

MERMAIDS AND CORPORATE BRANDING:

Histories, meanings and impacts

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ABSTRACT: Companies invest considerable resources into establishing meaningful and impactful brand identities, through which they build essential relationships with consumers. Several well-known consumer brands use mermaids as part of their brand identity. Perhaps no use of mermaids in branding is more ubiquitous than siren emblazoned on every Starbucks coffee cup. But Starbucks is not alone; other consumer brands, such as Chicken of the Sea, Virgin Voyages Cruise Line, and BonV!v Spiked Seltzer, incorporate mermaids as part of their brand architecture. Using the case method, this study will examine, brand by brand, the history, meaning, and impact of mermaids on particular brand identities and, thus, on the consumer relationships. This study considers the brand strategies of using mermaids and reflects on if and why these strategies have worked for the brands included in this study.

KEYWORDS: brands, brand imagery, brand logos, corporate brands, cruises, mermaids, merpeople, Starbucks

Introduction

The sultry siren that marks the millions of Starbucks coffee cups worldwide each day is just one example of a brand logo that employs imagery related to mermaids as part of its identity. Organisations invest significant resources, both time and money, in establishing and building their brand with the goals of creating a unique and recognisable identity for themselves, of connecting with and generating meaning for their target markets, and of distinguishing their brand from others in the marketplace. Thus, the choice to incorporate mermaids into their brand logos is a strategic decision. Mermaids, mermen, and merculture have a rich history throughout the world. Their significance and meaning vary geographically and historically, and yet share many common threads. Most notably, mermaids have come to represent women and feminism, hedonism and sexuality, the mysteries and allure of the sea, and the important linkages between land and water. For brands, the symbolism of the mermaid in corporate branding is under-investigated. This study considers the brand strategies of using mermaids and reflects on if and why these strategies have worked for the brands included in this study.

The Literature

This review of the scholarly literature in relation to the origins, histories, evolutions, and meanings of mermaids, mermen, and merculture was undertaken to help situate the

analysis of the various brands that utilise merpeople in brand identities. In addition, a review of branding strategies and brand identities will help to understand the choices some brands make in incorporating mermaids, mermen, and merculture in their brand logos. Finally, this review of the literature will consider existing scholarly intersections of branding and merpeople to identify the status of research on this topic.

The first references to a mermaid-like creature occurred around 5000 BCE in the Middle East (Shalaby, 2018) and since that time various manifestations of the mermaid can be found around the globe (Jones, 2018). Over time and geography, the mermaid has diverged in interpretations as uniquely situated to both time and place, and yet has maintained commonalities that render her familiar despite those inherent differences. Around the world, the mermaid goes by various names, including but not limited to siren (sirène or sirena), sea-maid/-en, nymph, nereid, oceanid, kelpie, *merenneito*, *havfrue*, etc. (Hayward, 2017: 8-9). Many of these names are derived from linguistically appropriate combinations of words for female (particularly young and/or virginal) and the sea, often with an equivalent derivation for the male of the species (Fenki, 2007). For ease of clarity in this article, the term mermaid will be used throughout except where such usage would erode from the point being made.

Mermaids are identifiable by enduring and relatively consistent markers. Firstly, the fish-like tail(s) distinguishes the mermaid from other creatures. The half-human, half-fish motif almost always renders the mermaid as split at the torso, with the upper half being human-like, and the lower half fish-like (although a few depictions of the opposite composition exist throughout history - Hayward, 2017: 10). The more common single tail prevails today, although examples of the split or dual tail continue to linger (for example, the Starbucks siren). Notably, the female form is dominant, with far fewer representations of the male version. Mermaids almost always have long flowing hair to represent her femininity, sexuality, and inherent allure. Her breasts serve as visible markers of her femaleness and, even when covered, are still prominently featured. Mermaids are often adorned with objects, such as scepters, combs, or mirrors, that harken again to her power of seduction (ibid: 14-16). In addition to her physical nature, mermaids are widely presented as having a voice so beautiful that it could lure unsuspecting men to their doom in the watery depths of the ocean. The mermaid's song is characterised as both lovely and deadly, a duality that is in keeping with other aspects of the mermaid's identity (Fitzgerald and Hayward, 2017). She is often somewhat amphibious – being able to survive, at least for a time, on land or out of water. Care is needed to avoid the assumption of a singular mermaid archetype, as part of her intrigue is her multiplicity of identities and the malleability of her persona (Pedersen, 2018). Her enigmatic self helps keep the mystery alive (Goggin, 2018).

While once rare, the mermaids' presence has grown more commonplace. She has been woven into society's fabric, first through artistic renderings and then by private citizens through both enterprise and individual expression. Mermaid culture today entails (pun intended) mermaid schools, mermaid festivals, mermaid communities (both online and in-person), mermaid tattoos, and mermaid merchandise, including stylised and semi-functional tails (Mellins, 2018). Mermaid fandom is divided into several key segments. First, casual mermaid fans enjoy merculture and avail themselves of opportunities to engage with mermaids on occasion. Mer-tourism tends to capitalise on these fans (Porter and Lück, 2018; Robertson, 2013). Second, mermaid fans exist for whom mermaids have an important symbolic significance or connection that is vital to the fans' identity. These folks take every opportunity to immerse themselves in merculture, even

living (to the extent possible) as mermaids (Sanna, 2016). Lastly, mermaid artists and entrepreneurs seek to make their living off merculture by responding to the demand from mermaid fans with products and services aimed at fulfilling fans' desires to immerse themselves in merculture (Porter and Lück, 2018). Mermaid fans can find plenty of camaraderie and wannabe mermaids are increasingly able to get closer to their fantasised ideal.

While the mermaid is clearly the dominant form of merperson, the merman – less visible in more recent history – at one time somewhat shared the proverbial stage with mermaids. In most popular media, mermen play a secondary role, if any role at all, with very few exceptions. Hayward (2017: 151-166) devotes a chapter to the presence of mermen in film but notes their almost universally secondary importance in relation to the mermaid. Scant scholarship exists that specifically focuses on mermen in any context. Mesker (2018) examines the use of mermen in craft beer branding and notes that the use of mermen is akin to the storytelling traditions of pub-culture, the authenticity of the place and the masculinity of patrons, and as a marker of craft beers' anti-establishment foundations and ideals. Hayward and Thorne (2018) delve into the merb'y subculture in modern-day Newfoundland where burly men dress up as mermen in an effort to simultaneously reclaim their masculinity and celebrate their 'feminine side'. Mermen differ from mermaids in terms of their association with sexuality, in large part because of their obvious lack of visible male sexual organs, and their meaning or importance in broader society is less well defined or consistent.

Mermaids are interesting because they have both embedded symbolism in their identity and have also been appropriated by non-mermaids to be representative of something else. Common symbolic significance of mermaids includes: a) femininity and female power, particularly over men (Hayward, 2017), b) sexuality and reproductivity, owing to both the mermaid's seductive persona and her ambiguous reproductive organs (Fenkl, 2007; Hayward, 2018a), and c) duality as represented by her dual nature (half-human, half-fish), her amphibious ability to live both in water and on land, her ability to be both alluring and deadly, as well as both beautiful and frightening (Hayward, 2017; Pedersen, 2018; Phillips and Rippin, 2010). The convergence of what a mermaid represents, at least in the western world, is a product of time whereby her identity and meaning have been massaged to fit a particular narrative that has gained acceptance in mainstream realms. While a singular representation of the mermaid should be avoided, the mermaid has evolved over time into an archetype that is widely recognisable and generally accepted by the public. This has led to widespread and growing adoration for and interest in mermaids throughout the western world.

