

Not Just a Sign: In what Ways can Semiotics be used to Contribute to Contemporary Rebranding Design?

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Abstract: We are fortunate to live in a world of rapid development, where at meantime people are increasingly unwilling to look beyond the surface to understand the nature of things, which is also a misfortune. Nowadays people see something, they are no longer thinking about the meaning but are just attracted by its appearance and forget it in a twinkling. Brand owners have to comply with the visual habits of human beings and refresh outdated brands by constantly designing a more eye-catching visual identity than before. Simplicity has become a true dogma over the years. Logos are also constantly designed and modified into a simpler shape... The business working through the concept of rebranding itself may ask the following questions: "Is this really a good sign that we are changing and moving forward to a better era? Is this an appropriate time for such substantive work? Are we discussing a soft evolution or metamorphosis? Does this rebranding address a clearly identified problem, and can it represent a genuine asset for making a progress" (Debit, 2017)? The content of this thesis explores this complex semiotic system running behind contemporary rebranding design. We started with this question: In what ways can semiotics be used to contribute to contemporary rebranding design? The research methods employed to resolve this question consisted of essays on semiotics, key readings on world best rebranding projects as well as case studies of particular branding company. This discussion brought us to several conclusions: Firstly, based on evolutionary knowledge of human visual habits, such as Gestalt Psychology and Selective Attention, we know that humans are creatures who only see what they want to see. In terms of this incontrovertible fact, can semiotics build its own temple on it. Secondly, the Functional Matrix system in Semiotics enables rebranding design to have the more possibility to survive in today's market. In other words, Semiotics brings rebranding design the foreground, makes it more explicit, memorable, recognizable and gives it more protection to keep up with the changing times (Skaggs, 2017). Lastly, the Cultural Symbolism system in Semiotics enables the logotypes in rebranding design have universal power over time. That is to say, no matter which country this rebranding design goes to, it can always be successfully recognized.

Keywords: Rebranding; Semiotics; Visual Identity; Logo Design; Brand Perception; Design Theory; Gestalt Principles; Brand Communication; Cultural Trends; Consumer Behaviour.

1. Introduction: Designers and Semioticians

Humans are consumers of nature; thus, brands play a ubiquitous role in our everyday lives. It appears when you pick up a bottle of Oatly milk from the shelf in Sainsbury. It presents to the moment you enter the store of Gentle Monsters, where you are surrounded by its great retail design such as an impressive spacecraft model and other mythical memorabilia, and four well-organised zones featuring various well-known apparel brands (Davidson, 2021). Indeed, every brand has its own unique value proposition and provides different user experiences to improve our life quality.

As you can see, the majority knows well about brand design, a subject whose key elements include the logo, colour scheme, typography, and other design components that make a brand stand out from competitors, and be recognizable to consumers (Tarver, 2022). Usually, a good brand design tells good stories. For instance, the electric car company Piëch, launched in 2017 with a brand that was largely inspired by its founder's personal history – Toni Piëch, is the great-grandson of Ferdinand Porsche (Wood, 2022).

However, only a few pays attention to rebranding design. What is rebranding design? According to the Macmillan Dictionary (Macmillan Dictionary, N/D), the word "rebranding", compared to the word "branding", with an extra prefix of "re", which stands for the meaning "again, back and repetition", has the power that cannot be underestimated too, especially in these current turbulent times.

What does it mean to be in an age characterized by change? The rapid development of biology, information, and space? The diversification of economic models, or the turbulence of globalization? In the past three years, an unexpected public health crisis has shattered mankind's optimistic expectation of a sustainable future. Since then, "change" has become a topic that cannot be ignored. Chuang Tzu: The Way of Heaven, states "All things are transformed; every bud and feature have its proper form", and another thought-provoking book (Xie, 1983), The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons, once holds, "Change is a form of longevity, and generalization does not lack".

The word "change" not only refers to the evolutionary process of the world in which all things and phenomena come into being but also this phrase is an expression of our attitude toward the development of design today. Change is the only way to endure, and the only way not to become mind-impooverished is to transform ourselves across the past and into the present, discovering those problems and trying our best to resolve them. The underlying nature of "change" needs to be reconsidered in the context of design history as well.

Here's an example of visual identity design for the Co-op supermarket. On the left is the work done for the Co-op by North Design in 2016. It revives an old Co-op identity – the Co-op's classic identity from the 1960s that you can see on the right. When looking at this image, there's something of a trend in brand design to recover, revive and work with old designs rather than design new things. This trend says something about design looking to the past as a source and as

something that carries a meaning. It is a chance to shout out, “We need to make some changes regarding the new era!” And here comes rebranding design, which has recently become a kind of fashion art that attracts public attention and brings

people together in order to keep the pace with this changing world. The benefits of it will not only impact a company’s overall profit, but most importantly they’ll make every organisation more connected with the world.



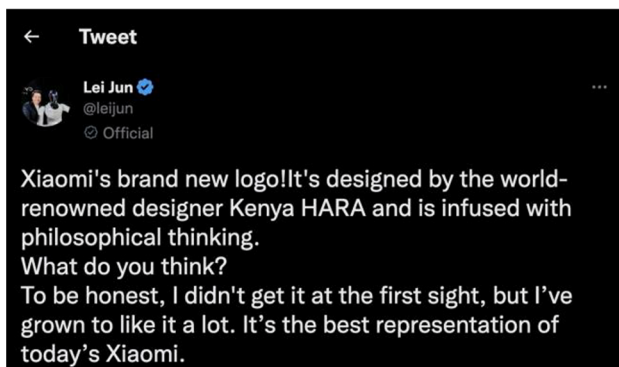
Figure 1. Co-op identity by North Design, 2016



Figure 2. Co-op identity, 1968

Another example happens in early 2021, Lei Jun (2021), the founder and CEO of Xiaomi Corporation, the world second largest manufacturer of smartphones, tweeted his opinion on Xiaomi’s new logo designed by the world-

renowned designer Kenya HARA (Bureau, 2021). The moment he posted, he received lots of feedback and comments from users worldwide.



PIYUSHDAS @piyushdas_ · Mar 31, 2021

Replying to @leijun

Change the shape does not mean new logo 😂😂😂😂😂😂😂 even a school going can also do that XD



Sanjay negi @Ace_Sanjay_negi · Mar 31, 2021

Replying to @leijun

Why you need world renowned designer to make this no change in letter design only outer shape changed ... My phone app icon is also in this shape ... Nothing big deal

Figure 3. Screenshots from Lei Jun’s Twitter, 2021

Unfortunately, when browsing the content, most of the comments were negative as the screenshots shown above (Jun, 2021). The launching event has become the subject of social media mockery for spending three years and hundreds of thousands of dollars on a new logo that looks remarkably similar to the original (Hadi, 2021).

However, when I later watched the explanation video on YouTube, HARA stated that the new logo “is not just a simple design of the shape,” but rather an “encapsulation of Xiaomi’s inner spirit” as it intends to convey the essence of Xiaomi’s

core concept: Alive (Xiaomi, 2021). HARA’s design team behind the new logo studied circles and squares extensively at the first stage, encountering a mathematical equation: $|x|^n + |y|^n = 1$. By bringing variables of n into this equation, spectacular shapes could be found between circles and squares. Out of twenty-four options, the team, at last, opted for shape $n:3$, standing for “a perfect balance” both visually and contextually (Hadi, 2021).

