

THE SECRET PSYCHOLOGY BEHIND ADS THAT WORK

When it comes to developing effective advertising, a little science goes a long way.

That's the message Dr. Veronika Ponomarenko hopes to convey through her research into consumer perceptions of brand imagery.

"Every design choice sends a message, consciously or not," says Ponomarenko, an assistant professor of marketing at the Bryan School of Business and Economics. "The goal is to teach future marketers to design with both strategy and consumer psychology in mind."

Her latest study, conducted with three co-authors, is showcased in the June issue of International Journal of Research in Marketing. Brand elements – including logo shape, color, slogans, or even a product name – work together to convey human-like traits, such as being exciting, competent, masculine, or feminine, Ponomarenko says. For instance, when consumers see a pink logo, they usually perceive the associated brand as feminine.

"Our research reveals an important but subtle implicit association: people tend to link visual simplicity with masculinity and visual complexity with femininity, often without being consciously aware of it," she says.

Ads become more effective when their visual aesthetics match how a brand wants to be perceived, the research shows. This means that simple design tends to work better for "masculine" brands such as McDonald's, Canon, or BMW, while more complex creative is better for "feminine" brands like Dove, Lindt, or Chanel.

"It's a subtle design tweak, but one that can make a real difference in outcomes like clicks, attitudes, and purchase intentions," Ponomarenko says. "This happens because the ad 'feels right' and is easier for people to mentally process."

One caveat is that people who think more analytically are less affected by whether the ad's visuals match the brand's perceived identity. "This shows that design effects are not one size fits all," she says.

Overall, the research breaks new ground because this type of implicit bias has not been widely explored previously, Ponomarenko says.

It's a lesson she takes directly into her classroom.

"Students often find it eye-opening," she says. "It sparks lively discussions about implicit associations and how they subtly influence consumer perceptions."

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