



GESTALT PRINCIPLES IN DESTINATION LOGOS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON PEOPLE'S RECOGNITION OF AND INTENTION TO VISIT A COUNTRY

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine the influence of gestalt principles exhibited in destination logos on audience's intention to visit a country and the extent to which they recognize the country based on its tourism icon. A total of 154 logos were collected from the websites of 116 countries, and were rated based on the extent to which six gestalt principles were present in each. Based on the scores, the logos were classified as having high, medium and low gestalt attributes. Two representative logos for each level were selected. An online survey of undergraduate students was conducted to determine the influence of these gestalt traits on recognition and people's intention to visit the country being promoted. The results reveal that high-gestalt logos enhanced intention to visit. Although the medium-gestalt logos elicited greater recognition, high-gestalt logos were more effective in capturing the characteristics of the countries they represent than low-gestalt logos.

INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries in the world (Fetscherin, 2010). The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) reports that in 2007 alone, over 900 million tourists crossed international borders for their holidays, generating revenues of US\$856 billion (Bowman, 2010). Though there was a decline in these figures in 2009 perhaps as a consequence of the worldwide recession, global tourism "recovered strongly" in 2010 with an overall increase of 6.7%, adding 935 million tourists mainly from the emerging economies of Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas (Goodman, 2011). Despite the worldwide economic slump, the UNWTO forecasts continuous growth in international tourism, projecting an average of 43 million additional tourists every year until 2030 (UNWTO, 2011). More are expected to visit the developing world to take advantage of "exotic" cultures, cheaper hotels, virgin forests, pristine beaches, and the warm weather these nations offer (Roe et al., 2004; Bowman 2010; UNWTO, 2011).

This projected pace of growth has understandably prompted governments to position their countries as prime tourist destinations. In doing so, they have turned to branding techniques to establish an image and to differentiate their country on the global market. One of the ways to attain a competitive edge is by deploying a memorable destination logo (Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 2001; Kleppe and Mossberg, 2006). These logos aim to communicate distinction or a unique identity (Harish, 2010). They have been known to elicit desired notions and emotions, influence behavior (Rafaeli et al., 2008), and speed up recognition (Berry, 1989; Morrow, 1992). According to Rafaeli et al. (2008), a country logo may reflect special or historical events or it may present the ethos of its citizens. A strong country brand has been found to equate to substantial tourist arrivals (Fetscherin, 2010). Harish (2010) found that prospective visitors and investors rely significantly on the destination's image in making their decisions.

Because of this, efforts are expended to arrive at the "right" visual identity. Among other attributes, this visual identity, encapsulated in a logo, must be congruent with the message, and must be crafted for high impact considering minimal or fast-paced exposure. In the design of such logos, gestalt principles are particularly useful because such principles offer a visual frame of reference designers can use as a reliable psychological basis for the spatial organization of graphic information. In effect, gestalt perceptual factors offer guidelines as to how the eye organizes visual experiences. Indeed, how people evaluate a logo has been found to affect their evaluations of the organizations the logos represent (Aronczyk, 2008; Henderson and Cote, 1998).

Although there are numerous studies on logo design characteristics (e.g., Fang and Mowen, 2005; Zhang et al., 2006), few have examined the deployment of a wide range of gestalt principles in logo design (Chang et al., 2001; Cao, 2003). Often, discussions in marketing literature are limited to various rules of thumb propagated in the trade press that have been neither tested empirically nor integrated to form a comprehensive set of guidelines.

This study aims to expand the literature on the effect of design on consumer evaluation of logos by assessing the gestalt characteristics of country logos for tourism and their influence on people's recognition of and intention to visit the country these logos represent. The results are expected to offer insights in the development of visual assets on which countries spend enormous time and money to promote (Hutton, 1997; Lentschner, 2001; Henderson et al., 2003).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Although there is no definitive definition of a country brand, Papp-Váry (2010) generally defines it as something that combines visual communication and marketing techniques to promote a country. Country branding aims to "stimulate exports, attract tourists, investments, and immigration, and create positive international perceptions and attitudes" (Fetscherin, 2010, p. 468). A traditional dimension of country branding is a "destination image," which involves "not only the perceptions of individual destination attributes but also the holistic impression made by the destination" (Echtner and Ritchie, 1991, p. 8). Destination image has been shown to be a significant determinant of visitors' choice (Lee et al., 2002). In the severe competition for tourists and their spending dollars, destination branding strives to achieve seven broad objectives—image, recognition, differentiation, consistency, brand messages, emotional response, and expectations (Blain et al., 2005).

