Perceptual Fluency and Brand Evaluation: How the Ease of Seeing Shapes the Ease of Believing

Abstract

The ease with which a mind processes a brand – logo, name or packaging, is not a neutral cognitive by-product of perception but is a consequential evaluative signal influencing consumers' preferences , judgements of trustworthiness, and purchasing decisions without even realizing. The current systematic review studies the impact of perceptual fluency on brand evaluation in contexts ranging from logo design, brand names, packaging, eco-labelling, and competitive selection. Based on the principles of the hedonic fluency principle, the mere-exposure effect, and discrepancy attribution theory, the current review argues that brands get a systematic benefit due to their familiarity since they evoke positive affective reactions that people falsely attribute to the qualities of the brand. Notably, this link is context-dependent, since the signal of disfluency reflects innovation in the case of entrepreneurship, the use of multilingual packaging implies asymmetric processing costs, while consumer knowledge determines the standard used to assess ease. Importantly, the findings suggest that perceptual fluency is a relational construct rather than an inherent characteristic of stimuli.

Keywords: perceptual fluency; brand evaluation; perceptual disfluency; logo complexity; consumer decision making

Introduction: The Invisible Architect of Brand Perception

When you walk into a supermarket and try to reach for the same milk brand that you have been consuming for years without as much as a second glance at other brands available right there, here you are no necessarily acting out of habit, loyalty or even genuine preference for that particular product's taste. You may, in fact be acting in response of something far more automatic and invisible: the subjective feeling that the product or the brand's logo, label, shape, size and name are easy process. This easiness of the mind in processing something is what we call **processing fluency** and it has emerged as one of the most powerful and underappreciated drivers of consumer judgement, purchasing intentions and decision and the way we evaluate brands.

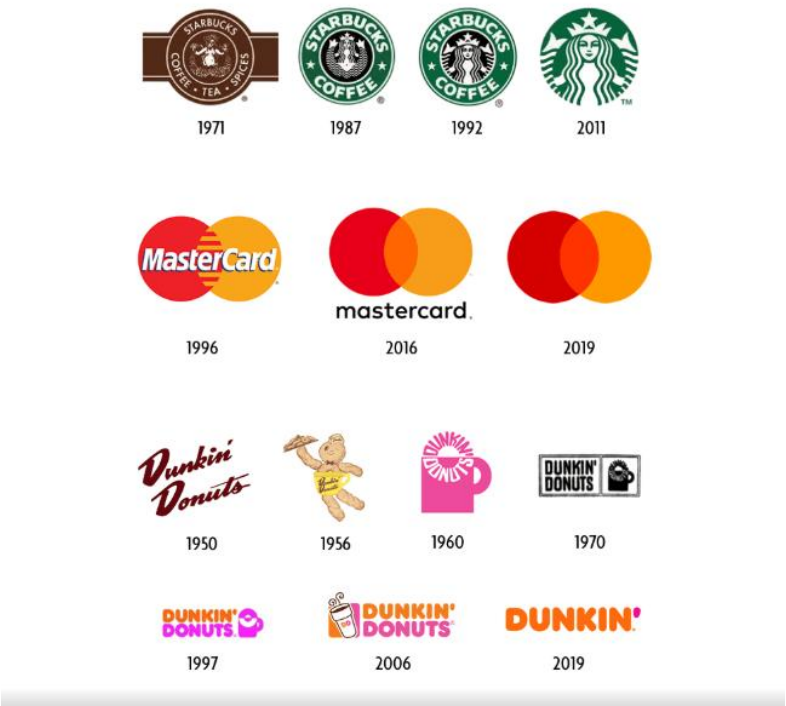
Processing fluency can be defined as a subjective experience of ease of the difficulty that you face when you mentally process a stimulus (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Reber, Schwarz, & Winkielman, 2004). So, think of it as the friction (or the lack of friction thereof) that you mind feels when it perceives, encodes and recognises and makes sense of the whole world around it. When that friction is reduced and is low, something very interesting happens: the mind: our mind interprets the smoothness of processing and registers it as a positive signal, which generated a mild but consequential hedonic glow that represents the way we evaluate anything that we happen to be processing in that exact moment. (Winkielman & Cacioppo, 2001). Thus, when the friction is high, the same warm cools and the evaluations tend to become less favourable.

