

Corporate Visual Identity: alternative practices and theorizing

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Visual diversity at Holi Festival, India - <http://www.waterandmegacities.org/wp-content/uploads/Coloured-People.jpg>

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Introduction: initial impressions and contradictions

The purpose of this thesis proposal (TP) is to introduce its readers to a PhD-project at its current stage with around two years remaining. The overall goal of the PhD-project as such is to challenge and develop the existing concepts, theories and practices of Corporate Visual Identity. This will be done via empirical explorations and by seeking inspiration from alternative theoretical perspectives on identity in an organizational context

The initial part of the TP will focus on introducing, developing, framing and clarifying the overall research question that drives the project. Furthermore, the introduction will focus on the planned contributions of the dissertation. The introduction will be followed by the theoretical and methodological considerations of the two main parts of the project - the first focusing on the current theory and practice of CVI and the second focusing on alternative dittos. Finally, the TP will round off with a conclusion that includes the status of the project at the time of writing and the plan ahead.

The way in which Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) and Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) suggest framing and structuring research has inspired this project. Thus, the main forces driving this project are problematizing and assumption-challenging rather than gap-spotting. The specific problem, paradox or mystery that sets the scene for the project at hand will be outlined below.

Visuals on the rise: from linguistic turn to visual turn

“The visual is a pervasive feature of contemporary organization.” (Bell et al. 2014, 1).

Inspired by this simple yet powerful statement, visuals are regarded as an increasingly important and dominating feature of organizational life, communication and management. According to newer organizational and management theory, exemplified by Bell et al. (2014) and Meyer et al. (2013), the highly praised and influential interpretive turn have contributed with many interesting new perspectives on organizational and managerial life and with methodologies to explore these. According to both Bell et al. (2014) and Meyer et al. (2013), the interpretive turn consists of two separate, however equally important, perspectives or turns - the linguistic and the visual. However, the interpretive turn has had a one-sided perspective focusing only on linguistics and has done this to a degree that the interpretive turn and the linguistic turn (Rorty 1979) have been used more or less interchangeably. In sum, Bell et al. (2014, 3) therefore advance that:

“Consequently, visibility and vision remain under-explored and under-theorized in the organizational literature” Bell et al. (2014, 3).

This blind spot is problematic in the sense that focusing only on the linguistics as interpretive, which have contributed with highly influential insights and perspectives, have excluded researchers from focusing on the visuals as interpretive, which suggestively could hold equally interesting new perspectives on a wide range of themes spanning the organizational arena. Especially the visual side of corporate branding, marketing, product development and image is highlighted by Bell et al. (2014) as areas in which a new interpretive perspective on visuals could be beneficial. Meyer et al. (2013,

527) support the notion of fruitful research venues across the wide spectrum of organizational and managerial theory and supplement the visually underexplored areas of focus listed above, with areas such as human resource management, strategy, organizational change, innovation, entrepreneurship, design and reputation. Finally, Meyer et al. (2013, 527) “...see great potential in future research that engages with the role of visuals in strategic communication”. Within strategic communication, especially an alternative and interpretive perspective on visuals in contexts of “*iconizing a collective identity*”, “*visual creation of credibility*” and “*acquiring reputation and legitimacy*” is advanced as particularly fruitful areas to explore” (Meyer et al. 2013, 527). In short, newer organizational theorists strongly banner that the time is now ripe for an alternative and interpretive approach to visuals in an organizational context – the visual turn.

In an organizational, and especially in a communicative and identity context, corporate visual identity (CVI) is regarded as one of the main theoretical streams used to understand and describe the visual aspects of organizations. As an example, Simões et al. (2005, 158) hold that the purpose of CVI is to visually “*express the essence of the organization*”, which underscores the clear links to identity (essence) and visual communication (express). Supported by the above, CVI appears to be a relevant concept to explore from an interpretive perspective. Therefore, this project will explore how visuals are dealt with in the CVI literature and if an interpretive perspective could benefit the field, as suggested by Bell et al. (2014) and Meyer et al. (2013). The following section will look into the field of CVI, to outline the initial impressions of this arguably increasingly important theoretical field at its current stage.

CVI literature: initial impressions

According to Balmer (1995a), the theoretical field of CVI was born out of the practice of graphic design back in the 1950s. Although it can by no means be regarded as a new field, CVI is still regarded as an important, however, underexplored and undertheorized area of research within an organizational context (Mann and Ghuman (2014), Jong Woo et al. (2008), van den Bosch, Elving, et al. (2006) and Rosson and Brooks (2004)). Authors like Sharma and Jain (2011), Rosson and Brooks (2004), Melewar (2001) and Baker and Balmer (1997) regard CVI to be an integrated and important element of Corporate Identity. The importance associated with CVI in regards to the various elements of corporate identity is exemplified by Brooks et al. (2005, 137) who state that “*corporate identity is made up of many facets*” and that the “*visual elements play critical roles*”.

One of the definitions often used in the literature to describe CVI reads: “*the visual common thread that runs through the way an organisation expresses itself*” (van den Bosch, Elving, et al. 2006, 871). Furthermore, CVI is often considered to “*consists of name, logo, typography, color, slogan, and, often additional graphic design elements*” (Bolhuis et al. 2015, 1), which are typically seen to be applied in or on channels/media like websites, buildings, leaflets, cloths etc. (Bartholmé and Melewar 2014, Sharma and Jain 2011). The purpose of CVI is often linked to the improvement of stakeholder recognition and identification, which are regarded as a competitive advantage that will bring prosperity to the organization “behind” the CVI. This standpoint is exemplified by Alkibay et al. (2007, 135-136) who hold that:

“Used cleverly, corporate visual identity can improve an organization’s standing within the community by providing its staff with a sense of pride, building a strong reputation and gaining an advantage over competitors”.

Although the management side of CVI is suggestively underexplored (Hussain and Ferdous 2014, Bravo et al. 2012, Jordá-Albiñana et al. 2009), researchers like Simões et al. (2005) and Van den Bosch et al. (2004) argue that, in order for CVI to fulfill its purpose of creating strong reputation and identification, CVI managers should focus on making sure that CVI is used consistently throughout all channels/media and that the CVI authentically reflects the organization or the essence of it. In general, the idea of CVI consistency and authenticity seems to be supported by a vast number of theorists including Bartholmé and Melewar (2014), van den Bosch, de Jong, et al. (2006) and Melewar and Saunders (2000). Stressing the importance of consistency within the field of corporate identity in general, of which CVI is seen to be an important element, Leitch and Motion (1999, 195) conclude that: *“Overall, corporate identity theory has tended to view multiplicity as the enemy to be overcome.”*

Based on an initial review of the literature, it appears that the CVI literature, or at least part of it, rests on a set of shared assumptions regarding organization, communication and management. It seems that organizations are largely regarded as relatively stable and with some sort of essence that should be authentically visualized via a CVI to build internal and external identification. Furthermore, the various CVI elements should be used consistently throughout all media. This arguably prepossesses that the organization can control and manage who sees the CVI and how the CVI is used across all internal and external platforms.

These assumptions are very similar to the assumptions challenged and problematized by Leitch and Motion (1999), who, working from a post-modern perspective and focusing on corporate identity, argue that such assumptions are weak and faulty in the sense that they are message and transmission centered (not meaning centered), as they ignore the existence of complexity (instead of acknowledging it) and as they assume that there is a singular truth (instead of several socially constructed truths). Similarly, authors like Christensen and Cheney (2015), Torp (2009), Christensen, Morsing, et al. (2008) and Christensen, Firat, et al. (2008) have challenged similar assumptions within the overall fields of integrated communication and corporate communication, a process which is arguably constructive in an attempt to avoid stagnation (Sandberg and Alvesson 2011). However, no such critical literature can be found in regards to CVI. Therefore, the critical and interpretive perspectives offered in fields related to the CVI literature will be explored to find inspiration for critical theorizing and empirical explorations in the realm of CVI. These alternative theoretical perspectives will shortly be presented below. Furthermore, the initial impressions of the current CVI literature will also be problematized empirically by highlighting successful examples of organizations using CVI practices that do not comply with the ones found in the current CVI literature. Altogether, the current CVI literature will be challenged both theoretically and empirically to offer a more nuanced and alternative perspective on CVI theorizing and practices.

