

# Study says logos make a group seem 'real'

April 15 2016, by Kathleen Holder

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Organizations have logos, sports teams have mascots, countries have flags and national anthems. In marketing plans and political campaigns, a good logo is considered an essential tool for building brand identity.

New research at the University of California, Davis, shows that logos do far more—creating the impression that a group is unified, effective and coordinated, even when the members of the group don't really seem that way on their own.

In a series of experiments, social psychologists Shannon Callahan and Alison Ledgerwood found that logos, flags and other group symbols make even disparate collections of individuals appear more tightly knit, effective, and even intimidating to outsiders. These effects held even for groups whose members seem to have little in common.

But there was a tradeoff: Groups that used logos to enhance their image as competent and cohesive were also perceived as less inclusive and less warm.

## **Flags and logos used for centuries, but psychological function not well-understood**

While flags and emblems have been used for centuries around the world, and logos are ubiquitous today, their psychological function has not been well understood, said Ledgerwood, an associate professor in the Department of Psychology. "Nobody's really asked this question: What do symbols do for a group?"

In a series of online experiments, Ledgerwood and Callahan, a psychology doctoral student, asked participants to rate a variety of different groups (sometimes imaginary, and sometimes real) on how unified, organized, competent, threatening and friendly they seemed.

Consistent with past research, groups whose members looked the most like each other on the surface were considered the most unified and grouplike (for example, alien cartoon characters that were all the same color). But even diverse groups were rated as more unified—and more threatening—if they had a symbol.

"Part of the reason that people tend to see a political group or a sports team as a real, unified entity, and also tend to see them as potentially threatening, may be because they have these group symbols," Ledgerwood said.

To account for stereotypes, the researchers asked undergraduate students to rate 35 real-world groups for perceived competence and warmth, then picked eight that varied along the middle range of both scales: atheists, blue-collar workers, conservatives, Jewish people, Native Americans, obese people, immigrants and the disabled. A larger group of students then rated their perceptions of how unified, skillful and friendly each group seemed. A symbol made all groups look more cohesive, more competent and less warm.

A second series of experiments suggested that people also have an intuitive sense about when and how to use group symbols to archive a desired impression—study participants tended to choose to display a flag or logo with they wanted their country or team to look united and intimidating, while selecting courteous acts like bringing food or other gifts when focused on collaboration.

The research findings, published today (April 15) in the *Journal of*

*Personality and Social Psychology*, could help guide organizations and other groups in deciding whether to adopt a symbol.

"It may depend on what their goals are," Ledgerwood said. "If they want to seem very competent and coordinated, like they get things done, they might want to have a logo. But if their goal is to seem inclusive and cooperative and open to outsiders, a logo might backfire."

The studies also illuminate the risks for symbols to polarize people, making groups seem more monolithic than they are and escalating us-versus-them conflicts, she said.

"When we think about groups as unified entities, we lose sight of the individuals and don't see each [group](#) in its diversity. That can really hinder cooperation," Ledgerwood said. "Each side sees the other side as unified and threatening, so they have to be unified and threatening back. If a nation wants to have a productive dialogue, for instance, that might be really difficult to do when we're all waving our symbols around."

Provided by UC Davis

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