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Corporate Visual Identity: Exploring the Dogma of Consistency

Magnus Kristian Gregersen and Trine Susanne Johansen

Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this research paper is to conceptually and empirically explore and challenge the dogma of CVI consistency. This is done to nuance the current polarized debate of consistency or no consistency.

Design/methodology/approach - A qualitative research strategy is employed in this paper. Specifically, the empirical work rests on an interview study with strategists from 10 different CVI agencies. The interview transcripts are analyzed using template analysis.

Findings - In terms of findings, both empirical and conceptual arguments for and against CVI consistency are presented. Many of these arguments rest on conflicting assumptions of CVI communication, CVI authenticity and CVI management, which all influence the debate of CVI consistency.

Practical implications - CVI practitioners are presented with a more reflective approach to dealing with consistency and hands on examples for inspiration.

Originality/value - This paper offers alternative and more nuanced conceptualizations of CVI consistency. This includes seeing consistency and inconsistency as ends of a spectrum to be balanced rather than mutually exclusive and by differentiating between consistency across platforms and consistency over time – coined CVI continuity. Furthermore, several future research areas that can help to further develop the field of CVI are suggested.

Keywords Corporate visual identity, consistency, corporate visual identity management, agencies

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

As a theoretical field, corporate visual identity (CVI) was born out of graphic design practices in the 1950s (Balmer, 1995). Today, numerous scholars consider CVI to be an integrated element of corporate identity, i.e. the presentation of an organization through symbols, communication and behavior (e.g. Melewar, 2001; Sharma and Jain, 2011; Baker and Balmer, 1997; van Riel and Balmer, 1997). The importance of CVI in regards to corporate identity is exemplified by Olins (1989, p. 7) who stresses that “*design is a significant component in the identity mix*”. However, despite the importance ascribed to CVI within the corporate identity literature, it remains underexplored and undertheorized (Mann and Ghuman, 2014; Fetscherin and Usunier, 2012; Jong Woo *et al.*, 2008; van den Bosch, Elving, and de Jong, 2006; Rosson and Brooks, 2004).

The literature typically defines CVI as “*the visual common thread that runs through the way an organisation expresses itself*” (van den Bosch, Elving, and de Jong, 2006, p. 871). CVI often “*consists of name, logo, typography, color, slogan, and, often additional graphic design elements*” (Bolhuis *et al.*, 2015, p. 1), which are typically applied on platforms such as websites, buildings, leaflets and clothes (Bartholmé and Melewar, 2014). CVI is linked to the improvement of

corporate reputation as well as stakeholder recognition and identification (van den Bosch *et al.*, 2005). As suggested by Alkibay *et al.* (2007, pp. 135-136): “*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*”.

How to manage CVI is suggestively underexplored (Bravo *et al.*, 2012; Hussain and Ferdous, 2014; Jordá-Albiñana *et al.*, 2009). However, researchers like Simões *et al.* (2005), van den Bosch *et al.* (2005) and van den Bosch *et al.* (2004) argue that, in order for CVI to fulfil its purpose of creating strong reputation and identification, CVI managers should focus on making sure that CVI is used consistently on all platforms and that it authentically reflects the organization’s essence. Stressing the high importance granted to consistency within corporate identity in general, of which CVI is seen to be an important element, Leitch and Motion (1999, p. 195) conclude that: “*Overall, corporate identity theory has tended to view multiplicity as the enemy to be overcome*.” In support of the need for CVI consistency, van den Bosch *et al.* (2005) stress that designing a consistent CVI manual and implementation plan are not the main challenge for CVI managers. On the contrary, the actual implementation of the manual and the actual day to day management of insuring CVI consistency in order to build reputation and identification are highlighted as the main challenges. In short, within the CVI literature, a dogma of consistency exists. That is, consistency is a seemingly unchallenged basic assumption of the mainstream CVI literature.

