a strong positive correlation between the amount of context and viewer score, r (268) = 3.73, $p < 0.001$.

RQ1c. How does the overall visual context surrounding a logo correlate with the initial response for companies with established brand equity? The presence or absence of brand equity does not seem to change the relationship between context and viewer rating. *Brand New* features both rebranded logos and completely new marks. Since a completely new company or brand cannot, by definition, have brand equity, those posts were excluded from analysis. From the sample of 335 logos, 300 of the logos were rebranding previous identities. Even among companies with established brand equity,

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visual context was significantly correlated to improved viewer response. There was a significant positive correlation between the number of examples in the rebranded posts and viewer score, $r(300) = 0.374$, $p < 0.001$.

Further examination of the data revealed that the most established companies (like Sonic, Dolby, Zara, and HSBC) had significantly more votes than the average post. The posts were divided into two groups based on vote totals. The higher brand equity group including only posts which averaged greater than 1,000 votes per question ($n = 47$) still demonstrated a significant positive correlation between the number of examples and the viewer score, $r(47) = 0.499$, $p < 0.001$. The lower brand equity grouping including posts with less than 1,000 votes per question ($n = 288$) also showed a positive correlation between the number of examples and the viewer score, $r(288) = 0.358$, $p < 0.001$. Even companies with brand equity receive higher scores when more context is provided.

RQ2. How does showing the logo with environmental context correspond to initial user reaction? An increased amount of environmental context showing the logo in use corresponds with higher viewer scores. The average post in the data set had 2.87 examples showing environmental context, with a minimum of zero examples and a maximum of 16. Posts with a greater amount of environmental context correlates to an improved viewer score, $r(335) = 0.308$, $p < 0.001$.

To better understand the difference, posts were divided into two groups — posts with two or fewer environmental examples ($n = 180$) and posts with three or more environmental examples ($n = 155$) — and were compared with an independent t-test. Posts with three or more examples ($M = 55.7$, $SD = 16.5$) were found to have significantly higher viewer scores than the group with two or fewer environmental

examples ($M = 44.3$, $SD = 18.4$), t (333) = 5.92, $p < 0.001$. Figure 4.3 shows a comparison between the two groups.

Finally, data was grouped into two groups to compare posts that featured only environmental context ($n = 9$) and a second group that had environmental context combined with informational context ($n = 228$). Posts featuring only informational examples were excluded. No significant difference was found between posts with only environmental context ($M = 49.3$, $SD = 16.1$) and posts with multiple context types ($M = 52.0$, $SD = 18.3$), t (235) = -0.0443, $p = 0.658$.

RQ3: How does the amount of informational context presented correspond to initial response from consumers? Increased examples featuring informational context are correlated with positive viewer scores when combined with other types of context. The average post in the data set had 2.78 informational examples, with a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 13. Posts with a greater number of examples correspond with higher viewer scores, r (335) = 0.331, $p < 0.001$.

The posts were divided into two groups — posts with two or fewer informational examples ($n = 188$) and posts with three or more informational examples ($n = 147$) — and compared with an independent t-test. Posts with three or more informational examples ($M = 55.7$, $SD = 17.0$) were found to have significantly higher viewer scores than posts with two or fewer informational examples ($M = 44.8$, $SD = 18.2$), t (333) = 5.58, $p < 0.001$. Figure 4.4 shows the difference between the two groups.

To see how posts with only informational context performed, the posts were divided into one group with only informational context ($n = 95$) and another group with posts that included both informational and environmental context ($n = 228$). Posts with

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only environmental context were excluded. The groups were compared using an independent t-test. Posts featuring only informational context ($M = 44.0$, $SD = 18.1$) showed lower viewer scores than posts that used a mix of context types ($M = 52.0$, $SD = 18.3$), $t(321) = -3.61$, $p < 0.001$.

RQ4. Does overall visual context impact initial reaction to logos with different aesthetic properties? Context corresponds with improved initial reaction, even for logos with different aesthetic features. To view whether viewer's aesthetic preferences are influenced by context, logos were coded for their icon symmetry. Within the data set, 45.7% of the logos featured an asymmetrical icon design ($n = 153$), 13.7% of the logos had symmetrical icons ($n = 46$) and 40.6% featured a wordmark with no icon ($n = 136$).

An independent t-test evaluated whether there was a significant difference in viewer scores between symmetrical designs ($M = 50.6$, $SD = 17.3$) and asymmetrical designs ($M = 46.8$, $SD = 18.4$). No significance was found, $t(197) = -1.23$, $p = 0.219$.

Viewers did not prefer one aesthetic style over the other but was context a potential factor in their rating? The data set was divided into two groups — symmetrical and asymmetrical — to see if there was still a correlation between the number of examples in each subset and the viewer score.

For the symmetrical group ($n = 46$), there was a significant correlation between the number of examples and the viewer score, $r(46) = 0.417$, $p = 0.004$. The asymmetrical group also showed a significant correlation between the number of examples and the viewer score, $r(153) = 0.287$, $p < 0.001$.

These results indicate that regardless of the aesthetic preference of the viewer, reaction was better for posts that featured greater numbers of examples.

RQ5a: How does the presence of video context correlate with initial viewer reaction? Posts with video examples yielded slightly lower viewer scores. Within the sample, only 41.8% ($n = 140$) included video examples. The maximum number of videos included in a post was 5. There was a significant negative correlation between the number of videos and the viewer score, $r(335) = -0.134$, $p = 0.014$. Because video was usually present in comparatively small numbers, the data was grouped into two groups — posts with video examples ($n = 140$) and posts without video examples ($n = 195$) — and analyzed using an independent t-test. Posts with video examples ($M = 46.4$, $SD = 16.9$) had a slightly lower, but significantly different viewer scores than posts with no video ($M = 51.8$, $SD = 19.2$), $t(333) = -2.62$, $p = 0.009$. Figure 4.5 shows a comparison of the video and no video groups.