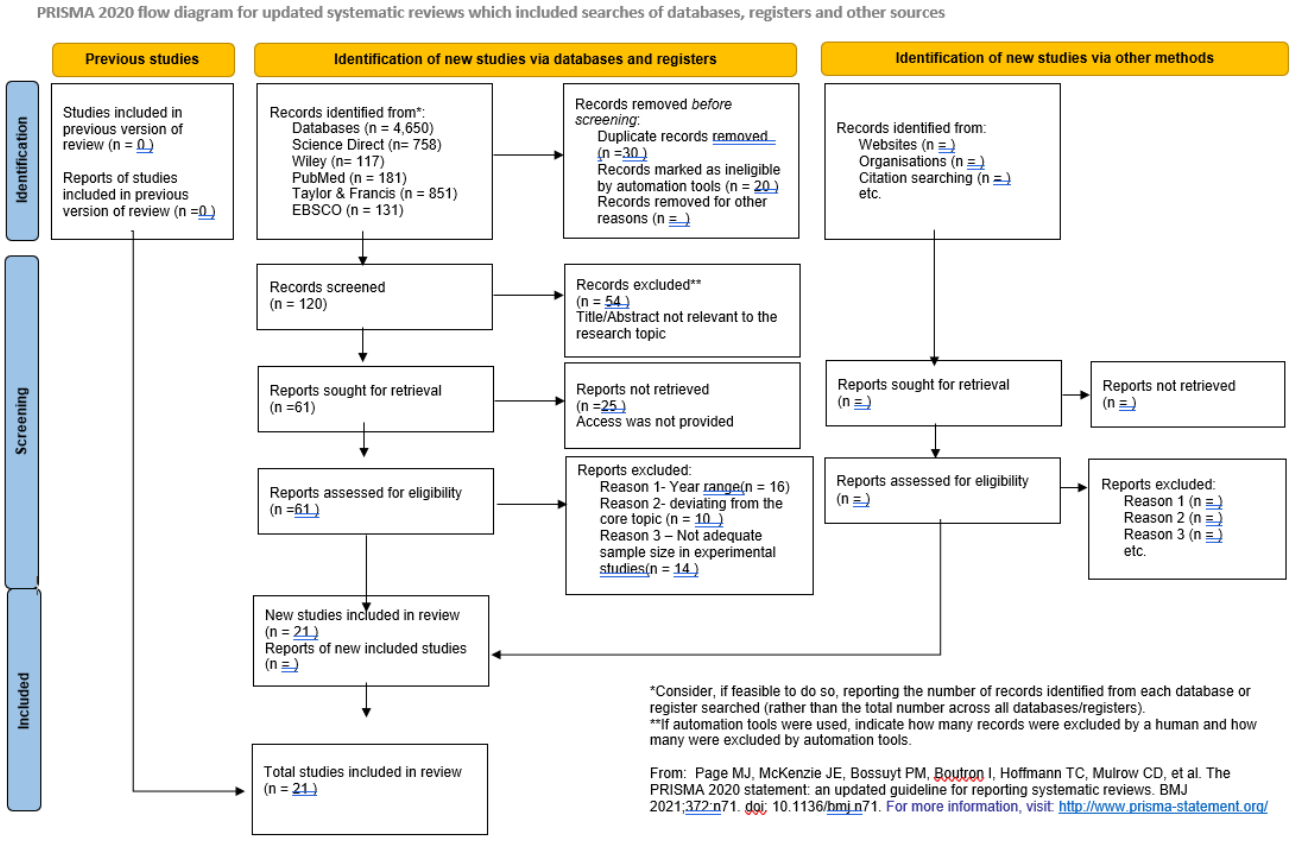
Now talking in a broader construct of processing fluency, the term occupied a particularly important place in the minds of brand researchers. Here we are referring to the ease with which the visual or the packaging design's orderliness is encoded by the perceptual system (Reber et al., 2004). Perceptual fluency can be said to be gateway through which the brands make contact with the consumers' minds and implications of brand evaluations and consumer decision making is truly profound. This review brings together a body of empirical and theoretical work to examine how perceptual fluency affects the evaluation of brands and why the factor of familiarity creates a gravitational pull towards certain types of brands and logos over novel alternatives. The review

will also explore how the visual complexity of brand logos moderates the purchase intentions in ways that sometimes defy intuition.

