Branding: A Prosthesis of Identity
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Abstract

This article investigates the prosthesis of identity through the process of branding. It examines cross-cultural manifestations of this phenomena from sixth millennium BCE Syria to twelfth century Japan and Britain. From the Neolithic Era, humanity has sought to extend their identities using pictorial signs that were characteristically simple. Designed to be distinctive and instantly recognisable, the totemic symbols served to signal the origin of the bearer. Subsequently, the development of branding coincided with periods of increased mobility both in respect to geography and social strata. This includes fifth millennium Mesopotamia, nineteenth century Britain, and America during the 1920s.

There are fewer articles of greater influence on contemporary culture than A Theory of Human Motivation written by Abraham Maslow in 1943. Nearly seventy-five years later, his theories about the societal need for "belongingness" and "esteem" remain a mainstay of advertising campaigns (Maslow). Although the principles are used to sell a broad range of products from shampoo to breakfast cereal they are epitomised by apparel. This is with reference to garments and accessories bearing corporation logos. Whereas other purchased items, imbued with abstract products, are intended for personal consumption the public display of these symbols may be interpreted as a form of signalling. The intention of the wearers is to literally seek the fulfilment of the aforementioned social needs. This article investigates the use of brands as prosthesis.

Coats and Crests: Identity Garnered on Garments in the Middle Ages and the Muromachi Period

A logo, at its most basic, is a pictorial sign. In his essay, The Visual Language, Ernest Gombrich described the principle as reducing images to "distinctive features" (Gombrich 46). They represent a "simplification of code," the meaning of which we are conditioned to recognise (Gombrich 46). Logos may also be interpreted as a manifestation of totemism. According to anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, the principle exists in all civilisations and reflects an effort to evoke the power of nature (71-127). Totemism is also a method of population distribution (Levi-Straus 166).

This principle, in a form garnered on garments, is manifested in Mon Kiri. The practice of cutting out family crests evolved into a form of corporate branding in Japan during the Meiji Period (1868-1912) (Christensen 14). During the Muromachi period (1336-1573) the crests provided an integral means of identification on the battlefield (Christensen 13). The adorning of crests on armour was also exercised in Europe during the twelfth century, when the faces of knights were similarly obscured by helmets (Family Crests of Japan 8). Both Mon Kiri and "Coat[s] of Arms" utilised totemic symbols (Family Crests of Japan 8; Elven 14; Christensen 13). The mon for the imperial family (figs. 1 & 2) during the Muromachi Period featured chrysanthemum and paulownia flowers (Goin' Japanesque). "Coat[s] of Arms" in Britain featured a menagerie of animals including lions (fig. 3), horses and eagles (Elven).

The prothesis of identity through garnering symbols on the battlefield provided "safety" through demonstrating "belongingness". This constituted a conflation of two separate "needs" in the "hierarchy of prepotency" propositioned by Maslow.

Fig. 1. The mon symbolising the Imperial Family during the Muromachi Period featured chrysanthemum and paulownia. "Kamon (Japanese Family Crests): Ancient Key to Samurai Culture." Goin’ Japanesque! 15 Nov. 2015. 27 July 2019 <http://goinjapanesque.com/05983/>.

Fig. 2. An example of the crest being utilised on a garment can be found in this portrait of samurai Oda Nobunaga. "Japan’s 12 Most Famous Samurai." All About Japan. 27 Aug. 2018. 27 July 2019 <https://allabout-japan.com/en/article/5818/>.
However, archaeologists concur that the modern principle of branding predates this practice. The implementation of carved seals or stamps to make indelible transcribes as to “burn down” (Starcevic 179). Using hot elements to singe markings onto animals been recorded as early as 2700 BCE in Egypt (Starcevic 182).

The term ‘brand’, adapted from the Norse “brandr”, was introduced into the English language during the sixteenth century (Starcevic 179). At its most literal, it “unhygienic practices” of Chinese producers were proliferated (Wengrow 11). Subsequently, the brand also offered consumers assurance in quality.

Plantations began to operate from Assam to Ceylon (Jones 267-269). Amidst the rampant diversification of tea sources in the Victorian era, concerns about the legitimisation of the origin of a product is, arguably, the primary function of branding. This principle is also applicable to subjects. The prothesis of brands, as opposed to heraldry.

The Twinings Logo (fig. 4) has remained unchanged since the design was commissioned by the grandson of the company founder Richard Twining in 1787 (Twining).

In his 1817 compendium on family crests, Deuchar elaborated on heraldry by writing:

A substantial part of the new population, though still a distinct minority, was made modestly affluent, in some places quite wealthy, by privatization of or the countryside and the industrialization of the cities, and by the sorts of commercial and other services that this called forth. The new money stimulated the consumer demand… that allowed a market economy of a scope not known before. (40)
impressions of handcrafted objects dates back to Prehistoric Mesopotamia (Starcevic 183; Wengrow 13). Similar traditions developed during the Bronze Age in both China and the Indus Valley (Starcevic 185).

