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Abstract

Differentiating oneself from competition and breaking through the clutter of the modern, saturated marketplace has become increasingly complicated. In addition, consumers have become more powerful and critical towards formal marketing messages. These realities have led to a necessity for companies to turn more of their focus and resources toward the exploitation of visual communication. Visual brand identity (VBI) serves as a significant tool that helps brands to represent themselves and convey their essence. However, to date, proper conceptualisation of VBI has been limited and as a result, the purpose of this study is to provide a holistic and thorough examination of VBI. In addition, since the modern marketplace is characterised by constant change, brands are under pressure to renew their visual appearance on a regular basis in order to maintain relevancy. Therefore, a further aim of this study is to determine the procedures and strategies marketing experts employ in order to uphold an appropriate balance between the implementation of visual changes and the maintenance of a familiar VBI.

The theoretical framework for the studied issues was predominantly formed by the concepts of brand identity, visual identity and visual brand identity. The most conventional visual brand elements were also closely examined, as were the notions of consistency, brand identification and brand familiarity. Potential reasons for, consequences of, and factors to be considered in the implementation of visual changes were also part of the theoretical framework. Finally, semi-structured theme interviews with eleven marketing experts were conducted. With the aspiration of contributing to the existing knowledge surrounding the topic, answers to the research questions were presented through the comparison and contrast of theory and the empirical findings.

The findings revealed that VBI is a multidimensional construct that can serve as a valuable resource if understood and managed properly. Focus on the brand purpose is of utmost importance in the construction of VBI and rational reasoning is paramount to the decision-making process concerning a brand's visual look. Through the two aforementioned factors, brands can become truly meaningful and consistent, which is crucial for the creation of brand recognition, brand familiarity and a system-like branding process. Furthermore, a major part of branding involves human-related factors that contribute to the success of VBI. In the implementation of visual changes, arbitrary or dramatic alterations should be avoided. Instead, changes should be subtle and form part of an ongoing brand evolution process.

Key words	Brand identity, Visual identity, Visual brand identity, Visual changes, Visual consistency, Brand familiarity
Further information	





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Tiivistelmä

Kilpailusta erottautuminen tämän päivän yltäkyläisillä markkinoilla on yhä haastavampaa. Lisäksi kuluttajien valta ja kriittisyys virallisia markkinointiviestejä kohtaan ovat kasvaneet. Nämä realiteetit ovat pakottaneet yritykset kääntämään huomionsa ja voimavaransa visuaalisen kommunikaation hyödyntämiseen. Visuaalinen brändi-identiteetti (VBI) toimii merkittävänä markkinointityökaluna edustaen brändejä ja ilmaisten niiden olemassaolon tarkoitusta. VBI:iin liittyvä tutkimus on kuitenkin ollut tähän päivään asti riittämätöntä, ja niinpä tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on tarkastella VBI:tä aikaisempaa kokonaisvaltaisemmin. Tämän päivän markkinoita kuvastaa myös jatkuva muutostila, minkä seurauksena brändit pyrkivät paineen alla uudistamaan ulkoasuaan tasaisin väliajoin. Näin ollen tämä tutkimus pyrkii myös selvittämään ne toimenpiteet ja strategiat, joita markkinointialan ammattilaiset hyödyntävät pyrkiessään tasapainoilemaan visuaalisten brändimuutosten toteuttamisen ja kuluttajille tutuksi tulleen VBI:n ylläpitämisen välillä.

Tämän tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys koostuu pääasiassa brändi-identiteetin, visuaalisen identiteetin ja visuaalisen brändi-identiteetin tarkastelusta. Lisäksi tavanomaisimpia brändielementtejä sekä johdonmukaisuuden, brändin tunnistamisen ja brändin tuttuuden käsitteitä käsitellään syvemmin. Visuaalisten muutosten mahdolliset syyt ja seuraukset sekä muutoksiin liittyvät huomioonotettavat tekijät kuuluvat myös tämän tutkimuksen teoreettiseen viitekehukseen. Tutkimusta varten toteutettiin 11 puolistrukturoitua teemahaastattelua markkinoinnin asiantuntijoiden kanssa. Tutkimuksen päämääränä oli täydentää tämänhetkistä tietämystä tutkimusaiheesta toteuttamalla vertaileva analyysi tutkimuksessa käytetyn teorian ja empiiristen tulosten pohjalta.

Tutkimuksen tulokset paljastivat VBI:n moniulotteisuuden. VBI voi toimia arvokkaana voimavarana markkinoijille, mikäli konsepti ymmärretään ja sitä johdetaan oikein. VBI:n tehokkaan rakentamisen kannalta tärkeimmät tekijät ovat huomion keskittäminen brändin tarkoituksen ympärille sekä looginen perustelu brändin ulkoasua koskevia päätöksiä tehtäessä. Näiden toimenpiteiden kautta brändistä on mahdollista tulla aidosti merkityksellinen ja johdonmukainen, mikä on välttämätöntä brändin tunnistamisen, tunnettuuden ja systeemimäisen brändäysprosessin kannalta. Lisäksi brändäykseen liittyy useita inhimillisiä tekijöitä, jotka osaltaan edesauttavat VBI:n menestymistä. Mielivaltaisia tai dramaattisia visuaalisia muutoksia tulisi välttää ja sen sijaan, toteuttaa muutoksia hienovaraisesti osana brändin jatkuvaa kehitystä.

Asiasanat	Brändi-identiteetti, Visuaalinen identiteetti, Visuaalinen brändi-identiteetti, Visuaaliset muutokset, Visuaalinen johdonmukaisuus, Brändin tuttuus
Muita tietoja	





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University of Turku

VISUAL BRAND IDENTITY (VBI)

**Essential constituents in the construction of a brand's visual
look and the implementation of visual changes**

Master's Thesis
in Marketing

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Table of contents

1	INTRODUCTION.....	7
1.1	Introduction to the topic.....	7
1.2	Purpose of the study.....	8
1.3	Structure of the study.....	9
2	THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: VISUAL BRAND IDENTITY (VBI).....	11
2.1	The era of visual communication.....	11
2.2	Background and definition of visual brand identity.....	13
2.3	Basic visual brand elements.....	17
2.3.1	Logo.....	17
2.3.2	Symbols.....	20
2.3.3	Colours.....	22
2.3.4	Typography.....	24
2.4	Construction of visual brand identity.....	27
2.4.1	Success factors in the construction of visual brand identity.....	27
2.4.2	Consistency.....	29
2.4.3	Brand identification and brand familiarity.....	33
2.5	Implementation of visual changes.....	35
3	RESEARCH METHODS.....	43
3.1	Research approach.....	43
3.2	Data collection.....	44
3.3	Description of Informants.....	46
3.4	Data analysis.....	51
3.5	Evaluation of the reliability and validity of the study.....	53
4	EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION: EXPERT INFORMANTS’ CONSIDERATIONS OF VISUAL BRAND IDENTITY.....	57
4.1	Expert view on the significance of visual marketing.....	57
4.2	Expert view on the concept of visual brand identity.....	61
4.2.1	Definition of visual brand identity.....	61
4.2.2	Visual elements encompassing visual brand identity.....	65
4.2.3	The contradictory role of a brand logo.....	71
4.3	Expert view on the construction of visual brand identity.....	73
4.3.1	Key success factors in the construction of visual brand identity.....	73
4.3.2	The process of constructing visual brand identity.....	80

4.3.3	Differences between working for a strong and weak visual brand identity	85
4.3.4	Control vs. freedom in brands' visual executions	89
4.3.5	Challenges in the construction of visual brand identity.....	91
4.4	Expert view on the implementation of visual changes	95
4.4.1	Reasons for visual changes.....	95
4.4.2	Procedures and strategies in the implementation of visual changes	96
5	CONCLUSIONS	105
5.1	Brief answers to the research questions and theoretical contributions	105
5.1.1	Definition of visual brand identity.....	106
5.1.2	Visual elements encompassing visual brand identity	107
5.1.3	Success factors in the construction of visual brand identity.....	108
5.1.4	Challenges in the construction of visual brand identity.....	112
5.1.5	The role of the advertising agency in the construction of visual brand identity	112
5.1.6	Central procedures and strategies in the implementation of visual changes	114
5.2	Managerial contributions	115
5.3	Limitations and suggestions for future research	116
6	SUMMARY	117
	REFERENCES	122
	APPENDIX 1 – TRANSLATED INTERVIEW THEMES AND QUESTIONS	128
	APPENDIX 2 – OPERATIONALISATION TABLE.....	130

List of figures

Figure 1	The most common visual elements of visual brand identity	15
Figure 2	A pyramid illustrating the identity process (After Wheeler 2006, 22).....	16
Figure 3	The most memorable logos in the U.S and U.K (Walker 2017, 213)	19
Figure 4	Symbols for Target, Apple, Nike (top row; left to right), IBM and McDonalds (bottom row; left to right). (Bullseye love: The history of	

Target’s logo 2014; Jens 2016; Nike.com 2018; Park et al. 2014,
10.) 21

Figure 5	Tiffany’s robin’s egg blue signature colour (Tiffany.com 2018).....	23
Figure 6	Kellogg’s typographic style in 2014 (Kellogg Co. 2016)	25
Figure 7	The relationship between brand definitions and visual elements (Pohjola 2003, 115).....	28
Figure 8	Corona’s consistent theme (“look and feel”) in its advertisements (Phillips et al. 2014b, 322).....	31
Figure 9	Red Brick’s consistent theme (“look & feel”) in its advertisements (Phillips et al. 2014b, 321)	32
Figure 10	Tallink Silja Line’s new refined seal mark (Arte 2014).....	37
Figure 11	Flexibility of Tallink Silja Line’s new refined seal mark (Silja Line: Hylkeen vuosi 2014)	38
Figure 12	Gap's unsuccessful logo change (Theguardian.com 2010)	40
Figure 13	Coca-Cola’s logo changes during 1887-2016 (The Coca-Cola Company 2016)42	
Figure 14	Starbuck’s logo changes during 1971-2011 (Starbucks.com 2018).....	42
Figure 15	Attributes of an ideal visual brand identity (After Wheeler 2006, 17)...	109

List of tables

Table 1	Interview details.....	48
Table 2	The number of mentions of visual brand elements.....	69

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction to the topic

Today's market environment is overlaid with pictures. In consequence, companies are focusing more of their marketing efforts into the visual side of branding. Various visual elements – such as logotypes, symbols, colours and typefaces – are used to represent brands and help consumers to identify them (Clifton 2009, 113; Phillips, McQuarrie & Griffin 2014a, 225-226.) This leads to consumers often being able to elicit preconceived notions about a brand solely through the visual elements in an advertisement, prior to seeing the logo or reading any text (Phillips et al. 2014a, 225, 234, Grumbein 2016, 169). Visual content serves as a shortcut that makes it possible for brands to express themselves, communicate mood, impressions and brand personalities with a single glance by the consumer (Branthwaite 2002, 164; Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård 2004, 225).

Imagery is a powerful advertising tool for a number of reasons. It has the ability to persuade, influence, inspire and evoke memory. Images are capable of depicting a complex idea in a simple manner through, for instance, body language or facial expressions. (Young 2012.) Since visual information is processed a lot faster than text (Manic 2015, 90; Koetting 2016, 18), it results in more immediate absorption and comprehension of information, servicing the distracted consumers' need for instant gratification. As a result, images are becoming the most effective way for brands to break through "the clutter" and better target the modern consumer and their shortening attention span. In addition, globalisation, enhanced technologies and changes in less-developed economies are all broadening the opportunities to create richer visual communication for potential target audiences in markets all over the world. Images serve as an efficient means to transcend the marketing message across different cultures and languages and thus, images can facilitate the establishment of a consistent brand image across several markets. (Bulmer & Buchanan-Oliver 2006, 49; Young 2012; Manic 2015, 89.) At best, the use of images in marketing can also foster sustainable relationships with consumers (Branthwaite 2002, 164, 168, 170; Perinne 2015, 53).

Visual brand identity (VBI) relates to the way a brand looks and feels in a holistic manner. It can be regarded as "the face" of the brand that is comprised of different visual elements that together serve as an entity identifying and representing the brand. (Phillips et al. 2014b, 320, 328.) The basic components of a brand's visual identity typically include different versions of logotypes, symbols, colours and typefaces, which can be complemented by other graphic elements (Clifton 2009, 113).

In order for a brand to be easily identified and distinguished by consumers, the brand's visual elements should be both distinctive and recognisable (Phillips et al. 2014b, 324).

Another contributing factor to this is the brand's visual content remaining consistent over time and throughout different platforms (Williams 2006, 33). Consistency in the brand's visual executions is important for not only brand recognition and recall, but also for the evolution of brand attitude (Percy & Elliott 2009, 323). However, today's fast-paced market environment has led to consumers constantly looking forward to some sorts of changes, which has put brands under pressure to renew their look on a regular basis. In consequence, the challenge that brands face, is being able to implement changes that simultaneously preserve familiarity and contribute to the brand staying relevant to consumers. (D'Lacey 2014, 1.)

Consumers longing for change is not the mere reason why brands are increasingly forced to refresh their looks. Other factors that encourage change include increased competition and the need for differentiation; the desire to grow (D'Lacey 2014, 1); the objective of repositioning oneself (Koch & Boush 2000, 141); or simply the necessity to keep up with the times and maintain relevancy (Aaker 1991, 251; Kolbl et al. 2015, 5).

1.2 Purpose of the study

The concept of identity has been the subject of study in various fields and therefore, it has been observed from several perspectives. However, *visual* identity as a concept is rather distinguishable and mostly linked to marketing and communications fields. Visual identity is an important contributor to an organisation's success and a significant factor in branding (Alessandri 2009, 4). Since it is likely that what consumers see have a bigger impact on them compared to what they read (Clifton 2009, 112), studying the visual side of marketing seems paramount. However, to date, VBI has only been examined through single visual elements, such as colour or font, that only partly – and therefore, inadequately – depict VBI. In consequence, various visual brand elements have been identified but very little of the existing branding literature discusses the way these elements are used in unison to form desired brand meanings. (Phillips et al. 2014b, 330.) Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine VBI more holistically without it being tied – or restricted – to one certain visual element. Moreover, due to the novelty of the term “visual brand identity”, an additional desire in this study is to discover how marketing experts grasp the concept and ascertain what factors they consider contributing to the successful construction of VBI. Thereby, the aim is to make up for the deficiency of theoretical data related to the studied issues and add more practical points in the discussion.

In addition to the insufficient conceptualisation of VBI, marketing experts also face the challenge of navigating conflicting imperatives: on one hand, respecting the constraints of an established VBI and on the other hand, ensuring the brand will not become stagnant or out-dated. (Phillips et al. 2014a, 234.) Therefore, a further and final aim

of this study is to determine the procedures and strategies marketing experts employ when tackling the challenge of refreshing a brand's look while maintaining its familiar VBI.

Based on the aforementioned challenges, the following research questions have been formulated:

1. What is visual brand identity?
2. Which visual elements can form visual brand identity?
3. What are the success factors and challenges in the construction of visual brand identity?
4. What are the central procedures and strategies used in the implementation of visual changes?

In answering these research questions, academic literature and databases, such as ABI/INFORM Collection (ProQuest); Business Source Complete (EBSCO); Emerald Insight; and Volter, were utilised. In selecting the final articles for this paper, the sources were mostly limited to material created in recent years in order to maintain relevance to the modern marketplace. Having said that, some older research has also been referred to in this paper, however, this is generally justifiable in that this research repeatedly appears in more recent studies.

With regards to the empirical data of the study, semi-structured theme interviews were conducted with eleven marketing experts who deal with brands on a daily basis. Most of these expert informants were designers, creatives and art directors, who are responsible for planning and creating visual content for brands. By conducting the interviews, the aim was to gain deep insight into the concept of VBI and the implementation of visual changes. Finally, through the comparison of theory and the statements received in each interview, meaningful conclusions were aimed to be drawn. The objective of drawing these conclusions was to contribute to the existing knowledge surrounding the topic and capture the reality of today's marketplace.

1.3 Structure of the study

This study is organised as follows: Chapter 2 begins with general background information regarding the effectiveness and importance of visual marketing in the modern marketplace. The study then proceeds to discuss VBI – the most focal term of the study – before examining the most basic elements of the concept: logo, symbols, colours and typography. In addition, Chapter 2 will discuss factors that may contribute to the construction of an effective VBI. The most central terms of that discussion are consistency, brand identification and brand familiarity. After covering the topic of VBI, visual changes – the

second dominant theme of this paper – will be explored in Chapter 2.5. The discussion will include potential reasons for, consequences of, and factors to be considered in the implementation of visual changes. These issues will be demonstrated with real life examples and images of both successful and unsuccessful visual re-branding cases.

In Chapter 3, research methods of this study will be explored in greater depth. This discussion will encompass the introduction of the chosen research approach, data collection methods, description of research informants, data analysis, as well as the evaluation of the reliability and validity of the study. In Chapter 4, the empirical findings of the study will be discussed, following the structure of both the theory in this study as well as the interview themes (see Appendix 1).

Finally, in Chapter 5, conclusions of the study will be drawn with a presentation of the answers to the research questions. Furthermore, the theoretical and managerial contributions, as well as the possibilities and limitations for future research will be examined. The summary of the study will form the sixth – and final – chapter of this paper.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: VISUAL BRAND IDENTITY (VBI)

2.1 The era of visual communication

The realities of the modern, oversaturated marketplace have complicated breaking through the noise. In recent years, the marketplace flooded with offerings scarcely differing from each other functionally has intensified competition. Additionally, consumers have become more powerful, conscious and critical towards formal marketing messages. As a result of the aforementioned reasons, visual imagery is now even more widely used in advertising than words, as companies have increasingly started to exploit the benefits of visual communication. In fact, today's preferred means of receiving marketing messages seems to be exactly through visibility. (Branthwaite 2002, 164; Salzer-Morling & Strannegard 2004, 225; McQuarrie & Phillips 2008, 99; Neher 2013, 5; Hammond 2015, 64.)

In addition to the realities of today's oversaturated marketplace and the more critical consumers, there are several other reasons why imagery has become an especially attractive marketing tool. When it comes to images versus words, McQuarrie & Phillips (2008, 104) argue that advertising a brand with words is not as effective as expressing a brand in image form. First of all, human perception is visual to the largest extent – sight, more than any other senses, registers information about the world. More than 90 percent of the processed information is derived from the visual receptors on a daily basis. (Wheeler 2006, 8; Manic 2015, 89.) In addition, the brain is also able to process images faster than text (Neher 2013, 5). In the case of print advertisements, the typical reader gives them a passing glance at best, unless they can otherwise be drawn in further by the imagery presented (McQuarrie & Phillips 2008, 104). In terms of time spent looking at print advertisements, studies involving the use of eye-tracking cameras reveal that approximately 70 percent of the time spent observing an advertisement is devoted to looking at the picture. Therefore, visual elements used in advertisements are important contributors to effective communication. (Percy & Elliott 2009, 323.)

Visual content is easier and faster to comprehend than text, even beyond cultural and linguistic groups. Moreover, the shortness of visual content appeals to the modern consumers with short attention spans. (Neher 2013, 5; Manic 2015, 89.) Visual content is able to grab the attention of distracted consumers more efficiently than mere words (Koetting 2016, 18). Visual content is eye-catching and has an instant impact on human emotions (Manic 2015, 89). Furthermore, glancing over an image is rather quick and effortless, whereas reading requires some effort (McQuarrie & Phillips 2008, 104). Images can be remembered and recognised immediately, while words must be decoded into

meaning (Wheeler 2006, 9). Based on the effectiveness of visuals, Koetting (2016, 18), argues that, indeed, brands' graphics should be utilised to "show" rather than "tell". Because the modern consumers make purchase decisions as fast as within a few seconds, presenting a brand or an offering's promise in a visual form is paramount in today's marketplace. There being numerous offerings claiming their second to none attributes in the marketplace, it is significantly harder to differentiate one from another through the use of mere words. Images, in turn, are able to communicate complicated information, encapsulate symbolic expressions and facilitate differentiation. (Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård 2004, 225; Koetting 2016, 18.)

Through the presentation of visual advertisements, consumers are more likely to be convinced to make a desired decision in comparison to verbal advertisements. Images are often considered to be more objective than verbal marketing messages and they create a richer and clearer emotional experience for consumers. Through images, impressions and brand personalities can also be communicated more efficiently. By using visual content in marketing, brands can be "humanised" and thus, made easier to relate to. (Branthwaite 2002, 164, 168, 170; Manic 2015, 89, 91; Perinne 2015, 53.) All of these factors justify the dominant role images are likely to play in contemporary advertisements.

Images also seem to have a cutting edge in relation to their role in the human memory. According to Manic (2015, 89), the majority of people remember 80 percent of what they see and only 20 percent of what they read. Moreover, visual elements hold a dominant position in memory (Percy & Elliott 2009, 323). That too demonstrates a need for greater emphasis on imagery over the body copy in advertisements (McQuarrie & Phillips 2008, 104).

Advertising is characterised by the use of visual device, exaggeration, innuendo and humour as means to deliver a marketing claim to the audience. When communicating verbally, the focus is often in cognitive interpretations, disregarding the personal, creative and intuitive impact through which brands can build associations and express personality to consumers. Images, however, are experienced directly and inwardly and thus, induce emotions, mood and intuitions. Visual imagery is an efficient marketing tool to communicate ideas, suggestions and emotions, to give confidence or hope and to create a real and plausible product benefit out of an abstract idea. Images are effective in creating a certain mood and expressing a vision. When done right, the use of images in marketing can foster sustainable relationships with consumers. (Branthwaite 2002, 164-165, 168, 170; Morr 2017, 28.)

2.2 Background and definition of visual brand identity

Identity and identification are terms that hold a lot of power. The whole organisational phenomena can be said to be constructed on identity and identification. The terms are strongly associated with the very definition of an entity – be it an organisation, a group or a person. Identity and identification express distinctiveness and oneness, all the while enabling blurring, multiplicity and dynamism in the identity content and process. (Albert et al. 2000, 13.)

Brand identity can be regarded as the visual and verbal expression of a brand; strengthening, communicating and visualising it (Wheeler 2006, 6). It is argued that in order to build a successful brand, a strong brand identity must exist as it has an impact on the level of awareness consumers have about the brand (Koch & Boush 2000, 142; Alselm & Kosteljik 2008, 909). Koch & Boush (2000, 142) define brand identity as a unique set of associations that the company aims to develop and sustain. Brand associations, in turn, refer to anything that is mentally connected to the brand (Aaker 1991, 272). These associations represent the brand and act as the brand's promise to its customers. The value proposition may include functional, emotional and self-expressive benefits. The type and favourability of a brand association, together with the strength and uniqueness of the association, determine the kind of brand image that is formed in a consumer's mind. (Koch & Boush 2000, 142.) Associations can influence the processing and recall of information, serve as a differentiating factor, encourage purchase, generate positive attitudes and emotions, as well as provide the basis for brand extensions (Aaker 1991, 272).

Ideally, brand identity is authentic, memorable, meaningful, differentiated, sustainable, flexible and valuable to consumers. In psychology, authenticity implies to self-knowledge and basing decisions on that self-knowledge. In the same way, brand identity must be consistent with its vision and sense of self. Therefore, authenticity cannot be gained if the brand does not have a clear understanding of its reason for existence, its value proposition and competitive advantage. Brand identity needs to be an authentic expression of the brand's unique vision, goals, values, tone-of-voice and personality. Similarly, the design needs to be suitable for the brand culture, values, target audience and the field of business in which the brand operates. Pohjola 2003, 146-147; Wheeler 2006, 6.)

The concept of identity has been the subject of study in various fields and therefore, it has been observed from several perspectives. However, *visual* identity as a concept is rather different and mostly linked to the marketing and communications fields. Some research of visual identity has been conducted in the management field for the reason that the overall identity of an organisation has strategic importance. This point is worth noticing, since each person in an organisation should regard visual identity as a significant contributor to the organisation's success. (Alessandri 2009, 4.)

Visual identity entails all of the elements that can be observed and measured in an organisation's visual presentation of itself. Therefore, it can be regarded as the visible part of the identity. When an organisation's elements are observed individually, they can be thought to partly form the organisation's assembly of tools. As a whole, however, these elements form the character of the organisation – its *gestalt* – and therefore, strategy should significantly be involved in the process of identity building. After all, the way the organisation looks and acts has an impact on the associations formed in the minds of the public. (Wheeler 2006, 8; Pohjola 2003, 108; Alessandri 2009, 5.)

Visual identity is a significant factor in branding, since what consumers see is likely to have a bigger impact on them compared to what they read (Clifton 2009, 112). Visual identity influences perceptions and evokes associations of the brand. Ideally, visual identity represents and strengthens the brand behind it by reinforcing the desired perceptions. (Pohjola 2003, 20; Wheeler 2006, 8, 14.) According to Alessandri (2009, 5), visual identity is a strategically planned and a purposefully depicted construct that aims to create a positive organisational image among consumers. The purpose of a positive identity, in turn, is to generate a favourable reputation over time. Alessandri (2009, 4) argues that visual identity should be a matter of focus in business, since all organisations have it, whether it was acknowledged or not. Moreover, a brand's visual look should be aligned with the chosen brand strategy and suit all of the target markets (Pohjola 2003, 146).

According to Phillips et al. (2014b, 320, 328), visual brand identity (VBI) refers to the way the brand looks and feels in a holistic manner. Thereby, it can be regarded as “the face” of the brand that is comprised of different visual elements that together serve as an entity, identifying and representing the brand. VBI communicates about itself at each consumer touchpoint and in that way, it constantly reminds consumers about the brand's core values and purpose. Furthermore, visual identity also encases the mission and vision of the brand. (Pohjola 2003, 146; Wheeler 2006, 17, 22.)

The basic visual elements of a brand's visual identity typically include different versions of logotypes, symbols, colours and typefaces. Examples of these are the McDonald's arches symbol, the colour red attached to Coca Cola and the Johnson typeface established solely for London Underground. In addition, other graphic elements such as patterns, illustrations, photography, or icons may complement the earlier mentioned basic elements. (Pohjola 2003, 108; Clifton 2009, 113.) According to Zaichkowsky (2010, 549), also shape, unique package or product design, as well as product benefit descriptions can contribute to brand differentiation and thus, brand identity. Furthermore, Alessandri (2009, 5) states that visual identity also entails the tagline – or slogan – as a complementary element, typically used together with the brand name or the logo. In addition, she considers architecture to be part of visual identity, since it is also observable. This is supported by Melewar et al. (2006, 144), who state that architecture should be paid attention to, since it can have an impact on the perceptions consumers form about the visual

identity. Lastly, Alessandri (2009, 5) points out that also the company's public behaviour, including – but not limited to – its recruitment of employees, customers, shareholders and suppliers, is included in the visual identity. Therefore, visual identity can be regarded as an organisation's all-encompassing visual presentation of itself. Figure 1 serves as an aggregation of the most common visual elements of VBI, according to existing literature. The four basic elements are bolded in capital letters in the figure.

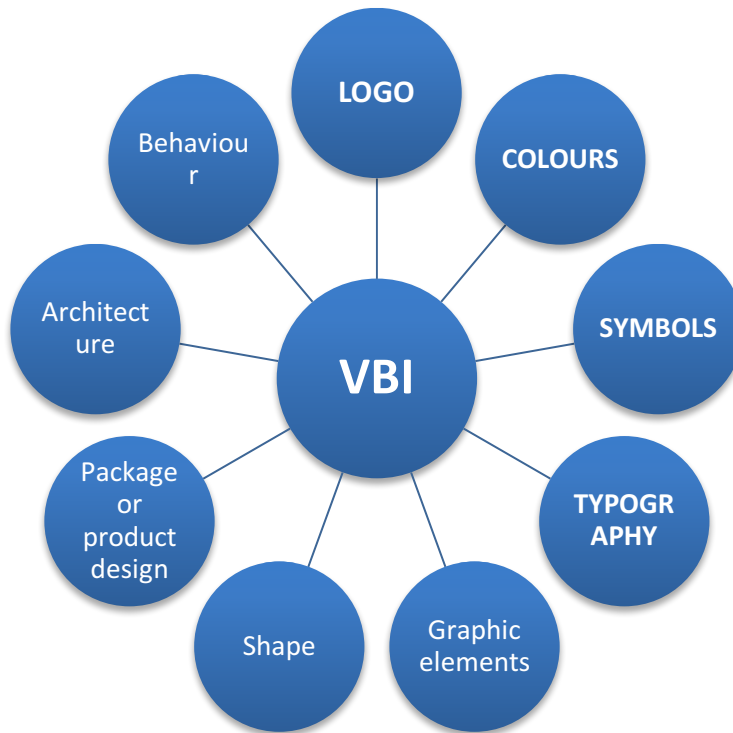


Figure 1 The most common visual elements of visual brand identity

There are visual elements that contribute to brand identification everywhere – from billboards to buses, televisions to trucks, and magazines to merchandise. Taking advantage of symbols and marks can help companies stand out in the marketplace and thus, logos and stickers – among others – are widely used on different offerings. (Koch & Boush 2000, 141.) A brand's visual elements can form the basis for differentiation, given that the elements are sufficiently distinct and equally support the brand's essence. Differentiation, in turn, is likely to give a brand an advantage in the marketplace. (Bettinger & Tracey 2002, 22; Pohjola 2003, 108.) Sturken and Cartwright (2001, 228) argue that in order to maintain profitability, even global brands must retain the distinctive features that form their identity in the marketplace. A significant factor in ensuring the brand is easily identified and distinguished by consumers is for the visual elements to be simultaneously recognisable and unique in comparison to the elements of the competing brands. (Phillips et al. 2014b, 324) The brand position is built upon associations and the ways they differ from competition (Aaker 1991, 272).

Visual elements draw consumers' attention in shop displays, advertisements, magazines, as well as in several other platforms. In addition, they shape consumer interpretations through the formation of certain associations and brand attributes in the minds of the consumer. For instance, when a brand, such as Apple, is recognised, either conscious or subconscious functional or symbolic attributes are attached to it. Furthermore, expectations for the look, feel and function arise. Therefore, visual look or design serves not only as an informant about the functional product attributes, but also entails symbolic meanings. These meanings, in turn, contribute to consumers feeling increasingly attached to products or brands and may even lead to the emergence of completely new lifestyles and social phenomena. (Pohjola 2003, 27; Karjalainen 2007.) Moreover, visual elements encase references to the time and environment in which the brand operates, as well as technology, authenticity, price and general style that a brand aims to depict (Pohjola 2003, 111-112).

According to Campbell (2014, 53), identity is the expression that defines the brand the best. In the core of the identity lies the essence of the brand: who the brand is, what values it represents and what motivates it. This is supported by Morr (2017, 27), who argue that the first step in building a brand identity is to define the brand and the brand core: what the brand represents and what kind of a mission it has. Once the essence of the brand has been defined, everything else should be built on that essence. Figure 2 illustrates a pyramid of the identity process after Wheeler (2006, 22).

