Authenticity in Branding

A thesis presented to
the faculty of
the College of Fine Arts of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts

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May 2013

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This thesis titled
Authenticity in Branding

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ABSTRACT

STORER, HEATHER J., M.F.A., May 2013, Graphic Design

Authenticity in Branding

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It seems as though the practice of branding has become an art of deception. While there is no simple solution to a “quest for authenticity,” there is merit to further exploration and investigation of the idea of authenticity as it relates to branding. We live in an age where a product is not simply sold for product’s sake, but along with that product we are confronted with ideas about lifestyle, personality, history, experience, community, etc. Consumers are attracted to the story-telling aspect of brands; it helps us relate to a product and draws our attention and loyalties. However, consumers also expect some level of honesty from a company…some degree of truth.

Finding the place at which “truth” and “story” can overlap will prove to be valuable to both consumers and designers. Consumers will have a heightened awareness of their participation in viewing and interpreting brand messaging as well as a greater attentiveness to brand story-telling devices such as nostalgia. Designers will have a greater consideration for the tactics used in creating brand messaging and how their aesthetic decision-making has such a strong effect on consumer beliefs.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis research was completed with the support and care of many people. Many thanks to my committee members, Don Adleta, Sherry Blankenship, and Tom Bartel, who offered wisdom, guidance and support. Also thanks to Molly Schoenhoff and Lydia McDermott for the assistance and knowledge offered during the thesis-writing process. Additional gratitude is extended to Michael Bierut in appreciation of his guidance offered during his visit to the Ohio University graphic design department. I would also like to thank my fellow graphic design classmates, Frederick A. Jesser IV, Ryan Lewis, and Eunice Delaquis for providing a supportive and challenging environment in which to foster and further my education.

Of course, the completion of this research would not be possible without the love and support of my family and friends, especially Maddie Cupp and my parents, Don and Becky Storer, who were supportive throughout the research process and assisted with the installation of my thesis exhibition show.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the film, *The Truman Show*, the main character discovers his entire life - family, friends, job, and town - has been falsely concocted by a television producer for the sake of creating entertainment. The main character, Truman, portrayed by Jim Carrey, starts to notice the “perfection” of everything around him and he begins to realize that things are artificial—including some walls that are merely false stage-set walls. He begins to frantically search for the truth in this false world that is his reality. He realizes that even the sky was not authentic. He discovers it as he climbs the staircase to the director’s sound booth (Figure 1). Over the past few decades branding has taken a turn toward this fake reality for the sake of telling the “brand story.” Branding and advertising produce fakes, forgeries, and recreations in an attempt to make an emotional connection with consumers. As much as this false landscape holds a certain appeal, we, like Truman, want to learn the true story.

![Figure 1. Jim Carrey in “The Truman Show.” From “The Truman Show,” Paramount Pictures, 1998.](http://media.tumblr.com/tumblr_m7nba4OKeF1qzzh6g.jpg)
The practice of branding has become an art of deception. While there is no simple solution to a “quest for authenticity,” There is merit to further exploration and investigation of this stumbling block that challenges so many designers. It is inevitable that other “aesthetic predecessors” will influence design. However, is it fair to say that designers can never produce authentic work? The challenge in the commercial world of design is posed by the requirement to tell a story—a brand story. We live in an age where a product is not simply sold for product’s sake, but along with that product we are confronted with ideas about lifestyle, personality, history, experience, community, etc. Consumers are attracted to the story-telling aspect of brands; it helps us relate to a product and draws our attention and loyalties. However, consumers also expect some level of honesty from a company…some degree of truth. For example, in the food industry, consumers have recently gained a heightened awareness of social and environmental practices in food production. Supermarket shelves have become full of products promising to be “natural” or “organic.” Shoppers rely on food packaging and advertisements to offer informative messages in addition to seductive ones. It is important, therefore, to understand the simultaneous presence of “story-telling” and “truth-telling” within the world of consumerism and the role design plays in each of these instances. Finding the place at which “story” and “truth” can overlap will prove to be valuable to both consumers and designers, and will be a first step to understanding the ethical dilemmas of commercial-driven design.
An awareness of the “story-telling” phenomenon can be attained by examining the varying degrees of “fakeness” that are abundant in various types of design. For example, there are differences in tactics employed by designers such as parody, emulation, reference, and intentional forgery. It is significant to understand that our environment is so saturated with things that are fake, yet not all fakes are the same. A better understanding of these methods of deception can assist designers and consumers in developing an awareness of the “inauthenticness” within the practice of branding.

By exploring the historical context that has framed the way in which the practice of branding exists today and investigating some of these subjects through visual research, this project will provide a unique look into the story-telling and truth-telling tactics that have become commonplace in the commoditized world. Consumers will have a heightened awareness of their participation in viewing and interpreting brand messaging. Designers will have a greater consideration for the tactics used in creating brand messaging.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Context of Deception and Branding

To understand the incredible means by which branding has transformed our culture, it is important examine how the practice of branding, as we understand it today, came to be. Branding can be related to many fields and is often associated with advertising and graphic design, perhaps a hybrid of the two. A major shift in our culture and, as a result, a major shift in the world of advertising and graphic design occurred with the industrial revolution and the advent of mass-produced goods. As Steven Heller put it: “…modern graphic design is the result of the transition in the late nineteenth century from a product to a consumer culture” (Bierut, 1997, p. 112). The arrival of mass production brought an unprecedented amount of varieties of products and the need arose for consumers to be able to differentiate among varieties of similar goods.

In the book No Logo Naomi Klein describes the birth of branding and the role of design for a consumer culture: “The first task of branding was to bestow proper names on generic goods such as sugar, flour, soap and cereal, which had previously been scooped out of barrels by local shopkeepers.” Graphic designers were needed to create a visual reference point for consumers—a trustworthy face to attach to a product:

‘Familiar personalities such as Dr. Brown, Uncle Ben, Aunt Jemima, and Old Grand-Dad came to replace the shopkeeper, who was traditionally responsible for measuring bulk foods for customers and acting as an advocate for products…a nationwide vocabulary of brand names replaced the local shopkeeper as the interface between consumer and product’ (Klein, 1999, p. 6).
Here, from the birth of branding, one can see the beginnings of a deceptive practice. Fictitious characters were being created to replace real people. The placement of trust was shifted from a real person (local shopkeeper) to a fictitious one such as the Quaker Oats man.