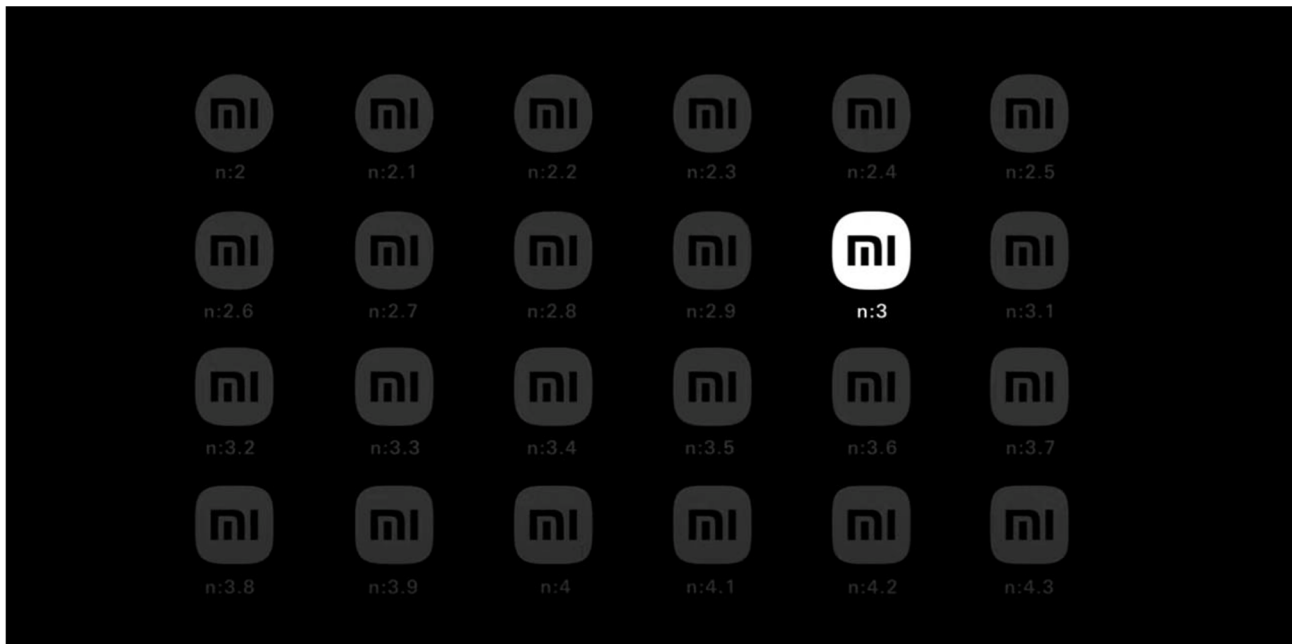


Figure 4. Xiaomi's New Identity Using Mathematic Equation, 2021

Based on Xiaomi's example, we can conclude that the new logo is not a simple redesign of the shape itself like most of the people on the internet talked about. It is not all about aesthetics, instead, the essence behind this rebranding is to refresh the brand value in terms of now and future, then to pick the optimal visual solution, following mankind's ancient visual habits, to represent its brand faith and value at the most, so that Xiaomi continues to benefit mankind and society.

A rebranding design is often not about what specific changes it makes, but it is about the question of why it made the change that matters: How those visual habits passed down from our ancestors unconsciously have an effect on us? What makes a rebranding design memorable and managed to catch people's hearts?

Semiotics is the second subject of my dissertation. The magic of a timeless visual identity is to skilfully blend these two aspects together (Debit, 2017). If a rebranding design is a necessity of our changing times, then semiotics is the gateway for us to reach that brand new world. Steven Skaggs, the author of the book *Fire Sign*, suggested that the best community of designers manipulates visual things in order to influence people. Meanwhile, the community of semioticians studies how things are able to influence people (2017, p. xiii). His words emphasize seeing design and semiotics as two separate things yet complement with each other tightly. There is something, something great happening behind the wonderful moment when we see a well-developed logo or graphic, just like "the decisive moment", an idea raised by French photographic master, Henri Cartier-Bresson, which characterized as "an important moment within the constant flow of life and capture it in a fraction of a second" (Bresson, 2014).

Donald Norman once challenged the premises and practices of the design profession: Designers often fail to understand the complexity of the issues and the depth of knowledge already known (2017, p. 10). That is why I would like to investigate semiotics in rebranding design. I hope to help most of the people who are not familiar with this field, to understand the abundant background research and use of modern cognitive psychology that the designers have devoted

themselves to. Skaggs (2017, p. xi) pointed out that "designers are people who design for urban needs and rural needs, for social development and creative communities. They are involved with environmental sustainability and economic policy, agriculture, competitive products, and brands for micro-enterprises, developing new products for the bottom-of-pyramid market, and redeveloping old products for mature or wealthy markets, etc". From my perspective, designers indeed have fresh eyes that can produce insightful images, and what matters more is that the eyes are also educated and knowledgeable.

Therefore, my entire year of driven research in response to the subject, "change", could be summarised by "In what ways can semiotics be used to contribute to contemporary rebranding design"?

This question will also be the topic of my essay, which I will resolve in the three following chapters: In the first chapter, I will start with a brief sketch of the science of visual perception, introducing how humans perceive the world to the extent of physiology and perceptual psychology, explaining the concept of "visual entity (visents)", and clarifying opinions of the externalists'. Secondly, based on the solid visual perception model established in chapter one, I will further analyse basic Peircean semiotic theories applied in rebranding design nowadays in general, and various ways in which meaning is formed in a sign. Once a strong theoretical basis is built in the first two chapters, I will move on to the case study of Landor Associates, the world-famous brand consulting firm founded in 1941 by Walter Landor. For over 60 years, it has set the sound principle of branding and creative thinking that truly change our perspective on the world. This case study will aim to analyse "Breakaway Brands", a system which tells us that it is important not to be too stuck with data and manual and must have a balance that can react to the sudden changes of the market (Landor: Brand Strategy, 2004, p. 7).

I will pursue primary and secondary research to support each argument, combining literary sources and a case study. My readings will involve essays on Peircean semiotics, Saussurian semiology, and writings on the importance of

rebranding design.

2. How Humans Perceive the World

2.1. Understanding Visual Perception Models

We see lots of things every day. However, not many people know how we see things. To understand how semiotics in rebranding design influence people unconsciously, we should learn human's perceptual system first. What is being seen? How do we perceive the world? What is our visual cortex functioning when we see something?

Led by Albert Einstein, externalists hold that visual objects are mind dependent. "If nobody is in the house, yet that table remains where it is" (2017, p. 19). Things are as they are out there in the world, and it is our perceptual system's job to reveal them to our consciousness. Those things that physically exist in the world in Einstein's words are named "visual entity", which represents "the sum of something that can be seen, something visually perceptible" (2017, p. 25). Just think of them as ingredients waiting in the fridge for the right moment to be fully "cooked" into awareness.

