RCMOS – Multidisciplinary Scientific Journal O
Saber. ISSN: 2675-9128. São Paulo-SP.

Year VII, v.2 2026 | Submission: 19/09/2026 | Accepted: 19/10/2026 | Published: 19/11/2026

The psychology of visual branding: how design influences consumer decision-making

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ABSTRACT
Visual brand elements — color, logo shape, typography, packaging and the consistency with which they are deployed — shape consumer decisions mainly through three routes: they capture attention, they ease processing, and they carry associations that are transferred to the brand. This review synthesizes peer-reviewed evidence from consumer psychology, marketing and visual neuroscience published between 1968 and 2016. Experimental studies show that hue maps onto brand-personality dimensions (Labrecque; Milne, 2012), that circular versus angular logos shift attribute judgments toward comfort or durability (Jiang et al., 2016), that incomplete typefaces raise perceived innovativeness but lower perceived trustworthiness (Hagtvedt, 2011), and that low-level visual saliency can bias rapid food choices independently of stated preference (Milosavljevic et al., 2012). Across studies, effects are contingent: they depend on congruence with the product category, decision speed, cognitive load and the consumer's existing commitment to the brand. We integrate these findings into a three-stage framework (attention, fluency, meaning) and set out testable propositions. We also flag the limits of the evidence base, including reliance on student samples, short-term outcome measures and widely repeated statistics that lack a traceable empirical source.
Keywords: Visual branding. Color psychology. Logo design. Processing fluency. Visual attention. Packaging. Consumer decision-making.

1 INTRODUCTION

Most purchase decisions are made quickly, under limited attention, and among options that differ little in function. In that setting, what a brand looks like is often the first and sometimes the only information a consumer processes. Firms invest accordingly: logo redesigns, color trademarks and packaging refreshes are among the most visible branding decisions a company makes.

Keller's (1993) model of customer-based brand equity offers a useful anchor. It defines brand knowledge as brand awareness plus brand image, the set of associations linked to the brand in memory. Visual elements serve both functions. They make a brand easier to find and recognize, and they carry meanings of their own (warmth, strength, innovativeness) that can attach to the brand.

This article reviews experimental and field evidence on how visual design influences consumer judgment and choice. It asks three questions. First, through which psychological mechanisms do visual cues act? Second, what does the evidence show for specific design elements: color, logo shape, typography and packaging? Third, under what conditions do these effects strengthen, weaken or reverse?

The contribution is threefold. We organize a scattered literature around a single attention–fluency–meaning sequence. We stress contingency, because the most robust finding across studies is that design effects depend on fit with the product, the consumer and the decision context. Finally, we

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separate well-supported claims from popular ones that lack a traceable empirical basis.

2 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Dual-process accounts of judgment

Dual-process theories distinguish fast, associative, low-effort processing from slower, deliberative processing (Evans; Stanovich, 2013; Kahneman, 2011). Visual brand cues are processed largely by the first route. They are registered within a glance, and their influence often operates without the consumer being able to report it. This matters for theory and for measurement: self-reported reasons for a choice may omit the visual cues that shaped it.

2.2 Processing fluency

Processing fluency is the subjective ease with which a stimulus is perceived and understood. Reber, Schwarz and Winkielman (2004) argue that aesthetic pleasure is partly a function of fluency: stimuli that are symmetrical, high in contrast, prototypical or previously seen are processed more easily, and that ease is experienced as positive affect. Schwarz (2004) extends the argument to consumer judgment, showing that people use metacognitive ease as information when evaluating options.
In a branding context, Lee and Labroo (2004) show that both perceptual fluency (ease of seeing) and conceptual fluency (ease of bringing a brand to mind from a related cue) increase brand evaluations. Fluency therefore offers one explanation for why clear, consistent and familiar visual identities tend to be liked.

2.3 Mere exposure

Zajonc (1968) demonstrated that repeated exposure to a neutral stimulus increases liking for it, even without reinforcement. Janiszewski (1993) found that brand names and product packages could gain in liking from exposures the participants did not attend to, which he termed preattentive mere exposure. Exposure effects provide a mechanism by which consistent visual identity builds positive affect over time, independent of the message content.

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2.4 Associative networks and brand personality

Associative network models treat a brand as a node in memory linked to attributes, feelings and images (Keller, 1993). Aaker (1997) identified five dimensions of brand personality: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness. Much of the research reviewed below tests whether specific visual features activate associations that align with, and transfer to, these dimensions.

3 COLOR

Color is the most studied visual brand element, and the evidence supports a conditional rather than a universal account. Specific hues do carry associations, but whether those associations help a brand depends on their fit with the product and the intended positioning.