From this point, the practice of commercial design grew into a new sort of animal. Branding grew into much more than creating a character or mascot to promote a product—it was about capturing the “essence” of a corporation…associating it with a desirable lifestyle. There was a so-called “branding boom” of the eighties, in which people were now walking advertisements, with company logos becoming ever-present on shirts, jackets, hats, etc. Klein describes a key turning point within the practice of branding: “in 1988 when Philip Morris purchased Kraft for $12.6 billion—six times what
the company was worth on paper.” This was a moment that defined how branding added a tangible value to a corporation: “…a huge dollar value had been assigned to something that had previously been abstract and unquantifiable—a brand name” (Klein, 1999, p. 7-8).

At the end of the 80s Bill Moyers created a documentary film, “Consuming Images,” to describe the phenomenon of branding. In this film he states:

The mass producing and consuming of images has transformed the way you and I see and understand the world. In politics, in business, in journalism…the visual media have taken center stage, shaping the public mind with powerful tools of fiction that both please and deceive (Moyers, 1989).

Moyers is referring to the barrage of advertising in the 1980s that was aimed at seducing audiences through the process of story telling. Visual elements were used to tell a story and to persuade consumers to desire a certain lifestyle and/or products.

The recession following the branding boom of the 80s proved that branding added strength to a corporation. The brands that came out of the recession successfully were those who were selling a brand more than a product (Klein, 1999, p. 17). In the 90s a new shift towards the entire “brand experience” was beginning to take hold of the corporate world. Advertisements were only the small first stepping-stone to building a brand. Naomi Klein explains how successful brands such as the Body Shop and Starbucks …had fostered powerful identities by making their brand concept into a virus and sending it out into the culture via a variety of channels: cultural sponsorship, political controversy, the consumer experience and brand extensions. Direct
advertising, in this context, was viewed as a rather clumsy intrusion into a much more organic approach (1999, p. 20).

Klein is describing how branding evolved from straightforward, traditional advertising techniques to a myriad of techniques to tap into consumer’s desires. From this point branding has seeped into every area of our culture: music, movies, television, sports, and even our cityscapes. Every venue has been exploited in the name of creating a brand experience.

In order to create a branded “experience,” companies rely on story-telling to engage the consumer and generate an emotional connection with the brand. Story-telling practices can range from creating a likeable mascot, such as the Quaker Oats man, to conveying a back-story or history of a company. Often these story-telling devices blur the lines between fact and fiction. This story-telling practice creates controversy among some branding or design professionals.

**Nostalgia: A Deceptive Marketing Tool?**

The use of nostalgic ideas and imagery has become common practice in the world of marketing. Type, colors, textures, and imagery that remind consumers of simpler times, or that allude to a historical context allow consumers to connect with brands and brand messaging at an emotional level. However, there is some difference of opinion among design professionals as to the ethical implications of the use of nostalgic imagery. Some view this practice as deceitful, as merely a means to lie to lure consumers, while other professionals view their aesthetic decision-making as a necessary part of communicating a brand message and forming a connection with the consumer.
Two well-known graphic designers, Tibor Kalman and Joe Duffy, debated the ethical issues surrounding packaging design, and whether or not certain aesthetic decisions could be deemed deceptive. There are two important issues raised in the documented debate between Tibor Kalman and Joe Duffy. These two well-established design professionals debate an ethical dilemma: the package used as a tool to deceive consumers in order to seduce them into purchasing, and the idea that an attractive package design becomes an added value, inherent to the product itself—the consumer is not just convinced to desire the contents of the package, the consumer desires the package itself. First, Joe Duffy suggests that the packaging is part of the product itself: “The package itself is part of the product. It’s not just what’s in the container; it’s everything that’s part of it. If the package is better, for any number of reasons, the product is better.” (Kenedi, 2011).

Duffy also raises an important issue with his implication that the packaging is part of the product. Historically, packaging obviously was created and designed for functionality, but we now live in a different era in which the aesthetics of packaging play an important role for the product. Packages are not just used to sell a product; they are selling ideas, lifestyles, aspirations, etc. If this is true, then consumers are no longer just buying a product contained in a package, but they are buying the package itself and the ideas it is communicating. Kalman disagrees with the concept that the package should be considered part of the product and argues, “that’s the big lie of marketing.” Kalman also addresses the tendency of marketers and packages to employ the use of nostalgia and references the packaging of the Classico spaghetti sauce (Figure 3) designed by Joe
Duffy:

The fake nostalgia thing is kind of a lie. I think the reason people do fake nostalgia in packaging is because marketers and researchers have convinced us—and it’s probably true—that good old-fashioned homemade spaghetti sauce is better than computer-aided-design spaghetti sauce (Kenedi, 2011).

Kalman feels that the aesthetic decision to use a nostalgic design crosses an ethical boundary and that the designer is being intentionally deceptive to the consumer.

Elliot Weiss supports this idea in his article, “Packaging Jewishness: Novelty and Tradition in Kosher Food Packaging,” in which he discusses the tendency of kosher food packaging design to emphasize ideas of nostalgia and tradition to lure consumers. Weiss suggests that the nature of these designs is deceptive in regards to the contradiction between the ideas of “tradition” and “mass production.” Weiss states: “References to
tradition help to obscure the paradoxical effect in which the very mass production processes that make a packaged product possible are the same processes responsible for eroding traditional production methods and practices.” (2004, p. 1).

While Duffy defends the nostalgic graphics like those used for the *Classico* packaging by suggesting that the graphic style is indicative of the Italian recipes used for the product, Kalman argues that the graphics indicate a false history:

To me, the lie in these old-time folksy graphics is that the spaghetti sauce is any better. The lie is in getting people to believe: ‘Oh, this is an old- fashioned label. This company must have been around for a hundred years. This must be an old- fashioned recipe that uses all-natural ingredients just like my mama used to do’ (Kenedi, 2011).

Kalman is implying that desiger’s aesthetic choices lead the consumer to believe in false ideas. Weiss also cites the practices in which “…advertisers construct mythical product genealogies as substitutes for real histories” (2004, p. 1). He gives the example of packaging (Figure 4) created by *Delancey Dessert Company*:

The romanticized vision of the Lower East Side described in the label text is reinforced by the photographic imagery on the front of the package. An elderly man and woman hold trays of what appear to be the deserts they just baked. The costume of the subjects, as well as the pictorial conventions, “age” the photo and authenticate the product within (2004, p. 13).