A typical human eye will respond to wavelengths from about 380 to about 750 nanometres ('Visible spectrum', 2022). According to Skaggs (2017, p. 15), what happens between the scene and the seen is a process called perception. There are two ways of forming the perception: bottom-up processing held by R.L. Gregory, and top-down processing raised by J.J. Gibson which is opposing. A person who got used to bottom-up processing will begin by examining small pieces of external sensory information and assemble them into one conclusion. Whereas a person who is familiar with top-down processing will use model, memory, and expectation from the past that he/she already knew to interpret the information (Myers, 2009). Today, a hybrid view wins out, thanks to the fPET brain scans. It proves that when our eyes attend to something, activity flows within both ways.

Goodale and Milner's excellent study (1992) on neuroscience explains this procedure in detail. When the visual entity is seen by us, signals from the retina arrive in the visual cortex, they split into two streams at the same time. One stream travel through the cortex dorsally where brute signals are impinging on the retina. In simple terms, signals that go through this pathway have the ability to say: "Hey! I am here! Look at me!", drawing people's attention at the initial stage as a stimulus. Also, the dorsal stream plays a role in our space perception, and in telling our body how to respond three-dimensionally. Meanwhile, the others travel through it ventrally. The ventral stream has a greater part to play in recognition. Signals that travel through this pathway address a particular question: "What is it? Where is it? Is it coming or going? Does it resemble anything I've seen before?" And when we gaze at an object, there is constant communication between these two areas (dorsal and ventral) of our brain. As a result, we have a conceptual apprehension of what we see (Goodale and Milner, 1992).

This study shows that when the information comes through our eyes, a process of sorting, of making guesses and reaching likely conclusions is happening, so as to what is eventually perceived is an answer to "most likely case" judgements or a best-guess hypothesis, just as we are on a boat that infinitely close to the destination yet never reach because we can never know the external world directly, since all contact with it is mediated by our bodies as we do the perceiving.

Similar to Goodale and Milner's visual perception model, the model shown in figure 5 visualises a viewing situation based on critical realism which is easier to understand. The visual entity (a) which has metaphysically existed as a set of potential perceptions, is affected by the light waves (b) that strike the eye (c). Later, an almost instantaneous series of unconscious resonances in the brain (d) results in a decision that is experienced as cognition (e).

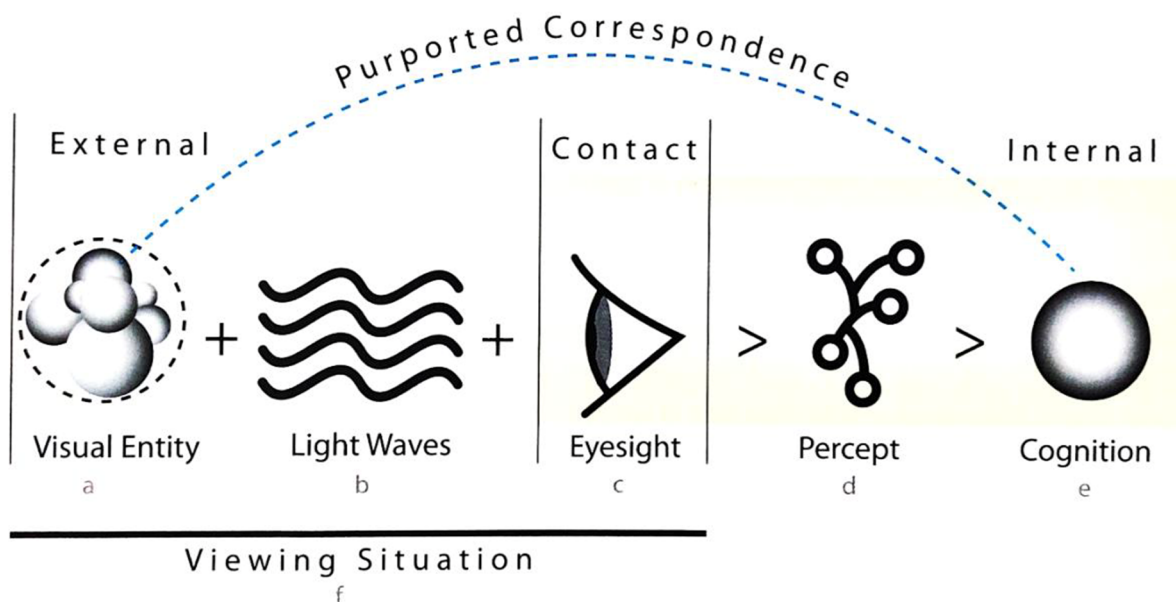


Figure 5. Xiaomi's New Identity Using Mathematic Equation, 2021

Based on Goodale and Milner's visual perception model and viewing situation from critical realism, we can conclude that when visents and light are brought together, they passed through the eyes. Perception then directs to a tentative conclusion, known as cognition. It is not a definitive judgement, but a procedure of mental analysis that goes

backwards and forwards between different areas of the brain.

To be specific, imagine you are in the forest, and there is a rare flower that you are going to take your friend to see. At this point, the number of ways the flower could be seen would be incredibly vast. It could be a flower in sunny days, in a big fog or in a storm... But the day you brought her to the flower

is mostly sunny and the light is trickling across the path. You began to feel confident about how your friend will perceive the flower. However, the fact is that it is still your friend's experience of it that collapses to a single experience of first sighting the flower. Whereas you are having your own ones, from a slightly different angle, although extremely similar.

That is what I am trying to explain in this section, of how individuals perceive the world. As the old saying goes: "There are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people's eyes". This is a world surrounded by empiricism, a psychological term that explains "all knowledge can only be gained by experience" (Folescu, 2004). Every time we see a new thing; the perceptual system makes a small mark on our body. When the mark is triggered again one day in the future, we will have completely different cognition and new marks. Brand designers are like mark makers, bringing amazing memories and sharing those inspiring moments with mankind. As we learn more and more about the amazing capacity of our perceptual systems to process information, we will become more adept at designing brand logos, because we know what is behind it, how it functions and why we do it.

2.2. Understanding Human's Visual Habits

2.2.1. Visual Habit One: Selective Attention

After understanding the process of how we see, let us investigate two other essential visual habits humans share in common. Seeing is not only a very complicated interactive process but also addresses selectivity. In the famous experiment known as 'Invisible Gorilla', led by Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris (Chabris and Simons, 2010), the participants were first asked to count the number of times the players wearing white passed the basketball. As this simple action unfolded, a person wearing a gorilla suit walks across the court (Chabris and Simons, 2010). Statistics show that in the end nearly half of the participants did not even notice the gorilla, because they were too concentrated on following the given instruction: counting numbers (Mirzoeff, 2015). Simons later attributes this to what he calls 'inattention blindness', a term that explains people's 'inability to perceive outside information when concentrating on a task' (Mirzoeff, 2015).



Figure 6. Chabris and Simons, still from 'Invisible gorilla' video, 2010

This is where the explanation should have ended and followed by a conclusion. However, it did not. Please do not forget we are living in a crazy changing world. Mirzoeff (2015, p. 79) again showed the 'Invisible Gorilla' test video to students and others in current times. Surprisingly, the result

showed that nearly everyone sees the gorilla! It proves that a population that has grown up with video games and touch screens sees things completely differently compared to the past. But... why? What has happened in response to new media nowadays? Mirzoeff (2015, p. 79) suggests that the capacities of the human body obviously cannot have evolved in such a short space of time. Rather, the change exactly comes in the way we make use of visual information.