RQ5b: How does the presence of animated context influence initial viewer reaction? Posts that featured examples with animation corresponded to higher viewer scores. Animation was only present in 22.4% of the logo reviews ($n = 75$), becoming more common in the later years of the sample. Between 2013 and 2016, only 14 posts included an animation, compared to 61 posts between 2017 and 2020. There was a positive correlation between the number of animations and the viewer score, $r(335) = 0.166$, $p = 0.002$. Similar to video, because of the smaller numbers of animated examples, the data set was divided into two groups — one that included animated examples ($n = 75$) and one group that did not include animated examples ($n = 260$) — and analyzed using an independent t-test. Posts that included animation ($M = 55.8$, $SD = 16.8$) were significantly

higher than posts that did not include animation ($M = 47.8$, $SD = 18.5$). Posts with

animated examples had viewer scores that were 9.4 points better than completely static

posts. Figure 4.6 shows the difference between the viewer scores with animated examples

and those without.

Table 4.1: Summary context types, viewer score, and comments

	Total Context	Enviro. Context	Inform. Context	Animated Context	Video Context	Viewer Score	Viewer Comments
N	335	335	335	335	335	335	335
Mean	6.15	2.87	2.78	0.355	0.507	49.6	39.5
Min.	0	0	0	0	0	8.30	1
Max.	19	16	13	6	5	87.5	188
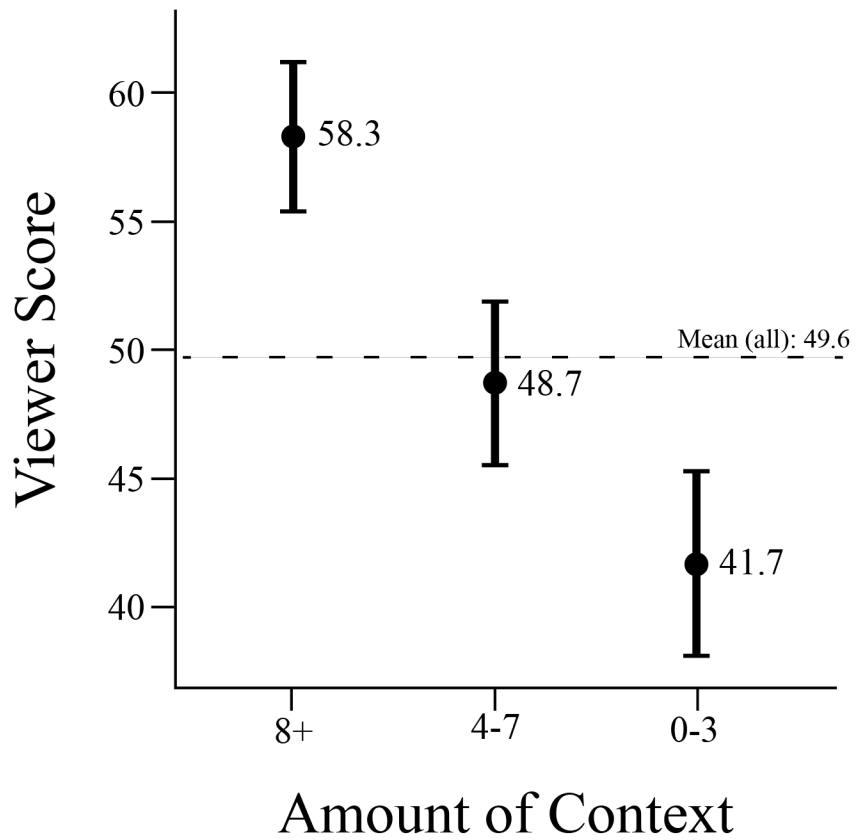
Figure 4.1: Comparison of mean viewer score and three overall context groupings.
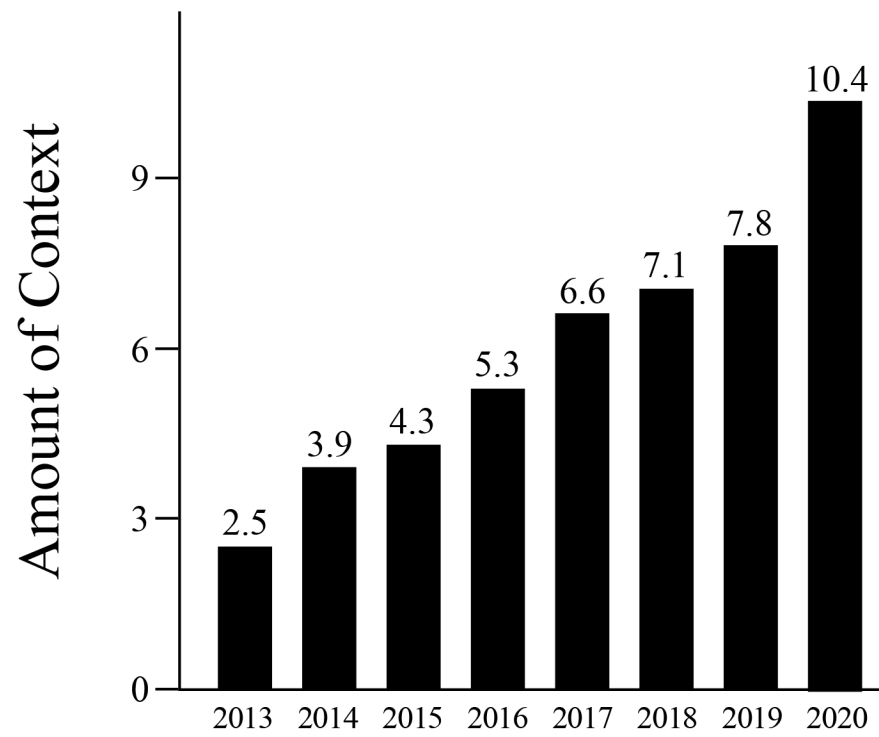
Figure 4.2: Change in the total amount of visual context from 2013-2020.
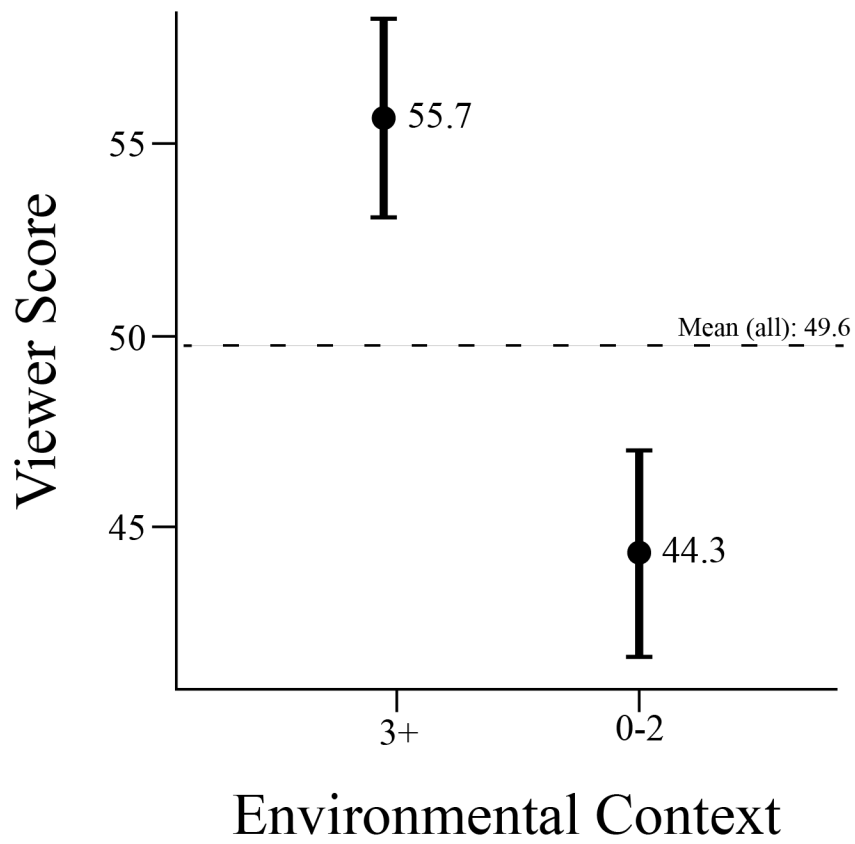
Figure 4.3: Comparison between mean viewer scores for posts with less than two environmental examples and three or more environmental examples.
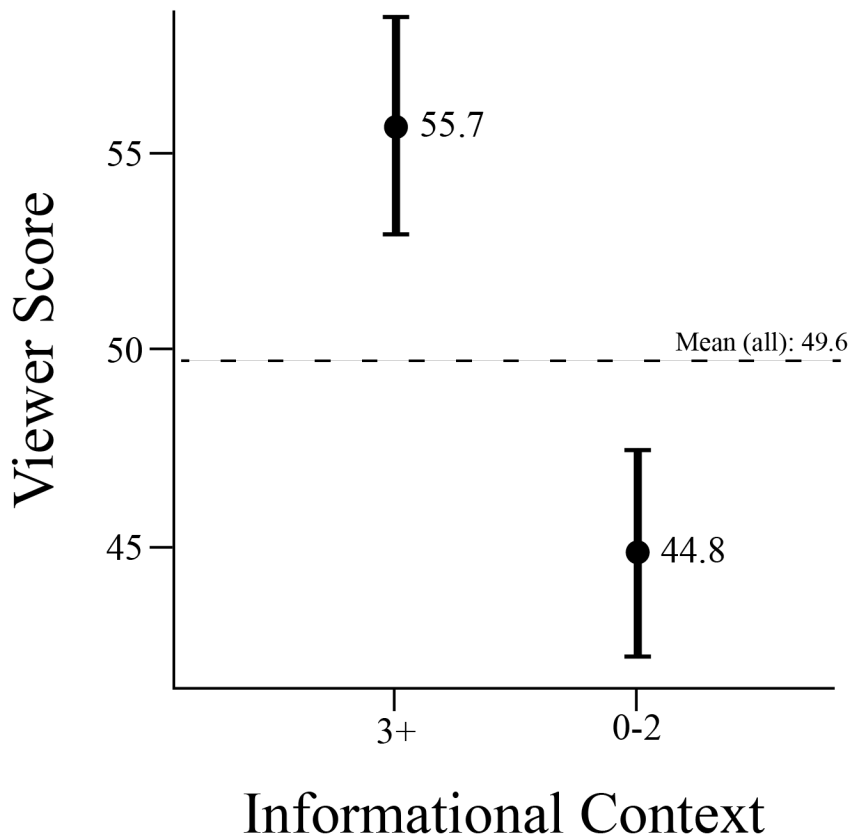
Figure 4.4: Comparison between mean viewer scores for posts with less than two informational examples and three or more informational examples.
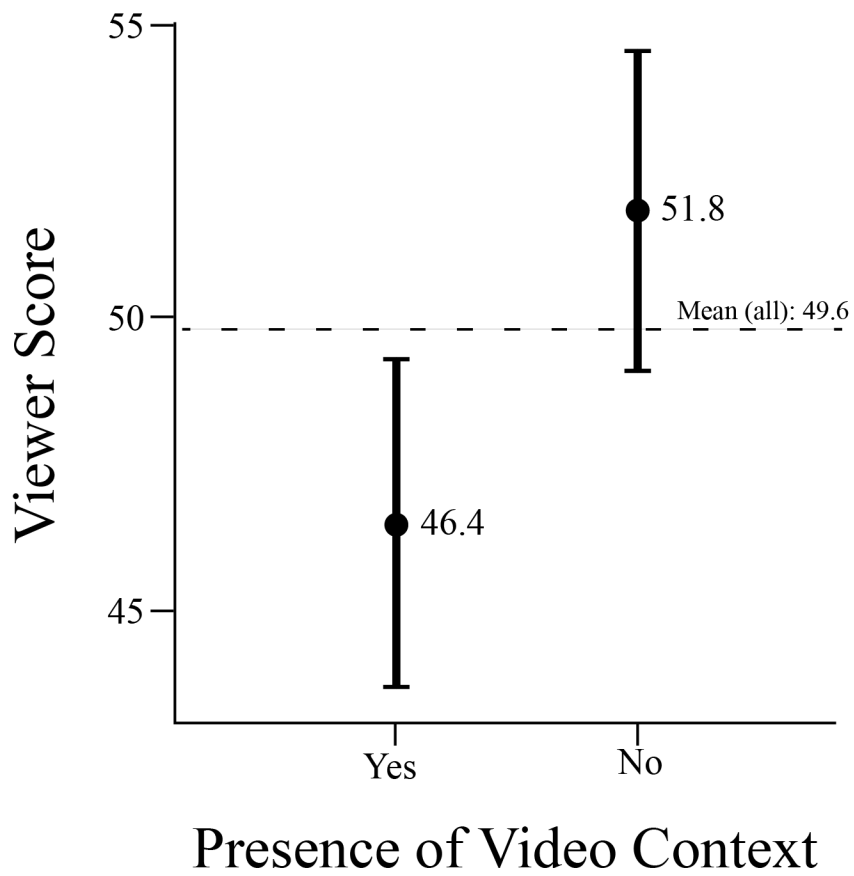
Figure 4.5: Comparison of mean viewer scores for posts with and without video context.