Mermaids have come to represent feminism, female identity, female sexuality (heterosexuality), the LGBTQ+ community, and body positivity. The relative ubiquity and power dynamic of mermaids in mainstream popular culture in contrast to her male equivalent, both in water (mermen) and on land (human males), elevates the mermaid figure as a feminist icon (Frasl, 2018; Neimanis, 2019; Subanti, 2018). Celebrated for both their beauty and power, mermaids straddle the realm of traditional femininity and dominance over both their watery world and the men who find them alluring. Mermaids often are represented as overtly and aggressively sexual, challenging the traditional image of women as being demure and passive with respect to sex and sexuality (Hateley, 2006; Kokai, 2011). Her otherness and duality have come to represent individuals who themselves identify in manners outside of established social expectations and empowers those individuals to honor and celebrate those parts of themselves. Within the LGBTQ+

community, mermaids have grown to represent acceptance (and even celebration) of otherness and difference, particularly for the trans community (Campbell Galman, 2018; Shipley, 2012; Spencer, 2014). Mermaids are indicative of the duality experienced by members of the LGBTQ+ community. In all, the mermaid offers a symbolic marker that many people who have often been on the outside can relate to and identify with.

More recently, mermaids have also become synonymous with ocean stewardship and environmental protection, particularly as these topics have grown in importance to mainstream consumers. Mermaids serve as a relatable link between humans and the mysteries of the ocean and call into question the human degradation of the oceans for capitalistic purposes, including over-fishing, pollution, and the extraction of minerals or fossil fuels from oceanic environs (Barritt, 2020; Porter and Lück, 2018). For humans, mermaids provide a glimpse into an otherwise unknowable world and their human-like characteristics enable land dwellers to more easily empathise with the destruction of their watery home. Rising ocean temperatures and higher waterlines associated with the climate change emergency also bring closer the worlds inhabited by mermaids and humans, blurring the line between the mermaids' natural environment and that of humans. As this crisis continues to wreak havoc on the world's low lying coastal (and, in some cases, inland) communities, the world of the mermaid inches closer to human habitats.

This article examines the incorporation of mermaids in the logos of consumer brands. Branding is a strategy incorporated by a variety of entities (including profit-oriented companies, not-for-profit organisations, people, causes, ideas, etc.) to create a unique identity for their product, to help establish and cultivate relationships with target audiences, to help distinguish their product from that of the competition, and to leverage equity to further advance the objectives of the brand's owners (Chen, 2001). A variety of branding strategies exist. One of these strategies is the development of brand architecture that can be used to provide sensory information to key audiences in an effort to both identify the brand and to establish brand salience. Brand architecture can be comprised of many parts, including but not limited to slogans, colors, packaging, jingles, social media presence, along with the use of characters/mascots and logos (Keller, 2014). The development of a brand's architecture is an important and strategic endeavour, one that garners careful consideration and intent. When done well, the components of a brand's architecture enhance the value of the brand, both in the hearts and minds of consumers, as well as for shareholders. Thus, the use of mermaids in corporate branding is not accidental or incidental, but rather an integral part of a brand's identity and strategy.

Part of a brand's strategy is to establish a visual brand identity – a symbol that can be used to denote one brand from another. Logos are one way to achieve this objective. Brand logos are relatively simple and impactful visual images that serve to identify the brand associated with a product (Bresciani and Del Ponte, 2017; César Machado, Fonseca, and Martins, 2021, Kaur and Kaur, 2019). Over time, these logos become familiar to target audiences and serve as a direct marker linking to a brand about which those same audiences have knowledge or experience. Well-developed logos have broad appeal and are widely and easily recognised – for example the Nike Swoosh, McDonald's Golden Arches, Apple's apple with the bite taken out of it – and often make important contributions to a brand's equity. When examined carefully, many corporate logos are imbued with information and/or symbolism that intricately connect to the brand's story (Llorente-Barroso and García-García, 2014). If successful, logos can become synonymous

with a brand, such that even minor changes to the logo can be met with fierce opposition from customers (Hynes, 2009).

Brand identity is much like human identity, and reflects the traits or characteristics embedded into the brand that help to establish a persona that human audiences can engage with and relate to (Ghodeswar, 2008; Liu, Hsu, and Fan, 2020; Nandan, 2005; Urde, 2013). This can include both physical attributes as well as psychological dimensions. To aid in the development of a persona, some brands elect to utilise a character or mascot (either real or imaginary, human or non-human) to embody and convey the brand identity the brand wants to cultivate (Malik and Guptha, 2014). Tony the Tiger (Kellogg's Frosted Flakes), the Pillsbury Doughboy, and Mr. Pringle are just a few examples of brand characters that enable brands to adopt human-like traits. The anthropomorphism of human-like characters (Ronald McDonald), animal (Toucan Sam for Froot Loops), mythical (Starbucks' siren), or inanimate (the Pixar lamp, named Luxo Jr.) provides a vehicle through which brand personality can be portrayed and understood. In both static and dynamic form, these characters imbue the brand's identity in a relatable, accessible, and expressible form and often become beloved among target consumer groups, adding equity to the brand (Cayla, 2013; Trivedi, 2018).

This article focuses on the use of mermaids in the brand identities of consumer products, but these are not the only types of products that are branded using mermaids. During the search for brands that utilise mermaids, mermen, or merculture in their logos, several industrial or B2B brands emerged, including Mermaid Studios (a design and implementation software company), Mermaid (a subsea and off-shore drilling company), Mermaid Pools (a pool and hot-tub business), Mermaid Inc. (a print and packaging company), Mermaid Biosciences (a non-antibiotic disease control company for the aquaculture industry), among others. Mermaids are used in the branding of places, including Warsaw, Poland and Norfolk, Virginia. As Wasilewski and Kestrzewa (2018) noted, the brand logo for Warsaw features a mermaid (or *syrenka* in Polish) on its coat of arms and the mermaid motif has become synonymous with the Polish city. In the case of Norfolk, Crisp (2020) points to the community's history and location as a coastal town as being consistent with the image of the mermaid and noted the ability to manage and manipulate the image in a variety of forms to accentuate the destination's brand identity. Finally, during the search for brands that utilise mermaids, a large number of small local businesses were identified that fall outside of the mermaid fandom but that still incorporate mermaids in their brand logos. Of course, companies and brands that cater to the mer-fandom often embed mermaids in their logos, including Mernation and Mermaid Amatheia (mermaid tail makers), Aquamermaid, Planet Mermaid, Myiam Mermaid Academy and Philippine Mermaid Swimming Academy (mermaid schools), Mermaid Hilton Head (a mermaid experience and photography business), among many other small businesses (both bricks-and-mortar and online). Numerous tourism-related businesses use brands that have mermaids in the logos, including many small accommodation businesses such as Mermaid Cottages, Mermaid Inn, Mermaid Beach Hotel, Mermaid Suites; small specialty shops such as Four Mermaids, The Mermaid Gift Shop, and Mermaid Cove; and restaurants and eateries such as Mermaid and the Oyster, Blue Mermaid, and Surly Mermaid – just to name a few. These entities are ones where a mermaid appears in the company's logo. If organisations that only utilise mermaids in their company name were included this list would be much longer.