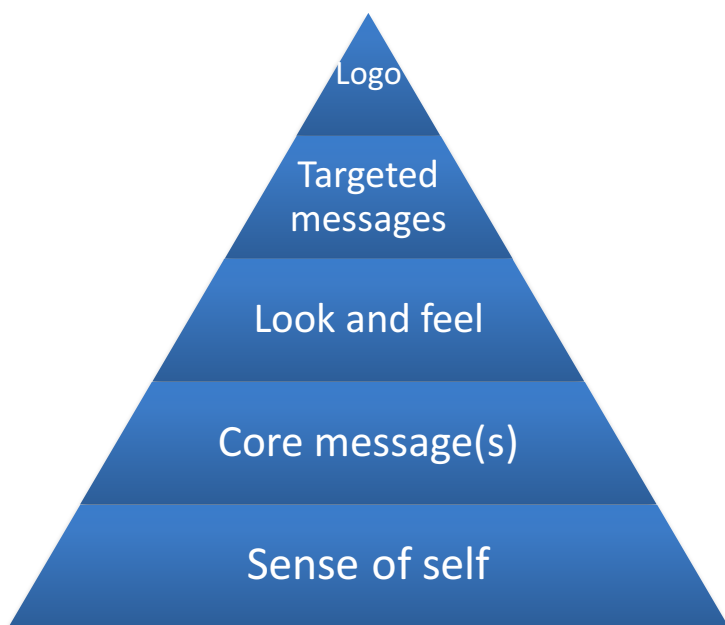


Figure 2 A pyramid illustrating the identity process (After Wheeler 2006, 22)

As earlier stated and also illustrated in Figure 2, the starting point in the identity process is the comprehension of the brand purpose and sense of self. Once this kind of comprehension has been formed, it is important to create a core message that is communicated to consumers across different channels. Each message should consistently support the essence of the brand and thus, the brand purpose. (Wheeler 2006, 29; Alessandri 2009, 27-28.) This consistency is important because – as Bettinger & Tracey (2002, 22) argue – the aim to stand for everything will eventually lead to the brand standing for nothing.

After creating the core message, more targeted messages can be delivered, potentially involving references to the target audience's expectations (Pohjola 2003, 114). However, even though a brand's individual messages and advertisements should be different, the fundamental theme must remain consistent. Therefore, it is crucial that each creative execution somehow contributes to the overall “look and feel” of the brand. (Karjalainen 2007; Percy & Elliott 2009, 322-325.) Based on this logic, Wheeler's order of the process has been slightly altered in Figure 2, as “Look and feel” and “Targeted messages” have been transposed. The purpose of this alteration is to highlight the importance of the holistic “look and feel” of the brand always serving as the basis for all kind of more specific brand communication. According to Hammond (2015, 64), a consistent theme appearing in each consumer-brand interaction contributes to the memorability of the brand.

At the tip of the triangle in the identity process is the brand's one single visual element, such as the logo. The task of each individual brand element is to merely support what has been evoked by the holistic look and feel of the brand, formed by all of the visual elements together. This holistic look and feel contributes to the target audience recognising a certain visual execution to “belong” to the brand (Percy & Elliott 2009, 323).

A brand may include one or more of its visual identity elements in its communication across different platforms (Alessandri 2009, 9). Even though the purpose of a brand's visual elements is to work in unison, they all add meaning to the brand in their own way. (Campbell 2015, 50). Therefore, the basic visual brand elements – the logo, symbols, colours and typography – will next be discussed in more detail.

2.3 Basic visual brand elements

2.3.1 Logo

A logo is an organisation's or brand's mark used for identification, working very much in the same way as people's names (Campbell 2015, 50; Morr 2017, 28). It serves as a graphic representation or image evoking memory associations of the brand in question (Banerjee 2008, 60; Walsh et al. 2010, 76). Logo is the first brand-consumer touchpoint,

facilitating recognition and recall of the brand behind it. In the crowded marketplace, a strong brand presence can contribute to standing out from the visual clutter. (Banerjee 2008, 60; Hynes 2009, 545; Morr 2017, 28.) A powerful logo may enhance formal corporate communication and have an impact on emotions (Van Riel & Cees 1995, 39).

Logos are omnipresent in the marketplace and the average consumer is encountered by a large number of them on a daily basis. Logos are of great monetary value – a lot of financial investments are directed towards their development, as they may serve as significant organisational assets. (Melewar et al. 2006, 144; Hagtvedt 2011, 86.) In fact, Morr (2017, 27) argues that the logo can be regarded as the brand's most significant design element.

A logo can be an independent graphic element – or an icon – such as the Nike Swoosh, or alternatively, it may be a word designed in a specific typeface. The latter is called a logotype, which FedEx, for instance, takes advantage of, as the main means of identification. A logotype does not include any other visuality, and therefore, the chosen typeface for the logotype is a strategic issue. The role of the typeface is to depict the tone and style the organisation desires to accomplish. (Alessandri 2009, 14.)

The decision about the logo should be based on the image the organisation or brand aims to project to consumers. However, it has been suggested that, ideally, logos evoke common associations among the target audience, and in that way, elicit a clear, familiar meaning. Familiarity in the meaning elicitation can be accomplished by choosing a design of a familiar object that is both unique and effortlessly understood. Familiar logos may facilitate correct brand recognition. (Henderson & Cote 1998, 24.) However, Walker (2017, 215) argues that meaning is non-existent until associations are formed. Associations, in turn, are accumulated over time (Melewar et al. 2006, 144). In addition to the logo depicting a familiar meaning, it is also important that the chosen logo – as any other VBI element – is applied in a consistent manner (Henderson & Cote 1998, 24; Alessandri 2009, 14-15).

Brand logos are often complex stimuli conveying meaning through several visual elements they are comprised of. These visual elements include shape, typeface and colour (Hynes 2009, 545; Yuwei et al. 2016, 721), which all contribute to the formation of associations between them and the organisation. Therefore, not only do logos serve as company signatures, but they also act like symbols (Melewar et al. 2006, 144; Hynes 2009, 545; Taylor 2011, 15). Symbols will be discussed in more detail in subchapter 2.4.

In today's marketplace, consumers are encountered by a wide variety of alternatives, and thus, a recognisable and trustworthy logo may have an impact on buying behavior and the ultimate choice. It is argued that the logo is the most important tool in the creation of brand recognition and therefore, it should be made memorable and unique. An effective – and functional – logo is clean, simple and easy to understand. Moreover, often the most effortlessly remembered logos are characterised by a unique shape – Nike, Apple, and

Microsoft serving as examples Figure 3 depicts the most memorable logos among 3000 U.S and U.K citizens. The survey was carried out by Branding company Siegel + Gale. (Hynes 2009, 28; Morr 2017, 28; Walker 2017, 213, 216.)

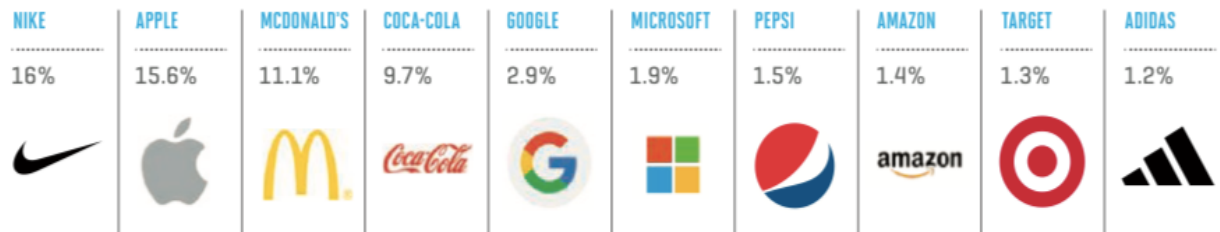


Figure 3 The most memorable logos in the U.S and U.K (Walker 2017, 213)

According to the co-founder of Integrated Marketing Group, Jeff Hilton (2009, 34), strong logos register with the consumer in an instant. In addition, they are aligned with the desired positioning and value proposition, and appeal to the brand's most important stakeholders. NIKE's swoosh logo is among the best-known logos in the world, representing speed and movement. (Zaichkowsky 2010, 552).

Companies should be careful not to make their logos too colourful or overwhelmingly complicated with graphics or 3D, since that is likely to result in sensory overload. Logo and symbol design, development and communication are important factors in branding, and visual factors are often carefully re-considered and communicated to consumers especially at times when a company's visual identity is altered due to, for instance, the aim of increasing market profile or the establishment of new organisational forms such as mergers and acquisitions. (Melewar et al. 2006, 144; Morr 2017, 28, 709.) In many cases, changes in the name or the logo are implemented as a result of changes in the competitive environment. One of these changes can be, for instance, the trend of being identifiable and synonymous with the Internet. (Melewar & Wooldridge 2001, 329.) According to Gray & Balmer (1998, 700), logos should be altered in a subtle manner over time, depicting the evolving corporate (or brand) identity. Shell, for instance, altered its graphics system in several occasions during the 20th century. However, in each change, some version of the shell logo was retained in order to maintain consistency.

Bettinger & Tracey (2002) argue that a popular misconception – even among several marketing managers – is that a brand is synonymous with a logo. However, as Campbell (2015, 50) points out, strong brands do not rely on a mere logo – instead, they take advantage of a wide range of design elements that add meaning to the brand. Therefore, the discussion will now proceed to observe some other important visual elements that contribute to the formation of VBI.

2.3.2 *Symbols*

Today, the majority of companies and offerings are rather similar. Whereas in the past, it was thought that a good product was enough to win a consumer over, today's highly competitive marketplace offering a plethora of choice has turned the focus on differentiation and the creation of uniqueness. According to Leigh et al. (1992, 28), at times when companies face challenges in differentiation, a symbol can turn out to be the brand's central differentiating element. In fact, a significant success factor in the modern marketplace is the skilful elicitation of meaning, as people assumedly relate to things through symbolic meanings society has created. Therefore, today's brands go beyond mere physical offerings, as they are also composed of symbols through which they express themselves. In consequence, brand strategists and managers are now striving to fill their offerings with meaning and turn commodities into concepts and lifestyles with their symbolic appeal. In fact, it is argued that the actual purpose of brands is to be interpreted as symbolic images. Based on that view, brands are consumed as aesthetic expressions when they take shape as images or signs. (Aaker 1991, 197; Leigh et al. 1992, 28; Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård 2004, 224-225.)

A thorough consideration of symbolic details can contribute to increased effectiveness of one's marketing efforts. Because symbols serve as indicators of brands and product classes, symbols may, for instance, encourage purchase. Moreover, as people are able to learn visual images easier than words, symbols can be effective in creating brand awareness; generating associations, liking and emotions; and invoking humour and fantasy. These, in turn, can have an impact on loyalty and perceived quality. For example, the golden arches symbol – or "M" – that represent McDonalds (Figure 4), is widely recognised by consumers all over the world. The policy of the company is to guarantee all of their customers that their meals are of the same quality in all parts of the world. Therefore, what really matters, in fact, is not the symbol itself, but instead, the meaning and promise behind it. An important factor to be ensured is that a positive symbolic meaning is formed in a consistent manner at each brand-consumer touchpoint. (Aaker 1991, 201-202, 269; Leigh et al. 1992, 37; Melewar et al. 2006, 144.)

According to Bettinger & Tracey (2002, 19), an effective brand symbol is unique and easy to notice in order to differentiate the brand from competitors. What's more, the symbol should represent and reinforce the brand's essence through its visual appearance and the emotions it evokes. Moreover, it should be functional in a way that it, for instance, works on different platforms, in different colours and in different sizes.

A symbol can serve as a powerful asset and should be evidently connected to the brand name. In case a brand name evokes and supports an effective symbol, it is easier to connect it to the name. A symbol that elicits strong associations – such as Mickey Mouse – is likely to have an obvious, positive impact on the brand, and thus, become a significant

asset for the company. In order for consumers to be able to learn the association between a symbol and a brand quickly, the symbol should be made so that it reflects the brand. For instance, the brand Apple's bitten apple fruit symbolises being different and unique. This apple symbol differs significantly from other high-tech companies and perhaps for that reason, it resonates with consumers wanting to do things their own way. Nike's Swoosh symbol, in turn, represents activity, flow, energy and movement – factors relevant to a sports brand (Figure 4). At the extreme, the symbol and the brand can be the same, such as in Sony's, IBM's (Figure 4) and GM's case. (Aaker 1991, 191, 197, 202; Park et al. 2014, 11.)

By repeatedly exposing a certain symbol to consumers, it may become so recognisable that the need for the actual brand name in the corporate signature in advertising may disappear. Brands like Target, Apple and Nike have succeeded in that. (Wheeler 2006, 8.) An important guideline is to create a unique symbol and legally protect it from imitators (Aaker 1991, 202). Figure 4 depicts some well-known brand symbols.

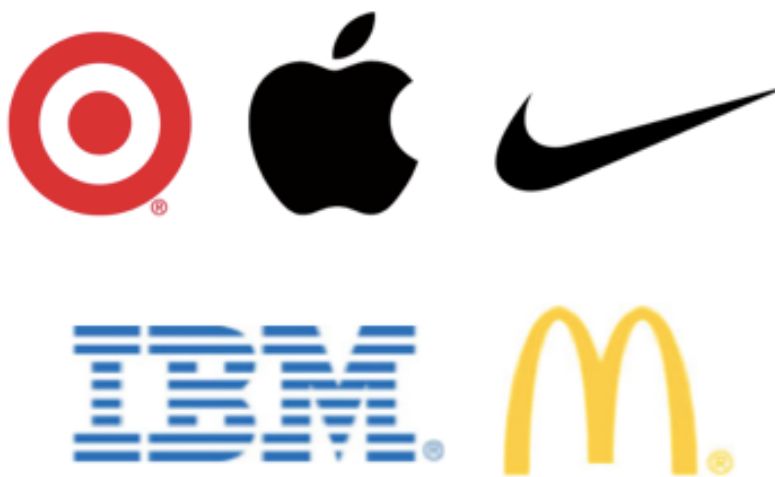


Figure 4 Symbols for Target, Apple, Nike (top row; left to right), IBM and McDonalds (bottom row; left to right). (Bullseye love: The history of Target's logo 2014; Jens 2016; Nike.com 2018; Park et al. 2014, 10.)

As stated earlier, a brand is usually positively affected by consumers forming clear associations between the symbol and the brand name. However, in case the associations are significantly strong, the brand may face difficulties in repositioning or extending itself. For instance, an extension would alter both the name/product-class association and the symbol/product-class association. Therefore, a symbol whose association with a product class is weak, may be able to enjoy some strategic flexibility. (Aaker 1991, 202-203.)

2.3.3 Colours

Colour is among the visual elements that are possibly taken the most advantage of in the communication of products and brand identities. Colour is visible in advertising, packaging, distribution and even on the offering itself evoking emotions and communicating the desired – and sometimes symbolic – meanings. Although the use of a certain colour palette can change due to shifts in consumer tastes and lifestyles, colours are capable of communicating meaning that transcends tastes, industries and (sometimes) cultures. Some of the meanings behind colours are associated with certain usage contexts or situations within a culture, and can thus vary. (Klink 2003, 146; Pohjola 2003, 136.)

The use of colour can be a crucial factor in successful branding and thus, the relationship between colour and brand identity should be thoroughly considered. In fact, Aslem (2005, 9) argues that colour makes the brand. The use of a certain colour – or colours – can have several benefits: it can contribute to the brand standing out in a specific sector; facilitate the communication of brand characteristics, brand values and brand promises; create awareness, as well as evoke positive brand attitudes. In addition, a certain colour palette can help the brand appear more approachable. (Evans et al. 2009, 73; Hosea 2017.) Colour is a significant part of corporate and marketing communication and has an impact on consumer perception, preferences, as well as buying behavior. In addition, colour facilitates positioning – or re-positioning – and differentiation (Aslem 2005, 1; Hosea 2017). Furthermore, Hosea (2017) argues that colour elicits emotion more efficiently than words.

Even though name, logo and product type can identify a brand, colour is often the first factor that grabs a consumer's attention (Hosea 2017). Therefore, logos also take advantage of colour in order to build a unique, recognisable identity (Romaniuk & Nenycz-Thiel 2014, 315). Organisations and brands may use one or more colours as part of their visual identities, but an increasing number is basing their brand communications and identities around a certain signature colour. The luxury jewellery brand Tiffany, for instance, has trademarked its robin's egg blue colour that is used in all of the brand's communication and packaging (Figure 5). The logistics company UPS, in turn, used to build its brand personality around the colour brown with the slogan "What can brown do for you?" – until the company retired the slogan in 2010. Other brands that have made a certain colour their "signature" are the confectionery company Cadbury with the colour purple and the oil and gas company Shell with the colour yellow. Finally, the technology company IBM – informally called "Big Blue" – took advantage of that nickname for several years by showing blue colour strips at the top and bottom of its television advertisements. (Alessandri 2009, 16; Hosea 2017.)



Figure 5 Tiffany's robin's egg blue signature colour (Tiffany.com 2018)

Specific brand colours, such as the trademarked “Tiffany blue” in Figure 5, serve as powerful brand identifiers and play a significant role in the visual experience the brands offer consumers. In some cases, colour can be even more powerful than the brand name itself and in consequence, become the most effective advertising tool for the brand. However, consistency in the use of a certain colour together with the colour's distinctiveness in the marketplace determines whether that colour will become a powerful brand identifier or not (Pohjola 2003, 135). At best, colour is capable of communicating the brand message and the brand meaning in an instant (Hosea 2017).

Existing research affirms that colour has an impact on consumer response. First of all, different colours have been shown to have different attention values. For instance, warm colours, such as orange and red, cause the message to appear smaller. Red is often said to have the biggest attention value. As stated earlier, colours also convey different meanings and emotions. The majority of colours is linked to both positive and negative meanings and naturally, different colours are more or less trendy at different times. A smart utilisation of colours can attract attention to the brand and help the brand stand out from competition, as earlier stated. (Evans et al. 2009, 53, 73.)

So called simple colours are vibrant and intense, such as the colours of the toy retailer Toys ”R” Us and the fast food company McDonald's, whereas sophisticated colours imply to elegance and intimate communication, such as the colours used by the Italian fashion company Armani, the luxury jewellery brand Tiffany and the luxury vehicle brand Jaguar. Furthermore, as stated earlier, colour also facilitates the effectiveness of ”visual branding”, making the offering stand out from competition. For instance, oil companies and car rental companies take advantage of their corporate colours in order to differentiate themselves visually: Shell, for instance, uses yellow and red, whereas Avis uses red and white in their signage. (Moser 2003, according to Aslem 2005, 9; Alessandri 2009, 15-16.)

It is notable that colours symbolise different things across different cultures. For instance, the colour white symbolises purity in America and most Western countries, whereas in Asia, it is the colour of death. In addition, the meaning of different colours may vary in different contexts, depending on, for instance, individual experiences or the business field in question. Therefore, the decision about brand colours should be done cautiously. (Pohjola 2003, 136; Evans et al. 2009, 73.)

2.3.4 *Typography*

In the same way as colour is able to determine the tone of a brand and influence brand associations in the minds of consumers, typography – and typefaces – may also have a significant impact on how VBI is evaluated by consumers (Alessandri 2009, 47). The confectionery company Cadbury's, the beverage corporation Coca-Cola and the food manufacturing company Kellogg's serve as well-known examples of the power of typography. At times, they are so identifiable that they can be displayed without a logo. (Baker & Balmer 1997, 371.) In Figure 6, Kellogg's typography used in 2014 is depicted.

According to MacCarthy & Mothersbaugh (2002, 664), typography refers to "the form, spacing and layout of words and sentences in the text of a written or displayed communications message." Hence, typography can be considered to be comprised of three components. Different typeface characteristics have an impact on the appearance of the letters. Factors that deal with these characteristics include style, size, x-height, weight slant, stress and colour, in addition to which also movement is included in electronic media. Spacing implies to the distance between words, between letters within words, and between lines of text. Layout bears the positioning of the words and text blocks and is comprised of, for instance, line length, number of columns, justification of text, and the consistency or contrast of text across an advertisement. (McCarthy & Mothersbaugh 2002, 665-666.) According to gestalt psychology research, people tend to observe the whole entity – the gestalt – first, after which they move on to the details. Therefore, layout has a significant influence on the formed associations. (Pohjola 2003, 145.) In addition to Figure 6 below, the advertisements by the brewing company Red Brick in Figure 9 serve as examples of a typographic style.



Figure 6 Kellogg's typographic style in 2014 (Kellogg Co. 2016)

Typography creates connotative meanings. The chosen typeface has to reflect the company image (e.g. innovative vs. traditional), the product involvement category (e.g. low vs. high; affective vs. cognitive), as well as the brand message (e.g. exclusive vs. inclusive). In addition, the chosen typography has to be coherent in a way that current and potential future brand extensions are possible. For some brands, the chosen typeface can serve as a symbol to the customers and reflect the company's visual image. An example of this is the famous typeface of Coca-Cola (Figure 3) that contributes to the strengthening of the brand identity as well as the growing of market share. (Zaichkowsky 2010, 552.)

The majority of practitioners and communication designers would most likely agree that powerful visual – and hence marketing – communication strongly relies on effective typography and the implementation of good type design. Typography is often regarded as a significant – and mandatory – component in word-driven media, such as print advertising, and it is able to improve advertisement effectiveness considerably. (Nedeljković et al. 2014, 50; McCarthy & Mothersbaugh 2002, 664, 666.)

According to Henderson et al. (2004, 61), there may be several responses to typeface characteristics and design. First of all, design adds meaning to the stimulus, going beyond the plain illustration of letters. Second of all, design evokes feelings. Last of all, design is a tool with which companies can tell things about themselves. The typeface design can be seen as a tool for "dressing up" the advertiser's written word in the same way as spokespeople dress up the advertiser's spoken word. According to Henderson et al. (2004, 62), certain typeface characteristics can have an impact on impressions consumers consider formal, innovative, emotional, attractive, honest, interesting, strong, warm, and so forth. Several communications research experts propose that mood, attitude, tone, as well as a unique personality can all be communicated through the use of a certain typeface and its distinctive elements (Shaikh et al. 2006).

The use of a chosen type design can also contribute to outcomes such as brands gaining consumers' attention. For instance, the written message can be emphasised with bold or italics letters in the aim of indicating that something in the text is worth noticing. (McCarthy & Mothersbaugh 2002, 664, 666.) Designers and researchers have shown growing interest towards typographic research concerning the emotional dimension in their efforts to optimise the usability of typography. Many of them postulate that the way typography is applied to visual communication can elicit feelings and form opinions. (Nedeljković et al. 2014, 50.)

Typographic elements influence processing and persuasion outcomes such as attitudes and perceptions. Typography can have an impact on, for instance, semantic associations, legibility and appearance. Semantic associations refer to the connotations that consumers create about the text or brand that surpass the text's initial semantic content. These connotations often concern personality-traits such as elegance and sophistication and hence, they form a useful connection to the formation of brand personality. For instance, consumers may link ornate fonts to elegance and in consequence, regard the brand itself as elegant or stylish. The formed connotations may directly influence the later formed attitude-based judgements about the brand. (Aaker 1997; McCarthy & Mothersbaugh 2002, 665-666.) The research done by Shaikh et al. (2006) affirms that, indeed, consumers link personality attributes to typefaces, in addition to which they make judgements about their appropriateness. In their research, consumers were asked to evaluate print samples on such attributes as exciting or dull, flexible or rude, conformist or rebel, and masculine or feminine, and consumers linked fonts to personalities in a consistent manner as well as evaluated their appropriate uses. (Holst-Larkin 2006, 418.)

In the same way as different typeface elements, also spacing and layout can evoke associations about the text and the brand. For instance, an advertisement comprised of a lot of white space due to large intersentence spacing can associate the brand with purity. Moreover, increased spacing between letters, words and/or sentences taking up more space for the text can increase the perceived amount of ad copy. (McCarthy & Mothersbaugh 2002, 671.) With regards to layout factors, strongly structured text with clear columns may evoke associations – via prior experience – with informative material. Therefore, brands aspiring to make their appearance more business-like, should pick a more formal layout style, whereas brands striving to appear more trendy or playful, should take advantage of a more flexible layout. (McCarthy & Mothersbaugh 2002, 673.)

Legibility refers to the ease of perceiving letters and words not only physically, but also perceptually. For instance, a smaller font may challenge the ability to distinguish one letter from the other and, in consequence, reduce the legibility of the ad copy. That, in turn, may result in reduced persuasion indirectly via the capability of processing. Inconsistent fonts and sizes are a case in point, since the use of them may lead to the ad appearing unorganised and hence unpleasant to look at. These kinds of negative feelings

may have an impact on the attitude towards the advertisement, as well as the brand. (McCarthy & Mothersbaugh 2002, 666.)

Next, the success factors in the construction of VBI will be discussed.

2.4 Construction of visual brand identity

2.4.1 Success factors in the construction of visual brand identity

Since visual identity is an extremely significant part of a brand – and therefore its message – the way that visual identity is promoted should be a strategic matter. In order for the promotion of the identity – and therefore the organisation or brand itself – to be as effective as possible, an integrated standpoint is encouraged. Integrated communication refers to the coordination of brand messages in a way that they all support each other and reinforce the same associations. (Pohjola 2003, 108; Alessandri 2009, 26.) Furthermore, the management of consumer perception by integrating brand meaning and distinctive visual appearance of the brand is paramount for an effective VBI. In order to succeed in this, comprehension of visual perception and cognition is needed. (Wheeler 2006, 8; Pohjola 2003, 122.) Some issues related to perception and cognition will be discussed further in 2.7.1 and 2.7.2.

According to Pohjola (2003, 114), the definition of a brand – and VBI – should include both rational and emotional benefits. In designing a brand's visual look, not only rational arguments are essential, but also the desired brand associations, as well as the general brand feeling play important roles. Ideally, the brand's core message or competitive advantage can be summed up in, for instance, a single image, communicating the brand benefit to consumers in an understandable manner. Design, in turn, is crucial for building a certain brand persona.

Pohjola (2003, 114) argues that in order to manage a brand, it is essential to figure out an understandable way to justify the definitions of VBI through references to the brand content, competition, as well as the target audience's expectations. Pohjola suggests that different solutions for brand communication can be tied together by, for instance, defining the brand world and brand persona. The brand world refers to the brand's mental state that is reflected in the brand imagery, among other things. The brand world is visualised through a unique style that appears in, for instance, the surroundings, people and graphics around the brand. An example of a brand world that is sometimes taken advantage of by Finnish companies is a Finnish lake scenery. On the contrary, the brand world of the athletic footwear and apparel corporation, Nike, is reflected through New York's ci-

tyscape. Pohjola adds that when definitions are being put together, different visual material can be taken advantage of, since linking words to imagery contributes to clarity. Figure 7 illustrates Pohjola's (2003, 115) suggestion for the formation of a connection between brand definitions and visual elements. The figure can marshal visual content creation, as well as brand development.

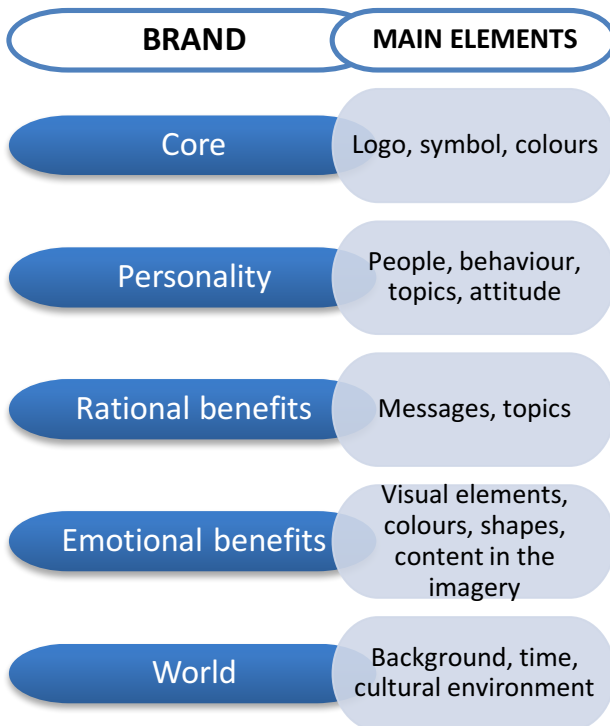


Figure 7 The relationship between brand definitions and visual elements (Pohjola 2003, 115)

It is not paramount - or even ideal - that all of a brand's creative executions look identical. As stated earlier, the critical point is that they all share similar holistic "look and feel", so that the target audience recognises the visual execution to "belong" to the brand. After becoming recognisable, variations between executions can be implemented. Variations and thus, flexibility in a brand's visual appearance, contribute to the brand remaining fresh and exciting. (Percy & Elliott 2009, 323.) Wheeler (2006, 124) highlights the paramount importance of flexibility for an evolving marketing strategy. According to her, flexibility enables change and growth in the future. However, the challenge lies in the ability to design a sufficient balance between flexibility of and consistency in communications.

Next, consistency, brand identification and brand familiarity will be discussed in more detail, since they all appear to be extremely beneficial in the construction of a strong VBI.

2.4.2 Consistency

It has been estimated that in the modern marketplace, the daily advertising exposure is about 1000 advertisements striving to get consumers' attention. In consequence, it is impossible for consumers to pay attention to all of the messages they are exposed to. (Fennis & Stroebe 2016, 48.) Additionally, for the majority of people, it is paramount that they hear, see or experience something several times before they fully understand it. For instance, when an advertisement is shown on television, people may not see the whole spot the first time, or they might hear the spot while they are actively engaged in some other activity. Therefore, they end up missing the actual advertisement. This emphasises the importance of communicating a core message throughout different platforms in a consistent manner. (Alessandri 2009, 23.)

People learn by building on the information stored in memory. According to the so-called accumulation model, new information is combined with the existing knowledge in memory, which means that all of the things consumers see, hear, smell and experience around a brand are stored in memory for future retrievals. Once clarity has been formed about the way the brand desires to be perceived, every brand message should consistently support that goal. (Alessandri 2009, 27-28; Wheeler 2006, 29.) In addition, the same kind of tone-of-voice that reflects the brand's "way of talking", should be established in a consistent manner in each visual brand execution. Different touchpoints with the brand – be it on television, in a consumer's car, at her desk, or online – should all contribute to the reinforcement of consistent associations that are understandable and distinctive. Consistency is the attribute holding all the pieces together in a way that feels seamless to the consumer. (Pohjola 2003, 109; Wheeler 2006, 28- 29.) According to Bettinger & Tracey (2002, 22), consumers desire consistency in visual brand elements in the same way as they desire consistency in the delivery of the brand promise.

Applying a visual identity consistently over time is among the most powerful marketing tools a brand can take advantage of (Wheeler 2006, 28). There are several brands within different categories of consumer goods that are not only renowned for their quality, but also for their recognisable visual look. These brands take advantage of specific visual elements that consistently appear in their product assortments. With regards to the creation of positive associations, message consistency is of paramount importance. The explanation for that is that it is only over time, as consumers begin to get to know a certain identity, that associations are formed. If a brand's visual elements are used arbitrarily and inconsistently, consumers are likely to get confused and the brand weakened. To ensure consumers are properly exposed to a certain VBI, it needs to be depicted in a consistent manner across different platforms. The assumption behind a truly consistent and integra-

ted strategy is that consumers often regard all of a brand's communication as one inseparable flow of information. (Bettinger & Tracey 2002, 22; Karjalainen 2007; Alessandri 2009, 27.)

Apple is a good example of a brand that has embraced the visual age we live in. Apple's brand icon – in its simplicity – is able to communicate the brand's essence at each consumer interface in an instant – and without words. Apple has taken advantage of its characteristic brand communication style from the beginning, and as a result, its advertisements are easily recognisable. (Williams 2006, 33.) Apple's recognisable logo is depicted in Figure 4.

