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Sight bites: A study of viewers' impressions of corporate logos in the communications industry

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Abstract

Logos (logotypes) are corporate emblems or symbols of identity that are designed to convey an organization's identity to its members and to outsiders. Current postmodernist influences, involving aesthetics of ambiguity and playfulness, have led to recognizable influences on the design of certain logos and may have influenced the public's impressions of the organizations that they represent. Design companies either do not carry out empirical impression-formation studies of logos or, if they do carry them out, do not generally publish their results. This study shows that the logos of six (tele)communications organizations create distinct impressions, and that these impressions are only sometimes of the type and quality presumably intended by their designers.

Introduction

The logo of a company or other institution is increasingly the 'face' that it presents to the public. Some writers still call it a 'logotype', which implies that it is composed of typographical letters (usually the initials of the organization's name); however, artistic and presentational developments have in some cases led to alterations of the letter shapes, as in the Yorkshire Electricity and Scottish Enterprise logos with their highly unusual letter shapes, or have worked them into semi-illustrations of function (as, for example, in the rippled 'bucket' of the Anglian Water logo or the 'sparky' letter N of the National Power logo) to produce emblems that are more like logograms or ideograms than logotypes.

Focusing on the function of a logo, J. Mallory Wober has suggest that it be construed as a *sight bite*, which conveys the idea that in a culture where copious information is addressed to the eye logos are not just simple denotative labels but are intended to convey succinct impressions of corporate personality and function, analogously to the politician's sound bite. Although people read periodicals for less than ten minutes per day on average, they watch television for about three hours per day, and outdoors they see many billboards and shop fronts. Within this visual 'clamour', people form impressions of corporate identities. A great deal is known about forming impressions from faces and body language (see, e.g., Argyle, 1988; Bull & Frederikson, 1994; Costanzo & Archer, 1989; Ekman, Friesen, & Ellsworth, 1972), but much less work has been published about processes and results of judgements of corporate logos, possibly because of the commercial sensitivity of such information. It is reasonable to presume, however, that there are at least two components to viewers' responses to a logo: reactions to the logo itself and judgements of the corporation that it represents. Both of these aspects are explored in this article.

Designing logos can be a prosperous business. The consultancy firm Wolff Olins of London, in a recent advertisement to recruit a 'Corporate Identity Senior Communications Specialist', commented: 'We are Europe's largest independent consultancy . . . the strength of our work lies in our ability to analyse, define and articulate the idea behind our clients' businesses clearly and effectively, to their own employees and the world at large'. The

corporate identity of the Wolff Olins organization, incidentally, is conveyed in conventional sans serif capitals. Two known examples of their work for others include the more adventurous mixed typeface iTC of the Independent Television Commission's logo (see Figure 1) and British Telecom's 'pixie in tights' (Mark Steyn, *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 March 1994, p. 15).

Mark Steyn contrasted his 'New England telephone directory, emblazoned with a modified version of the same Bell symbol it has used since 1889' with BT's pixie, saying that 'it would be hard to think of any emblem less appropriate for a semi-public near monopoly. British culture has mastered the language of advertising but has no idea how to use it. . . . Admen prefer images that bear no relationship to reality . . . advertising . . . seems to be more successful for the adman than for the clients'. Lynn Barber (*The Independent on Sunday*, 14 March 1993, p. 25) had earlier declared:

Hitherto my most hated logos have all been members of the wafty drawing school – the Labour Party's rose, the Liberal Democrats' yellow bird, BT's climbing man, the Prudential's sheikh. They all look as if they belong on heated hair rollers . . . but I'm not sure that Carlton television's logo is not more irritating still. It consists of the word CARLON written properly in Gill with a stupid baby T nestling in the crook of the L. . . . Carlton's head of Presentation . . . briefed the designers Lambie Nairn & Co to come up with something 'warm, friendly, accessible, all the usual things' and that Carl(t)on was the result. Bizarre.

Logos continue to attract occasional comment from attentive journalists, especially when the routine is broken. The *Daily Mirror* (16 April 1994, TV Section, p. 4) reported that 'for the first time the BBC2 logo is being used in a commercial on the rival channel – in an ad for Pizza Hut, promoting a two-for-one offer. . . . The BBC . . . were as pleased as punch'. Libby Purves (*The Times*, 27 January 1995, p. 15) noticed that the Britannia Building Society 'has scrubbed [Britannia] from the logo because it wishes to be seen as "bright, cheerful, purposive and modern". . . . Last year . . . a Bank of England wit [concluded that] Britannia was an unsuitable tercentenary image for the Bank. . . . Why . . . if she conveys British power and confidence, is she sitting down?'. Developing the point both amusingly and instructively, Purves concluded that 'we must make our minds up whether we want poor old Britannia or not'.

