Marketing scholar investigates psychological effects of logo design

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Marketers invest countless resources to design the perfect visual logo for their brand, believing that consumers apply a logo's meaning to its accompanying brand.

Consumer behavior literature supports this assumption by documenting how a logo's meaning can affect attitudes toward and beliefs about associated brands. New research by a University of Kansas marketing scholar documents both how and when consumers attribute the meaning of a visual element to their broader environment instead of the brand itself.

Noelle Nelson, assistant professor of marketing at the University of Kansas School of Business, and her co-author's study, "When Brand Logos Describe the Environment: Design Instability and the Utility of Safety-Oriented Products," is forthcoming in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"We know that the key to stimulating desire for safety-oriented products lies in increasing consumers' motives for safety," Nelson said. "But this study suggests that rather than relying on people's memory of events to guide the level of safety they should seek, a more effective marketing strategy would be to increase one's perceptions of unsafe environmental conditions."

Safety-oriented products are products that shield a consumer—or his or her possessions—from the consequences of negative events, such as a

home security system, car insurance, even a bicycle helmet.

Nelson finds that logos featuring elements oriented to appear unstable cue inferences of unsafe conditions, and since safety-oriented products are resistant to inferences that they are unsafe, the inference is instead applied to the broader environment.

This perception of an unsafe environment increases the perceived usefulness of safety-oriented products, which suggests that in some cases a logo with a meaning opposite to the desired product or brand beliefs may ironically increase demand for the product.

"Our findings demonstrate the wide-reaching effects of brand logos and point to easy and effective ways to encourage consumer safety through visual design," Nelson said.

A core assumption underlying logo design is that inferences generated from a design are applied to the product or brand to which the logo is attached. Nelson's research demonstrates that some products are resistant to particular inferences, which leads such inferences to be applied instead to one's environment.

"Specifically, when considering safety-oriented products, consumers exposed to unstable-looking brand logos infer the presence of unsafe conditions, and because safety-oriented products are resistant to inferences that they are unsafe, the inference is instead applied to one's environment.

"Overall the present findings suggest that in some cases, a logo design that is opposed to desired product or brand beliefs may ironically help boost demand," Nelson said.

Her research builds on literature in visual design, inference-making and

intuitive physics to explore both how and when consumers use brand logos to infer the condition of their environment and how this ultimately shapes product-based outcomes.