The double challenge: alternative theories and practices

In the following two sections, the main theoretical and empirical challenges to the current CVI literature will be highlighted.

Alternative sets of theoretical assumptions: initial impressions

Originally, organizational identity was theorized as that which was central, enduring and distinctive to the organization (Albert and Whetten 1985). This perspective on organizational identity resonates well with the assumptions of stability (enduring) and essence (central and distinctive) found to dominate the present CVI literature. However, newer and more dynamic perspectives on organizational identity, which are arguably inspired by the assumptions underpinning the interpretive turn described above, have taken over today. According to a recent review of the organizational identity literature (Gioia et al. 2013), four perspectives or views on organizational identity can be said to exist : social construction, social actor, institutional and population ecology. Furthermore, discursive approaches (Fiol 2002), narrative approaches (Brown 2006) and process approaches to organizational identity (Schultz and Hernes 2013, Schultz 2012) have also been advanced.

Although these approaches appear to be overlapping, hard to place in distinct hierarchies, and have differences, some of the main assumptions seem to be shared across these newer perspectives on organizational identity. As an example, the review of Gioia et al. (2013) systematically problematizes the notions of a central, enduring and distinctive organizational identity. Instead, it is argued that organizational identity change (not that enduring) and that multiple identities can exist simultaneously (no central). Similarly, operating from a process perspective, the suggestion that organizational identity is a social and communicative process in which a complex mosaic of stakeholders contributes to the endless becoming of the organizational identity is made explicit below. Here, identity construction is described as:

“...those processes of social construction through which actors in and around organizations claim, accept, negotiate, affirm, stabilize, maintain, reproduce, challenge, disrupt, destabilize, repair, or otherwise relate to their sense of selves and others.” (Schultz 2012, 3)

Finally, various variations of the CCO (Communication Constitutes Organization) perspective, although referring to the organization and not its identity, can be mentioned (Schoeneborn et al. 2014). Seen from this perspective, communication, suggestively also visual communication, is what constitutes the organization in an ongoing dialogue between all internal and external stakeholders. The notion of visuals as constitutional instead of transmissional, is supported by Ashcraft et al. (2009) and by Meyer et al. (2013, 494), who suggest that:

“Just as verbal language, visual manifestations not only express or represent reality, but also assist in constructing it”.

In a similar vein, the field of communication appears to have moved away from a sender-message-receiver perspective on communication (Shannon and Weaver 1949) in favour of more dialogue and co-creation oriented perspectives (Overton-de Klerk and Verwey 2013). According to Merz et al. (2009), the fields of both marketing and branding have evolved from focusing on sender-receiver to dialogue, from customers to stakeholders and from product/company centered value creation to stakeholder involvement and value co-creation. This more dynamic and dialogue oriented approach to communication is supported by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2013) who argue in favour of co-

creation and highlight the prospect of shared value and meaning. Additionally, the concept of co-creation has been adopted to fields like corporate branding (Hatch and Schultz 2010) and communication (Johansen and Andersen 2012). However, it does not seem to have been adopted by the CVI literature.

Operating from this alternative and more interpretive set of assumptions problematizes two of the main themes found to dominate the CVI literature – authenticity and consistency. As an example, if an organization has no objectively identifiable essence or core, how can the CVI be authentic or objectively true to this core? Inspired by the literature on authenticity, one possibility could be to approach CVI authenticity in a more nuanced and interpretive manner. Operating from this perspective, the traditional take on CVI authenticity (that which is right and rooted in historical facts) could instead be seen as *“a dopey nostalgia for a non-existent past”* (Potter 2010, 270). Instead, CVI authenticity could be inspired by the concept of *“acceptable authenticity”* that advances the notions that: *“...in an era of instant communications, authenticity continues to be constructed, challenged and re-constructed”* (Freathy and Thomas 2014, 191) and that *“Far from providing objective, disengaged portrayals of previous events, both literary narratives and visual imagery consistently serve to reinforce particular versions of history”* (Freathy and Thomas 2014, 180). Similarly, Torp (2010) advances that representatives, for example managers, can only be regarded as authentic in their communication if they are perceived to be so by the ones they represent. That is, authenticity is strongly linked to the inclusion of multiple voices and seen as an ongoing social process – not simply a personal matter of “walking the talk” or not. Alternatively, inspired by the notion of CSR as aspirational talk rather than authentic and transparent communication (Christensen et al. 2013), the goal of authentic CVI could be substituted with a notion of an aspirational CVI that can help organizations in realizing their visions.

If CVI communication is hard to control and co-created by a vast variety of internal and external stakeholders, how can it be consistent across all media and channels? Perhaps a solution could be to find inspiration from the concepts of flexible integration (Christensen, Firat, et al. 2008) and common starting point (van Riel and Blackburn 1995). Although not focusing on CVI, these concepts represent attempts of combining the premise of complexity with the quest for consistency. That is, instead of seeing consistency as absolute or not, these concepts, in various ways, operate with levels or forms of consistency. Similar lines of thought could potentially be adapted by the field of CVI – for example in a continuum spanning from full consistency to no consistency.

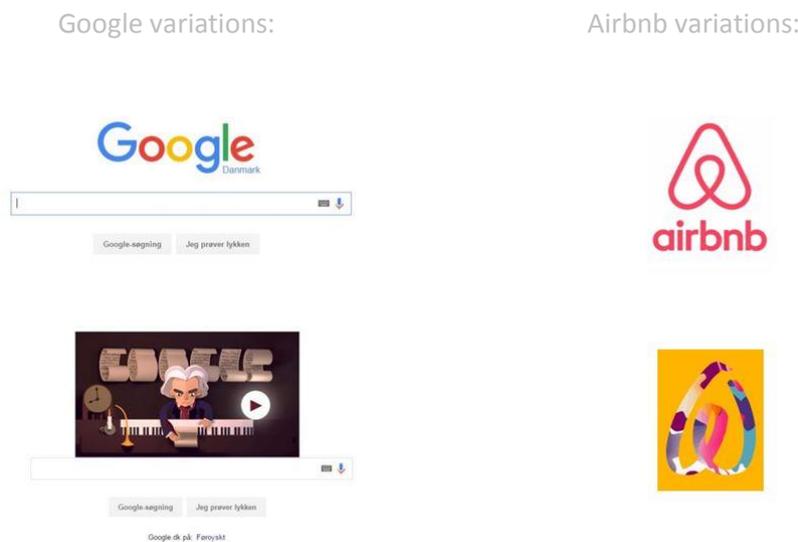
The CVI literature seems to be operating on a set of assumptions which have recently been challenged in related areas of research in an attempt to offer a more nuanced and alternative perspective on the given fields. As shortly highlighted below, the assumptions of the current CVI literature can also be problematized or challenged by the CVI practices of at least some organizations. This second problematizing is introduced below.