The central hypothesis that will be explored and through this review is:
Given a choice between a familiar brand or logo and a novel one, consumers will systematically prefer the familiar option, and this preference is substantially mediated by the perceptual fluency.

This preference is not trivially explained by the conscious reasoning related to quality or value but it might be rather the downstream consequence of a cognitive shortcut or a schema – the mind's tendency to treat its own ease of processing as evidence of goodness, safety and truth.





Theoretical Underpinning: Metacognitive Experience of Processing Fluency

As we delve into analyzing the manifestation of perceptual fluency/disfluency in branding and logos, we must first understand the theoretical underpinning of the whole process. The critical points from the literature regarding processing fluency reveal that the human judgment is controlled not only by what we think but also by how we think. In other words, the experience of thinking is an important aspect (Schwartz, 2004) called **metacognitive experience**. The feeling of when a thought comes easily to mind, as pulling a thread from a well wound spool, it carries information that people can use, often without awareness in order to make evaluative judgements.

Now this mechanism through which this phenomenon occurs has been formalised as the **hedonic fluency model** (Winkielman & Cacioppo, 2001). Now according to this model, fluent processing generates a more positive effect and that positive affect is them misattributed to the target stimulus which is being evaluated. Furthermore, this effect in turn acts as a signal: if the processing feels good, then the thing that is being processed must be good. Winkielman and Cacioppo (2001) shows that with this psychophysiological evidence, showing that just the mere exposure to the

fluent stimuli activated the zygomatic (smiling) muscle activity even when the participants reported absolutely no conscious activity or awareness of their affective reaction. The smile turns out to precede the thought.

Now this hedonic marking has been shown to produce more and more favourable evaluations across an impressively diverse range of outcomes. Fluent stimuli is liked more (Reber, Winkielman, & Schwarz, 1998), judged as truer (Schwarz, 2004), perceived as safer (Dohle & Siegrist, 2014), and assigned higher quality ratings (Chang, 2013; Hüttl-Maack & Munz, 2025). In terms of marketing scholars, the implication is quite clear: with the mental ease with which a brand is perceived is not a neutral feature of the encounter but it is a lever that shapes the evaluation and can be designed for or against.

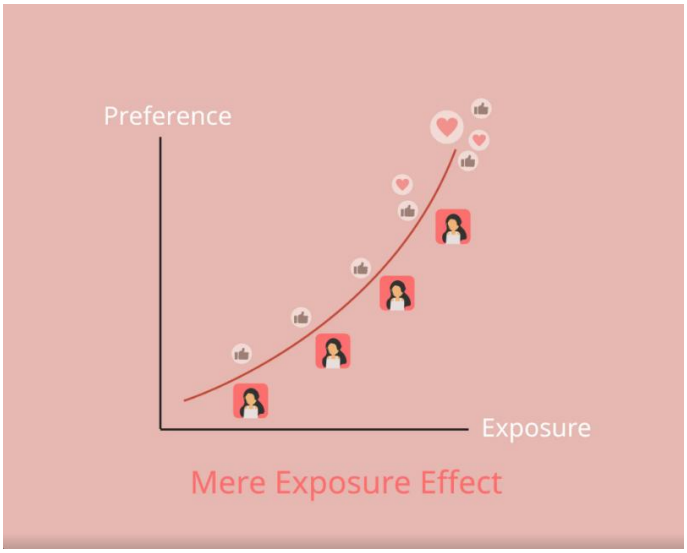
Familiarity as the Engine of Perceptual Fluency: Why Familiar Brands Win

Delving a bit deeper into perceptual fluency, one of the most robust sources would have to be stimulus familiarity. So, when a stimulus has been encountered before, even if it was brief and without conscious awareness, the subsequent encounters with it are processed more easily and quickly because the perceptual system has already laid down a representational trace that reduces the cognitive work or load od re-encoding (Jacoby, Woloshyn, & Kelley, 1989). This is also called as the **mere exposure effect** and the consequences of the same for brand evaluations are far reaching. In Zajonc's (1968) foundational work, participants were shown Chinese characters at varying frequencies and then they were asked to rate the characters' pleasantness and meaningfulness. Without any more semantic knowledge of the characters, they consistently rated more frequently seen characters more positively. The key here is that the effect doesn't depend on any sort of conscious awareness of the stimulus's familiarity. In their study from 2009, Hansen and Wanke found that the fluency effect works even in cases where participants weren't consciously aware of being exposed to the stimulus previously. It doesn't matter whether the brand tells the consumer "you saw me before," because the mind is already fluent with it and responds appropriately.

