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Task: Employ keywords to explore and identify an individual research area and related practice project, conclude with a focussed research question, and write a proposal of 2500 words

Word Count: 2595

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Identity
3. Nostalgia
4. Authenticity
5. Conclusion

For this assessment, I can confirm that I have not used Generative AI to support me in structuring my submission, including creating a draft argument structure, identifying parts and headings. I can confirm that I have not used generative AI to create text for my submission. I can confirm that I have not used Generative AI for creative materials, such as images.

Graphic design plays a key role in determining how both individuals, as well as communities understand themselves, especially within relation to contemporary culture, where visual identity is constantly being constructed, re-shaped and consumed. This essay aims to explore the concepts of identity, nostalgia, and authenticity, examining how these concepts are interconnected, but also how they influence both the creation and perception of design. Drawing upon the theories of key thinkers such as Theodor Adorno, Svetlana Boym and Virgil Abloh. The discussion will consider the way in which identity is constructed, how nostalgia can shape emotional engagement, as well as the various ways in which authenticity is both performed and perceived. These ideas will be explored in references to various key thinkers, as well as contemporary design and visual culture, which will form a critical foundation for a future practical project in my third year.

The term “identity” is often understood as being a fixed sense of self, however, the true meaning of identity can become increasingly complex when examined within a visual and cultural context. While some view identity as being an inherent concept, it is rather something that can be constructed through external influences such as our environment, and the media that we interact with. One such key thinker who has studied this concept is Stuart Hall, who believes that identity is fluid, suggesting that it is a “matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (Hall, 1990) - highlighting it’s evolving nature.

When we consider logos, typography, colour, and images - these are all tools by which identity is both expressed and constructed. In the context of branding, each of these elements is carefully considered to communicate particular values and beliefs.

However, their impact goes far beyond this, with brands holding the ability to actively shape how individuals and groups perceive themselves, as well as others. An example of where this is especially evident is within sport, where the visual identity of a club becomes inseparable from the concept of social belonging. A football badge acts not solely as a mark of identification, but as a symbol of loyalty and emotional attachment.

A key thinker whose work can be used to understand this idea, is the work of Benedict Anderson, who described nations as being “imagined communities.” Anderson (1983) argues that members of a community will “never know most of their fellow-members” yet they still perceive a shared connection, and this is achieved through shared symbols and narratives. This concept can be applied directly to sport, where the design and visual identity of a club can create a sense of belonging amongst a large and dispersed group of people. Through repeated exposure to visual markers, such as colours and crests, that individuals come to identify with a collective, which in turn reinforces both personal and group identity.

However, this is not to say that communities will always identify with the symbols used by football clubs. The proposed rebrand of Leeds United in 2018 demonstrates how deeply attached people are to identity and visual design within football culture. The new crest, intending to modernise the club’s image moving forward, featured a simplified “Leeds Salute”, however, it was met with immediate backlash from supporters and ultimately the club rescinded the proposal within days. The reaction from the Leeds fanbase demonstrates that the identity of a club is not imposed or determined by designers and is instead constructed and maintained as a collective by supporters of the club. The uproar surrounding the proposal reinforces the idea that visual identity

must align with the shared history and values that are held by the club's fanbase.

Ultimately, the failed rebranding of Leeds United highlights that these emotional attachments and cultural meanings are vital to the visual identity of a club and disregarding them may disrupt the very identity a rebrand seeks to represent.

The work of Pierre Bourdieu also provides a useful framework for understanding constructed identity through his concept of cultural capital, which suggests that taste, style and aesthetic preferences are deeply tied to social structure and class; "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier." (Bourdieu, 1984). Considering his perspective, it becomes apparent that visual identity can often be strategic, capable of signalling belonging to certain cultural groups. In a design context, it raises the question of whether identities can be constructed through the careful and deliberate selection of certain visual cues that are each associated with specific social meanings.

Considering both Bourdieu's work, it is clear that brands frequently construct identities in order to appear more authentic, culturally imbedded or to create an artificial heritage. The use of traditional, old-fashioned typography, as well as muted, 'vintage' colour palettes can create a false impression of longevity and legitimacy, even when the history of a brand is completely fictional. In this regard, identity becomes performative, less about the inherent truth and reality of a brand's identity, and more about how successfully an artificial identity can be communicated with a believable narrative.

