Guessing Success: Pop Culture, Science, and Logo Evolution

Natasha Mangal

Abstract

This project is designed to examine the various aspects of logo design, to judge what is effective or not, and to see if either pop culture or science determines the effectiveness of a logo. Several examples of current logos will be examined under the lens of various scientific studies concerning logo design. On one hand, the success and failure of several modern logos, each implementing some aspect of popular culture, will be discussed with consideration of both the professional opinions of graphic designers and the opinion of the public. These include the Gap logo, London 2012 Olympic logo, HSBC logo, and the Pepsi logo among others. Some of these examples will be compared to actual pieces and/or elements of contemporary art. Conversely, the scientific studies compiled which include research on the effects of chroma (color) and separate design elements will be applied to these various case studies of modern logos, determining success or failure based on empirical standards. A conclusion will be formed based on the result of this research, determining how effective each method is. Throughout this paper, several internet sources will be utilized, ranging from design blogs to news organizations. Due to the misleading nature of some internet content, only blog entries composed by active professional graphic designers will be consulted in this paper. In all, the research should make a case for the importance of utilizing science in design, a field previously thought to be an imprecise and highly uncertain art.

In the modern age, visual culture has become more important to companies searching to get their product noticed. The influence of an image has risen to an all-time high, as fewer words are used to attract consumers. As our attention spans shrink, newer and bolder approaches to advertising have been adopted in order to cope with the change. Over the past few years, marketing strategies in regard to print ads and consumer branding have become increasingly aware of the implications of life in a modern society. Less text is used to influence the consumer, and in lieu of explanations a new attention to subliminal messaging has emerged. There is, in fact, no greater indication of this change than when one observes the change in logos over time.

From the steady evolution of the Starbucks logo to the timeless "golden arches" of McDonald's, it is through these universally recognizable symbols of popular culture that we can reflect on ourselves as a consumer society. What makes these advertisements successful, and do these particular elements stem from pop culture alone or does science also factor in? Mac Cato, graphic designer and author of Go Logo! admits that, as consumers in a modern society, "we are bombarded by iconic imagery every day; some estimates suggest that we see as many as 6,000 logos per day" (80). Logos are required to appeal and re-appeal to consumers constantly. When a brand makes the decision to

update its logo in exchange for a more contemporary one, the new design is the result of an attempt to maintain the brand's identity while gaining relevance in a new age. Therefore, I will examine the qualities of logos in accordance with popular culture versus science – which is a more effective source when considering logo design and redesign schemes? To do so, several credible scientific studies conducted within the past ten years were compiled, each of which attempt to verify that individual design elements can be judged as either effective or ineffective definitely. In addition, modern day logo releases, some of which include the Gap and Pepsi logo redesign program, were considered along with the opinions of the public as compiled by news sources. Lastly, graphic designers actively in the field who publish in books and in online design blogs were consulted and their opinions on what is effective and ineffective in design were also considered. Interestingly, although most logos in today's society are formed modeling current trends in art and culture, it has been found that not only can science adequately determine the standards by which logos should be designed, but it can also explain a logo's rate of success or failure with accuracy.

In terms of pop culture, many aspects of society run on what's currently trendy. From what is on television to billboard advertisements to the runway, our tastes change rapidly across the fields of our interests. However, trends are not born instantly, but are instead the result of a culmination of ideas and opinions that spread into a publically-accepted part of our lives. For instance, something as simple as the font currently used in city signs and landmarks has changed over the years in order to embody a more modern image. According to chief design editor and owner of milkandone.com, Neil Custard, this particular font known as Helvetica is said to have, "a ubiquitous presence in the contemporary visual landscape….it can be found everywhere, from signs, to logos, posters to packaging. [It] is undeniably the most versatile font of the modern age." Furthermore, the idea of minimalism embodying the essence of present aesthetic trends is a commonly accepted idea. Design author for *Specky Boy Design Magazine*, Jennifer Moline, agrees with this assessment, adding that, "[today's] rendering technology is unthinkable, yet we still study Mondrian. Great minimalist work is striking, elegant, and classic... a minimalist ad stands out from the crowd." The examples of Helvetica and minimalism appear as elements of pop culture that act as guidelines when designing not only logos, but our world as we know it. Graphic designers must pay particular attention

to these types of cultural aesthetic trends at all times to effectively relate to its modern audience. In truth, to be successful in logo design means, as authors of <u>Pro Logo</u> Chevalier and Mazzalovo state, "being in phase with the mood of the moment without betraying the constants of [brand] identity, [which] requires talent, intuition and processes that are difficult to rationalize" (186). In this fast-paced world of changing minds and opinions, there arises a real dilemma of relevance for the graphic designers who attempt to effectively refresh a decades-old logo, for in abiding by what may be considered as currently "popular" in culture there still exists the possibility of failure.

