

Archetypes

Universal patterns of theme and form resulting from innate biases or dispositions.

Archetypes are found in the themes of myths (e.g., death and rebirth), characters in literature (e.g., hero and villain), and imagery in dreams (e.g., eyes and teeth). They are believed to be a product of unconscious biases and dispositions that have been “hardwired” in the brain over the course of human evolution. Since these innate biases and dispositions are unconscious, their existence is inferred when common patterns emerge in many cultures over long periods. Identifying and aligning appropriate archetypes with a design will increase its probability of success.¹

Harley-Davidson aligns its product design and branding with the outlaw archetype, emphasizing freedom and living outside the rules of society. Products have a certain look and feel (e.g., black and chrome motorcycles with a loud, distinctive sound) and marketing images emphasize rugged looking people in black leather. Nike (named after the Greek goddess of victory), by contrast, aligns its brand with the Hero archetype, using heroic sports figures to promote its product. Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, and Lance Armstrong are all shown wearing Nike products while typically striking a heroic pose. This does not mean that a picture of Michael Jordan on a Harley wouldn’t help sell motorcycles, or that a picture of a group of outlaws wearing Nike leather jackets wouldn’t help sell sportswear. It does mean that the probability of success would be lower because the archetypes do not align with the design.²

In storytelling, archetypal themes are all too familiar. For example, one archetypal plot—the Hero’s Journey—can be summarized as follows: a prospective hero is called to an adventure that he or she refuses; a meeting with a mentor occurs and the hero meets the call; the hero experiences various trials, often including the defeat or death of the mentor by an ultimate enemy; the hero must overcome self-doubt and confront the ultimate enemy; the hero defeats the ultimate enemy and returns home to great celebration. This archetypal theme has been successfully employed by filmmakers like George Lucas and George Miller, and is also evident in the works of Steven Spielberg, John Boorman, Francis Coppola, and a number of Disney animated films.³

Consider archetypal themes and forms in all aspects of a design—from form and function to name and brand. Since archetypes influence perception on an unconscious and primarily affective level, they are especially useful when traditional modes of communication (e.g., language) cannot be used. Note that reactions to specific archetypes may vary across cultures and, therefore, should be tested on target populations prior to use.

See also Affordance, Biophilia Effect, Contour Bias, Mimicry, and Threat Detection.

¹ The seminal work on archetypes is “The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious” by Carl G. Jung, in the *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Vol. 9 Part 1 (translated by R. F. C. Hull), Princeton University Press, 1981.

² See *The Hero and the Outlaw: Building Extraordinary Brands through the Power of Archetypes* by Margaret Mark and Carol S. Pearson, McGraw-Hill Trade, 2001.

³ The seminal work on archetypes in storytelling is *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell, Princeton University Press, 1960.

These are proposed designs for a marker system to warn future generations of the presence of a nuclear-waste disposal site. The design specification required the markers to stand for the life of the radioactive hazard (10,000

years), clearly warn people to stay away from the area, and assume that future civilizations will not be knowledgeable of radioactive hazards or speak any language known today. The designs address this seemingly impossible specification through the

brilliant application of archetypal theme and form—parched earth, snakelike earthworks, and claws and thorns—to warn future humans of the radioactive hazards on an affective, instinctive level.