Alternative CVI practices: initial impressions

Comparing how CVI is theorized, as shortly presented above, to how CVI is practiced, as shortly presented below, raises a series of interesting contradictions and mysteries. These contradictions

will help to drive the focus, initiate the empirical explorations and trigger the theoretical debates of the dissertation. A few of these “CVI anomalies” that mystified and intrigued the author to do the project outlined in this TP include Google and Airbnb (depicted below in figure 1). Google, from time to time, removes the logo from its website in favor of an animation only vaguely visually related to, or even in no way related to, the CVI or the work of the organization. Airbnb gives the users of its website the opportunity to create their own versions of the corporate logo (in terms of shape, color, pattern etc.), allows for a free use of these “logo-variations” and even encourages the users to share their “logo variations” on the corporate website, which 157264 users have done at the time of writing. In short, Google and Airbnb seem to embrace a set of assumptions that are more in line with the ones discussed in the section “alternative sets of theoretical assumptions” than the ones found in the current CVI literature.

Figure 1: Google and Airbnb variations



Despite using, what the CVI theory would characterize as inconsistent and thus weak CVI practices (Baker and Balmer 1997), which suggestively should lead to diffused reputations and ultimately to negative business performance, both Google and Airbnb seem to be well known, globally operating and highly successful companies with strong images and reputations¹. Furthermore, an initial exploration of CVI cases found in online databases², suggests that Airbnb and Google are not isolated and unique cases but rather high profiled examples of organizations that experiment with the traditional approach to CVI found in the current literature. Finally, it seems that some of the

¹ Google: <http://www.forbes.com/powerful-brands/list/#tab:rank> and Airbnb: <http://www.inc.com/magazine/201412/burt-helm/airbnb-company-of-the-year-2014.html>

² Moving Brands: <http://www.movingbrands.com/work/> and Brand New: http://www.underconsideration.com/mt_bn/mt-search.cgi?IncludeBlogs=9&limit=100&search=dynamic#.VhZkkfmqgkp

agencies designing the CVIs have incorporated notions like co-creation and stakeholder involvement into their design processes. Here exemplified by a quote from the website of Designit³:

“Our process is deeply co-creation oriented, involving both our clients and their customers from early insights to final implementation.”

Overall, initial findings suggest that at least some of the agencies and organizations that work with CVI seem to operate differently from what is advanced in the current CVI literature. How can this be? Are they stand alone examples or not? And what might this imply for the theory and practice of CVI? These are questions informing the project.

Overall research question: setting the course

An initial impression of the theory and practice of CVI ironically suggests that the current theoretical field of CVI, initially born out of the practice of CVI, seems to be somewhat decoupled from the current CVI practices. That is, the current CVI theory seems to operate on assumptions of organizational and managerial control and the ideal of CVI authenticity and consistency. On the other hand, at least part of the practice seems to make use of alternative assumptions like co-creation and CVI variation. These assumptions are more in line with newer approaches from the fields of organizational identity and co-creation and resonate well with the call for an interpretive approach to visuals - the visual turn. Altogether, the current CVI literature seems to be problematic in the sense that it appears to be somewhat out of touch with the practice of CVI. Furthermore, the current CVI literature is regarded as problematic in the sense that it seems to rest on a set of conceptual assumptions that are challenged in related areas of research such as organizational identity. The overall goal of this dissertation is to explore the assumptions and consequences of this possible dual mismatch between how CVI is theorized and practiced and the mismatch in assumptions found in the CVI literature and other identity literature operating at an organizational level. In the quest to shed light on the above, the overall research question guiding the project reads:

How can empirical explorations and alternative theoretical perspectives on identity in an organizational context challenge and develop the existing concepts, theories and practices of Corporate Visual Identity?

To operationalise this overall research question, it has been broken down into sub-questions that will help to see the overall research question from different perspectives. These sub-questions also help to structure the final written dissertation in terms of chapters and sections. The sub-questions read:

- What are the overall themes and assumptions dominating the CVI literature? And how might these be challenged and better understood by exploring the assumptions found in other areas of research relating to identity in an organizational context?
- What are the overall themes and assumptions dominating how the CVI-agencies work with CVI? And how might these be challenged and better understood by exploring the

³ Designit: <https://designit.com/what-we-do>

assumptions found in other areas of research relating to identity in an organizational context?

- Are the notions of CVI consistency and authenticity still relevant for the theory and practice of CVI when operating on an alternative and more dynamic set of assumptions? If so, how? If not, do other concepts emerge? And what might the theoretical and practical implications of this be?

As can be seen above, this project focuses on visuals at an organizational level. That is, only little, if any, focus will be given to the visuals of products, labels, ads, buildings etc. in isolation. Instead, these visuals will be seen as part of a general visualization of the organizational – the CVI. Furthermore it is fully accepted that CVI is often regarded as an integrated part of the overall concepts of corporate branding and corporate identity and that it would be interesting and relevant to further explore how CVI relates to these concepts. However, this is not the purpose of this project. Instead, this project will focus on CVI in its own right, which will allow for a more thorough exploration.

Overall thoughts on philosophy of science, structure, theory and methodology

In terms of philosophy of science, this project will take the position that Collin (1998) refers to as moderate social constructivist and that Wenneberg (2000) refers to as the position of social reality. This is, ontologically, the existence of a physical and material world or reality, which can exist independent of social constructions, is accepted. However, the social and human world or reality will be regarded as a social construct. On the epistemological level, it is accepted that the physical world can be relatively objectively documented and analysed. As an example, in a CVI-context, the colours, size etc. of a CVI can be measured objectively. However, the social and human world must be accessed and analysed as social constructions – not as an objective truth. In a CVI context, this implies that the meaning of the CVI, how it is perceived, why it is created etc. must be explored interpretatively.

Inspired by Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) and Alvesson and Kärreman (2007), the theoretical and empirical work, or more specifically the relationship between the two, takes an iterative approach. Thus, the theories chosen and used will be influenced by what is found in the empirical work and vice versa. Structurally, the dissertation will, aside from an introduction and a conclusion, be divided into two main sections with separate theory, methodology and analysis. The first main section, primarily driven by the first two sub-questions listed above, will explore how CVI is currently theorised and practiced on an overall scale. More specifically, this section will include a structured review of the current CVI literature and an exploration of how the agencies, the ones designing the CVIs and consulting the organizations on how to work with the CVIs, see and work with CVI. From this overall insight into the theory and practice of CVI, specific and interesting contradictions, themes and paradoxes have started to emerge – for example CVI consistency and authenticity seen from a dynamic perspective. The second main part of the project, which sets out to answer the last sub-question listed above, will, based on single case studies go more into depth with these emerging themes. Altogether, as the project progresses, the focus of both the theory and the imperial work will gradually move from an overall perspective to a more narrow focus which will enable focused

debates and theorizing that will in turn contribute with new perspectives relevant for the current theories and practices of CVI.

Overall goal and planned contributions

As already stated, the overall objective is to map out, understand, challenge and debate the dual mystery at hand: 1) contradictions in how CVI is theorised and practiced and 2) contradicting sets of assumptions in the CVI literature and related areas of research on identity in an organizational context. Also catering to the trend of gap-closing, in the process of unravelling the CVI-mystery, the project also plans to participate in closing gaps already identified in the literature. However, gap-closing will be seen as a by-product of debating the contradictions – not as an end in itself. Some of the gaps already identified in the literature include:

- The notion of CVI as a highly important yet underexplored area of research that calls for more research in general (Mann and Ghuman (2014), Fetscherin and Usunier (2012), Jong Woo et al. (2008), van den Bosch, Elving, et al. (2006) and Rosson and Brooks (2004)).
- A call for an interpretive approach to visuals in an organization context, especially focusing on aspects relating to identity and communication, is advanced in the visual turn (see Bell et al. (2014) and Meyer et al. (2013)).
- Although CVI is included in reviews of corporate branding (Fetscherin and Usunier 2012) and corporate identity (Balmer 2008), no review focusing explicitly on CVI can be found. As the CVI is naturally not the main focus in the reviews on corporate branding and corporate identity, no in-depth status can be found on CVI leaving the field in a state of limbo.
- Although Torp (2009), Christensen, Morsing, et al. (2008) and Christensen, Firat, et al. (2008) have challenged the assumptions of the overall fields of integrated communication and corporate communication, a process which is arguably constructive in an attempt to avoid stagnation (Sandberg and Alvesson 2011), very little or no critical theorizing focusing specifically on the theory and practice of CVI can be found.