Figure 4.6: Comparison of mean viewer scores between posts with and without animated context.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

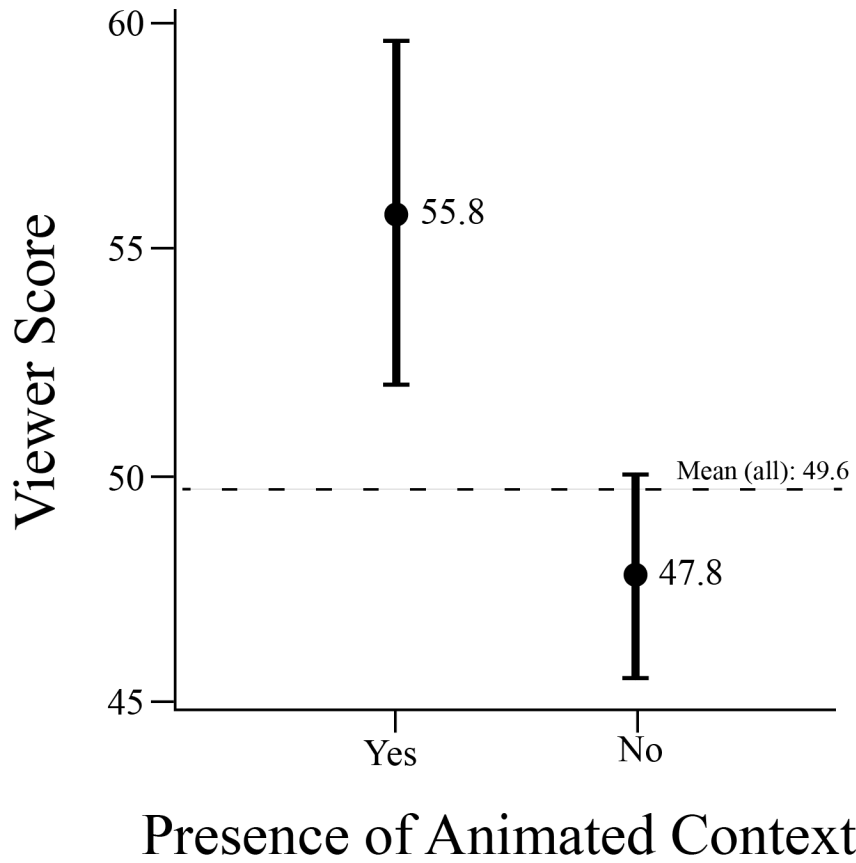## The predictable power of context

In almost all types of context that were examined, more examples resulted in significantly better ratings from *Brand New* viewers. The number of total examples correlated to improved viewer response. Both environmental and informational examples resulted in higher scores. The presence of animation context correlated with better ratings. And for the single context type that correlated with worse scores – video – there are reasonable explanations for why that type of context might work differently.

To summarize the results, the impact of surrounding context is significant. When more than eight examples of visual context were shown on a *Brand New* post, the average rating was 58.3, almost 10 points greater than the four to seven group and 16.6 points high than the posts with three or fewer examples. When looking at just environmental context, posts with three or more were 11.4 points greater than those with less than two. Informational context showed a similar effect and posts with three or more examples were 10.9 points greater than the posts with less than two. *Brand New* viewers preferred posts with more context and rewarded those posts with higher scores.