When we talk about evaluating a brand, this suggests that there is a time factor involved. Namely, a brand will have had longer in the perceptual field to develop an advantage of fluency over competitors. Therefore, when a consumer sees a known milk brand competing with a new entrant, she isn't judging neutral stimuli. Instead, the former can be processed fluently by the visual systems, while the latter requires somewhat more work on encoding.

Similarly, the hypotheses postulated above have also received credible and significant validation through the studies conducted by Mohsenin & Munz (2025) on the role played by perceptual disfluency in the competitive decision-making processes of consumers. In their research, eleven pre-registered experiments involving a total of 9,042 subjects revealed that perceptual disfluency, as created by unfamiliar fonts, low image resolutions or distracting backgrounds, tends to induce a bias towards consumer preference towards choices perceived as intuitively appealing. Notably, one of the key beneficiaries of this phenomenon was the familiar brand. Under circumstances of perceptual disfluency, consumers tend to base their decisions upon the degree of familiarity associated with certain brands. This makes intuitive sense since under the influence of perceptual disfluency, consumers tend to make decisions based on their unconscious inclination towards what they know and what they perceive to be familiar to them.

Mohsenin & Munz (2025) attribute this perceptual bias to the misperception of the link between perceptual disfluency and decision difficulty, which refers to the indecision experienced by individuals when making choices between alternative brands (Novemsky et al., 2007). This confusion between the effort of processing perceptual information regarding the product and the difficulty of making the choice helps consumers instinctively overcome the problem by selecting products that require minimal cognitive exertion, such as established brands. This is a critical point worth mentioning. In a perceptually difficult environment, characterized by cluttered supermarket shelves, dull computer screens, or intricate packaging, established brands may prove more attractive than prospective competitors.



Brand Names, Pronunciation, and the Fluency of Sound

Perceptual fluency encompasses more than just visual perception and includes perceptual experience from the auditory and motor-articulatory channels. Modern studies have revealed that the pronunciation of the name of the product is easy to pronounce not only out loud but also in inner speech. This influences both the perceptions of the name itself and the product that it represents because reading creates automatic articulation simulations (Topolinski & Strack, 2009). Thus, every time people interact with the brand name, they repeat how it sounds aloud.

This principle has been employed by Silva, Chrobot, Newman, Schwarz, and Topolinsky (2017) in studying market trustworthiness. In their study comprising ten different experiments with a total of 608 participants, they found out that eBay sellers employing pronounceable short names were perceived as more trustworthy than sellers with difficult to pronounce and long usernames although cues for trustworthiness like feedback ratings were present and participants were explicitly told to attend to them. It turns out then that pronunciability, an attribute that is entirely separate from all measurable indicators of trustworthiness, became significant enough to influence judgments of market trustworthiness. In this instance, fluency became an artificial substitute for credentials; the name is easy, therefore trust is easy.

At a more fundamental level, the role of articulation kinematics in the motor fluency component of the phenomenon discussed in this essay has been explored by Bakhtiaria, Körner, and Topolinski (2016) in relation to preferences for made-up words. When expanding upon prior

demonstrations of the in-out effect (Topolinski et al., 2014), Bakhtiaria et al. have shown that words whose articulation kinematics move from front to back (i.e., inward words, such as MENIKA) are rated more positively than words whose kinematics move from back to front (i.e., outward words, such as KENIMA). Importantly, these researchers showed that the reason for the preference is articulatory fluency because words articulated from the front to the back of the mouth are more common and hence better rehearsed than outward words. As a result of their corpus analyses, they concluded that front consonants are more frequent than rear ones at the beginning of words while the reverse pattern is observed at the end position in English and German. Implications of this finding for branding are quite interesting because articulation kinematics represent internal dynamics of speaking that consumers are unaware of. Nevertheless, they also tend to affect consumers' perception of pleasantness and liking toward a product name.

