Executive Summary

Symmetry and Likeability: Prior Research and Transfer to the Field of Advertising
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The question of whether people prefer symmetry to asymmetry has been explored for many decades. Many design guides recommend the use of symmetry, and many scientific publications report that people like symmetrical visual images more than asymmetrical ones. However, the proportion of symmetrical images that people observe in everyday life is very high (e.g., leaves of trees, house facades, hands, butterfly wings). Symmetry therefore does not exist as an exception. Only rare phenomena can cause special (very favorable) reactions in humans. After discussing the reasons why researchers nonetheless often discover and report a positive effect of symmetry on the likeability of visual stimuli, we focused on symmetry in print ads. To the best of our knowledge, symmetry in advertising has not yet been explored.

From the perspective of advertising practice, we propose to distinguish at least two types of symmetry: 1. Symmetry/asymmetry of elements that attract attention and are meaningful (e.g., the pair of polar bears in Coca-Cola advertisements); 2. Symmetry/asymmetry of abstract decorative backgrounds (e.g., leaves, dots, circles as background motifs). We find higher ad likeability when attention-attracting, meaningful elements are symmetrical because these stimuli trigger perceptions of regularity as well as aesthetic appreciation, while symmetrical decorative backgrounds only evoke perceptions of regularity.

Moreover, we recommend considering such symmetries more often when designing advertisements. We found not only an increase in ad likeability but also an improvement in brand attitudes when brand familiarity was low. For well-known brands, we have found that brand attitudes and purchase intention do not benefit from the usage of symmetry. We conclude that the effectiveness of symmetry is limited to influencing the evaluations of lesser-known brands.