

Rethinking the Cultural Icon: Its Use and Function in Popular Culture

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ABSTRACT

Background *The role of cultural icons in twenty-first century North American popular culture has been under-theorized in communication scholarship. This is a significant gap in knowledge, given the importance of the icon as a public text through which collective cultural values are symbolized.*

Analysis *Using the novel approach of the scoping review, this article illuminates the current landscape of iconic studies by identifying wide-ranging examples of the cultural icon from academic scholarship, recognizing organizational categories, and synthesizing existing definitions to highlight the limits of current conceptualizations.*

Conclusions and Implications *Informed by the collected data, this article suggests a redefinition of the cultural icon that considers its current novel role in revealing tensions between different articulations of collective cultural values.*

Keywords *Cultural icon; Symbolism; Collective values; Publics; Visual communication*

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte *Le rôle des icônes culturelles dans la culture populaire nord-américaine de ce siècle n'a pas encore reçu une attention théorique soutenue en communication. Cette lacune est sérieuse, vu l'importance de l'icône en tant que texte public par lequel nous représentons nos valeurs culturelles collectives.*

Analyse *Au moyen de l'approche novatrice qu'est l'examen de la portée, cet article illumine le terrain contemporain des études iconiques en identifiant divers exemples de l'icône culturelle dans la recherche académique, en recensant des catégories organisationnelles pour celui-ci, et en faisant la synthèse de définitions courantes afin de souligner les limites des conceptualisations actuelles.*

Conclusion et implications *Cet article s'inspire des données recueillies pour proposer une redéfinition de l'icône culturelle qui rend compte de son rôle novateur de souligner les tensions sous-tendant diverses articulations de valeurs culturelles collectives.*

Mots clés *icône culturelle; Symbolisme; Valeurs collectives; Publics; Communication visuelle*

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Introduction

What constitutes a “cultural icon” in twenty-first century North American popular culture? All of the following have been attributed this status in academic literature: Shakespeare, Oprah, Batman, Anne of Green Gables, the Cowboy, the 1960s female pop singer, the horse, Las Vegas, the library, the Barbie doll, DNA, and the New York Yankees. These popular cultural icons share characteristics in common with all icons: the ability to function as repositories of collective cultural values, a ubiquitous presence in popular culture, and roots in specific socio-historical contexts that contribute to their iconicity. They are subject to high levels of public scrutiny through elevated circulation in North American popular culture: appearing authoritative and controversial in different historical moments and in varied contexts. However, they are also a category of unique iconic communicative entities that exist in and through mass culture, mass media, broadcasting, popular audiences, and the digital networked culture of the internet. They belong to the cultural history of the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Cultural icons in twenty-first century North American popular culture have a heightened malleability, or adaptability, in part due to digital editing and distribution technologies, evoking the idea of contemporary cultural icons as biological entities that are alive and changing.¹ And yet, despite the wide use of the term “cultural icon” in popular discourse and academic literature, the concept is not treated as a unique version of iconic signification but more often as a subset of the icon, resulting in its poor definition and under-theorization, especially in the context of networked digital culture.

This study aims to establish a formalized and concrete way of conceptualizing the role of the cultural icon in twenty-first century North American popular culture. It does this by engaging in a novel approach to surveying current literature on the cultural icon: the method of the scoping review—a popular approach in social and health science research used to assess the breadth of existing research on a given topic. By systematically collecting information about cultural icons from comprehensive academic databases (including Communication & Mass Media Complete, JSTOR, Academic Search Complete, the Web of Science, and Google Scholar), this study produces an inventory of iconic examples illuminating the existing landscape of study, including organizational categories and concept definitions. Further, by synthesizing the data, including how cultural icons are labelled and defined, the study isolates the existing language used to describe their function(s) highlighting the limits of current conceptualizations. Based on this data, a new definition of the cultural icon as it functions within current networked digital culture is suggested, addressing a theoretical gap in cultural theory with reference to the study of iconic symbolism in twenty-first century North American popular culture. Cultural icons are the product of specific historical contexts, thus they are able to point to the significance of the particular social, cultural, and political moments and modes in which they are embedded. This enables them to illuminate cultural anxieties, and highlight the tensions between different versions of collective meaning.²

The language of the icon: Describing iconic function

Given the status of icons as visual shortcuts for complex ideas, their meanings tend to be assumed, rather than defined, by those who use them (Fishwick & Browne, 1970).

This is problematic because understanding the meaning of an icon (*what* it communicates or expresses) is directly connected to the ability to isolate and explain its function (*how* it communicates specific cultural values) and to explore its purpose (*why* it is chosen as a representative symbol of those values). These interrelated elements form a language of iconic signification that is used to explore its importance.

In popular discourse, iconic language tends to be simplified, often applied as a descriptor (something is “iconic”) or in declarative statements (something/someone is “an icon”). A common example of this is its use as an adjective to label a famous figure, such as a celebrity idol or venerated historical person. However, the term is also frequently applied as a noun to describe objects associated with everyday practices in networked digital culture, as in the example of the computer desktop icon, which functions as a screen image linking to programs or files. Whether adjective or noun, “icons” and “iconic” are popular labels in journalistic writing as evidenced by the number of such references in Canadian news sources. Between 2011 and 2016 alone, 78,879 mentions of the term “icon” or “iconic” appear in Canadian news sources.³ That is the equivalent of 36 uses of the term per day.