In essence, all these studies have led to the conclusion that there is an interplay between brand familiarity and brand fluency. In other words, the fact that brands are familiar means that they are easier to process visually than unfamiliar brands. Their names are also easier to say repeatedly and their fluency leads to more positive attitudes towards the brands.

Logo Complexity and Brand Evaluation: The Double-Edged Nature of Disfluency

The ending would have been nice had the story ended there, but unfortunately, it would have been simplistic. There are mounting empirical evidences showing that visual complexity, which usually induces disfluency, is not always linked to worse brand evaluations. In specific settings, disfluency assumes a different meaning: it is no longer associated with negativity, but rather "newness," "creativity," and "something interesting to study." Identifying situations where disfluency aids versus those where it hinders brand evaluation is the core question addressed by research on the relationship between disfluency and branding.

The conventional wisdom suggests that logos that are easier to perceive visually, hence disfluently fluent, would yield more positive brand evaluations. Indeed, studies confirm that visually complex stimuli increase cognitive processing difficulty, slow down information processing, and lower aesthetic pleasure (Reber et al., 2004). An easily recognizable image, such

as the bitten Apple or the swooshed Nike, makes less effortful for its recipients, and it would therefore be expected to elicit better feelings than a complex logo design based on the model of hedonic fluency.

However, Mahmood, Luffarelli, and Mukesh (2018/2019) presented a strikingly counterintuitive finding regarding equity crowdfunding. Their main claim is that logo complexity leads to perceptual disfluency, which creates feelings of *unfamiliarity*, and this unfamiliarity is reframed as *novelty*, which is a strong positive signal of innovativeness in the minds of investors evaluating entrepreneurial ventures. Because innovativeness is an important quality characteristic of start-ups, logo complexity may *enhance* funding choices by influencing perceptions of innovativeness and not by reducing them due to aesthetics.

Mahmood et al. (2018/2019) conducted three experiments using a multimethod design – a large-scale survey (N = 2,630 participants), a field study based on 10,611 investments made by 5,427 individuals across 62 crowdfunding projects, and a laboratory experiment (N = 200 participants). All three empirical tests provided robust evidence of the serial mediation hypothesis: logo complexity → logo disfluency → perceived innovativeness → investment intention. According to Mahmood et al. (2018/2019), a one-unit change in the logo complexity rating resulted in an increase in the amount invested by 8%, which is roughly equal to the effects size of high-validity signals like the number of entrepreneurs within a team. The researchers' empirical research excluded any other possible variables, proving that it is precisely perceptions of innovativeness due to disfluency, rather than the perception of preparedness or some other construct, that produces the effect in question.

Indeed, the idea that disfluency could become a positive sign in the context where the observer is concerned with goal-relevant characteristics of a stimulus fits well into the conceptual framework outlined by Labroo and Kim (2009). As these researchers found out, processing difficulty becomes a trigger for positive outcomes in cases where the disfluent stimulus is viewed as an instrumental tool that helps achieve a particular goal. In the context of a time-limited crowdfunding campaign aimed at discovering the innovativeness of the projects to be invested in, the visual complexity of the logo is used by a donor as an easily recognizable metacognitive cue.

To put it mildly, this is quite an unexpected conclusion. The very same feature – visual complexity – that makes the task of processing the logo more difficult becomes a marker of the innovative nature of a startup. The paradox, however, can be easily resolved if one realises that fluency effects depend on context and attribution (Schwarz, 2004). Thus, what is important is not just

how difficult or easy the task feels but its inferential consequences which people draw upon experiencing this easiness/difficulty.

It seems that this attribution-dependency can be clearly demonstrated by Mohsenin and Munz (2025), who have revealed that the benefit that the perceptual disfluency offers to familiar brand is neutralised if the consumers are made aware that the origin of the disfluency in question was *external* and did not relate to actual decision complexity involved. Namely, those participants whose disfluency was attributed to the external cause (font, background image) expressed no increased preference toward familiar brands.

Packaging, Language, and the Social Scale of Fluency

It is evident that the perceptual fluency framework scales beyond just the individual logos and brand names to cover broader packaging and presentation decisions. a significant and apt example would include research by Hüttl-Maack and Munz (2025) where they examined a commercially widespread but really understudied use of multilingual product packaging in internationally retailing. They conducted 3 experimental studied (N= 3010), and investigated how would the presence of foreign language translations on product packaging affects the consumers' subjective processing experience and product evaluations.