Limited research exists that investigates the use of mermaids in corporate brands, and what exists almost exclusively looks at Starbucks, to the exclusion of other brands. In the

following sections, corporate brands that use mermaids will be identified and analysed to better understand the meaning and functionality of mermaids in terms of brand identity.

Methods

This article examines the brands that incorporate mermaids, mermen, and merculture in their brand identities. A list of brands that incorporate mer-imagery in their brand architecture was developed via Internet searching. The brands and brand architecture were identified, sourced, and analysed using foundational constructs of mermaids and the affiliated concepts. The case method was selected as the research method because of the relatively small number of brands identified for the study and in adherence to the study objective of delving deep into the use of, the strategy behind, and effects of mer-imagery in the brand's identity. According to Zainal (2007), the case method is a research strategy and method of inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within the context of real-life and is widely used in the social sciences. This method is designed to focus on one (or very few) subjects to enable a deeper and more focused examination, free from undue influence of the other. For this article, the use of mini-cases, one for each of the brands identified, will allow for both in-depth analysis of each case and a comparison between cases to identify common themes if or when they exist.

The first step in the research was to identify the brands to include in the study. The focus was on national or global brands that operate from or target Anglo-speaking markets such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. A search of the internet focused on brands that use mermaids or mermen in their logos and was then extended to include brands that use sea creatures, sea monsters, mythical creatures, imaginary creatures, etc. until no further relevant brands were identified. Searches were also conducted using alternative words for mermaids/mermen, such as nereid, oceanid, siren, selkies, or water nymph. In addition, searches within broad industry categories were conducted, including sports teams, fashion, cosmetics, travel, food and beverage, vehicles, video games, and entertainment, were included to help ensure no major brands in the Anglo-speaking markets were overlooked. Searches focused on images, but where text was included, searches were limited to English language results. Selection criteria included that the brand logo employed an image that included a merperson or merpeople. Brands that included other sea-creatures in the images, but not merpeople, were excluded from the study, including those that focused on kraken (the Seattle National Hockey League expansion team), sea monsters (Hydra Markets), and references to tritons (including the trident used by Maserati, Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines, and Trident gum).

Once the list of brands was established, each brand was investigated using both scholarly and non-scholarly online sources to understand better the brand's origin and history, the inclusion and evolution of the use of merpeople (in all cases, mermaids) in the brand logo, the ways in which mermaids were incorporated in the brands, the symbolism behind that representation, and the impact of the brand's identity on performance in the market. To supplement text-based resources, each company was contacted. Where companies responded to inquiries, communications with a company representative helped uncover details in the branding strategy that might not be present in other sources. The result is a mini-case for each brand that provides fresh insights into the use of mermaids in brand identities.

Results:

After an extensive search for brands to include in this study, eight brands emerged as meeting the inclusion criteria: Starbucks, Chicken of the Sea, Sirena Tuna, BonV!v Spiked Seltzer, and four cruise lines - Crystal Cruises, Dream Cruises, Princess Cruises, and Virgin Voyages. Following are mini-case studies that examine the use of mermaids in the branding for each of these companies.

Starbucks

Starbucks' history is well documented, both by the company's founder, Howard Schultz (1997, 2011) and others in mainstream media and academic spheres (e.g. Lingley, 2009; Mussies, 2020). According to Starbucks, the name of the company was inspired by a coffee-loving first-mate in the Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick* (1851) and was a nod to the early coffee-trade's seafaring traditions (Starbucks.com, n.d: online). When designing the logo, the company again turned to the sea and found inspiration in a two-tailed siren story in Norse mythology (Paules-Bronet, 2017). In a reply to their inquiry about the origin of the logo, Phillips and Rippen quote Starbucks as stating:

three college students created the Starbucks name and logo after discovering classic, nautical characters in literature and art. The two-tailed siren depicted on the logo is a creature of strength and power and is common in medieval adventure tales. (2010: 484).

There is some perception that the logo was inspired by the medieval story of Melusine, in which the eponymous heroine had a curse that saw her lower half transformed into a serpent once a week, but the connection seems to be more obviously derived from the adoption of the heroine's name to refer to split-tailed mermaids that appeared in religious and related statuary in the medieval period. Interestingly, on the Starbucks' corporate webpage, they claim she is inspired by the sirens of Greek mythology, even though those were part woman/part bird, rather than the type of split-tailed mermaid presented in the Starbucks' logo (Starbucks.com, n.d). In keeping with the mystery and allure of mermaids, Starbucks has never confirmed the full details of its logo's origin, although, as Woodcock (2018) asserts, the evidence of the logo being based on Melusine is overwhelming.

Over the company's history and expansive growth, the siren evolved. The original Starbucks' siren was depicted much as she might appear in an ancient nautical book or on a map. She was seductive and alluring, maybe even terrifying (Fenkl, 2007). At first, she was crafted in a style akin to a wooden carving - her scales, twin tails, long hair, exposed breasts, and crown is shown in considerable detail. Unlike one-tailed mermaids, her two-tailed figure is suggestive and even provocative, dripping with sexuality, with her femaleness on full display through her split tail rendering her vagina 'visible'. As the company grew, she was reimagined into an image that will feel more familiar to Starbucks lovers today. In the logo, her transition was incremental (Holden, 2017; Logogenie.net, 2020; Figure 1). In starkly less detail, the reimagined siren was youthful, beautiful, and less overtly seductive. Gone was any hint of a monster, and instead she is ethereal and warm and invites customers in with her open arms. She kept her long flowing hair (now covering her breasts), her crown, and her two-tails. Notably gone in this reiteration was the obvious cleft in her tail, which now exists outside of the logo's vantage point, which aids in masking her mermaid identity. The logo colour remains

verdant green, but gone are the company name and direct association with coffee – she now stands alone as the symbol of the coffee giant (Chen and Bei, 2018). Today, she is one of the most recognisable figures in corporate branding and part of the cultural landscape in many urban and suburban locales around the world (Klara, 2014). Even slight alterations to her image are met with division and controversy (Fuller, 2011). Although her siren identity is disguised in the current logo, customers do recognise her as being emblematic of Starbucks.



Figure 1 - The Evolution of Starbucks' Logo (Vorobyeva, 2019).

Starbucks is a juggernaut in the retail coffee quick-service food space, boasting over 32,000 stores in 72 countries in 2020 (Statista, 2021). The Starbucks logo is among the top ten most recognisable corporate logos in the US (Eldred, 2020) and her influence is rapidly spreading throughout the globe. While she graces the side of millions of white coffee cups every day and has wide-spread recognition in the marketplace, Starbucks uses her in a very specific and limited way in their corporate branding. Aside from the ubiquitous adornment on the cups and select signage, the siren plays a more limited role in Starbucks' other marketing and branding initiatives. She serves as a place-marker or symbol, but she is static, frozen, and two-dimensional rather than dynamic and engaging. Except for those in-the-know, die-hard Starbucks aficionados (of which Starbucks has millions), her identity can be mysterious or misleading, and, at least in her latest iteration, some may not recognise her as a mermaid at all. For Starbucks' legions of rabid fans, the logo is a direct link to Starbucks' rich history and legendary origins or back-story. Starbucks' fandom includes fan clubs, fan fiction, tattoos, Starbucks-themed regalia, and millions of social media followers. For the casual Starbucks' customer, she is a familiar face and part of a shared consumer culture that invites us in. The casual consumer, and even some rabid consumers, may not have studied the logo or the brand's history, but nonetheless the figure is innately familiar to them – even if they don't know she is a mermaid.