In the age of industrialisation, concentrating on a specific activity and ignoring distractions was extremely desirable. It is because a high standard of attention and focalisation is a must when working on a machine in a factory. Whereas in the contemporary digital-dominated world, the majority prioritize the ability to stay in touch with information from multiple channels – multi-tasking is the buzzword (Mirzoeff, 2015) in current times.

To be honest, while I am writing the dissertation, my friends are sending me text messages to which they expect prompt replies, no matter what I am doing. Based on this phenomenon, it is not hard to conclude that in the past, we were trained to focus on one task, meaning we might not see the gorilla. Now that our time is fragmented and are trained to pay attention to distractions. That means we are able to see the gorilla! Sounds weird, right? That is how our audience rule the design world. And that is also why we need rebranding design. Knowing their continually changing visual habits is the key led to a good piece of design.

To sum up, based on the phenomenon of the same experiment yet conducted at different times and resulting in opposing outcomes, we can conclude that people see things selectively. People always see what they want to see.

2.2.2. Visual Habit Two: Gestalt Principles

While on a holiday in 1910, Wertheimer was travelling on a train to Frankfurt when he suddenly saw a row of flashing lights at a railway crossing, around a rectangular frame, much like the lights on a huge theatre screen. Instead of a series of individual light bulbs illuminating in sequence, what Wertheimer "witnessed" was one light moving around the frame. He was astonished at what he found. The phenomenon left him pondering on his own: "Why does that light seem to be moving? I know this is just a bunch of individual bulbs lighting up in order, but why do I perceive ONLY one dot, one light, moving around in this pattern?" With those doubts and questions, he resolutely decided to give up his vacation, getting off the train to Frankfurt, found a hotel room, and went straight to a toy shop to buy a zoetrope (Reinfurt, 2019).

This is a short story about the origin of Gestalt Principle. The word "Gestalt" does not translate readily into English. In Switzerland, they use the word "gestalten" to describe the activity of designing, which means "form-giving", or "whole-making" (2019, p. 106). They believe that thought is a whole, meaningful perception, rather than a simple collection of connected images; The idea of learning is to form a gestalt, to change one gestalt into another. Our visual system automatically constructs structures for visual input and perceives shapes, patterns, and objects at a nervous system level, rather than just seeing disconnected edges, lines, and regions. The so-called Gestalt is the translation of the German gestalt, meaning "gestalt" or "shape"; They believe that the process of learning is not a process of trial and error, but a process of insight, that is, a sudden solution to a problem in the context of the current situation. Another common point is how people perceive and remember what they see (2019, p. 107). In the story, Wertheimer discovered that humans are

good at instituting a whole from a series of discrete perceptions, since he has perceived a bunch of individual bulbs lighting up in order as if one light is moving around (2019, p. 106).

Among them, the theory is subdivided into eight small principles that detailed describe how discrete elements produce coherent groups:

1. Law of Proximity: a group of objects will always be associated to the group of objects that is near them, and not to the one that is further away. The closer the two elements are, the more likely they are to fit together. That means they have a stronger relationship (Mann, 2015).

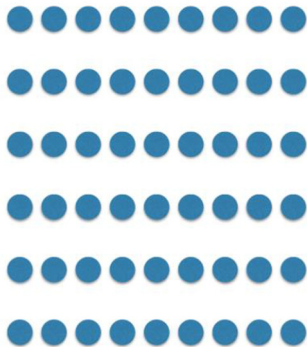


Figure 7. Example image of Law of Proximity: the horizontal distance is greater than the vertical distance, which is what makes our brain interpret the image as “six horizontal columns of circles” instead of “nine vertical columns of circles”, 2015.

2. Law of Closure: our brain’s instinct to associate what it sees to things it already knows and will automatically complete the missing information without it being asked (Mann, 2015).

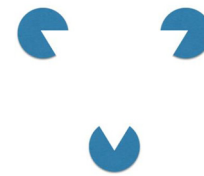


Figure 8. Example image of Law of Closure: our brain’s ability to interpret the image and quickly finds out 3 packmen and the triangle in the middle, 2015.

3. Law of Good Figure: our brain’s instinct to look at things in a simple manner (Mann, 2015).

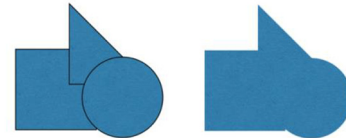


Figure 9. Example image of Law of Symmetry: brain preferred to interpret the image as 3 pairs of brackets, 2015.

4. Law of Symmetry: our brain’s instinct to look at things symmetrically (Mann, 2015).



Figure 10. Example image of Law of Good Figure: brain preferred to interpret the image on the right as “a square, a circle and a triangle” instead of as a complicated image, 2015.

5. Law of Figure & Ground: our brain’s instinct to tell the difference between the important and the unimportant. Perception helps us to separate the figure from the background. The greater the contrast between the figure and the background, the more obvious the outline of the figure, the easier the figure is to be detected (Mann, 2015).

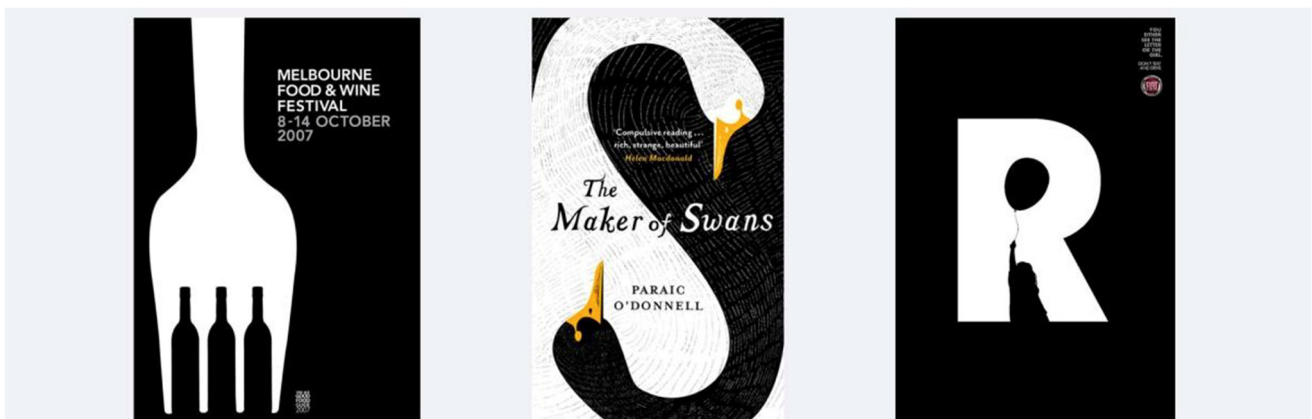


Figure 11. Example image of Law of Figure & Ground: brain preferred to interpret these 3 images as a fork, a swan, and an “R”, 2015

6. Law of Common Fate: objects functioning or moving in the same direction appear to belong together, that is, they are perceived as a single unit (Mann, 2015).



