

Platforms+: Apple TV+ and Disney+'s Symbols of Exclusivity

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Every few months, it seems another media giant announces the launch of a new streaming platform. With each announcement, the playing field gets more crowded, creating an ever more competitive market and forcing customers to choose between services or pay cable-TV-like prices for multiple subscriptions. A new name comes with each media conglomerate's entry into the streaming platform ecosystem — or with the addition of a second tier to an existing streaming service). Some platforms, such as NBC's Peacock, opt not to use the parent company name at the risk of losing brand name recognition. Others opt for a sleeker version using a symbol: Disney+, Apple+, and Paramount+ are notable examples. An analysis of the first two of these streaming platforms—launched within months of one another—will allow me to investigate larger marketing trends and ways of thinking in the cultural landscape.

What does the + qualifier do? How does the symbol play an important role in these media companies' branding and marketing strategies? How do companies deploy this symbol to attract customers and reflect their company history? Furthermore, how does the visual culture associated with a mathematical symbol mediate brand ideologies and aesthetics? Though keyword analyses appear less common than brand overviews, keywords and symbols offer portals into the brands.

Using the + symbol deployed by Disney and Apple as case studies, I will attempt to dissect the complex, overlapping functions of this symbol, which may seem inconspicuous or unremarkable on the surface. My paper is divided into two major lines of argument. The first will introduce the + sign as a part of a logo equation with Apple TV+ as a case study. The second section will look at Disney+ and its double deployment of brand nostalgia and innovation in its logo.

Brand Overviews

The announcement of the name Disney+ is not surprising when considering the company's history of diversification and self-sufficiency in distributing and licensing its film library. As Christopher Anderson details, Disney's theatrical distribution subsidiary Buena Vista was established in the early 1950s as a means "to end its reliance on major studio distribution," which, as Janet Wasko argues, "signaled the Disney company's transition from a marginal independent film company to one of the Hollywood majors."¹ In the same decade, Disney embraced television to advertise new ventures like the Disneyland theme park while establishing familiarity in audiences' homes. Premiering on ABC, *Walt Disney's Disneyland* (1954–1958), which in part showcased the construction of the amusement park, was a promotional tool for future Disney experiences and recycled family favorites.

Disney's embrace of streaming in the late 2010s mirrors its response to the emergence of television in the 1950s. As many studios panicked following the rise of streamers and dwindling numbers of cinemagoers, Disney answered this uncertainty with platformization.² By streamlining its services, Disney has protected its content, strengthened its brand identity, and facilitated access to its celluloid vault.

Apple's first foray into the digital content marketplace was the iTunes store. Launched in 2003—when music fans were torrenting, and music executives were panicking—iTunes was the first legal digital catalog to offer downloads from all five major music companies.³ In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Shoshana Zuboff details Apple's lucrative response to a changing demand:

Napster hacked the music industry, but Apple appeared to have hacked capitalism. It is easy to forget just how dramatic Apple's hack really was. The company's profits soared largely on the strength of its iPod/iTunes/iPhone sales. . . Even today

the figures are staggering: three days after the launch of the Windows-compatible iTunes platform in October 2003, listeners downloaded a million copies of the free iTunes software and paid for a million songs, prompting Steve Jobs to announce, “In less than one week we’ve broken every record and become the largest online music company in the world.”⁴

The instant success of the iTunes store, Zuboff argues, was made possible in part by Apple’s ability to tap into individualized consumption through the option to purchase single song files, and the customizability of the iPod. Zuboff explains, “The combination of the iTunes platform and the iPod device made it possible for listeners to continuously *reconfigure* their songs at will. No two iPods were the same, and an iPod one week was different from the same iPod another week, as listeners decided and re-decided the dynamic pattern.”⁵ Does the same pattern emerge with Apple TV+ and, say, a MacBook?