The etymology of the term “icon” reveals a long history of shifting conceptions that include the icon as sign, the icon as sacred religious image/object, and the icon as representative cultural symbol. Annotations in the Oxford English Dictionary on the term “icon” place the emergence of these interrelated definitions in the sixteenth, nineteenth, and mid-twentieth centuries respectively (OED Online, 2016). These approaches are represented in academic literature, especially in the areas of semiotics, art history, and visual culture, in which the icon has been a key subject of study. Charles Sanders Peirce developed a foundational semiotic model of signs and their functions, arguing that an icon is a simple sign, “which stands for its object ... Most icons, if not all, are *likenesses* of their objects” (Houser & Kloesel, 1992, p. 13, emphasis in original). As examples, Peirce offered the object of the photograph, the diagram, and geometric figures. This approach offers a language of the icon as “sign” representing a given object.

The second approach describes the function of the icon as religious symbol, introducing the language of the sacred. As Martin Kemp (2012) notes, the term “icon” has been “associated specifically with the hieratic and largely invariant paintings produced over the centuries in Eastern Churches and favoured by Orthodox Christianity to this day” (p. 17). Here, the core function of the icon is to represent a sacred symbol and present it for worship. This description of the icon as sacred religious object is directly connected to the centrality of the Christian Church in medieval European life (Alexander, Bartmanski, & Giesen, 2012; Nachbar & Lause, 1992).

And finally, the third approach describes the function of the icon as representative of a cultural symbol. Differentiating the contemporary context from the “traditional” view of the icon as sacred object above, visual culture scholars Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2009) argue that icons are images or people that symbolize broader notions, including “universal concepts, emotions, and meanings” (p. 445). Emphasis here is placed on the ways in which icons function as signs that “refer to something beyond its individual components” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p. 444), situating their study within the broader context of popular, mass mediated culture.

As the above approaches illustrate, different conceptions of iconic function invite the use of different terminology: the icon as sign, as sacred object, and as universal symbol. Additionally, there are also a number of thematic variations of the cultural icon that have been developed in academic scholarship to explain their significance in very specific cultural, social, and historical contexts. Examples of these include: the “popular icon” (Fishwick & Brown, 1970, p. 3; Geist & Nachbar, 1983, p. 97; Nachbar & Lause, 1992, p. 171); “imagetext” (Mitchell, 1998, p. 52); “icon of outrage” (Perlmutter, 1998, p. 11); “popular iconic metaphor” (Columbus & Boerger, 2002, p. 579); “iconic brand” (Holt, 2004, p. 4); “American Icon” (Hall & Hall, 2006, p. xvii); “photojournalistic icon” (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007, p. 27); “fantastic icon” (Rodgers, 2009, p. 3); and “Western [capitalist] icon” (Fridell & Konings, 2013, p. 4). These subsets of the cultural icon are novel articulations of its range of uses in interpreting collective cultural values. However, these conceptions do not account for differences between the cultural work performed by icons, nor, necessarily, the networked digital culture in which versions of iconic images circulate.

Despite the ubiquity of cultural icons in twenty-first century North American popular culture, as repositories of collective cultural values they function in different ways: there are variations in popularity, potency, familiarity, circulation, and use. Kemp (2012) purposes two main categories of iconic signification outlining key differences in the way they function as representations: general icons are highly recognizable non-specific entities (such as a heart shape or an apple), while a specific icon has a definitive form or text (such as a specific person, image, or text). Specific icons, especially those in the form of a single original image (e.g., the Obama HOPE poster) that is easily digitized and shared, raise anew core questions of function related to the icon: how does the image circulate and make meaning? What are the effects of the intensification of use on iconic images that have been amplified by digital editing and the sharing practices and technologies of digital culture? As case study, the example of the “Keep Calm and Carry On” poster offers some potential answers.

The cultural work of the icon: The case of the “Keep Calm and Carry On” poster

The popular motivational slogan “Keep Calm and Carry On” has become the subject of countless cultural texts, from globally available commercial products to internet memes (Hatherley, 2016; Mastony, 2009; Slack 2012; Thorpe, 2016). The phrase originated from a poster created by the British Ministry of Information in 1939 that was rediscovered in a British used bookstore in 2000, commercially mass produced for global audiences beginning in 2008, and registered as a trademark in Europe and the United States by a British company in 2011 (Hatherley, 2016, 2017; Lewis, 2004, 2012; Thorpe, 2016).

Now a recognized as a “global design icon” (Hatherley, 2006, para. 4) this popular poster image with bright red background, and simple white lettering topped with the symbol of a crown, which came to prominence in the midst of the 2008–2009 global economic crisis, is most commonly interpreted as a symbol of fortitude and endurance that is intended to inspire and motivate with its “gentle, yet stern, directive” (Wilson, 2009, para. 1). This reading of its meaning has been expressed in a range of ways, including interpretations of the poster as a symbol of World War II nostalgia in Britain

(Lewis, 2012); as representative of the “pithy sentiment of resilience” (Lewis, 2017, back cover); and as symbolizing “British stoicism and the ‘stiff upper lip’” (Thorpe, 2016, para. 4). The resonance of the poster’s message for current audiences is both internal and external: the central motivational message appears positive and progressive, challenging the negative socio-historical context of economic (and other) uncertainty against which it is framed. This is not a simplistic reading of the meaning of this cultural icon, and yet, to end its analysis here ignores a competing narrative that contributes to its significance: that the “progressive” slogan can be read as promoting the status quo of the present and/or a past state. Acknowledging the original historical context of the poster as a propaganda message of the British Ministry of Information during World War II, Owen Hatherley (2009, 2016, 2017) argues, that the poster is a form of “austerity nostalgia,” embodying a very particular ideological viewpoint: “a yearning for the kind of public modernism that ... characterised the period from the 1930s to the early 1970s” (Hatherley, 2016, para. 6, 10). For Hatherley (2009), the prominent meaning of the icon as a symbol of resilience is problematic because it masks the competing meaning of the poster as a representation of repression through “ironic aesthetic authoritarianism” (p. 2).