Figure 12. Example image of Law of Common Fate: brain preferred to interpret the image as a running rabbit instead of bunches of black horizontal lines, 2015.

7. Law of Continuity: “elements that are connected by uniform visual properties are perceived as being more related than elements that are not connected” (Mann, 2015).

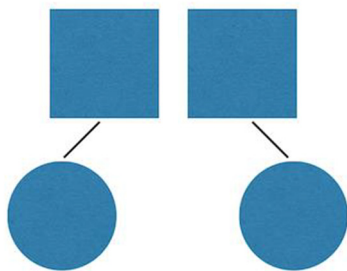


Figure 13. Example image of Law of Continuity: our brain’s instinct to connect each square with a circle instead of two squares and two circles just because they are joined together by a line, 2015.

8. Law of Similarity: when the audience sees that a number of objects have similar characteristics, it tends to associate them with one another and treat them equally. For example, in group debates, we often have several people competing to speak, but we can still hear someone’s speech through the noise, because the voice quality of the person’s speech is always similar. If the quality of his speech varied frequently, it would be difficult to distinguish his words from the noise. People think of things as a whole that clearly have common properties (shape, size, common movement, direction, colour, etc.). Elements with similar visual features are considered to be more related than those without similar visual features. (Mann, 2015).

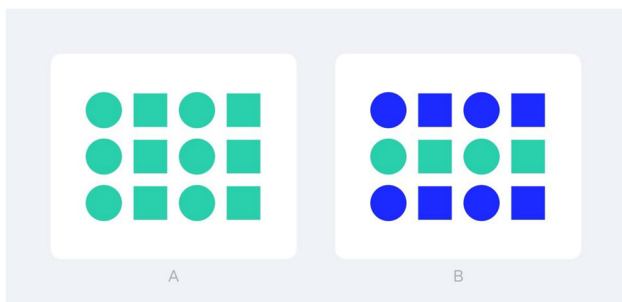


Figure 14. Example image of Law of Similarity, 2015.

In short, the theory claims that our brain automatically invents the glue in-between and conveys a distinct, unmistakable sensation of a whole.

As the theory emerged, so did controversy. Most of the people must be familiar with this sentence: “The whole is

greater than the sum of its parts” (2019, p. 105).

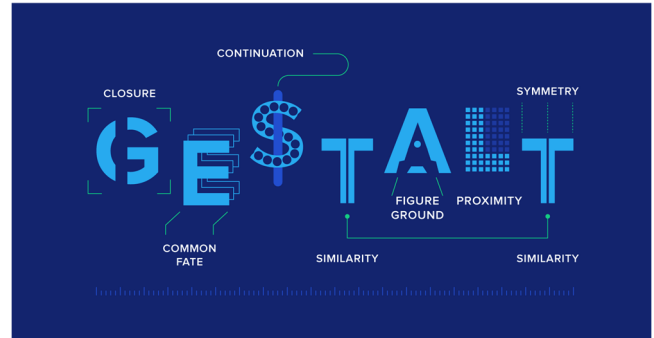


Figure 15. Gestalt Principle, 2018

However, it is wrong. According to a group of German psychologists, they suggested that “we perceive the world in organized wholes, not in parts at all” (2019, p. 105). That is to say, the whole calculated by our brain is actually a new thing, completely separate from any sum of its parts. It is a “new, distinct, dynamic, and inseparable whole” (2019, p. 105).

WHOLE ≠ PART + PART + PART +PART

Figure 16. Gestalt Principle, 2019

When Gestalt Principle is used in rebranding world, those Visual Entity is composed of lots of individual visents, and visents can be identified as simple, compound, or complex. Simple visents trace a single contour and appear to be a single visual unit. The edges of compound visents are also simple but usually follow a more convoluted path and produce the illusion they are more than a single visual unit. Complex visents are gestalts involving multiple discrete visents yet appear to be a whole visual unit (2017, p.26).

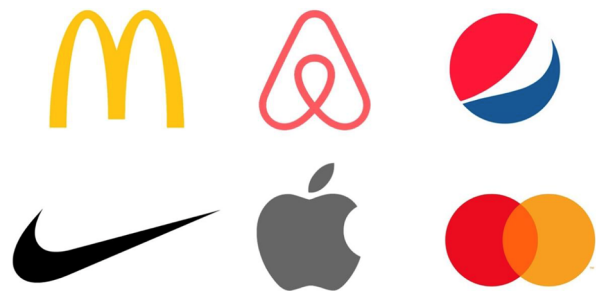


Figure 17. Logos with Simple Visents, 2023

Above shows Apple Inc’s bitten apple logo design and Nike’s simple swoosh logo design. Both are good examples of a simple business logo design. Simple logo designs do not speak much about the brands they are associated with, but one can easily remember them for their simplicity.

To sum up, we classify and summarize the principles for two purposes: one for self-examination, we tend to focus more on the creation of visual effects in the process of design and ignore the most basic principles, such as a complete design concept before design; Check your own design works during the design process to avoid low-level mistakes that lead to repeated revisions, such as misalignment of information, cluttered layout, etc. After the design is

completed, the demand-side has a reasonable statement. The second is to be able to draw parallels when designing under the premise of deep understanding.

Brand design is not all about beautiful pixels and perfect graphics. It's all about communication, performance, and convenience. Gestalt principles have always helped us achieve these goals, creating an enjoyable experience for users and great success for the business.



Figure 18. Logos with Compound Visents, 2023

Through those examples above, we can find that these eight rules do not exist independently, they have a high degree of correlation and is complementary related to one another. We need to follow up different demand types and user scenarios, use these basic rules to play a combination of fists, so that our design scheme is more based on.

When making products or designing, we must consider the factors of human's cognition and memory, which is an innate nature. People's aesthetics have basic requirements for simplicity and harmony. Only by making better use of visual space in design works, reducing the complexity of design, and maintaining the integrity of Gestalt principles as far as possible, can audience better understand the brands more easily.

3. How Meaning is Formed: Basic Peircean Semiotic Strategies in Rebranding

Once we got to know vital visual habits humans share in common, our task, from here on out, is to discuss how visents

are considered as signs that interact, move the audience, inform them, addressing their eyes and influencing their thoughts, leading them to order in a chaotic changing world. The discussion now turns to the specific contributions Peircean semiotics offers to contemporary rebranding design.

The meaning of any sign is affected by who is reading that sign (Crow, 2016). Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 – 1914) once recognized a creative process of exchange between the sign and the reader (Crow, 2016). He also proposed that “a sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. The sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object” (Crow, 2016).

First of all, we begin with the most fundamental concept of Peirce's Triadic Model of communication: referent, sign, interpretant.

3.1. Peirce's Triadic Model of Communication

A given frame of analysis, known as Peirce's Triadic Model of Communication, can help to explain what is happening when we are either consciously or unconsciously aware of what we saw. Skaggs (2017, p. 42) explains that this frame of analysis is also well known as “The Semiotic Moment”, which involves a third-order relation, respectively including three components: sign, referent and interpretant. Each performs its interdependent function with one another.

