

LETTERS AS CORPORATE VISUAL IDENTITY SIGNS

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Abstract

Although the domain of Corporate Visual Identity (CVI) is based on the strategic, design and operational levels [1], this research relates to a greater extent with the first two, omitting the third.

Bosch, Jong and Ewing (2004) consider that the strategic level refers to the desired corporate image by a determined company; that is to say, the way it is intended to distinguish, be seen and publicly displayed (brand architecture, reputation, local or international dimension, and positioning), referring to the selection of visual elements capable of creating meanings / connotations materializing properly normalized corporate values, and the operational level regarding the effort to manage, coordinate and maintain consistency of CVI integrated in a business logic over time depending on market changes. Previous studies were mainly devoted to symbols and less on logos or letters in corporate communication, but still, without taking into account or crossing data with the strategic goal of the organization (and the designer). By analyzing meanings of logos in an isolated context, it is not possible to understand if they work (given their goals), but only to identify some of its connotations and denotations.

Having that in mind, this research identified as priorities the following starting points: 1 – Identify Corporate Values / Corporate Identity of the entities under study, 2 – Identify the intention of the designer in the design of a logo and selecting a font, 3 – Identify different types of public perception created by corporate logos and letters.

For the third point, it is crucial to mention that the position of the authors Norberto Chaves and Raul Belluza was accepted (2003) [2], according to which logos originate different kinds of meaning by denotation and connotation:

– By denotation, the name or the intended main object that typography or logos refer to; through basic connotation (which graphic forms invoke by visualization) or secondary connotation (which relies on the logo as a representative of concepts associated with the company).

Although the operational level of the CVI and the very corporate conduct condition public perception, due to time constraints it will not be possible to cross data with those of this investigation. However, through a non-interventionist research and case studies methodology, the meanings of logos and corporate typography are compared at the time of its encoding, (in collaboration with designers) and decoding (by the non-designer public).

Introduction

This research is contextualized in philosophical roots and in the praxis of communication design.

The origins of the term "communication" come from the Latin *communicatio*, *communi* which, in turn, comes from *commune*, meaning "common good", "public good", "participation", "sharing" and "to have in common". So, briefly, in a general perspective, "communication is a form of interaction between two separate beings, and the support of interaction is the exchange of information" (Castro, 2007) [3]. Communicating is to share or to have in common, as a transmitter and receiver, a piece of information.

In this study, objects of communication design are meant as strategic tools designed to function in a way, interfaces between sender and receiver (appropriate to their shared inter-subjective codes). To that purpose, the designer Francisco Providencia (2000) [4] considers that, communication design creates

artifacts of communication through design, that is to say, instruments that promote the decoding of the message by the recipients.

According to Jorge Frascara (2008) [5], "visual communication design deals with the construction of visual messages in order to drive knowledge, attitudes and behavior of people" [6] and the task of the communication designer consists in the interpretation and representation of messages according to a program, "a work that is beyond cosmetics, which is related to the planning and structuring of communications, with its production and evaluation" [7].

Authors such as Ioan Costa (2008) [8] reported that the definition of Corporate Visual Identity (CVI) is particularly complex, since visual language hasn't a repertoire of universal and unequivocal signs as it occurs with writing. Moreover, as stated by Maria Acaso (2006) [9] visual language is the older semi-structured communication system known... and the one with the most universal character [10]. For Acaso (2006), the characteristic that most distinguishes visual language from the others is its resemblance to reality, and the great variety of ways to represent it. The designer decides which level of approximation to reality and gender he is interested in incorporating to the visual message. In summary, the effectiveness of Corporate Visual Identity depends on a number of inter-subjective signs shared by sender and receiver.

The verification of the peculiarities of visual communication, emphasize the need for studies that meet communication design's point of view, that is to say, that contemplate the perspective of "message builders" and its receptors (Frascara, 2008).

Base knowledge

In this research it is understood that Corporate Identity is the set of attributes assumed as innate by an organization, which constitute the "discourse of identity". It develops within the organization throughout the history of the company, business plan and corporate culture (Villafañe, 1999) [11].

Corporate Image refers to the public register of identifying attributes of the organization. It deals with the spontaneous or intentional interpretation made by society, each group, sector or collective about the organization. A social phenomenon that results from a collective process in which a range of stimuli are recognized and filtered, (selected) decoded, reinterpreted (based on associations), organized by classes, archetypes or clichés (Emilio Vilar, 2006) [12].