They discovered that the packaging design functions as a fluency environment, which means that the languages that were printed on a pack were actually not just neutral text elements but acted as modulators of how easily the product as a whole is mentally processed. They also identified 2 specific characteristics of multilingual packaging: one- the **number** of foreign language

translations that were displayed and second, the consumers' degree of **familiarity** with those languages.

We need to look further into what this means. Here the consumers' unfamiliarity with the foreign languages on packaging of products emerged as the more powerful drivers of disfluency. This means that the mere presence of an unfamiliar script such as Chinese, Korean or even Japanese on an everyday grocery product would introduce a foreign language friction that the consumers would experience as difficulty which would then propagate negatively through product attitudes, perceived quality and intentions of purchasing via the familiar hedonic fluency pathway. This is a kind of perceptual contamination: the strangeness of the script of the language would affect the evaluation of the product itself, even though the product information in the consumer's native language remains the same. The packaging is, in fact asking the eye to do the extra work and the mind charges the product for the labour which then ultimately results in familiarity-based purchasing.

In this case, the number of translations also mattered but only when the count exceeded four languages, which is a threshold effect that suggests that the consumers can tolerate modest multilingualism without any processing cost, but the experience disfluency when packaging becomes visually crowed with the text blocks in many scripts. At that particular point, the visual complexity increases, the layout ceases to feel orderly and the ease of locating and processing the relevant information deteriorates. Hüttl-Maack & Munz (2025) refer to this as the "silent salesman" dilemma – in an effort to guide the customer through visual cues to the product and make it more attractive, manufacturers produce packaging that presents itself as a barrier made of dense and incomprehensible text.

One particularly theoretically important result that emerges from the study relates to the moderating role of **expectation calibration** on the effect of fluency. With technically complex products such as coffee machines or Bluetooth speakers, the negative effect of multilingual packaging on processing fluency disappeared completely, due to consumers' expectation of encountering difficulty when dealing with such products in terms of packaging. In other words, if the consumer expects the packaging of a particular item, say, a coffee machine, to be difficult and rich in information, adding twelve different language blocks would not lead to discrepancy between their expectation and actual experience and, therefore, would not contribute to processing disfluency. This result corroborates the idea that fluency and disfluency should be

understood as discrepancies between expected and experienced ease of processing rather than a certain degree of effort put into it (Whittlesea & Williams, 1998; Landwehr et al., 2011).

Cognitive Fluency in Eco-Labels: Information Design as a Fluency Tool

The framework of perceptual fluency has also been applied to the design of environmental certification marks, where the challenge of communicating complex information in a simple visual format creates acute cognitive barriers for the consumers with low category knowledge. Wang, Du, Liu and Wang (2022) introduced the concept of "joint presentation of eco-label information" as a design intervention to improve consumers' **cognitive fluency** with eco-labels – that is, their ease of understanding the meaning and significance of the certification mark.
The conceptualization of their research rests upon dual coding theory (Paivio, 1991). According to it, a combination of verbal and non-verbal representations of one concept increases the benefits of the cognitive processes involved in processing the information. Presentation of an eco-label icon without explanatory text is a non-verbal representation of the concept. Many customers have a hard time interpreting it as such without additional information because of their lack of eco-labelling knowledge. Descriptive text provides verbal representation that connects to the meaning of the icon and reduces the amount of cognitive load necessary for comprehending the content of the label.

Through three well-conducted experiments (N = 240 for Study 1, N = 206 for Study 2, and N = 314 for Study 3), Wang et al. (2022) found out that JPEI improved the cognitive fluency and, thus, increased purchase intentions among participants with **low eco-labelling** knowledge while being ineffective among participants with high eco-labelling knowledge who can comprehend the icon due to previous experience with similar concepts. This example shows how the boundary condition in question can be utilized to make an information-design decision more meaningful. The same solution will be helpful for some people and useless for others due to different levels of expertise. In other words, the eco-label will seem a foreign language to uninformed customers, and JPEI will be its dictionary.

The research conducted by Wang et al. (2022) shows that spatial contiguity, which entails having the description text placed near the eco-label icon rather than distant from it, improves the

cognitive fluency and purchasing intentions of consumers who have little knowledge. It is consistent with the findings regarding the effects of spatial contiguity within multimedia learning (Mayer, 2003). In such cases, there would be no need for the viewer to switch his/her gaze around in order to gather more information, and hence the attentional resources required for information integration would be minimized.