In this case the package design is validating the authenticity of the product. The package design is conveying a sense of time, place, and history through the image selection.
In addition, the idea of faking authenticity is common in the practice of graphic design. It is a technique often employed to connect with viewers on an emotional level. Much as the Delancey Dessert company used an aged-looking photograph to evoke ideas about history and culture, designers often employ visual cues to reference a time, place, etc. In “No More Rules” Rick Poynor describes a trend in the 1990s: “many commercial ventures deployed postmodern nostalgia to trigger reassuring emotions in consumers” (Poynor, 2003, p. 89).

Tibor Kalman and his design firm M&Co. were known for employing vernacular design or design that was created by the general public, i.e., not trained in the graphic arts. One example of this is a print advertisement Kalman created for Restaurant Florent, a trendy restaurant in the meatpacking district of New York (Poynor, 2003, p. 82). The
design mimicked the plastic letter signs often used by delis in which some characters may be re-appropriated and used in place of another character. (Figure 5) In a way, Kalman was doing something that was similar to the *Delancey Dessert Company*. He was using a recognizable visual style that evoked a sense of localism, tradition, and perhaps even nostalgia.

![Figure 5](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_RwmGaB6TA0s/Sc7Rfjke1oI/AAAAAAAADc4/A69Q9YJPJho/s400/re5.jpg)

The idea of truth and authenticity arises again in the case of these designs. Both are intentionally replicating the aesthetic of something old or traditional. In the case of Kalman’s ad, it is intentionally replicating the look of a local, non-professionally designed deli sign.
The nostalgic design trend rose to a peak in the 1990s when ads were replicating the retro style of designs from the 20s to 50s. Old Navy built an entire ad/branding campaign around a postmodern nostalgic style that referenced retro advertisements (Poynor, 2003, p. 89). The retro style offered consumers something that was reassuring and familiar. Though different in their approaches, the same can be said for the vernacular style of the Restaurant Florent ad and the Delancey Dessert Company packaging. Each was revisiting a recognizable design language as a way of emotionally connecting the consumer to the brand.

Nostalgia and “Fakes” in Architectural Design

The re-appropriation of familiar design can be seen in other areas beyond packaged/consumable goods. For example, the architectural design industry has become inundated with similar practices - the use of deception in the quest for nostalgia. Much like the packaging design discussed earlier, architects’ aesthetic decision-making often involves recycling familiar styles in order to evoke nostalgic ideas and to convey a false history. Much as consumers are emotionally drawn to the “retro” packaging, they are also drawn to “retro” architecture that reminds them of simpler times or an illusionary lifestyle. Architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable describes this phenomenon as a result of “…the American state of mind, in which illusion is preferred over reality to the point where the replica is accepted as genuine and the simulacrum replaces the source” (Huxtable, 1997, p. 2).

The trend of illusionary architecture can also be seen in residential and retail developments in the 90s and 2000s. Huxtable describes them as “…neotraditional
residential developments based on a past ideal of community that has become part of the mythology of the American dream” (Huxtable, 1997, p. 42). These communities are often criticized for basing a community structure on an outdated nostalgic idea of small-town American living that neglects the contemporary condition of our society and promotes the idea of sameness and conformity. As Huxtable describes, “this restricted and rigidly controlled design, while charming to the eye, evades the issue and desirability of diversity…” (Huxtable, 1997, p. 44).

Often referred to as “lifestyle communities,” this type of architecture inevitably draws comparison to the champion of lifestyle branding: Disney. Through their films, products, and theme parks, Disney adeptly markets the American dream. In an interview with PBS, author Naomi Klein explains the Disney marketing scheme, which is “…selling an idea of a lost American town where there was a town square and your kids were safe to walk in the streets” (Interview Naomi Klein, 2004).

This phenomenon reached its peak when Disney planned and developed its first residential community of Celebration, Florida. (Figure 6) This community features neotraditional architecture and small-town tropes such as a retro movie theater, shops, restaurants, parks, etc. A fascinating feature in this community is the absence of branded retail establishments. There are no McDonalds or Wal-Marts in this small town. Klein explains the goal of the Disney-branded community with the absence of outside brands: “Once you actually achieve brand nirvana, what you want to do is you want to seal the exits. There's no competition, and you've got full synergy, full vertical integration, and there's no need for marketing” (Interview Naomi Klein, 2004).
While retro mimicry may be the growing trend in community and retail planning, the presence of “fakes” is nothing new in the realm of architecture. In our culture we are constantly replicating styles of architecture for the sake of entertainment. Las Vegas is a prime example of this notion. Set in an expansive and empty dessert, the Las Vegas strip is a myriad of replicas, fakes, and forgeries of architecture from other times and places. It is difficult to create architecture that is not pointing to or referencing the visual style of something else. The architectural landscape, like other fields of design, is a collection of symbols.

Architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, analyzed the presence of symbols and messaging in architecture in the book/study: Learning from Las Vegas. In this study Venturi and Brown identify two types of architecture, which they refer to as the
“duck” and the “decorated shed.” Venturi and Brown describe the “duck” building as an instance “where the architectural systems of space, structure, and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form. This kind of building-becoming-sculpture we’d call the duck in honor of the duck-shaped drive-in, ‘The Long Island Duckling’…”

Figure 7. The duck. http://www.wordsinspace.net/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/VenturiDuckShed.jpg

The other type of architecture was explained as an instance “where systems of space and structure are directly at the service of program, and ornament is applied independently of them. This we call the decorated shed” (Venturi & Brown, 1972, p. 88).

Figure 8. The decorated shed. http://www.wordsinspace.net/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/VenturiDuckShed.jpg
What is significant about the system of categorization created by Venturi and Brown is that they have identified two types of architecture, which could be considered “fake” while maintaining the validity of both archetypes. This recognition can be significant in the world of branding as well. The acceptance that there are many fakes, but not all fakes are the same, could prove valuable to designers and consumers, as they consider the approach to brand design.

In his book, Joseph Pine also addresses the idea of different types of fakes and builds on an idea laid out by Ada Louise Huxtable in “The Unreal America.” Huxtable states that

…it is becoming increasingly difficult to tell the real fakes from the fake fake. All fakes are clearly not equal; there are good fakes and bad fakes. The standard is no longer real versus phony, but the relative merits of the imitation” (Huxtable, 1997, p. 75).

It is important to recognize the value in identifying the differences among fakes. With a culture that has become saturated with “fakeness” there must be a method for categorization among deceptive aesthetics so that it may be determined when such deceptive tactics are ethically wrong, and when they may be appropriately used.