However, contradictory to the CVI literature, scholars within other disciplines are challenging and questioning the usefulness of consistency (e.g. Christensen, Firat, and Torp, 2008). These scholars problematize the idea of blindly pursuing alignment and harmonization, arguing that this could inhibit organizational maneuverability and the ability to adapt and change. Moreover, organizations like Google and Airbnb make use of CVI inconsistencies, e.g. dynamic visualization of their websites, shifting logos and changing colors. Despite using, what the CVI literature would characterize as inconsistent, and thus weak, CVI (Baker and Balmer, 1997), which suggestively should lead to diffused reputations and negative business performance, these organizations’ brands are well-known, successful and have strong reputations [1]. As documented by Van Nes (2012), who lists and classifies numerous inconsistent CVIs, these cases might not be unique, isolated or deviant examples. Instead, they are potentially representatives of an alternative, more dynamic and more nuanced approach to consistency. So, what are the arguments for developing and using inconsistent CVIs? And what theoretical and managerial implications might this more dynamic approach to consistency have? These questions fuel and guide the theoretical discussions and empirical explorations undertaken in this paper. Based on an interview study among 10 agency strategists, the purpose of the paper is to conceptually and empirically explore and challenge consistency as the underlying dogma of CVI. The contributions are both academic and practical: Academically, the findings are relevant as they help to challenge and nuance one of the main dogmatic assumptions of the CVI literature, i.e. consistency. Practically, the findings will help CVI developers and managers towards a more reflective and informed approach to working with CVI consistency [2].

Theoretical Framework

The literature presented below forms the theoretical foundation for the explorations to come and is divided into three sections. The first section defines CVI by mapping and explicating different

terminologies and conceptualizations. The second section presents and elaborates on the dogma of consistency as central to the CVI literature. And the third section, inspired by a process of problematization (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013), challenges consistency as a dogmatic ideal with reference to scholarship within corporate communication, integrated communication and corporate identity.

Conceptual foundation: multiple terminologies - similar definitions

Visualization on an organizational level is characterized by terminological multiplicity (Balmer, 2008; Alkibay *et al.*, 2007; Topalian, 2003; Balmer, 2001). Overall, existing definitions can be grouped into three terminologies, i.e. corporate visual identity (CVI), visual brand Identity (VBI) and visual identity (VI). CVI is often defined as “*the symbols and graphical elements that express the essence of an organization*” (van den Bosch *et al.*, 2005, p. 108); VBI is typically defined as the “*face of the brand*” (Phillips *et al.*, 2014, p. 319); and Bravo *et al.* (2013, p. 535) suggest that VI “*embodies any visual element that is associated with an organization*”. To further add to the terminological confusion, Balmer and Wilson (1998, p. 12) argue that graphic designers often use the term corporate identity to refer to “*an organization’s system of visual identity*” and Melewar and Saunders (2000, 539) use the terminology of corporate visual identity system (CVIS).

Exploring these terminologies along with the elements of which they consist and the platforms where they are used, it becomes clear that the different terminologies are highly overlapping when it comes to their conceptualization of the phenomena in question. Regardless of whether scholars use CVI, VI or VBI, they, for the most part, focus on the same visual elements (name, logo, typography, color, slogan and additional graphic design elements) used to visualize a corporation, organization or corporate brand. The same is the case in terms of platforms. Most theorists address applying the visual elements on platforms like prints, websites and buildings. In addition to elements and platforms, a third indication of the overlapping nature of the terminologies can be found in the tendency to use the terms interchangeable and to cross-reference the different terminologies. An example of this interchangeable use is Bartholmé and Melewar (2009) who use CVI, VI and corporate design seemingly synonymously. More generally, VI is seen as an “umbrella term” that is used interchangeably to refer to the visual identity of brands (Hankinson and Rochester, 2005), organizations (Bravo *et al.*, 2013) and corporations (Baker and Balmer, 1997). Although CVI, VI and VBI differ in terminology, their conceptualizations appear similar. Therefore, in line with what seems to be the norm within the field, from this point onwards, previous work on CVI, VI and VBI are used interchangeably under the label CVI. Specifically, CVI is defined as *how an organization is visualized across all platforms*. The main CVI elements are name, logo, typography, color, slogan and additional graphic elements and the CVI platforms include, but are not limited to, print, online, buildings and clothes.