Visual consistency is a factor that helps brands to appear reliable and unique in a way that they cannot be mistaken for something else. Moreover, it contributes to differentiation – crucial for brands' success – as well as increased brand awareness and positive brand attitude. In terms of creative executions within a marketing communication program, consistency is among the most significant contributors to effectiveness. Even though some variation in individual brand messages and advertisements is encouraged, all of a brand's visual executions should somehow contribute to the overall “look and feel” of the brand. In this way, the fundamental theme remains consistent, which is of paramount importance. (Karjalainen 2007; Percy & Elliott 2009, 322-325.)

Furthermore, in order to maximise the benefits of a consistent VBI, the brand should appear the same across the world. Since companies are becoming increasingly multifaceted with several business lines selling different offerings, a cohesive global image further supports the perception of one solid company. As brands expand to new business areas, consistency can contribute to consumers' acceptance and awareness of new innovations. (Wheeler 2006, 29.)

Figures 8 and 9 illustrate consistent visual brand communication of two beer brands, Corona and Red Brick, by comparing two different advertisements by both brands.

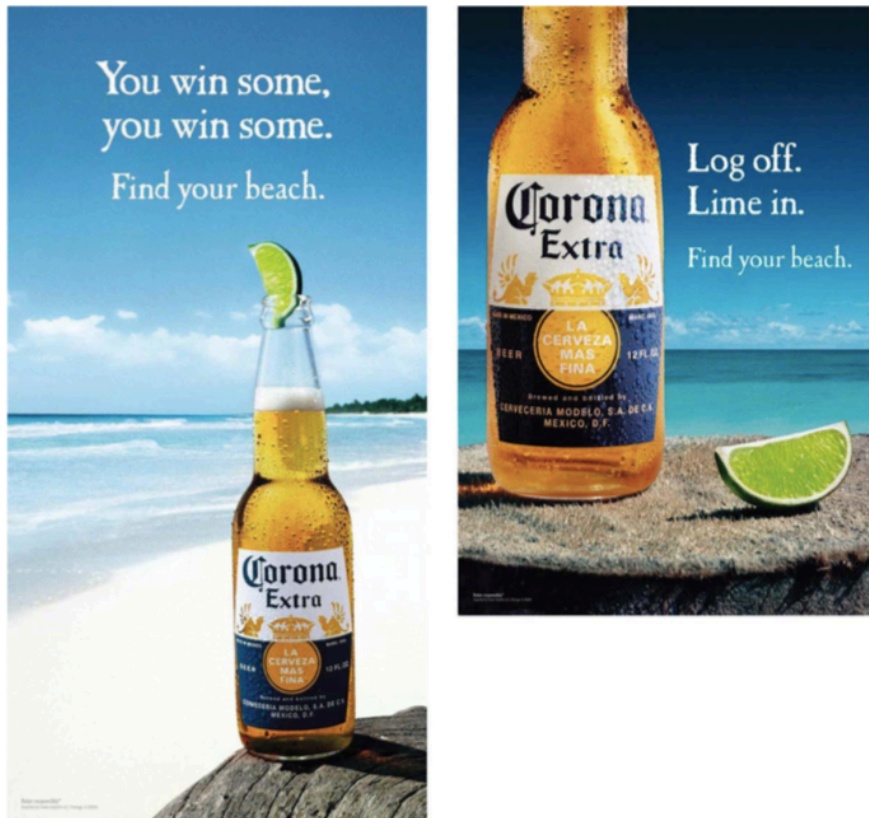


Figure 8 Corona’s consistent theme (“look and feel”) in its advertisements (Phillips et al. 2014b, 322)

As seen in Figure 8, the two Corona advertisements take advantage of several identical visual elements, such as the font, the brand product (bottle) and the lime. Furthermore, the white typeface and the tagline, “Find your beach”, is the same in both of the advertisements. However, there are a few major differences as well: in the left advertisement, the background includes waves, a white sandy beach and tropical vegetation, whereas in the right advertisement, the water in the background is very still, and no beach or vegetation are shown. Also, the placement of the bottle, as well as the lime differ. Despite the differences, however, both of the advertisements represent the same fundamental theme – “look and feel” – and thus, communicate a consistent, easily recognisable VBI.



Figure 9 Red Brick’s consistent theme (“look & feel”) in its advertisements (Phillips et al. 2014b, 321)

In the same way as the Corona advertisements in Figure 8, also Red Brick’s advertisements in Figure 9 serve as good examples of consistency and a unified “look and feel” of the brand. Both of the advertisements share similar visual elements, such as the layout, the brand product (bottle), the earth tone colour palette, the varying typeface sizes, and the line framing. In consequence of this visual consistency between the advertisements, it is very likely that consumers recognise these advertisements to belong to the same brand. That being said, if a closer look at the advertisements is taken, the individual visual elements do differ: the colours, the typeface sizes and the frame elements are not identical. These variations in visual elements demonstrates the balance between flexibility and consistency that strong VBIs master.

Establishing consistent creative executions during a certain campaign – and over time – is crucial for brand awareness (Percy & Elliott 2009, 322). Unquestionably, the generation of brand awareness is easier over a longer period of time, since learning is more effective through repetition and reinforcement (Aaker 1991, 271). Therefore, certain elements should be consistently displayed in each visual representation of the brand. If the consumer is repeatedly exposed to a consistent visual expression – a unified “look and feel” – of the brand, the link between the brand and the consumer is reinforced. This kind of consistency may result in brand awareness being provoked by a sole execution, without a direct link to the brand name. In this case, the role of the brand name is only to support what has been evoked by the visual look of the execution. Therefore, consistency will

facilitate both brand awareness and immediate brand recognition among consumers, whenever they are exposed to the brand in one way or another. The brand should be planted in consumers' minds in a way that contributes to the brand identity to be widely recognised throughout multiple communication channels. (Christenson & Worthington 2000, 39; Wheeler 2006, 29; Percy & Elliott 2009, 322.) People tend to prefer the recognisable, and according to Aaker (1991, 271), recognition is also “cue for presence, substance and permanence.”

Existing marketing research on consumer processing posits that the processing of brand information as well as the liking of an advertisement increases if consistent – and hence, familiar – visual elements are used in advertising. Liking may also result when visual themes are consistent with consumers' expectations, especially if the previous brand evaluation is positive. Furthermore, for the same reason, it has been proposed that consumers possibly like brands with strong VBI better. Research on both familiarity and consistency suggests that advertisements progressively expressing a consistent VBI would be liked better in comparison to advertisements whose VBI elements have been changed in an unfamiliar manner. Since the majority of advertising is processed in low-involvement situations, a strong VBI may contribute to decreased perceived purchase risk, facilitate the formation of positive associations, and result in increased liking in case the previous brand experience is positive. (Phillips et al. 2014a, 228.)

In the construction of a consistent VBI, an important phase is to determine specific ways the brand's visual elements can and should be used. Rules concerning the use of VBI elements facilitate the generation of consistency in the use of the identity, and this consistency, in turn, facilitates the protection of the VBI from misuse and infringement. The rules determining the proper ways a brand's visual identity elements should be used are often codified in a VBI manual or guide. These manuals and guides are developed to ensure all actors around the brand use the VBI properly and consistently. (Wheeler 2006, 29; Alessandri 2009, 54.) Consistency in the communication of VBI does not equate to rigidity or restriction. Instead, consistency serves as the basis for the creation of brand equity through repetition, persistence and frequency. It is enabled by a commitment to brand identity standards, and is further encouraged by a culture in which the brand and its expressions are valued. (Wheeler 2006, 28.)

2.4.3 Brand identification and brand familiarity

Marketing and consumer researches have long acknowledged the highly significant role that memory plays in consumer choice and brand consideration (Holden & Vanhuele 1999, 479). To contribute to brand identification, the link between a brand element and the brand name must easily be retrievable from consumers' long-term memory. Brands

reinforce linkages to brand-identity elements as consumers' learning improves. Learning, in turn, takes place in situations where the consumer processes a simultaneous representation of brand elements and the brand name. However, distinctive visual elements can work together as cues – beyond the brand name – that evoke the brand in consumer memory and facilitate brand identification. In some instances, brand identification can occur even when the brand name is not exposed to the consumer. An example of this is Nike's advertising, in which only the "Swoosh"-logo (Figure 4) is showing. (Romaniuk et al. 2007, 50; Romaniuk 2014, 314.)

According to Romaniuk & Nenycz-Thiel (2014, 318), fame and uniqueness are paramount in the creation of a strong brand identity. Fame indicates the number of consumers that can retrieve the link between the identity element and the brand name. This is based on the fact that retrieval of anything is initially dependent on the connection to the cue stimulating memory (Tulving & Pearstone, 1966). The higher the fame of the link between a brand and a visual element among consumers, the more people are likely to be able to retrieve the brand when being encountered by it in the future – simultaneously with the visual element. Correspondingly, the lower the fame of the link between a brand and a visual element, the bigger the likelihood of incorrect brand identification it is, referring to the visual element being ineffective. (Romaniuk & Nenycz-Thiel 2014, 315.)

Uniqueness refers to the competitiveness of other offerings or brands with a linkage to the same cue. In case there are other offerings linked to the same cue, the retrieval of the target offering will be harder because of the competitive interference effect (Heil et al, 1994). For instance, both McDonald's and Burger King's – two fast-food company rivals – use the colour yellow in their logos, and consequently, in situations where McDonald's takes advantage of yellow in its advertising, consumers might retrieve Burger King instead. Uniqueness – being the only brand associated with a certain visual element – is a significant factor in the creation of a strong brand identity, since a marketer is unable to control the communication of competing brands. After consumers have created strong associations to competing brands, it will potentially be harder to regain uniqueness by getting the consumers forget about these associations. Therefore, uniqueness should be the most fundamental goal, independent of fame. (Romaniuk & Nenycz-Thiel 2014, 315, 318.) In this study, the terms uniqueness and distinctiveness are used interchangeably.

There are a few factors that can reduce the effectiveness of competitive interference on memory, one of which is brand familiarity. Brand familiarity refers to the knowledge of; direct or indirect experience with; or loyalty towards the advertised brand. It implies to stimuli that have been encountered earlier and additionally, have been encoded and stored in memory. Familiarity is a significant contributor to the ease of processing. (Tellis 2004, 125; Fennis & Stroebe 2016, 57, 112.)

In the buzzing marketplace that is constantly bombarding consumers with appealing alternatives, familiarity serves as an effective brand asset for securing an offering's competitiveness. For instance, a familiar brand can encourage customers to stick to buying it even when the competition is fierce. (Bennett & Lagos 2007, 195.) Having a group of loyal customers may decrease marketing expenditure because it is significantly less expensive to retain a customer in comparison to gaining or regaining one. Loyal customers can also spread brand awareness and reassure new customers. Moreover, loyal customers allow companies to take their time to react to competitive advances. (Aaker 1991, 271.)

Kent & Allen (1994, 103) also agree with the beneficial role of brand familiarity, arguing that familiar brands have significant advantages over less-known brands in the marketplace. Based on their study results, advertising of competing brands does not harm familiar brands considerably, as consumers seem to recall new product information for familiar brands better – independent of variance in advertisement executions, processing goals, exposure time, and previous exposure to the tested advertisement in their study. Additionally, according to their study, consumers are likely to struggle with recalling product information in advertisements of new brands within massively advertised categories. Furthermore, Phillips et al. (2014a, 228) argue that advertisements expressing a strong VBI are potentially perceived as more familiar and the brands in question evaluated more positively in comparison to advertisements in which visual brand elements have been altered more disorderedly over time and repeated less frequently.

Next, the discussion will proceed to examine the implementation of visual changes as well as the potential consequences of visual changes in the modern marketplace.

2.5 Implementation of visual changes

The twenty-first century is strongly characterised by constant change. Institutions, technology, science, style, vocabulary and the environment are in a constant flux and what's more, the pace of change is increasing. In the modern marketplace, the external environment is volatile – competitors are reshaping themselves, new brands are appearing, the business cycle is hard to predict and consumers as well as the marketplace dynamics are constantly changing. Moreover, the breakthrough of technology and social networking has resulted in consumers encountering new ideas at a rapid pace and in consequence, regular changes of some sort are continuously looked forward to. Therefore, companies are under constant pressure to keep up with the changes and stay relevant to consumers at all times. (Wheeler 2006, 26; Banerjee 2008, 63; Irani & Bapna 2011; D'Lacey 2014, 1.)

Once brands are created, they are likely to grow, expand and either succeed or lose their popularity among consumers. Throughout their whole existence, brands face competition in the market by other brands who strive to gain consumers' affection. A brand's visual change serves as an opportunity to break through the visual clutter and differentiate the brand identity from others, no matter whether the brand is a newcomer or an established one. It is common that companies will not start paying attention to the idea of change until the brand is already starting to lose its popularity or is encountered by new competition. A brand refresh should be regarded as part of a continuous brand evolution process, playing an essential role in the brand strategy. (D'Lacey 2014, 1; Kolbl et al. 2015, 5.)

Changing an established VBI – or any individual identity element – always requires a thorough consideration of the existing equity of the identity rather than regarding the change as purely cosmetic (Banerjee 2008, 60; Alessandri 2009, 67). That being said, there are various reasons for the need of a visual change. Often the problem brands face is them becoming out-dated in one way or another. For instance, a certain positioning strategy may become obsolete, the target audience may age, or the brand associations may become unappealing over time as tastes and preferences alter. Therefore, visual changes may be done in the hope of adding some novelty or excitement into the brand or simply keeping the brand up-to-date. Additional reasons for the need for visual changes include diversification; brand extensions; growth; brand fortification; repositioning; or brand clarification. (Aaker 1991, 251; Koch & Boush 2000, 141; Alessandri 2009, 68, 81; Irani & Bapna 2011; Kolbl et al. 2015, 5.) When revitalising a brand, companies often aim to increase sales due to improved equity, which is often linked to better recognition, optimised perceived quality, altered associations, extended customer base, and/or improved loyalty (Aaker 1991, 242).

However, while change seems to be ubiquitous, brand identities should be designed to have sustainability as well. Sustainability refers to the ability of a brand's visual identity to endure in an ever-changing environment. Even though change is linked to expectations, change for the sake of change is not likely to gain sustainability in the long-term. Furthermore, since changes often require a considerable monetary investment, the implementation of changes for mere cosmetic reasons is not appropriately justified. Instead, a change should result from a strategic and clear objective, like one stated earlier. Most importantly, a changed visual appearance should conserve the legacy of the brand while communicating a new direction. Brands that are built over time serve as a significant investment. (Wheeler 2006, 13, 26.; Banerjee 2008, 60, 67-68.)

In order to accomplish both sustainability and relevancy in the modern marketplace, a brand's look, feel and presentation style ought to be under constant evolution. Instead of occasionally executing some considerable changes, it is now crucial for companies to renew their brands on a regular basis, contributing to the maintenance of their market

share. Whereas earlier, companies may have maintained the same brand language for years or even decades, many of them are now striving to implement change which, on one hand, would preserve familiarity and on the other hand, would facilitate staying relevant. (D’Lacey 2014, 1.) Branding is a continuous, evolving process, in which new visual elements are regularly either added or removed (Phillips et al. 2014b, 318). However, since innovation bears the risk of destroying existing brand recall among consumers, the balance between refreshing the brand and maintaining the existing brand cues is of utmost importance. Therefore, in situations where change is considered, it is crucial to: 1) recognise the brand elements that are valuable and should therefore be kept; 2) identify the role these valuable brand elements play in branding; and 3) figure out the way to update them without sacrificing brand recognition. (Chalal 2015.)

Figure 10 illustrates the successful visual identity redesign of the cruise ferry company, Tallink Silja Line, which was implemented in 2014. Finnish consumers gave a warm welcome to the newly refined seal mark, Harri, who got his smile back in the visual renewal. (Silja Line: Hylkeen vuosi 2014; Arte 2018.)



Figure 10 Tallink Silja Line’s new refined seal mark (Arte 2014)

According to the Graphic designer behind the renewal, Anssi Arte (2018), the previous renewal implemented by TBWA/France in 2012 upset the Finnish consumers, as the seal mark got more serious. In the visual renewal in 2014, Arte aimed to respect the authentic tradition of the seal mark, while updating it and making it more relevant to today’s marketplace. The new seal mark became friendlier through its smiley face, appealing to the target audience, such as families. This visual change is a good example of a modest – yet meaningful – alteration that was well justified.

Furthermore, the seal mark’s look was made flexible and human in a way that several different expressions and contexts were designed for him. Some examples of these are depicted in Figure 11. As stated earlier, flexibility in a brand’s visual executions is among the success factors in the construction of VBI, contributing to the brand appearing fresh and exciting.

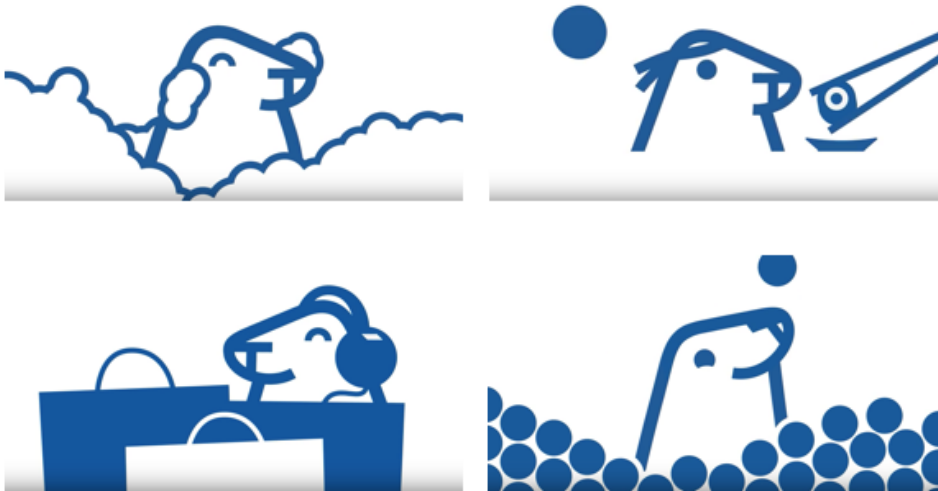


Figure 11 Flexibility of Tallink Silja Line’s new refined seal mark (Silja Line: Hylkeen vuosi 2014)

As seen in Figure 11, even though Tallink Silja Line’s new seal mark is being put in different situations, doing different things and having somewhat varying facial expressions, the holistic look and feel of it remains the same. Therefore, the seal mark is easy to recognise to “belong” to the cruise ferry company Tallink Silja Line. (Percy & Elliott’s 2009, 323.)

According to Alessandri (2009, 67), there are two important factors to be considered when planning the change of an existing VBI: the reason for the change, and the extent of the change. Alessandri names these two types of changes a wholesale change and an incremental change. She states that in a situation where a brand believes its visual identity not working because it is communicating an incorrect — or an insufficiently strong — message, a wholesale change of the identity may be appropriate. A wholesale change refers to a perfect reform of the name, logo, tagline, colour palette, and so forth. This kind of change is strategically and logistically the most challenging one.

On a strategic level, changing a visual identity completely requires thorough research on various factors: the reason for the identity change; what the existing visual identity projects; what the changed identity should project; and the desired consequence of the visual identity change. In order to justify a wholesale change, these questions must be given clear and specific answers. In case a wholesale change is implemented without a strategic justification, the consequences are likely to be extremely harmful to the brand and its reputation. (Alessandri 2009, 67.)

In a situation where a brand believes it needs a visual change where some linkages to the existing identity are kept, one or more incremental changes would be appropriate. Possible incremental changes include a name change; a logo redesign; or even a fresh tagline. Research can contribute to the discovery of an appropriate visual identity element

that would be able to project the desired associations more precisely. (Alessandri 2009, 67.)

A brand revitalisation can contribute to, for instance, bigger market share, internationalisation, strength of perceived brand image and improved brand visibility on a general level. Through the brand revitalisation process, the competitiveness of the brand can be affirmed, especially if the brand has not previously managed to succeed or be consistent in its actions. A crucial starting point in the brand revitalisation process is to recognise and analyse the signs of the brand aging, after which a mixture of suitable revitalisation elements and strategies can be implemented. (Kolbl et al. 2015, 10.)

Even though some sorts of visual changes are encouraged in order for brands to keep up with the ever-evolving marketplace, changes can naturally fail as well. For instance, a unique brand image can be harmed and in consequence, violate the overall brand equity. The success or failure of the changes in visual brand identifiers is eventually determined by consumers and their reactions to the changes. (Koch & Boush 2000, 141.) However, revitalising a brand is often significantly less expensive and risky in comparison to developing a new brand (Aaker 1991, 242). In addition, staying the same for a long time is likely to turn out costlier than examining ways to connect with customers on a regular basis. (D’Lacey 2014).

The number and frequency of visual identifier changes varies among companies. For instance, the beverage corporation Coca-Cola has kept the same typeface and colour since 1886 when the company started the production of its soda. The food company General Mills, in turn, has continuously changed the face of Betty Crocker, the fictional personification of the company’s packaged food brand. In addition, there are some examples of more radical implementations of visual changes such as the sports team Denver Broncos, which changed its whole logo and colours. (Koch & Boush 2000, 141.)

According to Karel & Kosteljik’s adjusted marketing paradigm (2008), companies should pay more attention to their brands’ connection to the human mind. Whereas the ”traditional” marketing paradigm argues that changes in brand strategy are relevant because of changes in consumer needs, the adjusted marketing paradigm finds these strategic decisions questionable if the changes in brand strategies are not linked to the brand identity and the fundamental brand resources. In case the brand aims to satisfy all of the existing consumer needs, the result may be a diffused – and hence, confused – brand image. That, in turn, may be detrimental to the brand-consumer relationships. The brand strategy being too oriented towards consumer needs may end up being harmful for the brand, since consumer demands may not be suitable with the fundamental brand identity. According to Karel & Alsem, the brand identity should always lean on the company’s core competencies, because an identity can only be considered trustworthy if it is really

actualised. Therefore, according to this view, brand identity should be based on the company's superior skills and resources instead of just consumer needs. (Karel & Alsem 2008, 910-911.)

The brand identity is regarded as the representation of the values that the brand strives to live by. In consequence, it is the foundation of the establishment and maintenance of the brand-customer relationship. An identity change, therefore, requires that the company's fundamental resources and values change. However, an identity change may lead to consumers questioning the stability and trustworthiness of the brand, which, in turn, could deteriorate the brand-consumer relationship. (Karel & Alsem 2008, 911.) According to Morgan & Hunt (1994), trust plays a significant role in relationship commitment, in addition to which reputation is positively correlated with trust (Ganesan 1994). Therefore, in order for the brand to be trusted, it may be necessary to ensure that consumers know what the brand's identity is (Karel & Alsem 2008, 911). This further emphasises the importance of defining the brand core, from which all of the brand's visuality should stem from, as discussed earlier in chapter 2.2.

In their paper, Grobert et al. (2016) examine the impact of a logo change by several companies. Through their examples, the authors highlight the significance of caution and considerateness towards consumers when implementing these changes. In situations where the change is radical or surprising, the consumer response may be extremely negative, especially if the brand has become very familiar or consumers have become significantly attached to it. An example of this is the clothing retail company GAP, whose logo change led to extremely distressed consumers (Grobert et al. 2016, 239). This logo change is depicted in Figure 12.



Figure 12 Gap's unsuccessful logo change (Theguardian.com 2010)

Through the logo change illustrated above in Figure 12, GAP demolished its twenty-year-old blue-box logo with the brand name in white block font and replaced it with a new tiny blue-box logo with the brand name in black, remarkably different font. This dramatic and sudden change caused a media lash as consumers expressed their disapproval and disgust towards the new logo on different social media channels. In consequence,

GAP was obliged to revive the old logo a few days after the launch. (Irani & Bapna 2011; Grobert et al. 2016, 239.) This unsuccessful logo change highlights the importance of modest evolution and respect towards the brand associations formed by consumers.

Another example of an unsuccessful logo change is a French business school, Grenoble Ecole de Management, experienced a similar negative reaction from people after radically changing its logo in 2014. The school received criticism expressing the dismay of people not being informed about the change in advance, as well as not being asked about their opinion first. Furthermore, in the disapproving messages, people also noted that they actually preferred the previous logo. (Grobert et al. 2016, 239.) Therefore, consideration towards consumers is of utmost importance when planning a visual brand change. Since any visual identity change will cause some sort of a public reaction, it is paramount that the change – as well as the reason for it – are communicated to the public. (Alessandri 2009, 77; Banerjee 2008, 67.)

These examples indicate the riskiness of a logo change – it may induce a negative response among current customers, as well as other stakeholders that have formed a more or less close relationships with the brand. (Grobert et al. 2016, 239.) Consumers may not like a new logo, especially in situations where the old logo holds a significant recall. Over time, brand associations are formed in the minds of consumers through the use of, for instance, a company name, logo and tagline. Therefore, a change may lead to consumers feeling uncomfortable and confused as the brand familiarity vanishes. In consequence, the brand image may deteriorate. (Banerjee 2008, 68.) This riskiness is not merely linked to a logo change but relates to changes in any other VBI element as well.

Figure 13 and 14 indicate the modest logo changes that two successful brands, the beverage corporation Coca-Cola and the coffee company Starbucks have implemented during their lifetimes. In both figures, the representation of the evolution is to be followed as normal English text would be read (left to right; top to bottom).



Figure 13 Coca-Cola's logo changes during 1887-2016 (The Coca-Cola Company 2016)

It is notable that Coca-Cola has a history of over 100 years and yet, its typeface and brand colours have remained more or less the same the whole time. Finally, Coca-Cola became so recognisable, that the brand was able to replace the brand name with people's names and city names, which is shown in the second last illustration in the bottom row in Figure 13.



Figure 14 Starbucks' logo changes during 1971-2011 (Starbucks.com 2018)

As seen in Figure 14, Starbucks' logo changes during the last 40 years have been extremely subtle – the colours, shape and the icon have remained very similar in the three previous logo versions. Only the original logo had a different colour and name. Similar to Nike and Apple, for instance, also Starbucks has removed the brand name of its logo completely. This removal was well justified, as it was due to brand extensions (Irani & Bapna 2011).

3 RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Research approach

The chosen research method in this study is qualitative. Qualitative research approaches focus on interpretations and a holistic understanding of attitudes, behavior and motivations (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2015, 4–5; Chris 2015, 837). Qualitative researchers aim to discover the conceptions and meanings that the research participants hold and hence, make sense of the studied issues according to them. Qualitative researchers regard the research as a learning process in which knowledge is formed together with the research participants. (Daymon & Holloway 2011, 7–8.) Because the purpose of this study was to form a holistic and profound understanding of the studied issues, a qualitative research approach was considered justifiable. Moreover, a further desire in this study was to conduct interviews in the form of a dialogue, where a shared knowledge is formed with the research participants. As Hirsjärvi et al. (1997, 165) state, the preferred qualitative research methods are such that truly allow the viewpoints of the participants to be heard. Furthermore, the observation of qualitative data is multifaceted and detailed.

Qualitative research implies to a holistic gathering of information, where the data is collected in real, natural settings. Moreover, multidimensionality, complexity, richness of expression and observing the studied issues from various perspectives apply to qualitative research. (Hirsjärvi et al. 1997, 165; Alasuutari 2011, 81-82, 84.) Since the studied issues in this research appeared to be rather multidimensional and even partly based on interpretations, a qualitative approach that would not be based on a more superficial, numeral analysis, was considered paramount. As Eriksson & Kovalainen (2015, 4-5) stipulate, qualitative research approach is often taken advantage of in situations where quantitative studies have not been able to provide a sufficiently deep understanding of issues.

The qualitative approach in this study is inductive, which refers to the researcher not aiming to test a hypothesis. Instead of conducting a research on the basis of an inflexible framework or predetermined theories, a qualitative approach is open-minded. Hence, flexibility, spontaneity and creativity throughout the study are amongst the advantages of being a qualitative researcher. (Alasuutari 2011, 82; Daymon & Holloway 2011, 107.) Even though this research process started with an initial topic and a research plan, some novel – and even unexpected – issues arose from the participants’ way of understanding the world. In consequence, the initial research plan was slightly re-modified to correspond with the given circumstances as the research proceeded. In addition, the emphasis of different themes in the study were slightly modified to correspond with the empirical findings. (Hirsjärvi et al. 1997, 165; Daymon & Holloway 2011, 8.)

Qualitative approaches see reality as socially constructed – they take the context of the research study into consideration, which refers to the social-cultural, historical/temporal and physical location and the conditions in which it takes place. Therefore, instead of the gained knowledge being an absolute truth, it is tied to the context and is temporary in nature. Moreover, the sample in qualitative studies is usually small and the study small scale. (Daymon & Holloway 2011, 107; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2015, 4–5.) However, the target group is often selected appropriately so that it is not based on a random sample (Hirsjärvi et al. 1997, 165). This study was conducted in expert context and therefore, the study perspective is tied to one group of individuals and their perceptions. Furthermore, the sample size (11) is rather limited, which further indicates that the gained knowledge cannot be regarded as an absolute truth but rather one point of view regarding the studied issues. Despite the fact that the findings of qualitative research are often profound, they are hardly ever generalisable – at least in a statistical sense as in survey studies (Alasuutari 2011, 231). That is the case in this study as well. However, as Yin (2009, 43) states, qualitative studies may rely on analytic generalisation. This study then, aims to form broad theoretical assumptions and frameworks through the evaluation of the empirical results.

3.2 Data collection

The empirical data of this study was collected through semi-structured theme interviews. A theme interview refers to a method that does not proceed through detailed questions – rather, it takes advantage of larger themes that appear in the study (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2001, 48). With regards to the interviews conducted for this study, four themes were selected. These were preceded by background information for each informant. The four themes were: 1) Visual marketing & Visual brand identity (VBI), 2) The construction of VBI, 3) Consumer processing and 4) Visual changes. The questions were formed on the basis of the research problem, research questions and the theoretical framework in this study. Furthermore, the varied questions relating to each theme reflected the emphasis given to them in this study. Therefore, the fewest number of questions related to the third theme regarding consumer processing. In Appendix 2, the operationalisation table further illustrates the interrelations between the purpose of this study, the research questions, the theoretical framework of this study, the expert views derived from the interviews, as well as the interview themes.

Since the answers in semi-structured interviews are not limited to certain predefined alternatives, the informant can answer the questions with his or her own words. Hence, the biggest benefit of conducting semi-structured interviews is the fact that the materials are fairly systematic and broad in scope while also enabling a somewhat conversational

and informal style of discussion in the interview. The purpose of the semi-structured interview method is to allow the informant to discuss the topic in a free manner. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 7; Alasuutari 2011, 149.) With regards to the interviews conducted for this study, the informants were allowed to speak as freely as desired in order to discover the most significant – and even hidden – aspects relating to the interview themes. A further aim was to take notice of the informants' own interpretations and conceptions of the studied issues. The semi-structured interview method evokes answers to both "what" and "how" questions, which contributed to the successful execution of the interviews for this study. (Qu & Dumay 2011, 246; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 7.) A rough list of the interview questions can be found in Appendix 1.