Furthermore, Pine discusses that we now have a place in our culture for so many fakes that we can now divide the fakes into “real” and “fake” categories. Pine divides the fakes by using these criteria: “Is it what it says it is?” and “Is true to itself?”
In this way Disneyland can be described as a “fake real” because although it is not what it says it is (a magic kingdom) but it is true to itself. (Gilmore, 2007, p. 109) There have been so many fake creations in the name of commerce and entertainment that we must acknowledge that there can be such a thing as “real fake.” Products such as artificial sweetener and temporary tattoos are things that are intentionally created to be fake. Can there be authenticity in something fake? If you follow Pine’s logic, the answer is yes.

In his *Time* magazine article, John Cloud responds to Pine’s ideas and suggests that the public will find an offering to be authentic by admission of its fakeness. For example, *The Daily Show* is a fake news show that openly admits to its fakeness, and its audience may find its programming to be more authentic because of this fact. Cloud suggests: “Today you are authentic when you acknowledge just how fake you really are” (Cloud, 2008, p. 3)

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* acknowledges that the term “authentic” could refer to something that is a reproduction or copy of something else: “conforming to an original so as to reproduce essential features” or “made or done the same way as an original” (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*). This definition suggests that we can define
something as “authentic” that is, in actuality, a copy of something that is authentic.

In her response to Michael Bierut’s article (2005) on authenticity, Marian Bantjes echoes this sentiment: “Of course there are levels of inauthenticity, from reference and emulation to willful trickery, parody and outright forgery.” She also suggests that pure authenticity can never be achieved in the design world “…because everything is borrowed or stolen.”

**The Consequences of Deception in Branding**

As consumers become aware of the deception and forgery that are present within our visual landscape, there are negative consequences that can result. Consumers may begin to distrust brands as they become attentive to the illusory nature of marketing. An example of this can be seen by brands that have developed such a dominating presence within our society that their existence seems to counteract some of the core values or ideas that were originally connected to the brand image. For example, Starbucks, a brand that has built its success on the premise of creating the “third place”—a place that people can commune outside the workplace or home environments. Starbucks store environments mimic the feel of local coffee houses that provide trendy music and art and offer a “homey” environment to enjoy coffee, work on a laptop, etc. However, these cozy local-feeling hang-outs lose their appeal when Starbucks retail locations have grown to occupy every street corner and airport corridor in the country. The brand loses its unique one-of-a-kind appeal and begins to feel more like a commoditized environment. In an attempt to bring back the local coffee house feel, Starbucks opened several “stealth” stores that were void of the Starbucks brand graphics and signature mermaid logo (Figure 10).

Instead, the coffee shop took on the name of the street on which it was located (Figure 11). The over-saturation of the coffee shop market has also led to commentary and criticisms of the *Starbucks* brand. The satirical web newspaper, *The Onion*, posted a headline: “New *Starbucks* Opens in Rest Room of Existing *Starbucks*.” Marketing experts suggest that even viral Internet posts such as *The Onion* article reinforce the idea “…that *Starbucks* is little more than a profit-driven marketing affectation…” It is also suggested that this alternate brand image concocted by *Starbucks*’ critics creates a “dopplegänger” image of the brand that is contrary to the intended brand message. The promoters of this theory suggest that “…emotional-branding strategies are conducive to the emergence of a dopplegänger brand image, which is defined as a family of disparaging images and meanings about a brand that circulate throughout popular culture” (Thompson et al., 2006, p. 50-54).

Similar phenomenon can be seen with big box retailers such as *Wal-Mart* and *Target*. These retailers have become so large and impersonal they have used marketing tactics that emulate a small local shop. For example, *Wal-Mart*’s in-house grocery brand, “Marketside,” utilizes visuals and packaging designs that emulate a specialty bakery shop or local farmer’s market (Figure 12).
It’s ironic that a mass-market retailer that is responsible for the demise of locally owned, small-town businesses markets its in-house brand by using visual cues that allude to those small, local shops.

In response to the myriad of branding messages being produced and consumed in our culture there has been a backlash reaction among consumers and the design community itself. This reaction manifests itself in the form of visual critique in the name of ethics, social responsibility, etc. Matthew Soar states that there has been an “…escalation in the promotion of ‘culture jamming’ as a viable form of populist, anti-commercial critique” (2002, p. 572). A prime example of this anti-brand design movement would be “…the Canadian magazine *Adbusters*, perhaps best known for its spoof ads deriding a whole range of ills associated with excessive consumerism and the corporate concentration of media ownership…” (Soar, 2002, p. 572). Soar also references a call to action made by notable practitioners in the field of graphic design in the form of a “…polemical document called the ‘First Things First Manifesto’, which calls, in part,
for a ‘reversal of priorities in favor of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication – a mindshift away from product marketing’” (2002, p. 571).

In describing several forms of responses from the design community, Soar draws attention to the strong reaction to design being used as a visual tool in the practice of consumerism and, as a result, the ethical responsibility that is placed on the practice of graphic design. In the examples of culture jamming, *Adbusters*, and the “First Things First Manifesto” Soar draws attention to the common thread among these responses in which “…they identify designers in particular as potent agents of positive social change” (Soar, 2002, p. 572).

Design writer Rick Poynor draws attention to a similar phenomenon seen in the satirical work of Shawn Wolfe, an artist whose work draws attention to the deceptive nature of consumer-driven graphic design. Wolfe’s work includes fictitious but realistic looking advertisements for non-existent products with “no clear function.” Poynor suggests that Wolfe’s fake advertising “satirizes the abstract nature of branding’s transcendent calls to the consumer” (2003, p.163-165). Examples of Shawn Wolfe’s satire include several ads for a fictitious company called “Beakit” including one for a confusing product referred to as a “Remover Installer.”
Poynor concludes that with ads such as these “Wolfe was aiming not at the imperialistic ambitions, omnipresence or failings of a particular brand, but at an entire system of production and consumption” (2003, p. 165). Wolfe clearly targets the deceptive nature of branding with the Beakit tagline: “‘The general gloss of falsity is our only product’” (Poynor, 2003, p. 165). Similar to the idea of the *Daily Show*, this ad can be perceived as being authentic due to the fact that it owns up to its’ fakeness. There is an inherent “authenticness” in the intentional, satirical fakeness.
The Designer’s Role in Authenticity

The negative commentary surrounding the practices of branding raises the question of the role of the designer and how one could take a more honest or authentic approach to brand oriented design. Important considerations in the role of the designer include the aesthetic decisions made by the designer (and the reasoning behind those decisions) and the consideration of the audience’s perception of the brand message—the perception of its “authenticness.”