Corporate Visual Identity is the set of organized messages in a system designed according to a program to build a distinctive style capable of creating a positive corporate image and corporate identity-related (Costa, 2004).

In parallel with the communication process, it is considered that Corporate Visual Identity is the conveyed message, while Corporate Identity is information, and Corporate Image how the message was decoded.

The sense of Visual Identity

In the professional lexicon is common to find terms like "theme", "tone" or "style" to characterize fonts, the kind of corporate visual language adopted to communicate with different audiences.

To that purpose, Olins (1989) [13] states that corporate style is a tool used by organizations to stand out and to differentiate from its competitors, so that "when an organization within the industry has a strong personality and wants to demonstrate its individuality to those with whom it deals, there is no clearer, more powerful statement than that demonstrated by a strong individual visual style." It is understood that, as stated by Yves Zimmermann (1998) [14], opposing to being fashionable, which is to share the same language with a group, "to have style it is to be unique, to be different" [15]. In the scope of Corporate Visual Identity, the concept of style refers to "a quality or a characteristic way of expressing itself" [16] (Schmitt and Simonson, 1998) [17], and with this way of becoming public it could use all the expressions of communication design.

The authors Haig and Harper (1997) ensure that Visual Identity's style is directly related to credibility, which, moreover, is a trust factor that increases its persuasive power. This notion of corporate credibility is important, because while people as consumers prefer to relate with the brands that are more trustworthy because they are seen as the most professional, most competent and most knowledgeable in the subject – "the logotype should serve as the credible voice of the company's graphics program. But, once again, as it happens with a person, the logotype must be a believable representation of the business it symbolizes to be effective" (Haig and Harper, 1997).

With these data, it is possible to assume that the Corporate Visual Identity message should obey to a strategic program and to the values of Corporate Identity, as well as to the selection of graphic codes adjusted to the audience.

Methodology

Against the existence of formulas in the design process and also aware of the existence of a largely empirical praxis, this research aims to contribute with data about how graphic shapes can create meaning in projects of Corporate Visual Identity.

If the existence of similar studies coming to this issue was an important support to this research, it also constituted a learning process, made possible by the analysis of its methodological procedures.

Although empirical studies such as the one conducted by Frederic W. Goudy (Typology, 1940) [18], already questioned the ability of the letter in creating personality and in enhancing the meaning of the message graphically, scientific studies are posterior and less expressive.

Investigations on the impact of typography have been divided between studies on perceptive efficacy (clarity, readability and recognition) and graphic features in the creation of meaning capable of reinforcing the message.

The work of Sir Cyril Burt, in 1911, can be identified as a pioneer study on the impact of letters at a perceptive level, since it focused on how the letter interferes with reading (reading time, text meaning and readability), and the understanding of a message.

In 1957, Osgood, Suci y Tannenbaum developed a study that is based on the selection of semantic scales arranged in opposite pairs of adjectives. This approach came to be a major influence for many subsequent studies, including this research.

After analyzing previous studies, the following investigation question was defined:

- Is the selection of Corporate Typography a strategic factor in the design of Corporate Visual Identity, given the desired Corporate Image?

On the hypothesis, we identified the following:

- Corporate Typography has the potential to identify, distinguish and transmit values of a company or brand, through denotative and connotative associations, giving it its own value.

The defined methodological framework, to search for a possible answer to the research question, assumes that logos originate different kinds of meaning by denotation and connotation (Chaves and Bellucia, 2003):

- By denotation, referring to the meaning originated by the name to which the letter or logo refers to;
- By connotation
 - Primary, referring to the meaning that the graphic form invokes by visualization;
 - Secondary (related to the associations incorporated to logos over time and the conduct of the organization).

Moreover, the analysis of previous studies identified, as an initial premise, the need to assess the meanings of logos from its operating context and from the communicative intention that gave them meaning.

Contrary to previous studies, this research seeks to compare the data of Corporate Visual Identity programs, the context in which they operate and public perception.

The exclusion of designers from the universe of respondents was a crucial fact in the evaluation of denotations and connotations of logos. Such decision relates to the need to gauge the natural perceptions of people who are not conditioned by a whole range of teachings and philosophies inherent to a speciality. From the selection, 15 case studies remained, Spanish and Portuguese brands, with great size and reputation from various sectors of activity, and then proceeded to collect data on the CVI program with their respective authors.