All of the questions in the interviews were open in nature, giving the informant a sense of control and freedom in answering. Additionally, open questions proved to allow for more detailed answers, which was valuable in that they induced insight into the informants' holistic understanding of attitudes, behavior and motivations (Chris 2015, 837). Furthermore, not conducting a readily scripted interview allowed for the presentation of additional questions when opportunities arose. Indeed, some additional questions were included in the interviews when they were considered relevant to the study, when new or interesting viewpoints rose and when there was a need for the informant to specify his or her answer. Careful listening was a major factor in this, since the informants' responses were considered to serve as clues that could facilitate the formation of subsequent interview questions and the discovery of the need to request for additional information. Moreover, the correct interpretation of the interview answers was tested by asking additional questions or summarising the response. (Maykut & Morehouse 1994, 82; Saunders & Lewis 2012, 154-155.)

The purpose of the conducted theme interviews was to place the research informants' interpretations and meanings given to the studied issues in the centre of the study. These meanings were also believed to be partly shaped in the interaction between the interviewer and the informant, since the interview answers were considered to reflect 1) the presence of the interviewer, 2) the manner in which the questions were presented, as well as 3) the previous questions and answers. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2001, 48– 49; Alasuutari 2011, 149.)

Prior to the semi-structured theme interviews, a preliminary plan for the topics, issues and themes to be discussed was prepared. However, since the semi-structured interview method is based on a dialogue, it allowed for the freedom of adapting and varying the style, pace and ordering of questions, wording, as well as different follow-up strategies in each interview. Furthermore, the emphasis of each interview theme varied across the interviews, depending on the available time as well as the relevance of each theme to the informant's job description. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2001, 47; Schmidt 2004, 204; Qu & Dumay 2011, 246; Saunders & Lewis 2012, 151, 152-153.) As Maykut & Morehouse

(1994, 83) stipulate, during the actual interview situation, a skilful researcher will learn about the issues that the interviewee considers important within the wide boundaries of the interview topic and questions, and in consequence, aims to examine those particular issues in the interview. The flexibility in the interviews were believed to contribute to rich responses from the informants.

Before each interview, a rough list of the interview questions was sent to the research informants via e-mail, so that he or she could go through them in advance if desired. The estimated length of the interview was also agreed with each of the informants in advance, depending on the informant's time and resources available. Furthermore, on the basis of convenience, in all cases, the research informants selected their own offices as the interview location. The length of the conducted theme interviews varied between half an hour and 2,5 hours, which seem to be the typical length of theme interviews. However, the majority of the interviews lasted approximately for an hour, which was regarded as the most ideal time frame to not only sufficiently cover all of the interview questions and themes, but also establish a trusting and respecting relationship with the informant. (Maykut & Morehouse 1994, 80; Hirsjärvi et al. 1997, 208; Saunders & Lewis 2012, 153.) In addition to answering the interview questions, the majority of the informants also presented some of their portfolio works and based their answers on them. This contributed to the formation of a more holistic understanding of the studied issues in practice.

As advised by Maykut & Morehouse (1994, 83), the interviews were audio-recorded, after which the contents were transcribed to a written form. The interviews were recorded simultaneously with a phone application (Voice Memos) and a computer application (QuickTime Player). By recording the interviews with two applications at the same time, the aim was to ensure successful recording and hence, correct transcription. Before beginning with the actual interview questions, each informant was asked for the permission to record. In addition, the permission to use the informant's name and the advertising agency was also requested. A permission to both of these procedures was given by each informant.

3.3 Description of Informants

The aim of the qualitative theme interviews in this study was to discover how marketing experts understand the concept of VBI both as a whole and through the different elements that make up the concept. A further purpose was to gain knowledge of the procedures and strategies these marketing experts employ when planning and creating visual content for brands. Lastly, potential reasons for and factors relating to visual changes were matters of interest. Because this study is focused on visual issues, art directors, creatives and de-

signers were regarded as particularly valuable informants. These advertising agency experts plan and create visual content for brands on a daily basis and in consequence, are especially visually adept. Despite this preference, also one Key account manager; one Client director; one Business director; and one Chief executive officer were interviewed. This allowed for the observation of the studied issues to be done from different perspectives, and therefore, further contributed to the formation of holistic understanding of the topic.

The first potential advertising agencies for this study were contacted via e-mail/phone during the first week of October in 2017. The advertising agencies were mainly selected on the basis of the researcher's existing knowledge of them. In addition, some unfamiliar agencies that were simply come across on the internet were contacted as well. In cases where a certain advertising agency was unfamiliar, the work portfolio on their website was thoroughly observed and judged by the visual orientation of the agency. Furthermore, the number of visual brand identity cases was examined. Based on this evaluation, some unfamiliar advertising agencies were contacted as well. However, two things considering the selection of the advertising agencies are worth pointing out. First of all, the number of advertising agencies is rather limited in Turku, where this study was brought forth. Second of all, it was acknowledged that not all of the contacted advertising agencies would agree to an interview. Therefore, excessively strict criteria for the selection of the advertising agencies were not set.

In addition to the initial selection of advertising agencies, one particular person as well as an advertising agency were also recommended by two informants of this study. Because the expert opinions about these informant candidates were greatly valued, interviews with both of them were conducted. Overall, eight advertising agencies were contacted, five of which agreed to an interview. In addition to the advertising agencies, also an individual Entrepreneur/Graphic designer was interviewed in his home office. Three of the advertising agencies where interviews were conducted were located in Turku and two agencies as well as the individual Entrepreneur/Graphic designer's home office were located in Helsinki. The first two interviews were conducted on the 10th of October and the last two interviews on the 10th of November. Therefore, the interview period lasted exactly for a month. Details about the interviews as well as the informants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1 Interview details

Date	Advertising agency	Name of the informant	Job title	Experience (yrs)	Length of the interview
10.10.17	Parcero	Heikki Kyllönen	Co-founder; Key account manager	5 years	57 min
10.10.17	Parcero	Tatu Raitis	Client director	3,5 years	95 min
18.10.17	Hungry	Janne Kunttu	Creative	6 years	68 min
19.10.17	TBWA	Joni Furstenborg	(Senior) Art director	14 years	68 min
19.10.17	TBWA	Iikka Maunumaa	Business director	9 years	60 min
24.10.17	Parcero	Minttu Nurminen	Lead visual designer	4 years	71 min
2.11.17	Briiffi	Tarmo Helminen	Art director	13 years	47 min
2.11.17	Briiffi	Johannes Norrman	Creative executive; Art director	21 years	58 min
3.11.17	hasan & partners	Anssi Arte	Graphic designer; Independent entrepreneur	14 years	150 min
10.11.17	Werklig	Janne Kaitala	Chief executive officer; Co-founder	12 years	37 min
10.11.17	Werklig	Anssi Kähärä	Creative director; Co-founder	10 years	60 min

The first informant, Heikki Kyllönen, is a Co-founder of a five-year-old digital and content marketing agency, Parcero, which is located in Turku. In addition to Kyllönen, there are 16 employees in the agency. According to him, the idea of starting an advertising agency business arose from the realisation that visually exciting materials are of huge importance in today's marketplace. Consequently, Parcero has focused on the creation of visual content since the beginning. In addition, the skilful media usage has led to Parcero

becoming a significant actor on social media. The agency's mission, according to Kyllönen, is to become the leading content marketing agency in the grocery section. Kyllönen currently works at Parcero as the Key account manager. Kyllönen actively takes part in the strategic planning and product development at the agency, in addition to which he manages customer relationships with various brands.

The second informant, Tatu Raitis, works as a Client director at Parcero, and has been employed in the agency for 3,5 years. In addition to client acquisition and client management, Raitis focuses on concept development. He has completed a Masters's degree in Turku School of Economics, majoring in Marketing. Some of Raitis' clients include a confectionary company Cloetta; a beverage company Hartwall; and a trading sector company Kesko.

The third informant, Janne Kunttu, works as a Creative in an advertising agency of nine employees, Hungry, which is also located in Turku. According to Kunttu, Hungry mainly focuses on advertising and brand strategy issues, in addition to which the agency creates a lot of digital content, such as internet sites, for brands. Kunttu has an art director background and has worked in various advertising agencies since 2012. The majority of Kunttu's daily work assignments relate to working with images and branding. Some of Kunttu's clients include Kesko, which is engaged in the grocery, building, technical and car trade; Kimara, which builds log houses and cottages; and Ainokoti, which is a construction company. Kunttu has been designing new VBIs for all of the aforementioned companies.

The fourth informant, Joni Furstenborg, has worked in the advertising field since graduating from Pekka Halonen academy in 2004. Furstenborg's current job title is (Senior) Art director at TBWA Helsinki. He describes TBWA as a respected and ambitious advertising agency, in addition to which it is the most international one in Finland. There are currently about 130 employees at TBWA. Some of the typical work assignments in the agency include the creation of brand films, internet sites, logo design and visual design. According to Furstenborg, a lot of the agency's work is being done in close collaboration with the clients, which allows effective planning and quick reaction to arising issues. Some of Furstenborg's clients over the years have included an airline company Finnair; and a travel, logistics and infrastructure engineering service company VR, for which Furstenborg has been designing VBIs and modifying different visual elements.

The fifth informant, Iikka Maunumaa, has worked at TBWA for nine years – first, as a Strategy director and nowadays as a Business director. Maunumaa describes TBWA as the leading Finnish marketing agency of the digital age, focusing on brand building. According to Maunumaa, TBWA is also a truly international marketing agency, with a well-working international network. The agency's mission is to create a disruptive marketing model for its clients, helping them in differentiation and creating the basis for growth. Before employed by TBWA, Maunumaa worked for a digital agency Satama Interactive

as a Programmer and, later on, as a Client director. According to Maunumaa, his current work at TBWA can be described as a combination of strategy and client management. Issues Maunumaa works with may relate to, for instance, brand revitalisation and the planning of brand behavior. Maunumaa currently has three clients: Neste, which is known for renewable fuel; Neste Jacobs, which provides solutions for high-quality technology, engineering, and project services; and Lumo, which offers rental apartments. Neste has been TBWA's client for over 10 years now, and Maunumaa has taken part in the creation of the brand guidelines concerning, for instance, Neste's brand behavior, logos, brand colours, graphic instructions, fonts and brand images.

The sixth informant, Minttu Nurminen, is the Lead visual designer at Parcero, before which she has worked as a freelancer. At Parcero, Nurminen develops the "visual module" – as she puts it – as a function, and takes part in concept management and development. Furthermore, Nurminen films, photographs and animates, in addition to which she helps her team in day-to-day work. She describes Parcero as "young and fast" – able to stay on the crest of wave and react quickly, which she regards as one of Parcero's biggest strengths. Some of Nurminen's clients include a trading sector company Kesko; a hospitality company Restel; and a dairy company Arla.

The seventh informant, Tarmo Helminen, works as an Art director at Briiffi, Turku. Helminen has graduated from Turku Arts Academy, where he studied media production and marketing. In addition to that, Helminen has also studied graphic design. Helminen's work background includes print, design, freelance and concept design. At Briiffi, Helminen mostly engages himself in concept planning, idea generation and branding. Helminen describes Briiffi as an advertising agency that concentrates in the communication of a certain idea, concept or message, rather than the channel through which it is communicated. Furthermore, during the last years Briiffi has been turning its focus into more and more digitality. Some of Helminen's clients include an automotive company Valmet Automotive; an industrial corporation ABB; and a cooperative store TOK, which is operating in, for instance, hotel, restaurant and retail businesses.

The eighth informant, Johannes Norrman, works as the Creative executive and Art director at Briiffi. In addition to having a degree in graphic design, Norrman has deepened his know-how during his work career with studies in international marketing and management. Having worked with visual design, graphic design and marketing communications, Norrman is the most experienced informant of this study. At Briiffi, his work assignments involve, for instance, planning, consultation, team coaching and, most of all, branding and designing. Norrman describes Briiffi as a multi-talent in marketing communications, providing clients with integrated marketing communication solutions. Some of Norrman's clients include Jopo, which is Finland's best-selling bicycle brand; Valmet,

which is the leading global developer and supplier of technologies, automation and services for the pulp, paper and energy industries; and Metso group, which is the world-leading industrial company operating in over 50 countries.

The ninth informant, Anssi Arte, is a Graphic designer at Hasan & Partners, in addition to which he also works as a private entrepreneur. Arte completed a Master's degree in Graphic design from Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture in 2013. Arte has specialised in companies' identity systems and therefore, most of his work assignments relate to VBI design and visual re-branding for a range of companies from start-ups to large corporations. Arte has designed new visual identities for a teleoperator DNA; a pioneering blood analysis company Nightingale Health; a cruise ferry company Tallink Silja Line and a Finnish national lottery and gaming company Veikkaus, among others.

The tenth informant, Janne Kaitala, is a Co-founder, as well as the Chief executive officer at Werklig, Helsinki. He has completed a Master's degree in Marketing in Aalto University and has worked in the field of marketing since 2006. Kaitala describes Werklig as a strategic brand design agency, whose mission is to create global success stories. According to Kaitala, when Werklig was founded with Anssi Kähärä in 2008, it was solely a design agency focusing on brands' visual looks. However, soon after that the founders came to the realisation that, in order for design to be successful, it should be based on the client's strategy. Since that realisation, Werklig has created about 100 brand strategies in addition to the visual designing that the agency is best known of. Some of Werklig's clients include Kyrö Distillery Company; City of Helsinki and an ice cream company Suomen Jäätelö, all for which the agency has designed visual identities.

The eleventh – and final – informant, Anssi Kähärä, is the other Co-founder of Werklig and works in the agency as the Creative director. Kähärä's background is in graphic design – he graduated from Lahti Institute of Design in 2004. After the graduation, he started his Master's studies in Aalto university, Helsinki, although never graduated due arisen work opportunities. Kähärä has worked in the field of marketing since 2008, when he founded Werklig with Janne Kaitala. At Werklig, Kähärä designs brands' visual elements, supervises photoshoots and creates brand strategies, among other things.

3.4 Data analysis

The analysis, interpretations and conclusions drawn from the collected data lie at the heart of the study. These phases are significant, since they have been directing the researcher from the very beginning. The aim of the data analysis is to increase the value of the information. During the analysis, the researcher will find out the type of answers he or she is receiving to the initial research problems. In analysing the data, the researcher may also

discover whether the research problems should have been set somewhat differently. (Hirsjärvi et al. 1997, 217; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 108.) With regards to this study, the research problem remained the same after completing the interviews, but the research questions were slightly modified and also supplemented with two additional questions.

According to Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2009, 91), the basic analysis method in qualitative research is content analysis, which refers to the analysis of materials that are either written, heard or seen. In this study, the analysed material was the audio-taped – and later transcribed – interview statements, through which the large number of raw data was transferred into an easily readable form. As Hirsjärvi (1997, 217) suggests, prior to the data analysis in this study, the sufficiency and correctness of the gathered information were examined. In consequence, after completing the transcription, some of the research participants were re-contacted via e-mail in order to 1) receive answers to questions that were not asked in the actual interview due to lack of time, or 2) specify or supplement some recorded answers.

The data analysis in this study was ongoing as suggested by Maykut & Morehouse (1994, 123) and Hirsjärvi et al. (1997, 217). The aim of that conduct was to maintain the inspiration drawn from the data collection phase as well as allow for the development of the research design throughout the process. Moreover, the ongoing analysis was considered to facilitate the subsequent data collection efforts. Transcription of each interview took place as soon after the interview as possible. Even though various issues of interest rose during the data analysis, the transcribed observations were aimed to be simplified by examining the data from the theoretical and methodological viewpoint of this study. This simplification was done by bolding and underlining some of the most relevant statements in the transcribed data. Once the full transcription was completed, all of the gathered interview data was carefully examined, during which additional, meaningful statements were bolded. This phase was facilitated by the research problem and the research questions that directed the attention. In order to draw meanings from the data, smaller units of it were combined first, after which larger thematic meanings were identified by naming a common denominator that is related to them. Finally, the bolded data was combined under the four interview themes, which were further separated into four different Word documents. By combining different empirical statements, the aim was to cull for meaning through the discovery of consistent rules or phenomena that appear from the data. Moreover, the comments by each informant were coloured with different hues in all of the documents. Later, these organised and thematised sections served as the basis for the conclusions of this study. (Maykut & Morehouse 1994, 128; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 91-92, 109; Alasuutari 2011, 39-41; Saldana et al. 2014, 91.)

Despite the fact that a qualitative researcher combines observations in the hope of discovering common features or the same phenomenon, the goal of the qualitative analysis is not the generalisation of the results. Therefore, in this study, the observations were

considered to serve as clues instead of generalisable findings. The final aim of the data analysis was to interpret these clues and offer potential explanations to different issues that emerged from the data. Even one exception in the data led to the issue being reconsidered and the divergent result being compared to the rest of the data. In consequence, a new rule was potentially determined on the basis of any contradictory finding. (Alasuutari 1995, 14-15, 39.)

Analysing the data does not suffice to report the results of the study but instead, the researcher should draw syntheses out of it. The syntheses combine the main findings of the study and aim to answer to the research problems in a clear manner. This will be done in Chapter 6, which forms the conclusions of this study. (Hirsjärvi et al. 1997, 222.)

3.5 Evaluation of the reliability and validity of the study

Validity of the study refers to the extent to which the study presents a correct depiction or explanation to the studied issues and hence, answers to the research problem in an accurate manner. Therefore, validity reflects the competence of the study, which is also linked to the interpretations of the data. (Hirsjärvi et al. 1997, 222; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 292.) Reliability, in turn, refers to the replicability of the study results. Therefore, reliability is linked to the generation of research consistency in that it allows another researcher to replicate the study and present identical findings. However, these two definitions are based on the methodology literature and have been criticised, since they have originated from quantitative research and they mostly relate to the demands of quantitative studies. What's more, there are slight variations in the ways these terms have been interpreted in the literature, which also adds to the complicatedness of the evaluation of the two issues. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2012, 136-137; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 292.)

Despite the somewhat difficult nature of the evaluation of reliability and validity of qualitative research, there are a few factors the evaluation can be based on. These include the topic and purpose of the study; data collection; the study participants; the relationship between the researcher and the research participants; the schedule of the study; the ethicalness of the study; and the analysis of the study. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2012, 140-141.) Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008, 292-293) suggest that validity is evaluated through triangulation and member check. Triangulation refers to the use of several theories and viewpoints in the explanation and interpretation of the studied issues. Member check, in turn, implies to allowing the research participants to verify the researcher's interpretations of the empirical data. These two procedures were employed in this study in order to establish validity. First of all, a dialogue between different perspectives held by both theory and the research informants was aimed to be carried out throughout the whole study. Second of all, the completed presentation of the empirical findings (Chapter 4) was sent to

all of the informants via e-mail, in addition to which each informant's individual description section in 3.3 (Description of Informants) was sent in a separate e-mail. The majority of informants made slight corrections to the material sent to them, immediately after which these corrections were applied to this study by the researcher.

According to Eskola & Suoranta (1988, 217), the reliability of the study can be improved by giving the reader the possibility to evaluate the study by following the same kind of reasoning as the researcher. Therefore, it is paramount that all of the choices regarding the research approach, as well as methods and arguments are reported as unambiguously as possible. In this study, all of these aforementioned factors have been thoroughly discussed with justification of each choice made regarding the research approach as well as methods.

With regards to the interview method, there are several factors that can cause errors in the study. These errors can be attributed to both the interviewer and the research informant, as well as the general interview situation. For instance, the interviewer may regard the interview situation as intimidating or even scary. Also, the fact that the informant tends to give responds that are found socially accepted, may deteriorate the reliability of an interview. What's more, individuals make interpretations of their positions and aim to secure both themselves and others in various ways. Since interviews are always bound to a certain situation and context, the informant may speak in a different manner in the interview compared to some other situation. Therefore, a crucial factor in interviews is the interviewer's ability to make correct interpretations of the informants' responds based on, for instance, cultural meanings and context. (Hirsjärvi et al. 1997, 202.) To contribute to the correct interpretation of the statements given by the informants, a considerable number of unedited interview quotations is presented in this study. Moreover, the statements given by the research informants are observed from multiple angles as well as compared with both other statements and theory. Additionally, it is emphasised that instead of aiming to generalise the findings, the purpose of this study is to widen the existing knowledge surrounding the examined issues.

Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 294–295; according to Lincoln and Guba 1985) present an alternative procedure for the evaluation of reliability and validity in qualitative research. That alternative forms the concept of “trustworthiness” that consists of four factors: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility is concerned with the extent to which the researcher is familiar with the topic and the amount of data is adequate to justify the statements made in the study. Furthermore, the evaluation of credibility encases observation of the nature of links made between the empirical findings and the study categories, as well as the ability of other researchers to come up with similar interpretations when taking advantage of the same materials. The data collected for this study was drawn from 11 interviews that produced 129 pages of transcribed text. Because the purpose of this study was to re-direct the focus around the chosen topic, the

amount of collected data can be considered adequate to add to the existing body of research. However, since the evaluation of an adequate amount of empirical data in qualitative research is a rather challenging task, a so-called saturation technique can also be applied. Saturation implies to a situation in which the research informants are not able to provide any new information relating to the research problem. In these cases, data will start to repeat itself. (Hirsjärvi et al. 1997, 181; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 87.) With regards to this study, a slightly new information was provided in each interview, which implies to the need for a larger number of informants. However, the non-saturation of this study can also be thought to reflect the emphasised multidimensionality of the studied issues. Furthermore, consistent larger themes and notions relating to the research problem did repeatedly arise in the interviews, indicating perhaps the most significant issues around the topic. Having said that, as Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2009, 85) argue, thesis is only practice for its author and thus, the amount of the collected data should not be considered the most significant criterion. In addition, Saunders & Lewis (2012, 158) argue that when planning one's own interviews, an appropriate sample size for homogeneous groups is often around 10, as it was in this case.

Transferability refers to the correspondence between the evaluated research and earlier research (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 295). As stated earlier, a connection between the empirical findings and earlier research is maintained throughout this study in the form of a dialogue between different viewpoints. The aim of this dialogue is to show the extent to which similarity can be found in existing research.

Dependability refers to the research being logical, traceable and documented (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294). To improve the dependability of this study, a detailed description of the data collection, research informants and data analysis is presented in 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4. As stated in 3.2 (Data collection), the interviews were recorded simultaneously with two applications in order to ensure successful documentation and hence, correct transcription. Moreover, this kind of data collection allowed an easy access to the data at all times. However, it should be noted that the interviews were conducted and transcribed in Finnish but translated into English after that. Since there is an element of subjectivity to translations, the trustworthiness of this study may have been influenced by them.

Finally, confirmability points to the ability to make an understandable and neutral link between the interpretations of the findings and the data. Hence, confirmability is concerned with the degree of bias or untruthfulness on behalf of the researcher. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294.) According to Maykut & Morehouse (1994, 123), the qualitative researcher's task of analysing the collected data is rather paradoxical. On one hand, the researcher must take an active role in discovering the experiences and thoughts of the research participants, and on the other hand, the researcher should simultaneously acknowledge his or her own biases and perceptions that might influence the analysed issues.

In the discussion concerning reliability of qualitative research, the frequent questions relate to the “truth” and objectivity of the study. In addition, the impartiality of the researcher should be taken into consideration. In evaluating the impartiality, one should consider whether the researcher truly aims to form an understanding of the research participants, or are the observations filtered through the researcher’s own thoughts and conceptions. However, there are factors that inevitably influence the researcher’s perceptions, including the researcher’s sex, age, religion, political orientation, citizenship and work position. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2001, 185; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2012, 135-136.) A true motivation towards the formation of holistic understanding of the studied issues contributed to the pursuit of an objective data analysis throughout this study. Furthermore, absolutely no desire for biased interpretations of the findings was experienced.

4 EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION: EXPERT INFORMANTS' CONSIDERATIONS OF VISUAL BRAND IDENTITY

4.1 Expert view on the significance of visual marketing

The first theme in the interviews was divided into two parts: the significance of visual marketing and the concept of visual brand identity (VBI). Even though the significance of visual marketing was not part of the research questions, I considered it meaningful to discuss it in the interviews in the hope of amplifying the rationale of this study.

To begin with, all of the informants acknowledged the power of visual marketing. Several informants¹ pointed out that the significance of visuality has only increased in the modern marketplace and is likely to keep increasing. This view aligns with that of McQuarrie & Phillips' (2008, 99), who state that visual imagery is now even more widely used in advertising than words. Furthermore, Young (2012) notes that companies have increasingly started to exploit the benefits of visual communication.

According to some informants², one of the reasons for the increasing visuality in marketing is the rise of different social media channels that are highly visual in nature: Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat and even Facebook as a few examples. Neher (2013) also acknowledges the link between the rise of different photo-sharing platforms and the increased popularity of the use of visual imagery in communication. Moreover, two informants³ described human beings as fundamentally visual, which they thought added to the importance of taking advantage of visuality in marketing. This is surely the case, since human perception is visual to the largest extent (Maniac 2015, 89).

If we think about visual marketing, I guess we are mainly talking about pictures and video... Well, they are very powerful tools when trying to create associations – they indeed tell more than words and with them, you are able to build a brand that looks like you. They [pictures and video] are in an essential role in it. It is really hard to build a brand without a certain visual look. - - It has [kind of] been emphasised in the modern world even more. I mean, whereas in the olden days it was sufficient that you had a logo and beautiful business cards, today, since [the rise of] Facebook and social media, you have to upgrade the whole thing and consider what kind

¹ such as Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen (Parcero), Creative executive/Art director Johannes Norrman (Briiffi) and Creative director Anssi Kähärä (Werklig)

² Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen (Parcero), Business director Iikka Maunumaa (TBWA), Creative executive/Art director Johannes Norrman and Creative director Anssi Kähärä (Werklig)

³ Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parcero) and Creative director Anssi Kähärä (Werklig)

of a [visual] brand world you have. So it [visual marketing] is truly significant. (Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen, Parceró)

As for the power of visual marketing, pictures and video were stated to serve as effective tools at, for instance, gaining consumers' attention; creating associations; generating memory traces; as well as positioning and differentiating oneself in the noisy marketplace. These notions are supported by Koetting (2016, 18); Manic (2015, 89); Neher (2013, 5); Young (2012) and Percy & Elliott (2009, 323.) Two informants⁴ pointed out that it is particularly visuality with which brands compete in, for instance, grocery stores, where the time used for choosing a low-involvement product is often extremely short and the number of competing brands is huge. Lead visual designer Nurminen also discussed the challenge brands face in stores, such as the fact that consumers often wander there without a lot of conscious thought. According to Nurminen, consumers usually buy what they are used to buy – and in these cases, brand recognition plays a huge role. Nurminen stated that effective visual branding, in particular, allows for the creation of brand recognition.

The challenge of gaining consumers' attention in today's "noisy" marketplace was acknowledged by several informants⁵. Taking advantage of visuality when trying to tackle this challenge was often emphasised.

I play the guitar myself and I am able to recognise ten guitarists in the world by only hearing them play for one second. And that's how visuality should work as well. But the world is so freaking full of everything, so finding that kind of an efficient visual look is really hard. - - In the modern world, stopping the watcher of a cat video is quite the task indeed. (Art director Joni Furstenborg, TBWA)

The stimulus has to be generated quickly and what's more, it will truly be competing with quite a few other messages in that (communication) flood. In addition, you have to be able to get into the five percent or so that will generate any kind of permanent memory trace. I mean, it is the visuality that will make you stand out. It is the first thing that will attract attention. (Client director Tatu Raitis, Parceró)

⁴ Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry) and Business director Iikka Maunumaa (TBWA)

⁵ such as Client director Tatu Raitis (Parceró), Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry), Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA) and Business director Iikka Maunumaa (TBWA)

Furthermore, it was stipulated⁶ that through visuality, brands inform consumers about themselves at each brand encounter and thus, visuality is an important part of branding. For instance, visuality was thought to serve as an effective tool in brand positioning:

You can open any women's magazine and see that the more expensive the category is in which a brand positions itself, the fewer [written] claims there are about it [the brand] and the more visual narration there is. (CEO Janne Kaitala, Werklig)

Lead visual designer Nurminen added that the quickest manner in which a brand's essence is conveyed to consumers is through visuality. Furthermore, several informants⁷ stated that a brand's visual look serves as a brand promise or "guarantee of quality":

I think visuality is, in fact, the redeeming of the brand promise - - and the redeeming of the purpose for its existence. It is the manifestation of it. (Art director Joni Furstenborg, TBWA)

Having said that, it was also stated⁸ that visuality is in a significant role only if it conveys meaning:

[Visuality] is extremely powerful only when it's not [left] hollow. And now, we are talking about the redeeming [of the brand promise] or the meaning of the brand: that is, maximising the customer lifetime value - - and increasing brand loyalty. I mean, if you have a beautiful product or a service and everything looks great but it's hollow - if the product or service doesn't work - customers will not return. Then, it [the brand] is only an image wrapped in a nice paper, which, at the end, does not interest anyone. (CEO Janne Kaitala, Werklig)

When asked about the significance of visuality in comparison to copywriting or audio, the informants gave somewhat varying answers. As stated earlier, visuality was indeed regarded as the ultimate tool with which the attention can be drawn to the brand and the brand's essence can be communicated to consumers:

Visuality is what should convey the brand's essence in the quickest manner. - - When it comes to copywriting, you are required to read the text and

⁶ by Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry) and Creative executive/Art director Johannes Norrman

⁷ Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA), Business director Iikka Maunumaa (TBWA) and CEO Janne Kaitala (Werklig)

⁸ by Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA) and CEO Janne Kaitala (Werklig)

digest it, and it is the same thing with audio; you need to listen to the whole thing but - - as for visual perception, it is as quick as lightning, and so, if people [marketing experts] do their jobs well, consumers are immediately able to see what this [the brand] is all about [when they see it]. (Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen, Parcerio)

This view is supported by Wheeler (2006, 9), who stipulates that images can be remembered and recognised immediately, whereas words need to be decoded into meaning. Furthermore, as Manic (2015, 89) notes, more than 90 percent of the processed information is derived from the visual receptors on a daily basis, which further reinforces the power of visuality in marketing.

It was also added⁹ that audio's role is not as significant, since consumers do not always have the sound on – especially on social media channels. In these cases, the informants found the role of visuality extremely important. As for copywriting, Business director Maunumaa pointed out that it can be a tool with which a brand may be able to generate “an aha moment” or communicate humour – although this can only occur once the consumer's attention has been gained with a picture. Thus, based on that view, all of the different tools work tightly together in the creation of a holistic brand experience. Somewhat aligned with Maunumaa's viewpoint, it was repeatedly stated among most informants¹⁰ that visuality cannot be separated from the other forms of communication, especially text and sound. Visuality – in all its significance – was considered to be effective only when combined with copywriting and audio:

I find typography to be - - part of the visual style as well. That's why I wouldn't like to separate them [visuality and copywriting] in any way. I mean, when they are strong together, you have a good story and a good look. Neither of them survive on their own. - - Yes, an image stops you, but I have noticed multiple times that - - even if you have a good image, the story may be pretty bad. However, clients are enchanted by an image, so in that sense, visuality is more powerful than a great word... - - An image's emotional world is so much stronger than that of a word's. (Art director Joni Furstenborg, TBWA)

⁹ by Creative executive/Art director Johannes Norrman and Business director Iikka Maunumaa

¹⁰ Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry), Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA), Art director Tarmo Helminen (Briiffi), Creative executive/Art director Johannes Norrman (Briiffi), Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners) and Creative director Anssi Kähärä (Werklig)

It's kind of like a symbiosis – even if it [an advertisement] is visually great, it won't work if the text is empty and meaningless. (Creative Janne Kunttu, Hungry)

The layout and the content are inseparable in a way. - - It doesn't go like "Here's our layout, just throw any kind of content on it and it will work." It just doesn't go like that. (Graphic designer Arte, hasan & partners)

Based on the above, the views expressed by several informants were aligned with those of Phillips et al. (2014b, 320, 328), who point out that different elements together serve as an entity that facilitates the identification and representation of a brand.