The question of the definitive meaning of this iconic text is wrapped up in its status as a “specific icon” that originated in a definitive visual form (i.e., the object of the poster). Writing about this icon (Hatherley, 2016, 2017; Lewis, 2017) includes narrative attempts to pinpoint the historical moment and context in which the image gained fame. The objective of authentication (tracing out the origin story of an icon) is to solidify its meaning and, in relation to the multiplicity of iconic images in current mediated culture, to assert its significance. Origin stories are offered as proof of the icon’s public importance, although the purpose of establishing such a narrative can produce contradictions in the meaning of the icon for the reader, as Charlotte Riley points out in her review of Hatherley’s (2017) book *The Ministry of Nostalgia*:

[Hatherley] points out that this poster was never mass produced until 2008; it was designed by the Ministry of Information in 1939, along with two other posters (‘Your Courage, Your Cheerfulness, Your Resolution Will Bring Us Victory’ and ‘Freedom is in Peril, Defend it with All Your Might’) but was never used, and most of the stocks of the poster were pulped. Hatherley argues that is therefore ‘a historical object of a very peculiar sort’, although it is unclear why he feels that the fact that the poster was not displayed in the past makes it any less valid as a historic artefact today: is popular exposure or reception so critical in making a piece of material culture ‘real’? If the poster had been displayed by a British population that is mostly now dead, would contemporary engagement with its imagery by people who could not remember its original purpose be any more meaningful? (Riley, 2016, para. 5)

The preoccupation with tracing a specific iconic image to its emergent point in popular culture is not specific to the “Keep Calm and Carry On” poster, but it is emblematic of changing notions of the icon’s function in twenty-first century North American popular culture. Other examples include the legal dispute over the source

image of artist Shepard Fairey's HOPE artwork (Banet-Weiser & Sturken, 2010) and the search for the human subject featured in J. Howard Miller's "We Can Do It!" image (Kimble, 2016). In these cases, the icon's "authenticity" (i.e., its original source/context) is being called into question by the networked digital environment in which it currently circulates. The intensification of use is contributing to a perceived crisis in credibility that is being negotiated, paradoxically, through the affirmation of its origins in a single source, rather than through the collective impact of a body of images that produce its recognizability. Promoting the icon as the product of a single pathway ignores the importance of circulation in the meaning-making process of iconic signification, which impacts how the purpose of an icon is read: as having a definitive source of meaning rather than a messy and entangled cultural narrative. This highlights the need to re-affirm circulation as a core aspect of how the cultural icon achieves iconicity in popular culture.

The example of the "Keep Calm and Carry On" poster as cultural icon, with its multiple narratives and origin stories, underlines the importance of considering an icon's function more closely in order to better analyze its meaning and significance. What follows is a systematic analysis of the existing language of icons in academic literature in order to isolate how an icon's function is described in its conceptualization.

Methodology: Scoping review of existing literature

This study presents data from a scoping review of academic literature on the "cultural icon" and "popular icon" in order to highlight patterns in use. The purpose of a scoping review is to survey existing literature on a topic in order to identify gaps in knowledge and suggest questions to guide future research. The data illustrates that cultural icons are an increasingly popular topic of study despite the limited theorization about their functioning and broader significance to the contemporary cultural landscape.

As a social research methodology, the purpose of a scoping review is to "map *rapidly* the key concepts underpinning a research area and the main sources and types of evidence available" (Mays, Roberts, & Popay, 2001, emphasis in original). Hilary Arksey and Lisa O'Malley (2005) identify four reasons to undertake this kind of literature review: to assess the range of material available on a particular topic; to determine whether a full systematic review should be done;⁴ to compile, condense, and disseminate research findings; and finally, to highlight significant gaps in research. While the scoping review is not designed to assess the quality of literature identified, it is a methodological framework that excels at highlighting gaps caused by lack of research activity (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). This study was undertaken to highlight gaps in research on the topic of the "cultural icon," and in doing so also identifies the current range of research on the topic by collecting, condensing, and synthesizing the findings.

This scoping review of the "cultural icon" follows the five stages suggested by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) to conduct effective studies, it: 1) identifies research topic using wide parameters; 2) locates literature using electronic databases, reference lists, and hand searches; 3) selects relevant studies using defined inclusion/exclusion criteria; 4) extracts and charts qualitative data according to issues/themes of study; and 5) condenses and summarizes the data. The overall goal here is to illuminate existing areas of research and to highlight the themes present in that research in order to pro-

vide an accurate report on the state of literature (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). It is important as well to note the limitations of this scoping review: a single reviewer screened the abstracts and the quality of the studies identified was not assessed.