When looking at logos and visual identities, context is an important factor. This is not necessarily a surprising result. Designers have written about and discussed the power of context for decades, especially when presenting to clients (Airey, 2014; Bierut, 2006). But in today's media environment, how we present logos to consumers has become

equally important. *Brand New* cofounder Vit commented that context is vital to how people respond to new logos:

> When the media asks people to view a logo in a white square on a website, they don't know how to judge that. There's no real association, no context and no experience of the way in which it's going to be used - and most people hate it because people hate change by default. (*Design Trends of 2013: The Stripped-down Logo*, 2013)

Designers' intuition about the power of context aligns with the theories that have been applied to the study of logos. Semiotic theory holds that groups of symbols form a semiotic system that can enhance meaning in the eyes of the viewer. Each separate element contributes to the viewer's perception and formation of meaning (Skaggs, 2017). The findings also seem to be in line with expectations based on processing fluency. One facet of the theory – conceptual fluency – recognizes that additional context can help viewers form meaning and improve response (Morgan et al., 2021). In this study, visual context clearly seemed to influence viewer response.

If visual context has such a predictable impact on consumer reception to logos, why has it not been studied? The most obvious reason is the assumption that a logo is representative of the entire visual branding system. Experiments focus exclusively on logos because they are easier to work with and the assumption is that insights from those studies can be applied widely across all types of corporate identities. Exploring the impact of a surrounding visual identity system is an exceptionally more complicated process.

A second issue is more complex, though. Several studies found that context was important but assumed that the context had to be contained in the logo (Luffarelli, Mukesh, et al., 2019; Morgan et al., 2021). One recent study acknowledged that meaning

"can be fostered by providing context," but assumed that the context would be contained in the logo somewhere, perhaps in the name of the company (Morgan et al., 2021).

The study on descriptiveness in logos (Luffarelli, Mukesh, et al., 2019) included six experiments and found that logos with more straightforward meaning were preferred, but again, because the study focused only on logos, it assumes that the descriptiveness must also be present in the logo. One of the experiments gauged viewer reaction to a logo for a fictional basketball supply company and the findings indicated that the viewers preferred the version of the logo with a basketball literally depicted in the logo (Luffarelli, Mukesh, et al., 2019). When presented along with no surrounding context, that is a reasonable finding in line with theoretical expectations based on conceptual fluency. But what if the logo was surrounded with basketball imagery? What if the store was built in the shape of a giant basketball? Would the descriptiveness of the logo still matter to the viewer if the entire store provided supporting visual context?

Visual identity systems allow the designers and their clients to offload the complexity of communicating all meaning to the system that surrounds the logo. The imagery, color, and typefaces are chosen specifically by the designers and are intended to convey as much meaning as the logo. This transfer of meaning to the visual identity system would be especially important when the logo is minimalist or simple. An article on the design trends towards simple logos noted this potential, commenting that "ultra-simple approaches that might cause outrage when taken out of context come alive when applied as part of a broader branding system" (*Design Trends of 2013: The Stripped-down Logo*, 2013). Other than in experimental settings and on social media, logos rarely appears completely without context. The surrounding context of the visual identity

system is a key part of how people interpret logos and any study that does not take that into account is fundamentally flawed.

Many posts clearly received improved consumer response from the added context. One post featured a logo for Grounded, a business-to-business company selling compostable coffee packaging and featured a "decomposing" typeface. The logo was a simple wordmark with a custom typeface but the post included 15 examples including several animations and received an above-average viewer score of 56.2. Commenters were generally positive about the concept and user *AaronMakesArt* concluded "I agree that the logo on its own doesn't get the right message across, but once it's combined with the applications it all works beautifully!"

Since *Brand New* voters were voting for one of three categories, Great, Fine, or Bad, it becomes easy to examine how voting shifted when the amount of context changes. Essentially, increased amounts of visual context resulted in a larger number of viewers voting Great and a smaller number choosing Bad. The number of voters for Fine stayed even. This would seem to indicate that Fine voters became more likely to select Great, and an equal number of viewers that would have voted Bad moved to Fine. This is notable because it implies that the effect of context is spread across all viewers, even ones who may have voted Bad.

This study shows no upper limit to the effects of context. More context correlated with a better score. Regardless of the quality of the logo being reviewed, commenters often asked for more examples. The highest-rated post in the entire sample was a 2015 logo for Zebra Technologies, which featured only two examples, one of which was a video. In the comments, user *jinushaun* wanted to see more of the design, noting "I would

love to see the whole identity system." Commenter *Michael Emjay Johnson* agreed: "APPLICATIONS!!!! I want to see APPLICATIONS!!!!"

Initial reaction and brand equity

Even for companies with brand equity, additional context corresponded to better viewer responses. This does not mean that brand equity does not have an effect on viewer response, but what it means is that the power of context works even for companies with existing brand equity. In fact, the way this study divided out the logos with higher brand equity gives an indication of the heightened attention. Higher profile companies received a greater number of votes. More people cared and chose to voice their opinion.

Most studies avoid using popular brands in their experiments for fear that established brand equity could bias the results. As such, much of the logo literature is conducted using fictional logos and companies. This study shows that – at least when looking at the visual context surrounding logos – real logos for real companies can still present valid results.

Designers and researchers both acknowledge that moving consumers from a beloved logo to a new logo is a challenging process. Airey advises designers on the challenges of rebranding, noting that "if you've been asked to complete a redesign, the stakes are higher, for both you and your client" (Airey, 2014). But rebranding does not always mean a negative reaction will follow, and from this study, it appears that added visual context can help both companies with established brand equity and new companies with no brand equity.