The mermaid also aligns with Starbucks' mission to be consumers' "third place" (Lin, 2012). Mermaids are significant for their otherness - they are neither human nor fish, belonging neither in their watery world, nor on land. Starbucks has positioned itself as a third place for customers, neither home nor the office. This idea has spawned an entire new destination for the laptop crowd – a space where cyber-squatting, freelancing, connecting, and escapism is not only possible, but encouraged. The mermaid is symbolic of those individuals who share her otherness and seek to find a place where they can be and flourish. She stands as a marker of that which is familiar, comfortable, accessible, and predictable and she is part of consumers' routine or ritual (Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel, 2006). The early days of the company were spent helping consumers make the link between Starbucks and its symbols, of which the logo is just one (others include the white cup, unique coffee lingo, signature drinks, communal spaces, etc.) (Luffarelli, Mukesh, and Mahood, 2019). Now that Starbucks has made its mark and has firmly

established itself within both consumer- and coffee-culture, the brand can turn its attention to other streams of business. In terms of the future, the removal of the Starbucks name and association with coffee from the logo, letting the mermaid stand alone as the corporate symbol, provides opportunities for brand extension beyond the world of coffee (Chen and Bei, 2018).

Chicken of the Sea

Founded in 1914 as a fish canning operation in California, based in San Diego, and then rebranded in 1930 as Chicken of the Sea, the company's cheeky name stems from a phrase used by local fishers to reflect the mild flavor and color of albacore tuna. The brand's iconic mermaid imagery was launched in 1952. In 2014, she was named Catalina (Business Wire, 2014).¹ She is a comparatively modest (by mermaid standards) with brilliant flowing blond hair, golden sceptre, and of course the ubiquitous tail. Unlike most other mermaids, her tail-like appendage extends up her torso, past her navel, to cover her breasts – much like a strapless dress. She remained mostly unchanged until the 1990s when her image was revamped to make her more contemporary and 'realistic' but keeping her likeness's essential elements (Figure 2). Throughout the branding, she is perched on land/rock rather than immersed in water. In the brand's marketing, she is used as both a symbol of the brand and a spokesperson where she emphasises both the quality of the product and the brand's commitment to ocean stewardship.

In 2005 Catalina was joined by a male character, the Chicken of the Sea Hunk (a purported play on the word chunk). While not a merman himself, the Hunk was designed to attract female shoppers and the campaign dripped with sexual innuendo, when the Hunk proclaimed, "I know what women want. The Mermaid's making sure I give it to them" (Reyes, 2005: online). In print versions of the ad, the Hunk is buff, shirtless, and brandishes a mermaid tattoo on his shoulder – a nod to the brand's iconic mermaid. Following up on the Hunk campaign in 2008, the company launched the Mermaid Jingle Jam, where consumers were challenged to write new lyrics to the brand's famous commercial jingle (Business Wire, 2008). In 2011, the brand stepped outside of the usual in-store promotional activities that were typical for this product category and launched an ambitious social media campaign focusing on the mermaid, including having the mermaid tweet out recipes, post Facebook polls and contests, answer consumer questions, and tout the health and nutritional aspects of the product (Quinn, 2011). The move was intended to bring the brand (via the mermaid) to life.

According to personal correspondence with the company, the mermaid is a cornerstone of the brand's identity. Chicken of the Sea actively utilises their mermaid character, not only in their logo but throughout their branding and marketing communications. The brand identity is built around her and she is used to embody the brand's personality to connect with target audiences. Beyond a static image used to represent the brand, Catalina serves as a useful resource to consumers, providing information (recipes), enabling engagement (contests), and advocating for ocean preservation. The cartoon image of Catalina emphasises the linkage between the ocean and humans. Rather than being overtly sexy or provocative, the mermaid is attractive but demure – an ally and friend to women (the targeted consumer segment) instead of being a threat to women's femininity or family structure as is common in mermaid folklore. Among the brands that

¹ A decision that may have reflected the proliferation of mermaid-motifs in nearby Catalina Island (Hayward, 2019).

use mermaids in their logos, she is rendered in the most detail (along with Virgin Voyages and Sirena Tuna) – full color, cartoonish (almost Disneyesque) (Mortensen, 2008), and complete. Her persona is human-like, fun and playful (she splashes a young child sitting on the rocks enjoying a tuna sandwich in one TV commercial from the 1990s), and friendly/outgoing. Catalina brandishes her sceptre like a wand, as if she is about to grant a wish (perhaps by making dinner magically appear on the table). The company takes full advantage of their mermaid along the full scope of its branding, weaving her into their brand identity at every turn. She is not just a brand marker, she is the living embodiment of the brand.

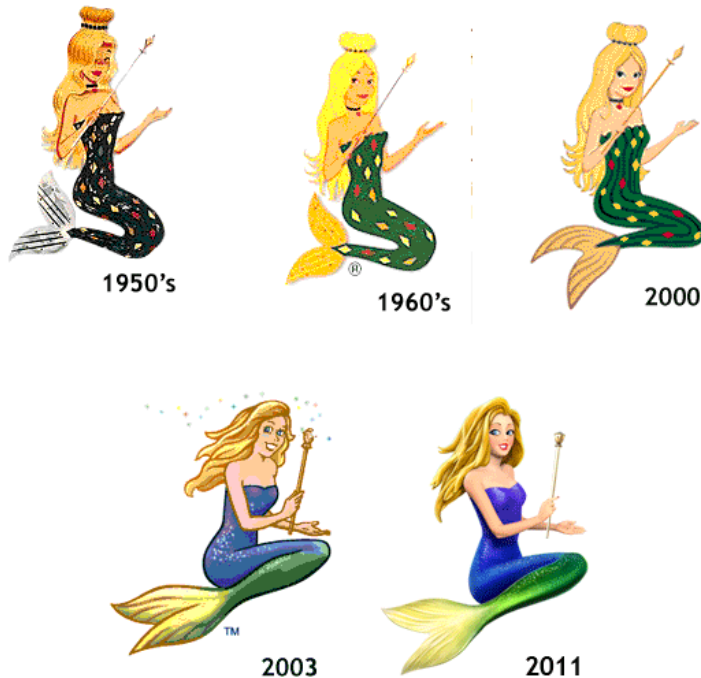


Figure 2 - Evolution of Chicken of the Sea Logo (Devard, n.d).

Since 2008, Chicken of the Sea's parent company, Tri-Union Seafoods, have filed a number of trademark suits against the Otis McAllister Company, which produces a number of tinned fish products, including tuna, under the brand name La Sirena. The company began operating in California in 1918, principally producing tinned sardines, and has a major presence in the South and Central American markets. Since its early stages, it has used the image of a red-haired mermaid reclining on a rock in the sea as its logo (Figure 3). Unlike Chicken of the Sea, this logo has not been subject to significant variation or development or been deployed in advertising in any of the manners that Chicken of the Sea's mermaid has. In the early 2000s the company sought to establish itself as a major presence in the US, prompting Tri-Union to allege infringement action. These actions have not succeeded in that La Sirena is still package with a mermaid logo (Figure 3).



Figure 3 – La Sirena seafood brand tinned tuna (2021).