The dogma of consistency within CVI

Consistency is highly important to CVI – even to a degree that is it incorporated into the very definition of it (van den Bosch, Elving and de Jong, 2006). The dominating notion seems to be that: “*The CVI literature rejects the notion that users will tolerate either confusion or design inconsistency*” (Masiki, 2011, p. 96). The dogma of CVI consistency is similar to ideals of alignment, integration and synchronization found within literature of corporate identity (e.g. van

Riel and Balmer, 1997). To create and uphold consistency, scholars seem to agree that a centralization of power is needed and that development, coordination and decision making should be centralized at organizational headquarters, preferably led by a chief executive (Melewar and Saunders, 1998). As an example, van den Bosch *et al.* (2004, p. 225) see insuring consistency as “*one of the major operational issues*” facing CVI managers. To address the issue of consistency, Simões *et al.* (2005, p. 155) recommend CVI managers to “*transmit the strategic, visual dimensions of corporate identity to internal and external audiences*” via manuals. Similarly, van den Bosch *et al.* (2004, p. 231) 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*”. However, van den Bosch, de Jong, and Elving (2006) and van den Bosch *et al.* (2004) suggest that these somewhat mechanical approaches should be combined 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. Finally, CVI managers are advised to set an example to culturally embed the CVI (van den Bosch *et al.*, 2004). In short, the more effort managers use on setting up CVI initiatives, the more consistency is achieved, which is assumed to be unquestionably positive. Furthermore, the primary weaponry of CVI managers is seen to be CVI tools, e.g. manuals, templates, regulations, measurements and guidelines, and leading by example.

Although the field, in general, strongly advocates consistency, a limited number of more nuanced suggestions to deal with consistency issues can be found. These sporadic suggestions include Schmitt (1995) and Bravo *et al.* (2013) who argue in favor of some level of national adaption of CVI when dealing with international contexts; van den Bosch *et al.* (2005, p. 114) who present a slight opening by arguing that “*very minor changes*” to the CVI over a long period of time could be relevant; and Melewar *et al.* (2001, p. 425) who adhere to “*the highly standardized end of the spectrum*” of CVI consistency. Melewar *et al.* (2001) thus imply that a spectrum exists – unfortunately without revealing the nature of such a spectrum or what lies at the opposite end of standardization. These alternative views aside, the overall impression of the CVI literature is that consistency, as a dogmatic principle, assumes that visual alignment across all platforms is highly preferred. Moreover, equally characteristic of this dogma is the view that inconsistency is to be avoided at all cost.

Challenging the dogma of consistency in CVI

In accordance with problematization (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013), i.e. challenging the underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions of theory, theorists like Torp (2009), Christensen, Morsing, and Cheney (2008), Christensen, Firat, and Torp (2008) and Leitch and Motion (1999) have sought to challenge and develop the fields of corporate communication, integrated communication and corporate identity. Along the same lines, the dogma of CVI consistency can be problematized in three different ways: communication, complexity and ontology.

First, the extant CVI literature, frequently inspired by Shannon and Weaver (1949), seems to assume that transmitting a consistent CVI will generate consistent receptions amongst stakeholders. This is challenged by dialogue-oriented and co-creative approaches to communication (e.g. Merz *et al.*, 2009; Overton-de Klerk and Verwey, 2013; Prahalad and

Ramaswamy, 2013). Here, communication is seen as an interactive and interpretive process of meaning co-creation – not as a mere tool for sending a message to a passive receiver. Second, consistency can be challenged on the notion of ignoring complexity. That is, if CVI communication is hard to control and is co-created by a vast variety of internal and external interpreters, how can it be consistent across all platforms? Perhaps a solution could be to find inspiration from the concepts of flexible integration (Christensen, Firat, and Torp, 2008) and common starting points (van Riel and Blackburn, 1995). Although not focused 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, these concepts, in various ways, operate with different levels or forms of consistency (similar to the alternative suggestions emanating from the CVI literature itself, see above). Third, ontologically, the argument for consistency appears to rest on the dual assumption that there is a stable organizational essence and that this essence can and shall be authentically visualized via a consistent CVI (van den Bosch *et al.*, 2005). Whereas the last part of this dual assumption goes back to assumptions of communication as transmission and of management as control, the assumption of a stable organizational essence ties to an ontological debate over whether or not organizational essence exists. An example of this ontological dispute can be found in a review of the organizational identity literature (Gioia *et al.*, 2013) in which it is proposed leaving the idea of essence behind in favor of a non-essentialist ontology of organizational identity. In short, the ontological argument for CVI consistency can be questioned. One of the very few works that deal with the assumptions of CVI consistency and CVI in general is Bolhuis *et al.* (2015, p. 4) who, in a somewhat offhand comment, note: *“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, which questions the vastly dominating assumptions of communication as transmission and ontological essence. However, interesting as the dialogue perspective is, it is not fully unfolded to a degree where it is discussed what such a perspective holds for the theory and practice of CVI at large or for the dogma of consistency. In sum, consistency, a dogmatic assumption within CVI literature, is open to problematization. Moreover, CVI managers and strategists need to consider consistency as a potentially multifaceted term. To empirically explore how the dogma of consistency is understood and worked with within CVI practice, a study of how consistency is understood, conceptualized and operationalized from an agency perspective is undertaken. Emphasis is placed on agencies since they, via their many clients from various markets and industries, can offer insights into CVI practices across organizations.