Peirce defines the physical form of the sign (in most cases made or created by men), as the “Sign”. The “Sign” must stand for something else. That something else for which the “Sign” serves as a surrogate is called the “Referent” (could be a real existing object or a mental concept referred to or any content that is able to be communicated). In completing this proxy work, the “Sign” also has a significant impact on people's interpreting system, in other words, people's thoughts. Peirce called the impact the “Sign” has on people's interpreting system, the “Interpretant” (Skaggs, 2017), derived from a Latin word, *interpretārī*, which is defined as to explain, translate, or interpret (Media Studies, 2023).

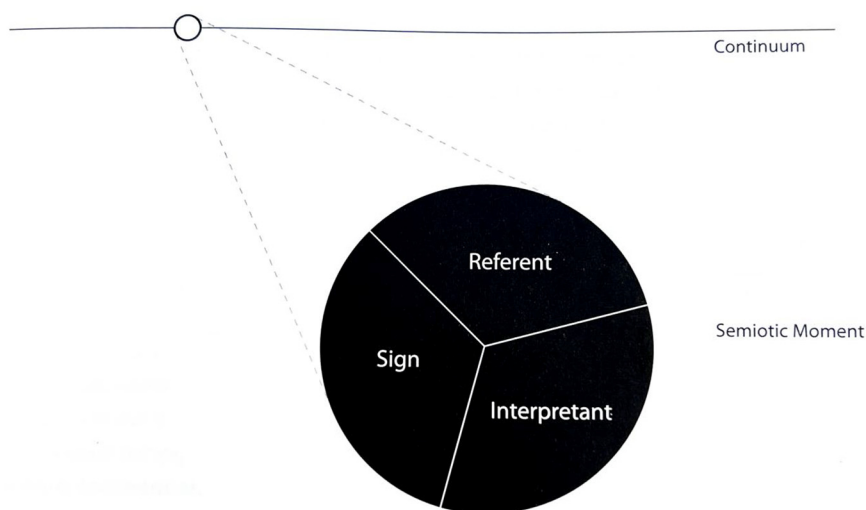


Figure 19. Peirce's Triadic Model of Communication, 2017

Confused? You are not alone. Let us take a common example that encountering this proxy process in our daily life. Imagine you are at an intersection and there is a traffic light

directly in front of you. It is currently in the form of a flashing green light towards you, with a countdown number of three displayed below it. Based on just one declarative paragraph,

we already have two components, the man-made “Sign” and the “Referent”. In this scenario, the “Sign” is the flashing green light with a countdown number of three. The “Referent” is trying to deliver an underlying message: Please stay where you are and wait for the next green light to cross the road. What about the “Interpretant”? Some people may think: three-second green light, I can definitely run to the other side in time! Some of you may be thinking: I'm wearing high heels today; three seconds is not enough to get me across the street. I better wait for the next light. Here, the “Interpretant” varies based on the way people think, depending on the distinctive disposition and living habits each individual holds.

Now that we understood how Peirce's system is implanted in the real world. So how does the visent fit into this system? What will “The Semiotic Moment” be like if we apply Peirce's Triadic Model of Communication to the design world? Skaggs (2017, p. 44)'s answer to these questions is to raise three more questions: “What is it that needs to be communicated (‘Referent’)? What visual thing might be devised to carry that mission forward (‘Signal’)? Who are the waiting minds that will receive the communication and how can they be expected to receive it (‘Interpretant’)?” According to modern communication theory, these three questions respectively refer to: the message contents, the message as the signal, and the message as received. If we put them into design studio practice today, they are echoed in the project brief, design craft, and ensuing feedback.

To sum up, the above are the basic elements applied to the moment when a sign is read by its audience, as well as the equivalent names in the design world.

By understanding Peirce's Triadic Model of Communication, we can better understand that designs with good communication skills always fulfil these three elements: the sign, the referent and the interpretant.

3.2. Peirce's Sign Classes

3.2.1. Signs, Visents, Signals and Displays

We have talked about and provided definitions of “Sign” in the previous section. (2017, p. 53) I do not understand Latin very well does not prevent me from knowing that the Cuneiform script page I am holding is a “Display”. Therefore, it is possible that people could interpret something as a “Display” even though they don't pick up signalling behaviours at all. Is this “Visent” a “Signal”? The answer is made by the audience (2017, p. 54).

Most important of all is that making displays and systems of display is what we, as designers, do. Essentially, design work is centred on the formation of display elements, entire displays, and systems of displays. A “Visent” becomes a display when it is taken to be a “Signal”, an act of delivering a message. When referring to a visual display, you can alternatively call it a “work”, or “a piece of graphic design”. A “Sign” is the visent within experience, especially when people focus on its semiotic function within the frame provided by a given Semiotic Moment (2017, p. 53).

3.2.2. In Semiotics World: The Three Trichotomies

The sign classes allow our discussion to begin to move away from abstract logical theory toward specific, concrete instances of graphic design in action. Peirce considered the above questions across the three orders of relation: first-order singularity, second-order dualism, and finally third-order, triadic relations” (Skaggs, 2017).

The first trichotomy answers the most fundamental question: “What kind of things can function as signs”? It

classifies the three broad classes of things – qualities, visents, and systems – that have the power to function semiotically as visual signs, a guide, and intends.



Figure 20. An Example of a Stop Sign Illustrated the three Parts of Trichotomy, 2023

Let us find an example to explain these in detail. Suppose you are driving on the highway, and suddenly you saw a stop sign. The picture shown above is the sign right in front of you. The moment you saw it; it has already illustrated the first trichotomy. The quality of the hue (that particular red) is capable of signifying danger, urgency, halt, and attention. The visent is the placard, that usually appears on the street at an intersection. It helps to act as a sign to stop. Meanwhile, the system of road laws encodes the signing by stipulating that this kind of placard be placed at intersections so as to give a command to stop. Besides, the system that is the English language allows letters to communicate typographically (p.57, 2017).

The second trichotomy emphasizes connections a sign may have with its referent. There are 3 kinds of connections: iconic, indexic and symbolic (p. 58, 2017). Iconic relationships are relationships based on resemblance between a sign and its referent. For example, your passport photo has a stronger and clearer relationship to your appearance in real life than photos you edited with beauty camera filters do. In short, anything (usually graphic) that signifies something on the basis of similarity or likeness is iconic. An indexic relationship refers to physical or environmental contact or contiguity with the referent. For example, a bookmark stuck in a book, “You are here” in Google map. In short, index always require the attention to notify you “something” is “something”. Lastly, the symbolic relation appears when requiring education, common knowledge in human group, or learning process in order for the audience to be made aware of. If the above three conditions are met, then the second trichotomy is completed (p. 58, 2017).

Then we enter the third trichotomy. It is all about how much import, weight, or what we might call “authority toward action”. In other words, the third trichotomy explains the motivation or the goal of a piece of graphic design: a conclusion one draws from it after the encounter. It usually comes from feedback after the design is distributed (p. 59, 2017).

We can conclude that, first trichotomy is the “immediate stimulus before any spatial, subjective or temporal interpretation”. Second trichotomy is the “actualisation of the stimulus in objects or happenings”. Third trichotomy is the “repeated interpretation in space and time of the relationship between the stimuli and the objects” (Lencastre and Co rte-Real, 2009). The relationship between the three is progressive at each level, without which one is indispensable.

