



## Making information matter: Symmetrically appealing layouts promote issue relevance, which facilitates action and attention to argument quality<sup>☆</sup>



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Messages were displayed in symmetrical or asymmetrical layouts.
- Participants rated the symmetrical messages as more personally relevant.
- Overall liking of the layout mediated this effect.
- Relevance predicted desire to learn about and act in accordance with the message.
- Simple changes in a message's layout can enhance how much people care about an issue.

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### ABSTRACT

What makes information relevant? We hypothesized that text displayed in a symmetrical, rather than asymmetrical, layout would be more appealing to people, and that appeal would then be used to infer that the topic is personally relevant. Relevance, in turn, should increase the degree to which people engage with the information presented in the message. In three experiments, respondents read text arranged symmetrically or asymmetrically. As predicted, symmetry influences relevance indirectly through appeal, such that symmetrical articles were more appealing than asymmetrical articles, and appeal predicted relevance. Relevance, then, predicted the desire to acquire and act on the information in the article (Experiment 2) and increased attention to argument quality, for participants were more influenced by strong, rather than weak, arguments (Experiment 3). Perceptions of reading difficulty and trustworthiness did not account for the findings, indicating that it is the appeal of symmetry which promoted issue relevance.

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“You can present the material, but you can't make me care.”

[~Watterson (1994)]

What makes a topic relevant to people? This question is essential, given that educators, marketers, and activists often seek to make their topic, product, or viewpoint seem important and personally relevant to others. When a topic is relevant, people are more engaged with the information; furthermore, they are likely to pay attention to and act upon information about the topic (Briñol & Petty, 2006; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979; Rothman, Salovey, Turvey, & Fishkin, 1993). In this

article, we explore the hypothesis that visually appealing layouts will lead people to perceive the information presented as more personally relevant. This relevance will, in turn, promote information engagement. In other words, we propose that, when it comes to making people care about information, visual appeal matters.

In this research, we first propose that visual symmetry increases esthetic appeal. This prediction is consistent with research indicating that symmetry is an esthetically pleasing characteristic, in both objects (Jacobsen & Höfel, 2002; Reber & Schwarz, 2006) and faces (Rhodes, 2006). Symmetry may increase appeal because it increases the ease with which information is processed, that is, processing fluency (Cho, Schwarz, & Song, 2008; Garner, 1974; Reber, 2002; Reber, Schwarz, & Winkielman, 2004). Symmetry is thought to promote fluent processing because a symmetrical image contains less information than an asymmetrical one, and thus the content of the entire image is perceived more quickly (Garner, 1974; Marković & Gvozdenović, 2001). This experience of processing fluency is “hedonically marked” (Reber et al.,

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2004) as a positive affective experience (Winkielman & Cacioppo, 2001), which then promotes liking for and favorable judgments about what is being easily processed. For example, fluency enhances the degree to which images are liked and found to be attractive (Forster, Leder, & Ansorge, 2013; Winkielman, Halberstadt, Fazendeiro, & Catty, 2006; Winkielman, Schwarz, Fazendeiro, & Reber, 2003). Indeed, Reber et al. (2004) argue that features, like symmetry, which lead us to perceive things as beautiful actually do so because these features facilitate easy processing. Thus, we hypothesize that text displayed in a symmetrical fashion will be found more appealing than text displayed in an asymmetrical fashion.

We hypothesize that the beauty and appeal associated with text displayed in a symmetrical fashion would then increase the extent to which people view the topic of the text as personally relevant. This effect may occur because people want to identify with things that they like – they want to incorporate appealing things into the self. For example, a large body of research indicates that people associate beauty with goodness (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991). People accept and want to be around beautiful things (Langlois et al., 2000). People identify more strongly with brands they find attractive (prestigious, coherent, and distinctive; Currás-pérez, Bigné-alcañiz, & Alvarado-herrera, 2009). These works indicate that people desire to associate and identify with attractive, appealing things. Thus, if something is evaluated as appealing, it may be evaluated as personally relevant; that is, as something worthy of incorporation with the self. Indeed, Briñol and Petty (2006) point out that linking or matching a message to the self can increase personal relevance. If so, it makes sense that information presented in a visually appealing way should increase the degree to which people perceive that information as personally relevant.

Investigating factors that increase relevance is important because relevance increases people's motivation to process a message and engage with the information presented (see Briñol & Petty, 2006). For example, relevance increases the degree to which people pay attention to the quality of arguments within a message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979). Relevance also promotes information seeking and action in response to a message. For instance, when the information is perceived as relevant, students are more likely to buy an informational packet on heart disease (Roser, 1990), and women are more likely to obtain a mammogram (Rothman et al., 1993). Thus, we predict that relevance may promote information engagement, which we define as being more likely to be influenced by the argument quality within the message, to seek out information about the message, and to act in accordance with the message.