Methodological Framework and Research Design

Given the nascent research area of exploring the arguments for and against CVI consistency, a qualitative research strategy has, in accordance with Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) and Edmondson and McManus (2007), been chosen. As this paper is focused on the practice of an industry, not any particular segment of that industry, a study including multiple voices and opinions is appropriate. In order to allow for flexibility, interaction and the possibility to refine the study in accordance with increased levels of insights, an open and dialogue-oriented research strategy was chosen. More specifically, strategists from 10 different agencies, all recommended for their high-quality work with CVI design and consultancy, were interviewed. This research strategy balances the wide scope, being the multiple agency clients from various industries and of

differing sizes, with the focus and depth of 10 personal interviews. As highlighted by e.g. Phillips *et al.* (2014), van den Bosch, Elving and de Jong (2006) and Balmer and Soenen (1999), agency strategists offer a unique possibility for researchers interested in CVI. As agency strategists work in the intersection of advising multiple clients on CVI matters and debating CVI design with the agency creative, this group of professionals is arguably in a unique position to offer both a broad perspective on how organizations of various sizes and industries work with CVI and how CVIs are designed. The 10 semi-structured face-to-face interviews, which allow for both structure and flexibility (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015), all followed an interview guide consisting mainly of open-ended questions centered around areas relevant for CVI consistency. To insure a certain level of structure in the interviews, a core of theoretically grounded themes was included in all the interview guides. However, the interview guides also included flexible elements. First, prior to the interviews, the corporate websites of the agencies were explored and quotes relevant to CVI consistency were included in the interview guide as initiators for more in-depth explanation of the meanings and rationales behind the quotes. Second, the interview guides were adjusted in accordance with the increased understanding accumulated throughout the interviews. Finally, the nature of the interview guides allowed the flexibility needed to adapt to the progression of the individual interviews. The interviews were held between March and August, 2015 and lasted between 42 and 79 minutes in length. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. To insure anonymity, all interviewees and agencies are anonymized.

The study takes the position of moderate social constructivism (Collin, 1998). Consequently, the premise is that, as a physical entity, CVI can be relatively objectively documented in terms of colors, size etc. However, the perception, interpretation and meaning of CVI and beliefs about how it should be designed and managed are based on subjective and socially constructed perceptions. To interpret these perceptions, the interview transcripts are analyzed using template analysis, a type of qualitative thematic analysis that combines a structured and flexible approach to analyzing empirical material (Brooks *et al.*, 2015; King, 2012). What makes template analysis structured is the overall idea of organizing the empirical material into themes and its use of “priori themes”, themes that are developed and defined before initiating the coding. The two priori themes of this study were CVI consistency and CVI inconsistency. The deductive characteristics of template analysis are combined with an iterative process. The six steps of analysis included in template analysis are seen as highly iterative, overlapping phases in which priori themes, thematic structures, labeling, and coding are continuously recoded, reinterpreted, reorganized and re-coined before finalizing the thematic structure presented in the analysis (King, 2012; King and Brooks, 2016). Furthermore, the themes are seen as constructed meaning and interpretations, not as “truths” emerging from the empirical material (Thomas, 2011, p. 172). This iterative process included multiple recodings in NVivo followed by extensive reading, noting and highlighting, crossing over and reorganization of themes.

Analysis

Following the template analysis guidelines (King and Brooks, 2016), it took four iterations before settling on the final thematic structure that is made up of four lateral themes and one horizontal theme that cut across and influence the other four themes. As figure 1 shows, the iterative analysis led to a continuously more nuanced understanding of CVI consistency manifested in a more nuanced and complex thematic structure. Overall, the themes are divided into 1) CVI consistency:

deals with how the CVI strategists support consistency; 2) CVI inconsistency: focus on how the strategists are also critical to consistency; 3) Historical development in the balance: explores how the balance between consistency and inconsistency has changed over time; 4) Including the consumers: debates various ways in which consumers influence CVI consistency via different forms of inclusion; and 5) Digitalization: a horizontal theme that highlights how the strategists perceive digitalization to influence the other four themes and thus consistency.