In “Clean New World” Maud Lavin examines the differing opinions of designers William Golden and Paul Rand in regards to the role of the aesthetic and the conveyance of a message. Aesthetic decisions made by the designer play an important role in how the consumer or audience receives and/or believes a message. Lavin states: “…Golden shares Paul Rand’s adulation of order, simplicity and legibility. Yet unlike Rand he does not conflate these formal issues with the communication of a mythic essential truth” (Lavin, 2001, p. 83).

Golden, who had created some politically active designs through his work at CBS, was critical of Rand’s thought that a simplistic and straightforward design equated a sense of honesty. Golden argued that in commercial work there would always be an inevitable practice of deception because the client will always want the designer “…to help create an attitude about the facts, not to communicate them” (Lavin, 2001, p. 83).

Rand practices design under the notion that through simplistic design, honesty can be conveyed: “Rand believes that the designer should pursue simplicity in order to divine some abstract “truth” (Lavin, 2001, p. 81). Rand’s approach is similar to the idea of
design serving as a visual metaphor for the brand message. The goal is for the aesthetic
decisions to be based entirely on the conveying the essential essence of the brand—to
create a visual metaphor that provides a message of truth.

The arguments made by Golden and Rand are lacking the comparison between
two commercial projects: one that takes a simplistic and straightforward approach, such
as Rand prefers, and another project that uses more deceptive tactics such as decorative
elements, nostalgic imagery, faux texture, etc. Is there not merit in comparing the honesty
of these tactics? Within commercial practices can there be a range of truthfulness?

Golden wants to argue that the involvement of a corporate client precludes one
from conveying facts, yet his designs for political/social causes could also be considered
to “…create an attitude about the facts, not to communicate them” (Lavin, 2001, p. 83).
Political ads are often present one side of an argument.

In Golden’s work, such as a political poster for a candidate, he is using visual
means to communicate a message to a targeted audience to persuade them to take action.
In Rand’s work, such as the IBM logo, he is using visual means to communicate a
message to a targeted audience to persuade them to take action. The difference could lie
in the fact that William Golden may be producing political posters of his own accord,
with himself as the “client.” While Paul Rand has the third party client, IBM, involved in
the message that he is communicating with his work. But aren’t both messages biased in
some way? Political posters are merely advertisements for one’s cause, candidate, etc.
One design might be persuading you to vote for a candidate while another design might
Another example of aesthetic decision making and its relationship to gaining audience trust is in the selection of typeface. Michael Bierut responded to an interesting study conducted by Errol Morris and the *New York Times*. Morris posted a passage through the *New York Times* blog describing the likelihood of an asteroid hitting the earth. After the site visitors read the passage they responded in a survey to say how “believable” the passage was. Each time someone visited the site the typeface of the passage changed randomly between Baskerville, Computer Modern, Georgia, Helvetica, Comic Sans, or Trebuchet. The study showed that passages set in Baskerville were voted as being more believable than passages set in any of the other typefaces. Comic Sans was determined to be the least trustworthy of the typefaces.

While it may be true that other studies may need to be conducted before this data could be legitimized, the research presents some fascinating ideas. The idea that visual aesthetics influence what we perceive as being true or false. It is logical that we are more likely to put trust in serif fonts. They have a history, they have stood the test of time, they are serious and refined… etc. It is interesting that John Baskerville, inventor of this trustworthy typeface, used the type to print bibles and books of prayer—types of publications in which a level of honesty was essential. One would think that the public would not be so easily swayed by the aesthetics of information and that the focus would be on the content. However, the research by Morris clearly indicates that we are easily
deceived by appearances or that aesthetics play a large role in the credibility of a message. (Bierut, 2012).

This is an important consideration in the field of branding. Brands are constantly trying to persuade or convince consumers to believe in their product or services. The study involving typeface perception suggests that type selection could play an important role in consumer perception. Visual aesthetics play an important role in how we perceive a message; typeface selection, image selection, and color selection all become ethical decisions.

While the designer may have an ethical responsibility when it comes to translating a message it is evident, through the examination of aesthetic devices in advertising and architecture and beyond, that designs will often be influenced by a predecessor, and may visually represent ideas of the past. Audiences have accepted false representations as “real.” As mentioned previously, there are many levels of “inauthenticity,” and recognizing the differences among them is an important step towards taking an ethical approach to design.

Another important factor is the differences in the audience/consumer perception of brand messages. Consumer strategists at Iconoculture, a company specializing in consumer research published an article entitled, “Stealth Branding and Authenticity: How companies can keep it real.” The article discussed the ever-growing importance of authenticity and audience perception of authenticity to the practice of branding as a result of smaller brands being bought out by larger corporations. For example, Converse is owned by Nike, Ben and Jerry’s is owned by Unilever and Odwalla juice is owned by
Coca Cola. In order to retain or gain customer loyalty these companies have to maintain a unique set of brand practices so as not to appear to melt into the look and feel of a parent mega-corporation. By maintaining a separate identity from a parent company, a product such as Ben & Jerry’s is able to maintain the unique appeal that makes it a successful brand. The author states that this process helps these brands come across to the consumer as authentic.

The author also suggests that different generations perceive authenticity in different ways. For example, younger generations feel that a level of participation and interaction with a brand makes it authentic, while baby boomers respond to nostalgia. Different experiences are required to convince consumers of different ages that a brand is authentic. Technology might also play an important role in regards to this phenomenon. Younger generations of today are more connected with one another and more connected to information than ever before. Their experience with a product is much more likely to involve an online experience than baby boomers or older generations. The youth generation with its involvement in social media allows for another kind of brand interaction beyond a commercial or seeing a product ad on a billboard, or encountering a product display in a retail environment. Their definition of “authenticity” as it relates to a brand will likely be influenced by a completely different set of factors. On the contrary, older generations, as is suggested in the article, are influenced by ideas of nostalgia and would probably relate well to brands that have a history, familiarity…brands that they have grown up with. The older millennials (20-30 year olds) believe a brand is authentic when there is a great amount of transparency (be it good or bad). Honesty and a glimpse
of behind-the-scenes practices build brand trust with this generation. This is logical since this generation was a part of the branding boom that happened in the late 80s and early 90s when brand lifestyles became the trend in marketing. This generation grew up wearing logos and brand names plastered on their clothing, but also have enough access to technology and information to be inquisitive and investigative about brand information that is accessible to the public. This article raises an important point that authenticity and the practices that build brand trust are age and generation-specific. Our environment and cultural surroundings play an important role in how we perceive things as being authentic. This is important for the role of the designer to consider that there is not one truly authentic solution. Instead we must consider the target audience when considering how to effectively convey an authentic message to a consumer. (Ramberg & Anderson, 2008).