Summing up, in the process of exploring the overall research question, and the sub-questions underpinning it, the project will contribute with:

- Developing an alternative and more nuanced understanding of how CVI can be theorized.
- Closing gaps identified in the current literature.
- Opening up new gaps or research venues that could be explored in future research.
- Inspiring practitioners to consider alternative approaches to CVI.

In the following section, the two main sections of the dissertation and their separate sets of theory, methodology and analysis will be highlighted.

Part one: current theory and overall CVI practices

The overall goal of this first part of the dissertation is to better understand how CVI is currently theorized and practiced on an overall scale. Theoretically, a structured review of the CVI literature will be conducted to give a clear and nuanced understanding of the current CVI literature.

Empirically, an exploration of how the agencies, the ones who design the CVIs for a vast and varied amount of organizations and consult them on how to work with the CVIs, will be undertaken. This will be done to get an overall impression of how CVI is currently practiced.

Theory: a structured review of the current CVI literature

At the time of writing, the search criteria has been set up, the search has been conducted and the review material has been sorted, filtered, read and coded. Finally, the analysis is in progress. The following will briefly introduce the reader to the main ideas and rationales behind the structured search and the filtering of the review material. Finally, the main findings of the analysis, which is still in working progress, will be highlighted.

The search, the filtering and the final pool:

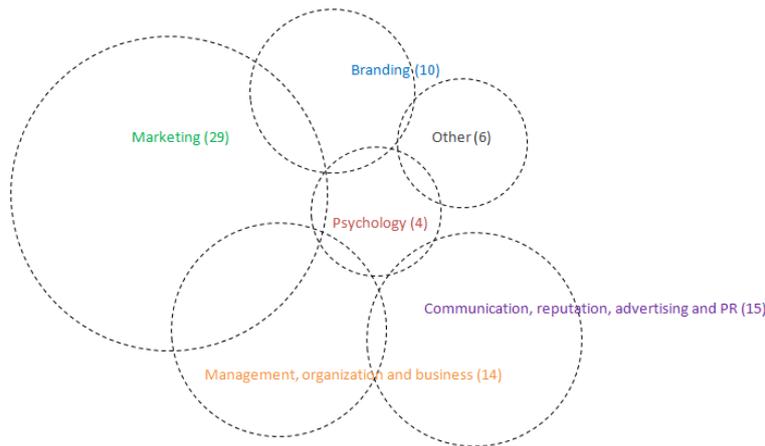
Based on the initial readings, it became clear that the terminology used to debate CVI is very inconsistent and diverse. Consequently, the terminology used to set up the search parameters where, in an attempt to harvest a wide and as representative sample as possible, fairly open. Specifically, visual identit* (covering visual identity, visual identities etc.) in combination with one or more of the following words was set up as search criteria: organisation*, organization*, corporat*, compan*, brand* or business. In databases that did not allow for combination searches, the search criterion was simply visual identit*.

Well aware of the time consuming nature of its setup, a search solution including both a database search and a google scholar search was chosen. This solution was chosen in the hope of reviewing the field in its full complexity. The databases chosen included multiple journals within areas such as management, communication, marketing, organization, business, social science and humanities. In an attempt to limit the quantity and improve the academic quality, only peer reviewed papers were searched for. Finally, due to own limitations in terms of language, only work done in English was included in the search.

In total, the database search generated 322 hits, which where all imported and compiled in an endnote list. Having excluded duplicates, the pool was reduced to 179 unique hits. Removing the nonacademic work and journal articles not relevant to the review, the list was reduced to 78 journal articles. The individual evaluation process used to sort the hits included following the URL (if available), reading abstracts, following the information provided and looking for additional information online. Following the same procedure, the initial google scholar search of 26 hits which was reduced to 4 new and unique peer reviewed journal articles. Uniting the two searches, the total pool included 82 peer reviewed articles. Having read the material, 4 additional articles were removed as they were not evaluated as relevant for the review despite the fact that their abstracts

suggested otherwise. In summary, 78 peer reviewed journal articles from no less than 46 different journals make up the pool of knowledge informing the literature review. Below, the articles have been grouped into rough and overlapping clusters to map out and visualize their origin. It should be noted that the overlaps cannot be perfectly visualized as most, if not all, of the clusters somehow overlap with the rest. Furthermore, some texts could be placed in more than one cluster.

Figure 2: The origins of the reviewed texts



As can be seen, the fields of marketing (led by European Journal of Marketing, 10 articles), branding (led by Journal of Brand Management, 8 articles) and a range of other communication centered fields of research (united in the cluster Communication, reputation, advertising and PR) are the main contributors. However, also links to journals focusing on psychology and other areas can be found. In conclusion, the extremely diverse nature and origin of the articles contributing to the review supports the notion that visual identity is of interest to a wide range of fields.

Unexpectedly, the work of Olins (1989), who is often referred to in the literature, did not show up in the search. This could be explained by the fact that his work was mainly published in books which are not included in this “article only” review. However, the root cause of the exclusion is expected to be terminology. As explained by Balmer and Wilson (1998), the graphic designers of the 1980s and 1990s, including Olins, typically used the term corporate identity, not included in the search criteria, to describe the field that today is referred to as visual identity or corporate visual identity.

The fact that the work of Olins and other potentially relevant work are not directly included in the review can naturally be seen as a limitation for the review. However, their work is elaborated on and reviewed in later work that is included in this review, which arguably indirectly includes their work in the review. As an example, the early reviews and thoughts presented by Balmer and others (Baker and Balmer 1997, van Riel and Balmer 1997, Balmer 1995b, a), only some of which are included in the review, are all explicitly referred to, presented and build upon in later work all included in the review (Balmer 2008, Balmer 2001, Balmer and Wilson 1998). This includes, but is not limited to, a review of the different schools of corporate identity – one of them being the visual school that builds

on ideas and concepts cited to graphic designers and consultants like Olins. In the ideal of all worlds, inclusion of all relevant papers and books would be preferable. However, no review will be able to capture the knowledge of all articles and books ever written – compromises must be made. Therefore, the fact that this review primarily focuses on newer work, while still (directly or indirectly) including the older work, is not seen as highly problematic.

Approaching the 78 journal papers:

Reading through the 78 journal articles selected for the review, the author payed special attention to how the papers dealt with the following areas: 1) definitions, elements and purpose, 2) main themes debated, 3) management and 4) general and ontological assumptions. These thematic insights where noted down in a vast table to allow for a structured analysis of the areas of focus.

This rather deductive approach was chosen to offer the reviewer a system for approaching a field characterized by inconsistent terminology and no apparent structure or themes. As in any other deductive approach, the danger of preset restrains and limitations lurks. A fully inductive approach could potentially have been chosen in an attempt to be entirely open to all themes emerging from the field. However, the areas of focus chosen for a structured approach to the literature were deliberately widened to capture variations within the field, which will limit the danger of reviewing the field wearing blinkers. In the following sections, the main themes and underlying assumptions found to characterize the field are presented.