This introduces two further ideas about logos. The first is that some are so familiar that they may be felt to be 'public property', so that citizens have an interest, perhaps even some right, in determining their retention or change. Such logos are displayed on 'our' money or on goods and devices that we regularly use and rely on, thus we come in part to identify ourselves by association with such ubiquitous symbols. The second notion, following Purves, is that something systematic should be more widely known about aspects of corporate identities of companies that are such prominent actors in public life; public knowledge could play a part in decisions on continuity or change involving these symbols.

A few comments are in order about the influence of postmodernism (see, e.g., Docker, 1994) on the design of many new logos. Docker's book itself has a cover with several different font sizes and colour backgrounds, hinting at an aspect of postmodernist style. Docker suggests that postmodernism almost intends to elude simple definition, but he indicates that it is out of touch with 'positivistic science; . . . postmodernity [is] a search for dissent and the recognition of heterogeneity, of a multiplicity of arguments never arriving at agreement' (p. 109). He refers to 'a postmodern aesthetic as inclusive, contradictory, extravagant, excessive, "flamboyant"' (p. 88) and to 'the postmodern architect as designing buildings . . . with a sense of paradox and irony and wit, using a "joke to get to seriousness"' (p. 85). If these conceptions have begun to influence designers who create logos, then we should expect to find a departure from a 'four-square' dignified statement, of which the Rolls

Royce RR is a classic example, supported as it is by the Parthenon-like radiator grille. British Telecom's soft-edged letters and androgynous creature and the Independent Television Commission's trigram of mixed fonts, sizes, and colours are characteristically postmodern designs.

Though the design world may explore a new informality of visual idiom, clients may nevertheless wish to convey a more formal personality. A small item in *Design Week* (23 November, 1990) reported Wolff Olins's spokeswoman saying of their new design that 'the ITC will need to be bold and assertive to claim attention [as the key regulatory body] in an increasingly complex and competitive industry'; the spokesman of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (as it then was), the ITC's predecessor said that 'the brief is to make it plain that the ITC will be a firm and assertive organisation, independent of the government and programme makers'. These are rare public statements of the meaning a new logo is intended to convey.

The study reported in this article explores the possibility that a group of judges may interpret the ITC itself, via its logo, as firm, bold, assertive, and independent. In the light of the fact that *The Sun* newspaper (30 January 1991, p. 9) reported that BT spent some £250,000 'developing a new logo of a man blowing a trumpet' and awarded its own £100 prize for designs sent in by readers (several attractive and ingenious examples of which were published), we considered it opportune to explore what judges might think of Wolff Olins's BT symbol as well. In view of the fact that both organizations are in the field of communications, it was decided also to include logos of other (tele)communications organizations (Central Television, Mercury Communications, the BBC, and the British Film Institute) in the study.

Method of enquiry

The purpose of this investigation was essentially exploratory; therefore no specific hypotheses were formulated beyond the general prediction that there would be significant differences in the subjects' ratings to the logos and the organizations that they represent.

No attempt was made to draw a representative sample or respondents, because we were not attempting to carry out a survey of average or typical opinions. Our interest focused on comparisons between perceptions of different logos on the same characteristics and between different ratings of the same logo on different characteristics; in addition we examined differences between people's perceptions of the corporate identities of the organizations themselves. For example, would the ITC logo be perceived as futuristic, fun, involving, and stimulating, in keeping with intentions emerging from the world of postmodern design, or (in parallel with the organization itself) as strong, assertive and active, thus fulfilling the design brief? Would the BBC corporate identity be perceived as stronger and more assertive (perhaps on account of its harder-edged lettering) than the iTC? Many other speculations along these lines could be drawn up, following scrutiny of the logos in the study, however these would almost all (apart from a few relating to the Independent Television Commission) be based on intuitive assumptions rather than any declared intentions of the designers of the corporations themselves. Our aim, therefore, was to compile an exploratory descriptive comparison rather than a normative representative study.

The subjects who participated in this study were 90 undergraduate students (64 women and 26 men) at the University of Leicester and De Montfort University; they were aged between 19 and 47 ($M = 22.9$, $SD = 5.5$). Subjects were first shown an example of a logo (Yorkshire Electricity) to illustrate the task, and they were then shown, one at a time, 12 logos representing Leicester University, Wolverhampton University, Mercury Telecommunications, the Independent Television Commission, British Telecom, the British

Film Institute, British Home Stores, Central Television, Powergen, Imperial Chemical Industries, the British Broadcasting Corporation and De Montfort University. These logos were presented individually in black and white and in random order. The data presented in this article are restricted to the six organizations belonging to the communications industry whose logos are displayed in Figure 1.