It is also important to gain an understanding of the practice of branding and how it has evolved into creating an environment of story telling. Designers will gain a better understanding of how to take a more authentic approach with their process of creating and conveying messages. Consumers will gain a better understanding of the role they play in the transmission and consumption of brand messaging. Visual research will assist in creating a greater awareness of truth and story and the functions they serve in a commoditized society.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

Throughout the research process several methods were employed in an attempt to have a greater understanding of authenticity from both the designer and audience point of view. The first explorations examined the design process and how that process can become more authentic. As mentioned previously, the aesthetic decisions made by a designer are important when considering an authentic approach to branding. There are inherent problems in the way in which marketers and designers approach the branding process that prevents brands from presenting an honest representation of a company and inhibit the visual outcome of a design. In an article for the Huffington Post, marketing expert Dr. R. Kay Green advises brands to look to their competition for answers:

Sometimes the best answers to brand questions can be found out in the field.

Often, if you're stuck on what your brand should be, the best way is to study what the competition is doing. It could be that there's something specific about their brand that might help you to shape your brand (Green, 2013).

This is not an uncommon approach to the branding process. Many brands participate in the practice of benchmarking. Benchmarking refers to comparing the business practices of different companies or specifically, brand qualities, characteristics, design choices, etc. The comparison of a brand to its competition often drives design decisions for a brand. The need to differentiate from competition is essential in the practice of branding. However, does this benchmarking practice encourage authenticity? Dr. R. Kay Green also advises a brand to be true to itself: “When building brand
awareness, you must deliver your authentic self. Be original, be yourself, and be honest” (Green, 2013). This idea seems contradictory to the idea of shaping your brand around competition. How can a brand be “true to itself” if it is basing its identity around another brand?

From a design standpoint, the benchmarking practice can stifle the creative process and prevent the design from conveying an authentic idea or message about the brand. There is the desire to differentiate a brand from its competition, but also create a brand that is recognizable. If a new sports drink brand was being created, there would be the need to differentiate its logo and identity from the competition. However, there is also the tendency to follow the design language of the competition in order to be associated with a certain brand category. If all sports drinks use black and white colors and bold type on their packaging and a new sports drink brand is presented in packaging with pastel colors and a logo featuring a script font, would you buy it? Would you trust that this product is, in fact, a sports drink? As Michael Bierut suggested, “We rely on familiar visual cues to relate to a brand or product. Recognition and familiarity aids in brand trust” (Bierut, 2005). Thus, the audience perception plays an important role when determining a good balance between telling the brand story and recycling familiar design schemes.

How can designers find a balance in the design aesthetic that has both a familiarity and differentiation from the competition? By focusing design choices on brand competition, designers may not create a design that communicates a message about the unique qualities that are inherent in a brand. The absence of this practice might allow for a more authentic method of brand design.
Visual Study 1: Creating an authentic visual representation of ideas

In the first series of visual studies, the goal was to create a design that visually represents the specific qualities and characteristics that are unique to a brand. Much like the notion of Paul Rand who thought “…that the designer should pursue simplicity in order to divine some abstract “truth” (Lavin, 2001, p. 81). Instead of focusing on other brands, I tried to create a visual metaphor for a brand: an illustration of the essence of a brand. The company used for this study is a web analytics company that tracks retailer’s foot traffic and web traffic simultaneously in real time. The characteristic that was unique to this brand was the ability to collect and present sets of data from the “brick and mortar” retail space and the online retail concurrently. The first series of studies visually focused on the concept of two sets of data overlapping to emphasize the idea of the value inherent in seeing these two pieces of information simultaneously. In seeing both foot traffic and web traffic simultaneously, the retailer can glean a third piece of information: the relationship between these two sets of data. The first series of studies sought to emphasize the overlap of two sets of information through the use of overlapping shapes.

The second series of studies focused on the momentum of the process. The data is being collected in real-time and is constantly changing, constantly in motion. The second set of studies sought to illustrate both the numerous amounts of data and the forward momentum. These ideas were illustrated using shapes designed to have a dynamic movement as well as present multiple copies of the shape to illustrate the amount of data being collected (Figure 15). These studies were eventually translated into a series of motion studies in which a color change occurred when two different colors of shapes passed over each other.

*Figure 15. Visual study—motion still. By H. Storer, 2013.*

The results of the first set of visual studies were fruitful. The key component of this visual exploration was the focus on visually translating the concepts of the company and the absence of comparison to competitors. By allowing for an absence of
benchmarking, the results were an honest and simple communication of the brand message, which prevented the message from becoming jaded by visual solutions used by competitors. Though benchmarking is a common practice in branding, and will likely continue to be so, it is valuable for designers to consider the translation of the message as the principal focus of their work and to regard benchmarking as a secondary or tertiary concern in the branding and design thought process.

**Visual Study 2: An exploration of honesty in consumer packaging**

Designers have been criticized for re-appropriating and recycling familiar design elements, particularly ones that are “retro” or “nostalgic.” In his writing on the topic of authenticity, graphic designer Michael Bierut questioned the notion of creating a visually unique design solution in regards to pasta sauce: “Would you know what it was if you saw it on the grocery store shelf? Would you trust it enough to put its contents on your spaghetti?” What is an appropriate balance between truth-telling and story-telling within the realm of branding?