In all three civilisations branding facilitated both commerce and aspects of Totemism. In the sixth millennium BCE in “prehistoric” Mesopotamia, referred to as the Halaf period, stone seals were carved to emulate organic form such as animal teeth (Wengrow 13-14). They were used to safeguard objects by “confer[ring] part of the bearer’s personality” (Wengrow 14). They were concurrently applied to secure the contents of vessels containing “exotic goods” used in transactions (Wengrow 15). Worn as amulets (figs. 5 & 6) the seals, and the symbols they produced, were a physical extension of their owners (Wengrow 14).

Fig. 5. Recreation of stamp seal amulets from Neolithic Mesopotamia during the sixth millennium BCE. Wengrow, David. “Prehistories of Commodity Branding.” Current Anthropology 49.1 (2008): 14.


Fig. 7. Recreation of stamp seal designs from Mesopotamia from the late fifth to fourth millennium BCE. Wengrow, David. “Prehistories of Commodity Branding.” Current Anthropology 49.1 (2008): 16.

In the following millennia, the seals would increase exponentially in application and aesthetic complexity (fig. 7) to support the development of household cum cottage industries (Wengrow 15). In addition to handcrafts, sealed vessels would transport consumables such as wine, aromatic oils and animal fats (Wengrow 18). The illustrations on the seals included depictions of rituals undertaken by human figures and/or allegories using animals.

It can be ascertained that the transition in the Victorian Era from heraldry to commerce, from family to corporation, had precedence. By extension, consumers were able to participate in this process of value attribution using brands as signifiers. The principle remained prevalent during the modern and post-modern eras and can be respectively interpreted using structuralist and post-structuralist theory.

Totemism to Simulacrum: The Evolution of Advertising from the Modern to Post-Modern Eras

In 2011, Lisa Chaney wrote of the inception of the Coco Chanel logo (fig. 8) in her biography Chanel: An Intimate Life:

A crucial element in the signature design of the Chanel No.5 bottle is the small black ‘C’ within a black circle set as the seal at the neck. On the top of the lid are two more ‘C’s, intertwined back to back... from at least 1924, the No5 bottles sported the unmistakable logo... these two ‘C’s referred to Gabrielle, – in other words Coco Chanel herself, and would become the logo for the House of Chanel.

Chaney continued by describing Chanel’s fascination of totemic symbols as expressed through her use of tarot cards. She also “surrounded herself with objects ripe with meaning” such as representations of wheat and lions in reference prosperity and to her zodiac symbol ‘Leo’ respectively.
This product was considered the "financial basis" of the Chanel "empire" which emerged during the second and third decades of the twentieth century (Tikkanen). Chanel is credited for revolutionising Haute Couture by introducing chic modern designs that emphasised "simplicity and comfort." This was as opposed to the corseted highly embellished fashion that characterised the Victorian Era (Tikkanen). The lavish designs released by the House of Worth were, in and of themselves, "conspicuous" displays of "consumption" (Veblen 17). In contrast, the prestige and status associated with the "poor girl" look introduced by Chanel was invested in the story of the designer (Tikkanen). A primary example is her marinière or sailor's blouse with a Breton stripe that epitomised her ascension from café singer to couturier (Tikkanen; Burstein 8). This signifier might have gone unobserved by less discerning consumers of fashion if it were not for branding. Not unlike the Prehistoric Mesopotamians, this iteration of branding is a process which "confer[s]" the "personality" of the designer into the garment (Wengrow 13 -14). The wearer of the garment is, in turn, is imbued by extension.

Advertisers in the post-structuralist era embraced Levi-Strauss’s structuralist anthropological theories (Williamson 50). This is with particular reference to "bricolage" or the "preconditioning" of totemic symbols (Williamson 173; Pool 50).

Subsequently, advertising creatives cum “bricoleur” employed his principles to imbue the brands with symbolic power. This symbolic capital was, arguably, transferable to the product and, ultimately, to its consumer (Williamson 173).

Post-structuralist and semiotician Jean Baudrillard “exhaustively” critiqued brands and the advertising, or simulacrum, that embellished them between the late 1960s and early 1980s (Wengrow 10-11). In Simulacra and Simulation he wrote,

> it is the reflection of a profound reality;  
> it masks and denatures a profound reality;  
> it masks the absence of a profound reality;  
> it has no relation to any reality whatsoever;  
> it is its own pure simulacrum. (6)

The symbolic power of the Chanel brand resonates in the ‘profound reality’ of her story. It is efficiently ‘denatured’ through becoming simplified, conspicuous and instantly recognisable. It is, as a logo, physically juxtaposed as simulacra onto apparel. This simulacrum, in turn, effects the ‘profound reality’ of the consumer.