Findings: The cultural icon in academic scholarship

This scoping review undertook a search of the terms “cultural icon” and “popular icon,” including examples, and sought to identify original definitions of either term. The search involved a comprehensive set of databases, including Communication & Mass Media Complete, JSTOR, Academic Search Complete, the Web of Science, and Google Scholar. It also included a hand search of directly relevant sources, including the *Journal of Visual Culture*, *Journal of Popular Culture*, and relevant books (as identified in the book reviews in the database search, and located via general library search of the topic) that were not captured in the original search. In total, 508 items were identified in academic and grey literature (unpublished or non-commercially published, e.g., theses and dissertations), and 255 abstracts were marked for inclusion in the scoping review. Publishing dates range from 1970 to 2016, with yearly totals measuring no more than 11 manuscripts before the year 2002, and up to 19 manuscripts per year between 2003 and 2016, peaking between 2006 and 2011. The publication type breakdown is the following: 187 journal articles, 51 books/book chapters, 13 dissertations/theses, and 4 conference papers. The diversity of these sources captures not only published materials on the topic but also emerging research contributing to discussions on iconicity and icon theory. The fields of study captured in this review are wide-ranging, stemming from the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. The findings demonstrate that treatments of iconic meaning are being undertaken using a range of theories, methods, and practices, including those from: literary studies, critical cultural studies, communication studies, religious studies, media studies, film studies, heritage studies, gender studies, Canadian studies, popular culture, sports studies, visual culture, theatre and performance studies, modern languages, sociology, social psychology, cultural anthropology, historical geography, and the history/social studies of science.

The initial search sought manuscripts that used the term “cultural icon” or “popular icon,” and then the following inclusion criteria was applied: is the term “cultural icon” or “popular icon” being used to describe and/or analyze an example that is the primary focus of the study, or one related to the primary focus (a secondary example mentioned more than once in the manuscript)? If yes, the entry was marked for inclusion and the example was recorded and coded under one of three descriptive categories: person, place, or thing. Definitions of the terms were recorded as well, where available, although this was not criteria for inclusion/exclusion as so few analyses of iconic signification actually included a theoretical explorations of the term: of the 255 included manuscripts, only 31 offered definitions of the term, some of which were cited from previous works. These results and their significance will be explored in more detail below.

It is worth considering the use of the individual search terms “cultural” and “popular” icon because in practice, the terms are used interchangeably and defined in very similar ways in the included literature. The 255 manuscripts marked for inclusion in this study were coded as treatments of either “cultural” or “popular” icons depending on which term was used as a descriptor in the analysis: 193 used the term “cultural”

(76%), while 53 used “popular” (21%), and 9 (4%) used both terms (i.e., both labels used in the same manuscript, or the labels were used in conjunction with one another, “popular cultural icon”). Clearly the high number of entries under “cultural icon” demonstrates its preferred status as the adjective to qualify the meaning of the icon in contemporary culture, while the term “popular” is much less regularly used.

While it may be tempting to assume that the difference in the use of the terms is linked to the types (e.g., status, class, value) of icons being described, in the literature surveyed both terms are used to describe a range of examples belonging to the categories of person, place, or thing linked to different cultural contexts. On the surface a “cultural icon” appears to be isolated within the cultural sphere in terms of its influence or significance, which in turn suggests that the “popular icon” is limited to popular contexts. However, this is not how the terms are treated in practice, where similar icons are coded with either label and are given similar definitions, as will be explored in the following section. As the data collected in this study suggests, the similarities between icons in terms of their classifications and categorizations far surpasses differences in their treatment as subjects under study. The ways in which cultural/popular iconic study finds itself implicitly organized according to a largely unwritten set of similar rules is intriguing, but is also highly significant here because it suggests a starting place for establishing a theory of cultural icons in twenty-first century North American popular culture.

Although the primary goal of the scoping review was to identify academic and grey literature employing the use of the term “cultural icon” and “popular icon,” it was also to compile a list of examples of icons in the selected manuscripts in order to highlight the breadth of existing study in this area. One of the key patterns evident in the collection of this data was observable from the first stages of the research process: that the icons under study belong to the three broad categories of “person” (specific and non-specific human and animal figures), “place” (specific and non-specific places and spaces), and “thing” (specific and non-specific objects and ideas). The “person” category included the highest number of entries: 182 of 255 (71%), while the “thing” category included 62 entries (24%), and the “place” category just 11 entries (4%). The three categories were the first level of the sorting process, within which subcategories were created to further differentiate between individual entries. These are summarized in Table 1 below, along with the total number of entries collected in each category, as well key examples.

As the most highly populated in this scoping review, the category of “person” offers the opportunity for two unique observations about existing studies of icons. The first is that the category contains a large variety of examples, from individual people (both dead—Frida Kahlo—and living—Elton John), to fictional characters created in the arts and media (from Mary Poppins to Bart Simpson), to classes of people in history (such as “pioneer women” and “soldier”), to archetypes representing mythical persons (fairy tale characters, zombies). Generally speaking, the popularity of the category of “person” as icon type could be explained in a number of ways, not the least of which is the tradition of human forms as religious icons, and the popularity of current celebrity culture that encourages idol worship. However, these explanations do not