In conclusion, the significance of visuality in marketing was acknowledged by all of the informants, some of whom further emphasised its superiority over copywriting and audio. The biggest efficacies of visuality were stated to be its ability to direct attention to and communicate about brands in a quick manner. That being said, it was considered paramount to take all of the different forms of communication into consideration instead of separating them, since they all support each other in the creation of a brand experience. The same was thought to apply to different visual elements in brand communication. Thus, a holistic view should be taken when observing factors relating to visuality in marketing.

4.2 Expert view on the concept of visual brand identity

4.2.1 Definition of visual brand identity

The second part of the first interview theme regarded the concept of VBI. Furthermore, this part involved subthemes concerning VBI elements and the construction and communication of a successful VBI. The discussion of these subthemes can be found in 4.2.1 and 4.2.2.

The concept of VBI generated perhaps the most conversation in the interviews. The informants regarded it as an interesting, yet a somewhat tricky term – in fact, some of the informants¹¹ found the term rather difficult to define due to its abstractness. However, it was widely considered an essential factor determining the success of brands: the informants linked it to, for instance, first impressions; instant recognisability; brand associations; strategic issues; brand purpose; brand position; target group; and simply “everything you

¹¹ Art director Tarmo Helminen (Briiffi), Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners) and Creative director Anssi Kähärä (Werklig)

can look at” around the brand. These notions are supported by theory, as Pohjola (2003, 108) also views visual identity as something the eyes can see; Phillips et al. (2014b, 320, 328), Wheeler (2006, 6, 8) and Williams (2006, 33) link VBI to recognisability; Alessandri (2009, 5), Wheeler (2006, 8) and Pohjola (2003, 20) all acknowledge the connection between VBI and brand associations; and the strategic nature of VBI is stated by Alessandri (2009, 4). Furthermore, Wheeler (2006, 22) points out that the starting point in the identity process is the comprehension of the brand purpose and the visual side of the identity should be suitable for the target audience.

In addition to the aforementioned notions, a significant factor concerning the concept of VBI was considered to be consumers’ ability to link a brand’s visual elements to the brand in question. Thus, VBI serves as a visual identifier for brands.

It [visual brand identity] is something recognisable communicated by a certain company. (CEO Janne Kaitala, Werklig)

It [visual brand identity] usually depicts the visual characteristics of a certain brand - - it is comprised of the recognisable visual elements of the brand - -. (Creative director Anssi Kähärä, Werklig)

These views are supported by Phillips et al. (2014b, 320, 328) who state that VBI serves as an entity that identifies and represents the brand. Furthermore, Alessandri (2009, 5) views VBI as the gestalt of the organisation. According to the informants, VBI conveys the brand’s visual style and characteristics in a way that makes it recognisable among consumers. Ideally – according to Business director Maunumaa – VBI provokes recognisability in an instant. Instant recognisability, in turn, may be partly linked to issues concerning subconsciousness. Client director Raitis noted that consumers are able to make connections to previous experiences subconsciously, which is facilitated by so called brand cues. These brand cues are formed over time when a brand has adopted a certain look that is repeatedly represented across different platforms. This view is aligned with existing literature. For instance, Tulving & Pearstone (1966) state that the retrieval of anything initially depends on the connection to the cue that stimulates memory. Furthermore, as Alessandri (2009, 27-28) states, all of the things consumers see, hear, smell and experience around a brand are stored in memory for future retrievals, since people learn by building on the information already stored in memory. Aaker (1991, 271), in turn, points out that learning is more effective through repetition. According to Percy & Elliott (2009, 322), a brand’s unified ”look and feel” that is transmitted through an execution contributes to the creation and reinforcement of a link between the brand and a consumer. Consistency will facilitate immediate brand recognition among consumers whenever they are exposed to the brand in one way or another.

Furthermore, VBI was regarded as a significant communications tool with which brands are able to inform consumers about themselves¹². Lead visual designer Nurminen emphasised the importance of conveying the brand's essence in a quick and effective manner, which could be facilitated by VBI. Furthermore, VBI was thought¹³ to play a major role in the creation of first impressions:

I think visual brand identity is what first impressions are based on – it is the feeling a consumer gets about a brand in a nanosecond when she or he simply looks at it. Therefore, VBI should be used as a branding tool to tell consumers what the brand is about. (Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen, Parco)

In addition to VBI serving as an important communications tool for brands, it was stated that VBI should give guidance for brands' visual executions as well. Therefore, VBI can be regarded as the basis for branding:

[Visual brand] identity kind of serves as the framework for communication. - - If you compare branding and identity to running a restaurant, the identity's core elements and the layout are kind of the recipe you need for cooking the food, and advertising is the concreteness; the part where you start cooking and making things happen. (Graphic designer Anssi Arte, hasan & partners)

According to Arte, VBI should be seen as a strategic tool and the centre of focus when decision about brands' visual content are made. This view is supported by Wheeler (2006), who adduces that sufficient understanding of the concept of VBI allows for the establishment of a logical structure that should be followed in order to develop the desired VBI. In that way, VBI can serve as a valuable resource in branding. Also agreeing with Arte, Alessandri (2009, 4) claims VBI has strategic importance.

Moreover, quite a few informants stated that VBI should depict the purpose for a brand's existence. In addition, it should be able to do it extremely effectively. According to Art director Furstenborg, at best, VBI is able to depict the brand's essence with only one image. Furstenborg took Michael Jordan's strong visual identity as an example: one simple image with which Michael Jordan's essence can be quickly depicted is simply one of a dunking man. Creative Kunttu's view was aligned with this: he stated that a brand's

¹² This was stated by Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA) and Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry)

¹³ by Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parcero) and Creative executive/Art director Johannes Norman (Briiffi)

essence should be summed up into, for instance, one adjective, facilitating communication in the crowded marketplace. He explained this by pointing out that the modern consumer's media usage does not allow brands to communicate several things about themselves at once, since the busy and distracted consumers may only give brands one single chance to be heard. Furthermore, Business director Maunumaa stated that the time consumers give for brands to communicate about themselves is extremely short, and therefore, it is paramount to be able to fit the brand's core message in the first couple of seconds of the consumer's attention. Hence, the whole brand essence should be instantly conveyed to consumers through the representation of VBI.

Building VBI on the brand purpose is also highlighted by Wheeler (2006, 22). Furthermore, Alessandri (2009, 27-28) states that the creation of a core brand message is important for clarity as well as the storage of brand cues in consumer memory. Pohjola (2003, 110) also points out that amongst the enormous flood of information in today's marketplace, it is meaningful to simplify the visual presentation of self.

In the discussion of the term, VBI, the multidimensionality of it emerged. As stated earlier, VBI was seen as a somewhat abstract term that was challenging to define. Especially Creative director Kähärä contemplated this difficulty, stating that design is a somewhat imprecise science and the terminology varies within it. CEO Kaitala's view was aligned with this, as he stated that even the terms "brand" and "design" are both equivocal and may mean different things to different people. This, in turn, poses challenges for the definition of the term, VBI.

It [design] is not mathematics... everything is kind of blurry and the terminology varies. - - Yes, it [visual brand identity] can mechanically be defined rather precisely but what it [visual brand identity] actually means is another question. - - If you stick to the classical visual surface and the few conventional elements, it [the definition of the term] is easy, but the thing is, that doesn't apply [to the modern marketplace] anymore since the rise of so many different touchpoints through, for instance, several medias. And, if you have eyes, everything is kind of visual. You're up a blind alley [when trying to define the term visual brand identity]. (Creative director Anssi Kähärä, Werklig)

Kähärä further contemplated the limits within which VBI should be defined and pointed out to the difficulty of setting these limits. According to Kähärä, the narrowest view would consider the concept of VBI to be made up of the few classical elements (he himself considered the basic elements to be the logo, colours, typography, shapes, pictures and imagery), whereas the widest view would encase "everything the eyes can see" around a brand – as earlier stated by some other informants. In the latter case, Kähärä

considered things such as the interior design of a brand's premises to be part of the concept.

In the discussion regarding the complexity of the term VBI, Kähärä added that in fact, a brand's visual identity can be quite flexible in the modern marketplace. According to him, instead of designing VBI within the limits of a precise definition, not all of the theoretically defined visual elements have to be present – today, VBI can actually be based on significantly smaller nuances. The same was stated by Furstenborg as well, who pointed out that the smallest nuances can, indeed, make a difference: a certain filter, a certain cropping style or a certain combination of images and text as a few examples. This kind of flexibility is also highlighted by Wheeler (2006, 124), who argues that flexibility is paramount for an evolving marketing strategy, which, in turn, enables change and growth in the future.

Based on the discussed, VBI is not a univocal construct: the way of grasping it is always based on interpretations as well as the chosen framework. The broadest definition embodies simply everything one sees around the brand in question. This can include the premises, the staff, the staff's clothing, the company cars, the furniture as well as the opinions and statements heard through the grapevine. A narrower definition, in turn, can be thought to embody a few recognisable visual elements that are repeatedly used in brand communication. Whichever view is being taken, VBI should always be regarded as a powerful communications tool that is able to depict a brand's essence and aspects relating to it in an effective manner.

4.2.2 Visual elements encompassing visual brand identity

It was acknowledged by all the informants that visual elements serve as important communication tools helping brands to, for instance, express themselves; create brand associations; evoke interest towards them; differentiate themselves as well as generate recognisability. Thus, the notions were aligned with the existing branding literature. For instance, Hammond (2015, 64) states that brands may express their personalities through the use of visual elements; Karjalainen (2007) points out that a brand's visual elements draw consumers' attention in several platforms and shape the brand associations; and Koch & Boush (2000, 141) allege that visual elements contribute to brand identification. Furthermore, Pohjola (2003, 108) claims that a brand's visual elements can form the basis for differentiation.

Key account manager Kyllönen stated that through the visual brand elements that make up a brand's "visual world", brands are able to communicate their history, as well as express their personality to consumers. Pohjola (2003, 114) also notes that a brand's "visual world" reflects the brand's mental condition, and can be concretised in the brand's

imagery. Moreover, Kyllönen pointed out that visual brand elements can also serve as reflections of the target group's expectations for the brand. Again, Pohjola's (2003, 114) view is aligned with this, as he adduces that the communication of visual elements can involve references to the target audience's expectations. Furthermore, Art director Helminen stipulated that the starting point in the planning of visual brand communication is to take the brand's target audience into consideration.

Additionally, it was emphasised¹⁴ that by taking advantage of the same visual elements over time and across different platforms – and thus, “always looking the same” – brands are able to make themselves recognisable among consumers.

Recognisability is linked to the coherency of the brand's visual world now and in the past... It is about the systematic use of the brand. (Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen, Parco)

This view is shared by Wheeler (2006, 28) and Karjalainen (2007) who also stress the positive impact of consistency on recognisability. Karjalainen (2007) states that indeed, brands with recognisable looks employ specific visual elements that systematically appear around their offerings.

According to some informants,¹⁵ visual elements are, at best, able to communicate every single aspect of the brand.

The most fundamental purpose of a brand's visual elements is to communicate the brand's essence; its soul; the feeling it transmits; and the values it represents. (Creative director Anssi Kähärä, Werklig)

This is aligned with the views expressed by Wheeler (2006, 14), who point out that visual identity – the entity made up of its visual elements – constantly reminds consumers about the brand's core values and purpose.

Furthermore, it was argued by some informants¹⁶ that visual elements also serve as symbols and references that form links to the brand they represent. Karjalainen (2007) also acknowledges this. Client director Raitis considered this kind of symbolism to be more effective in brand communication than, for instance, copywriting, since people tend to form perceptions through symbols. However, Raitis added that brand messages based on effective symbolism are also more difficult to create, which poses a challenge for brands.

¹⁴ by Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen (Parco) and Art director Tarmo Helminen (Briiffi)

¹⁵ Art director Tarmo Helminen (Briiffi), Creative executive/Art director Johannes Norrman (Briiffi) and Creative director Anssi Kähärä (Werklig)

¹⁶ Client director Tatu Raitis (Parco), Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA) and Business director Iikka Maunumaa (TBWA),

When asked about the role of different visual elements making up a brand's visual identity, it was often emphasised that instead of separating a brand's visual elements, it is important to observe these elements in unison. This way of thinking applied to the designing of VBI as well.

I start designing [visual brand identities] through some kinds of stylescapes – I don't just draw a mere logo or a mere typography but instead, I have a big wide palette on me all the time, with which I begin to piece the [whole brand] world together and figure out how it's going to be built up. And at the same time, the typography slowly takes its final form and the logo starts to move to a certain direction. Separating [a brand's] visual elements and working on them individually starts to feel more and more distant to me. After all, I think the idea is that everything is consistent and each element is part of the big whole. That's why I feel like separating the visual elements and designing them apart from each other would make the identity itself disappear. (Creative Janne Kunttu, Hungry)

This view is reinforced by existing literature, as Phillips et al. (2014b, 320, 328) adduce that a brand's visual elements together serve as an entity that identifies and represents a brand. Moreover, Creative director Kähärä pointed out that, although each visual element adds their own part into the brand, none of them is effective independently. Lead visual designer Nurminen, in turn, stipulated that all of the different factors relating to a certain brand – and therefore, also the visual brand elements – should form an ensemble within which they truly co-operate. CEO Kaitala also acknowledged that there is meaning behind each visual element, but was quick to add that it is the combination of them what matters more. He continued that, in the beginning of a design process regarding VBI, it is important to select only those visual elements that form the most appropriate entity for the brand in question. According to Kaitala, the crucial factor in the selection of these elements is the bravery to leave some elements out of "the palette" completely and perhaps focus on one element more than the other. Pohjola (2003, 108) shares this view. The final number and nature of a brand's visual elements is always situation-dependent and in consequence, varies across brands. The most crucial factor in the selection of visual elements is the fact that they all support each other and reinforce consistent brand associations:

The visual elements should form a consistent whole that could be regarded as a brand's own portfolio – like look, this is what we are and these are the things that relate to us. - - It all starts from the association game as well: what kinds of associations people tend to form between certain things. (Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen, Parcero)

With regards to the visual elements that the informants considered the most essential ones in the formation of VBI, three elements rose above the others. These visual elements were 1) the logo, which was emphasised by many;¹⁷ (2) the font or typography; and 3) the colours. In fact, Graphic designer Arte referred to these three elements as “The Holy Trinity” that every VBI should include. Pohjola (2003, 108) also adduces that traditionally, the central elements of visual identity have been the logo, typography and signature colours. Clifton (2009, 113) supports this view as well, although he considers symbols to be included in the group of basic visual elements as well.

In addition to the main visual elements mentioned above, also pictures, illustrations and photography styles were mentioned by several informants¹⁸, aligned with the view expressed by Clifton (2009, 113). Furthermore, animation; video techniques; shapes; symbols; materials and surfaces; iconography, and brand-consumer touchpoints, were repeatedly mentioned. Creative executive Norrman linked visual brand elements to all forms of visual narration, which is supported by Alessandri (2009, 5). She alleges that visual identity entails all of the observable elements that are displayed in the comprehensive visual presentation of the brand. A more detailed summary of the VBI elements mentioned by the informants can be found in table 2.

¹⁷ Such as Art director Tarmo Helminen (Briiffi), Creative executive/Art director Johannes Norrman (Briiffi) and partly Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners)

¹⁸ Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry), Art director Tarmo Helminen (Briiffi), Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners), CEO Janne Kaitala (Werklig) and Creative director Anssi Kähärä (Werklig)

Table 2 The number of mentions of visual brand elements

Logo	11 (everyone)
Colours	11 (everyone)
Typography	8
Shapes	8
Font	5
Symbols, references, iconography	5
Pictures, illustrations etc.	5
Touchpoints	5
Spaces/Premises	4
Materials	3
Staff (service, clothes etc.)	3
Managing the big whole	1

Table 2 illustrates that, at best, everyone out of the 11 informants mentioned the same element, which, in this case, were the logo and colours. The second most mentioned elements were typography and shapes, both of which were mentioned by 8 informants. Font was mentioned by 5 informants, 4 of whom also mentioned typography, a big entity encompassing fonts. Symbols, references or iconography were mentioned 5 times as well. Likewise, pictures, imagery or illustrations were also mentioned by 5 informants, as well touchpoints with consumers. By touchpoints, the informants referred to all of the situations in which consumers may encounter the brand in one way or another. These situations, in turn, may involve using brand's user interface; discovering other people's opinions about the brand; or seeing the brand vehicle on the street.

The remarks about the last five elements in Table 2 are noteworthy: on the basis of those views, VBI is not merely comprised of basic graphic elements, but instead, it can actually be thought to encompass simply everything one sees around the brand – including buildings, spaces and people. According to the informants, VBI entails the premises,

the furniture, the product packages, the staff members, the work clothes, the communication, the web service, the user interface and thus – as Art director Furstenborg’s contended – “more than one could think of”. Therefore, a holistic view should be taken when observing – and constructing – VBI:

Identity consists of everything: the communication between people, the premises, the cars, the products, the production practices... - - you need to look at it holistically. (Graphic designer Anssi Arte, hasan & partners)

Despite the surprising remark stated by the informants, it is notable that Alessandri (2009, 5) does also mention the architecture as well as the company’s public behaviour to be part of visual identity. According to her, the public behaviour includes the reception, service, the recruitment of employees, customers, shareholders and suppliers. The multidimensionality of VBI was also revealed by the informants:

Usually there are about 20 articles in a brand’s guide book but the thing is, it doesn’t end there. - - The fact that you were either offered or not offered a coffee in the lobby represents one’s visual identity. - - Even the message your staff member’s wife sends out about your company is one element of visual brand identity, as well as the way of expressing it. In fact, it could be encapsulated so that a brand cannot control its identity, but instead, it’s in the hands of the consumers. And, - - if the [brand] story is credible, consumers will repeat it. - - You don’t share a video of a brand because you like the brand – you share the video because you like your friend. The brand just happens to represent the same thing as you. (Art director Joni Furstenborg, TBWA)

Furthermore, Business director Maunumaa pointed out that managing the big whole and a certain visual style in general is also paramount for the formation of VBI. Even though this was only directly stated by Maunumaa, the same thought appeared in the discussion with the other informants as well.

In sum, VBI is unexpectedly multidimensional, being made up of visual elements that go beyond basic theoretical claims. These visual elements all support each other in the visual representation of the brand behind them. It should be noted that any single visual element is not able to convey everything about a brand and thus, a holistic view is of paramount importance. Having said that, the discussion will proceed to examine one visual brand element a bit further, since it was mentioned by all of the informants and generated the most conversation – for and against it. That visual element is the brand logo.

4.2.3 *The contradictory role of a brand logo*

Those who don't understand what visual brand identity is, try to tell everything in the logo. (Arte)

As stated earlier, the brand logo generated a lot of discussion and revealed interesting information relating to the realities of branding. Some of the informants regarded the logo as the most important visual brand element, while others argued that too much emphasis has been – and is still being – put on it. Moreover, opinions about logo changes were somewhat varying among the informants: while some seemed to have a relatively positive attitude towards logo changes, others expressed a concern about those changes, revealing that they usually agree to a logo change rather unwillingly. These informants argued that a logo change 1) alters the existing VBI too much and 2) is often incorrectly regarded as an action that will save the brand from a downturn even though other procedures would, in fact, be more appropriate. Logo changes will be discussed further in 4.5.

Even though some informants noted that too much emphasis is often being put on the brand logo, the logo was stated to have many important roles in branding. Perhaps the most significant of these was considered to be the connection it can form between itself and the brand in question:

Logo has several roles; it is the tip of the iceberg and of course - - the quintessential identification element. In my opinion, logo should be regarded as a signalling tool, a street sign or a flag. I mean, the first need [people have] is to recognise a brand from the logo. - - Logo doesn't sell anything, it is merely there to identify. - - The other main task of a logo is to serve as a signature - - it is kind of a seal of guarantee. (Graphic designer Anssi Arte, hasan & partners)

Arte explained that most (Western) consumers are often used to reading visual layouts so that they start from the upper left corner and end it at the lower corner on the right. Thus, when the brand logo is situated in the upper left corner in the brand layout, the logo serves as an efficient identifier for the brand. Correspondingly, in advertisements, either the story or the image is usually in the centre of the attention first, after which the direction of the attention proceeds to the lower corner on the right. In this case, by placing the brand logo in that lower corner, the logo serves as a “signature”, as Arte referred to it as, signifying “an ending” to the advertisement. Business director Maunumaa also emphasised the placement of the brand logo in the lower right corner in order for the logo to serve as the brand “signature”. This notion is strongly supported by existing literature, since Pohjola (2003, 114), Taylor (2011, 15) and Hynes (2009, 545) all contend that the logo can be

compared to a signature at the end of a letter, informing the receiver about the sender. Furthermore, Campbell (2015, 50) also notes that a logo is a mark for identification, working in a similar way as people's names.

Arte pointed out that even though the significance of the logo is huge, it is crucial that it is meaningful. That meaning, in turn, is accumulated over time, being based on the brand's actions. This view is shared by Melewar et al. (2006, 144), who adduce that what matters the most in the logo is not the symbol itself, but rather, the meaning and promise it conveys. The authors also allege that this meaning is built over time through brand behaviour. Walker (2017, 215) agrees with this, as he states that symbols do not elicit any meaning until associations are formed. Additionally, Arte considered a meaningful logo to be one that stands the test of time and different trends.

When a new logo is made, it is an empty glass; its value is completely non-existent. It is what you do after it that will kind of start accumulating meaning to it. So even though it is important to decide the shape of the logo and the way it represents [the brand] in an appropriate manner, - - it doesn't actually matter what the shape of it is because... the only thing that matters is - - whether it is so clear and timeless that it still, after a few trends have gone past, represents [the brand] in an appropriate way. Whether it is timeless, whether it is able to grow and represent certain things in the future that we don't even really know of at this moment in time. (Graphic designer Anssi Arte, hasan & partners)

A few of the informants discussed the somewhat distorted views some companies seem to have about the significance of brand logos. According to CEO Kaitala, too much emphasis is often placed on the brand logo, instead of carefully observing all the visual elements on a case-by-case basis. Hence, not every brands' appropriate mix of visual elements is the same, and, in some cases, the logo may actually be less significant for a brand in comparison to other visual elements. Creative director Kähärä's view was somewhat aligned with this, as he stated that a common bias around brands is to think that a beautiful logo will solve a potential branding problem. He pointed out that, once again, a more holistic view should be taken and more attention directed towards the combination of visual elements and how they work in unison. According to Kähärä, apart from revealing the brand name, it is actually rather vague what a brand logo transmits. Taylor (2011, 15) also considers a common misperception to be that the logo equates to the brand behind it. However, more factors – such as meaning creation and additional visual elements – should be considered to contribute to successful branding.

As I tend to say, logo is only a motor. But that motor won't take you anywhere – you need to have the car around it. (Graphic designer Anssi Arte, hasan & partners)

Thus, the logo is useless if there are no other elements around it, giving it meaning and making it work. VBI is an entity that only exists when the sum of its parts are supported by one another.

4.3 Expert view on the construction of visual brand identity

4.3.1 Key success factors in the construction of visual brand identity

After discussing VBI and the different elements that make up the concept, the informants were asked about the key factors they found important in the construction of VBI. Some matters of interest in this discussion were the appropriate use of visual elements in brand communication; the nature of the selected visual elements in the construction of the desired VBI; as well as the creation of recognisability and familiarity for a brand through its VBI.

With regards to the nature and the appropriate use of visual brand elements, the answers were very similar among the informants. Moreover, they also aligned with the theory in this study: first of all, brands' visual elements should be distinctive in order to gain consumers' attention. Second of all, they should be consistent, contributing to clarity and – ideally – recognisability, which the informants regarded as a significant factor helping brands to succeed in the marketplace.

Sturken & Cartwright (2001, 228) also stipulate that in order for brands to maintain profitability, it is of paramount importance that the elements making up the identity are distinctive. Wheeler (2006, 8) agrees with this, as she notes that a brand's distinctive visual appearance is crucial for an effective VBI. Romaniuk (2014, 314), in turn, points out that distinctive visual elements can work together as cues – beyond the brand name – that evoke the brand in consumer memory. According to Pohjola (2006, 58), distinctive brand elements contribute to correct brand recognition and thus, their existence is vital. As for consistency, Williams (2006, 33) states that it facilitates correct brand identification, in addition to which Percy & Elliott (2009, 323) note that it may lead to both brand recognition and recall, as well as the evolution of brand attitude.

With regards to the creation of distinctiveness, the conventions appearing in the sector emerged several times in the discussions. A few informants¹⁹ asserted that there are often certain colours or other visual elements that represent different sectors or fields of business, such as the colour green or a leafy shape standing for environmental-friendliness. In consequence, it was claimed by the informants that the creation of distinctiveness can be accomplished by simply creating visual content that does not follow certain conventions of the field:

You can be in the organic, hipster café category without having the colour olive green or brown as your signature colour. Those [kinds of conventions] are dangerous in a way. - - It's a matter of distinctiveness. - - Distinctiveness means that you put on that fluorescent yellow jacket in the sleet. (Graphic designer Anssi Arte, hasan & partners)

Business director Maunumaa also advocated for questioning the conventions and the reason why certain things have traditionally been done in a specific way. He continued that once the conventions have been broken, the brand can – and should – be exposed to novel things that may facilitate standing out. Lead visual designer Nurminen, in turn, pointed out that doing similar things with a competitor will only support and benefit that competitor and thus, the creation of distinctiveness is vital.

According to the informants, consistency refers to 1) the visual elements appearing repeatedly and systematically in a brand's communication over time and across different platforms; and 2) not changing the initially chosen visual elements often or arbitrarily. The first statement is supported by Williams (2006, 33), Alessandri (2009, 23) as well as Karjalainen (2007).

Recognisability is linked to the consistency in a brand's visual world now and in the past... It is about the systematic use of a brand. (Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen, Parceró)

Several informants²⁰ stressed the importance of repeating the same look and idea on as many platforms as possible in order to provoke familiarity among consumers. Lead visual designer Nurminen stated that if a brand continuously establishes different kind of imagery in its marketing communications, brand associations formed by consumers will

¹⁹ such as Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry), Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parceró), Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners) and Business director Iikka Maunumaa (TBWA)

²⁰ such as Business director Iikka Maunumaa (TBWA), Client director Tatu Raitis (Parceró) and Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parceró)

be so scattered that the brand fails to generate a sense of familiarity. A few other informants²¹ also discussed this, pointing out that the required memory engrams around the brand will not be formed if the visual style of the brand varies a lot.

For the sake of generating recognisability and engrams, usually the aim of advertising is to do things in a systematic, similar way. Otherwise, the engram weakens and the euros that have been put into [advertising] go to waste because people don't get who the advertisement is for. - - So it [advertising] should always strengthen the engram. - - The power of brands is based on the notion that they somehow seem familiar. Like "Oh, I've seen that somewhere." (Business director Iikka Maunumaa, TBWA)

Maunumaa explained this by pointing out that generally, people not only aim to avoid taking risks, but they are also lazy. In consequence, they do not want to spend too much time thinking. Therefore, familiar brands often appeal to them since they do not require a lot of processing. Kent & Allen (1994, 103) support the view regarding the beneficial role of brand familiarity. Furthermore, according to Phillips et al. (2014a, 228), familiar looking advertisements may be evaluated more positively in comparison to advertisements of which the brand's visual elements have been altered more disorderedly over time and repeated less frequently. Nurminen's view was also aligned with this, as she stated that a sense of familiarity – consumers seeing the same visual elements again and again around a certain brand – is often effective in terms of brand recognisability and consumers' ease of processing. Furthermore, Wheeler (2006, 29) states that all of a brand's communication should strengthen the same associations in an understandable matter. Therefore, a core message should be created and communicated across different channels. According to Aaker (1991, 271), learning is more effective through repetition, which was emphasised in the discussions as well:

The message has to be similar in every media channel - - and also over time. Repetition. That's the thing. - - The reason why consumers don't recognise a brand is that - - sometimes, the message hasn't been coherent enough – it has become kind of blurry. (Client director Tatu Raitis, Parcero)

Business director Maunumaa compared the repetition of the same visual elements to the psychological effect music has: the more you hear a certain song, the better it often starts to feel. He continued that, with repetition, the brand starts to feel familiar, which

²¹ Client director Tatu Raitis (Parcero), Business director Iikka Maunumaa (TBWA) and Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen (Parcero)

may then lead to the consumer positioning the brand in his consideration set when choosing which brand to buy. This, according to Maunumaa, is the ideal situation resulting from a familiar look.

Maunumaa added that also mastering the whole entity that both “looks and feels right” is important for the creation of recognition. The same statement is given by Wheeler (2006, 29). This unified look and feel consistently takes advantage of specific colours, typefaces and formats. Art director Helminen affirmed that recognition is difficult to create and hence, it requires time, perseverance and – as stated earlier – consistency. The importance of perseverance was often stressed in the interviews when discussing factors contributing to a successful creation of VBI. In fact, Art director Furstenborg claimed perseverance to be the single most important factor in the construction of VBI in the long run.

Moreover, Lead visual designer Nurminen made an interesting point concerning VBI that did not emerge from the theory. She stated that, in addition to the systematic appearance of the brand’s characteristic visual elements and the visual style, also the context in which the brand is systematically seen by consumers matters in shaping the VBI. This could mean not only the platforms, events and situations in which the brand appears, but also the other brands around which it appears. CEO Kaitala also stated that the redeeming of the brand’s promise is – among other things – linked to “who the brand hangs out with.” According to Nurminen, by locating a brand in a certain context, the desired brand positioning may be easier to gain and the target group easier to reach. She advised brands to choose these contexts especially so that they are linked to the values the brand wants to represent. Basing the whole design and construction of VBI on values was emphasised by Nurminen on many occasions. Other informants²² also discussed the role of values in today’s branding. According to both Kyllönen and Raitis, the significance of value-based branding has increased in the recent times:

Whereas earlier, people looked for meanings from the church or the motherland, today, they look for those meanings from brands. (Client director Tatu Raitis, Parcero)

Raitis stressed the role of consistency in a brand’s “value talk” since, according to him, consumers are likely to feel let down if the values the brand represents vary across brand executions. Karel & Alsem (2008, 911) as well as Wheeler (2006, 22) also argue that brand identity is regarded as the representation of the values that the brand strives to live by. Based on the view of the former, values are so central for brand identity that a change

²² Especially Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen (Parcero), Client director Tatu Raitis (Parcero) and Creative director Anssi Kähärä (Werklig)

in values means that the identity changes as well. According to Karjalainen (2007), strategic meaning creation is ultimately based on values. Therefore, consistency in value communication is paramount in order to build and maintain a certain brand identity.

Furthermore, also clarity and loyalty towards the brand's essence in the visual executions were mentioned by several informants when discussing the employment of visual elements in brand communication. Arte advocated for making the visual elements appropriate and meaningful. With regards to brand logos, Henderson & Cote (1998, 24) also argue that they should depict a clear, familiar meaning and evoke common associations among the target audience. In addition, Melewar et al. (2006, 144) adduce that the meaning is more important than the visual element itself. According to Campbell (2015, 50), in turn, all visual elements add meaning to the brand.