Sirena Tuna

Based out of Australia, Sirena Tuna opened for business in 1956 as a producer of Italian-style tuna products. Positioned as a premium product that emphasised the quality of locally and ethically sourced tuna with the Italian methods of preparing and preserving the fish, Sirena Tuna quickly found an audience in delis, restaurants, and markets around the country. Today, its tuna comes from around the world, with a purported dedication to pole and line fishing methods and a corporate commitment to environmental sustainability (Sirena, 2021). Sirena's cans of tuna are packaged in distinctive yellow wrapped tins with a mermaid featured in the center/top of the tin (Figure 4). In typical mermaid fashion, she is pretty, with long flowing hair that strategically covers her bare breasts, her tail is on display and the transition from human torso to tail occurs lower on this mermaid than in others which provides a glimpse at her somewhat human-like buttocks. This mermaid, and the packaging in general, is retro in style and markedly different from the fully developed cartoon-style mermaid used by Chicken of the Sea. She is posed with her hands behind her head, like she is relaxed and reclining – perhaps like she is sunning herself, without a care in the world and inviting the viewer to join her.

Sirena Tuna's packaging is widely recognised in its markets and has broad appeal, and the mermaid is an important part of that identity along with the bright yellow tin. The brand plays up its Italian origins, considered by consumers to be a mark of quality and craftsmanship (Ochoa and Lorimer, 2017), even though the brand is actually an Australian company started by Italian immigrants. The mermaid does not appear prominently in other marketing communications on the company's website or social media platforms (Sirena Ads, n.d), it is part of the packaging but does not play a vital direct role in other forms of marketing communications. Yet, the ads – both video and still photos – emphasise attractive, scantily-clad, voluptuous females, playfully enjoying a day by the sea whilst eating Sirena Tuna, helping to link the brand (as symbolised by the mermaid) to the product (tuna). For other advertisements, the focus is on providing customers with recipe ideas. According to personal correspondence with the company, the mermaid is an integral part of the brand's identity, but they offered no backstory or details about her to supplement her image on the product packaging (Chong, 2021). She is mysterious and unknowable, adding to her allure.



Figure 4 - Sirena Tuna logo as displayed on can top (2021).

The Sirena mermaid is sexy and sensuous. Her vintage vibe, harkening to the sun-soaked coastline of Italy, is a marker for the brand's image as an Italian and artisanal product. The affect is that of making tuna sexy, or at least more interesting than many other standard, canned, or packaged products (Online Circle Digital, n.d.). While she may be the focal point of the brand's image, she is not the focal point of the brand's messaging which instead emphasises the product, and its quality and versatility. The mermaid is symbolic of the brand's perceived roots and its commitment to timeless craftsmanship that imbues the product with authenticity. This is an example of a product where packaging (not just the logo) is vital to the brand's identity and conveys important information to consumers, irrespective of whether that information is accurate or not. Sirena Tuna is a 'lifestyle brand', clearly articulating how its products can be used to fulfill expectations about a way of life that emphasises food as a pleasure, indulgence, and communal experience (Eric, Tom, and Bruce, n.d.). The mermaid is emblematic of that lifestyle – *La Dolce Vita* (Italian for 'the Sweet Life').

BonV!v Spiked Seltzer

BonV!v Spiked Seltzer is part of the growing prepared, highball-style² mixed drinks category of alcoholic beverages. In 2013, the product was originally introduced to the marketplace under the brand name Spiked Seltzer, which was both a unique brand and a distinct product category in a competitive market space. This was confusing for consumers and problematic for the brand, and ultimately led to a rebranding. Spiked Seltzer rebranded as Bon and Viv Spiked Seltzer (later BonV!v Spiked Seltzer), and the company was sold to Anheuser-Busch InBev in 2016. Billed as a 'hard' seltzer, the beverage is a mix of seltzer water (carbonated water), alcohol, and (typically) a fruit flavoring, and the market is burgeoning with category offerings from both global alcohol brands and small, craft beverage producers (Jennings, 2019).

² A highball is a mixed alcoholic drink composed of an alcoholic base spirit and a larger proportion of a non-alcoholic mixer, often a carbonated beverage.

Since the brand's inception, mermaids were part of the brand logo and identity. But in 2016, the brand ramped up the use of the mermaids in its branding from just the logo to full-blown promotional advertisement campaigns that featured its two mermaids. The brand is built around two fictional characters, mermaids named Bonnie and Vivian. The two are part of both the brand's logo and marketing campaign, notably appearing in a US National Football League Superbowl commercial in 2019 (Eads, 2020) that has over 11 million views on YouTube. There are a couple of versions available on BonV!v's YouTube channel (BonV!v Spiked Seltzer YouTube Channel, 2021). The commercials feature Bonnie and Vivian as two mermaids with flowing hair and iridescent tails. Both are wearing full-coverage tops (blouses) that match their tails, rather than being bare chested or minimally clad. They are underwater and inviting customers to join them for a beverage. The mermaids speak (in underwater, bubbly voices), telling viewers about the products, flavours, and refreshing qualities. Notably, Bonnie and Vivian share possession of a trident, typically reserved as a symbol of male dominance and power. The two are reminiscent of barmaids serving up beverages to customers. More recent versions of the commercials feature Priyanka Chopra Jonas (not as a mermaid), an A-list celebrity and notable for her vivacious appearance and sex appeal, demonstrating how to make various concoctions with BonV!v's beverages.

Originally, the mermaids featured prominently on product cans as twinning images, replete with long flowing hair, crown, shells covering their breasts, and the typically scaled fishtail. Unlike the video commercials, the mermaids on the cans are less life-like, and instead are flat (both literally and figuratively) and lack the abundance of personality they possessed in the video commercials. The colors of their hair and tails change with the different flavors of the beverage but typically fall into vibrant, female-friendly colors such as pink, purple, and light blue. The two mermaids are jointly holding a trident, looking away from each other into the distance and appear to be beckoning whoever is in their gaze to join them with outstretched arms. Even in their static form, the mermaids are playful, fun, and enticing – inviting consumers to join them for a refreshingly good time. More current packaging seems to have de-emphasised the mermaids in favor of allowing space for the brand name, BonV!v (Figure 5), which may be part of the branding strategy to emphasise the brand name in an intensely competitive product category.



(Figure 5 - Evolution of BonV!v logo (Brand New, 2020).

Cruise Lines

Three cruise lines have logos that are suggestive of mermaids (Crystal, Dream and Princess) while the fourth, Virgin Voyages has a clearly recognisable mermaid as its logo.

Crystal Cruises³ was established in 1988 in the luxury cruise category and has since expanded to include Crystal River Cruises, Crystal Yacht Cruise, and Crystal Expedition Cruises. The branding is somewhat more abstract than others in this study, entailing an emblem that is a diptych – containing two images in one. First, the primary image comprises two flanking seahorses – facing each other and creating a relief of space between them. Second, in the negative space between the two seahorses there is an image that may be perceived as a mermaid, although this is unclear. The figure may be interpreted as wearing a crown, raising her arms in a welcoming embrace, with an hourglass figure and a hinting of a tail. In addition to the tail that appears as part of the possible mermaid image, there is another tail plunging into the water at the top of the image, which may or may not be the tail of a mermaid (Figure 6). The image requires interpretation by the viewer and can be understood in a variety of ways. That ambiguity aligns with the ambiguity of mermaids in general. She is difficult to see, blending effortlessly into the environment around her – an enigma. In terms of usage of the logo, Crystal Cruises uses the same logo across all of their cruise subsidiaries. The logo is used extensively in promotional material, but largely serves as a marker to emblazon all aspects of the cruise experience as Crystal Cruises.