Twenty years later, in response to declining hardware revenue, Apple has slowly shifted away from hardware and into services, a category broad enough to encompass sales from apps, cloud storage, music streaming, and, of course, Apple Originals.⁶ Crucial to this shift—and to Apple’s brand identity as a whole—has been the seamless integration of software, services, and hardware.

Re-organizing the Equation

The + sign is most associated with its mathematical significance. Its sibling, the minus, is tricky to discuss within the context of visual culture, given its indistinguishability from the hyphen or dash. Unsurprisingly, the success of subscription services hinges on marketing the positives of paying for access, not the negatives. However, the equal sign is often similarly uprooted from its usual context in arithmetic and reappropriated, while retaining some of its mathematical meaning. As quoted by Jeff Scheible in *Digital Shift: The Cultural Logic of Punctuation*, David Golumbia writes that “there is little more to understanding computation than comprehending this simple principle: mathematical calculation can be made to stand for propositions that are themselves not mathematical, but must still conform to mathematical rules.”⁷ Despite the absence of a calculation, the equal sign nevertheless signifies a relationship between two or more parts. The + sign, when placed at the end of a company logo like Apple or Disney, creates an equation out of a brand

name, or more accurately, it reveals a preexisting equation that the brand name disguises. Instead of between two or more numbers, the + sign is placed at the end.

Another Bite: Apple's +

The + was first introduced into Apple's lexicon on 25 March 2019, with the announcement of Apple News+. Apple TV+, launched later that same year on 1 November, is the company's first venture into original programming. In advertising campaigns and the logo projections displayed right before each Apple TV+ Original, the equation is sleek and compact, consistent with Apple's brand image. It takes the shape of the Apple logo in black, followed by a lower-case bold-lettered "tv" and ending with a bold +. In the pared-down design, all three elements seem to share equal weight. The + sign is more than a mathematical sign linking two elements together, though it does also do that. If we can agree that Apple TV+ is an equation, in which "Apple" + "TV" + "+" = some value, then the + represents both a value and a sign. The + signifies the leap from the Apple TV as hardware (the digital media player and microconsole was released in 2006) to Apple TV as a streaming service. It also serves as a symbol of movement towards all-original creative digital production.

When Apple TV+ was announced at the Apple Special Event on 25 March 2019, many of the creatives behind these new productions appeared both onstage and projected on a screen behind the stage. In a segment revealing the first Apple TV+ original *The Morning Show*, a black and white picture of Jennifer Aniston and Reese Witherspoon (both are Executive Producers and actors in the series) appeared after the Apple TV+ logo, a shadow to their presence on stage. This configuration recurred with every artist that appeared onstage, from Oprah to Big Bird. Thus, a new layer to the equation appears: Apple TV + Oprah or perhaps Apple TV+ = Oprah. Apple, like the mid-century studio system, is touting its star power.

What is so effective about the + is its open-ended signification. Because the + technically only represents the difference between a console and a streaming service, its implicit meanings are potentially endless. The value at the other side of the equals sign is ambiguous. The + could signify more connectivity, more Apple products, more content, better content, better user experience, more brand power, more revenue, higher subscription fees, positive vibes, and so on. Given the tremendous success of iTunes and the iPod in the early

2000s, perhaps the + signals Apple's desire to recreate this fusion of hardware and services. Their success may depend less on the quality of the programming than on Apple's understanding of how consumer demands and habits have changed since the early 2000s. If the "i" represents the consumer's desire for an individualized experience, then what does the + say about consumer desires now? By seeing the + as part of an equation, the brand's identity and positioning becomes easier to dissect.

In the logo projection, which appears before every Apple Original, the + is revealed before the rest of the logo, illuminating the letters "tv" and the Apple logo to its left. This presentation of the logo conveys Apple's brand confidence, as well as their marketing strategy for the service. This animation acts as a kind of self-reflection on the part of the brand. The +, the brand's future, arrives on screen first, overriding the Apple logo and "tv." However, given that the + is placed after the Apple logo and "tv," there is a sense of natural expansion. The logo projection here does more than just advertise the new service; it performs the double duty of projecting the future while illuminating the company's past.