Moreover, two informants²³ emphasised the importance of having one's own signature style and remaining loyal to it. Two others²⁴, in turn, pointed out the salience of following the strategic brand promise in each of the brand's visual execution. According to Kaitala, that strategic promise can be comprised of the following three things: to be inspiring, to be distinctive and to be based on the truth. Being truthful was mentioned by several other informants²⁵. According to Creative director Kähärä, consumers look for authenticity and brands will eventually get caught by untruthfulness, be that the case in their marketing communications.

What you claim to be has to be honest... It is exaggeration to say that our strategy is to be totally crazy. I mean, the identity can't be fireworks unless that's what the brand [or company] truly is. If it's not, then it [the visual content] is just something that's glued on. (Graphic designer Anssi Arte, hasan & partners)

According to Wheeler (2006, 6, 22), an ideal brand identity is authentic, and authenticity, in turn, cannot be gained if the brand does not have a clear understanding of the reason for its existence. Therefore, she argues that the starting point in the identity process is the comprehension of the brand purpose and sense of self. Aligned with this view, Art director Furstenborg considered knowing the brand's purpose to be the most important factor in all visual content creation:

I believe that if you [as a marketing expert] don't know why the brand exists, then it doesn't. Then it is not clear. - - And in that case, it doesn't

²³ Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parcero) and Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA)

²⁴ Creative executive/Art director Johannes Norrman (Briiffi) and CEO Janne Kaitala (Werklig)

²⁵ Such as Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA), Business director Iikka Maunumaa (TBWA), Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners) and Creative director Anssi Kähärä (Werklig)

matter what [kind of visuality] you come up with because then, it's just wallpaper, it's not true. The core has to be clear first. We are talking about purpose. (Art director Joni Furstenborg, TBWA)

Two other informants²⁶ completely agreed with this view, stating that the brand has to be able to justify its existence:

Everything needs to start with "why". - - why do we exist in the first place. You need to be able to tell WHY. And through that, you will start to find different core reasons for your brand's existence. - - After that, every brand ambassador, every print advertisement and so forth have to be able to answer that same question. (Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen, Parcero)

Thus, in order for the visual elements to be effective and the brand to be meaningful, the brand has to be clearly defined first, after which each individual working around the brand must internalise this definition and commit to it. Another important factor is staying true to the brand core – the reason for the brand's existence – its “purpose”. According to two informants²⁷, the worst-case scenario is having a brand that does not represent any specific values and thus, is not able to claim anything. Maunumaa described these kinds of brands as “grey, falling in the middle brands”, which are the most boring ones to work for.

Furthermore, Graphic designer Arte mentioned additional practical points concerning the selection of effective visual elements. He pointed out that they should be not only appropriate and meaningful, but also simple enough to 1) work well on different platforms; 2) allow for imaginativeness and playfulness in the visual content creation and 3) make up a system that any graphic artist or visual designer can follow. Art director Furstenborg also advocated for simplicity, yet brought up the salience of multidimensionality at the same time:

When you have to create new content on a weekly or monthly basis, - - my advice is to always make it simple - -. Nowadays, since the rise of Instagram and Twitter accounts and all of those, you have to be able to represent fifty different things during the day, and so, if the identity is not easily duplicated, it's a bad one. Therefore, it [identity] can't be just one picture or one way [of being], but instead, it has to be extremely multidimensional. (Art director Joni Furstenborg, TBWA)

²⁶ Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen (Parcero) and Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parcero)

²⁷ Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners) and Business director Iikka Maunumaa (TBWA)

This view somewhat contradicted the earlier discussion of simplifying the brand into a core message, picture or word (in Chapter 4.2). Perhaps we can interpret the issue so that a simplified visual look is the utmost enabler of multidimensionality and therefore, simplicity and clarity should be pursued first. Then, as a result of the accomplished clarity, the identity will be easier to duplicate.

In the discussion of clarity in brands' visual executions, either appropriate instructions or the so called "brand book" was mentioned by the majority of informants²⁸. According to them, a brand book refers to brand guidelines that consist of, for instance, a clear definition of the brand in question; factors relating to it; as well as instructions on carrying out the brand's signature style through the use of certain visual elements. Aligned with this, Wheeler (2006, 29) and Alessandri (2009, 54) also state that the rules determining the proper ways a brand's visual identity elements should be used are often codified in a VBI manual or guide. These manuals and guides are developed to ensure all marketing experts working for the brand internalise and commit to a certain consistent use of the VBI in question. According to several informants,²⁹ the most important factor in the construction of a consistent and clear VBI over a long period of time is, precisely, following a clearly established brand book.

You simply have to have a really great brand book. You must be able to tell everyone who creates content for your brand what your font is, what your colours are and what meaning all these things [visual elements] should convey. And through that conduct, consumers will be able to identify your brand for sure. (Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen, Parceró)

Moreover, several informants³⁰ also argued that consistency is easier to maintain if the people working with the brand are well aware of the specific story the brand aims to communicate:

A well instructed brand [is the foundation for the long-term construction of visual brand identity]. And generally, if the story and idea behind the brand are strong and understandable enough, it's quite difficult to stray

²⁸ Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen (Parceró), Client director Tatu Raitis (Parceró), Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parceró), Art director Tarmo Helminen (Briiffi), Creative executive/Art director Johannes Norrman (Briiffi), Business director Iikka Maunumaa (TBWA), Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners), Creative director Anssi Kähärä (Werklig),

²⁹ such as Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen (Parceró), Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parceró) and Art director Tarmo Helminen (Briiffi)

³⁰ such as Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry), Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA), Art director Tarmo Helminen (Briiffi), Creative director Anssi Kähärä (Werklig),

from that [the brand's core idea]. - - Another important factor is that everyone who does it [makes visual content for the brand] knows what it [the brand] is about. (Art director Tarmo Helminen, Briiffi)

Additionally, Graphic designer Arte pointed out that a proper brand book can positively influence the attitudes of the people who make visual content for the brand in question:

For sure, you get a feeling like damn, these things [the instructions] got to be dealt with accuracy and like, these [instructions] are valuable [brand] equity. (Graphic designer Anssi Arte, hasan & partners)

Furthermore, a few informants³¹ mentioned human factors such as chemistry and collaboration between the advertising agency and the client; communication within each organisation; people's egos; the desire for power, as well as general understanding and awareness of branding issues to be important factors affecting the construction of VBI. Several informants³² advocated for engaging the client in the design process to ensure that all parties are on the same wavelength and have similar understanding of the issues. For instance, the importance of workshops was pointed out. Creative Kunttu considered the foundation for long-term brand building to be a strong connection with the client. In fact, he argued that a smooth collaboration between the agency and the client is the most important factor in branding. Graphic designer Arte also discussed the importance of relationship chemistry, in addition to which he emphasised the significance of trust. Key account manager Kyllönen, in turn, wished for an even closer collaboration with the client since, according to him, it facilitates the work process on behalf of both parties.

Next, various phases involved in the process of constructing VBI will be investigated. Some of the issues that will be covered are the different tasks and roles during the process as well as the challenges involved.

4.3.2 The process of constructing visual brand identity

Even though all of the informants acknowledged that some kind of a process is certainly involved in the construction of VBI, Creative Kunttu and Graphic designer Arte – who had also previously worked together at hasan & partners – raised a rather interesting

³¹ Such as Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA), Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners) and Creative director Anssi Kähärä (Werklig)

³² Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen (Parcero), Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry), Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA), Art director Tarmo Helminen (Briiffi), Creative executive/Art director Johannes Norrman (Briiffi), CEO Janne Kaitala (Werklig) and Creative director Anssi Kähärä (Werklig)

viewpoint in the discussions. These two informants regarded the whole concept of VBI, above all, as a system. According to them, this system provides a logical step-by-step process that should be followed in the design and construction of VBI. This system-based view is worth discussing in more detail, since it entailed several important factors concerning branding. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the view was the salience to justify all of the decisions concerning a brand's visual style. This aspect was emphasised by some other informants³³ as well. Neither Arte or Kunttu regarded VBI as some artistic or feeling-based accomplishment that is solely visually appealing. Instead, according to them, VBI is built through predefined steps that guide justifiable decision-making:

I see visual brand identity as a system... - - It is like a big machinery - -. I mean, visual brand identity is not just a logo or a group of arbitrary elements, like, "I think this looks cool" kind of thing. (Graphic designer Anssi Arte, hasan & partners)

For Kunttu and Arte, the construction of VBI is actually based on a logical process rather than aesthetics or creativity:

- - graphic design is not art. Even if you felt like being artistic, it [graphic design] should be divided into a process. - - And my approach is kind of to "never cheat the process." If you just start vibing on it and searching for a certain feeling, it is likely to go wrong. - - All the fonts, for instance, have their own history of where they have been used and so, basing the decision about a font on a mere feeling is not the right thing to do. The same goes for colours and all of the other elements. I think that the best kind of design is being able to justify every decision. - - Then, your clients are also able to understand that okay, this wasn't just some artsy whim that the designer got this morning but they also see the clear process behind it (Creative Janne Kunttu, Hungry)

Arte referred to himself as an architecture or an engineer of some sort when trying to describe the logical process that he, as a graphic designer, engages himself in. Most of all, he stressed the importance of analytical work and rational design process. However, he did also acknowledge the added value that emotions create in branding. In addition, Arte affirmed that it cannot be denied that everything visual is aesthetic, and so, in that sense, function and aesthetic must go hand in hand as well.

³³ such as Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA), Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parcero) and CEO Janne Kaitala (Werklig)

I see aesthetics as a trap and when you don't understand what it [visual brand identity] is about, you try to base your assessment on aesthetics. - - Visual consistency and a system-like identity are made with ratio and logic but then again, at the end of the day, the focus has to be on emotion. I mean, a system doesn't interest anyone – people are interested in some kind of a story and meaning. After all, emotion is where the final trigger comes from. (Graphic designer Anssi Arte, hasan & partners)

However, Arte also pointed out that his view should not be seen as the only correct one:

I feel like there are as many different ways of designing visual [brand] identities as there are graphic designers. It's really important to define your own personal approach to it... mine is kind of like technic-scientific. (Graphic designer Anssi Arte, hasan & partners)

In the same way as Arte, also two other informants³⁴ emphasised the salience of analytical and rational approach in design. According to Creative Kunttu, two thirds of design consist of pure research and reasoning, only after which there is room for creativity and "crazy ideas." A similar thought was expressed by some other informants as well, such as Art director Furstenborg. According to this thought, the very core of the brand has to be clearly defined first, after which there is space for creativity and even foolishness. In fact, Graphic designer Arte even stated creativity to be "overrated."

To conclude the previously discussed, on one hand, logic is needed in the construction of VBI in order to make it clear and consistent, but on the other hand, emotion is with which marketers are able to attract consumers to the brand. This view was by no means only shared between Kunttu and Arte. In fact, also CEO Kaitala asserted that the decisions concerning a brand's visual elements should not be based on personal preferences. Instead, the selected visual elements should form the most suitable combination for the brand in question, contributing to the successful implementation of the brand strategy. This view is shared by Melewar et al. (2006, 144).

With regards to the beginning of an ideation, the majority of the informants affirmed that the process begins with a briefing given by the client. However, the thoroughness of the briefing was told to vary. Whereas sometimes, all of the essential elements of the brand are clearly presented in the briefing, other times a lot of freedom and trust may be given to the advertising agency. However, according to Client director Raitis, typically the core elements are stated in the briefing instead of the agency having to come up with

³⁴ Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry) and Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parcero)

them completely on their own. Whatever the case, Graphic designer Arte stressed the importance of taking the brand's visual elements seriously and putting thought into them:

The thought that I've been using is that you have to think of your logo or any single visual element as if it was some kind of a design chair worth 8000 euros - - you have to express the same kind of respect and consideration towards a visual element that you show towards the actual offering you're selling. However, too often a brand's visual look is regarded as a mere surface, which results in an arbitrary outcome. (Graphic designer Arte, hasan & partners)

In addition to the briefing, the beginning of the design process includes going through the client's previous materials and other data through which the agency aims to form a holistic view of the brand's present situation as well as the challenges and opportunities for the future. This was stated by a few informants³⁵.

It might sound like a no-brainer, but it's extremely important that you spend time with the brand. That you gather all of the brand materials and surround yourself with them... that you aim to get into that brand world. (Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen, Parcero)

Two informants³⁶ asserted that although time-consuming, it is important to get familiarised with the brand's previous visual content in order to maintain consistency as well as be better able to create new, meaningful visual content that supports the brand's essence.

The most essential part of my job is to do brand communication that is immediately understood by a consumer to belong to my client. I think that it [brand communication] should always be seamlessly linked to everything else that the client does. (Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen, Parcero)

It is not about guessing or being artistic. The more artistic you are, the more it is going to go wrong. I believe in deliberated decisions. If you feel like you need to go looking for inspiration from somewhere else, you

³⁵ Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry), Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parcero) and Creative director Anssi Kähärä (Werklig)

³⁶ Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry) and Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parcero)

should really just go deeper into the customer, the brand and the offering.
(Creative Janne Kunttu, Hungry)

Kunttu called this first step of the process “a research phase”, in which the VBI “is being put on an operating table.” According to Kunttu, the most important factor in this phase is to be able to see the big picture – familiarise oneself with the holistic brand image and the present situation of the brand. Key account manager Kyllönen’s view was aligned with this. He pointed out that once the required research is done, it is possible to find out which factors are already working for the brand and which factors require modification. After that, the process proceeds into considering the appropriate brand message.

Furthermore, key words, reference pictures and mood boards can facilitate the visualization of the potential brand elements and “the visual world” of the brand. It is crucial for a designer to be able to be exceedingly variable – readily adopting different mind-sets, styles and brand guidelines – in order to create successful content for different brands.

The majority of informants³⁷ mentioned different matrixes, grids or charts they take advantage of when producing ideas for their client’s VBI. With the help of these kinds of tools, the informants aim to answer important questions that relate to the brand’s current situation as well as the future objectives. Some issues to be covered include brand values; brand associations; assets and differentiating factors; challenges and solutions; brand position; competitors; target group; as well as the appropriate brand message and visual style through which these issues can be conveyed to consumers. According to Art director Furstenborg, chart-like tools can help to clarify the brand’s essence that is to be communicated in each visual brand execution – an important factor Furstenborg felt the advertising industry has only recently realised. Moreover, Furstenborg considered the imagination of “future reactions” to serve as a useful tool, referring to things the brand wants consumers to say about it. According to Furstenborg, the brand’s mission and vision – two essential matters to be embedded in VBI – can rather easily be drawn from that.

According to some informants³⁸, key words, reference pictures and mood boards facilitate the visualisation of the potential brand elements; brand persona; and brand world; as well as the general feeling that the brand should convey. In addition to the aforementioned tools, also swot-analysis or competitor analysis can be taken advantage of³⁹. Business director Maunumaa revealed that the ideation at TBWA is often started with a vast number of inspiring images, keywords and so forth, after which the brand’s essence is

³⁷ Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen (Parcero), Client director Tatu Raitis (Parcero), Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry), Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parcero), Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA), Art director Tarmo Helminen (Briiffi), Creative executive/Art director Johannes Norrman (Briiffi) and Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners)

³⁸ Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry), Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA) and Business director Iikka Maunumaa (TBWA)

³⁹ Asserted by Creative executive/Art director Johannes Norrman

further narrowed and specified. This was stipulated by a few other informants⁴⁰ as well: first, the overall brand feeling is being searched on a general level, after which it is important to define the very core of the brand. As stated earlier, once the core is clear and simple enough, there is space for creativity and flexibility. After all – as Maunumaa noted – brands need to allow for variation in their communication and visual style so that they would not appear stuck. Wheeler (2006, 124) supports this view, as she points out that flexibility is paramount for an evolving marketing strategy, which, in turn, enables change and growth in the future. Creative Kunttu’s statement was aligned with that of Maunumaa’s as well. He advised to take advantage of different tools through which the work process for a certain brand can become systematic and clear, the decisions can be well justified, and the basis for the VBI in question can be created. However, he also added that once the brand basis is clear, it is important to allow for variation in the executions.

The individuality of each case was pointed out by a few informants⁴¹, who stated that the same kind of content cannot be created for different brands. Rather, it is an imperative to conduct thorough research on each client and aim to discover the main challenges as well as opportunities involved in each individual case.

It’s your responsibility to make it work. To bring a soul to it and understand what you need to communicate. (Graphic designer Anssi Arte, hasan & partners)

Moreover, also the employed visual elements vary among brands. As discussed earlier in 4.2.1, not all of the visual elements of the palette are being used in every brand’s communication. Furthermore, some visual elements are more emphasised than others, depending on the brand in question. According to Creative Kunttu, it is crucial for a designer to be able to be exceedingly variable – readily adopting different mind-sets, styles and brand guidelines – in order to create successful content for various brands. Next, the difference between working for a “weak” and “strong” VBI will be examined.

4.3.3 Differences between working for a strong and weak visual brand identity

When asked about the difference between working for a strong and weak brand, the answers were somewhat varying. However, it was often stated that each one has both pros and cons – involving elements that facilitate the work and elements that pose challenges.

⁴⁰ Such as Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry) and Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners)

⁴¹ Such as Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners) and Creative director Anssi Kähärä (Werklig)

Even though it was regarded as “cool” to get to work for big and iconic brands, most informants mentioned the strict – and therefore restricting – guidelines these big brands require to follow. Furthermore, it was contended that because the VBIs of strong brands are already so established and clear, the work mainly consists of following the brand guidelines and supporting the brand. However, it was also pointed out that while a strong VBI may facilitate the work, the given tasks may be boring, restricting and even suppressive with regards to creativity.

When it comes to creativity, it [working for a strong visual brand identity] is actually quite boring, since the brand is so strong. I'm not allowed to do anything to it. They [strong brands] are so strictly supervised. (Art director Joni Furstenborg, TBWA)

Client director Maunumaa's reaction towards working for a strong VBI was a bit more positive than that of Furstenborg's. Maunumaa found it mostly pleasant, although he did consider some level of freedom important.

It [working for a strong visual brand identity] is nice for sure - - especially if it allows for variation and some kind of freedom. If it [the visual brand identity] is very rigid, like, "we always look like this" kind of thing, then it obviously restricts the work a little. But I'd say that [working for] a strong visual brand identity is a positive thing per se. (Business director Iikka Maunumaa, TBWA)

In addition to Maunumaa, a few other informants⁴² found it pleasant and even rewarding to work for a brand whose visual identity is strong. Both Raitis and Maunumaa claimed explained this by the fact that the brand is widely known among consumers and the brand is often mostly regarded as interesting. Furthermore, Maunumaa pointed out that working for big, well-known brands boosts designers' own egos and for that reason, it is considered pleasant. In contrast, Art director Helminen stated that one challenge with “weak” VBIs is the possibility of consumers having varying conceptions of the brand, which may lead to confusion.

Even though some informants found working for strong brands to be pleasant, it was also stated⁴³ that strong, “iconic” brands often have higher requirements for their content, which means that the designers and content creators must not only be able to maintain the

⁴² Such as Client director Tatu Raitis (Parcero), Art director Tarmo Helminen (Briiffi) and Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners)

⁴³ By Client director Tatu Raitis (Parcero), Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA) and Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners)

same level of quality, but also be able to improve it. That being said, it was often added by the informants that this is surely not always the case – sometimes iconic brands simply aim to maintain their current position instead of, for instance, striving to increase their market share. In these cases, the task for advertising agencies is simply to ”support” the brand, as Client director Raitis put it. The two other informants from the marketing agency Parcero⁴⁴ also described working for a strong brand to be a matter of supporting its actions and its current style by loyally following the brand guidelines:

We don't own the brand, we just have the brand in maintenance with us for a while. We are sort of the brand's partners who are taking care of the brand. Therefore, the instructions come from the client and we are to follow them. - - We simply need to comply with the style and respect the tradition. No one is going to destroy it. (Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen, Parcero)

Arte's statement was aligned with several other informants:

Depending on the client, bigger demands may of course be given to you... But then again, if the [visual] identity is strong, it means that it's established and you do not necessarily have to do anything to the elements. Instead, your task may be to focus on one single thing that should be fixed. (Graphic designer Anssi Arte, hasan & partners)

Moreover, the clarity and confidence that strong brands possess were argued to facilitate the work for them. According to Nurminen, strong brands are often well aware of their current situation, competitors, objectives as well as the challenges that need to be overcome. Client director Raitis and Graphic designer Arte's views were aligned with this, as they stated that it is easier to get a grasp of the existing VBI and make appropriate visual material for it if it is clearly defined and simplified. Similar arguments were earlier stated by Art director Furstenborg as well.

Two informants⁴⁵ considered an important factor in working for a strong brand to be a thorough familiarisation with it. These two informants stated that, in order to create new material for a strong brand, it is paramount to get extremely familiarised with the brand's current situation and its visual elements; analyse the opportunities for flexibility; figure out the reasons behind the brand's past actions and absorb the required brand mind-set. Creative Kunttu pointed out that even though strong brands may have extremely strict guidelines to be followed, he respects the fact that those kinds of brands have been able

⁴⁴ Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen (Parcero) and Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parcero)

⁴⁵ Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry) and Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parcero)

to create such a clear “system” for their branding procedures. Other informants⁴⁶ expressed similar respect towards strong, clearly established brands, as well. Furthermore, Norrman stated that clearly established brands form a solid base for brand development.

The most preferred clients among several informants⁴⁷ were claimed to be start-up companies or competing, ”challenger” brands, since they are often new, fresh, fun, exciting and brave. Moreover, the informants⁴⁸ expressed their appreciation towards the fact that brands with weak VBIs usually trust the advertising agency’s professionalism and in consequence, grant them freedom in content creation. Creative executive Norrman found it rewarding to work for a weak brand because, according to him, it is then possible to make a big impact on the brand development.

If I think about a weak visual brand identity, the work consists of creating significantly more. You GET to create, and that’s really enjoyable. - - Usually these kinds of brands have much fewer questions they are able to answer in comparison to strong visual brand identities, which gives us a very good chance to prove what we are capable of. So that’s where I think my work can truly flourish in a way. (Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen, Parcero)

The most pleasurable case for a designer is to work with a small start-up company because they’ve chosen us and trust our know-how. Those kinds of companies never say to you that ”hey, the copy in that print could be placed a little lower.” (Art director Joni Furstenborg, TBWA)

Even though it was often stated that weak VBIs grant marketing experts the freedom to create something new, the importance of familiarising oneself with the brand’s current situation and market position – the basic starting point for an ideation – was also always pointed out by the informants. That being said, according to Art director Helminen, brand development and branding are easier to put into practise for a weak brand because the brand basis is not so strong. This view somewhat contradicted the earlier discussion about the ease of working for a strong brand, thanks to their clear instructions and brand guidelines. However, not having a clear brand basis can allow for creativity and freedom that many informants admitted appreciating. All in all, we can perhaps conclude that each case

⁴⁶ Such as Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA) and Creative executive/Art director Johannes Norrman (Briiffi)

⁴⁷ Client director Tatu Raitis (Parcero), Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry), Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parcero), Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA), Business director Iikka Maunumaa (TBWA),

⁴⁸ Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parcero), Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA), Business director Iikka Maunumaa (TBWA)

is individual and in consequence, the ease or difficulty naturally varies in different situations.

In the discussion of differences between working for a strong and weak brand, Creative director Kähärä's approach was somewhat different – yet reasonable – than that of any other informant. He stated that, instead of regarding VBI as “strong” or “weak”, it should always be regarded as “interesting” or “uninteresting.” He pointed out that even if the visual brand elements are strong and clear, consumers may not find the VBI interesting as a whole – which is always a crucial contributor to the success of brands. Hence, it is paramount to conduct thorough consumer research and keep up with the times when aiming to create efficient – and interesting – visual content for brands.

Next, the topic of control versus freedom in brands' visual executions will be covered. The discussion will then proceed to observe the challenges involved in the construction of VBI.

4.3.4 Control vs. freedom in brands' visual executions

With regards to instructions given by clients, the number was stated to vary a lot, depending on the brand and the situation. However, it was stated that some kinds of basic instructions are always given. The main restrictor was often contended to be few marketing managers and people in other high positions. These people were said to suppress creativity by giving excessively strict instructions and too little space for new ideas. Furthermore, this strictness was also claimed to deteriorate the nature of collaboration between the advertising agency and the client.

Clients often have some kinds of “brand cops” who may stick to things a little too simple and don't give space for creativity. (Art director Tarmo Helminen, Briiffi)

If the client wants to be in control; determine how the copies should sound and how the images should look, the collaboration can get really strained. Once that happens, creative people are not really able to go deep into it. (Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen, Parco)

The worst-case scenario is working with a brand identity that is awful and yet, the client insists on it not being touched... So you need to follow a particular [predefined] style when making material for the brand. I mean, designers always have the desire to make things better and visually appealing but when you only have certain kinds of elements to play with, it's

absolutely impossible. It's like a good singer tries to sing incorrectly on purpose... It's like extremely frustrating. You just struggle to do your job because you feel like it's not right. (Creative Janne Kunttu, Hungry)

In contrast, cases where freedom and creativity are allowed were revealed to be the most enjoyable ones:

If we GET to do re-branding, the work is very fruitful. Those kinds of clients are nice who let you make modifications and pursue a new style. That's very enjoyable. (Creative Janne Kunttu, Hungry)

It is noteworthy that both Kunttu and Nurminen used the expression “get to” when discussing cases in which they were allowed to use creativity and make visual changes to a brand’s style. The expression indicates the positive attitude and excitement the designers have towards freedom and flexibility in visual executions.

Some informants⁴⁹ emphasised the importance of being granted the client’s trust when making visual content for their brands. All of these informants did acknowledge the right for the client to give some instructions but, at the same time, it was pointed out that it is professionalism what the client pays for – and therefore, the client’s stance should correspond with that. Furthermore, the informants also expressed confidence towards their skills and views:

The client naturally participates in the process, but on the other hand, we make it clear that we sell professionalism. - - Of course, we also take the [client's] comments into consideration – if they are reasonable. (Business director Iikka Maunumaa, TBWA)

Usually we are given some kind of an objective or a wish. - - And through that, our professionalism – that we will accomplish that objective – is being trusted. I would say that 99% of the cases are such where the client trusts our professionalism and that we know what we are doing. (Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen, Parceró)

It's all about the fact that we simply must understand the brand and produce coherence. (Client director Tatu Raitis, Parceró)

⁴⁹ Client director Tatu Raitis (Parceró), Business director Iikka Maunumaa (TBWA) and Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parceró)

Therefore, freedom and trust are highly appreciated among the informants, but at the same time, it is acknowledged that it is the advertising agency's responsibility to be able to produce material that is aligned with the brand's existing identity and visions.

4.3.5 *Challenges in the construction of visual brand identity*

As in most processes, there are several challenges involved in the construction of VBI. However, it is notable that the potential challenges stated below may vary in each individual case, depending largely on the actors involved, as well as the brand in question.

According to the informants, the majority of challenges that the construction of VBI poses relate to human factors. Some of these were stated to be closely linked to the agency-client relationship; lack of flexibility; egoism; differing visions or motives; and the skills, qualities and resources of the advertising agency itself. Several informants⁵⁰ contended that the client's unwillingness to change its brand in any way poses a major challenge, straining the collaboration and deteriorating the work. A few informants alleged that there are often one or few individuals in high positions that desire a full control and in consequence, do not give space for creativity or flexibility. Art director Furstenborg added that sometimes the mere desire for these people is to leave their own mark on the brand without having a full understanding of the brand's essence. Another challenging factor was stated to be those brand managers, for instance, who have created such a personal bond with their brand that they fail to notice any faults in it.

Something [about a brand] that we [the agency team] may find embarrassing or extremely poor can be the brand manager's absolute favourite thing... In fact, the smaller the brands are, the more personal the brands are for them [brand managers] and the less marketing knowledge there usually is. (Client director Tatu Raitis, Parcoero)

If everything is in bits and pieces, it usually indicates that the company itself is not aware of the situation. It's one kind of a paradox, in a way, that all of the brands that need help the most don't usually realise it themselves. (Creative director Anssi Kähärä, Werklig)

Furthermore, the challenge of conflicting views between the client and the advertising agency emerged from the discussions. The responsibility of the advertising agency to

⁵⁰ Such as Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen (Parcoero), Client director Tatu Raitis (Parcoero), Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry) and Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA)

produce successful content for brands was stressed and bravery combined with good reasoning skills were considered paramount⁵¹ in ensuring this.

The situation can easily be such that a client wants to do things in a certain way and you know that it's not going to work. But you do it anyway, and it fails, and it's your fault. Then you, as a marketing agency, have just carried out a failed campaign. It's really easy to shoot yourself in the foot if you can't get your mouth open. (Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen, Parcero)

If we think a certain way, we always have a reason for it. Ultimately it all comes down to appropriate reasoning. When you point out to the client that they are not the brand's customers themselves, they need to let go of the brand... We are not building the brand for them but for their customers. (Art director Tarmo Helminen, Briiffi)

In addition to the notions of challenging clients, Creative Kunttu emphasised the fact that there can also be several restricting factors that the advertising agency team itself creates for the content creation. These include the team not believing in its own ideas and visions; the fear of expressing these ideas to either the team itself or the client; or a discouraging working environment (which may be the biggest reason leading to the two aforementioned problems). Graphic designer Arte, in turn, claimed the organisational structure and complexity to be major challenges. By that he referred to, for instance, power relations, different opinions and the problem of high employee turnover in today's workplaces. He explained that new employees may not always have formed a holistic conception of branding issues which may hinder the work process.

Egoism and different motives between designers and clients were also mentioned by a few informants⁵². According to Art director Furstenborg, clients often aim to create commercial content which may not always be visually appealing, whereas designers dream about award winning work and lifting their own profile. That was also stated by Business director Maunumaa, who said that every designer is a narcissist in a way – eager to see their own work in the cityscape. Creative Kunttu, in turn, pointed out that designers usually strive to make aesthetic visual content, which may be challenged by the client's strict instructions.

⁵¹ by Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen (Parcero), Client director Tatu Raitis (Parcero), Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry), Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parcero), Art director Tarmo Helminen (Briiffi), Business director Iikka Maunumaa (TBWA), Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners) and Creative director Anssi Kähärä (Werklig)

⁵² Client director Tatu Raitis (Parcero), Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry), Business director Iikka Maunumaa (TBWA) and Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA)

Moreover, Furstenborg pointed out that in today's saturated marketplace, it is extremely challenging to create one's own signature style that will make consumers instantly recognise the brand in question. Aligned with this view, Lead visual designer Nurminen considered the ability to break field-related conventions and be unique while still recognisably representing a certain field to be difficult. Graphic designer Arte and Art director Helminen, in turn, discussed the general "noise" in the modern world, which makes standing out more difficult for brands. Furthermore, forming clear visions of the brand and making the brand core – and the VBI itself – clear and simple were considered challenges by a few informants⁵³. Creative director Kähärä also stated that the somewhat abstractive nature of branding – and brands themselves – add to that difficulty. Additionally, it was contended⁵⁴ that cases where various advertising agencies have been working for the same brand are likely to result in varying visions, insufficient communication between different parties and consequently, the brand appearing inconsistent and unclear to consumers.