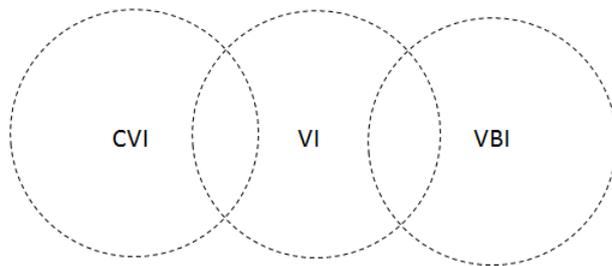
Systematizing the review pool: the mainstream and the deviations

Reading through the literature, the following four themes emerged as dominant within the field: 1) Conceptual inconsistency and development, 2) Global CVI-standardization vs. national CVI-localization, 3) Issues related to CVI management and change, and 4) logos and ads. As the format of the TP does not allow for a thorough review of the four themes, the following will highlight the main points found in the in-depth review, that is still in process.

Theme 1: conceptual inconsistency and the underlying assumptions

The first of four major themes debated in the literature is conceptual or terminological inconsistency. Examples of theorists who have problematized this inconsistency include, but is far from limited to, Alkibay et al. (2007), Topalian (2003) and Balmer (2001). On an overall scale, the definitions found in the literature can be grouped into the three overlapping concepts of corporate visual identity (CVI), visual brand Identity (VBI) and visual identity (VI), which are visualized (Figure 3) and explored below.

Figure 3: Overlapping definitions



CVI is often defined as *“the symbols and graphical elements that express the essence of an organization”* van den Bosch et al. (2005, 108), VBI is typically found to be defined as the *“face of the brand”* (Phillips et al. 2014, 319) and Bravo et al. (2013, 535) suggest that *“visual identity embodies any visual element that is associated with an organization”*. Exploring these and other definitions of CVI, VI and VBI, the elements of which they consist and the channels in which these elements are used, it becomes obvious that these clusters are highly overlapping. That is, regardless of dealing with CVI, VI or VBI, most theorists focus on the same visual elements (name, logo, typography, color, slogan and additional graphic design elements) to visualize whatever concept. The same is the case in terms of channels or touch points as referred to within the VBI context. Most theorists have a notion of applying the visual elements in channels like print, websites, buildings etc. Yet another indication of the overlapping nature of these clusters can be found in the tendency of many papers to use the terms interchangeable and their tendency to cross-reference the different streams. Examples of this interchangeable use of “labeling” include, but is far from limited to, Bartholmé and Melewar (2009, 157) who refer to CVI, VI and corporate design seemingly interchangeably and Alessandri et al. (2006, 261) who, referencing van den Bosch et al. (2005), define the visual identity of an organization, and not a corporation, using a CVI definition. More generally, VI is often used as an “umbrella term” that is used interchangeably to refer to the visual identity of both brands (Hankinson and Rochester 2005), organizations (Bravo et al. 2013) and corporations (Baker and Balmer 1997). Altogether, reading through the literature, one is left with the impression of a field saturated with inconsistent and overlapping terminologies and definitions.

Based on a review of the definitions of the overlapping concepts of CVI, VI and VBI found in the literature and exemplified above, it will be concluded that the mentioned fields share, not only visual elements and channels, but, and at least as important, also assumptions. These assumptions will be presented with a point of departure in how Bravo et al. (2012, 678) define VI, which in many regards captures how CVI, VBI and VI are typically perceived within the literature:

“First, visual identity will allow an organisation to obtain visibility and recognition in the market. Second, it is a symbol for stakeholders that will positively influence image and corporate reputation. Third, visual identity projects the organisation’s structure externally in an integrated way. Finally visual identity has an internal function in terms of leading employees to identify themselves with the company.”

From the above it can be seen that a certain set of assumptions dominates the fields of CVI, VI and VBI. As an example, the initial part of the quote above assumes that the organization is in control,

the second part suggests that stakeholders are separate from the VI, the third section assumes that an organization's structure can and should be projected to (not in dialogue with) stakeholders in a consistent way. Finally, it is assumed that employees are under the influence of (as opposed to influencing) the VI. This can be seen in the notion that VI is seen as a strategic tool for convincing employee to identify with the company.

In general, as also highlighted in the introduction, the fields seem to share the following assumptions: an organization has some sort of essence that can and should be authentically visualized, the organization is in control of the CVI, the CVI can and should be consistent across channels, and the CVI is communicated to (not in collaboration with) internal and external stakeholders to build identification, reputation and differentiation. One of the very few, however, very notable exceptions of the transmission oriented approach to CVI is presented by Bolhuis et al. (2015, 4) who, in a somewhat offhand comment, note that:

"In the communication process, the CVI gives meaning to the brand or organization. In the assimilation process, the brand or organization gives meaning to the CVI."

Here, the relationship between CVI and brand or organization is described as an ongoing dialogue of mutual influence as opposed to the classical transmission assumption found to strongly dominate the field. However interesting as the dialogue perspective is, it is unfortunately not fully unfolded to a degree where it is discussed what such a perspective holds for the theory and practice of CVI at large. This project will try to further unfold and explore this, and similar, suggestions.

Theme 2: global CVI-standardization vs. national CVI-localization

A second theme debated in the literature is the question of whether globally operating organizations should make use of one consistent CVI globally or should adapt the CVI to local markets. Based on the dominating notion that *"The CVI literature rejects the notion that users will tolerate either confusion or design inconsistency"* (Masiki 2011, 96) it is hardly surprising to find that the claim for CVI consistency, also at a global level, is generally dominating the field. Especially, the multiple articles that Melewar, Saunders and Balmer have created based on a study of how multinational companies with headquarters in Britain and subsidiaries in Malaysia work with CVI, seem to support the notion of a globally consistent CVI. As an example, Melewar and Saunders (1998, 301) strongly argue in favor of global standardization, which they find improve sales, consumer goodwill, consumer's familiarity, advertising awareness, market share, executive recruitment and receptivity of locals. To create and uphold this consistency, Melewar and Saunders (1998) argue that a centralization of power is needed and that the development, coordination and decision making should be centralized at headquarters, preferably let by a chief executive. A few years later they reach a similar conclusion, arguing for the existence of a trend towards *"the highly standardized end of the spectrum"* when it comes to global CVI standardization (Melewar et al. 2001, 425). Here, especially the idea of a spectrum is deemed interesting and will, unlike in the original text, be explored further in this project. For example, how to differentiate between being "not standardized", "relatively standardized" and "highly standardized"? And how standardized or consistent should a CVI be? These are questions that will be explored later on in the project.

In contrast to the above, Schmitt (1995, 35) finds that: “... *in positioning corporations and marketing products in East Asia, it is necessary to adjust a global identity to local tastes*”. In a similar vein, Bravo et al. (2013, 549) find that “*the monolithic mould*” is still the preferred approach although the “*visual identity should also be adapted to the particular characteristics of each country*”. That is, here a monolithic approach to CVI consistency, which leaves a little room for national adaption, is suggested. However, how much should the organizations adapt its CVI? and how? Again, the development of a continuum of CVI consistency seems appropriate to explore further.

In terms of underlying assumptions driving the debate of global CVI consistency or local adaption at least two assumptions can be found: managerial control is positive and communicating is a process of sending out messages to stakeholders. In the body of literature reviewed, even in the work that acknowledge that some level of adaption is needed, it is, explicitly or not, assumed that managers can and should control the CVI. That is, by altering the manuals, the HQ managers can change how the CVI is applied worldwide to achieve the recommended degree of CVI consistency, which should lead to improved image etc. As an example, Jordá-Albiñana et al. (2009, 192) document “*how concerned multinational companies are about total control of how the brand is applied*” and how this lust for control results in the creation of vast manuals and guidelines that “*the subsidiaries merely copy*”. The assumptions underpinning the CVI communication is, similar to the managerial assumptions, rather transmission oriented. This is exemplified by Jordá-Albiñana et al. (2009, 176) who, heavily inspired by Shannon and Weaver (1949), explicitly refer to *messages* that are *encoded* by the organization and *sent* to a given receiver where the message is *decoded*. That is, the CVI is created by the organizational management and sent or conveyed to stakeholders. Altogether, though the field seems to agree on its underlying assumptions of management and communication, divergent perspectives on how consistent CVI should be in a global context seem to exist.

