

Research: Curved or square?

In the introduction to their article, Moshe Bar and Mital Neta refer to various studies that showed that our preference for shapes is driven by factors such as symmetry, prototypicality, contrast, complexity and 'flowing shapes'. Previous research concluded that people have an aversion to sharp-lined contours, as these are experienced as threatening. A classic, curved Spanish guitar is, for example, a shape that people will sooner like than a guitar with lots of pointy bits. A study that involved photos of people in which their shoulders, elbows, etc. were made pointier, showed that these characteristics are associated with more aggressive personality traits.

Bar and Neta's study saw fourteen people confronted with 140 pairs of pictures of objects (such as a watch). The only variation within the pairs was the roundness of the object. Participants were, for example, presented two pictures of nearly identical sofas; one with round-shaped cushions and armrests, and one with a more square shape. 23 of these pairs depicted letters; for example, an 'A' with curved lines, and an 'A' with straight lines. Participants were asked to, based on their gut feeling, indicate which picture they preferred; they were not told what the hypothesis of the study was.

The results showed that people have a clear preference for curved shapes. But the researchers did point out that the meaning of a depicted object can suppress the effect of shape preference. Most people don't like snakes, for example, despite it being a curve-shaped animal. A chocolate bar, on the other hand, is square-shaped, but still liked by many. Bar and Neta tried to overcome such effects by mainly using pictures of objects that people generally have no clear liking or disliking for (such as sofas, watches and meaningless shapes).

This study is still open to some criticism, namely that conclusions were drawn on the basis of relatively little data (14 persons); but the results are still strong enough to expect that a larger scale will not yield different results. Another point to note is that the researchers never indicated whether the participants to this study were (predominantly) male or female.

The consequences of this study are far-reaching. We are, for example, seeing widespread uptake of sharp and sleek (edge) design in the car industry. It still remains to be seen whether such designs will ultimately appeal to more consumers than curved designs. For car interiors it has long been accepted that curved shapes are preferred to square ones. And where square-shaped melons

are concerned, the question remains whether these will sell better than traditional, round melons.

Reference(s)

Bar, M., Neta, M. (2006), Humans prefer curved visual objects. *Psychological Science*, vol.17, no.8 (p.645-648). *

*: available in the EURIB library.