Furthermore, Kähärä mentioned the challenge of taking different contexts into consideration when making material for brands. He pointed out that because consumers naturally have different individual experiences and cultural backgrounds, the decisions concerning visual brand elements should be made wisely. He continued by referring to the colour symbolism that is sometimes taken advantage in the selection of brand colours. Kähärä himself found it inappropriate to base branding decisions on colour symbolism since, for instance, the colour green may mean the complete opposite to one person than the other. Therefore, different cultural backgrounds, as well as personal experiences among consumers pose challenges for the construction and communication of VBI, as well as the selection of visual elements in the first place. Pohjola (2003, 111) also discusses the importance of taking cultural meanings into consideration. According to him, changes in culture and the environment have an impact on the ways different visual presentations are understood and how their meanings alter. In addition, he states that more meanings can generally be linked to visual elements than the designer behind them even intended to create. Wheeler (2006, 44) also emphasises the salience of cultural insight in the construction and communication of VBI. She states that the creative team needs to thoroughly consider the connotation and complexity of subtle cultural differences when engaging themselves in naming, logo design, image development, colour, retail spaces and the creation of key brand messages. According to her, assumptions and stereotypes should be set aside in the design process in order to understand consumers and their uniqueness.

⁵³ Creative executive/Art director Johannes Norrman (Briiffi), Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners) and Creative director Anssi Kähärä (Werklig)

⁵⁴ by Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA) and Client director Tatu Raitis (Parcero)

With regards to visual changes, Art director Helminen stated one challenge to concern the consumers who have formed an extremely fond link to the brand in question. According to him, those consumers can feel upset or hurt if changes are being made. The same issue was stated to occasionally apply to some clients as well, as stated earlier. Hence, as far as visual changes are concerned, turning ideas into concreteness is not challenging merely because of the abstract nature of branding, as earlier discussed. It is also challenging because of the vast number of different actors involved with the brand.

Lastly, insufficient funds were stated⁵⁵ to pose challenges for the construction of VBI. Some informants, such as Graphic designer Arte, pointed out that in some cases, the visions, ideas and procedures are clearly defined and internalised by all parties but the insufficient funds force the advertising agency to alter the initial plan. According to Art director Furstenborg, in turn, insufficient funds may lead to brands taking advantage of readily-made stock images or “image banks” in their brand communication. That, in turn, may lead to the problem of several brands using the same images and thus, appearing the same. In addition, another scenario was alleged⁵⁶ to be the brand being forced to appear more ordinary than initially desired. However, according to some informants⁵⁷, also the small size of the market in Finland limits the opportunities for brands to appear unique and instead, pressures them to strive for safety and ordinariness. Furstenborg pointed out that this safety and ordinariness in branding does nothing but weakens the brand and therefore, it should be truly avoided.

Drawing conclusions from above, a major part of branding involves human-related factors that contribute to the success of brands. Human qualities such as openness, tolerance, flexibility, cooperativeness, good reasoning skills and confidence can all be considered vital in branding, as well as a knowledgeable team within a democratic organisation. However, as Arte put it, great design is hardly ever democratic – instead, it involves several different actors, departments, committees and hierarchies that all have differing visions and opinions of the brand in question. For the same reason, Art director Helminen emphasised the importance of gathering different people and departments in charge into the planning process in order to contribute to the formation of shared visions and to avoid backlash.

Next, the final interview theme – implementation of visual changes – will be covered.

⁵⁵ by, for instance Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA) and Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA)

⁵⁶ by Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen (Parcero), Client director Tatu Raitis (Parcero) and Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parcero)

⁵⁷ Client director Tatu Raitis (Parcero) and Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parcero)

4.4 Expert view on the implementation of visual changes

4.4.1 *Reasons for visual changes*

The last interview theme, visual changes, generated a lot of conversation. All of the informants emphasised the importance of making subtle changes in a brand's visual look, since more radical ones are likely to have harmful consequences for the brand in question. In addition, it was often pointed out⁵⁸ that again, whichever decisions are being made, they have to be well justified.

The informants considered the most appropriate reason for visual changes to be updating the brand to the current times. Creative executive Norrman explained that what often drives change, is change itself. By that he referred to the client's business having changed dramatically; services having expanded; or the company having joined another company. These views are supported by literature. Wheeler (2006, 26) points out that the twenty-first century is strongly characterised by constant change. D'Lacey (2014, 1), in turn, states growth as one of the reasons for visual changes. Furthermore, several informants⁵⁹ pointed out that there might also be the need to change or widen the brand's target audience, which requires modifications in the brand's visual appearance. For instance, brands may desire to gain new customers⁶⁰; new interesting target group may have appeared⁶¹; or the brand's existing target audience may be aging⁶². The latter is also stated by Aaker (1991, 251). Furthermore, it was pointed out⁶³ that new exciting competitors may also push brands to refresh their looks to be better able to compete in the market. Another factor Client director Raitis contended to force brands to renew their visual appearance is the fact that consumers simply long for change. D'Lacey (2014, 1) shares the last two views.

Although several different reasons for the implementation of visual changes were mentioned by the informants, one reason rose above the others in the discussions: the passing of time and thus, the need for a "brand update." Therefore, the empirical findings suggest that relevancy to the modern world is the biggest criterion driving brand development. The necessity to keep up with the times and maintain relevancy is also pointed out by Kolbl et al. (2015, 5) and Aaker (1991, 251). According to Art director Furstenborg,

⁵⁸ by, for instance, Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry), Business director Iikka Maunumaa (TBWA), CEO Janne Kaitala, Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners) and Creative director Anssi Kähärä (Werklig)

⁵⁹ Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen (Parcero), Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry), Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parcero) and Art director Tarmo Helminen (Briiffi)

⁶⁰ stated by Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parcero)

⁶¹ stated by Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen (Parcero) and Creative Janne Kunttu (Hungry)

⁶² stated by Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parcero)

⁶³ by Client director Tatu Raitis (Parcero) and Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners)

brands may become irrelevant, in which case the reason for their existence vanishes. Kolbl et al. (2015, 5) also note that brand managers hoping to maintain the successfulness of their brands are often faced with the problem of the brand "growing old." Furthermore, Creative executive Norrman argued that visual culture may evolve, which pushes brands to renew their looks to keep up with the current times. Aligned with this, Client director Maunumaa pointed out that today, people admire simplicity, forcing brands to update any complicated visual elements.

Brands need to keep up with the times. No brand can stay the same like, "This is what we are and that's it." All brands need to change. (Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen, Parcero)

Surely, it's also better for the consumer that the brand he or she likes evolves, keeps up with the times and moves forward in the same way as the consumer. (Creative Janne Kunttu, Hungry)

Based on the discussion above, visual updating is paramount for the success of brands. It is notable that the same holds true for both small and big brands, since, as stated⁶⁴ in the discussions, "nothing lasts forever."

A typical fate for brands that have been successful for a long time is that, because of their strong position in the market, they forget about the maintenance of the brand. And then all of a sudden, the brand looks like it represents the 80's. (Client director Tatu Raitis, Parcero)

A similar statement is given by D'Lacey (2014, 1), who points out that it is common that companies start paying attention to the possibility of brand revitalisation only in case the brand is starting to lose its popularity or is encountered by new competition.

4.4.2 Procedures and strategies in the implementation of visual changes

Even though some sorts of visual changes were considered paramount for the success of brands, it was emphasised by all of the informants that big changes are rarely appropriate – instead, modifications should be made in a subtle and careful manner.

⁶⁴ by Client director Tatu Raitis (Parcero) and Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parcero)

The world keeps changing and we need to respond to it by tuning the brand on a continuous basis and building it in a subtle manner. The basic elements should not be changed without a big strategic change [behind it] but rather, the evolution [of the brand] should be ongoing. - - Identity is kind of like an attic that has to be cleaned every once in a while. (Graphic designer Anssi Arte, hasan & partners)

It always feels strange to me if someone comes and tells me to renew completely everything... That's like really dangerous, because then, especially if you're a big brand, there are already quite a few people who perceive you a certain way and therefore, it's usually too late if you get that brief [from a client]. (Art director Joni Furstenborg, TBWA)

When people have formed specific, extremely strong [brand] associations – especially towards very iconic brands – and you try to turn the ship around completely, it's really, really difficult [to succeed]. (Client director Tatu Raitis, Parcero)

D'Lacey (2014, 1) and Phillips et al. (2014b, 318) support this view, as they argue that a brand refresh should be regarded as a continuous brand evolution process playing an essential role in the brand strategy.

Maunumaa pointed out that dramatic visual changes are not recommendable unless the business is in serious trouble:

A brand's visual look should never be changed. That's like a general rule (laughs). If changes are made in a radical or wrong manner, it can lead to a massive decrease in the brand value as well as a consumer rebellion like in GAP's case. If we think about the most successful brands in the world, such as Levis, Heinz, Golgeit, Coca-Cola, AirBnb an so forth... Have they changed their logos a a lot? One of the important things that brand equity is based on is a recognisable logo or a visual look. (Business director Iikka Maunumaa, TBWA)

This view is supported by Wheeler (2006, 28), as she points out that consistency serves as the basis for the creation of brand equity through repetition, persistence and frequency. According to her, commitment to brand identity standards is of paramount importance.

Furthermore, Maunumaa pointed out that poor re-branding can alienate a big part of a brand's clientele in an instant and therefore, a brand's visuality should only be renewed

in a subtle manner, a little bit at a time. Two other informants⁶⁵ discussed the issue as well, stating that it is extremely unlikely that radical visual changes succeed, especially in the case of strong VBIs. This view was justified by the strong associations consumers have often formed about strong brands and the difficulty of changing these associations. Therefore, the informants emphasised the importance of visual consistency, since radical changes are indeed likely to create confusion and even shock among consumers. Grobert et al. (2016) also stress the salience of caution and considerateness towards consumers in the implementation of changes. Moreover, the authors note that in situations where change is radical or surprising, the consumer response may be very negative. Koch & Boush (2000, 141) also point out that changes can do harm to a unique brand image and in consequence, violate the overall brand equity. However, the success or failure of the changes in visual brand identifiers is ultimately determined by consumers and their reactions to these changes.

Even though consistency was considered crucial in brands' visual looks, Creative executive Kähärä pointed out that the term "consistency" poses some challenges as well. He noted that even though all of a brand's visual executions looking exactly the same may seem technically efficient, it may result in consumers losing their interest towards the brand. Therefore, slight variation within a certain framework is necessary.

*The more consistent the brand communication is, the more efficient it is. -
- You don't always have to look exactly the same but the same [core] mes-
sage has to come through. And as far as visuality is concerned, the use of
colours and the essential symbols should be consistently repeated so that
it is easy [for consumers] to recognise you [the brand]. (Creative execu-
tive Johannes Norrman, Briiffi)*

This view is aligned with that of Percy & Elliott's (2009, 323), as they state that it is not ideal that all of a brand's creative executions look identical. According to the authors, the critical point is that they all share a similar holistic look and feel, so that the target audience recognises the visual execution to "belong" to the brand. After becoming recognisable, variations between executions can be implemented. Variations, in turn, contribute to the brand and the executions remaining fresh and exciting. According to Wheeler (2006, 124), flexibility is paramount for an evolving marketing strategy, which, in turn, enables change and growth in the future.

Art director Furstenborg also advocated for cautious visual changes in order to maintain visual consistency and stay true to the brand's essence. Agreeing with the majority

⁶⁵ Client director Tatu Raitis (Parcero) and Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA)

of other informants, also Client director Maunumaa regarded successful re-branding as an evolution, in which the brand slowly evolves into the next "version" of itself. It was pointed out by several informants⁶⁶ that a good brand renewal is so subtle that consumers do not necessarily even notice it – the brand simply remains fresh at all times. The beverage brand Coca-Cola was repeatedly taken as a model example, since the successful company has made extremely subtle changes to its visual elements during its long history.

Furthermore, Arte pointed out that it is important that some kind of a memory engram remains after visual changes. This view is supported by Chalal (2015), who points out that innovation bears the risk of destroying existing brand recall among consumers and therefore, the balance between refreshing the brand and maintaining the existing brand cues is of paramount importance. Furthermore, as some other informants above, Arte also advocated for staying consistent to a brand's visual style and avoiding unjustifiable visual changes.

Of course, it would be nice to do something radical that's against the conventions... But the intrinsic value is not making something exquisite and exciting – I think that you should always respect the visual capital of the brand. Obviously, there are cases in which consumers find it [a brand] simply so outdated that everything should simply be thrown in the bin but all kind of meaningless facelift should be avoided. (Graphic designer Anssi Arte, hasan & partners)

As stated earlier, the focus on the brand purpose lies in the heart of designing VBIs and creating visual content for brands (Wheeler 2006, 22). The informants regarded rational reasoning to be of huge importance when making decisions about a brand's visual look. With rationality, brands can become truly meaningful and consistent, which is crucial for the creation of brand recognition and systematic brand building. In addition, discovering novel ways of using the same visual brand elements instead of erasing or replacing them completely was mentioned by several other informants⁶⁷.

The way they [brand's visual elements] are used is what matters the most - - there is a fundamental difference between the way they are used and the way they look. (Graphic designer Anssi Arte, hasan & partners)

⁶⁶ Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parcero), Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA) and Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners)

⁶⁷ Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA), Creative executive/Art director Johannes Norrman (Briiffi), Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners) and CEO Janne Kaitala (Werklig)

The purpose is not to erase all the work that has been done but instead, build upon it. In fact, we see VBI as an ongoing evolution. It is stupid to renew brands every five to fifteen years when it should be evolving all the time. When it is, the process won't become so oppressive for the client. I mean, putting an enormous amount of effort into a renewal and then seeing it all bog down. There are rather many elements in the palette that we can take advantage of in staying fresh. And for the sake of systematic brand building, that's a smarter way to maintain recognisability. (CEO Janne Kaitala, Werklig)

Aligned with the above, Alessandri (2009, 26) also states that regardless of the decisions concerning *which* elements to promote, *how* the visual identity is promoted should be considered a strategic matter. Furthermore, Key account manager Kyllönen pointed out that some elements can also be added to the palette, and update the brand in that way. This is stated by Phillips et al. (2014b, 318) as well. According to the authors, branding is an evolving process, in which new visual elements are regularly either added or removed. Furthermore, the importance of “respecting the tradition” and not destroying a brand with massive visual changes was emphasised by two informants⁶⁸. Art director Furstenborg stated that instead of breaking a certain VBI, he may “challenge” it in one way or another. However, he added that he always takes the most essential VBI elements into consideration. Chalal (2015) also points out that it is crucial to: 1) recognise the brand elements that are valuable and should therefore be kept; 2) identify the role these valuable brand elements play in branding; and 3) determine the way to update them without sacrificing brand recognition.

Some elements simply cannot be changed. You just need to recognise what is an essential element for the brand in question and what [element] generates [brand] recognisability. Is it colour, is it some shape, is it simply the placement of the logo, - - is it certain imagery... That [essential brand element] we won't touch. Or if we do, it'll be done in an extremely subtle way. (Art director Tarmo Helminen, Briiffi)

The [potential] procedures should be analysed critically... When you add or remove something [a visual brand element], you should note where the [brand] recognisability lies - - so that you won't lose the soul [of the brand]... - - With sensitivity, consideration and the information gathered in

⁶⁸ Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen (Parcero) and Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners)

an audit, it is possible to keep it [the visual brand identity] under control.
(Graphic designer Anssi Arte, hasan & partners)

Despite the fact that many informants emphasised staying true to the brand's look and not implementing visual changes without extreme caution, it was also pointed out that each case is situation-dependent. As Creative Kunttu saw it, certain VBIs should not be regarded as sacred but instead, they should be carefully analysed and modified if needed. The task that marketing experts have is to always conduct a careful evaluation of the brand's present situation as well as the needs for the future.⁶⁹ Norrman highlighted that in all visual changes, it is important to keep the brand's soul in mind, as well as the factors that evoke emotions among consumers.

You sort of need to figure out which things are valuable and which can be abandoned. So thoughts like "keep it simple" and "don't fix it if it's not broken" are important [to keep in mind]. For instance, sometimes there may be too many elements [in a brand's visual identity], so you need to eliminate some of them; consider what the most important one [element] is and focus on that one. That kind of focus is very important – that you focus on some specific element; that you understand what's excessive and what's the most important. An analysis of the present situation is the thing.
(Creative executive Johannes Norrman, Briiffi)

Therefore, Norrman's view is also somewhat aligned with that of Chalal's (2015) stated earlier.

One major challenge linked to the implementation of visual changes was stated⁷⁰ to be the client not having sufficient understanding of visual re-branding. Examples of this were mentioned to be the client not knowing the appropriate time for visual changes; not keeping the brand core in mind when implementing changes; or neglecting all visual changes completely.

Many times, there is some new marketing manager who wants his or her own mark on it [the visual brand identity] but very often, that marketing manager forgets about the brand core – the whole purpose for the brand's existence – as well as the brand's visual style - - which leads to the changes

⁶⁹ stated by informants, such as Creative executive/Art director Johannes Norrman (Briiffi) and Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners)

⁷⁰ by Client director Tatu Raitis (Parcero), Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA), Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners), CEO Janne Kaitala (Werklig) and Creative director Anssi Kähärä (Werklig)

going to the dogs. In these cases, the road with the new visual identity is just so hard to walk. (Art director Joni Furstenborg, TBWA)

Often the situation is that clients themselves get bored of their own brand identities – before the actual consumers have even gotten used to them. You have to understand that even if you were constantly dealing with the brand yourself, your customers may not be. If we think of the slogan "Just do it" as part of Nike's brand identity, you know it and you remember it. Do you remember what is [characteristic of] Reebok's [identity]? Since Nike came up with the slogan "Just do it", Reebok has changed theirs every two years. And nobody remembers. This is related to the fact that it is necessary to believe in certain things and do them systematically. A systematic way of leading the brand towards the vision of the future by believing in the things that are important to you [is necessary]. (CEO Janne Kaitala, Werklig)

Creative director Kähärä also mentioned the same problem as Kaitala, alleging that often clients get bored of their own brand identity when only a minor part of consumers have familiarised themselves with it. He stated that even though it is not often meaningful to retain the same brand font, for instance, for ten years or so, the overall visual style as well as the feel of the brand should remain the same. This view is supported by Percy & Elliott (2009, 323), who also point out that it is not ideal that all of a brand's creative executions look identical. According to them, the critical point is that they all share similar holistic look and feel in order for the target audience to recognise the visual execution to "belong" to the brand. Once recognisability has been accomplished, variations between executions can be implemented. Moreover, Furstenborg added that the brand can undoubtedly be evolved and refined along the way, and in case something does not work, some minor modifications can be made. However, "reinventing the wheel" every couple of years may be dangerous. Both Kähärä and Kaitala also expressed their disbelief in renewing a brand for the sake of a renewal. They emphasised the importance of implementing a thorough analysis with the client; observing which things work and which do not and, most of all, justify all these observations, as highlighted earlier.

It is justifiable to keep up with the times - - but change for the sake of change is not justifiable. There has to be a reason why. Stop with why, continue with why. (CEO Janne Kaitala, Werklig)

I'm always interested in the strategic justification for a [visual] change. Sometimes I have also been forced to change something when I've myself

thought that the [same visual] elements could have been retained.
(Graphic designer Anssi Arte, hasan & partners)

As for the logo changes, somewhat varying answers were given by the informants. Some⁷¹ expressed their unwillingness towards logo changes, whereas others⁷² considered them somewhat acceptable. However, the majority of informants stated that again, for any action, proper reasoning is paramount.

The logo is an element I wouldn't personally touch. If the logo needs to be touched, it should be re-designed completely – but I would never change some minor parts of a logo. And that's because the logo should be a one hundred percent no-brainer for a consumer – it should be an element that didn't require any processing from a consumer to realise that hey, there's that brand again. If you keep touching the logo all the time, the consumer begins to react to it like, wait a minute, that [logo] used to be this way, now it's that way, what's wrong with it. (Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen, Parco)

Art director Helminen's attitude towards logo changes was somewhat more positive, although he did emphasise the importance of modesty in the changes:

I do think that the logo can be renewed. That being said, it cannot be turned upside down, especially if the brand in question is well-known - - that confuses consumers. But small, subtle modifications and changes can be made. There's a fine line in how it should be done. (Art director Tarmo Helminen, Briiffi)

Moreover, it was contended⁷³ that often ignorance about appropriate branding procedures leads to the misconception of a logo change to be the correct thing to do in situations when it is not:

If a client wants a new logo, I usually object to it because, in many cases, that's not what they really need. (Art director Joni Furstenborg, TBWA)

⁷¹ e.g. Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA), Lead visual designer Minttu Nurminen (Parco), Creative executive/Art director Johannes Norrman (Briiffi) and CEO Janne Kaitala (Werklig)

⁷² Key account manager Heikki Kyllönen (Parco) and Art director Tarmo Helminen (Briiffi)

⁷³ by Art director Joni Furstenborg (TBWA) and Graphic designer Anssi Arte (hasan & partners)

A new logo does not equate to a new visual brand identity. (Graphic designer Anssi Arte, hasan & partners)

On the contrary, Art director Helminen mentioned situations where a brand manager has been willing to change any other visual brand element except for the logo, since the bond with the logo has grown too strong. However, this also indicates insufficient judgement skills on behalf of the client.

In sum, the attitude towards logo changes seems to vary between brand clients and marketing agency experts. The majority of the informants, however, appeared to hold similar views towards these changes, stating that as with any other visual brand element, a change in the brand logo has to be rationally justified. Furthermore, slow and modest logo changes were advocated for, in order to maintain brand recognisability and avoid confusion among consumers.

Next, conclusions of this study will be drawn by comparing the existing literature and the empirical findings. Furthermore, theoretical and managerial implications will be made, in addition to which limitations of the study as well as suggestions for future research will be discussed.

5 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Brief answers to the research questions and theoretical contributions

To date, the study of visual brand identity (VBI) has been inadequate in that only single visual elements, such as colour or font, have been examined in isolation. However, these elements only partly depict VBI. Due to the fact that very little of the existing branding literature discusses the way these elements operate in unison to form desired brand meanings (Phillips et al. 2014b, 330), the purpose of this study was to examine VBI more holistically, without it being tied – or restricted – to any one individual visual element. In addition, key success factors and challenges in the construction of VBI were matters of interest. A further and final research focus was to determine the procedures and strategies marketing experts take advantage of when navigating two key conflicting imperatives: on one hand, maintaining the consistency of an established VBI, and on the other hand, remaining relevant in the evolving environment by implementing visual changes. (Phillips et al. 2014a, 234.)

Based on the aforementioned challenges, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What is visual brand identity?
2. Which visual elements can form visual brand identity?
3. What are the success factors and challenges in the construction of visual brand identity?
4. What are the central procedures and strategies used in the implementation of visual changes?

The theoretical framework for the studied issues was predominantly formed by the concepts of brand identity, visual identity and visual brand identity. In addition, the most conventional visual brand elements – the logo, colours, typography and symbols – were examined more closely in order to form general understanding of the basic issues around the topic. As for the potential factors contributing to the construction of an effective VBI, matters of theoretical focus were the notions of consistency, brand identification and brand familiarity. Lastly, the discussion of visual changes encased potential reasons for, consequences of, and factors to be considered in the implementation of visual changes. These issues were further demonstrated with real life examples and images of both successful and unsuccessful visual re-branding cases.

With regards to the empirical data of the study, 11 semi-structured theme interviews with marketing experts were conducted. With the qualitative research approach, the focus was directed towards interpretations and a holistic understanding of attitudes, behavior and motivations of these marketing experts. A further aim was to discover the conceptions and meanings the research informants hold and thus, make sense of the studied issues according to them. Given that the interviewed marketing experts plan and create visual content for brands on a daily basis, as well as participate in the construction of VBIs, they were regarded as valuable sources of insight for this study. In conducting the interviews, the aim was to gain deep insight into the concept of VBI and the implementation of visual changes, as well as capture the reality of the modern marketplace. A further objective of the empirical findings was to make up for the deficiency of theoretical data related to the studied issues and add more practical points in the discussion. Below, conclusions of the studied issues along with the answers to the research questions will be drawn through the comparison of the theory and the empirical findings of this study.

5.1.1 *Definition of visual brand identity*

According to Phillips et al. (2014b, 320), VBI refers to the way a brand looks and feels in a holistic manner. It can be regarded as “the face” – or the gestalt – of a brand that is comprised of different visual elements that together serve as an entity, identifying and representing the brand (Alessandri 2009, 5; Phillips et al. 2014b, 320). The empirical findings were aligned with the existing literature, as the informants found VBI to convey a brand’s visual style by depicting the recognisable visual characteristics of the brand. Therefore, the purpose of VBI is to reinforce the link between a brand’s visual content and the brand in question. Transmitting a unified “look and feel” of the brand through each visual brand execution contributes to the creation and reinforcement of a connection between the brand and the customer (Percy & Elliott 2009, 322). In addition, VBI serves as the visual identifier for brands.

The empirical findings revealed that VBI is an essential factor in the success of brands. The informants linked it to, for instance, target audience’s expectations; first impressions; instant recognisability; brand associations; brand position; strategic issues; values; and, most significantly, brand purpose. These notions are mostly supported by theory, as Wheeler (2006, 22) notes that the visual side of the identity should be suitable for the target audience; Phillips et al. (2014b, 320, 328), Wheeler (2006, 6, 8) and Williams (2006, 33) link VBI to recognisability; Alessandri (2009, 5), Wheeler (2006, 8) and Pohjola (2003, 20) all acknowledge the connection between VBI and brand associations; and the strategic nature of VBI is pointed out by, among others, Alessandri (2009, 4). Furthermore, Wheeler (2006, 14) argues that visual identity constantly reminds consumers

about the brand's core values and purpose. Wheeler (2006, 22) also stresses that the starting point in the identity process is the comprehension of the brand purpose. According to the informants, the distracted consumers may only give brands one single chance to be heard – or seen – and therefore, the brand purpose should instantly be conveyed to consumers through a visual representation of the brand. A strong VBI serves as an effective tool to communicate this purpose.

VBI was regarded as a powerful framework for brand communication, helping brands to inform consumers about themselves in a quick and effective manner. Hence, VBI offers the basis for branding. This view is supported by Wheeler (2006) who contends that sufficient understanding of the concept of VBI allows for the formation of a logical structure that should be followed in order to construct the desired VBI. In fact, two informants regarded VBI, above all, as a system. According to that system-based view, VBI is constructed through predefined steps that guide justifiable decision-making. Therefore, even though VBI should elicit emotion and meaning, the construction of it should be carried out with logical reasoning. Instead of basing brand-related decisions on personal preferences or aesthetics, the decisions should always contribute to the successful implementation of a specific brand strategy. This logical approach ensures the VBI is clear and consistent. This view is supported by Melewar et al. (2006, 144).

5.1.2 Visual elements encompassing visual brand identity

Typically, the existing branding literature names the basic visual elements of a brand's visual identity to include different versions of logotypes, symbols, colours and typefaces, which can be complemented by additional graphic elements, such as symbols (Pohjola 2003, 108; Clifton 2009, 113; Alessandri 2009, 18). A wider definition, however, regards VBI as a construct made up of all of the elements that can be observed in the organisation's visual presentation of itself. This can include not only the brand premises and architecture, but also the brand's public behaviour. (Alessandri 2009, 5.) The empirical findings supported these abovementioned notions. In addition to the basic, recognisable visual elements repeatedly used in brand communication, all of the touchpoints with consumers – and simply “everything that the eyes can see” around a certain brand – were regarded as part of VBI. Wheeler (2006) considers different brand-consumer touchpoints to be, for instance, business cards; brochures; packaging; websites; advertising; environments; vehicles; and uniforms. VBI communicates about itself at each consumer touchpoint and in that way, it constantly reminds consumers about the brand's core values and purpose (Phillips et al. 2014b, 328).

The empirical findings and theory seemed to be well aligned with the aforementioned branding literature, although the multidimensional – yet vague – nature of the concept

was emphasised by the informants. The empirical findings suggested that the visual elements involved in VBI are indistinct, based on interpretations and the selected framework. However, in all cases, the visual elements of VBI should always be recognised as “belonging” to the brand in question, reinforcing uniform brand associations and meanings, derived from the brand’s essence. According to the empirical findings, visual elements serve as important communication tools, helping brands to, for instance, express themselves; create brand associations; evoke interest; differentiate themselves and generate recognisability. Again, the notions were aligned with the existing branding literature. Brands may express their personalities through the use of visual elements (Hammond 2016, 64). Visual elements can also draw consumers’ attention in various platforms and shape brand associations (Karjalainen 2007). Furthermore, visual elements contribute to brand identification (Koch & Boush 2000, 141) and form the basis for differentiation (Pohjola 2003, 108). According to the informants, visual elements have the potential to communicate every aspect of the brand.

Based on the empirical findings, instead of separating a brand’s visual elements, observing them as whole is of paramount importance in the construction of VBI. Although each visual element conveys meaning, none of them operate in isolation from the other elements. This is supported by existing literature, as Phillips et al. (2014b, 320, 328) assert that a brand’s visual elements together serve as *an entity* that identifies and represents the brand. For instance, the empirical findings suggest that too much focus is often directed towards the brand logo, which is sometimes incorrectly considered to wholly represent the brand and the VBI. However, the logo is useless without other elements around it, giving it meaning and making it work. Therefore, instead of focusing on single visual elements, the most crucial factor in the construction of VBI is selecting an appropriate *combination* of different visual elements that support each other and reinforce the same brand associations. As Pohjola (2003, 108) states, the final number and nature of a brand’s visual elements is always situation-dependent and hence, varies across brands. Again, the most crucial factor is an effective, co-operative mix of elements through which VBI is formed.

5.1.3 Success factors in the construction of visual brand identity

With regards to the factors contributing to the successful construction and communication of VBI, distinctiveness; consistency; recognisability and meaning elicitation rose above others as perhaps the most critical factors. Furthermore, familiarity; authenticity; justification; simplification; an appropriate context; commitment; flexibility; and sustainability were regarded as additional success factors in the construction of VBI. Some of these notions are supported by Wheeler (2006, 17). Figure 15 depicts these VBI ideals that

contribute to a brand's success in the marketplace. The figure is slightly modified from Wheeler's version, as factors that emerged in the empirical findings have been added in red. Thus, this study extends the current conceptualisations of the ideal characteristics of VBI.