Theme 3: issues related to CVI management and change

Although authors like Hussain and Ferdous (2014), Bravo et al. (2012) and Jordá-Albiñana et al. (2009) still regarded it as an underexplored area within the field, the management of CVI, especially in times of change, is the third major theme discussed in the literature. What sets this theme apart from the rest, is the tendency to offer normative recommendations, which is elaborated on below.

CVI management in general:

The two primary goals for CVI managers, according to the literature, appear to be achieving CVI consistency and to make sure that CVI authentically reflect the organization. As an example, Van den Bosch et al. (2004, 225) see “*the problem of ensuring a consistent use of a CVI*” as “*one of the major operational issues*” facing CVI-managers. As already discussed in the initial part of the review, the importance of aligning CVI elements to gain CVI consistency is echoed in much of the literature. The work of Hussain and Ferdous (2014, 441), who, talking from a brand perspective, strongly argue in favor of aligning and integrating “*a number of visual brand identity touch-points*”, is an example of the fact that visual alignment and consistency is seen as one of the main managerial goals across the field – be it VI, CVI or VBI. The other general theme in the CVI management literature is authenticity. This is, a vast majority of the literature, explicitly or not, suggest that the consistent CVI should

authentically reflect the organization “behind” it. A few of the more explicit examples include Hussain and Ferdous (2014, 433) who urge that organizations should “*convey the individuality and distinctiveness of the company*” or “*express the essence of the organization*”, Simões et al. (2005, 158) who find that CVI should visualize the company culture and values and Idris and Whitfield (2014) who, drawing on Balmer (1995), see CVI as the way an organization “*communicates its corporate philosophy and personality*”.

Various suggestions on how to achieve these goals of CVI consistency and authenticity are suggested. However, in general, the theory seems to suggest combining different approaches. As an example, Van den Bosch et al. (2004) suggest that CVI managers should do everything in their power to develop, distribute and communicate CVI-tools (manuals, templates etc.) to all employees and “*urge and facilitate employees to comply with the CVI guidelines of an organization*” (Van den Bosch et al. 2004, 231). Simultaneously, they find that it is equally important for managers to set an example to culturally embed the CVI (Van den Bosch et al. 2004, 225). In short, the more effort managers use on setting up CVI initiatives, the more consistency is achieved. Furthermore, the primary weaponry of CVI managers are seen to be CVI-tools (manuals, templates, guidelines etc.) and leading by example.

CVI management from an internal perspective:

In their study of how to manage the internal implementation and maintenance of a corporate identity (CI), Simões et al. (2005, 163) stress the “*pivotal role of employees in implementing corporate identity*” and furthermore affirm that they regard “*visual identity as a fundamental element of corporate identity*”. From this it will be concluded that Simões et al. (2005) argue that employees have a pivotal role in implementing visual identity, which is regarded as a fundamental element of CI. The rationale behind this argument is twofold: a consistent and authentic CVI will increase employee identification with the organization “behind” the VI and build internal consensus (Simões et al. 2005, 155). In turn, the more the employees identify with, live and “deliver” the visualized identity, the more authentic the visual identity and the CI will appear in the eyes of external stakeholders, which will improve image, reputation and sales (Simões et al. 2005, 153). Similarly, van den Bosch, Elving, et al. (2006) argue that managers should have focus on both internal and external stakeholders in an attempt to strive for, not only CVI consistency, but also a correlation between the visualized identity and the organization – pointing towards authenticity. Supporting the notion that employees are important and that the visualized identity should be anchored internally in the organization, van den Bosch, de Jong, et al. (2006, 140), building on Fombrun and Van Riel (2004) find:

“Corporate values first need to be incorporated by employees before they can be expressed externally” and that *“the CVI should also first be understood and supported by the employees of the organization”*.

In the process of managing this internal process, which they regard to be largely controllable, Simões et al. (2005) advise managers to make use of audits, guidelines and checklists to control and monitor the visual and corporate identity - advice supported by van den Bosch, de Jong, et al. (2006). In summary, building on the work of Hatch and Schultz (1997) and van Riel and Balmer (1997), Simões

et al. (2005, 155) argue that management of the visual aspects of CI is to “*transmit the strategic, visual dimensions of corporate identity to internal and external audiences*” via CVI manuals etc. However, van den Bosch, de Jong, et al. (2006) suggest that organizations should combine these somewhat mechanical approaches with approaches centered on educating the employees, supporting the employees in the use of CVI and informing the employees of the strategy behind the CVI. According to their study, tools work okay; however, supplemented with education, information and support, even greater CVI consistency can be obtained.

The above, suggests that many of the assumptions found in the literature so far also can be found taking an internal perspective. CVI or VI is still regarded as controllable and transmittable, CVI consistency is seen as possible and positive and CVI should authentically reflect organizational values and culture (Simões et al. 2005, 158). Although strongly regimenting an argument for CVI consistency, Simões et al. (2005, 157) have, as can be seen below, a slight opening in terms of just how consistent the CVI should be – again raising and strengthening the argument for a CVI consistency continuum instead of operating with the extremes of consistent or not.

“Although the molding of identity may be varied for each stakeholder group, we suggest that there is a common platform for identity management”.

Similarly, van den Bosch, Elving, et al. (2006) have a slight opening regarding the nature of CVI authenticity, that is, the alignment of the CVI and the organization behind it. Still arguing in favor of CVI authenticity, van den Bosch, Elving, et al. (2006, 871) note that: “*...a CVI expresses the values and ambitions of an organisation, its business, and its characteristics*”. By including “ambitions”, the authors seem to suggest that authenticity can also have some element of aspiration to it. In other words, a CVI can still be seen as authentic although it does not visualize that which already is. Moving more into how this can be undertaken, van den Bosch, Elving, et al. (2006, 881) suggest, building on Hatch and Schultz (2003), that:

“Managing an organisation’s brand can be seen as a dynamic process that needs to be continuously adjusting to vision, culture and image”.

Even though the consequences and underlying assumptions of this more procedural and dynamic approach to CVI management and authenticity is not elaborated on in the article, it will still be regarded as an interesting and alternative opening into an area predominantly saturated with fixed assumptions of stability.

CVI management in times of change:

The CVI literature is also found to explore how best to manage CVI in times of change – mostly related to rebranding or organizational mergers and acquisitions. Again, the themes of CVI consistency and authenticity and the assumptions of managerial control and communication as transmission are dominating the literature. This can for example be seen in the work of Idris and Whitfield (2014), Sharma and Jain (2011), Melewar et al. (2006) and Brooks et al. (2005).