Figure 1: From priori themes to final thematic structure

CVI consistency

The CVI strategists discussed consistency in terms of platforms and time. In relation to platforms, the goal was to create consistency across all platforms and “*consistency across markets*” (strategist 4), all with the purpose of gaining differentiation, identification and recall. Moreover, upholding consistency over a longer period of time, i.e. CVI continuity, was also highlighted as important by the strategists. CVI continuity was perceived as important as changes to a CVI were seen to negatively influence recognizability, recall and believed stability, at least in the short term. Therefore, changes should be minor and dosed with care. According to strategist 8, even the “*agile people*” of this “*dynamic world*” are still “*creatures of habit*” and therefore, upholding a consistent CVI over time will be “*comforting and ensuring*” in the sense that they can still recognize the CVI and thus know what to expect from that brand.

CVI inconsistency

Seemingly in contrast to the above, all strategists, to various degrees, also argued in favor of some level of inconsistency over time and/or across platforms. Some level of inconsistency over time was generally accepted or even encouraged by the strategists. Referring to CVI, strategist 2 says: “*There has to be some growth potential in it*”. Strategist 10 reveals that the agency he represents very deliberately, when designing a new CVI, builds dynamic and therefore inconsistent elements into the CVI and plan for possible future adaptations. These dynamic elements could be a yearly change of color, a dynamic shape or a pattern that can be adapted as seen fit. According to the strategist, the dynamic elements are used to ensure that the CVI is more adaptable to various platforms and that it remains vibrant and relevant over a longer period of time. In relation to time

and CVI inconsistency, an interesting point is made: *“It has to be (visually) reinterpreted to mean the same.”* (Strategist 2). This suggests that CVI inconsistency over time paradoxically can be a means to the end of meaning consistency. That is, over time, a CVI should be adjusted in order to visualize the same meaning. Not explicated by the strategist, this reasoning rests on assumptions of a dynamic environment in which CVIs do not have stable or pre-set meanings but are instead interpreted constructions. Following this rationale, a CVI manager should continuously change the CVI to visualize the same meaning – for example the organizational essence. According to some of the strategists, this is exactly what some of the best brands are capable of doing as they are *“always in a form of Beta”* (strategist 2).

Contrary to much CVI theory, the strategists recognized the need for some level of platform adaption. As an example, strategist 10 holds that CVIs should be adjusted to a given platform in order to *“function in the context of which it is apart”* – be it a legal document or Facebook. The need for platform adaptability was especially recognized in relation to online social media platforms, where CVIs must comply with the general visual standards dictated by the platform. To many of the strategists, digitalization appears to foster CVI inconsistency. Strategist 9 even suggests that: *“...with the digitalization, an extreme reinterpretation of what identity is has occurred. And today, I would say that working with manuals is stupid. One has to work with guidelines and principles for visual identity.”* That is, recognizing that all platforms cannot be controlled, the CVI will have to adjust. In terms of CVI management, this necessitates discarding the strict restrictions of the manual in favor of overall guidelines and principles that offer more adaptability and flexibility.

Historical development in the balance

As indicated in the quote above, a shift in CVI conceptualization and management is suggested in the interviews. According to strategist 10, the historical reconceptualization can be broken down into three phases, which will be coined pre-manual, manual and post-manual. The pre-manual period was characterized by utter chaos and CVIs were conceptualized, designed and managed extremely laissez-faire with very little regards to concepts like consistency or authenticity. This necessitated a period with strict control and rigid management via brand manuals; the period of manuals. However, today digitalization, dynamic markets and the fast-paced media landscape call for more agile approaches that allow adaptability and flexibility without letting go of consistency and the benefits it brings. Therefore, moving into the period of post-manual, managers are recommended to discard the rigid manuals in favor for more overall guidelines. Considering the dogma of consistency within the literature, the strategists unanimous call to loosen the “straitjacket” of the brand manual and stop “brand policing” is striking and can be seen in statements like: *“that time is dying out, I would say”* (strategist 3), *“does not work anymore”* (strategist 5) and *“outdated way of working”* (strategist 7).