Clearly, the distinction between being authentic versus being perceived as authentic becomes increasingly blurred, and it raises important questions of the role of the designer. If identity can be constructed through visual means, to what extent can a

designer create an emotional connection purely through aesthetic and visual decisions. The ultimate question is whether an identity that is entirely artificial and fabricated can still be experienced as meaningful and authentic by its audience?



Figure 1: Comparison of proposed 2018 rebrand (left) and the current Leeds United Crest (right) (Dazeen, 2018).

Nostalgia is commonly defined as the sentimental longing for the past. However, rather than functioning as an accurate reflection of history, nostalgia often manifests as a selective reconstruction of the past, shaped by personal memory and visual representations. This definition is vital to understanding the role of nostalgia within graphic design, where the past is frequently reinterpreted and reimagined through aesthetic decisions.

Svetlana Boym is a key thinker when it comes to providing a framework for analysing nostalgia. Throughout her work, she distinguishes between the concepts of restorative and reflective nostalgia. Boym (2001) describes restorative nostalgia as being a desire to “rebuild the lost home”, while reflective nostalgia dwells in “longing itself.”

When we consider nostalgia in a graphic design context, the Chelsea FC 2025/26 third kit demonstrates how nostalgia is strategically employed in a contemporary context to

evoke an emotional response. Referencing the Nike T90 era, as well as using the previous Chelsea crest, the kit acts as a deliberate evocation of 2005, a year deeply tied to success for the club. Rather than acting as a faithful recreation of a particular shirt, it instead makes use of certain visual cues to create an emotional connection to the club's past, choosing aesthetic suggestion of the past rather than a true attempt to recreate it.

The use of design to evoke the past relies heavily on the use of visual signs and cultural symbols that are widely understood and accepted. Roland Barthes argued that images and objects carry meanings that go beyond their literal form, and thus function as part of a broader system of signification. Barthes (1964) believes this signification is a process, one that “binds the signifier and the signified”, suggesting that visual elements do not carry inherent meaning and instead have their meaning constructed through cultural interpretation.

In the context of graphic design, the use of certain typefaces, colour schemes and materials can signify a particular time throughout history. The use of serif typography and analogue photography can immediately convey a sense of history, even if they are applied to a more contemporary context. In this way, the visual cues do not reproduce the past directly, but rather, they construct a version of it that is emotionally and visually recognisable.

However, these ideas raise questions in relation to the authenticity of nostalgic representation. If the past is being reproduced through considered visual language, to what extent does nostalgic design accurately reflect reality? It becomes clear that nostalgic aesthetics do not necessarily refer to an actual past, but

rather to a more idealistic version of it, one that is shaped by media, repetition and sometimes, imagination.

Connecting the ideas of identity and nostalgia together, when we consider contemporary branding, nostalgia is often employed as a strategy to create an emotional connection to a brand, as well as perceived authenticity. Many modern brands adopt retro-inspired identities to suggest heritage, trust and longevity, regardless of the true history of the brand. In this regard, nostalgia becomes less about memory and more about effective communication – a tool that can be used to signal meaning and emotion. One critique of this is Fredric Jameson (1991) who believes that postmodern culture is prone to reducing the past down to "stylistic connotation" and only conveying the "glossy qualities" of the past. Considering this perspective, nostalgic design carries the risk of becoming superficial, as it prioritises aesthetic appeal rather than genuine historical accuracy.

While it is true that nostalgic design can become superficial, the emotional power of nostalgic visuals, even when superficial, cannot be underestimated – as it holds the ability to produce genuine emotional responses. These responses allow individuals to connect with the ideas of memory, identity and belonging. Putting this idea into a real-world, cultural context, such as music or sport, visual artefacts – such as old kits or album artwork, become imbued with personal and collective meaning. In this case, nostalgia is no longer purely a visual style but has evolved into a mechanism by which individuals are able to relate to their past experiences and shared histories.

However, if nostalgia can be constructed through design, then it becomes possible for design to create a sense of memory of history in a place where none may exist. This

leads us to an important consideration for the future of design: can designers intentionally create a feeling of nostalgia in order to create meaning and emotional connection, and if so, does this either undermine or enhance the perceived authenticity of such work?



Figure 2: Image depicting Chelsea FC's 25/26 Third Shirt, embellished with Nike T90 logo and previous Chelsea FC crest (Chelsea FC, 2025).

The word “authenticity” is often associated with ideas such as honesty, originality and sincerity. However, within contemporary design culture, our understanding of the word has become increasingly more complex. While authenticity is often understood as whether something is inherently genuine, when we consider the concepts of identity and nostalgia, it becomes apparent that authenticity can also be interpreted as a perception; something that is constructed and judged upon by an audience.