Minimalism, Fluency, and the Social Dimensions of Simplicity

When we look at the "simple is fluent so is good" narrative, one of the factors that is challenging is the role of **brand minimalism**, which refers to the conscious and deliberate stripping away of the visual elements in order to create clean and sparse brand aesthetics. In 2023, Chen and Liu explored when and why do minimalist brands appeals are more effective and how consumer socioeconomic status moderated responses to minimalism in many counterintuitive ways. Their works served as a reminder that fluency does operate withing a social and a cultural context, meaning that the simple, uncluttered, same design that reads as elegant restraint to a higher socioeconomic status consumer may also read as an information deficit –too little to evaluate, too sparse to trust – to a lower socioeconomic status consumer accustomed to valuing tangible, abundant product signals.

Now this social embedded nature of fluency effects is a productive complication. It points that the level of perceptual ease a brand design affords may not be a universally experienced in the same way, because the consumer bring different prior knowledge structures social frameworks and aesthetic schemas to the case. In terms of high knowledge, high socioeconomic status consumers , this minimalism enables fluid processing because the sparse design does not need to works hard to convey quality – they already have the cultural script. On the other hand, for lower knowledge consumers, the same design may create a disfluency not because the visual object is intrinsically hard to process but due to the reason that it withholds the detailed information cues that they rely on to form quality inferences.

Implications and Directions for Future Research

The literature on fluency reviewed here emphasizes several actionable implications for brand management. Logo designs need to consider not only aesthetic preferences but the fluency profile of the logo across different consumer segments: easily processed, simple logos help in maximising the positive affect of fluency for the developed and established brands that are seeking to deepen their familiarity based preferences, while at the same time more complex logos may signal innovativeness for early stage or digitally presented brands competing in innovation based markets (Mahmood et al., 2018/2019).

In terms of international brand management, the research findings of Hüttl-Maack and Munz (2025) suggest that the language choices on packaging are not merely a compliance or supply chain decisions but a decision based on fluency management. Brands distributing the same packaging across multiple markets should carefully consider the visual complexity introduced by multi-language text, particularly when the additional languages use unfamiliar scripts, and should weigh these fluency costs against operational savings.

Regarding the fields of creation and management of brand names, the results obtained by Silva et al. (2017) and Bakhtiaria et al. (2016) reveal that the pronounceability of brand names and their articulatory fluency should not be underestimated. The inability to pronounce brand names smoothly negatively impacts trust and liking perceptions even when the objective signs of reputation are provided.

It would be useful if future studies analysed the fluency effect in dynamic and longitudinal terms. Most studies consider the fluency effect only once but people encounter brands over prolonged periods of time during which brand name familiarization takes place. What will happen to the positive effect of brand name familiarity on perception in times of market instability, competition, and brand refreshment? In other words, we do not know how the fluency effect related to familiarity interacts with market dynamics, competitor entry barriers, and changes in logos made in order to make them look more fluent and pleasant to process. Another interesting topic that deserves attention is cultural differences in the concept of visual fluency because the visual syntax that creates the sense of intuitiveness of a logo for Western consumers might be different from the visual syntax used in East and South Asia.

Conclusion

Perceptual processing fluency functions as the unseen architect of brand evaluation, driving preferences and managing levels of trust beyond the reach of rational deliberation. As the reviewed literature suggests, it is possible to envision consumers as highly sensitive to processing difficulties. Namely, a smoother process of visual processing is interpreted as the implicit endorsement of the object of processing, regardless of whether or not the object in question truly deserves such a preference. Preferences for known brands and logos over unfamiliar brands and logos are not based on any rational comparison in favour of the former over the latter. Instead, they arise as a function of efficient mental processing of well-known stimuli.

This does not mean that consumer behaviour is irrational. On the contrary, this approach makes consumers' decisions highly ecologically driven. That is, preferences of consumers arise as a function of experience accumulated throughout an entire lifetime and the realization that familiarity is correlated with reliability and utility (Bakhtiaria et al., 2016; Zajonc, 1968). However, the key task facing scholars and practitioners is to figure out when this bias works to the advantage of consumers and brands, and when it should be steered into another direction.

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