Although they represent a minority and mostly come in the form of passing remarks or undeveloped ideas, deviations from the assumptions outlined above can be found. These deviations include Rosson and Brooks (2004) who shortly remark that the idea of separate identities that can be aligned can be challenged by newer approaches to organizational identity such as Gioia et al. (2000). It is noted that, according to these newer approaches, alignment could possibly be seen as two-way and ongoing instead of one-way and step by step. Similarly, Balmer and Thomson (2009) argue, again in a passing remark, that alignment could be seen as an ongoing process. A very notable example of alternative perspectives to CVI management is presented by Bolhuis et al. (2015, 3), who, working within the area of rebranding, suggest that: *“Ideally, a CVI reflects a balance between what an organization actually is and what it tries to be”*. That is, in contrast to the typical call for authenticity as a perfect reflection of the organizational “truth”, the authors argue for an element of aspiration – a visualization of a possible future truth if you will. Furthermore, the same authors argue that *“the relationship between an organization’s CVI and its identity is not necessarily a causal, one-directional one”* (Bolhuis et al. 2015, 3), as typically described in the literature. Instead the relationship is seen as a process of mutual and two-way influence in which *“...the visual identity both represents and affects an organization’s identity and image among stakeholders”* (Bolhuis et al. 2015, 2). The alternative and more dynamic approaches to CVI management, and the conceptual assumptions underpinning them, presented by Bolhuis et al. (2015, 2) are, although they are not fully developed, very interesting and relevant for the project at hand as they . They offer an alternative set of assumptions that will be explored in more depth throughout the dissertation.

Theme 4: logo and ads (recall, psychology and consumer perceptions):

The fourth and last major theme found in the literature is a cluster of articles dealing with logos and advertisements and how these are perceived and recalled. As this analysis is only just initiated, the following will be very brief. Although effort is used on exploring cross-cultural aspects of logo design and CVI (see Van der Lans et al. (2009) and Jong Woo et al. (2008)), most work is related to recall and consumer evaluation. As an example, Perea et al. (2015) explore if using capital letters or non-capital letters influence recall speed of brand names, Foroudi et al. (2014) deal with how logos influence consumer evaluation and Phillips et al. (2014) debate how advertisements can balance being new and interesting yet true to the established visual brand identity. What appears to be a common feature within this cluster of work is the link to psychology and cognition, which explains why a number of articles of the review pool stems from psychology as previously seen. In these works, a logo is typically, and often explicitly, seen and described as a given stimuli that is exposed to a large number of test-persons to provoke a response. The work seems to be operating on the notion that stakeholders such as consumers or employees can, not unlike the dogs of Pavlov’s behaviorist experiments (Pavlov 1927), be conditioned to respond to a CVI in a certain way. That is, it is assumed that stakeholders can and should repeatedly be exposed to a consistent CVI encoded with a planned meaning and that this exposure will condition the receivers to decode the CVI message and respond to it in the manner planned by the sender – the organization. As seen previously, such assumptions are problematized elsewhere and will be explored and discussed in this project.

Summing up and reflections

The literature reviewed suggests that, although exceptions can be found, a large majority of the work on CVI, VI and VBI operates based on the conceptual assumption of managerial control and a transmission oriented approach to communication. Furthermore, to a large extent, CVI consistency and authenticity are regarded as highly important and possible. In general, remarkably little empirical work could be found in the literature and especially the digital side of CVI seems to be underexplored. As an example, no work at all could be found on CVI in relation to social media. The overall goal of this dissertation is to unfold and further explore some of the deviations found in the literature and other alternative perspectives found within the realm of identity in an organizational context. Furthermore, some of the empirical explorations will look into the possibilities and challenges that the digital world present in relation to CVI. The following will shortly explain the initial ideas and work done to empirically understand and map out how CVI is generally practiced today.

Empirical exploration: overall current CVI practices

Having explored the current CVI theory via a structured review, the empirical explorations described below plan to provide insight into the overall CVI practices of today. Given the relative nascent area of the research (exploring CVI from an interpretive perspective), this project will, in accordance with theorists like Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) and Edmondson and McManus (2007), adapt an explorative and qualitative research strategy. More specifically, the empirical exploration will be twofold and will mainly include a series of interviews with strategists from top Danish agencies, which will be supplemented with a review of CVI case databases. At the time of writing, the interviews are yet to be transcribed and analyzed and the databases are yet to be systematically reviewed. Therefore, no analysis or findings can be presented below. Instead the research design will be of focus.

To get an overall impression of how current organizations work with CVI, representatives from the agencies working with the development and counseling of CVIs were contacted. More specifically, strategists⁴ from 12 acknowledged Danish agencies⁵, all recommended by their trade union⁶ and industry journalists⁷ for their high quality work on CVI, were interviewed. As these strategists all work in the intersection of advising the multiple clients of the agency on CVI matters and debating the CVI design with the agency designers, this group of professionals are arguably in a unique position to offer both a brought representative perspective of how organizations of various sizes and industries work with CVI and how CVIs are actually designed to cater for this. The privileged position of agency strategists is acknowledged and highlighted by authors like Phillips et al. (2014), van den Bosch, Elving, et al. (2006) and Balmer and Soenen (1999).

⁴ With various titles including: General Managers, Partners, Strategic Directors, Strategic Planners, Planners and Creative Directors.

⁵ 1508, &Co, DDB Copenhagen, Designit, Envision, e-types, Hatch and Bloom, Hjaltelin Stahl, Kontrapunkt, Kunde og Co, Scandinavian Design Group and Stupid Studio

⁶ Kreativitet og Kommunikation: <http://www.kreativitetogkommunikation.dk/>

⁷ Bureaubiz, <http://www.bureaubiz.dk/> and BureauBureau, <http://www.bureaubureau.dk/>

The 12 semi-structured interviews, which allows for both structure and flexibility (Yin 2010, Kvale 2008), all followed an interview guide consisting mainly of open-ended questions centered around areas such as: CVI consistency, CVI authenticity, CVI management and CVI design. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face at agency offices, were all recorded on dictaphone and will all be transcribed. As the empirical material is digital, it is easy accessible. This allows other researchers to perform an internal review of the empirical material and the future analysis to make sure that my findings are anchored in the empirical material and sound analysis.

At this stage of the project, the analytical considerations have been limited. For now, the plan is to make use of qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005), template analysis (King 2012) or directed content analysis (Hamzah et al. 2014) to find emerging systems, patterns or themes that can help to explain how the agency strategists see and work with CVI and what conceptual and practical assumptions might drive these practices.

Supplementing the findings of the interviews, a review of CVI case databases⁸ will be used to develop a continuum of CVI cases spanning from full CVI consistency to no CVI consistency. This process is only just initiated and will, besides nuancing the various degrees of visual consistency, be used to empirically map out how consistent the CVIs of the “real world” actually are. Altogether, it is hoped that the interviews and the review of the CVI case databases provide a nuanced impression of how CVI is generally practiced at the time of writing.

⁸ Moving Brands: <http://www.movingbrands.com/work/> and Brand New: http://www.underconsideration.com/mt_bn/mt-search.cgi?IncludeBlogs=9&limit=100&search=dynamic#.VhZkkfmqgkp

Part two: alternative perspectives on theory and practice of CVI

Whereas the first part of the project focused on overall tendencies, this second part of the project will focus on specific areas of interest. These areas of interest and relevance will emerge from the analysis of part one and as part one is still in the making, the final selection of focus areas are yet to be made. However, at the time of writing, the following areas of focus seem relevant to explore further theoretically and empirically: CVI consistency, CVI authenticity, CVI management and CVI communication. The following will highlight the main ideas and rationale behind the planned theoretical debates and empirical explorations. Please note, that the following are ideas – not detailed plans.

Theoretical considerations: seeking inspiration from identity in organizational context

To get a thorough and nuanced understanding of the current CVI literature, a structured review was initiated in part one of this project. This was done in respect of the field that this project sets out to challenge. In other words, in part one, an effort has been made to fully understand the field before challenging it. The time and effort used on the alternative perspectives on identity work within an organizational context, found in the second part of the project, does, at the time of writing, not match the time and effort put into reviewing the CVI literature. The initial impressions of the alternative theoretical perspectives from which this project plans to gather inspiration has thus already been presented in the introduction and will not be elaborated on further. In the future, this theory will be explored in more detail, but will not take on the form of a structured review. Instead, the alternative theory will be approached selectively and will be informed by the empirical findings of part one. That is, the themes emerging from the empirical findings of part one will determine what theoretical areas of focus that will be reviewed, discussed and used in part two.