Informational context

Like other types of visual context, informational context which shows the thinking behind the logo and visual system correlated with improved scores. Informational context was also the most common kind of context shown. All but nine posts contained some type of informational context showing logo versions, before-and-after images, typography guidelines, illustration or photography styles, and supporting graphics. When a post featured three or more examples of informational context, *Brand New* viewers scored the post more than 10 points higher than posts with two or fewer examples. Those results, though, were very similar to the overall trend that more context resulted in better scores, so it's unclear that there is any difference between examples explaining the system and other types of visual context.

There was one notable difference though. The sample included 95 posts with only informational examples. On those posts, viewers rated them 8 points lower than posts with a mix of different types of examples. Posts with only environmental context showed no difference. This would seem to imply that while informational examples help shape viewer opinion, they need to be paired with environmental examples to consistently improve viewer response.

Symmetry and other aesthetic factors

Most of the existing literature on logos looks at how aesthetic factors influence consumer response. Studies have tried to understand everything from color (Huang et al., 2008) to complexity (Grinsven & Das, 2014). This study used symmetry as the aesthetic factor and examined if the presence of visual context has the same effect on symmetrical

and asymmetrical logos. Posts were identified that featured icon-based logos and those icons were coded based on symmetry.

The literature about consumer preference for symmetry is all over the place. Studies have found that people find symmetry more beautiful, but other results have shown that asymmetrical logos are more exciting (Bajaj & Bond, 2018; Bettels & Wiedmann, 2019). Research indicates that preference for symmetry depends on the perspective of the viewer, but other experiments find that personality of the company is what truly matters (Bettels & Wiedmann, 2019; Luffarelli, Stamatogiannakis, et al., 2019; Northey & Chan, 2020). Given the lack of clear findings, it is unsurprising that *Brand New* viewers showed no significant preference between symmetrical logos and asymmetrical logos.

The posts were divided into two groups based on the presence of symmetry and each of the groups – symmetrical and asymmetrical – showed higher scores when more visual context was present, indicating that context was a more powerful factor in determining viewer rating than symmetry.

Studies that focus on the aesthetic effects of logos do not take into account the impact that the surrounding context can have. A symmetrical logo can be used in an asymmetrical way on a billboard and an asymmetrical logo can be centered on an ad. The aesthetic quality of the logo that is studied can be changed by the usage of that logo. This principle expands beyond just symmetry. Many companies adopt visual guidelines which use only black or white logos (i.e. Apple, Audi), but in use, these logos are placed on colorful backgrounds, imagery, and materials. If a color study only takes into account the

black or white in the official logo, it misses out on the color that may be added through the visual identity system.

Finally, aesthetic trends shift. One example of an aesthetic shift became obvious throughout this study. Most research that has been done on logos assumes a basic structure, an icon paired with a corporate name (Foroudi et al., 2017; Kim & Lim, 2019) However, when examining this data set, over 40% of the posts didn't feature an icon at all, and the trend towards wordmarks has only accelerated over the last few years. In 2017, almost half of the *Brand New* posts in the sample did not feature an icon in their logo at all. The graphic function of the icon is instead shifting into the identity system in the form of illustrations and alternate logos.

This is not to say that aesthetic properties do not have powerful effects. There is ample experimental evidence to show that visual features can have pronounced effects on consumer response (Kim & Lim, 2019) but studying the aesthetics of icons in logos misses the significant impact that surrounding context can have.

Video and animated context

Because both video and animation involve motion, it is easy to try and lump them together in a single category, but users interact with each media type in different ways. And as a result, they appear to have opposite effects on viewer scores.

Video was the only type of context that correlated with lower scores. Posts that included video were rated slightly lower – about 5 points less than posts without video. Video examples are hosted on YouTube or Vimeo and a thumbnail is embedded in the *Brand New* post with a play button. The video does not autoplay. Videos could not practically be coded for their content, even though they may contain environmental or

informational context. There is also no way to tell how many *Brand New* viewers have clicked and watched the video, or how much of it they watched. The most logical explanation for a lower video score is that viewers simply skip over the video examples, resulting in the viewer "seeing" fewer examples and the score decreases accordingly.

These video findings are in direct contrast to animated examples. Animations automatically play within the post and are typically shorter and unlike video, animations resulted in higher viewer scores for *Brand New* readers. Posts that featured animation were scored 8 points higher than posts without animation. Because they function passively, viewers experience them in the same way that they experience static examples.

One additional factor may involve the reason the examples are created. Videos are most likely repurposed employee-focused rollouts or television commercials. Animations are created especially for the rollout and likely targeted at consumers. A study into the use of animations and videos on web advertisements posited that animations may work best with low-involvement viewers, while high-involvement viewers were more interested in the video (Yoo et al., 2004). This could contribute to the difference in scores between videos and animations since videos are usually created for high involvement audiences like employees and partners, while animations are likely more targeted at the general audience that may be scrolling through social media. The more social media targeted animations may resonate better with the *Brand New* audience as they encounter a company, their logo, and supporting visual identity system for the first time.

Novelty might also be a factor. Logo animations are one of the newest trends in visual identity, and the online nature of modern logo launches means that animations can be repurposed across the web and social media. Over the last two years of the sample,

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they were present in 44% of all posts, a dramatic increase over previous years. If animations continue to grow in frequency, the novelty of animation may wear off and the positive effect on viewer response may lessen.

Animation is a relatively new component of logo introductions. This study adds to the literature by showing that animated examples are effective at shaping viewer response to new logos. More data and study is needed to determine the extent and the degree of that effect.

The nature of viewer criticism on *Brand New*

Many designers have commented on the harshness of reactions on Brand New (Bierut, 2013; Hadlock, 2020), but in actuality, the average across all posts in the sample is right at 50%. Essentially a Fine on their three-tier (Good-Fine-Bad) scale. This indicates that consumer reaction – at least among the voters – is more neutral than negative. Even the most negatively reviewed post had some viewers vote Great in the poll. Indeed, most of the criticism about the harshness of Brand New is not directed at the reviewer, but at the commenters (Bierut, 2013; *In Conversation with Armin Vit Of…*, 2021).

