

# Re-evaluating iconic brand assets in a post-pandemic world

Dr Gemma Calvert, Win Ee Chun and Dr Eamon Fulcher

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Distinctive brand assets have a powerful role to play in ensuring top-of-mind recall with consumers – but in a world changed by COVID-19, a strategic reassessment of assets is needed.

- The extent to which different countries were impacted by COVID-19 means brands will need to adopt a highly localised approach to different markets going forward.
- Uncovering which of these iconic brand assets are intuitively and automatically associated with a brand can inform marketing strategy.
- By deconstructing a brand's assets and embedding them into an implicit test, brand owners can derive directional and actionable insights.

## Marketing in the COVID-19 crisis

This article is part of a special WARC Snapshot focused on enabling brand marketers to re-strategise amid the unprecedented disruption caused by the novel coronavirus outbreak.

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## Why it matters

In an era when people and places now carry an invisible threat, brains dealing with the resulting stress and anxiety must prioritise assets that are easy to process. Brand marketers need to take stock of their brand assets and reassess the distinctions that make them stand out in an increasingly crowded digital milieu.

## Takeaways

- Brand assets can be perceived differently across different markets, are malleable and can shift over a relatively short timeframe.
- In prioritising the promotion of certain brand assets over others, marketers must consider that consumers are more likely to identify with brands that reflect images related to their identities.
- Implicit auditing of both brand assets and consumer identities can offer insights in to emerging acceptance and demand for different brand archetypes.

As the world grapples with the physical and psychological ravages of COVID-19 and the inevitable economic consequences, brand owners may well be searching for a proverbial crystal ball that can shed light on the likely behaviour of consumers as they emerge from the current crisis and centrally imposed lockdowns. What will be their demands, now that health and life has been globally threatened? How, if at all, will their mind-sets have changed? While there may be no crystal ball, neuroscience can help us make some fairly sensible predictions.

## **Threat causes cognitive lockdown**

Under threat, the brain seeks safety. System 1 thinking tends to dominate decision-making as the brain struggles to maintain a sense of control over a suddenly unfamiliar and threatening environment. Our responses to threat are characterized by snap decisions, impulsive responses, comfort seeking, and risk aversion. The brain seeks simplicity, short-cuts and security, from social interactions and the satisfaction of our consumptive habits. Witness the panic buying early in the outbreak where consumers bought up essential products like bread, rice, milk and eggs, irrespective of brand. This reflects the brain in survival mode. But later as food production increased, consumers (or their brains) sought safety by choosing familiar and trusted brands, while newly emerging brands on the fringe got ignored.

As the threat of a possible resurgence of the virus continues to hang overhead, trust will become an even more sought-after commodity for some years to come. Yet what signifies comfort or safety for one country doesn't necessarily extend to all (e.g. panic buying of guns, toilet paper and pasta in the USA, dried ham in Spain, and boxed wine in Finland).

An additional factor to consider is the extent to which different countries were impacted by the virus. Those hit worst will continue to remain cautious and in threat mode, others that suffered minimal incidences and disruption to their lives may adopt a more adventurous and positive outlook – a dichotomy witnessed after the 1918 Spanish flu epidemic.

All of this predicts that brands will need to adopt a highly localised approach to different markets going forward.

## **Short-cuts to success**

Distinctiveness. It's what a brand needs to survive in these vast global markets. But what determines a brand's ability to stay "top of mind" especially in these turbulent times? The answer, we believe, lies in its unique visual, verbal (and increasingly, other sensory) brand assets.

These can include (but are not limited to) a brand's logo, iconic colours and patterns, unique typography, packaging shapes, mnemonics, straplines and even their celebrity endorsers. All these assets act as short-cuts for the brain, making it easy for consumers to find a brand on a shelf peppered with competitors and involuntarily

activates stored memories of a brand's intangible assets.

	Categories	Examples			
Visual assets	Colours	 Starbucks	 McDonald's	 Google	 FedEx
	Logos				
	Celebrity endorsers				
	Typography	Vogue	Giorgio Armani	3M	TOYOTA
	Pack Shapes				
	Product Shapes				
	Taglines	Finger Lickin' Good	Make Believe	Have a break. Have a Kit Kat.	Open Happiness
	Conceptual traits	Creamy	Fast	Reliable	Luxurious
Non-visual Assets	Ingredients				
	Signature fragrances				
	Tactile signatures				

**Sonic Identity (non-visual asset):** A sonic identity adds a new dimension to the brand's identity. It represents the musical DNA of the brand and includes sonic signatures, melody and other audio assets.

**Examples:** Mastercard, Microsoft Xbox 360, Intel, Netflix

In other words, a brand's distinctive brand assets are extremely important because they operate at a subconscious level, influencing purchase decisions and evoking recall of past experiences. Indeed, recent **research from Kantar Millward Brown** revealed brands with the strongest assets are on average 52% more relevant than their competitors.