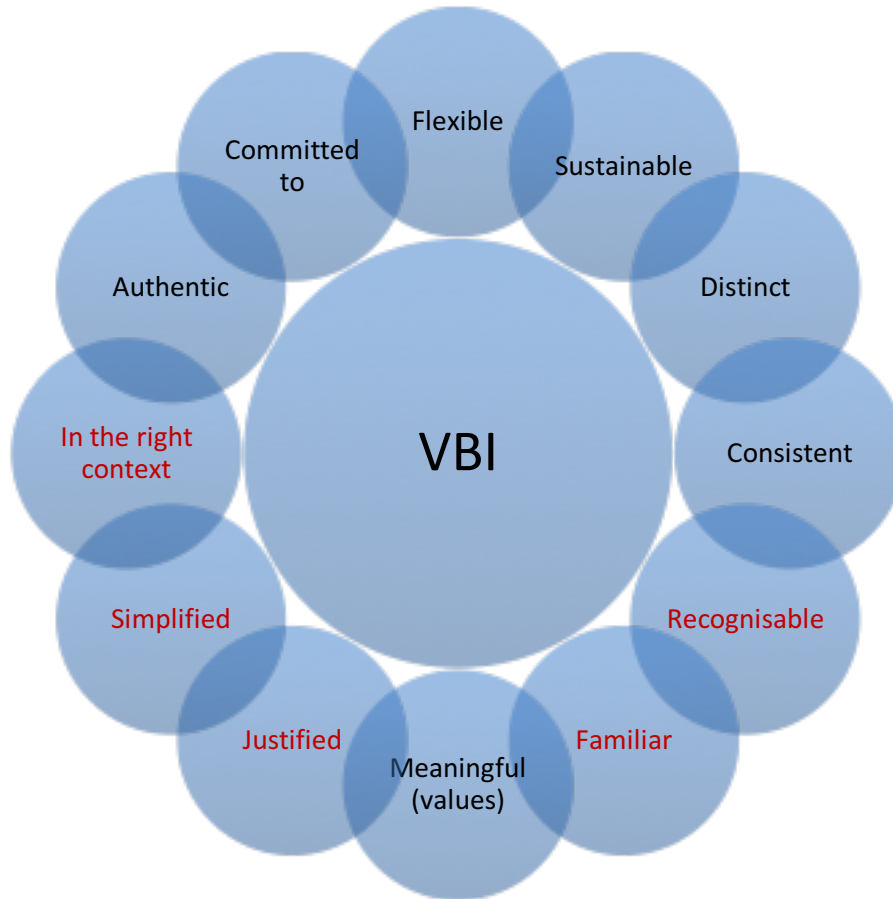


Figure 15 Attributes of an ideal visual brand identity (After Wheeler 2006, 17)

The empirical findings alleged that distinctiveness is central to gaining consumers' attention in the noisy marketplace. Wheeler (2006, 8) shares this view in noting that a brand's distinctive visual appearance is a crucial factor in the construction of an effective VBI. Distinctive visual elements can work together as cues – beyond the brand name – that evoke the brand in consumer memory (Romaniuk 2014, 314). According to Pohjola (2006, 58), distinctive brand elements contribute to correct brand recognition and thus, their existence is vital. Because the modern marketplace is extremely crowded, the informants thought distinctiveness can be created by breaking the traditional conventions of the field in which the brand operates.

Based on the empirical findings, consistency refers to 1) the visual elements appearing repeatedly and systematically in brand communication over time and across different platforms; and 2) not changing the original visual elements often or arbitrarily. The first

statement is supported by Williams (2006, 33), Alessandri (2009, 23) as well as Karjalainen (2007). Moreover, Wheeler (2006, 28) and Karjalainen (2007) agree with the empirical findings' assertion that consistency contributes to both clarity and recognisability – two important factors for a brand's success. In contrary, by continuously establishing different kind of imagery in marketing communications, brand associations formed by consumers will be so scattered that the brand fails to generate a sense of familiarity. Familiarity, in turn, was considered crucial by the informants, since familiar brands do not require a lot of processing and thus, they are often found appealing among the busy – and risk avoiding – consumers. Kent & Allen (1994, 103), as well as Phillips et al. (2014b, 228) also advocate for the beneficial role of brand familiarity. Brand communication should strengthen the same associations in an understandable matter (Wheeler (2006, 29), and therefore, it is advised that a core message is created and communicated across different channels. After all, learning is more effective through repetition (Aaker 1991, 271). In order to maintain clarity and consistency in a brand's visual executions, following a clearly established brand book was found in the empirical findings to be essential. In brand books, instructions for the creation of any visual material for a specific brand are given.

The empirical findings raised an interesting point concerning VBI that does not emerge from the theory. It was stated that, in addition to the systematic appearance of the brand's characteristic visual elements and visual style, the context in which the brand is systematically seen by consumers has an impact on the construction of VBI. The context, then, does not only cover the platforms, events and situations in which the brand appears, but also the other brands around which it appears. Therefore, the redeeming of the brand's promise can also be linked to "who the brand hangs out with", as stated by one informant. By locating a brand in a certain context, the desired brand positioning may be easier to gain and the target group easier to reach. The empirical findings advised that brands carefully choose these contexts so that they are linked to the values the brand wants to represent.

According to the empirical findings, value-based branding has increased its importance in the modern marketplace and thus, VBI is advised to be built on values and meanings. Karel & Alsem (2008, 911), as well as Wheeler (2006, 22) also share this view in stating that a brand identity serves as the representation of the values that the brand strives to live by. Furthermore, Karjalainen (2007) emphasises out that strategic meaning creation is based on values.

The empirical findings argued that the brand's visual presentation of itself should – at least first – be simplified to communicate the innermost gestalt of the brand. Alessandri (2009, 27-28) points out that the creation of a core brand message is important for clarity as well as the storage of brand cues in consumer memory. Because today's marketplace is flooded with information, it is meaningful to simplify the visual presentation of self

(Pohjola 2003, 110). Through a simplified and understandable visual style, brand communication is likely to become more effective.

Even though VBI should be simplified into a clear representation of a core message, it was also pointed out by the empirical findings that flexibility contributes to a brand's success in the long run. Instead of designing VBI within the limits of a precise definition, not all of the theoretically defined visual elements have to be present and moreover, the chosen elements can vary. As highlighted earlier, the most crucial factor is that all of a brand's visual executions represent the holistic "look and feel" of the brand, reinforcing the same brand associations, core message and brand purpose. Flexibility is paramount for an evolving marketing strategy, which, in turn, enables change and growth in the future (Wheeler 2006, 124). Slight variations in a brand's visual executions contribute to the brand remaining fresh and exciting (Percy & Elliott's (2009, 323). This factor is closely related to another success factor – sustainability – which refers to the ability of VBI to endure in an ever-changing environment. (Wheeler 2006, 26). The empirical findings suggested that the decisions surrounding a brand's visual elements are not to be based on the latest trends, as this can affect the sustainability of VBI. In addition, simplicity and justified brand-related decisions were considered to further contribute to a sustainable VBI. Justification of all decision-making in relation to VBI was emphasised by the empirical findings, since arbitrariness is likely to lead to a scattered, unclear and short-lived VBI – as well as confused consumers.

Commitment towards the brand's essence in visual executions was mentioned several times in the discussion. The empirical findings proposed that this commitment is also linked to truthfulness – according to some informants, the modern consumers look for authenticity and brands who are deceitful in their marketing communications, will eventually be caught out. According to Wheeler (2006, 6, 22), an ideal brand identity is authentic, and authenticity, in turn, cannot be gained if the brand does not have a clear understanding of the reason for its existence. It was emphasised – perhaps more than anything else in the discussion – that all of the brand's visuality has to stem from the brand core. In order to do so, the brand's purpose has to be clearly defined and thoroughly comprehended by each individual planning and creating content for the brand in question. As Wheeler (2006, 22) stipulates, the starting point in the identity process is the comprehension of the brand purpose and sense of self.

It was also suggested by empirical findings that once the brand core is established, creativity and playfulness in a brand's visual communication are allowed. Until then, the planning and construction of VBI should be implemented analytically and rationally, basing all brand-related decision-making on the most suitable combination for the brand in question. In fact, the empirical findings proposed that the importance of analytics and rationality in the construction of VBI outweighs that of creativity, aesthetics and feelings.

Furthermore, human factors were found extremely powerful in determining the success – or failure – of VBI. Human qualities such as openness, tolerance, flexibility, cooperativeness, supportiveness and confidence, complemented by a knowledgeable team within a democratic organisation, are considered vital in branding. The empirical findings indicated that trust towards the advertising agencies, as well as sufficient freedom in the visual executions are highly appreciated. These factors were considered to have a positive impact on, not only the design process, but also the outcome, encouraging creativity and innovativeness. Client engagement in the design process seemed to be appreciated and desired in order for all parties to be on the same wavelength. In fact, a strong connection with the client was even regarded as the foundation for long-term brand building.

5.1.4 Challenges in the construction of visual brand identity

According to the empirical findings, the majority of the challenges in the construction of VBIs are linked to human factors, most of which are closely related to the agency-client relationship. Some of these factors were stated to be chemistry; lack of flexibility; egoism; conflicting visions and ambitions; lack of trust and strained collaboration; insufficient understanding of branding issues; complex organisational structure; lack of communication; and insufficient skills, qualities or resources in the advertising agency itself. Furthermore, the noisy marketplace of today was revealed to pose challenges for breaking through the clutter of competing brands – particularly in cases of insufficient funds. In addition, breaking field-related conventions while appearing unique and recognisable was seen to be a difficult task.

Moreover, the somewhat abstract nature of branding – and brands themselves – was perceived to make turning visions, thoughts and ideas into a clear VBI a challenge. The empirical findings also illustrated that thorough research combined with good communication and reasoning skills are of utmost importance in order to tackle some of these challenges. Furthermore, human qualities such as openness, tolerance, flexibility, cooperativeness and confidence, as well as a knowledgeable team within a democratic organisation, were considered vital in branding.

5.1.5 The role of the advertising agency in the construction of visual brand identity

With regards to the beginning of an ideation, the majority of the informants stated that the process begins with a briefing given by the client. However, variations seem to exist in the thoroughness of the briefings, in that sometimes, all of the essential brand elements are clearly presented, whereas other times, more freedom and trust may be given to the

advertising agency. According to the informants, in addition to the briefing, the beginning of the design process includes a thorough analysis of the client's previous materials and other data, with the aim of establishing a holistic view of the brand's present situation as well as the challenges and opportunities for the future. It was postulated by the empirical findings that once a deep understanding is achieved, it is possible to find out which factors are already working for the brand and which factors require modification.

The empirical findings revealed that tools, such as matrixes, grids or charts are employed by the advertising agencies to get a clear understanding of a brand's current situation; objectives; challenges; competitors; differentiating factors; and values, among other things. Furthermore, key words, reference pictures and mood boards were revealed to facilitate the visualization of the potential brand elements and "the visual world" of the brand. Moreover, the empirical findings indicated that is crucial for a designer to be able to be exceedingly variable – readily adopting different mind-sets, styles and brand guidelines – in order to create successful content for different brands.

The nature of work for brands with strong and weak VBIs seems to vary, affecting the role of the advertising agency. However, the empirical findings alleged that there are positives and negatives in both cases. A positive of working with strong brands was stated to be that they already have a simplified and clear VBI. Therefore, the work for them mainly consists of following the pre-established guidelines and supporting the brand, which is considered rather effortless. In addition, the empirical findings revealed that working for a strong brand can boost the designer's ego, which may sometimes increase the pleasantness of the case. It was also asserted by the empirical findings that the clarity and the strong sense of self that strong brands are characteristic of, is highly respected. However, the higher number of instructions given by strong brands was sometimes seen as a downfall, in that it was thought to restrict creativity, as well as the generation of fresh – and sometimes risky – ideas. Furthermore, the empirical findings revealed that there may be an added element of pressure when dealing with brands with strong VBIs. Because of the existing standards that have been set, there are high expectations to maintain – or even improve – the level of quality in the visual executions.

Working for weak VBIs was often thought to give advertising agencies more freedom and flexibility in their visual executions, which was greatly valued. However, visual content creation was considered to be more challenging, as the brand core and objectives were sometimes regarded as vague. The most fruitful clients to work for were stated to be start-up companies or competing "challenger" brands, since they were perceived to be fresh, fun, exciting and brave. Because the VBI of such brands is not as clear as the VBI of strong brands, the empirical findings revealed that more creativity is generally allowed, more risks can be taken and fewer – if any – instructions are required to be followed. Furthermore, it was asserted that brands with weak VBIs are likely to place more trust in the advertising agencies, making the collaboration pleasant and fruitful.

5.1.6 *Central procedures and strategies in the implementation of visual changes*

In terms of visual changes, the empirical findings suggested relevancy to the ever-evolving marketplace to be the most significant criterion driving brand development. The necessity to keep up with the times and maintain relevancy is also pointed out by Aaker (1991, 251), Banerjee (2008, 63), D'Lacey (2014, 1) and Kolbl et al. (2015, 5). The empirical findings stressed the importance of subtle and ongoing evolution. This subtlety in the implementation of visual alterations was argued to contribute to the maintenance of consistency and familiarity, as well as help brands to stay true to their very essence. According to the informants, an ideal visual change is not necessarily even noticed by consumers – the brand simply evolves to the next "version" of itself. The importance of a continuous brand evolution process is also pointed out by Phillips et al. (2014b, 318), as well as D'Lacey (2014, 1) and Kolbl et al. (2015, 5), who further argue that this evolution process should play an essential role in the brand strategy.

Radical visual changes were stated to be rarely appropriate and involve several risks. For instance, it was argued that they may lead to not only a consumer rebellion, but also a massive decrease in the brand value. Grobert et al. (2016) also highlight the importance of caution and mindfulness towards consumers when implementing changes. In situations where the change is radical or comes as a surprise to consumers, the consumer response may be very negative. Furthermore, Koch & Boush (2000, 141) allege that a change can harm a unique brand image and in consequence, violate the overall brand equity.

According to the empirical findings, when implementing visual changes, it is of utmost importance that some kind of a memory engram remains. Chalal (2015) also advocates for the balance between refreshing the brand and maintaining the existing brand cues. To contribute to the maintenance of some memory engrams, it was advised to identify the visual brand elements that are central for brand recognition and should therefore be kept and focused on. Chalal's (2015) view is aligned with this. Furthermore, instead of erasing or replacing visual brand elements completely, the informants encouraged the discovery of novel ways of using them in visual executions. This view is supported by Alessandri (2009, 26), as she states that regardless of the decisions concerning *which* elements to promote, *how* the visual identity is promoted should be considered a strategic matter. The empirical findings stressed the importance of respecting the "visual capital" of a brand and not destroying the existing VBI. That being said, it was also stated that VBIs should not be regarded as sacred – instead, a careful analysis should always be conducted and modifications be made in justifiable cases. A thorough analysis of the brand's situation and logical reasoning in the implementation of visual changes were considered paramount.

5.2 Managerial contributions

The modern marketplace encases the challenge of constructing and reinforcing VBI that will stand the test of time. Building a strong VBI should be regarded as a key factor in carrying out a brand's long-term vision and strategic plan – after all, visuality is the main tool with which brand compete in today's marketplace. In order to comprehend, develop and control VBI, it is paramount to first understand the scope of visual elements that together construct that identity. Furthermore, it is also essential for the brand core to be well defined in order to comprehend how the visual brand elements can support and communicate the brand's essence in an effective and consistent manner. This, in turn, is likely to contribute to the brand being seen by the busy and distracted consumers. Lastly, the extended conceptualisation of the VBI ideals presented in this study can serve as a helpful planning tool for not only brand managers, but also everyone else involved in the planning, construction and communication of VBIs. Perhaps the most vital factor, however, is the comprehension of the larger ambitions for the visual brand identity.

All actors involved in the planning, construction and communication of the VBI must understand, internalise and commit to the brand's purpose and the visual style through which this purpose is conveyed to consumers. That, in turn, facilitates the maintenance of the VBI ideals, such as authenticity, consistency and familiarity. Once there is sufficient understanding of the concept of VBI, a logical process should be established and followed to allow for the development and reinforcement of the desired VBI. That process serves as a management tool for the VBI, ensuring that all parties involved make justifiable decisions in relation to the brand. When understood and managed properly, VBI can serve as a valuable resource.

In the saturated marketplace where existing offerings scarcely differentiate from each other or new competitors are appearing on a regular basis, innovativeness serves as a great asset. In order to encourage innovativeness, trust should be given to marketing experts who plan and create content for brands. This is likely to foster innovativeness, creativity, motivation and brand development. It should be noted that after all, the client is buying a professional service from advertising agencies and therefore, they should be granted trust and sufficient freedom. However, collaboration between the advertising agencies and their clients is also encouraged in order to form a shared vision of the VBI and create a pleasant work environment for all involved. For the same reason, communication flow within each organisation should be ensured. A shared involvement in the planning process between departments and individuals is imperative in order to avoid backlash in the construction and communication of VBI. Moreover, successful and interesting content creation is further aided by sufficient finances.

Lastly, changes in VBI require a careful, strategic approach, thorough planning and an emphasis on detail. Changing an existing VBI – or any individual identity element – always requires a thorough consideration of the existing value of the identity rather than regarding the change as purely cosmetic. Furthermore, change for the sake of change is not justifiable and therefore, a real analysis of the current situation, as well as the objectives for the future are of utmost importance. It should be ensured that VBI is both new and true: having relevant variation in the visual executions while remaining true to the established VBI. All brands need to keep up with the times to maintain relevancy, but it should be kept in mind that dramatic visual changes are rarely appropriate and likely to lead to a massive decrease in the brand value. A crucial factor is to keep the memory engrams consumers have formed in relation to the brand. Therefore, a brand refresh – as VBI itself – should be regarded as a continuous brand evolution process playing an essential role in the brand strategy.

5.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study examined marketing experts' understanding of the concept of VBI. Even though the unstructured theme interviews allowed rich description of the studied issues, the limited number of the research informants (11) restricts the ability to make generalisation of the empirical findings. However, it is likely that some commonalities would be found if a larger number of marketing experts were interviewed – given that they all worked with VBIs and thus, have formed an understanding of the issues. In order to gather a wider breadth of empirical data, a survey method is suggested for future research.

Furthermore, now that the definitions, visual elements, success factors and challenges relating to the concept of VBI have been established from the experts' point of view, it would be meaningful to extend the knowledge even further to examine the perceptions and understanding of other stakeholders in the marketplace. A consumer point of view of these issues could make a particularly valuable contribution to the existing knowledge, since consumers ultimately determine the success of brands. For instance, future research could perhaps observe how a combination of a brand's visual elements form certain brand associations in the minds of consumers and how various changes affect consumers' perceptions of and responses to VBIs. This could be done through a combination of surveys, qualitative and a range of experimental methods. For instance, the basic visual brand elements could be manipulated or varied in order to observe reactions to VBI alterations. Furthermore, experimental methods could also help to reveal important boundaries within which a brand's visual elements could be stretched until the VBI starts to scatter, violating brand recognition and the existing brand associations in the minds of consumers.

6 SUMMARY

Identity has been the subject of study in various fields and therefore, it has been observed from several perspectives. However, the concept of *visual brand identity (VBI)* seems rather novel, lacking sufficient coverage in branding literature. Visual identity is an important contributor to an organisation's success and a significant factor in branding. Since it is likely that nonverbal, visual elements have a bigger impact on consumers in comparison to verbal elements, studying the visual side of marketing seems of utmost importance. To date, VBI has been examined, inadequately, only through single visual elements, such as colour or font, that only partly depict the identity. In consequence, various visual brand elements have been identified but very little existing branding literature discusses the way these elements work collectively to form desired brand meanings. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine VBI more holistically without it being tied – or restricted – to a specific visual element. In addition, key success factors and challenges in the construction of VBI were observed.

Moreover, marketing experts of today face the challenge of navigating conflicting imperatives: on one hand, respecting the constraints of the established VBI, and on the other hand, ensuring the brand will not become stagnant or out-dated in today's fast-paced marketplace. Therefore, a further and final aim of this study was to discover the sorts of visual changes that are appropriate in order for a brand to appease both imperatives by refreshing its look while still maintaining its familiar VBI. In order to do so, the central procedures and strategies used in the implementation of visual changes were observed.

The theoretical framework for the studied issues was predominantly formed by the concepts of brand identity, visual identity and visual brand identity. In addition, the most conventional visual brand elements – the logo, colours, typography and symbols – were examined more closely in order to form general understanding of the basic issues around the topic. As for the potential factors contributing to the construction of an effective VBI, matters of theoretical focus were the notions of consistency, brand identification and brand familiarity. Lastly, the discussion of visual changes encased potential reasons for, consequences of, and factors to be considered in the implementation of visual changes. These issues were further demonstrated with real life examples and images of both successful and unsuccessful visual re-branding cases.

With regards to the empirical data of the study, semi-structured theme interviews were conducted with eleven marketing experts who work with brands and their visual content on a daily basis. By interviewing individuals in different roles, the aim was to form an expertly informed overview of the research topics. Furthermore, a meaningful definition of the concept of VBI was aimed to be brought forth by synthesising the views emerged from literature and empirical findings. Finally, with the aspiration of contributing to the

existing knowledge surrounding the topic, answers to the research questions were presented through the comparison of theory and the empirical findings.

The study suggests that VBI is a surprisingly multidimensional construct – the comprehension of which varies based on interpretations and the selected framework. According to the narrowest definition, VBI can be thought to embody a few recognisable visual elements that are repeatedly used in brand communication: the logo, colours, typography and symbols being the most common ones stated by literature. The broadest definition, in turn, encases elements that go beyond the basic theoretical claims. According to this definition, VBI refers to all of the observable elements that are displayed in the comprehensive visual presentation of the brand. This includes the brand premises, the staff (their appearance, behavior, etc.), the company cars and the full spectrum of brand-consumer touchpoints. Whichever view is being taken, VBI should always be regarded as a significant and powerful communications tool depicting the brand's essence in a quick manner; evoking interest; differentiating the brand, as well as generating recognisability. What's more, not all of the visual elements of the palette are being used in every brand's communication, and some visual elements may be given greater emphasis than others, depending on the brand in question. An essential factor is that all of a brand's visual elements form an entity that reinforces the consistent brand associations and meanings, instead of the elements working in isolation. Thus, a holistic view is of paramount importance when observing the concept of VBI.

VBI can be regarded as the visual expression of a brand, representing, strengthening and simplifying the brand's essence into a core message. Through each visual brand execution, this core message is, ideally, instantly conveyed to the modern, distracted consumer, making the brand discernible in the congested marketplace. VBI communicates about itself at each consumer touchpoint and in that way, it constantly reminds consumers about the brand's core values and purpose. Furthermore, VBI also encapsulates the mission and vision of the brand. The purpose of VBI is to reinforce the link between a brand's visual content and the brand in question. Therefore, VBI serves as the visual identifier for brands. A crucial factor in this is consistency – repeating the same visual look over time and across different platforms.

Furthermore, an ideal VBI is not only consistent, but also distinctive; recognisable; familiar; meaningful; authentic; simplified; flexible and sustainable. In addition, it should be located in appropriate contexts that further reinforce the desired brand associations. In order for the visual elements to be effective and the brand to be meaningful, the brand has to first be clearly defined, after which each individual working around the brand must internalise this definition and commit to it. Another important factor is staying true to the brand core; the reason for the brand's existence. This kind of commitment contributes to the achievement of not only consistency and clarity in a brand's visual executions, but also all of the other VBI ideals.

Even though VBI should encase emotion and meaning, a clear VBI requires a systematic work process that encourages rational justification through predefined steps. Therefore, VBI can be regarded as a logically constructed concept. Furthermore, clearly instructing brand books facilitate the planning and the creation of visual content that supports an established VBI. Perhaps the most essential factor in the construction of VBI, however, is to have a clear definition of the brand in question. This can be discovered by taking advantage of, for instance, different matrixes, grids or charts that help define the brand's current situation, objectives, challenges, competitors, differentiating factors and values, among other things. Furthermore, key words, reference pictures and mood boards can also facilitate picturing the potential visual brand elements, the visual style of the brand, as well as the general feeling that the VBI is supposed to convey. Once the overall idea of the brand has been formed, it is advised that all of the factors related to the brand are abridged into a specified brand core. Only after the brand core is clear and simple enough, creativity and flexibility are encouraged in order for the brand not to appear stagnant. The creation of successful and interesting brand content can be further aided by the designer's variability and adaptiveness to different mind-sets, styles and brand guidelines.

With regards to the challenges involved in the construction and communication of VBI, the majority of them seem to be linked to human factors and the agency-client relationship. These challenges include lack of flexibility; egoism; conflicting visions or motives; insufficient understanding of branding issues; complex organisational structure; lack of communication; and insufficient skills, qualities or resources in the advertising agency itself. Furthermore, the noisy marketplace of today poses challenges for breaking through the clutter – especially in cases where finances are limited. In addition, breaking field-related conventions while appearing unique and recognisable is a difficult task. Lastly, the somewhat abstract nature of branding – and brands themselves – can make turning the visions, thoughts and ideas into a clear VBI a challenge. Thorough research and good argumentation skills in the justification of brand-related decisions are of utmost importance in order to tackle some of these challenges. Moreover, human qualities such as openness, tolerance, flexibility, cooperativeness, good communication skills, confidence, as well as a knowledgeable team within a democratic organisation can be considered vital in branding. Therefore, all of the abovementioned challenges can be turned into opportunities – in which case, key to success is the ability to solve problems.

In terms of control versus freedom affecting the advertising agency's role in the construction and communication of VBIs, the amount seems to vary case by case. The main restrictor is often excessively strict instructions given by individuals in high positions. These stringent guidelines are thought to suppress creativity and have a detrimental effect on the nature of collaboration between the advertising agency and the client. Stricter instructions and guidelines are also often involved when working with strong VBIs. Due to the fact that strong brands already have such simplified and clear VBIs, the work for such

brands mainly consists of following the guidelines and supporting the brand. Strong brands' good sense of self together with their clearly defined branding systems seem to be highly appreciated among advertising agencies. Moreover, it is often considered exciting and honourable to have a strong brand as a client. Having said that, the previously mentioned strict guidelines may suppress creativity and in consequence, the nature of work can be found somewhat restricting and even boring. However, in some instances, work for strong brands can also involve more pressure, as the advertising agencies are required to maintain – or even improve – the already high level of quality in the visual executions.

In contrast, working for weak VBIs may give advertising agencies more freedom and flexibility in the visual executions, which is greatly valued. However, if VBI is unclear and the brand core is not in order, interesting content creation for it may be more challenging. The empirical findings propose that the most fruitful clients to work for are start-up companies or competing “challenger” brands, since they are often fresh, fun, exciting and brave. Because these kinds of brands are not as clear as the strongly established ones, often more creativity is allowed, more risks are possibly taken and fewer – if any – instructions are required to be followed. Furthermore, these kinds of brands are likely to put more trust in the advertising agencies, making the collaboration pleasant and fruitful. Marketing experts seem to truly appreciate and value being trusted in the content creation, allowing them to make an impact on the brand development and letting their work flourish. It is notable that after all, the client always buys professionalism from the advertising agencies and therefore, trust and sufficient freedom should be given to them. However, workshops and sufficient collaboration between the advertising agency and the client are encouraged in order to form a shared vision of the VBI and make the work pleasant for all parties.

When it comes to visual changes, the empirical findings suggest relevancy to the ever-evolving marketplace to be the most significant criterion driving brand development. Furthermore, what often drives change is change itself – be it organisational re-structuring, growth or a widened target audience, for instance. In addition, the fast-paced marketplace with consumers longing for constant change pushes brands – new and old – to renew their looks on a regular basis in order to remain competitive. However, big changes are rarely appropriate, instead, visual brand modifications should be subtle and ongoing. Radical visual changes risk brand recognition and may lead to a massive decrease in the brand value, as well as a consumer rebellion, alienating a big part of a brand's clientele in an instant. Therefore, consistency in a brand's visual look is of utmost importance in order to maintain recognisability and reinforce the brand's essence through the elicitation of certain brand associations. Having said that, there is a thin line between a consistent and a stagnant visual look, which further encourages slight variation within a certain fra-

mework to be implemented. As stated earlier, the crucial factor is that the brand communicates its core message and a holistic look and feel in each of its visual executions, so that the target audience recognises them to “belong” to the brand. When implementing visual changes, it is paramount that some kind of a memory engram remains. This can be done by 1) recognising the visual brand elements that are valuable and should therefore be kept; 2) identifying the role these valuable brand elements play in branding and 3) figuring out the way to update the visual brand elements without sacrificing brand recognition. For instance, instead of erasing or replacing visual brand elements completely, it is encouraged to discover novel ways of using them in visual executions.

In sum, focus on the brand purpose is of utmost importance in the planning, construction and communication of VBI. Additionally, rational reasoning is paramount when making decisions about a brand’s visual look. With rationality, brands can become truly meaningful and consistent, which is crucial for the creation of brand recognition, brand familiarity and a system-like branding process. Furthermore, a major part of branding involves human-related factors that contribute to the success of VBI. In the implementation of visual changes, arbitrary or dramatic alterations should be avoided and instead, focus on subtlety and an ongoing evolution. That being said, each brand case is different, and therefore, a thorough situational analysis is essential.

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APPENDIX 1 – TRANSLATED INTERVIEW THEMES AND QUESTIONS

Background questions

- Please tell me a little bit about yourself, your background and your current job description. What is your typical day at work?
- Please describe shortly the advertising agency you are currently working at (special know-how, mission, vision, strategy, objectives etc.)

Theme 1: Visual marketing and visual brand identity (VBI)

- What is your opinion about the role of visuality in the construction of brands as well as brand communication (e.g. in comparison to copywriting and audio)?
- How would you define the term visual brand identity? What do you think is the purpose of VBI?
- How do you think VBI is linked to the holistic brand identity?
- Which visual elements do you think VBI consists of?
- What do you think is the purpose or role of these visual elements?
- Can you give me any examples of the use of visual brand elements in brand communication (e.g. in advertisements etc.)?

Theme 2: The construction of VBI

- How do you think VBI should be constructed in the long run?
 - o What strategies, tools and procedures do you employ in the construction and communication of VBI?
 - o What factors do you think relate to the establishment and development of VBI?
 - o How much is your client usually involved in the planning and construction process?
- How do you start ideation when you commence a contract with a client?
- What phases are included in the design/construction process for VBI?
- What considerations are made regarding a client's existing VBI?
- How would you describe working for a brand whose VBI is a) strong b) weak?
- What challenges and opportunities do you think the construction and communication of VBI creates?

Theme 3: Consumer processing

- What factors do you think can contribute to the ease of consumer processing when they, for instance, see an advertisement?
- What should visual brand elements be like in order for consumers to identify the brand and differentiate it from competitors?
- Why do you think a consumer may recognise a certain brand from an advertisement prior to seeing the brand name?
- How do you think a brand can become recognisable or memorable?
- What do you think is the role of consistency in visual brand executions?

Theme 4: Visual changes

- First, what is your general opinion about the implementation of changes to a brand's visual style/appearance?
- Could you please tell me a little bit about the cases in which you have made either dramatic or moderate changes to a VBI?
 - o What reasons or strategic objectives were behind these changes?
 - o What kinds of visual changes did you make and why? How did the old and the new VBI differ from each other after those changes?
- To what degree do your clients instruct you in the creation of visual brand content?
- What procedures do you employ when you add, remove or modify a brand's visual elements?
- How do you think it is possible to modify a brand's visual elements without breaking the existing VBI?
- How much of an impact do you think you generally have on visual brand elements?
- What kinds of conflicts or differences of opinion have you experienced with your clients? How do you aim to solve these conflicts?

APPENDIX 2 – OPERATIONALISATION TABLE

Purpose of the study	Research questions	Theoretical chapters	Expert views	Interview themes
1. Holistic examination of visual brand identity (VBI)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is visual brand identity? 2. Which elements can form visual brand identity? 	2.2 Background and definition of visual brand identity 2.3 Basic visual brand elements	4.2 Expert view on the concept of visual brand identity	1. Visual marketing & visual brand identity (VBI)
2. Construction of VBI	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. What are the success factors and challenges in the construction of visual brand identity? 	2.4 Construction of visual brand identity	4.3 Expert view on the construction of visual brand identity	2. The construction of VBI 3. Consumer processing
3. Procedures and strategies in the implementation of visual changes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. What are the central procedures and strategies used in the implementation of visual changes? 	2.5. Implementation of visual changes	4.4 Expert view on the implementation of visual changes	4. Visual changes