

ASHLEY OTTO

In the Brand Scheme of Things

BY / EMILY IAZZETTI

Research explores how exposure to multiple brands makes consumer choices easier

On clothing, billboards and social media, brand logos are visible in almost every part of public life. A movement against brand saturation calls it “visual pollution,” but there has not been very much research about how seeing logos from multiple brands affects the brains of consumers.

Associate Professor of Marketing Ashley Otto was curious if being surrounded by branding might have some benefit to consumers. She started by looking at how brand exposure affects how people make decisions.

“The most common and consequential time we are exposed to brands is when we are making purchasing decisions. So that is when brands are most important to us,” Otto said. “We have learned to associate brands with making decisions.”

Otto’s research, “Exposure to Brands Makes Preferential Decisions Easier,” published in *Journal of Consumer Research*, used seven experiments to prove that it is easier for consumers to make decisions when they are surrounded by brands.



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“We just kind of hit the tip of the iceberg in terms of understanding that general exposure has an effect. Now we are trying to figure out what some of these effects are,” Otto said.

One of the experiments run in the Department of Marketing’s behavioral lab had Baylor undergraduate students pick a pen to get as a gift. While they were deciding, the students sat in cubicles surrounded either by brand logos, colorful generic shapes or blank walls. It was easiest for the students surrounded by logos to choose a pen, and they were the most satisfied with their choice.

“That was probably our most exciting experiment,” Otto said. “It was more naturalistic in the sense that we were not having them do anything with brands, the brands were in their space. And it led to this decision ease effect.”

The research showed that because consumers associate being around brands with having to make a purchasing decision, that brand exposure helps their brains get ready to make any kind of preferential decision.

“It is not something consumers are aware of, it is more of an automatic process,” Otto said. “But it does prepare one to make a decision, which then makes decisions feel easier when we are making them.”



For businesses, that means if consumers can see multiple different brands when they are shopping, like they would in a traditional shopping mall, then it will be easier for the consumer to decide what to buy. When decisions are easier, consumers are more satisfied and are more likely to become repeat customers, Otto said. To get this effect, businesses might consider using brand logos more prominently in the store layout or display design.

For people looking to be more efficient decision makers at home, unfortunately brand logo wallpaper in the kitchen will not make it easier to decide what to make for dinner. Otto’s research showed that people get more benefit from brand logo exposure when they are in an unfamiliar place.

“What we find is that when people are in environments that they are accustomed to, like your bedroom or your house, there are a lot of brands there, but they have essentially satiated on that exposure,” Otto said. “So, the effect turns off because it is not novel. They are not attending to these brands anymore.”

Otto said she hopes this research will help consumers think about marketing and branding in a more positive light.

“Quite often, we think that advertisers are just trying to get us to buy things all the time,” Otto said. “I think this shows a positive upside to just general brand exposure, and how it can help us make decisions and decisions that we are happier with.”



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