However, what brands intend to communicate to consumers may not always match what's stored in their minds.

How often have we heard brand managers bemoaning the fact that while their creative campaign is trending on social media, been viewed by millions of consumers and has won several prestigious creative awards, yet post-exposure spontaneous recall revealed that consumers intuitively and unintentionally associated the ad with a rival brand?

There are similar reports of celebrity endorsers mistakenly thought to be promoting a competitor in direct opposition to the paymaster's intent, perhaps because the System 1 brain automatically computes a better "goodness of fit" between that individual and the competitor. Furthermore, what we now know about human memories are that they are fallible, prone to degradation, subject to confabulation and yet all these changes occur in the absence of conscious awareness.

Another thing we know about perceived brand assets is that they can be perceived differently across different markets, are malleable and can shift over a relatively short timeframe. For example, when exposed to pertinent new information about a concept or topic, **implicit attitudes towards that concept can be altered**.

And brand colours or typographical assets immediately recognizable in Western markets can be misattributed to a competitor brand in Asian markets. The same can be true across different age groups, consumer segments and shopping environment (whether in-store or online).

So how can a brand truly know what stored representations of its visual and other sensory assets reside in their customers' brains at any point in time?

## Auditing implicit brand assets

Distinctive brand assets typically exert their influence on our behaviour automatically and without interruption to our ongoing stream of consciousness. Consequently, implicit research tools which capture these automatic brand associations at a subconscious level of processing give a much more accurate picture of what is stored in consumers' brains about a brand, product or service.

By deconstructing a brand's assets (see table above) and embedding them into an implicit test, brand owners can derive directional and actionable insights. This is referred to as an **implicit brand asset audit**. Importantly, uncovering which of these iconic brand assets are intuitively and automatically associated with your brand can inform marketing strategy.

For example, determining which visual chromatic assets belong to your brand or your competitors' can help you to differentiate by adopting a non-competitive new packaging schema prior to a relaunch. Additionally, the speed at which consumers intuitively recognise a brand's iconic features such as their advertising straplines or celebrity endorsers reflects their relevance or otherwise to that brand.

A recent marketing trend has been the replacement of celebrity endorsers with popular social media influencers or even unknown but genuine brand advocates from the populous. The latter strategy gains validity from findings in consumer psychology showing that the brain detects non-genuine affinity exceedingly well – and **research has shown** that advertisers would do better to engage an ordinary person that is a true brand advocate to promote the brand than a highly paid but ingenuous celebrity because consumers' brains respond better to authenticity.

Another factor to consider in prioritising the promotion of certain brand assets over others is that consumers are more likely to identify with brands that reflect images related to their identities.

During prolonged periods of isolation (recently reflected in social distancing) the human brain starts to crave human contact and group affiliation. Self-identities may adapt, reform and priorities are liable to shift. Implicit auditing not only of brand assets but consumer identities can also inform brand owners of the emerging acceptance and demand for rather different brand archetypes. Brands that meet these needs by connecting consumers based on their shared brand affiliation will stand to reap the likely reward of long-term advocates.

## **The emerging post pandemic landscape**

In the aftermath of COVID-19, some segments of the populations worst impacted are likely to adopt a mindset of caution and risk-aversion. This predicts a likely behavioural shift towards greater health consciousness, increasing reliance on authoritative experts, and the acceptance that more of life is going to be lived online, including consuming and socialising. Brands will need to think creatively how to build relationships within the new digital milieu.

One thing we can be sure of is that in an era when people and places now carry an invisible threat, brains dealing with the resulting stress and anxiety must prioritise assets that are easy to process. In this scenario, brands may want to consider adapting or adopting visual signifiers that connote healthiness and well-being to connect with consumers based on their current “top of mind” concerns rather than past interests.

This is no time for complexity or inconsistency. Newly emerging brands need to focus on the creation of distinctive assets that connote reliability, confidence and simplicity. As the wise adage attests “knowledge is power”. Brands that understand how their distinctive assets are represented in consumers’ brains in the post-pandemic world will be in a superior position to differentiate, dominate and adapt.

## **About the authors**

Dr Gemma Calvert is a  
Professor of Marketing, Nanyang Business School, NTU based in Singapore.

Win Ee Chun  
Behavioural Change Scientist, Split Second Research, Singapore

Dr Eamon Fulcher  
Co-Founder and CEO, Split Second Research, UK

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Americas: 229 West 43rd Street, 7th Floor, New York, NY 10036, United States - Tel: +1 212 201 2800

APAC: OUE Downtown 1, #44-03, 6 Shenton Way, 068809, Singapore - Tel: +65 3157 6200

EMEA: 33 Kingsway, London, WC2B 6UF, United Kingdom - Tel: +44 (0)20 7467 8100

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