Table 1: Cultural icon categories and subcategories

First level sorting category	Sub-category	Sub-category definition	Total entries	Examples
Person	Individual	human figure, historical (alive or documented as having been alive in history) or fictional (creation of the arts, media, folklore, legend)	125	Top entries: 1) Shakespeare (5) 2) Oprah (4)/Batman (4) 3) Beethoven (3) Top categories: a) Writer/Poet/Playwright (28) b) Musician/Composer/Singer (12) c) Superhero/Super-villain (8)
	Group	a category or type of human figure (archetype, trope), historical (alive or documented as having been alive in history) or fictional (creation of the arts, media, folklore, legend)	46	Top entries: 1) The Cowboy (2)/The Farmer (2) Top categories: a) The Female Performer (5) b) The "Modern Girl" (3) c) Black Femininity (2)
	Animal	animal form, historical (belonging to earth's ecosystem of the present or past) or fictional (creation of the arts, media, folklore, legend)	10	Top entries: 1) Horse (3) 2) Dog/Dingo (2) Top categories: a) Living Animals (6) b) Extinct Animals (2)
Place	Geographical	specific historical (noted in human geography past or present) or fictional place (a creation of the arts, media, folklore, legend) with definable boundaries	9	Top entries: none (all unique) Top Categories: a) Cities (4) b) Countries (2)
	Conceptual	a category or type of non-specific space (either historical or fictional) sharing particular characteristics that may be generally evoked	2	Top entries: none (all unique) Library (1) Classical Chinese Garden (1) Top categories: none
Thing	Object	A 3D material object that can be touched or held, in theory or in practice, and which may be historical or the product of a fictional narrative	32	Top entry: 1) Barbie (3) Top categories: a) Architecture (3) b) Boats (2)/Paintings (2)
	Concept	an idea represented through a set of meanings and/or series of related objects, which may be historical or the product of a fictional narrative	26	Top entries: 1) The Brand (3)/The Gene, DNA (3) Top categories: a) Songs (3) b) Books (3)
	Organization	a group of people joined by a specific common goal, which may be historical or the product of a fictional narrative	4	Top entries: none (all unique) Top categories: a) Entertainment (2) b) Sports (1)/Politics (1)

directly address an interesting implicit dichotomy in the “person” category: that “iconic people” can be readily sorted into “historical” and “fictional” subgroups. Curiously, this divide is most notable in examples coded in the “person” category, reflecting broader tensions that inform the meaning and significance of icons in contemporary culture. The goal here is not to suggest an artificial divide on which one side is occupied by “real” or verifiably “true” examples of cultural icons and the other by the imaginary, the unreal, or the untrue. Rather, the purpose of highlighting this tension, which is also the second unique observation offered by this study, is to show that cultural icons exist within symbolic spaces of meaning between “historical” and “fictional,” between “real” and “ideal.” When arguments form in the popular discourse of newspaper articles or blogs over the meaning of a cultural icon and/or controversies erupt over its symbolism, it takes place against the backdrop of this tension, which lies at the heart of iconic signification as a representational practice.

Discussion: Defining the cultural icon through form, function, and location

Table 1 summarizes the main categories of icons identified by the scoping review data, as well as subcategories, the total number of entries for each, and key examples, both in terms of “top entries” (cultural/popular icons appearing in two or more manuscripts in a subcategory) and “top categories” (groupings of the most popular topics in each subcategory). This data clearly illustrates the ranked popularity of icon types in academic literature, from the highest at number one to the lowest at number eight: 1) individual people (historical and fictional), 2) groups of people/human figures (historical and fictional), 3) objects, 4) concepts, 5) animals, 6) geographical places, 7) organizations, and 8) conceptual places. While this data speaks to the popularity (and thus value) placed on particular icon sub-types in contemporary culture, it does not offer any explanations about iconic function. Here, this study returns to the question of “cultural work” by asking the following question: what do cultural icons do? The answer to this question is located in the definition of “cultural icon” addressing the questions of form, function, and location.

As noted previously, of the 255 abstracts marked for inclusion in this study, only 31 (12%) of the discussions of icons included a definition of the concept, and of those, only 23 (9%) offered original definitions, which are presented in Appendix A. The low number of original definitions overall suggests that the complex role played by the icon is more often assumed than explained, which results in missed opportunities to address key questions about iconic signification, such as: What is an icon? What does it do? Where does it do it? In this study, inclusion criteria included the following: the definition offered must be for the cultural or popular icon (not traditional/religious or any other category) and the definition must be original (not cited from someone else). In order to simplify the data analysis, the included definitions were captured from the original texts in one to two sentences only, in some cases extracted from slightly longer descriptions, in a way that allowed for the form, function, and location of the icon to be best described. A detailed table of these definitions and data extraction can be found in Appendix A, while a summary of the coded data for “form,” “function,” and “location” appears in Table 2, grouped according to prevalent themes in each category.

Table 2: Summary of icon definition components by thematic grouping in each category

Icon definition components		
Form	Funtion	Location
<p>IMAGE (6)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • image • imagetext • picture, image or representation • images and ideas made 3D • image of canonical status and hieratic quality • "blank slate" <p>SYMBOL (4)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • symbol • symbol • exemplary symbols • symbolic focal point <p>OBJECT (3)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • objects • 3D objects, or 2D images of those objects • "empty vessel" <p>OTHER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • culturally resonant units • artifact • ideal courier of cultural meaning 	<p>THAT REFLECTS (6)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [to] reflect a range of meanings, [and] hold cultural resonance • [to] reflect, communicate or symbolise the world • [to] mirror public expectations, social tensions and political agendas • to be a surface for the projection of popular fantasy • [to] provide a surface on which struggles over meaning can be waged • to illuminate ideas, values, and norms <p>THAT ACTS AS SHORTCUT (5)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to reference broader meanings • to condense beliefs and values • to represent values within a particular context • [to] communicate ideas, beliefs and values • to express internal convictions externally <p>THAT SYMBOLIZES (3)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [to act as] symbol of a set of ideas of important values • to symbolize morality • [to] signify something essential to a group of people with common interests <p>THAT CONTAINS (2)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to act as a repository of anxieties and questions about identity • to embody the values and ideals of a given cultural group • [to act as] visible, concrete embodiments of myths, beliefs, and values <p>OTHER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [to act as] cultural negotiator and mediator • to be easily recognizable, quickly replaced, and magnetic 	<p>IN/FOR:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The social, society (3) • The political (2) • The public (1) • Popular culture (1) • Culture (1)