Earlier studies have shown that some logos have been successful in eliciting positive emotions, conveying meaning, enhancing behavioral intentions, and raising recognition about a company or brand (van der Lans et al., 2009; Henderson et al., 2003). Rafaeli et al. (2008) found that symbols and corporate logos can lead people to do things they otherwise would not do, suggesting the logos' utility whenever trust and spontaneous compliance are needed. Henderson et al. (2003) laud the logos' portability, pointing out that they are "the most common element of the marketing mix that can be used in an unaltered form when going abroad" (p. 298).

Designing logos, however, is costly. Selecting an appropriate one is a daunting task. As Colman et al. (1995) lament, "logotypes generate unique impressions, but the quality and type of these impressions are not always those intended by the designers" (p. 405). Many logos fall flat, failing to convey meaning through a hodgepodge of design elements that are irrelevant and do not connect to the market (Byrom and Lehman, 2007). Indeed, one of the nagging research gaps in destination branding is the effectiveness of brand slogans and logos (Pike et al., 2009). Pike et al. (2009) bemoan their observation that destination promotion has seen few creative ideas, and that most fail to achieve anything more than "ephemeral indifference" (p. 437).



Studies that examine audience reactions have identified the design characteristics of good logos (e.g., Henderson and Cote, 1998, van der Lans et al., 2009). The most common are simplicity (the ability to capture essence with a few design elements), naturalness (exhibited mainly through the use of commonly experienced objects), harmony (congruent patterns or arrangements of parts), proportion (the ratio of a logo's width to its height), and parallelism (the number of parallel lines in the design). Most of these are stylistic variables applied following some design convention.

Gestalt Principles in Visual Design

Behind these conventions, however, is a tacit recognition that visual perception is a "patternmaking process wherein people make sense of images through organization and meanings (recognition)" (Myers, 1990, p. 11). Gestalt principles of perception, proposed by German psychologists in the 1920s, describe the various ways people tend to visually assemble individual objects into groups or "unified wholes." In creating logos, it is important to consider the whole and not simply its parts because it is the complex totality of the elements in close relationship that ultimately creates meaning. This is made possible, according to Malamed (2009), because of the form-generating capability of our senses; where there is a collection of lines and curves, people see and recognize whole forms—the stronger the clarity of form, the more effective the design (Berryman, 1992).

Visual communicators do not agree on the exact number of gestalt principles that can be applied to design. Many, however, list six gestalt laws of perceptual organization particularly useful in the design of things—similarity, proximity, continuation, figure-ground relationships, closure, and assimilation (Read et al., 1997; Henderson et al., 2003; Cao, 2003; Lester, 2006; Myers, 1990). These have been shown to have a significant relationship with audience responses, including positive affect, perceptions of quality, recognition, and consensus in meaning (Henderson et al., 2003).

The principle of *similarity* states that design elements that are identical in terms of color, shape, size or orientation are grouped or seen together (Javier, 2011; Chang et al., 2001; Lester, 2006). Those that look the same unite, thus commanding attention (Fisher and Smith-Gratto, 1999). *Proximity* suggests that items are likely to be grouped together according to their nearness (Javier, 2011; Chang et al., 2002; Lester, 2006). Viewers assume that elements that are close to each other are related; those that are apart are not (Fulks, 1997). *Continuation* states that the eye is inclined to follow directions that are obvious or implied (Javier, 2011; Fultz, 1999). According to the *figure-ground* principle, the brain's continuous search for contours and edges forces it to distinguish between the foreground and background in a visual field (Fultz, 1999). *Closure* refers to the tendency to perceive multiple elements as a totality, to close gaps and to form wholes (Javier, 2011; Fultz, 1999). *Assimilation* is the process wherein a stimulus obtained by any one of the senses is related to the individual's vast storehouse of experience and behavior. Also known as *isomorphic correspondence*, this phenomenon suggests that interpretations are derived from the viewer's experiences and knowledge (Chang et al., 2002).

Viewers take advantage of these principles to group elements together into organized wholes and to establish coherent relationships between and among them. Following gestalt arguments, after having recognized the individual elements of a whole, the viewer seeks a coherent interpretation of the total image.

Given the foregoing literature on the likely impact of gestalt principles as they are applied in the design of country logos for tourism, this study asks: Does the extent to which a logo demonstrate gestalt principles influence people's intention to visit the country being promoted? What is the influence of these principles on people's ability to recognize the country the logo represents?