Interestingly, the number of comments decreased when more context was shown. It is unclear whether that is a result of the context or the corresponding higher scores, but it appears that commenting is more common on posts with negative reactions.

When examining the data from *Brand New*, it is important to keep in mind that not every viewer casts a vote at the bottom of the page. There is a slight drop off across the questions meaning that not everyone votes on all questions. Even fewer take the

additional step of posting a comment. Comment totals are a small fraction of the total number of people who viewed the post.

The comments also do not always reflect the voting totals. On a 2020 review of the Vancouver North Shore tourism logo with 16 examples, the viewer scores were high – one of the highest scores in the sample at 87.3 – but the comments are harsh. One commenter, Tom Swinnen felt the design was too trendy:

> Another recipe that throws together several outdoorsy design trends in a pot, boils it down to something that tastes good but is nothing but empty calories. Which is to say: pretty but meaningless.

Swinnen's opinion was echoed by many in the comment feed, but the criticism in the comments did not match the apparent enthusiasm for the design displayed in the voting results.

A review for the new demonstrates a different way that the comments may differ from the vote totals is the 2017 review of the logo for home improvement website Houzz, designed by legendary designer Paula Scher. The redesign featured a pair of examples and was met with a moderate response in the poll. But the opinions in the comments section were significantly harsher, attacking the logo and claiming that the only reason anyone voted positively for it was that it was designed by Paula Scher and her team at Pentagram. As commenter *Yael Miller* noted, "Paula knows her stuff - she doesn't have to try to impress designers, just make a strong, marketable identity."

A more extensive study of the comments would be necessary to understand the difference between the tone of the comments and the viewer opinion as recorded in the poll, but at least anecdotally, there is a disconnect between the large number of viewers who vote and the comparatively small number of commenters.

The changing nature of the logo and the rollout

The way logos are being developed and released is changing, and those changes are apparent through the data set. Companies are providing more content at launch to show the logo in action, perhaps anticipating the effect that the added context has on viewer opinion. Instead of simply announcing the logos to their employees or trying to quietly roll out a new design, companies have seemed to embrace the idea that the general public may be interested in their new logo and visual identity system. Over the seven years analyzed in this study, all types of context increased steadily. I see no evidence that the trend will stop.

Logos are shifting away from the traditional structure of an icon and logotype. And while brands have always featured multiple logos in different color combinations, the trend toward multiple logo types is accelerating. Over the first three years of the sample, 77.7% of all featured logos featured an icon, but between 2017 and 2020, more than half of the logos reviewed did not use an icon at all in their primary configuration. A look at popular corporate identities reveals a range of trends that support this shift. Starbucks has two logos: the "Siren" and the wordmark. Their two marks are not intended to be used together as a single logo (*Logos | Starbucks Creative Expression*, 2021). Audi recently introduced a variable logo, in which the four rings that make up the logo can change in weight depending on the need (*Audi Rings*, 2021). Red Hat has four different logo configurations that vary the proportion between their illustrated hat and the Red Hat wordmark (*Red Hat Logo Standards*, 2021). IBM has two official marks and a custom typeface that is intended to be used across all communications worldwide (*IBM Design Language*, 2021). Sports teams often feature several different logos, alternate

marks, and throwback looks. The El Paso Chihuahuas, a minor league baseball team whose logo design was reviewed on *Brand New* and included in the sample, featured five different logo variations (Vit, 2013). Previous research on visual branding has assumed that logos featured an icon and wordmark or just a wordmark, but that research does not necessarily apply to current design trends in corporate identity in the same way and many basic assumptions about logos and corporate identity may need to be revised.

Practical applications

Based on this study, there are several practical applications of the findings for designers and corporate brand managers.

Avoid showing the logo alone on a white box. Viewers respond best to logos in context. As part of the initial rollout strategy, provide images that show how the logo and its surrounding system will work. Showing the logo in context should improve customer reaction and decrease negative response.

More context is better. Showing a large number of examples with a variety of example types does not guarantee improved viewer reaction, but in general, more context yields a better response, at least on *Brand New*. There was no evidence in the study that indicated that there was an upper range at which too many examples resulted in lower scores. Designers may want to build in budget and project scope to allow for a larger number of examples for the rollout.

Animation is a great way to engage the viewer. Posts that featured animated examples performed better than logos with only static examples and may help a company communicate its new corporate brand in an engaging way. And while more research is

needed to fully understand how longer-form video works, it is likely that videos are best

reserved for internal and more highly engaged audiences.

Alternate explanations for effects of context

The influence of visual context on *Brand New* is the most likely explanation for

the correlation between increased examples and increased scores. Three other

possibilities – brand equity, editorial selection, and written commentary – may bias the

results, but there is evidence within the data indicates that it is unlikely. It is valuable

though to identify the alternate explanations and briefly address the factors involved.

<u>Brand equity</u>

The concept of brand equity is one of the foundations of visual identity. Branding

relies on identity systems to be the tangible representatives of a company's personality

and a connection with consumers. Brand equity is developed over a long period of time

through all of the touchpoints between a company and its customers.

Most studies – including this one – attempt to control for the effects of brand

equity. The fear is that viewers might base their opinions on what they know about the

company instead of the visual stimuli. Many experiments use fictional companies to

avoid bias from brand equity. Other researchers who use real companies ask participants

if they are familiar with a company and then weigh or disregard the responses

accordingly.

By using content analysis across a large sample and matching it to the poll

questions at the end of the post, this technique cannot precisely rule out the influence of

brand equity, but several steps were taken to ensure that brand equity did not significantly

skew the results. The study looked only at *Brand New*'s Noted posts, which feature

lesser-known companies than the fully Reviewed posts.