As presented in Table 2, there are common themes across definitions of the cultural icon, especially in terms of form and function as demonstrated in the data collected. In terms of “form,” the cultural icon was most commonly described as an image, symbol, or object, descriptions that are consistent with the predominant ways of conceiving of icons as previously discussed as signs, sacred objects, and repositories of broader values. Similarly, in the “function” category, the main themes of note to describe the central function of the icon (to reflect, to act as shortcut, to symbolize, to contain) are also consistent with the established descriptions of icons. However, this collection of definitions adds to the project of defining the cultural icon in twenty-first century North American popular culture in two significant ways: first, the long and

vividly descriptive list of iconic functions underlines the difficulty in capturing the dynamic and complex cultural work performed by the icon. Second, the common themes that cut across the diversity in the list of functions evoke the importance of the concept of “representation” as an anchoring idea in defining the key function of the cultural icon. The actions of “reflecting,” “acting as shortcut,” “symbolizing,” and “containing,” all of which emphasize the role of the icon as mediator between things, whether as a mirrored surface between the individual, groups, and society, or interpretative symbols used as shorthand between those groups, or vessels of containment that hold or embody meaningful messages between acts of communication.

The use of active language here in describing the icon as mediator encourages the reader to think about it less as passive symbolic entity and more as active symbolic agent. Highlighting a particular function of the “representation,” not only as a broader process of meaning making but specifically as an entity that denotes something else through the act of standing in for it, further emphasizes the active role of the icon as mediator.⁵ Evoking the notion of political representation (as in the example of an elected representative of a particular constituency), the cultural icon’s primary function is active, dynamic, and significant as it voices the cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes of the groups for which it has been tasked.

Re-conceptualizing the cultural icon: Emphasizing location and “public-ness”

The list of definitions collected here reveals patterns in how icons are conceived of as “things” that “perform action” in particular “arenas.” Interestingly, the third element of the definitions, where the icon performs its representational function, is particularly underdeveloped as the data in Table 2 illustrates, as only five options are identified (the social, the political, the public, popular culture, and culture). This highlights the sparseness of the conceptual landscape when it comes to locating icons and explaining where their labour and meaning are situated. It suggests that “where” icons do their cultural work is much less clear than what they are or what they are supposed to do. And yet, the question of a cultural icon’s location is fundamentally tied up in its function because it describes its field of work: the discursive space in which it moves and generates meaning, while circulating, replicating, and adapting to new contexts.

For the cultural icon, this field of work is inextricably tied to popular culture because cultural icons gain recognizability and familiarity in popular contexts, thus generating visual currency contributing to their iconicity. This landscape includes media texts, consumer objects, digital texts, social media, and popular discursive language and practices, all of which communicate meaning about icons. Additionally, the cultural icon is also fundamentally tied to the idea of the public, because the discursive space that cultural icons occupy in popular culture is open to public discussion and debate, and because the cultural values evoked by icons (whether celebrated or condemned) are inherently connected to idea of what is “good” for the public. The debate surrounding the dominant meaning of the “Keep Calm and Carry On” poster is a good example of this, as it can be read as *both* a protectionist message from a caring government, and an oppressive one with authoritarian overtones.

The idea of the “public-ness” of the icon is explored in a number of the manuscripts collected in the scoping review, which are explored in more detail here in order to underline the importance of this implicit aspect of iconic signification. Cultural icons play a public role in the negotiation of collective values, as Mary Rodgers’ (2009) observes the icon at “the same time evokes commonality and difference” (pp. 2–3) pointing to its role as a simultaneous signifier for different groups of people. These processes of public negotiation often produce contested icons, cultural icons that may “pass” in their ability to evoke particular iconic meanings for publics in one moment and “fail” in others. Mariana O’Ryan (2014) describes this public process when she observes that cultural icons become “the object of our demands. The icon must fulfil our expectations because we think that it is given to it to do so. Failure to deliver results in our disappointment and sometimes, condemnation” (p. 7). The view of the cultural icon as public text is reflected in two related conceptions of the photojournalistic icon identified in the scoping review: David P. Perlmutter’s “icons of outrage” (1998) and Robert Hariman and John Lucaites’s (2007) icons of liberal-democratic public culture. Referring to famous news photos of tragic world events, the “icon of outrage” that Perlmutter (1998) describes becomes a site of struggle for meaning because it elicits powerful emotional reactions and raises question about the effects of the image, namely whether the audience, and in some cases the photographer as well, has any power to change their environment/the world around them. Similarly, Hariman and Lucaites (2007) argue that photojournalistic icons (famous news images representing particular events) directly contribute to the conception of collective values and notions of the public because they speak to “what it means to be a citizen, to live in a modern polity, to possess equal rights, to have collective obligations, and similar determinations of public identity” (p. 28).

Cultural icons are both popular and public texts through which collective symbolisms and meanings take shape in specific ways: they are sites of complex processes of identity making taking shape in and through texts, objects, and practices in popular culture; they highlight the importance of cultural context in relation to questions of personal and collective identity; they invoke the notion of the public as a shared collective space connected to politics; they reposition consumer commodities as public texts; and finally, cultural icons highlight the importance of circulatory networks as forms of publics in which meaning is made and shared between social actors. Cultural icons in twenty-first century North American popular culture, such as the “Keep Calm and Carry On” poster, call upon viewers to consider the deep connection between processes of signification and collective meaning, as well as broader social contexts and how the individual fits within them.