METHOD

Gestalt Traits

A total of 154 logos were collected from the tourism websites of 116 countries. Two graduate students in journalism and mass communication who have had undergraduate and graduate courses in visual communication rated the extent to which six gestalt principles—similarity, proximity, continuity, figure-ground, closure, assimilation—were present in each logo using a scale from 1 to 5, where "1" means low and "5" means high. The scores for each logo were averaged. The two highest rated logos (Peru=20.8 and New Zealand=20.7) were considered images high in gestalt attributes. The scores were split at the median to identify the two logos that represent those that have medium-gestalt characteristics (Japan=13.7 and Tanzania=13.7). The two lowest scoring logos were designated as low-gestalt images (Aruba=8.3) and Bermuda 8.7). Table 1 shows the selected logos and their gestalt rankings.

Intercoder reliability was determined using Krippendorf's alpha (α). The results, shown in Table 2, indicate acceptable reliabilities.

Table 1. High-, medium-, and low-gestalt logos

Gestalt level	Country logos
High	 
Medium	 



Low		
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Table 2. Intercoder reliability results

Gestalt principle	Intercoder reliability (%)
Similarity	78.4
Proximity	74.1
Continuity	71.8
Figure-Ground	71.1
Closure	79.2
Assimilation	71.2

Recognition and Intention to Visit

An online survey was conducted to determine the influence of logo gestalt traits on recognition and people's intention to visit the country being promoted. A convenience sample of undergraduate students in an introduction to advertising course was asked to complete an online questionnaire that sought their reactions to each of the six identified logos.

Intention to visit was measured using a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree) in response to the statement "I would like to visit this country some day." *Recognition* refers to the extent to which respondents can match the logo with the country being depicted. This variable was measured by respondents' answers to two items: (1) I can identify this logo with the country it represents; and (2) This logo captures the characteristics of the country it represents (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.762$) also using five-point Likert scales (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree).

RESULTS

A total of 208 students 18 to 25 years old participated in the study of which 146 (70.2%) were female.

To what extent did the logos capture the essence of the country they represent? In terms of eliciting recognition, logos with medium-gestalt characteristics ($M=7.542$, $SD=1.807$) outperformed the logos with high ($M=6.717$, $SD=1.888$) and low gestalt levels ($M=5.953$, $SD=2.233$). The results of an ANOVA test indicate that recognition of the country and what it can offer a potential tourist vary by gestalt levels [$F(2, 1173)=61.770$, $p=0.000$]. The findings of a Tukey post-hoc test suggest that medium-gestalt characteristics were better at performing this function than the logos rated low in gestalt attributes. High-gestalt logos were perceived to be more effective in capturing the characteristics of the countries they represent than low-gestalt logos.

Logos high in gestalt traits registered the highest intention to visit among the respondents ($M=3.80$, $SD=0.87$). Contrary to expectations, those rated low in gestalt attributes elicited a higher intention to visit ($M=3.60$, $SD=1.01$) than those in the medium category ($M=3.52$, $SD=1.00$). The results of a one-way ANOVA suggest that the three gestalt levels evoked significantly different levels of intention to visit [$F(2, 1179) = 8.775$, $p = 0.000$]. A Tukey post-hoc test reveal that high-gestalt logos produced higher behavioral intention responses than logos that were low in gestalt characteristics and those that display medium gestalt traits. Intention to visit did not differ significantly between the low- and medium-gestalt logos.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings demonstrate that logos high in gestalt attributes can influence the ease with which people can recognize the nations the logos stand for and consumers' intention to visit these countries. The results are consistent with those of Chang et al. (2002) who observed that deploying gestalt principles in the design of corporate identity improves the evaluation of the products that carry these logos. This may be because, as Todorovic (2008) posits, "it is not attention that creates the forms, but rather the forms, organized in accord with gestalt principles, that draw attention" (p. 5345). The results buttress the notion that obvious Gestalt patterns can elicit positive reactions from target viewers. The results also support the observation that the joint effect of gestalt grouping principles demonstrates "reasonable strength" (Kubovy and van den Berg, 2008).

The findings add evidence in support of the notion that logos strong in patternmaking or grouping of elements have a higher propensity to produce the desired effects. That medium-gestalt logos were identified more with the country they symbolize than those high in gestalt traits suggest a preference for logos that are not simplistic but not overly complex.

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