	1st order relations	2nd order relations	3rd order relations
Fit to be signs	Qualities	Visents	Systems
Relation of sign to referent	Iconic	Indexic	Symbolic
Motivation	Display	Assertion	Conclusion

Figure 21. The Graph of the Three Trichotomies Arrayed Together, 2015.

3.2.3. Transferring to Brand World: Identity, Object, Response

If we apply semiotic into contemporary branding world, what will we get? The answer is that we will respectively get the model of Brand Triangle. The model is based on the application of the purest form of Peircean triadic semiotics firstness, secondness and thirdness in a simplified version (first trichotomy = identity; second trichotomy = object; third trichotomy = response). It has undergone successive reformulations within the study group as a result of its application as a tool for university training and consultancy and of its presentation and discussion at branding conferences (Lencastre and Co rte-Real, 2009).



Figure 23. The Look of Beauty, 2017

There are four vital considerations in the design of a logo.

Firstly, a logo should be memorable, that is also to say, to be simple. Memorable logo is one that is not easy to be forgotten, which makes them timeless. Timelessness describes logos that are able to transcend their current audience and cultural context and are designed with the future in mind (2017, p. 136).

Secondly, it must contain the appropriate attitude and tone. For example, a child-like font and colour scheme would be

appropriate for a logo for a children's toy store, not so much for a law firm.

A logo doesn't need to say what a company does. Restaurant logos don't need to show food, dentist logos don't need to show teeth, furniture store logos don't need to show furniture. Just because it's relevant, doesn't mean you can't do better. The Mercedes logo isn't a car. The Virgin Atlantic logo isn't an airplane. The Apple logo isn't a computer...

- David Airey (Cass, 2009)

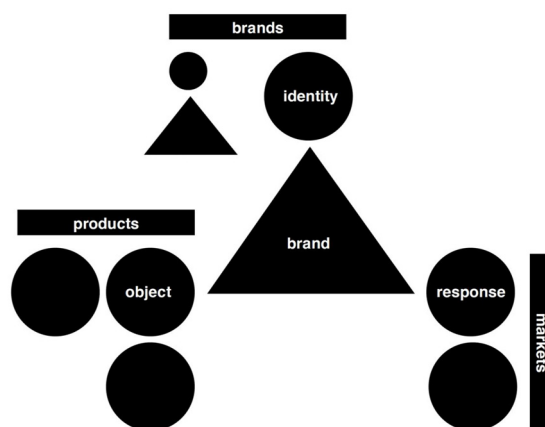


Figure 22. The Brand Triangle, 2010

The Brand Triangle is a simple but effective way of finding out how well your brand is doing from three different angle. In the diagram above, it can be interpreted as three parts as follows:

Among the many logos used to identify a brand, the Identity is the one that most directly to identify all of its products. It's usually the shortest form of a brand name, for example, Coke, IBM...because it makes it easier for us to express ourselves with our voice. The Object refers to product itself. It is a stage all about how you position your product in marketplace. Lastly, Response is also known as branding market research (Lencastre and Co rte-Real, 2009). Because these three stages are the equivalent transformation of The Three Trichotomies in the brand world, they also have a progressive relationship.

3.3. The Functional Matrix

3.3.1. MARVelous



Thirdly, being recognizable. Take Clinique and Lancôme as examples. They are both beauty products in the market, however they use distinctly different semantic profiles. As shown in the following figure, Clinique mainly uses the technique of highlighting the outer packaging itself of its products to obtain memory points. Meanwhile, Lancôme achieves this presence by emphasizing extreme close-ups of models (2017, p. 113).

Based on these examples, we can see that semantic profiles help us to map how similar brands developing unique brand images. In fact, each of them is unfolding in their unique systematic way, in response to what they perceive as their particular market segment. This analysis also reveals the underlying information, the subtle associative hints of the genre that will enable the brand to find reputation and symbols elsewhere in the future (2017, p. 115).

Fourthly, versatility represents multiple results of the design. For example, when a logotype is finished, it should be brought into several tests in different perspective, either skewing, or moulded in glass, or embossed, or reduced in size. In this way, it can be widely seen in the publicity (2017, p.142).

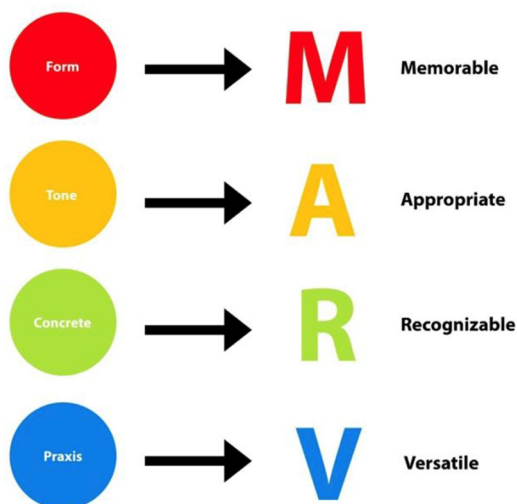


Figure 24. MARVelous Identity Design, 2017

To conclude, the Functional Matrix is an extension based on Peirce's third trichotomy and can be used widely in contemporary rebranding design. It can be used to "describe or evaluate how and why a certain piece of brand design work or fail" (2017, p. 137). Besides, it can also serve as a check at various analytical stages to ensure the design is likely to succeed.

4. Case Studies

In Chapter three, I will provide you with some real examples of rebranding design that demonstrates the use of semiotics to better validate the theoretical part in Chapters one and two.

4.1. Actual Applications Using Functional Matrix in Contemporary Rebranding Design

4.1.1. Barr Pharmaceuticals Brand Identity Refresh

Barr Pharmaceuticals was a global specialty and generic drug manufacturer. Barr Pharmaceuticals was extant for almost forty years before it was bought out by Teva

Pharmaceuticals in 2008.



Figure 25. Barr Pharmaceuticals Identity Design, 2017

In figure 25 (a), the image shows the original Barr logo. We can tell that the hexagon represents chemical bonds. The uniform colour blue manages to unify visents as a whole. The sans serif typeface harmonizes with the minimal drawing style of the hexagon. At first glance, there are no obvious problems. Compared (a) with (b) and (c), it is obvious to discover that the disharmony in colour and typefaces break the logo into two parts and make it more difficult to see the mark as a single visent (2017, p. 140). No doubt (a) wins in this competition.

However, even in (a), If we try to look at the sign for a long time, there are still problems exist: first, it is hard to tell that the colour blue carries any particular meaning; It is still forced and uncertain when we try to read the "b" in "barr". The audience may become confused about whether read it as "arr" or "barr", since the hexagon seems more likely to be a symbol instead of the letter "b" (2017, p. 141).

Therefore, the first focus in this rebranding case is to avoid issues of readability. The word should be clarified and read in a more natural, easy, and unforced way (2017, p. 140). The underlying logic to this problem is to not to have the hexagon do double duty at the same time. And secondly to keep the hexagon as close to the "barr" as possible (see more details in Chapter two, Gestalt Principle section – Law of Proximity). Then with this precondition, we get the initial modification shown in (d). Now that, (d) has solved recognition issues, completed recognition aspect of the logotype, the problem is now transferring to next stage competition, memorability (2017, p. 140).