Figure 6 - Logo for Crystal Cruises (2021).

Dream Cruises operates primarily in waters off of Asia but markets itself globally. The company's logo (Figure 7) suggests a mermaid, although her exact nature is unclear. Presented as a profiled silhouette intertwined with a stylised *D* in the name Dream, the mermaid-like figure features long flowing wavy hair, pronounced bosom, and a hint of a tail that blends seamlessly into the *D* in the logo. She appears to be cresting out of the water and her likeness is integrated with the waves around her making it difficult to distinguish between the two (Figure 7). She is positioned much like a figurehead mounted on the bow of a ship (or like the hood ornament on a car), leading the way on

³ Crystal Cruises was contacted to gather information about their logo and claimed that their logo contained images of seahorses. During follow up, the company was asked about the image of the mermaid(s) in the negative space between the seahorses but did not reply. I surveyed 10 individuals to determine if they too could see a potential mermaid in the image and they could (sometimes with prompting), so the logo is included in this study. It is not uncommon for brand logos to include hidden or surreptitious images as part of their branding as such a tactic – and/or unintended design aspect – creates mystery, intrigue, and curiosity.

the oceanic journey. In 2016, Dream launched a video advertisement titled *Mermaid's Dream*, featuring a love story between a mermaid and an astronaut (Leo Burnett China, 2016) inspired by a painting onboard one of the ships. Dream Cruise Lines latest ship, *Global Dream*, also features a mermaid as part of the ship's hull design (McAlpine, 2019) and the investment in mermaids as part of the brand's identity continues with the hull of *Explorer Dream*, this time blending the mermaid and a unicorn (*Travel Weekly Asia*, 2019). The mermaid motif is becoming an increasingly important part of the brand's identity and messaging. Dream Cruise Line appears to be trying to evoke otherworldly environs, such as the world of mermaids, to create out-of-this-world expectations for its cruisers.



Figure 7 - Dream Cruises Logo (2021).

Princess Cruises employs an image of a female with long wavy hair in their brand logo that the company refers to as a “sea witch” (p.c 2020). Sea witches sometimes appear in folklore in mermaid-like form, having the upper body of a female and the bottom half of a fish, although the two types of creatures are not always synonymous. While the image does not capture the female's body below the neck, and therefore the tail is not visible, her hair - which is presented as (literal) waves - hints at her possible mer-identity (Figure 8). She is one with the ocean, seamless and mesmerising. The image's beauty is simplistic and natural. Her status as a mermaid is unclear, even with respect to how Princess Cruise identifies her, and is left to the interpretation of the consumer. There is ambiguity in the logo about her true nature; she is mysterious and unknowable. Her gaze is implicitly seaward - toward the waves, as if longingly wishing to return to her watery home. The logo is heavily used, particularly on-board, as a brand marker to clearly link the cruise experience to the brand. Princess Cruises is the largest cruise line included in this study and the logo is relatively well recognised among cruisers and is part of the Carnival Cruise family of brands, the largest cruise-based corporation in the world in terms of number of passengers, number of ships, and overall revenue (Cruise Market Share, 2021).



Figure 8 - Princess Cruise Logo (Princess Cruises, 2021).

Virgin Voyages is part of Richard Branson's corporate conglomerate. Scheduled to be launched in 2020 (but delayed due to COVID19), the cruise line has been promoted as an 'adults only' experience that promises luxury, indulgence, and a lack of inhibition. In 2018, Virgin Voyages Cruise Line introduced Scarlet, the Lady of the Ship, as the embodiment of the brand and the name of the first ship. The mermaid graces the brand logo, and her likeness is affixed to the side of Virgin's first ship in the line. As the Virgin Voyages website attests, Scarlet is more than a brand mascot; she is intended to reflect the female-forward design and construction of the ship.

From engineers to builders, marine tech to crew captains and technical positions, this program is meant to help female leaders break through the glass ocean if you will; it's meant to create more leadership positions for women on the operations side of the sea travel industry. This multi-pronged approach, supported by skill development, recruitment, and mentoring, is something we find incredibly important in areas traditional lacking female leadership. (Virginvoyages.com, 2018: online).

There's irony in the notion that Virgin touts its female-forward leadership in the construction and operation of this ship given that Scarlet is reduced to her highly sexualised and physically accentuated form. In terms of branding, she is the same likeness, albeit in mermaid form, as the female figure embodied in the brand logos for Virgin Atlantic and Virgin Galactic. Even the corporate name, Virgin, has linkages to mermaids who are portrayed as both virginal and highly sexual. This duality is celebrated by the hedonistic nature of an adult-only cruise line.

As depicted by Virgin Voyages Cruise Line, the mermaid has the requisite long flowing hair and iridescent tail. Her breasts are bare but strategically covered by her flowing hair, and she appears to be in motion – swimming while trailing a flag or sail behind her emblazoned with the Virgin name (Figure 9). She sports a dorsal fin that accentuates her posterior. Scarlet appears inviting, overtly suggesting the sexuality and hedonism one might expect to find onboard, and luring others to follow her. Among the mermaids in this study, she is one of the most glamorous, sexualised, and vamped up. In an ironic twist, despite the purported commitment to making Virgin Voyages a female-centric endeavour; the mermaid featured on the side of Virgin Voyages ship(s) was designed by a man, Toby Tinsley. He describes his creative process as one where he sought to emphasise the sexuality and allure of the mermaid as a vehicle to welcome cruisers by embodying the spirit of the brand in the mermaid (Tinsley, 2018). Various iterations of

the mermaid were produced throughout the design phase and every aspect of her visual identity was carefully constructed to convey the messaging intended by the brand (Smith, 2019).



Figure 9 - Virgin Voyages Logo (2020).

Discussion:

The use of mermaids in branding for consumer products is a strategic decision – designed to invoke the associations that consumers have with mermaids onto the brand itself (Fajardo, Zhang, and Tsiros, 2016). For six of the eight brands in this study, the connection between the brand/product and mermaids is linear – the four cruise lines and two tuna producers are brands whose products rely on their connection to the ocean and mermaids serve as a valuable and symbolic link between the oceanic world and human world. Although none of these brands offer details about their brand's development, there are parallels between the amphibious nature of mermaids and cruise lines or fish companies, making the choice of mermaids in the brand logo consistent with the core of the brand. For the two other brands, Starbucks and BonV!v, the choice is less obvious and requires the telling and interpretation of the brand's story, which in itself is a self-gratifyingly constructed marketing tactic – that is, the story is told such that the choice of mermaids in the brand logo is a logical extension of the brand story, irrespective of the authenticity of the story (Herskovitz and Crystal, 2010). In the case of Starbucks, the origins of the company, its name, and its logo are legendary and relatively well document (or at least speculated), but maintain an aura of mystery and ambiguity via the absence of confirmation from the company about these (Woodcock, 2018). In each of the cases included in this study, the use of a mermaid fits the brand narrative, either objectively or through strategic manipulation.