Even in still images of the logo, the + glows, as if lit from within. This type of illumination imbues the logo with a tactile quality. In *Brand Hollywood*, Paul Grainge, invoking Vivian Sobchack, writes about the aesthetics of studio logos and how these are used as essential branding tools. In it, he speaks to the logos' haptic energies:

By inviting audiences to encounter or inhabit the world of the trademark, corporate logos have become increasingly tactile, appealing from the outset of film experience to "the way we are in some carnal modality able to touch and be touched by the substance and texture of images" (Sobchack 2004: 65).⁸

What is significant about Apple's tactile + is the fact that Apple is first and foremost a hardware manufacturer. They make tactile products. The illuminated +, then, is a subtle way of attempting to preserve that tactility despite entering a digital streaming market, which is essentially non-tactile. The glow of the + also recalls the screen glow essential to Apple's usual product lineup. On the *Fortune* website, a blurb on Apple details the slowing down of iPhone sales and the company's strategy to sustain growth as consumers hang on to phones and laptops longer.⁹ The tactile + represents a perhaps uneasy transition from a manufacturer of goods to a service

provider. Nevertheless, Apple is keen to hang on to that feeling of tactility through its logo projection.

More than simply a shift from hardware to software, the + also works to signal a mediation of services. If customers were watching Netflix and HBO on their Apple TV, now they are able to watch Apple Originals on their Apple TV. The announcement of Apple's Original programming suggests a desire to streamline hardware and services. Yet with drastically fewer original productions than Disney+, for instance, how many consumers will exclusively watch Apple Originals on Apple TVs?

Disney's Magic +

A major difference between Apple and Disney is Disney's legacy as a Hollywood Studio and a media conglomerate. In that sense, Disney+'s logo is more plainly an equation. On the homepage of the streaming site, there is a mathematical series below the "Sign up Now" button, which uses the stylized + from the logo to show off the sum of Disney's offerings. The homepage design functions as a form of brand awareness for those that might not know just how much Disney owns and has to offer. As the brand acquires more intellectual property, this series will continue to expand. The website was not the first time Disney has presented its empire as an equation. The television show *Disneyland* was itself "organized around the same four divisions as the park—Fantasyland, Adventureland, Frontierland, and Tomorrowland."¹⁰ With Disney, Pixar, Marvel, *Star Wars*, and National Geographic, Disney+ has more than four divisions, yet each can be categorized within one of Disneyland's divisions. The + is a kind of compass that orients the consumer within the brand's geography.

In terms of logo design, Disney is also simultaneously playing into brand nostalgia as a tactic to carve out a space for itself in the competitive online streaming market. The + is not perfectly symmetrical, unlike Apple's. The + is curved, riffing on the trademark Tinkerbell dust of Disney's traditional Cinderella Castle logo. The shaping processes of brand logos is an example of what Paul Grainge calls "the contemporary renaissance of classical design, enhanced by digital technologies," or perhaps a form of high-definition nostalgia.¹¹ In the logo projection, the tail, which emerges from behind the "D," reveals the + at the end, as if a part of a magic trick. The logo demonstrates the magic Disney touch. In all previous iterations of the Disney logo, however, the magic dust trail, which begins after the signature has

finished writing itself, starts on the “e” and completes a backward half-moon, ending on the “W” of “Walt.” In the Disney+ logo, the movement is forward, not backward. This movement towards a revelation, towards a new symbol, is indicative of the brand’s strategic positioning at the intersections of familiarity and innovation.