The focus now begins to emphasize the alignment between the hexagon with the x-heights of the lowercase letters. Under this circumstance, we get figure 25 (e), who is trying to investigate a figure and ground illusion (see more details in Chapter two, Gestalt Principle section – Law of Figure and Ground) (2017, p. 141). We also get option (f) and (g), by placing a black bar over the logo in order to make a pun on the name's English meaning (2017, p. 141). This makes logo alive!

Does logotype look like science? Does the logotype manage to express an appropriate attitude of the company in the pharmaceutical industry? At this stage, this rebranding process also considers the tone of the mark.

The last one came to praxis. Will this logotype easy to be fit in multiple circumstances? As a few tests of it in various sizes demonstrates that. Now we got figure 25 (g) finally! MARV is satisfied (2017, p. 142)!

The iteration shown above is just a brief idea of how Functional Matrix applied in real rebranding scenario. The reality is more brutal. Designers might go through hundreds of iterations or more to achieve the final version (2017, p. 142). To sum up, the Functional Matrix system in Semiotics enables rebranding design to have the more possibility to survive in today's market. Most importantly, it brings rebranding design the foreground, makes it more explicit, memorable, recognizable and gives it more protection to keep up with the changing times (2017, p. 143).

4.1.2. Gumtree UK Brand Identity Refresh

Gumtree UK was established in March 2000. The company's target audiences initially were Australians and

South Africans in London (Debit, 2017). Gumtree aimed set up a platform to help them find accommodations, a job, a chance to meet up people and much more. Now it has become an open community space, attracting users worldwide. The company's business has also expanded with a wide number of categories including jobs, housing, motors, second-handed for sales, pets etc (2017, p. 20). In 2016, Gumtree UK came to Koto, a design agency, hoping to conduct an identity fresh... During the rebranding process, semiotic analysis and consumer research had been conducted. The original logo shown below felt very fussy. Although it is based on the brand's actual founding story, it is still considered as an out-dated logotype.

Koto hopes to make some changes on the "tree", and started with an open mind (2017, p. 21). The basic logic behind this identity fresh is to use Law of Simplicity and yet retain distinctive brand story under a competitive digital market (2017, p.21).



Figure 26. New Logo and Identity for Gumtree by Koto (Brand New, 2023)



Figure 27. New Logo and Identity for Gumtree by Koto, 2017

4.2. Lander Associates: The Future is Ours!

The reason why I chose Lander Associates is because it not only solved a lot of branding problems of every kind on every continent, for over sixty years, but also it is a forward-looking company who reflect often. In the book *Lander: Brand Strategy: "Lander Associates" Case Study*, they had put forward some major branding issues in today's world. Hayes Roth, founder of a marketing consulting firm specializing in strategic positioning, believes that it is no longer enough just to make a product, distribute and sell it.

Lander has always had great acuity in marketing area. Craig Branigan, Chief Executive Officer of Lander Associates, once proposed that "no matter how complex or difficult the marketing challenge, the sound principles of good branding and creative thinking can truly change our perspective on the world" ("*Lander Associates*" Case Study, 2004). The following sections in chapter three will further explain.

4.2.1. Refresh Consumer Branding

Lander Associates believes that the key to success is satisfying the needs of the customers, and by achieving that goal, it will lead to maintaining and getting customers (2004, p.87). They resist that all companies must be able to always re-design and manage the connection between the brand and the customers. Successful marketing keeps a company's brand front and centre in people's minds, at least at the moment of decision-making.

They also Breakaway Brands, a system which tells us that it is important not be too stuck with data and manual and must have a balance that can react to the sudden changes of market.

For example, the most difficult packaging in the food category must be the wine labels because it requires to create the design integrated every element: the characteristic and breed of wine, quality of manufacturer, homemade feeling, stately appearance in the shops and at the table, credibility and authenticity, taste, and quality. It requires the superior sensitivity and perceptivity of designers - not to mention that the label design makes a consumer select red or white easily (2004, p.87).

4.2.2. Localization

"When the target area of design project would be worldwide, it is necessary to understand and consider the cultural characteristics of each country" (2009, p. 91).

For example, Coca-Cola's "Share a Coke" campaign is a brilliant example of localization. In the US, the bottles said Share a Coke with John or Sarah or Bobby. In Ireland, they chose Irish names like Aoife and Oisín. But the best example came from China where they used terms like "classmate" or "close friend" because it's impolite to address anyone by their first name (Moljevic, 2023).

Another example is that Owl is not symbolize anything particularly in Japan, however, it symbolizes "wisdom" in some countries, while symbolizes "folly" in another country (2009, p. 91). Thus, the symbols and colors have various meanings depending on countries, regions, generations, or gender. Thus, Cultural Localisation in rebranding is another crucial element.

5. Conclusion

Let us get back to the very first Xiaomi incident I proposed in the introduction part. In today's society, many people just

look at the surface and don't consider the truth of things. That is also my origin and purpose to write this dissertation. I hope to bring this topic on board, hoping people try to slow down in this era of rapid development. Sometimes the speed of life does bring us considerable rewards, but when we slow down to understand the layers of logic behind it, there will be more unexpected gains. The basic logic of having everything is to master a password that never goes out of date!

As we approach the conclusion part, it is the time to wrap up on the key findings in terms of the contribution's semiotics acting on contemporary rebranding design: We begins with evolutionary knowledge of human visual habits, such as Gestalt Psychology and Selective Attention, we know that humans are creatures who only see what they want to see. In terms of this incontrovertible fact, can semiotics build its own temple on it. Secondly, we introduce Peirce's Triadic Model of Communication and the Functional Matrix system in Semiotics that enables rebranding design to have the more possibility to survive in today's market (Skaggs, 2017). Lastly, case studies on the Cultural Symbolism system in Semiotics enables the logotypes in rebranding design have universal power over time.

Semiotic analysis has sharpened our eyes, helping today's rebranding world prepare for mature outcomes. "One can never escape culture, either by being within it or by being outside it" (Skaggs, 2017). The thesis of this dissertation is to informs people that semiotics is a vital link to connect consumers with rebranding design practice.

At present, all the brands in the world have a process of negation in the path of development and maturity, that is, a spiral upward process. With the passing of time, the stage of the brand will also subtly change, market environment, service population, consumption habits, cultural trends, etc.

I have no doubt that contemporary rebranding design has always been "a semiotics laboratory" (2017, p. 143). I know my dissertation is just a beginning, but no worries, whatever turns out to be, we all know the future is in our hands'.

Acknowledgments

When I chose to use the Xiaomi incident to start this dissertation, I thought that the principle I was faced with would be very simple, but when I delved into the semiotic theory again and again, I found that it was like an onion. After I peeled back the layers, another huge complex system opened up in front of me. It's not an easy topic to write about. But fortunately! A lot of worlds collided and finally made this dissertation happen, and I am so grateful they did.

John-Patrick Hartnett – my year three CTS tutor – from beginning of this dissertation, your supportive words were too kind. The reference, key readings, books and writing guidance shared by you have saved my life. And thank you for your understanding when I was struggling with the draft paper last December. Many thanks indeed! And many thanks to my parents! I eventually made it!

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