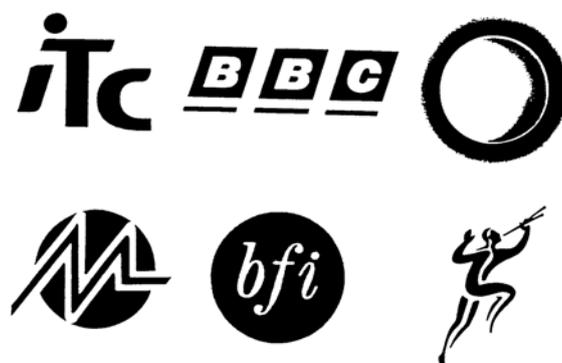


Figure 1

Subjects responded to the following counterbalanced set of 13 seven-point rating scales to assess their perceptions of each logo (in each case a score of 6 was given for ticking the response category anchored by the first-mentioned label, a score of zero for ticking the opposite extreme anchored by the second label, and intermediate scores for other responses): *involving – not involving, stimulating – not stimulating, interesting – not interesting, thought-provoking – not thought-provoking, entertaining – not entertaining, enjoyable – not enjoyable, humorous – not humorous, fun – not fun, good – bad, active – passive, strong – weak, assertive – submissive; futuristic – old fashioned*. Subjects were then asked to rate the company represented by each logo on the scales *assertive – submissive, bold – not bold, independent – submissive, firm – not firm, active – passive, strong – weak; stable – unstable*.

These rating scales were based on those that have been used as empirical definitions of involvement, entertainment, and enjoyment in previous studies of perceptions of advertisements (Norris and Colman, 1992, 1993, 1994) and of television programmes (Wober, 1988). It will be noted that three of the scales (*assertive, active, and strong*) were applied both to the logos and to the organizations they represented. The average across these three scales can thus be examined for a comparison of perceptions of the logos and their referents – though it is definitely not surmised that the perception of the former produces the latter; it is most likely that perceptions are (closely) interactive, with reactions to the known referent colouring perceptions of the logo and an associative flow in the other direction as well.

Subjects were given 25 minutes to complete the questionnaires and were urged to respond to all the scales for all the logos, giving their initial response and not thinking for too long about each rating. After they had completed the questionnaires, a general debriefing session was held. One-way analyses of variance were carried out on the ratings, followed by Tukey-HSD tests where appropriate to pin down significant differences between mean ratings across different logos or their referent companies within each characteristic (scale).

It should be borne in mind that any score over 3.0 denotes endorsement of the positive anchor of the scale. Because this article focuses on (tele)communications bodies, results will be shown only for these six, and the significance of differences will be stated in the instance of each single comparison made.

Results

Table 1 shows the mean ratings, calculated for each of the scales, for the logos of six organizations. Standard deviations ranged from 1.2 (ITC, *humorous – not humorous*) to 1.8 (ITC, *thought-provoking – not thought-provoking*).

TABLE 1 Mean scores for perceived characteristics of six logos

Scales	Logos						<i>F</i>
	BT	Centra 1	Mercury	BBC	ITC	BFI	
Strong	4.2	3.4	3.9	4.1	3.4	2.7	12.9*
Assertive	4.1	3.3	4.0	4.0	3.6	2.7	12.7*
Good	4.2	4.0	3.4	3.2	2.5	2.4	22.4*
Futuristic	4.0	4.3	4.2	2.0	2.9	2.3	39.5*
Active	4.6	2.8	3.9	3.4	2.7	2.1	19.2*
Interesting	4.0	3.9	3.0	2.0	1.7	2.0	42.9*
Stimulating	4.0	3.7	3.1	2.1	1.9	1.9	39.5*
Involving	3.9	3.5	2.9	2.2	2.0	1.9	33.8*
Thought- Provoking	3.5	3.6	2.8	1.9	2.0	1.7	36.5*
Enjoyable	3.8	3.3	2.8	2.1	1.8	2.0	28.3*
Entertaining	3.7	3.3	2.8	2.0	1.6	1.9	36.0*
Fun	3.7	2.5	2.3	1.7	1.6	1.7	24.6*
Humorous	2.7	1.7	1.8	1.4	1.1	1.3	17.4*
Mean	3.9	3.3	3.2	2.5	2.2	2.1	

Note. Tukey-HSD critical values for which pairs of means are significantly difference at $p < .05$ is 0.7 for all scales except *Humorous*, for which it is 0.6.