3.1 Color and brand personality

Labrecque and Milne (2012) conducted four studies drawing on aesthetics, color psychology and associative learning. They mapped hues onto brand-personality dimensions, examined how a logo's color affects perceived personality and purchase intent, and compared color use across product categories. Their title summarizes two of the clearest associations: red with excitement and blue with competence. The broader conclusion is that color is not decorative; it contributes to the brand image that consumers form.

3.2 Appropriateness and congruity

Bottomley and Doyle (2006) tested whether color effects depend on product type. In their first experiment, logos for functional products were judged more appropriate when rendered in functional colors, and logos for sensory-social products more appropriate in sensory-social colors. In their second experiment, when participants knew how a brand was trying to position itself, colors congruent with that position were rated more appropriate. The implication is that no color is "best" in the abstract. Fit with product category and positioning is what consumers reward.

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3.3 How strong is the evidence?

In a review for the *Annual Review of Psychology*, Elliot and Maier (2014) describe color psychology as a young field. They note that much of the research has been atheoretical and that many studies use small samples. Marketing practice nonetheless circulates confident claims. One frequently repeated figure, attributed to Singh (2006), holds that 62–90% of initial product assessments are based on color alone. We could not trace that figure to a primary experiment reported in the article, and we treat it as unverified. The defensible claim is narrower: color reliably carries associations, and those associations influence judgment when they fit the product.

4 LOGO SHAPE, TYPOGRAPHY AND VISUAL FORM

Logo and type research shows that small formal features shift specific attribute judgments, and that these effects run through identifiable cognitive processes rather than general liking.

4.1 Design guidelines for logos

Henderson and Cote (1998) provided an early systematic test of logo characteristics. They related design dimensions such as naturalness, harmony and elaborateness to responses including correct recognition, false recognition, affect and familiarity. Their results imply trade-offs: features that make a logo easy to recognize are not always the ones that make it liked, so the right design depends on whether the brand's goal is recognition or positive affect.

4.2 Circular and angular shapes

Jiang, Gorn, Galli and Chattopadhyay (2016) report five experiments showing that the mere circularity or angularity of a logo affects judgments of a product or company. Circular shapes activate associations of softness and lead to inferences such as comfort; angular shapes activate hardness and lead to inferences such as durability. The effect depends on mental imagery. It disappeared when the visuospatial component of working memory was occupied by an unrelated imagery task, among people with a low disposition to generate imagery, and when an ad headline stressed an attribute inconsistent with the shape's implication.

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4.3 Perceived motion and logo frames

Cian, Krishna and Elder (2014) show that static logos can evoke a sense of movement. Logos with more perceived movement drew more engagement, measured by self-report and eye tracking, and engagement improved brand attitudes. The effect was moderated by congruence: dynamic imagery helped when it fit the brand's character and could backfire otherwise.

Fajardo, Zhang and Tsiros (2016) studied a simple element: a frame around the logo. A frame can signify protection or confinement. When purchase risk was salient, framed logos were read as protective and increased purchase intent; when risk was low, the confinement reading dominated and reduced it. The same visual feature thus produced opposite effects depending on context.

4.4 Typography

Henderson, Giese and Cote (2004) showed that typeface design characteristics shape impressions of the brand along dimensions such as how pleasing, engaging, reassuring and prominent it appears. Doyle and Bottomley (2006) found that fonts judged congruent with a product were seen as more appropriate for its logotype, extending the congruity principle from color to type.

Hagtvedt (2011) examined incomplete typeface logos, in which parts of letters are deliberately missing. Across three studies, such logos increased perceived innovativeness but decreased perceived trustworthiness. They also lowered overall attitude toward the firm, but only among consumers with a prevention focus. The finding is a clean illustration of a design trade-off: a single stylistic choice can help one brand attribute and hurt another.

5 PACKAGING, VISUAL SALIENCE AND ATTENTION AT THE POINT OF SALE

At the shelf, visual design first has to win attention, and attention measurably shifts choice, especially when decisions are fast and preferences are weak.

5.1 Product form and holistic package design

Bloch (1995) argued that a product's form elicits cognitive and affective responses that shape approach or avoidance, and that consumers' design tastes are moderated by individual and situational factors. Orth and Malkewitz (2008) extended this to packaging. They showed that packages can be

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classified into holistic design types and that each type evokes distinct brand-personality impressions. Package design, in their account, works as a whole rather than as a sum of separate elements.

5.2 Attention capture and transfer

Pieters and Wedel (2004) used eye tracking with a large sample of print advertisements. The pictorial element captured attention largely regardless of its size; the text element captured attention in proportion to its size; and the brand element was especially effective at transferring attention to other parts of the ad. The study separates two jobs a visual element can perform: drawing the eye and directing it.