This second series of design studies was focused directly on the questions raised by Michael Bierut in his discussion on pasta sauce labels. Pasta sauce labeling provides an excellent venue for this vein of research. It is a very familiar and recognizable product that anyone can encounter on his or her weekly trip to the supermarket. It is a product that everyone has selected to purchase from amidst the wide variety of brands that are available. Pasta sauce is also a product that employs a variety of story-telling techniques ranging from nationality, history, nostalgia, to ingredients and farming practices. To
begin to understand pasta sauce packaging I created a visual catalog of existing brands. From this visual analysis, I identified reoccurring themes within pasta sauce labeling and determined categories that would direct my visual explorations:

1. Factory/Ingredients
2. Generic/Value
3. Organic/Fresh
4. Italian/Mom
5. Youth/Audience
6. Celebrity/Chef

The goal of the initial exploration was to design a series of labels for imaginary pasta sauce brands. Some of these fake brands were directed at the story-telling tropes that are typical in the existing pasta sauce brands. Other studies were aimed at an extremely honest or truth-telling portrayal of pasta sauce through the emphasis of production, ingredients, nutrition facts, etc. The design studies were aimed at creating a spectrum of design and brand solutions that ranged from an extreme version of story-telling to an extreme version of truth-telling. For example, one study presented a picture of jars of sauce being produced at a factory and the sauce was entitled: “Tomato Sauce From a Factory.”
This label represents an extreme version of honesty or truthfulness. The intent is to raise the question: “How much honesty does a consumer really want from a brand?” Do consumers truly want to see/understand where their food comes from or would they rather be told a story, even if it is fictitious?

A contrasting example is the study for a fake brand named “Aunt Rosa’s Italian Sauce.”
This design represents the opposite end of the spectrum: extreme story-telling.

The “Aunt Rosa’s” brand tells a story by indicating an Italian heritage through the use of words such as “Italian” and the name “Rosa.” The black and white image of an older woman of Italian descent represents nostalgic ideas and tells a history: whether real or imagined. The character presented in the image representing Rosa is not unlike characters such as Aunt Jemima or the Quaker Oats man. Even though these characters are fictitious they allow the consumer to relate the product to a persona and a set of ideas. The old photograph allows one to imagine an Italian family recipe that has been passed down through generations and is now being offered to consumers on their local supermarket shelf. These are the stories that brands tell through devices such as imagery, texture, language, typeface selection, etc.
Consumers are not impervious to the tactics used by designers to convey ideas about a brand. A study conducted by the *New York Times* indicated that people are more likely to trust text that is set in a serif typeface as opposed to a sans serif typeface (Bierut, 2012). Just as one is easily swayed by the use of a particular typeface, beliefs about a brand are easily influenced by the myriad of other visual devices such as imagery, color, illustrations, textures, and language.

Another method used to gain consumer trust is the use of celebrity names and faces for endorsements or for the identity of the brand itself. Similar to the mascots mentioned previously, a celebrity provides a personality and face to associate with a brand or product. Consumers may even feel more of a connection to a celebrity brand due to their experience with the celebrity through books, television, online, etc. In the case of pasta sauce, many of the celebrity brands are centered around a well-known chef, many of whom are featured on television cooking shows. However, what makes the consumers believe that they need the celebrity endorsed product more than a non-celebrity brand? The celebrity is not likely to oversee the day-to-day production of pasta sauce. In many cases the celebrity may not even have direct input into the recipe or ingredients of the product. These types of brands typically feature the chef’s name featured prominently as well as a photograph of the chef. These brands are telling a story based using a familiar face and name.
Visual studies were conducted for some fictitious celebrity brand pasta sauce. The intent of these studies was to cause the viewer to question the notion of celebrity as a tactic to gain brand trust. For these studies, the labels featured celebrities that one would not typically associate with the culinary industry or pasta sauce. One label featured Kim Kardashian (Figure 19) a celebrity who is featured on several reality television programs.
While Kim Kardashian has been featured as a celebrity endorser for other brands and as the figure head for her own clothing and fragrance collections, she is not a celebrity that one would associate with a food brand.

Another label featured actor Mario Lopez. For this study, the phrases used on the label were taken from actor and philanthropist Paul Newman’s existing brand of pasta sauce: “Newman’s Own.” The phrases “all natural” and “industrial strength” which appear on Paul Newman’s brand of sauce were used in the verbiage for the fictitious Mario Lopez brand of sauce. The phrases seem particularly appropriate when used in conjunction with a photograph of Mario Lopez, who is known for his athletic physique.

*Figure 20. Label study—“Mario Lopez.” By H. Storer, 2013.*
For the purposes of the thesis exhibition, these jars featuring fictitious celebrity brands were placed next to existing celebrity brands in order to cause the viewer to compare the two, and question the notion of celebrity used to garner trust.

*Figure 21. Label studies—Celebrity brands. By H. Storer, 2013.*

Another set of label studies focused on natural and organic-focused products. These brands also tell a story—one of environmentally friendly and health-conscious practices. There are a growing number of consumer products that claim to be “organic” and “natural” but these terms have very different meanings. The FDA does not regulate the use of the term “natural” but does have a set of regulations in place for the use of the word “organic.” (U.S. Food and Drug Administration) These phrases are often accompanied by the color green or photography of “fresh-looking” ingredients such as in the case of the Kroger brand “Simple Truth.” Not only does the name indicate honesty and simplistic ingredients, but the label features the coveted “USDA Organic” seal.
These devices target health-conscious consumers. If consumers are interested in honest organic farming practices, would they also be interested in the truth about labor practices?

Figure 22. Simple Truth Organic pasta sauce. By H. Storer, 2013.

Figure 23. Label Study—“Immigrant worker” label. By H. Storer, 2013.
A visual study was created for a fictitious label that says “fresh picked by non-documented immigrant workers” (Figure 23). The intention of this label is not to comment on the practice of immigrant farm workers, but to cause the viewers to question what level of information they expect to be present on a food-packaging label. If the consumers are concerned about the use of pesticides, would they also want to know what labor source is being utilized to harvest the crops?

The focus of this study began as analysis and observation and then evolved into other practices. For the purposes of the thesis show, it was determined that the best method of presentation would be to share visual studies of fictitious brands along with existing brands to cause the viewer to question the brand messaging and story-telling elements utilized in packaging design.

*Figure 24. Jar studies, thesis exhibition show. By H. Storer, 2013.*
The presence of familiar brands and visual cues will create a greater, heightened questioning of story-telling and truth-telling elements. The juxtaposition of fake brands and familiar supermarket brands will generate an awareness of tactics that consumers encounter, on a daily basis, in the form of packaging design.