* $p < .001$.

General Comparison of ITC and BBC Logos

The ITC logo was perceived (only just) as strong and assertive – in keeping with the assigned brief to the design company. The logo itself, bearing in mind the distinction between this and the organization, was perceived as definitely not humorous, not fun, not entertaining, not enjoyable, not interesting, and not stimulating (all scores less than 2.0). It might be said, therefore, that a postmodern reading was evidently not made of this logo by these subjects. Of possible interest to the ITC itself – and to the wider television-viewing society that it serves – was that the ITC logo was not considered good (though not very emphatically bad either), and similarly it tended toward the passive rather than the active pole of the *active – passive* scale.

The BBC logo was considered slightly good (rather than bad) and slightly active rather

than passive. It was evidently seen as a more old-fashioned logo than that of the ITC, but notwithstanding the mixing of upper-case and lower-case lettering for the latter, the BBC logo was seen as more active than the ITC's.

The following differences are all significant at an alpha level of $p < .05$ according to the analysis of variance and Tukey-HSD tests. All other differences were found to be non-significant.

Good – Bad Comparisons Across Logos

The Mercury logo was rated as more good than those of the ITC and BFI, but less good than the BT logo; the ITC logo was rated less good than those of Mercury, BT, Central Television, and BBC. The BT logo was rated as more good than those of the ITC, BFI, and the BBC. The BFI logo was rated less good than those of Mercury, BT, Central Television, and the BBC. Central Television's logo was rated more good than those of the BBC, ITC, and BFI. The BBC logo was rated less good than those of BT and Central Television but more good than those of the ITC and the BFI.

Strong – Weak Comparisons Across Logos

The Mercury logo was rated as stronger than that of the BFI; the ITC logo was rated as less strong than that of BT but stronger than that of the BFI. The BT logo was rated as stronger than those of the ITC, BFI, and Central Television.

Assertive – Not Assertive Comparisons Across Logos

The Mercury logo was rated as more assertive than that of Central Television and BFI. The ITC logo was rated as more assertive than that of the BFI. The BT logo was rated as more assertive than those of the ITC, BFI, and Central Television. The BFI logo was rated as less assertive than those of Mercury, the ITC, BT, and the BBC. The Central Television logo was rated as less assertive than those of BT, the BBC, and Mercury. The BBC logo was rated as more assertive than those of the BFI and Central Television.

It has been pointed out that the associations made between adjectival scales and logos may in part influence but may also be influenced by perceptions of the companies and organizations themselves. Table 2 presents scores for perceptions of the organizations, and for three of these scales, and shows the averages across seven scales for the logo and for the organization; it also shows the average scores for three scales (*assertive*, *active*, and *strong*) that were applied both to the logos and to the organizations.

TABLE 2 Mean ratings of communications organizations

Scales	Organizations						<i>F</i>
	BT	Centra l	Mercur y	BBC	ITC	BFI	
Bold	4.4	3.7	4.2	4.3	3.9	2.9	14.1**
Independent	4.5	3.9	4.2	4.3	3.5	2.9	10.7**
Assertive	4.3	3.5	4.2	4.2	3.8	3.0	12.0*
Stable	4.0	3.7	3.9	4.2	3.5	3.1	11.0**
Strong	4.0	3.4	3.9	4.2	3.4	2.7	16.2**

Firm	3.9	3.3	3.9	4.3	3.7	2.8	11.5**
Active	4.2	3.1	4.0	3.8	3.3	2.5	13.1**
Mean	4.2	3.5	4.0	4.2	3.6	2.8	
Org-Logo ^a	0.3	0.2	0.9	1.7	1.4	0.8	
Org-Logo ^B	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.3	0.2	

Note. Tukey-HSD critical values for which pairs of means are significantly difference at $p < .05$ is 0.6 for all scales except *Independent*, for which it is 0.7.

^aMean differences in ratings between organizations and their logos across all rating scales.

^bMean differences in ratings across three rating scales (*Assertive*, *Strong*, *Active*) used to rate both organizations and their logos.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

Figures are shown in Table 2 of critical values on the Tukey HSD tests that indicate that a difference of 0.6 or more between two means within each of six scales is statistically significant, while in the remaining scale (independent/submissive) it requires a difference between averages of 0.7 to be significant.

The organizations with the most positive ‘personalities’ or images were BT, the BBC, and Mercury. Behind the first two came the ITC and Central Television, and more noticeably behind the first two was the BFI, which was also rated significantly lower than are Central Television and the ITC. It is noticeable that the BFI as an organization received scores that were all fairly close to 3.0, possibly indicating uncertainty about its standing on the seven characteristics represented by the rating scales; when subjects rated the logo itself the scores were distinctly lower, indicating definite negative ratings of the logo rather than mere uncertainty.