5.3 Shelf attention and choice

Chandon, Hutchinson, Bradlow and Young (2009) combined eye tracking with purchase data. The number of shelf facings had a strong effect on brand evaluation that was entirely mediated by visual attention. Top- and middle-shelf positions gained more attention than low shelves, yet only top-shelf positions carried through to evaluation. A central conclusion is that attention is necessary but not sufficient: gaining a look does not guarantee a sale.

5.4 Visual saliency bias

Milosavljevic, Navalpakkam, Koch and Rangel (2012) adapted methods from visual neuroscience to three real food-choice experiments. They manipulated the relative brightness of items and found that visual saliency biased choice. The bias was largest at fast decision speeds, increased under cognitive load, and was strongest when participants did not have strong preferences among the options. This is direct evidence that low-level visual properties can influence choice independently of what consumers say they prefer.

5.5 Brand knowledge and neural responses

Neuroscientific work adds a caution and a confirmation. McClure et al. (2004) found that knowing a drink's brand altered both stated preferences and brain responses compared with blind tasting. Plassmann, Ramsøy and Milosavljevic (2012), in a critical review, argue that such methods can

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clarify the mechanisms behind branding effects but warn against overinterpreting activity in single brain regions.

6 CONSISTENCY, RECOGNITION AND MEMORY

Consistency turns visual elements into memory cues, which is why redesigns carry risk for the customers most attached to the brand.

6.1 Distinctive brand assets

Romaniuk (2018) frames colors, logos, fonts, characters and shapes as distinctive assets whose value lies in reliably triggering the brand name in memory. She proposes assessing assets on two criteria: fame, meaning how many category buyers link the asset to the brand, and uniqueness, meaning how rarely they link it to competitors. On this view, an asset's value comes less from its intrinsic meaning than from its consistent, exclusive association with one brand, which is built through repeated exposure.

This account fits the mechanisms in Section 2. Repeated, consistent exposure supports both mere-exposure liking (Zajonc, 1968) and perceptual fluency (Lee; Labroo, 2004). Frequent changes to visual identity would be expected to reset part of that accumulated advantage.

6.2 The cost of redesign

Walsh, Winterich and Mittal (2010) tested consumer responses to logo redesigns in a field experiment with 632 respondents, using the Adidas and New Balance logos. The more a previously angular logo was made rounder, the more negatively strongly committed consumers evaluated it, and this negative evaluation carried over to their attitude toward the brand. Weakly committed consumers responded positively to the same changes. The authors explain the result through self–brand connection: for committed customers, the logo represents a relationship, and changing it can feel like a threat to that relationship.

The practical implication is asymmetric. A redesign tested mainly on casual or non-customers may look like an improvement while alienating the brand's most valuable segment.

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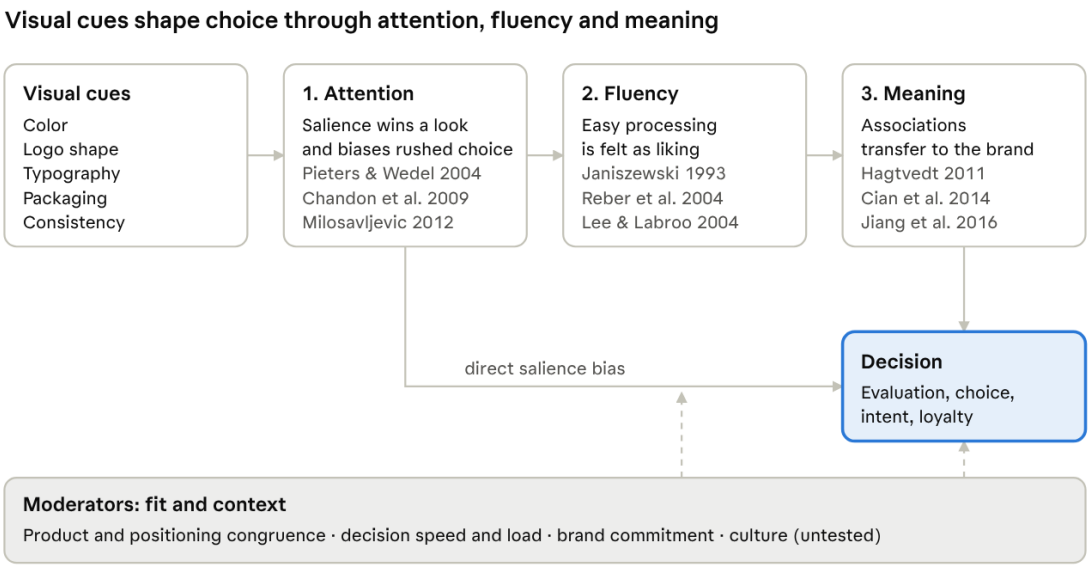
7 INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORK AND PROPOSITIONS

The findings reviewed above fit a three-stage sequence. Visual cues first compete for attention, then are processed with more or less ease, and finally activate associations that transfer to the brand. Attention can also affect choice directly when decisions are rushed. Fit and context moderate every stage.