In 1899, economist Thorstein Veblen wrote in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*:

> Conspicuous consumption of valuable goods it the means of reputability to the gentleman of leisure... costly entertainments, such as potlatch or the ball, are peculiarly adapted to serve this end... he consumes vicariously for his host at the same time that he is witness to the consumption... he is also made to witness his host’s facility in etiquette. (47)

Therefore, according to Veblen, it was the witnessing of "wasteful" consumption that "confers status" as opposed the primary conspicuous act (Han et al. 18). Despite television being in its experimental infancy advertising was at "the height of its powers" during the 1920s (Clark et al. 18; Hill 30). Post-World War 1 consumers, in America, experienced an unaccustomed level of prosperity and were unsuspecting of the motives of the newly formed advertising agencies (Clark et al. 18). Subsequently, the ‘witnessing’ of consumption could be constructed across a plethora of media from the newly emerged commercial radio to billboards (Hill viii–25). The resulting "status" was ‘confered’ onto brand logos. Women’s magazines, with a legacy dating back to 1828, were a primary locus (Hill 10).
Belonging in a Post-Structuralist World

It is significant to note that, in a post-structuralist world, consumers do not exclusively seek upward mobility in their selection of brands. The establishment of counter-culture icon Levi Strauss and Co. was concurrent to the emergence of both The House of Worth and Coco Chanel.

The Bavarian-born Levi Strauss commenced selling apparel in San Francisco in 1853 (Levi’s). Two decades later, in partnership with Nevada born tailor Jacob Davis, he patented the “riveted-for-strength” workwear using blue denim (Levi’s). Although the ontology of ‘jeans’ is contested, references to “Jene Fustyan” date back the sixteenth century (Snyder 139). It involved the combining cotton, wool and linen to create “vestments” for Geonese sailors (Snyder 138). The Two Horse Logo (fig. 10), depicting them unable to pull apart a pair of jeans to symbolise strength, has been in continuous use by Levi Strauss & Co. company since its design in 1886 (Levi’s).

The “rugged wear” would become the favoured apparel amongst miners at American Gold Rush (Muthu 6). Subsequently, between the 1930s – 1960s Hollywood films cultivated jeans as a symbol of “defiance” from Stage Coach staring John Wayne in 1939 to Rebel without A Cause staring James Dean in 1955 (Muthu 6; Edgar). Consequently, during the 1960s college students protesting in America (fig. 11) against the draft chose the attire to symbolise their solidarity with the working class (Hedarty). Notwithstanding a 1990s fashion revision of denim into a diversity of garments ranging from jackets to skirts, jeans have remained a wardrobe mainstay for the past half century (Hedarty; Muthu 10).

In 2003, the journal Science published an article “Does Rejection Hurt? An Fmri Study of Social Exclusion” (Eisenberger et al.). The cross-institutional study demonstrated that the neurological reaction to rejection is indistinguishable to physical pain. Whereas during the 1940s Maslow classified the desire for “belonging” as secondary to “physiological needs,” early twenty-first century psychologists would suggest “[social] acceptance is a mechanism for survival” (Weir 50).

In Simulacra and Simulation, Jean Baudrillard wrote:

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal... (1)

In the intervening thirty-eight years since this document was published the artifice of our interactions has increased exponentially. In order to locate ‘belongness’ in this hyperreality, the identities of the seekers require a level of encoding. Brands, as signifiers, provide a vehicle.

Whereas in Prehistoric Mesopotamia carved seals, worn as amulets, were used to extend the identity of a person, in post-digital China WeChat QR codes (fig. 12), stored in mobile phones, are used to facilitate transactions from exchanging contact details to commerce. Like other totems, they provide access to information such as locations, preferences, beliefs, marital status and financial circumstances. These individualised brands are the most recent incarnation of a technology that has developed over the past eight thousand years. The intermediary iteration, emblems affixed to garments, has remained prevalent since the twelfth century. Their continued salience is due to their visibility and, subsequent, accessibility as signifiers.
Fig. 12. It may be posited that Wechat QR codes are a form individualised branding. Like other totems, they store information pertaining to the owner's location, beliefs, preferences, marital status and financial circumstances. "Join Wechat groups using QR code on 2019." Techwebsites. 26 July 2019 <https://techwebsites.net/join-wechat-group-or-code/).

Fig. 13. Brands function effectively as signifiers is due to the international distribution of multinational corporations. This is the shopfront of Chanel in Dubai, which offers customers apparel bearing consistent insignia as the Parisian outlet at on Rue Cambon. Customers of Chanel can signify to each other with the confidence that their products will be recognised. "Chanel." The Dubai Mall. 26 July 2019 <https://thedubaimall.com/en/shop/chanel/).

Navigating a post-structuralist world of increasing mobility necessitates a rudimental understanding of these symbols. Whereas in the nineteenth century status was conveyed through consumption and witnessing consumption, from the twentieth century onwards the garnering of brands made this transaction immediate (Veblen 47; Han et al. 18). The bricolage of the brands is constructed by bricoleurs working in any number of contemporary creative fields such as advertising, filmmaking or song writing. They provide a system by which individuals can convey and recognise identities at prima facie. They enable the prosthesis of identity.

References