In the case of the ITC, the mean of the seven ratings of the organization was distinctly greater than the mean of the thirteen ratings of the logo. Comparing the two profiles of ratings, the organization was rated positively on all scales, whereas the logo was rated negatively on most (11 out of 13) of the scales. When only the three attributes that were run in common for the logo and the organization are examined, in no case did the logo get a better average score than the company. The ratings of the BBC as an organization (markedly positive) and of the BFI (generally neutral) were also more favourable than ratings of their logos.

Discussion

One of the features of Table 1 that has not thus far been pointed out is that there is a noticeable correlation, across the rating scales, between the organizations assessed. In other words, they all receive their more favourable ratings for *strong*, *assertive*, and *good* attributes, and all received their least favourable ratings for the attributes of being *entertaining*, *fun*, and *humorous*. In so far as the ITC logo may have sought to use a postmodern joke format in order to achieve a serious commercial objective, this attempt has evidently not succeeded. Neither was the ITC logo perceived as *entertaining*, *interesting*, or *stimulating*; that the organization itself received firmer scores is less likely to have arisen from the nature of its logo than may be the case with the BBC or BT.

On thirteen varied (though all positive) attributes, Central Television’s logo had a significantly higher score than did the BBC’s; in the opposite direction, on seven varied and also positive attributes Central Television itself received a lower average score than did the

BBC. These findings, as well as those for the ITC, suggest that there is a degree of inertia or momentum in the perception of an organization that is either independent of, or may even influence, the perception of the logo. In future investigations of perceptions of the logos of extremely well known organizations, it may therefore be interesting to use samples of judges who are similar to but outside the immediate culture in which the logos and their associated organizations function. Thus, for example, Canadian or other English-speaking subjects might be appropriate as judges of new logos for use by well-known organizations in Britain.

For BT, an organization with which the great majority of the population are well acquainted through services used each week or even each day, these results are presumably gratifying – the organization and its symbolic ‘pixie’ are well regarded. For the ITC, which is used by most of the population daily, but probably without them realising it, the results reported above may not be wholly reassuring. A modernist logo used by its predecessor, the Independent Broadcasting Authority, abandoned in favour of the more informal and postmodernist ITC logo, was rated less positively than that of Central Television. The subjects in our investigation were drawn from tertiary education, the segment who particularly go to the cinema. They may also have permissive attitudes that do not easily support the function of a restraining regulator. In that case they may think less well of the organization itself – but the logo should have a mission to help win support. In the present case, they may have adopted fashion in preference to function. Whatever the case, this small study suggests that the situation can readily be clarified should an organization wish to do so. Properly controlled pilot testing is carried out for many items before they are taken to the market; the same would surely be of benefit for the emblems under which these organizations ply their trades.

Appendix

The subjects’ ratings were analysed by means of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Tukey’s HSD (honestly significant difference) test of significance. The purpose of ANOVA was to determine in each case whether the differences between the six means – the ratings of the six logos or companies on each of the bipolar adjective scales – were statistically significant from one another. Whenever the ANOVA yielded an F value that was significant beyond $p < .05$, a Tukey-HSD test was performed to determine which of the six means differed significantly from which others, because a significant F value indicates merely that there is *some* unspecified significant difference or differences among the means but does not pinpoint the particular differences that are significant.

For a posteriori comparison of several means after ANOVA, the repeated application of a test designed to compare two means, for example a t test, is invalid because one in twenty such comparisons should be significant at the .05 level by chance alone. Various statistical tests with built-in protection against such Type I errors have been proposed. Most are based on the studentized range statistic q_r , which is defined as the ratio of the difference between the largest and smallest means being compared and the square root of the within-group variance divided by the number of scores in each group (Winer, 1971, pp. 185-196). The tests that are currently most widely used are Duncan’s Multiple Range, Newman-Keuls, Tukey-HSD, and Scheffé (MacRae, 1995). For pairwise comparisons of the type required in this study, most contemporary authorities recommend the Tukey test. For example, Howell (1987) says: ‘I recommend Tukey’s HSD test for making all pairwise comparisons’ (p. 357); and Kiess and Bloomquist (1985) say: ‘When the only comparisons to be made are those involving treatment means taken two at a time (i.e., pairwise comparisons), the Tukey test is the one recommended’ (p. 242). A similar recommendation is given in the majority of leading statistical textbooks.

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