Redefining the cultural icon

The following definition of the “cultural icon” reflects the data collected in this scoping review and addresses the gaps identified above:

A cultural icon is a symbol (in the form of person, place or thing) associated with the “public good,” represented in various forms (mental image, 2D, and 3D text), circulating through a variety of networks (social, material, digital) in popular culture, in response to broader modes and contexts of crisis.

This definition of the cultural icon emphasizes the notion of function (*how* it communicates specific cultural values) through the following elements: its symbolic representation (as person, place, or thing); its form (mental image, 2D, and 3D text); its circulation networks (social, material, digital); and its relational context (socio-historical environment). It adds to the existing literature by emphasizing several key elements of cultural icons in networked digital culture that are not predominant features of the conceptualizations identified by the scoping review. First is the element of context (emphasizing the notion of the public): cultural icons are institutionalized symbols embedded in complex social networks, communities, and publics. Second is the element of circulation: cultural icons experience moments of high distribution through popular networks in which replication and reconstitution occur in response to crisis events. These elements reflect two of the essential functions of cultural icons, which are “to create order out of chaos, [and] to help us define what is important” (Geist & Nachbar, 1983, p. 99).

Conclusion: Cultural icons in popular culture

This study adds to the cultural icon literature in three ways: first, it identifies the existing landscape of research on cultural icons by collecting examples and mapping out the use of icons by category (Table 1). Second, it synthesizes existing definitions of the concept in order to understand how the term is being conceptualized (Table 2). Third, it proposes a new concise and accurate definition of the concept of the “cultural icon” for use in critical cultural analysis. The value of redefining the cultural icon is to more accurately describe its current role in networked digital culture and to establish a common vocabulary to describe it as a distinct cultural phenomenon in twenty-first century North American popular culture.

This intervention into established conceptions of the icon challenges traditional definitions of the term formed in relation to studies of religious representations and semiotic theories of representation. Instead, it offers a unique theorization of the *cultural icon* as an analytical concept that performs the specialized cultural work of representing cultural anxieties, thus illuminating the tensions between different articulations of collective cultural values.

At the individual level, icons operate as souvenirs, mementos, or keepsakes; they are symbolic texts with material substance that sustain us in the present and connect us to different pasts. As Marshall Fishwick describes, the gain and loss of icons both sustains and depletes us, forming a particular relationship of exchange that uses a language of economics:

Even the poorest among us has [a] private icon-bank. We make deposits there regularly, and withdraw more than we know. Just as we tuck away special treasures (notes, emblems, photos, medals) in the corners of drawers, so do we tuck away iconic images in the corners of our minds. We draw interest from our deposits. Icons have a way of funding us, and sustaining whatever sense and form our lives assume. When we can no longer draw from an icon bank, we quickly go bankrupt. (Fishwick & Brown, 1970, p. 5)

The ways in which icons “sustain” us in the present can also be read as a symbolic sustenance akin to nourishment, a metaphor in which icons function as a sort of “cultural food” in a moment of need. But icons are also resources that are collected and stored away for future use in order to understand the past. Cultural icons are rooted in remembering, and the cultural work they perform is fundamentally connected to collective meaning and collective values, re-emphasizing the importance of the notion of community.

While cultural icons bridge the divide between the individual and the collective, they also occupy the paradoxical space between familiarity and novelty. They have the ability to evoke a familiar past in a new way in the present. Their ability to change and shift with cultural context is what enables them to embody anxieties and tensions about collective values, attitudes, and emotions in the contemporary moment. Cultural icons warrant deeper cultural analysis because of their ubiquity. More often than not, they go unexamined when they have much to reveal about conceptions of the public, collectivity, and community.

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Notes

1. Here I am indebted to W.J.T. Mitchell's (2005) wonderful notion of the lives (and aliveness) of images in his book *What do Pictures Want: The Lives and Loves of Images*.
2. This article is based on my doctoral dissertation: *Back to the Political Future: Coping With Crisis Through Radical Nostalgia for Revolutionary Icons* (Truman, 2014), which examines the appearance of “revolutionary icons” in North American popular culture against the backdrop of the economic crisis of 2008–2009. Using three iconic case studies, Marie Antoinette, Rosie the Riveter, and Barack Obama, I argue that “image icons” (particular popular images of revolutionary figures) become predominant ways of communicating meaning in moments of cultural crisis about collective values (such as equality and unity), resulting in the creation of unique discursive spaces that are fundamentally public and political.
3. Based on a search of 320 Canadian news sources from the Canadian Newsstream database. In terms of international press, according to the Factiva database (which features worldwide news coverage from 32,000 sources), the terms “icon” or “iconic” have appeared 1,259,104 times over the past five years.
4. As Hilary Arksey and Lisa O'Malley (2005) explain, the “systematic review” (p. 20) differs from the scoping review in its use of a well-defined research question, its narrow range, and study-quality assessment.
5. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “representation” as “The action of standing for, or in the place of, a person, group, or thing, and related senses” (OED Online, 2016).