In order to confront the intent of the CVI and designers' program, with public perception, organized questionnaires were elaborated as follows:

- People who know the logo (primary and secondary connotations) – Which structure is based on the Polarity Profile (Osgood in 1963) and literature on corporate communications;
- People who do not know the logo (primary connotations) – A questionnaire based on the Attribute Constellation (Abraham Moles in 1960).

A sample of each case study is composed by 90 Portuguese and Spanish people, excluding designers, at an age ranging between 18 and 70 years, with a total of 1350 respondents.

Phase A

The first phase began with the design of a first structured questionnaire to obtain data on the company, on the initial briefing and the intended meaning for the corporate logo and typography. This questionnaire was subdivided into sections entitled as follows: Identification of case study, The Challenge, The Intention, Coding, and Decoding.

After simple tests, the questionnaire was tested by 10 designers, and then corrected until there was no question about the good understanding of the questions.

Subsequently, the survey was carried out as well as the interview to 10 designers (with a total of 15 case studies), which apart from the answers to the questionnaire also provided other data on Corporate Visual Identity, such as graphic standards manuals or applications of the logo on various media.

This phase ended with data analysis and the preparation of a synthesis grid, where the adjectives that correspond to the types of intended meanings at the level of public decoding of the logos were listed. Other adjectives were still added from literature within corporate communication.

Phase B

The second phase aims to collect data about denotation and connotation of logos proposed by designers. Accordingly, two different questionnaires were prepared for the Portuguese and Spanish population, except for designers.

Study 1

The second questionnaire is intended to collect data on public perceptions of those who are unaware of the logo, thus trying to detect some primary connotations (meanings that the graphic shape invokes on its own). This questionnaire is based on the Moles' method (Attribute Constellation, 1960) and it consists in asking the respondents to write the first adjective that comes to mind when viewing the logo.

Since the third questionnaire is intended to the public that knows the logo, the objective is to identify some of the transmitted secondary connotations (associations incorporated within the logo mainly for the history and conduct of the organization).

Assuming that, regarding the analyzed logos, the symbolic perception of respondents is conditioned by several attributes that go beyond the visual domain, the questionnaire was based on Osgood's method

(Polarity Profile, 1963). For this reason, the second questionnaire presents a closed structure which seeks to obtain data simultaneously on the primary and secondary connotations.

The selection of scales for this third questionnaire ensured the representation of three factors where pairs of antonyms were grouped: assessment [19], power [20] and activity [21]. The adjectives that integrate the bipolar pairs are originated from the summary table that resulted from Phase A, and are rated on a scale of seven levels according to their semantic distance (-3, -2, -1, 0, +1, +2, +3).

For both questionnaires, some tests were performed according to the target profile of respondents, having proceeded to the appropriate refinements to obtain its approval.

The two questionnaires were used for each of the 15 case studies; each case had a convenience sample that consisted of 90 Portuguese and Spanish people, excluding designers, in an age range between 18 and 70 years.

Study 2

The second study investigates the degree of influence of the name and the business sector on the graphic perception of logos.

Based on the structure of the third, the fourth questionnaire is intended to replace logos for simple corporate letters without identification and to evaluate primary and secondary connotations. This questionnaire maintains the same number of respondents.

A fifth questionnaire will be designed in order to detect secondary associations that establish correspondences between the graphic shape of letters and different sectors or types of businesses.

Results and preliminary conclusions

Since this investigation is made in the beginning of the Study 2, conclusions are partial.

The specialized knowledge and aesthetic sense of the designers in typography seems to contrast with public perception, since in the second and third questionnaires (directed to the public in general), respondents display some difficulties in identifying the primary connotations of Activity and some ease in the Power and Evaluation connotations.

From the fifteen study cases it should be highlighted the number of respondents who are unaware of the logos in question (75.1%). However, it is noted a coincidence in the perception of the primary connotations among the results of the questionnaires two and three.

The present results allow to guess that the primary connotations of corporate typography significantly influence brands perception and that the effectiveness increases when they coincide with denotation and when they are reinforced by secondary connotations.

It is expected that the second study allows to assess the effects created by brand names, but also some associations or stereotypes related to specific sectors, activities or markets.

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[19] Assessment - how to appreciate the logo (for example, a bipolar scale: clean-dirty; functional-useless, etc.).

[20] Power - relates to the perceived strength of the logo (for example, a bipolar scale: liquid-solid, strong-weak, etc.).

[21] Activity - refers to the perception of the action of the logo (for example, a bipolar scale: stable-unstable, dynamic-static, etc.).