This approach is not unlike the satirical work of Shawn Wolfe, an artist whose work draws attention to the deceptive nature of consumer-driven graphic design. Wolfe’s work includes fictitious but realistic looking advertisements for non-existent products with “no clear function.” Rick Poynor suggests that Wolfe’s fake advertising “satirizes the abstract nature of branding’s transcendent calls to the consumer.” Wolfe emphasizes the deception that is present in advertising through the tagline in one of his fictitious ads: “The general gloss of falsity is our only product” (Poynor, 2003, p. 163-165). The blatant honesty in the statement presented in the familiar format of a magazine ad causes the viewers to consider the deceptive tactics they encounter through advertisements every day.

What is an appropriate balance between truth-telling and story-telling within the realm of branding? This question is at the heart of the visual research presented in my thesis show. To bring a poignant relevancy to this subject, the thesis show presentation featured an interactive magnetic wall graphic that illustrates the dual nature of truth and story within the practice of branding.
This Venn diagram represents that truth-telling and story-telling are both necessary to the practice of branding. Story-telling is a necessary part of branding that engages consumers and allows them to connect with a product or idea. Story-telling helps brands distinguish themselves from each other in an overpopulated market place. However, consumers need truth-telling messages to inform their purchasing decisions and to better understand what they are spending their money on or why they should place their trust with a certain company.

It was important for the design of the diagram to not present either side as negative or positive. The truth side of the diagram included adjectives such as “honest,” “accurate,” and “informative.” The story side of the diagram included adjectives such as “experiential,” “desirable,” and “nostalgic.” All of the adjectives featured on the diagram
could be valuable characteristics for a brand or company to possess. Ideally, a brand would feature qualities or characteristics from both sides of the diagram.

The audience plays an important role in the diagram. Each viewer may evaluate brands differently based on his/her own individual experience with and knowledge of a brand. Though the diagram is a subjective evaluation of brands, it can still be a valuable tool.

Finding the place at which “truth” and “story” can overlap will prove to be valuable to both consumers and designers. Consumers will have a heightened awareness of their participation in viewing and interpreting brand messaging. Designers will have a greater consideration for the tactics used in creating brand messaging. This diagram could be useful as a tool for designers to use when approaching a brand marketing or design project. Examining the truth and story telling elements within the practice of branding would be a constructive exercise to assist a company or brand in identifying who and what it wants to be.

The next section will examine the results of the visual research and the outcome of presenting the visual research within the context of the thesis exhibition show. The reaction to the exhibition indicates how these findings can be useful to both consumers and designers.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

As demonstrated in the literature review portion of the paper, branding has become a multi-faceted, experience-driven process. Story-telling has become an important part of that process. Through the use of brand mascots/characters, nostalgic imagery, type, color, etc. designers can convey a powerful story about the brand message. The control the designer has in the aesthetic decision-making process is important in translating a message to the audience. Ethical issues, regarding the truth, need to be imbedded in creative process. Shifting the focus of the process will allow designers to take a more authentic approach to brand design.

The initial visual research (Visual Study 1) allowed for an approach that was uninhibited by preconceived ideas, familial aesthetics, and benchmarking practices. Instead, the goal was to create a visual solution that will, as Lavin describes it, “…divine some abstract ‘truth’” (2001, p. 81). This study proved to be a valuable exercise for a designer—to create visuals without being restrained by the visual representations of the “competition.” The results included a series of visual metaphors that clearly translate an honest essence of the brand.

The literature review also indicated that consumers have become aware of the presence of fakeness, yet might not be persuaded to buy when merely confronted with a completely honest representation. Another point that is important to reinforce is the presence of many types of fakes within our visual environment and the awareness that not all of these fakes can be categorized in the same manner. These false representations have become numerous due to the presence of story-telling within the practice of branding. For
the purposes of the second visual study and thesis exhibition these ideas were represented, ironically, by presenting fakes—fictitious brands presented alongside real brands for the purposes of drawing attention to the story-telling tactics that we typically encounter in packaged consumer goods.

*Figure 26. Jar studies, thesis exhibition show. By H. Storer, 2013.*

This presentation created an awareness for the viewer of the variety of “fakes” we encounter as well as an awareness of the story-telling tools that designers use such as nostalgic imagery, color selection, typefaces, or other graphic devices.

The display also featured a set of extremely “honest” package designs that cause the viewer to question what level of honesty consumers really want from a brand.
This visual study raises consciousness to the fact that we rely on story-telling devices to attract and persuade consumers.

The visual research presented in the thesis show culminates in an interactive diagram that illustrates the duality of branding and the simultaneous presence of truth-telling and story-telling.
Story-telling is a necessary part of branding that engages consumers and allows them to connect with a product or idea. Story-telling helps brands distinguish themselves from each other in an overpopulated market place. However, consumers need truth-telling messages to inform their purchasing decisions and to better understand what they are spending their money on or why they should place their trust with a certain company.

The response to the interactive magnet board (Figure 28) was unique. Each viewer tended to place the brand magnets in different locations within the diagram or next to different adjectives. When multiple people were standing in front of the board, heated debate often ensued regarding what the correct placement of the brands should be. Through discussions with the exhibit attendees, it was determined that the audience based their analysis of the brands on a wide variety of factors. Some viewers based their decision on whether the brand was more truth-telling or story-telling based purely on the visual elements of the logos presented in the exhibit. Other viewers based their decisions on previous experiences with the brand such as interaction with products, ads and commercials, or media/news reports about the brand. The results from this exhibit indicate that consumers’ attitude about a brand can be influenced by a myriad of aspects - some that are controlled by the brand and some that are controlled by public opinion. The public opinion relates back to some of the examples that were previously discussed such as satirical news programs and culture jamming. Viewers as young as 5-6 years old were able to identify numerous brands and express an opinion about them. There was also a difference in which qualities were identified as “positive” attributes. Some participants viewed the “truth” side of the diagram as being desirable traits, while others considered
the “story” side of the diagram to be preferable. Others considered the most “successful” brands to be the brands that were placed in the middle of the diagram.

The effect of allowing audience participation with the magnet board helped strengthen the presence of the presentation of the spaghetti sauce jars on the shelves. By presenting the audience with a recognizable and familiar product such as spaghetti sauce, they can draw connections between the evaluation process they participated in with the magnet board to the evaluation process that happens every time they are at the supermarket or faced with a purchasing decision. Consumers will have a heightened awareness of their participation in viewing and interpreting brand messaging as well as a greater attentiveness to brand story-telling devices such as nostalgia. Designers will have a greater consideration for the tactics used in creating brand messaging and how their aesthetic decision-making is a crucial part of the entire marketing strategy. The combined influences on consumers and designers will have a strong impact on beliefs regarding authenticity.
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