Take for example the hushed October 2010 release of clothing design label Gap's new logo (*Fig. 1)*. In order to conform to a more modern and accessible image, the new logo uses clean lines, a simple blue box in the corner, and "the font of the modern age" Helvetica. As previously mentioned, these tenets of design (minimalism and Helvetica) are elements of pop culture that have become increasingly popular in the recent past. In this way, the design should, theoretically, appeal to modern audiences. However, the release of the logo triggered instantaneous backlash from the public. As documented in The Huffington Post, "the new logo was still live on the website…one week after the company swapped it in on gap.com. Confused fans took to Twitter, Facebook and tech blogs to complain… investors, competitors, and even potential employees may still be scratching their head that the company made such a mistake with something so important." The company's biggest mistake is considered to be the fact that the public was not consulted of the change before it happened. Increasingly, the power of public opinion, enhanced by social networking on the internet, has become quite the thorn in the side of graphic designers struggling to appease the masses. Even so, was there a way to predict the redesigned logo's failure, even before Gap spent over two years agonizing over its release?

It is here that science attempts to quantify universal standards for logos. In order to respond to the "trial and error" method classically employed in advertising and marketing campaigns, the design of logos has entered the realm of qualitative data and reason. Chief Executive Officer Dr. A. K. Pradeep of NeuroFocus, a new age marketing firm that implements neurological studies into its marketing schemes, analyzed the failure of the Gap logo in his scientific study. The study, testing elements of design such as activeness, novelty and stylishness, was conducted using EEG sensors that measure brainwave

activity 2,000 times a second. The results of the study, Dr. Pradeep admits, were not a surprise. He explains that, "With the new design, the Gap lost critical ground at the deep subconscious level for this essential brand attribute [stylishness]. For a retail apparel marketer seeking to reach and motivate their target audience, this loss of brand value in the 'stylish' category marks a major cause for concern." In fact, the study shows that the previous logo, "scored at an <u>exceptional</u> level, [whereas] the new logo <u>failed to register at all</u> for this critical attribute**.**" Although the logo used Helvetica, a font used liberally in modern society, it is in this way that it fails; it does not break new ground, nor does it have the same "novel" quality that the previous logo had, using an older styled serif font. The old style is what captured Gap's consumers, and it is in this respect that consumers felt severed from a brand that they had been familiar with for years. "The Gap sells a lot more than just blue jeans today, but relegating the blue of the original logo to minor 'legacy' status in the new version loses that essential connection in the consumer's subconscious to the brand's core origins…Instead of honoring their past, unfortunately the Gap relegated that past to lower relevance," claims Dr. Pradeep. In these ways, science can effectively pinpoint issues with logo design, and can possibly help determine the success of future logos.

In the case of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation and the Bank of China, it was trends in contemporary art rather than science that were consulted in its change. During the 1980s, in order to accommodate a new, internationally-savvy business schema, these two banks adopted new logos that would embody a globally acceptable image. Researched by D.J. Huppatz in the advent of its new design, its praise was sung in the <u>Journal of Design History</u>. The new bank imagery, "discard[s] eagles, lions, tigers and similar ferocious fauna in favour of simplified versions of currently fashionable and expensive works of art" (359). This switchover, along with changing the bank's name to an acronym, HSBC, has allowed for a universally-distinguishable image that is strong enough to speak on its own. The new logo features colors and shapes reminiscent of the Scottish flag and the cross of St. Andrew, hearkening back to the bank's colonial history. But the shapes here do not merely echo that of a flag. As the previous quote implies, there is a resemblance to works of contemporary art that makes the new logo socially acceptable and effectively eye-catching. The effectiveness of the "Mondrian" aesthetic talked about before is apparent in this example. In *fig. 2*, the logo

seems to bear a resemblance to modernist painter Mondrian's "Tableav IV" in that it incorporates red, a primary color, in a similar formation of geometric shapes, creating a pattern. Even though this logo uses contemporary art, an element of pop culture, as the basis for its redesign, it can be seen that in some instances it can be effective. For this logo, not only do current trends in the art world present themselves, but there is a unique homage to the bank's past (the "legacy" factor from Dr. Pradeep's study) that makes the new logo successful.