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Appendix A: Icon Definitions

Author(s)	Publication date	Definition from original manuscript	Form	Function	Location
Fishwick, M., & Browne, R.B.	1970	"[Popular] icons are images and ideas converted into three dimensions. They are.. external expressions of internal convictions, everyday things that make every day meaningful." (p. 1)	images and ideas made 3D	to express internal convictions externally	x
Geist, C.D. & Nachbar, J.	1983	"Popular icons are objects that suggest emotional and/or intellectual meanings beyond their physical appearance or use... they communicate ideas, beliefs and values..." (p. 97–98).	objects	[to] communicate ideas, beliefs and values	popular culture
Nachbar, J. & Lause, K.	1992	"[Popular] icons are three-dimensional objects (or two-dimensional images of those objects...) which are visible, concrete embodiments of the myths, beliefs, and values which form a culture's mind set." (p. 170–171)	3D objects, or 2D images of those objects	[to act as] visible, concrete embodiments of myths, beliefs, and values	x
Baty, S. P.	1995	"Icons are culturally resonant units that convey a familiar set of 'original' meanings and images. Because they represent content as form... they also provide a surface on which struggles over meaning can be waged." (p. 59)	culturally resonant units	[to] provide a surface on which struggles over meaning can be waged	x
Mitchell, W.J.T.	1998	"a composite 'imagetext', a combination of verbal and visual signs..." (p. 52)	imagetext	x	x
Rodgers, M.	1999	"a single artifact [that] can shed brilliant light on that dense tangle of ideas, values, and norms called a culture." (p. 1)	artifact	to illuminate ideas, values, and norms	x
Roberts, C.	2003	"cultural negotiator and mediator in shifting social and political climates." (p. 83)	x	[to act as] cultural negotiator and mediator	[the] social and political
Nelkin, D. & Lindee, M.S.	2004	"...a symbol, almost a magical force." (p. 2) "As a cultural icon, its meanings mirror public expectations, social tensions and political agendas." (p. 199)	symbol	[to] mirror public expectations, social tensions and political agendas	the public, the social, the political

Appendix A (continued)

Author(s)	Publication date	Definition from original manuscript	Form	Function	Location
Holt, D.B.	2004	"Cultural icons are exemplary symbols that people accept as a shorthand to represent important ideas. The crux of iconicity is that the person or the thing is widely regarded as the most compelling symbol of a set of ideas of values that a society deems important." (p. 1)	exemplary symbols	[to act as] symbol of a set of ideas of important values	society
Ashworth, G.J.	2006	"icons ... reflect, communicate or symbolise what has been made" (p. 392)	x	[to] reflect, communicate or symbolise the world	x
Hall, D. & Hall, S.G.	2006	"[The] range of meanings, plus people's disagreements about an icon's meanings and value, reflect the cultural resonance it holds, and provide the best indication of its character. In other words, a contest of possible meanings and values makes up the drawing power of an icon, and makes it dynamic, rather than static, evolving, rather than securely definable." (p. xviii)	x	[to] reflect a range of meanings, [to] hold cultural resonance	x
Parker, M.	2007	"Icons must signify at a fundamental level something essential to a group of people with common interests ... from small subgroups of people to large communities, nations, and even whole hemispheres. ..." (p. 515)	x	[to] signify something essential to a group of people with common interests	x
Skaggs, M.M.	2007	"Icons, by definition, are easily recognized by simple people, are quickly replaced by fresher icons, and are magnetic to iconoclasts." (p. 288)	x	to be easily recognizable, quickly replaced, and magnetic	x
O'Connell, J.T. & O'Connell, K.M.	2008	"the expression cultural icon ... [describes] a symbolic focal point or prism that points toward, sums up, and opens onto a much wider world of meaning." (p. 962)	symbolic focal point	to reference broader meanings	x

Appendix A (continued)

Author(s)	Publication date	Definition from original manuscript	Form	Function	Location
Mitchell, W.J.T.	2009	"a highly ambiguous blank slate on which popular fantasy could be projected." (p. 126)	"blank slate"	to be a surface for the projection of popular fantasy	x
Lang, Packer, J.	2009	"an ideal courier of cultural meaning, allowing it to be called up at anytime and in any context through creative and selective but readily recognizable citation." (p. 17)	ideal courier of cultural meaning	x	x
Mitchell, W.J.T.	2009	"a highly ambiguous blank slate on which popular fantasy could be projected." (p. 126)	"blank slate"	to be a surface for the projection of popular fantasy	x
Lang, B.	2009	"an image of canonical status and hieratic quality against which people measured their own morality ... " (p. 6)	image of canonical status and hieratic quality	to symbolize morality	x
Beal, T.	2011	"It's a condensation of what people who identify with it believe in and value. It says something about the culture in which it holds iconic power." (p. 5)	x	to condense beliefs and values	culture
Friedberg, A. & Linn, L.	2012	"The word "icon" refers to a picture, image, or other representation. ..." (p. 37)	picture, image or representation	x	x
Parker, M.	2012	"a definition of iconicity will be proposed consisting of four inter-connected conditions comprising, a) distinctness of image, b) durability of image, c) reproducibility of image and d) the tragic-dramatic narrative inherent in the image." (p. 2)	image	x	x

Appendix A (continued)

Author(s)	Publication date	Definition from original manuscript	Form	Function	Location
Truman, E.J.	2014	"popular symbol that embodies the values and ideals of a given cultural group." (p. 65)	symbol	to embody the values and ideals of a given cultural group	x
Bishop, W.	2014	"cultural icons representing the values of a particular historical moment, geographic place, or subculture." (p. 1)	x	to represent values within a particular context	x
O'Ryan, M.	2014	"an empty vessel into which a culture pours its anxieties and questions about identity." (p. 7)	"empty vessel"	to act as a repository of anxieties and questions about identity	x