

## Brand Values and the Perception of Symmetry

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### Abstract

The designers of corporate brand marks—otherwise known as logos—exploit symmetry for its ability to express notions of equality, cohesion and stability. However there has been little systematic investigation into how symmetry, within this context, is perceived. This paper presents the preliminary findings from a pilot survey that investigated the association between brand values and the perception of symmetry in financial services brand marks, and discusses the implications for further study.

### Introduction

Symmetry has long formed a central component in the design of human material culture, carrying both implicit and explicit meanings, and human cognition has evolved a perceptual system acutely attuned to detection of symmetry [1][2]. The prevalence of symmetry within modern brand identity design seems to indicate that symmetry continues to be intuitively used as one of a combination of graphical elements to convey meaning across multi-cultural audiences. Despite earlier observations [3][4][5], the potential of symmetry as an unambiguous and reliable communicative device, within the field of brand identity design, appears to be a relatively unexplored domain.

One of the key purposes of corporate brand marks is to communicate an aspect of organizational strategy—typically a distinctive point-of-difference. Whereas a brand mark originally functioned as an aesthetically pleasing identification tool, the primary purpose of today's brand marks is the expression of organizational values, moving beyond awareness (brand recognition and recall) to having associations that differentiate an organization's offering [6]. An analysis of case studies from prominent design consultancies showed that designers have relied upon symmetry as a visual device to communicate concepts such as cohesion, efficiency, and equality [7]. Whilst designers might intend to communicate such concepts, there is no assurance of their reliable interpretation. However it appears that recipients are adept at assigning values and concepts to the presence of symmetry within brand identities. Recent research has indicated that symmetrical organizational brand marks were perceived as being more ethically and socially responsible than those organizations whose brand marks were asymmetrical [8].

The initial part of this study [7] responded to the acknowledgment of the prevalence of symmetries within the brand marks of the financial services by identifying occurrences of the different types of symmetries within this graphical context. The second stage of this study has shifted the focus from the communicative intentions of symmetry to the interpretations of symmetry within brand marks. Specifically the intention was to see whether respondents perceived certain symmetries as conveying particular organizational values.

## Symmetry as Metaphor

There is an observable bias in human perception for simple configurations and regularities rather than random shapes [9], with notable superiority in the detection of vertical reflective symmetry above other types. Higher order symmetries are only likely to be detected by someone exposed to group theory [1]. Symmetry has been said to evoke notions of balance, harmony and regularity stability within the context of graphic design and compositional studies [1][2], with bilateral symmetry expressing balance, calmness and security while stable rotational arrangements as conveying confidence [9]. Within the field of brand identity, designers have used rotational symmetry—consciously or unconsciously—as a mechanism for expressing “cohesion” and “unification” [6]. In contrast, the recent asymmetrical brand mark created for London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games was described by its designers as “unconventionally bold, deliberately spirited, and unexpectedly dissonant”, a mark that reflects London’s “modern, edgy” qualities [10]. In the unveiling of this case, the interpretation of the symbol—and the subsequent response—generated significant critical debate, most of which was negative [11]. Whilst designers might intend to convey specific messages through the design of brand marks, there is no assurance that given meanings will successfully be interpreted by receivers. Accordingly, the communication of meaning requires both an initiator and a receiver, neither of which “has a monopoly on the meaning that passes between them” [12].

The expression of reliable messages through brand identities is said to be more crucial in the service sector due to the relative intangibility of offerings [5]. Research has indicated that financial services are among those service industries perceived as most intangible by consumers with banking products more or less indistinguishable [6]. With such market conditions it is particularly important for financial brands to convey appropriate meanings in order to attain a clear customer understanding of the brand. One strategy, termed “association”, is to link intangible elements to tangible symbols that convey appropriate meanings [5]. For example, Legal and General’s umbrella symbolizes “protection” or the ING lion that conveys “strength”. In addition to associative symbols, symmetry and balance (with sufficient complexity of design to maintain the viewer’s interest) have been shown to enhance the positive affective response of a brand mark, while the repetition of elements and moderate—although not perfect—symmetry enhances recall [5]. Perceptions of ethical leadership are also noted as being influenced by the visual cues of symmetry [8].