Another example of a logo that takes queue from the trends of contemporary art comes in the form of the logo redesign for Pepsi. However, when Pepsi decided to "refresh" their logo in a 2009 campaign, the resulting logo received mixed reviews. The change is the result of what graphic designer Peter Arnell of Arnell Group deems, "'an iconic graphic that's also happy…a hybrid between what Pepsi is and its new attitude, the inspiration of a smile'" (Patel "Few Smiles"). As opposed to the classic wave logo, the new logo implements the same color scheme of red, blue and white, but sacrifices gradient changes for a simplified, flatter aesthetic. In his praise of the redesign, Collins remarks that, "whatever is hot, now and up-to-date is packaged and sent out – it's Michael Jackson, it's Britney Spears, whatever's about to explode." As opposed to consulting science, the logo was created implementing ideas from pop-culture. The cleaner font resembles the font of the contemporary age, Helvetica, while the flatness of the new logo hearkens to the particular "pop art style" of contemporary artists Rothko and Warhol (Fig. 4). However, as graphic designer Aviv comments, "'Maybe Pepsi wanted the new logo to feel lighthearted, but instead it feels lightweight, especially for a brand of this magnitude'." In this light, the change is seen as a detriment to the brand, severing pre-established associations with the brand's recognizable 20th century "wave" in lieu of an abstract smile. In this case, mixed professional reviews of Pepsi's monumental rebranding scheme, costing in the neighborhood of $1 million, contribute to a mixed public reaction. As strategy director of Frog design Mary Anne Masterson puts it, the new logo, "'stepped away from its classic element instead of refining it…[placing] the burden on consumers to understand what the new ""smile"" means'." Brands and logos are supposed to be as didactic as possible to appeal to the masses in a positive manner, but with Pepsi's updated logo consumers are left with a metaphorical question mark hovering above their heads.

Science, on the other hand, ventures to eliminate the question mark entirely. In actuality, scientific analysis shows that elements of design can be judged on an individualized basis. This attempt is made by scientists Pamela Henderson and Joseph Cote in "Guidelines for Selecting or Modifying Logos." In this scientific study, several elements of design were tested separately in order to determine the most effective combination of design elements in a logo. Numerous factors were tested, including how "natural" the logo is, how organic the shapes are that comprise it, and how visually balanced the overall logo is. In all, 13 separate design elements were tested. It was determined that the best logos either generate high correct recognition (to the brand), positive effect with some recognition, or positive effect without thought to recognition; the mentality here is that even at its lowest point of recognition, when consumers fail to link the logo to its respective company, a good logo should at least leave a positive impression in the consumer's mind. These three possibilities were found to possess different design qualities implemented together to form a unified logo. For high recognition logos (the "best" type of logo), they are natural, harmonious, have optimal amounts of elaborateness and exhibit repetition (24). The study specifies each element as follows:

> *Natural* reflects the degree to which the design depicts commonly experienced objects. It is…representative and organic…*Harmony* is a congruent pattern or arrangement of parts that combines symmetry and balance and captures good design…*Elaborate* is not simply intricacy, but appears to capture the concept of design richness and the ability to use simple lines to capture the essence of something, It is comprised of complexity, activeness and depth…*Repetition* of elements occurs when parts of the design are similar or identical to one another (16-17).

As mentioned before, the Pepsi logo's redesign was successful in some respects, but a failure in others. This problem of interpretive ambiguity is also explained by this scientific study. The logo is successful in that it incorporates a natural form, that of a wave. Harmony is also achieved through even use of color, much like the harmony achieved through the yin-yang symbol. However, it is a failure in that it lacks elaborateness and repetition. In fact, the practice of simplification when redesigning logos is generally unsuccessful. Henderson and Cote find that, "Current trends lean

toward selecting very simple logos or simplifying existing logos…we recommend against this practice. Slightly more elaborate logos should evoke more positive affective evaluations and will maintain viewer interest and liking over repeated exposures" (21). In the context of the Pepsi logo overhaul, the elaborateness of the previous logo, one that implemented light and shadow creating a more 3-D effect, was much more successful than the new logo which sacrifices the gradation of color for flat tones of red and blue. As one designer criticizes, the redesign sacrifices the brand recognition that had been built up during the 90s, eliminating the "repeated exposure" element of the logo that had made it easily attributable to the brand it represented. Thus, according to this study, the failure of this logo redesign can be explained by science. Perhaps if the logo were accompanied with its namesake, Pepsi, it may still have the chance to gain success.