Considering this idea within graphic design, it raises concerns regarding whether authenticity is an intrinsic quality of a design, or can it be encapsulated through certain characteristics that are then perceived by an audience?

One perspective on authenticity is offered by Walter Benjamin, who introduces the concept of “aura” to describe the unique presence of an original idea or object.

Benjamin (1936) argues that “even the most perfect reproduction” lacks a “unique existence”, suggesting that authenticity is tied to the originality and the experience of an idea. Benjamin’s idea is deeply rooted in the concept of an idea or object having presence within time and space. Due to digital graphic design not possessing a singular location or moment of existence, but instead is circulated and published across various contexts, this ‘aura’ described by Benjamin, in many cases, does not exist. As a result of this, designers frequently attempt to recreate this ‘aura’ using references to traditional, hand-crafted design. These design choices function as signals of authenticity, implying history and depth even if artificially produced.

However, the idea that authenticity relies solely on visual cues and that it can be replicated using specific techniques raises the question as to whether one can distinguish between what is genuinely authentic and what is instead designed to appear as such. Theodor Adorno explores this question and is a strong critique of the standardisation of culture within modern capitalist societies. Adorno and Horkheimer (1944) argue that “culture today is infecting everything with sameness” while attempting to provide uniqueness and authenticity. This can be seen through the repeated use of certain visual trends and styles, and the result is brands presenting themselves as being truly authentic, but rather they are simply attempting to appear unique, yet are doing so within a system shaped by trends and mass-production.

This idea is explored further through the work of Jean Baudrillard, whose theory of simulation suggests that contemporary culture is dominated by representations that no longer refer to the original reality, and instead exist as self-contained systems of meaning; what he calls “a hyperreal.” This is where representations no longer replicate

reality, they instead create their own version of it. Applying this concept to graphic design, it implies that authenticity may no longer depend on a truthful, historical origin, and instead depends on the successful reproduction of the visual signs associated with it. Nostalgic aesthetics, often create a sense of authenticity by referencing a stylised version of the past, even when no direct connection exists.

An additional contemporary challenger to the traditional ideas of authenticity can be seen in the work of Virgil Abloh – whose design philosophy has redefined the boundaries of originality through recontextualisation of ideas. Abloh (2017) believes that “a creative only has to add a three percent tweak to a pre-existing concept” to generate a new innovative idea. Taking an idea or object, that people are familiar with and altering it slightly can dramatically shift perception – raising the question of where authenticity truly resides. Rather than following the traditional definition, that authenticity is rooted in originality or authorship, Abloh instead views it as something that is constructed through context and cultural awareness. This perspective ultimately represents a broader shift in contemporary design, where meaning is generated not solely through the creation of entirely new forms and ideas, but rather by reconfiguring those that we are already familiar with.

When we consider the way in which brand identities are constructed, we must acknowledge that if a sense of authenticity can be crafted through the use of nostalgic visual language and cultural signifiers, it suggests that authenticity is not something to be inherited, but something that can be purposefully created. This raises questions regarding future practice, as the distinction between whether designers are revealing visualising certain qualities that a brand may already possess, or whether they are

manufacturing these qualities. Additionally, there is the question of whether this distinction matters in the way that a piece of design or a brand is experienced.



Figure 3: Image depicting the original white Converse (left) and the Off-White collaboration version (right) - with the Off-White version demonstrating Virgil Abloh's "3% Rule."

Together, these chosen key words are a collective system through which contemporary brands, from fashion to football clubs, are constructed. Identity forms the foundation, using visual and cultural elements such as crests, logos, colours and history. This identity is ever-changing, and thus nostalgia acts as a mechanism that can reshape this identity, being used to draw attention to certain moments within a brand's history, which can then be translated into aesthetic references used throughout the brand's output. Finally, authenticity acts as an evaluative tool within this system, used to determine whether the identity of a brand or club feels genuine to its audience, despite being carefully designed. In this regard, authenticity is not inherent, but rather it is perceived. Together, they demonstrate that brand identity is not a consistent truth, but instead a continuously negotiated concept that is shaped through memory, response, design and perception.

Overall, these three keywords and my exploration into the concepts surrounding them have provided me with a curiosity about how brands, particularly football clubs make

conscious decisions regarding their identity. A possible research question could be “How does graphic design shape the identity and perception of a football club, and how are qualities such as nostalgia and authenticity visually considered during this process?”

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