The choice of mermaids in a brand's logo also serves a functional purpose. Mascots or brand characters have a lengthy and proven track record in branding as means through which a brand's identity and persona can be conveyed (Cayla, 2013). Using anthropomorphised characters in branding provides a vehicle through which a brand's identity can manifest and connect with target audiences (Belk and Kriazeva, 2018). As the importance of brand relationships grows, these characters take on roles within the brand – much like a brand ambassador (Ditt, 2017). For the more fully developed mermaids, such as Catalina (Chicken of the Sea's mermaid), that role might include being a spokesperson whereby the mermaid literally and figuratively communicates important information to audiences. For other visually well-developed mermaids, the full image is part of the brand story conveyed through her physical presence. The mermaids in the Virgin Voyages and Sirena Tuna logos are not developed in other contexts but still manage to convey important brand information to consumer who gazes at the images. Mermaids who are portrayed in less detail, such as those for Starbucks and several of the cruise lines, are mysterious and unknowable. The functionality of these more static logos is somewhat limited to a physical marker that denotes a particular brand and a general appeal of an attractive and intriguing logo.

As brands work to establish a unique brand identity, the use of mermaids in the brand logos works to facilitate that process. The qualities that the brand seeks to embody can be embedded into the mermaid and provide a convenient and practical means of conveying those characteristics to audiences (Brown, Ponsonby-McCabe, 2014). As a communication tool, mermaids blend their own mer-identities with the brand identity. The anthropic nature of mermaids enables the communication of human-like attributes and helps audiences make the linkages between the mermaid and brand. The use of mermaids also enables the brand's creators to craft a mermaid image that meets the needs of their brand because mermaids are pliable, their fictitious nature empowering the brand developers to make her whatever they wish her to be.

Gender plays a significant role in the use of mermaids in corporate brands. In terms of target audiences, gender is among the most common demographic segmentation strategy employed by brands to group consumers into meaning clusters (Moore and Wurster, 2007; Moss, 2007). For some of the brands, such as Chicken of the Sea and Sirena Tuna, females represent an important consumer group as buyers, users, and consumers of their products, and the mermaids in the brand logos serve as a nod to those consumers. For the Chicken of the Sea brand, the mermaid is a friendly peer who wants to help make the lives of female consumers easier by providing meal options for the customers' families. The Sirena Tuna brand utilises its mermaid differently, she is aspirational, and representative of a lifestyle associated with quality and indulgence that appeals to the premium target market for the brand. BonV!v is part of a product category that has traditionally appealed to female alcoholic beverage consumers and is growing in popularity among male consumers. The mermaids are part of the brand's fun, carefree, and goodtime image. Virgin Voyages uses its mermaid to embody the fun, sexually-charged energy that cruisers can expect to find on-board. This appeals to women who identify with (and/or aspire to) the confident, sexy, and take-charge mermaid, and to the men who find this archetype of a woman attractive. In contrast, Princess Cruises uses their sea witch as emblematic of female beauty – quietly alluring, demure and yet strong, and wistful. This mermaid is appealing to those looking to find romance and connection onboard the ships.

In addition to gender in relation to the target audiences, a growing body of research is examining the gendered characteristics of brands themselves (Spielmann, Dobscha, and Lowrey, 2021; Ulrich and Tissier-Desbordes, 2018). Just as brands are imbued with personality traits akin to those of humans, so too are brands designed with gendered characteristics engrained into the brand's identity. Brands can (and do) embody characteristics that have (at least historically) been more strongly associated with a particular gender. This practice is becoming increasingly complicated as society's understanding of gender has evolved past a binary interpretation to a more inclusive and fluid acceptance of gender expressions. Nevertheless, brand identities often have elements associated with gender expression and consumers can (and often do) classify brands into feminine or masculine categories. This is separate and distinct from who finds the brands appealing or who is the target audience for the brand. Brands that use mermaids in their logos may be using this image as an expression of the brand's identity. For example, Starbucks, along with many service-based brands, is considered a feminine brand. The cruise brands, like the practice of feminising ships, are feminine brands that emphasise hospitality, graciousness, and intimacy. The practice of gendering brands helps to facilitate emotional and relational connections that consumers have with brands. Mermaids, with their ubiquitous gender identity, may help facilitate these emotional responses.

Although the archetype of the mermaid in western culture is well established, it is neither singular nor definitive. Brands can mold their mermaid into the image that the brand wants to convey. The ambiguity of mermaids makes them pliable and interesting (Phillips and Rippin, 2010) and their otherworldly beauty is captivating. They are inherently unknowable, and that makes us want to know them more. For several of the brands, the mermaid's identity is unclear. Although the Starbucks logo is unequivocally a mermaid, many customers may not recognise her as such. For those that know her true identity, it serves as a mark of insider status or part of the exclusive group of Starbucks's coffee community. For Princess Cruises and Crystal Cruise Line, the logo, as well as the response from the companies themselves, fail to resolve questions about the identity of the mermaid-like image in the logo. The "is she or isn't she" mystery adds to the logos' appeal by enabling customers to imagine for themselves what they are seeing. In the Crystal Cruises logo, she is hidden in the negative space between the flanking seahorses and to some is, quite literally, invisible yet there to discover if your mind's eye allows it. In the Dream Cruises logo, she blends seamlessly into the font type. Without a clear depiction of her tail, her mermaid identity is hinted at via the way the figure is cresting out of the waves. For each of these logos, the ambiguity of the mermaid is part of her allure, beckoning consumers to come and know her.

The duality of mermaids is particularly useful in that it enables human audiences to relate to and identify with the logo's human-like aspects, but the non-human part of the mermaid lends an aura of otherness, curiosity, and mystery that draws in consumers. The dichotomy of her identity challenges consumers to consider their own relational identity to the brand and to juxtapose their human identity against that of the mermaid. The use of mermaids by cruise brands is a good example of using them to represent the duality of cruising. Cruise ships have a dualistic element – allowing land-dwellers to live on and enjoy the ocean as they otherwise would not be able. That land versus water dichotomy, the beauty and danger of life on the water, the idea of being welcomed on board but unwelcome if immersed in the water, and the notion of exploring a part of the earth where humans can only traverse in exceptional conditions is reflective of the mermaid's duality (Hayward, 2017; Pedersen, 2018; Phillips and Rippin, 2010). In many

instances, mermaids have been depicted as able to live (perhaps only temporarily) on land despite their watery predisposition, but cruising allows humans to live on the water in a new and intimate way, bringing them closer to the life of merpeople than would be otherwise possible. Mermaids are also dualistic in terms of sexuality, being portrayed at times as both virginal and at other times as sexual aggressors. She straddles (figuratively, since her anatomy does not enable her to straddle anything) the fantastical ideal of innocence and hedonism that many men find intoxicating and that women at times attempt to emulate. She often oozes sexuality but her body masks the means of sexual expression and gratification. Chicken of the Sea plays on the mermaid's innocence, she is modest, demure, and appealing to woman who are not looking for sexually charged imagery when shopping for tuna. In contrast, the Sirena Tuna mermaid is sexy, glamorous, sensuous, and alluring, which aligns with the indulgent, luxuriant, and premium tuna brand.