## The Perception of Financial Brand Values

Published studies that have analyzed brand identities have dealt with a limited range of symmetries and focus specifically on reflection across a vertical axis [2][5]. In addressing this limitation a comprehensive analysis of symmetry within brand symbols within the chosen sample was undertaken. The Brand Finance Banking 500 (2011) league table was used to identify the brand identities of the top 100 global financial brands, which generates a brand’s value by approximating a net present value based on a discounted estimation of future royalties [13]. The marks were grouped into one of five types: those with perfectly symmetrical symbols; those with close—or perceived—symmetrical symbols; combination marks, consisting of a graphic device and logotype arranged in a near symmetrical manner; asymmetric symbols; and logotypes (stylized name-marks). Using only the 80 marks containing symbols as a sample, the symbols were analyzed for their constituent symmetries. The results showed that just over half (51%) of the marks contained symbols exhibiting exact or perceived symmetries with 49% of the group considered asymmetrical. There appeared a clear prevalence of bilateral reflection (23%) followed by two-fold rotational symmetry (24%) above other multiple symmetries, as consistent with the literature [9]. See [7] for further discussion.

From within the sample 80 symbols categorized as symmetrical, perceived symmetrical and asymmetrical, three to four marks were selected for having properties that best exhibited the boundaries of the groupings (Figure 1). It was equally important that these exemplars had low recognition with the respondents, as the study sought to test the perceptions of the brand marks alone, as opposed to the signification of the brand associations built from other marketing communications. A significant limitation noted in previous studies has been the reliance on brand experts' opinions. This study therefore explores the customer perception of brand values as expressed through the corporate brand mark alone. Using the brand marks shown in Figure 1, a survey was conducted with postgraduate students studying at the University of Leeds. A sample of 47 respondents was used for data collection consisting of 23 design students and 24 non-design students. Five of the most frequently occurring organizational values—ethical, integrity, excellence, innovation, teamwork and customer satisfaction—as identified in a study published in Harvard Business Review, were presented alongside the selected cases [14]. Respondents were instructed to disregard any brand marks that they were familiar with through prior advertising or through dealings with as a customer. Respondents were asked to examine the brand marks and to highlight any of the given organizational values that they perceived to be expressed in each of the marks. Also as an emergent research design a comment box was provided to elicit explanations behind the perceptions for textual analysis in order to determine the key variables for further investigation (i.e. color, typeface, etc.).



Figure 1: Selected brand marks. Symmetrical symbols: (a) Bank of Yokohama, (b) Banamex, (c) DBS Bank, (d) PNC Global Investment Servicing. Perceived symmetrical symbols (e) Garanti, (f) National Australia Bank, (g) VTB. Asymmetrical symbols: (h) Merrill Lynch, (i) RBC Royal Bank, (j) Nordea.

### Preliminary Findings

The most frequently occurring value assigned to the rotationally symmetrical symbols the interpretation of “teamwork”, with a group average of 47%. The Banamex symbol, with the most explicit symmetrical construction, was assigned this value by 57% of respondents, followed by DBS (49%) and PNC (47%). A typical respondent explanation for this interpretation was the “unification of individuals parts”. The second most frequently assigned value to the symmetrical symbols was “integrity” (30%). In the case of Bank of Yokohama, the only reflective symbol from group 1, the assignment of values showed a greater spread across the range of values. By contrast, the figurative asymmetrical symbols of Merrill Lynch and RBC showed a low occurrence in the perceived values of “teamwork” (11% and 13% respectively) and “innovation” (9% and 6% respectively).

It was apparent from the findings that in the instances where abstract symbols resembled figurative marks that there appeared a greater reference to the totality of the shape—or gestalt—as opposed to the construction. For instance, the NAB symbol was interpreted as “excellent” and “innovative” which fits the metaphorical associations of a star. Similarly the symbol for Garanti was assigned the value of “ethical” by 47% of respondents, with supporting statements referencing the leaf-like shape and the color green. In both of the aforementioned cases no reference was made to the construction of the shape.

### Discussion and Avenues for Further Enquiry

Whilst some brand identity designers have used symmetry to express specific organizational values, the interpretation of such devices represents an under-explored domain. This study represents the preliminary stages of a series of surveys exploring the communicative value of symmetry in design. This preliminary survey revealed that abstract symbols, exhibiting rotational symmetry, were frequently interpreted as conveying the organizational value of “teamwork”. However, in cases where brand marks appeared more representational, the interpretation seemed to be derived from the literal representation of the symbol rather than the expressive qualities of the symmetrical construction. These findings provide several points to consider: firstly that rotational symmetry appears to be more expressive if within an abstract, non-figurative symbol. Secondly, when abstract symbols contain a figurative resemblance the construction, symmetrical or otherwise, has little influence on the interpretation. Color was occasionally cited as the signifier of an organizational value rather than the graphical construction; this suggests that monochrome reproductions might be more suitable for the next stages of the study.

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