Indeed, much of Disney+’s marketing and brand positioning taps into nostalgia. Grainge writes “one might argue that studio logos function at the very intersection of recollection and expectation, or what might be called the blockbuster’s aggregation of memory and hype.”¹² This quote perfectly sums up what the Disney+ logo is doing. The magic trick that creates the + sign is simultaneously habitual and exciting. The stylized + is then a symbol of the futurity of the brand, a futurity that is only made possible by the Disney legacy. This tension between the familiar and the new is summarized in Jean-Marie Floch’s book on *Visual Identities*, in which he tackles branding from the vantage of industrial semiotics. He writes that “visual identity means difference” because of its need to communicate the company’s specificity.¹³ Yet visual identity also suggests continuity: “Continuity cannot be seen here as mere repetition but rather as a kind of ‘becoming’ with its own logic and directional sequence.”¹⁴ The + sign encapsulates this ‘becoming’ through a continuous differentiation of the brand from other media companies.

It is possible to view the + sign as an attempt to alter the brand from the outside to reflect its diversification. In Theodor W. Adorno’s writing on exclamation points, he writes that “their proliferation was both a protest against convention and a symptom of the inability to alter the structure of language from within; language was attacked from the outside instead. . . a desperate written gesture that yearns in vain to transcend language.”¹⁵ If we think of the brand as a kind of language that cannot be transcended, then internal expansion and rebranding are ways of trying to reorganize the internal structure. A tricky tension exists between demonstrating change on the outside and risking brand identity.

The + symbol is a useful tool to calculate and critique a brand’s services and positioning. It organizes platform interfaces and helps consumers navigate their way through a brand. A great deal of insight can be gleaned from a media company’s logo. Paul Grainge writes that “entertainment companies have sought to project their logos as a means of confirming specific kinds of industrial authority and viewing pleasure.”¹⁶ The + is a key part of the pairing

of authority and visual pleasure in how it communicates access to a treasured back catalog or slate of flashy new programming.

Towards the end of Christopher Anderson's chapter on *Disneyland*, he speculates that Disney's television show may have been "the first harbinger of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's prediction for the apotheosis of the television age, the moment when 'the thinly veiled identity of all industrial culture products can come triumphantly out in the open, derisively fulfilling the Wagnerian dream of *Gesamtkunstwerk*—the fusion of all the arts in one work.'"¹⁷ If streaming platforms are *Gesamtkunstwerks*, then the + is their portal.

Notes

- 1 Christopher Anderson, "Disneyland," in *HollywoodTV: The Studio System in the Fifties*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 20; Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2001), 34.
- 2 Thomas Poell, David Nieborg, and José van Dijck, "Platformisation," *Internet Policy Review*, 8.4 (2019), <https://policyreview.info/concepts/platformisation>.
- 3 Andy Langer, "Is Steve Jobs the God of Music?" *Esquire*, 1 July 2003, www.esquire.com/features/steve-jobs-esquire-interview-0703.
- 4 Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, 1st ed. (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 57–58.
- 5 Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 63.
- 6 Six of Apple's services are available as a bundle called Apple One, paid for monthly.
- 7 Jeff Scheible, *Digital Shift: The Cultural Logic of Punctuation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 4.
- 8 Paul Grainge, *Brand Hollywood: Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age* (London: Routledge, 2008), 71.
- 9 Ross Kohan, "Fortune 500: Apple," *Fortune*, www.fortune.com/fortune500/2019/apple/ (accessed 4 April 2020).
- 10 Wasko, *Understanding Disney*, 21.
- 11 Grainge, *Brand Hollywood*, 77.
- 12 Grainge, *Brand Hollywood*, 79.
- 13 Jean-Marie Floch, *Visual Identities* (London: Continuum, 2000), 33.
- 14 Floch, *Visual Identities*, 33.
- 15 Theodor W. Adorno and Shierry Weber Nicholson, "Punctuation Marks," *The Antioch Review* 48, no. 3 (1990): 302.
- 16 Grainge, *Brand Hollywood*, 70.
- 17 Anderson, "Disneyland," 31.

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