Mermaids are the embodiment of otherness (Robertson, 2014). They fail to fit neatly into categories such as human or fish. For many humans who themselves feel as though they don't conform to socially defined and accepted norms, the mermaid's otherness is what they relate to and identify with. The popularity of mermaids within the 2SLGBTQ+ community is attributable to this identity as otherly (Campbell Galman, 2018; Shipley, 2012; Spencer, 2014). A mermaid's otherness is celebrated and increasingly society is doing the same – honouring those who do not fit established social structures or parameters. The use of mermaids, for example in the logos for BonV!v, Starbucks, and the cruise lines, is in part intended to be an invitation to yourself irrespective of whether you conform to established norms and a symbol that you will be welcomed. A part of Starbucks' brand identity is as a *third place* – a safe haven away from home or the office, where customers are welcomed to be themselves.

Mermaids are the ambassadors for their watery environment. Their symbolic connection to ocean stewardship is also an appealing dimension for cruise lines (Barritt, 2020; Cashman, 2019; Porter and Lück, 2018). The increasing emphasis by consumers to demand and support corporate social responsibility, including environmental causes, makes a compelling case for cruise lines to invest in initiatives that protect the ocean. This makes sense from both branding and pragmatic perspectives. The branding element of positioning cruise ships as guardians of the ocean in terms of the protection of sea creatures aligns with the core values of a growing number of consumers and helps to combat the perception of cruise ships as being contributors to ocean pollution. Additionally, from an operational perspective, having a pristine ocean environment is part of the aesthetic appeal of an ocean cruise and thus cruise lines should be motivated to protect that environment from harm or degradation. In addition to the cruise lines, ocean stewardship is also linked to Starbucks, BonV!v, Chicken of the Sea, and Sirena Tuna brands. For Starbucks, that linkage is historic. The Starbucks name and logo pay homage to the seafaring coffee trade in which the ocean was simultaneously a transportation link and an inescapable danger to those who dared attempt to traverse its span (Phillips and Rippin, 2010). This concept also applies to BonV!v in terms of the lengthy history of the seafaring traditions of the alcohol trade. For Starbucks and BonV!v, it is history (as depicted via the mermaids) that links their brands to the ocean and both brands harness this history to provide depth, meaning, and richness to their brands' identity, all of which helps consumers connect with the brands. For Chicken of the Sea and Sirena Tuna, ocean stewardship is critical as the source of their products. A clean and healthy ocean is vital to the supply and quality of fresh fish that is then harvested and sold to consumers. Sustainability and environmental practices are vital to

a successful fishery, and consumers are demanding that seafood products be produced in ways that preserve and protect fragile ocean ecosystems. Both tuna companies use the mermaid and other ocean stewardship indicators to convey to consumers the company's commitment to responsible ocean management strategies.

The discussion about the impact the mermaid logo has had on the brands included in this study is a bit like the perennial debate about the chicken and the egg. Did the choice of a mermaid for the logo of Starbucks shape its success in the marketplace or did the brand's success in the marketplace shape consumers' perceptions of the mermaid? There is little question about the importance of the mermaid now, nor about customers' affinity for the logo as evidenced by the robust fandom surrounding the mermaid. The brands in this study all have active social media accounts that use, to various degrees, the mermaids as part of that social media identity. For some, the use of the mermaid is limited to the depiction of the logo on the platform, but for brands such as Chicken of the Sea the mermaid is used as the 'voice' of the brand on social media and consumers can engage with the mermaid via the platform. For Starbucks, fans get tattoos, write fanfiction, collect merchandise, and proudly carry their branded cups as they go about their lives. Some of the brand mermaids have reached culturally iconic status, including Starbucks and Sirena Tuna, whereby the mermaids themselves are so revered by consumers.

As with other corporate giants like Coca Cola, McDonald's and Nike, Starbucks has been the subject of intense criticism with respect to the dominance, ethics, and damage of a capitalistic culture that values profits over people. Starbucks is considered relatively progressive for a global powerhouse, and a corporate leader in issues such as sustainability, inclusivity, and community (Fottrell, 2018; Rungtapaian, 2013). However, with growing cynicism among key market segments with respect to the negative impacts of glorifying capitalism and the rise in popularity of the support-local movements, Starbucks and the mermaid logo have been co-opted by activists to represent the money-hungry economic system that is destroying humanity (Hansen, 2016). The anti-Starbucks movement pushes back against the corporatisation of the marketplace and decries the cookie-cutter penetration of brands like Starbucks in terms of erasing a community's unique character or identity. Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel (2006) examine anti-Starbucks sentiment in general and how this movement has co-opted the mermaid as a symbol of corporate greed, inauthenticity, sterility, exploitation, and lack of originality. The examples of parodic logos in Figure 10 express these sentiments. Starbucks is not alone. Chicken of the Sea and Sirena Tuna have both been criticised for their purported impact on fish stocks whilst proclaiming the companies' commitment to ocean stewardship. In one campaign, a human dressed as the Chicken of the Sea mermaid was used to highlight socially irresponsible actions by the company (Figure 11). The use of the mermaids in the campaigns speaks to the strong importance and association the mermaids have with the brands. Beyond the use of the logo for anti-activism, the logos are also implicated in elaborate conspiracy theories linked to the illuminati, government mind-control, or the passage of secret information (e.g. Wu, 2020). In this, Starbucks has a 'secret menu', its logo has been likened to iconography of the masons, in just a few of the bizarre online speculative theories making the rounds on the internet.



Figure 10 - Some of the logos from the anti-Starbucks movement (Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel, 2006).



Figure 11 - Mermaid protesting against Chicken of the Sea (Greenpeace USA, 2015).

Conclusion: Limitations and Future Research

The use of mermaids and mermen in corporate branding was not overly common. One limitation of this study was the restrictive use of corporate brands for consumer products that target or operate in the Anglo-speaking marketplaces of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Brands that have a significant presence elsewhere in the world may have been missed. Also, much of the analysis of the brands with respect to the use of merpeople (mermaids) emphasises the western

interpretation and understanding of this creature, owing in part to the availability of information and other research in English. Finally, the study was limited to widely recognised brands in the Anglo-speaking marketplace and specifically omitted local brands that used merpeople/mermaids in their branding, when in fact, there were plenty of examples online of local retailers, restaurants/food and beverage purveyors, accommodations, and product brands that served a local market, which employed mermaids as part of their brand name and/or brand imagery. Further investigation into brands outside of the selection criteria used for this study may yield different insights. Furthermore, this study focused on merpeople to the exclusion of other mythical or fantastical sea creatures, which are also featured in branding. A study that investigated the use of those other creatures in branding may add to the dialogue. Finally, this study focused on the interpretation of brand meaning and significance from the perspective of the company/brand itself. However, with respect to branding, consumers' perspectives are as important (if not, more so). A study that examined how consumers understood and interpreted the use of merpeople in branding may be instructive about this branding strategy's efficacy.

Mermaids are exciting and alluring creatures, able to beguile and captivate lowly humans. While they have a long history of enchanting or terrorising land-dwellers, their explosive popularity in more recent years has tended to focus on whimsy, mysticism, creativity, self-expression, gender empowerment, sexuality, hedonism, environmentalism, and celebrating otherness. The use of merpeople (or mermaids in particular) in branding is, in part, intended to play into some of these aspects of merculture and mer-identity, and adherence to the mermaids' visual archetype is largely honored, with creative license when deemed strategically prudent. For the most part, brands offered little insight into their mermaids' origins and individuality, preferring to maintain an aura of mystery and intrigue – leaving her unknowable, which too is very mermaid-like. For consumers, she remains alluring as an object of aspiration, desire, and mystery. But most of all, she is inviting – beckoning consumers into her world.

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