After data collection, two tests looked for a context effect based on brand equity.

The first removed the 10% of posts that featured completely new identities – and thus had

no brand equity. The correlation between examples and viewer score remained

consistent. Upon examination, posts receiving high vote totals were more likely to be a

well-known company with the potential for brand equity. The samples were divided into

two groups: One with high vote totals and one with normal vote totals. Both groups

showed a significant correlation between the number of examples and viewer score.

Brand equity is something that can and should be minimized in experimental

settings, but it would appear from this study that the effects of context are present across

all *Brand New* posts, even ones where viewers may already have an established opinion

of the company.

<div align="center">Editorial selection</div>

Vit selects the content and decides which companies to feature on *Brand New* and

how many images to show on each post. Could the editorial process of selecting the

featured companies and samples skew the data? When *Brand New* first created the Noted

section, they seemed to limit the number of examples, but clearly, over time, they have

leaned toward including more and more examples. In 2020, the average number of

examples per post was 10.4. The content for the posts comes from companies or their

design firms, and Vit himself has commented that he prefers to show more context

(*Design Trends of 2013: The Stripped-down Logo*, 2013) When a commenter asked why

there weren't more examples present on *Brand New* for the Houzz redesign, Vit

<div align="center">61</div>

responded that "If there were more brand expression to show I would have happily shown it." Vit is showing the examples that are provided online as part of the logo launch and occasionally, if more images become available, he publishes a second follow-up post. Based on his statements and the general trend toward providing larger numbers of examples on Noted posts, it is unlikely that Vit is failing to show examples that are available and intentionally skewing the consumer response.

<p style="text-align:center">Written commentary</p>

Brand New includes a paragraph of commentary for each post usually written by Vit, and the top of the post includes short blurbs from the press release or announcement. This study does not examine the content of those paragraphs. The Noted posts were selected over the Reviewed posts because they were more structured with less editorial commentary. The short paragraphs of commentary often weigh the pros and cons of the elements shown instead of simply issuing a verdict. Vit himself has said that he thinks that "people look at images, then go straight to give their opinions. No matter how much we try, that's still going to happen" (Hadlock, 2020).

The written commentary is short in relation to the images in the post. It is unlikely that a short paragraph has an overwhelming effect compared to the volume of imagery in the post, but the influence of Vit's commentary cannot be completely ruled out using this content analysis technique.

<p style="text-align:center">Limitations to the current research</p>

This study utilizes a novel approach to examining how consumers respond to new logos. As such there are several limitations to the approach. Because this study looked at reviews on a website, it is impossible to know the audience of the website. Demographic

<p style="text-align:center">62</p>

features like age, gender, and nationality are unavailable. While we can assume that the people who visit *Brand New* are interested in brand identities, we do not know how many of them are professionally involved in design or branding.

This study uses icon symmetry as a variable to represent the aesthetic properties of logos. Symmetry seems to be a straightforward aesthetic feature to classify, but it proved more challenging than expected. The study coded for exact symmetry, where the right and left half are perfectly identical. Some icons were almost symmetrical, with just a slightly noticeable difference. Other icons were structurally symmetrical, but their coloring was asymmetrical. Bounding boxes that contained an icon could be symmetrical even though the contents were not symmetrical. Even perfectly symmetrical icons were often aligned with a wordmark in an asymmetrical configuration. This study uses a narrow definition of symmetry to ensure appropriate intercoder reliability and cannot account for other types of symmetry.

As with all online polls, it is impossible to guarantee that people did not vote multiple times or coordinate with others to improve scores. While *Brand New*'s poll has a basic restriction to restrict multiple votes from the same IP address, this limitation is easily overcome by motivated users.

While every effort has been made to control for brand equity, this study cannot guarantee that people who are voting have no prior experience with the company being featured. Furthermore, it's impossible to rule out how prior knowledge from social media or other media outlets may have influenced consumer response.

Future Research

This study is a starting point, and more research is needed on visual context and the effects on viewer response to new logos. Follow-up research can assist in better understanding these findings and determining new avenues to explore in future studies.

Experiments can test the impact of context while controlling for the factors that could not be eliminated through this content analysis, like brand equity and editorial influence. Additional research could also provide insights into how different types of context are perceived by viewers.

Qualitative examination of the comments on Brand New seems like an obvious next step, although with the understanding the comments do not always match the sentiment of the viewers who vote. The commenters however likely mirror the type of commentary found on social media and may provide interesting insights in addressing criticism from viewers.

In general, there needs to be more research on corporate visual identity, not just the logo. This study indicates that the surrounding context impacts viewer response to logos. Future studies cannot simply assume that the logo is representative of the entire system.

The importance of building design theory

The importance of context has been mentioned in essays by designers going back to Rand and yet, no quantitative research has been done to examine this effect. While this effect can be explained by borrowing theories like semiotics or conceptual fluency, these theories fail to take into account the perspective of the designer.

Design research is occurring in a variety of fields across academia – from marketing and management to psychology and engineering (Cash, 2018). And yet, designers themselves are not contributing to the literature. Perhaps this has to do with the relatively small number of Ph.D. programs in design (Cash, 2018; Davis, 2008). Or the Bauhaus traditions of focusing design education on object-based design practice. Design has found itself a seat at the table in corporate boardrooms, but as design moves away from objects and more towards complex systems, design theory becomes increasingly important to explore (Davis, 2008).

Something like the importance of context is perhaps a starting point. The power of context is a given within the design community and visual context can easily be explored and evaluated through quantitative means. While other theories may help explain the effects of context, a design-centered theory could merge established theories with insights from design and improve our collective understanding of the power of design.

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