There are more instances of big budget, supposedly "modernized" logos falling victim to criticism. Take the London 2012 Olympics logo for instance, a logo that cost upwards of $1 million to design. Praised by chairman of the games, Seb Coe, the design is said to "act as a reminder of [the] promise to use the Olympic spirit to inspire everyone and reach out to young people around the world." The target audience for this logo is established as the younger generation, but it is precisely from this target audience that the logo receives the most scrutiny. According to a user opinion on BBC's website, "it looks like a logo designed for young people by old people that don't understand young people." The intended message of the logo, one of inspiration, is entirely sidestepped as backlash seems to be the only thing that the logo has been able to achieve. In its defense, as International Olympic Committee President Jacques Rogge remarks, "the brand launched today by London 2012 is…an early indication of the dynamism, modernity and inclusiveness with which London 2012 will leave its Olympic mark." Even though it is made clear that the design is a reflection of modern and contemporary aesthetics, notably incorporating similar design elements to the HSBC logo by having flat colors and solid geometric shapes, its intended effect is less than positive. According to a public poll on the BBC website, the logo rating has consistently stayed at around 80% disapproval, where users voted the lowest possible score out of 4 on the design. Unlike the praiseworthy HSBC logo that uses a similar design strategy which makes use of modern art, the design for the 2012 London Olympics fails to land a firm grasp on elusive

success. Sometimes not even money, even at the cost of $1 million, can grant a logo immunity from often harsh public opinion.

Thus, science attempts to prove why, even on an international level, the logo is a failure. In "Logo Selection and Modification Guidelines: an empirical international validation in Chile", scientists Sergio Olavarrieta and Roberto Friedmann utilize the design characteristics described in the previous study conducted by Henderson and Cote, and implement a similar experiment in Chile to see whether or not the study could be applied on an international stage. The study found that:

> Correct recognition can be influenced by natural and repetitive designs in both U.S. and Chile. Another common factor…is the importance of harmony in order to generate a positive affect…The overall conclusion is that the logo design characteristics identified in the US-based literature, do affect consumer responses on a cross-cultural setting, thus adding value to the original framework" (17-18).

In considering this information, one can analyze the London 2012 logo failure in this context. As an international example of a logo, it is especially important for the logo to gain a general sense of positive affect amongst a diverse, global audience. First, the logo is not natural – it only exhibits the numbers 2012 in an abstract design. Although somewhat repetitive, the logo lacks harmony in that the parts are each abstracted and disconnected. In applying the characteristics discussed in Henderson and Cote's study, the logo is neither natural nor elaborate design-wise. There are no recognizable forms within the logo other than abstracted numbers, and its use of a singular color encapsulated within a few blocky shapes leaves its audience cold. Evidently, the general sense of public discontent over a logo design can be explained by empirical studies of logo design elements, even on an international level.

In logo designing, an important factor is also color. In the scientific study conducted by Gerald F. Gorn, Amitava Chattopadhyay, and Tracey Yi, the objective focuses on grounding logo color choices into a psychological study that can be used as a standard. Their study, entitled, "Effects of Color as an Executional Cue in Advertising" found that the shade of a color (the lightness or darkness of a color) dramatically influenced the salience of a logo to the consumer. The study suggests that, "Higher levels of chroma (the intensity of a color) and value influence feelings of excitement and relaxation [towards a brand], respectively" (1397). Indeed, as the researchers analyze their results

in the context of pre-existing successful brands, the study verifies itself. In the case of brand recognition, it was found that, "changing chroma or value might create the desired feeling state while still maintaining the hue associated with the product. A good example is provided by the redesign of the Ritz cracker advertising and repackaging in the early 1980s. Ritz kept the red hue but used a higher chroma level than in previous efforts, effectively making 'Ritz look ritzier'" (1398). In this way, scientific evidence has the ability to not only determine the best design elements to use, but can determine the ideal types of colors to use as well with very minimal guessing required.

Thus, it has been found that logo redesigns in the modern age have corresponded more to the current trends of popular culture, adopting stylistic guidelines found in pieces of modern and contemporary art. However, along with the various recent scientific analyses of logo designs, the most successful logos can be seen to have the characteristics designated as the most successful in experiments. As an age that is highly invested in the power of scientific research, more marketing firms should look to science to verify their initial designs and updates to designs. If current scientific studies concerning logo design elements are consulted instead of the ever-wavering public infatuation with various elements of popular culture, logo design no may longer have the risk of hit-or-miss; it can possibly "hit" every time.

Visual Aides:

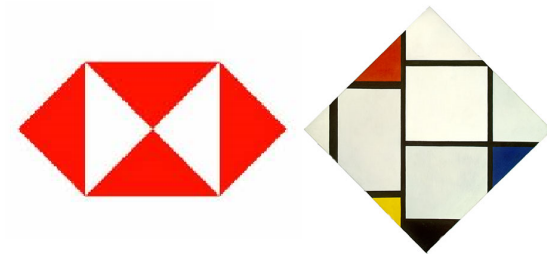*Fig. 1 – Original Gap Logo (left), Redesigned Logo (right)*

Fig.2 – HSBC Logo (left), Piet Mondrian's "Tableau No. IV" (right).

Fig. 3 – London 2012 Olympic Logo

Fig 4. – (from left) Rothko's "No. 301" , Pepsi's 2009 redesigned logo, Warhol's "Flowers".

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