Empirical considerations: focused case studies

The research method used to empirically explore the chosen areas of focus is qualitative case study. Case studies are chosen over other relevant methods as it is often recommended when faced with a complex and unknown situation or phenomenon (Bryman 2012), which is arguably the type of situation at hand – exploring CVI from a new and interpretive perspective. Furthermore, case studies are often used in the existing CVI theory and Balmer and Thomson (2009) make a strong argument for using case studies in identity studies to build new theory, which is what this project aspires to do. The possibility of generating new theory based on case studies, including single case studies, is supported by theorists like Yin (2014) and Flyvbjerg (2006). Finally, Leitch and Motion (1999) suggest focusing on the unorthodox cases that they find most relevant for developing new insights and theories. Informed by the above, this dissertation plans to do two qualitative case studies that focus on CVI authenticity and CVI consistency. To triangulate the empirical material, these case studies will include personal qualitative interviews, desktop research and document analysis. In terms of analysis of the empirical material, the considerations have been scarce. Again, qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005), template analysis (King 2012) or directed content analysis (Hamzah et al. 2014) are possibilities. Below, two initial suggestions for cases are presented.

Case 1: primarily focusing on CVI authenticity

Airbnb and Nordkyn are two of the cases that are currently under consideration. As already seen in the introduction, Airbnb invites its users to create their own Airbnb-logos. Possibly, this is done in an attempt to adapt the CVI to better reflect the local reality of the individual users – making it more authentic. If this is the rationale behind the alternative CVI practice or not will be explored further before embarking on a case study. Another possibility is Nordkyn, which is an organization that promotes tourism in the northern part of Norway. As visualized below, the CVI of Nordkyn, at least when it is used online, is adapted to authentically reflect the present temperature and wind in the area. This is done via changes to the shape and colour of the logo⁹.



As can be seen, both the Airbnb and the Nordkyn case seems to operate with a dynamic approach to what an organization is – be it the individual users (Airbnb) or the nature in which the organization rests (Nordkyn). What seems to be the rationale in both cases is the notion that in order to authentically reflect an organization that is continuously changing (be it changing users or weather), the CVI must change accordingly. As can be seen above, the case study on CVI authenticity might very well, besides contributing to a better understanding of CVI authenticity from an alternative perspective, also contribute with new insights into CVI consistency, online CVI, CVI management and CVI communication. To gain insight into how the concept of CVI authenticity is conceptualized and practiced at an agency level, an interview has been set up with Nikolaj Stagis who has written the book “The authentic company” (Stagis 2012) and has founded and is currently managing Stagis – a brand agency that differentiates itself via helping organizations to “*create authentic brands*”¹⁰.

Case 2: primarily focusing on CVI consistency

Having reviewed the CVI case databases and developed the continuum of CVI consistency, multiple suitable cases from which to select the right candidate are likely to emerge. Should this, although

⁹ Online: [http://www.underconsideration.com/brandnew/archives/where the cold wind blows.php#.Vec5HOsW2pc](http://www.underconsideration.com/brandnew/archives/where_the_cold_wind_blowes.php#.Vec5HOsW2pc)

¹⁰ Home page of Stagis: <http://www.stagis.com/>

highly unlikely, happen, both Airbnb and Nordkyn clearly have alternative approaches to CVI consistency and could therefore be relevant cases for exploring the practice of alternative CVI consistency. However, Google is currently the main candidate for exploring alternative approaches to CVI consistency. The reason for this is the fact that it will be considered a true anomaly – an example of a high profile organization that uses practices very divergent to what the theory suggests and still seems to be highly successful. How can this be? And what can be learned from it?

The empirical material used in this case study is planned to consist of screenshots of the many variations used at the google front page (the collection has been ongoing since august, 2015), interviews with brand managers from google and the agency creating the animations used at the front page of the corporate website. Below are a few examples of the varied visual identity that from time to time greets the visitors of google.dk:



Conclusion and the plan ahead

In short this projects sets out to challenge the current CVI theory – both theoretically and empirically. In the process of doing this, the project aims at contributing to both the theory and practice of CVI. Up till now, the focus has been on reviewing the current CVI literature, getting an initial impression of the alternative theories found within identity theory in organizational context, creating empirical material for the overall exploration and searching for relevant cases for in-depth case study explorations. Finally, some effort has been put into teaching, PhD courses and a stay at Institute of Organization, CBS. In the future, more focus will be given to the analytical aspects of the agency study, to exploring the alternative conceptual assumptions found within identity in an organizational context, to conference participation and to the design, conduction and analysis of the two planned case studies. For a more detailed for the plan ahead, please see appendix.

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Appendix

Time	Activity	Status
Up till now	<p>PhD courses (20/30 ECTS): Advanced Qualitative Research Methodologies, MGMT, AU – ECTS Introducing the Philosophy of Science, BCOM, AU - 5 ECTS Perspectives on Org, com and culture, IKL, CBS - 5 ECTS Research Paradigms in Strategic Communication, BCOM, AU - 5 ECTS</p> <p>Teaching (262,50/600 hours): Corporate Communication, internal (DK): teaching, supervision and exam BA thesis: supervision and exam Online rhetoric: censor</p> <p>Research: Semi-structured personal interviews with strategists from 12 top CVI agencies Structured review of CVI (78 articles in final pool) Continuum of CVI consistency and possible case companies Thesis proposal report Collected "alternative" google screen shots since august 2015</p> <p>Exchange to other institution, visiting PhD: 2 x 3 weeks at Department of Organization, CBS (Majken Schultz)</p> <p>Conferences and other events: Conference: Meetings across Mindsets, CBS Conference: Om deleøkonomi, Hildebrandt & Brandi and Aarhus BSS Debate session: A Process Theory of Organization, Professor Thor Hernes Feedback session: Project specific feedback from Professor Dennis Mumby Feedback session: Project specific feedback from Professor Linda Putnam</p>	<p>Completed Completed Completed Completed (assignment short)</p> <p>Completed Completed Completed</p> <p>Held (yet to transcribe and analyse) Search and read (yet to analyse) Completed Completed Initial list completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Completed Completed Completed Completed Completed</p>
Spring 2016	<p>PhD courses (25/30 ECTS): A PhD course in relation to a conference on Identity, 5 ECTS or a PhD course at MGHT/BCOM, 5 ECTS</p> <p>Teaching (337,5 hours – total 600/600 hours): Corporate Communication, internal (DK): teaching, supervision and exam BA thesis: supervision and exam</p> <p>Research: Thesis proposal: Professor Simon Torp and Associate Professor Carmen Maier Finish introduction Finish structured review of CVI and theory section Find cases for the CVI continuum and case study</p>	<p>Not initiated</p> <p>In process In process</p> <p>In process In process Analysis in process In process</p>
Fall 2016	<p>PhD courses (30/30 ECTS): A PhD course in relation to a conference on Identity, 5 ECTS or a PhD course at MGHT/BCOM, 5 ECTS</p> <p>Research: Work on methodology Case studies: collect and construct empirical data</p> <p>Conference: Attend a conference</p>	<p>Not initiated</p> <p>Initial steps taken Not initiated</p> <p>Not initiated</p>
Spring 2017	<p>Research: Finish methodology and work on analysis</p>	<p>Not initiated</p>
Fall 2017	<p>Research: Finalize the dissertation and hand in February 9, 2018</p>	<p>Not initiated</p>