Of course, manipulations that alter fluency also could influence information engagement via other mechanisms besides appeal and relevance, such as processing difficulty and trustworthiness. For instance, differences in processing fluency also influence feelings of processing difficulty. Research indicates that less fluent material is not only less esthetically pleasing, but also difficult to process (Song & Schwarz, 2008). People often disengage from tasks that are perceived to be too difficult (for review see: Brehm & Self, 1989). If so, then feelings of difficulty, rather than appeal, could lessen feelings of personal relevance by promoting disengagement. Another alternative mechanism is that processing fluency influences perceptions of trustworthiness, with more fluently processed information deemed as more truthful (Reber & Schwarz, 1999; Reber & Unkelbach, 2010). It may be that the fluency of symmetry promotes trust in the information, rather than appeal, and thus promotes relevance and engagement. Therefore, we examined whether feelings of difficulty and trust influence relevance and information engagement.

In sum, we hypothesize that the appeal of symmetry promotes issue relevance, and relevance, in turn, promotes information engagement. To examine this hypothesis, people read a message that was presented using a symmetrical or asymmetrical layout. There are many ways to manipulate symmetry, but in this paper, we altered vertical symmetry (symmetry that is based on the central, vertical bisection of the

image) by changing the layout of the boxes that contained the text of the persuasive message. Other forms of symmetry (i.e., rotational, diagonal) have been examined in the context of processing fluency and esthetics, but the strongest effects have been found for vertical symmetry (Palmer, 1991; Reber & Schwarz, 2006). Experiment 1 examined whether appeal, reading difficulty, or trust influenced the effect of symmetry on relevance. Experiments 2 and 3 replicate this effect and examine whether increased relevance promotes aspects of information engagement – in particular, seeking out additional information, acting upon the information, and being influenced by the quality of the arguments within the message.

## Experiment 1

### Participants

Participants were 44 (10 men) undergraduates ( $M_{\text{age}} = 18.61$  year,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.34$ ) who received course credit for participating in the experiment.

### Materials and procedure

Participants completed a study that examined their opinions of various advertisements, images, and text. After answering some demographic questions and questions about various attitudes, respondents had two minutes to read and evaluate a flyer for a debate on the effects of advertising on society. The text contained arguments indicating that advertising was sometimes harmful and sometimes beneficial. In the symmetrical condition, there was a title (centered on the page) with two boxes of text centered below it. In the asymmetrical condition, these two text boxes were offset and interspersed with two other boxes containing the title and flyer information (see Fig. 1).

After reading the flyer, participants responded to a series of items using a scale of 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely); these items included a measure of appeal (“How much did you like the layout of the article?”; “How much did you like the font used in the article?”),  $r(44) = .63, p < .001$ , reading difficulty (“How difficult was this article to read?”), trust (e.g. “How objective was the article?”), relevance (“How relevant was the topic to you?”), and, as a manipulation check, article symmetry (“How symmetrical/How balanced was the layout of the article?”,  $r(44) = .72, p < .001$ ).

### Results and discussion

#### Symmetry manipulation check

Perhaps because we used a very subtle manipulation of symmetry, respondents did not rate the symmetrical article ( $M = 5.48, SD = 0.89$ ) as significantly more symmetrical than the asymmetrical article ( $M = 4.93, SD = 1.35$ ),  $t(42) = 1.60, p = .12$ . However, the means tended to be in the predicted direction and conscious recognition of these differences may not be necessary for symmetry to influence appeal (Makin, Pecchinenda, & Bertamini, 2012).

#### Mediational analyses

We hypothesized that symmetry would lead to greater appeal, and that appeal would lead to increased reported relevance. To test this mediation, we used Hayes (2012) PROCESS macro; model 4. Confidence intervals were estimated using 5000 bootstrapping samples. The predictors were mean centered. Symmetry was dummy coded, with symmetrical = 1 and asymmetrical = 0. We report the unstandardized regression coefficients. As predicted, symmetry predicted appeal, with the more symmetrical layout being rated as more appealing than the less asymmetrical layout,  $b = 0.93, se = .47, t(42) = 2.00, p = .05$ . Appeal was associated with greater topic relevance,  $b = 0.35, se = .11, t(41) = 3.13, p = .003$ , and the direct effect of symmetry on relevance was not significant,  $b = .06, se = .36, p = .86$ . Lastly, as predicted, there

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