Figure 1 – Integrative framework: attention, fluency and meaning



Source: prepared for this review (2026). Note: solid arrows show the proposed sequence; dashed arrows show moderation. The citations name representative studies for each stage. The cultural moderator is proposed, not tested in the studies reviewed here.

The framework yields six testable propositions:

P1. Visual salience has its largest effect on choice when decisions are fast, cognitive load is high and preferences among options are weak (Milosavljevic et al., 2012).

P2. Attention gained at the point of sale improves evaluation only when it is followed by fluent processing or favorable associations (Chandon et al., 2009).

P3. Repeated, consistent exposure to the same visual assets increases liking and recognition through fluency and mere exposure (Janiszewski, 1993; Lee; Labroo, 2004; Romaniuk, 2018).

P4. Associations carried by a visual cue improve evaluation when congruent with the product category and positioning, and can lower it when incongruent (Bottomley; Doyle, 2006; Cian; Krishna; Elder, 2014; Fajardo; Zhang; Tsiros, 2016).

P5. Changes to established visual assets lower brand attitude among highly committed customers

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even when they improve evaluations among others (Walsh; Winterich; Mittal, 2010).

P6. A cue that signals one desirable attribute can lower another, so its net effect depends on which attribute matters most in the category (Hagtvedt, 2011).

8 DISCUSSION

8.1 Managerial implications

1. **Design for fit, not for universal appeal.** The congruity results for color (Bottomley; Doyle, 2006), type (Doyle; Bottomley, 2006), logo shape (Jiang et al., 2016) and perceived motion (Cian; Krishna; Elder, 2014) all point the same way. Choose visual cues whose associations match the attributes the brand wants to own.

2. **Identify trade-offs before launch.** A stylistic choice that signals innovation may cost trust (Hagtvedt, 2011). Test the attributes that matter most for the category, not only overall liking.

3. **Treat attention and persuasion as separate goals.** Salience can win a look and can bias rushed choices (Milosavljevic et al., 2012), but attention does not always convert into evaluation or sales (Chandon et al., 2009).

4. **Protect accumulated equity.** Consistent assets gain value through fame and uniqueness (Romaniuk, 2018). Before a redesign, test the reaction of committed customers separately (Walsh; Winterich; Mittal, 2010).

8.2 Limitations of the evidence base

• **Samples and settings.** Much of the evidence comes from laboratory studies and student samples, including the 632 undergraduates in Walsh et al. (2010). Henrich, Heine and Norenzayan (2010) show that participants from Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic societies are often unrepresentative of humans generally. Color associations in particular may differ across cultures. We note this as a plausible concern; this review did not systematically assess cross-cultural evidence.

• **Outcome measures.** Most studies measure attitudes, perceived attributes or purchase intent shortly after exposure. Fewer link design to actual purchase, repeat buying or long-run brand equity. Chandon et al. (2009) is a partial exception.

• **Replicability.** The Open Science Collaboration (2015) replicated a substantial minority of 100 published psychology findings with comparable effect sizes. Effects in this review have not, to our

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knowledge, been subjected to large-scale replication, and single-study findings should be treated as provisional.

• **Unverified statistics.** Widely cited percentages about color's influence should not be used without tracing them to a primary study (Section 3.3).

8.3 Directions for future research

1. Field experiments that link specific design changes to sales or loyalty data over months rather than minutes.
2. Cross-cultural tests of color and shape associations with preregistered hypotheses.
3. Studies of digital and dynamic contexts, such as app icons, small-screen rendering and animated logos, where size and motion change the attention and fluency calculus.
4. Direct comparisons of mechanisms (fluency versus association transfer) within the same study, to estimate how much each contributes.

9 CONCLUSION

Visual branding influences consumer decisions through identifiable psychological mechanisms. Design cues capture attention, make brands easier to process and recognize, and carry associations that transfer to the brand. The evidence does not support simple rules such as "red sells" or "round is friendly" in every case. It supports a principle of fit: visual cues work when their meanings match the product, the brand's positioning and the consumer's situation, and they can backfire when they do not. For researchers, the next step is to test these effects in the field, across cultures and over time. For practitioners, the evidence argues for deliberate, consistent and carefully tested visual identities rather than frequent change driven by aesthetic fashion.

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