Instead, most strategists talk about CVI consistency in terms of balancing the need for identification via CVI consistency and the need for market or platform adjustment via CVI inconsistency. Often, this balance is achieved by combining, what is referred to as, “core or key visual elements” and more “dynamic or creative visual elements”. That is, to cater for both CVI consistency and inconsistency, the strategists suggest that *“the really strong visual identities are dynamic but with some form of static red thread”* (strategist 6). In sum, according to the strategists,

CVI conceptualization and management is now in the post-manual period, a period that calls for balancing conflicting needs of identification and adaption, which requires CVI managers to acknowledge and work with complexity and to adapt a less brand centric and control oriented form of management.

Including the consumers

A way for CVI managers to embrace this post-manual approach is, according to the strategists, to include the consumers in various ways. This can be done by prototyping and testing the CVIs using focus groups, eye tracking, interviews, surveys or by launching a CVI and tracking its use and reactions via social media etc. The ongoing testing of prototypes serves the purpose of providing a basis for adjusting CVIs and validating these adjustments. As strategist 3 puts it: *“It’s not only pretty. It’s also just fucking right.”*

Another, and arguably more demanding, way to include the consumers builds on customization and co-creation. Here, the consumers are not only evolved in the testing, they are evolved in the ongoing creation and re-creation of the CVI. Multiple strategists highlight Coca-Cola as a prime example of a corporate brand that makes use of post-manual CVI management by allowing personalized labeling and inviting artists to design their own bottles. Furthermore, social media platforms are perceived by the strategists as co-creative contexts, not suited for strict management. Instead, CVI managers are encouraged to embrace the drive and commitment that consumers have for sharing, liking and re-creating visual material that all adds to the continued co-creation of a CVI: *“It would be stupid to stop people that actually have a desire to co-create and contribute to it (CVI)”* (Strategist 8). However, this form of involvement is not without its complications. As an example, strategist 8 refers to the delicate and complicated balance of the wish for managerial control and the delegation of power and control via consumer involvement. More specifically, she says that consumers are welcome to *“play with the logo”* but that a regular takeover can be harder to acknowledge for CVI managers. That is, according to the strategists, a clear move towards co-creation and looser CVI management is deemed necessary – although, it does have its unresolved complications related the “rights” level of consumer involvement and the “right” balance of CVI consistency and inconsistency. In sum, the empirical insights show the enormous complexity, and at times paradoxical tendencies, in the way that the CVI strategists talk about and conceptualize consistency.

Discussion

The presented theory and analysis allow for a mapping of arguments for and against CVI consistency. Table 1 below provides the reader with an overview of these arguments. The multiple arguments for and against CVI consistency have been divided into the three groups of 1) CVI communication; 2) CVI authenticity; and 3) CVI management. The assumptions that one holds in regards to CVI communication, CVI authenticity and CVI management will influence the weight given to the arguments for or against CVI consistency. This grouping will also serve to structure the discussion.

CVI communication and CVI communication over time

The dominating conceptualization of CVI communication, in which consistency is held in high regards, is rooted in a transmission perspective on communication. That is, managers create a consistent CVI and send it out to internal and external receivers who decode it as intended. This continued and consistent CVI stimuli will lead to stronger identification, recall, differentiation etc. Overtime, a consistent use of CVI will, as the receivers continue to decode the communication in the same manner, improve reputation and trust. A major argument for CVI consistency, based on communication as transmission, is the perceived benefits of identification, differentiation and reputation. Contrary to this, both conceptual and practical arguments for CVI inconsistency exist. On a practical level, an argument for inconsistency is the need for adaptability and flexibility that will enable CVIs to better adapt to certain platforms (especially digital), markets or future needs. On a conceptual level, an argument for CVI inconsistency is located in co-creative and constructionist approaches to CVI communication (e.g. Johansen and Andersen, 2012; Handelman, 2006). That is, as different interpreters construct different meanings of the same CVI and as the same interpreter over time constructs varying meanings of the same CVI, the goal of consistency in meaning becomes superfluous. Instead, CVI should be adopted according to various groups of interpreters and across time to the same interpreters. In sum, arguments for both consistent and inconsistent CVI communication can be mounted. How one conceptualizes CVI communication, as either transmission or construction, might influence the weight given to the polar arguments. Alternatively, one could, as suggested by the strategists and Van Nes (2012), seek to balance these seemingly opposing arguments by creating and using CVIs with both consistent and inconsistent elements.

CVI authenticity

Another strong argument for CVI consistency within the existing literature is the notion of authenticity, the ideal that CVI should authentically or truthfully visualize the essence of the organization. As this essence is assumed to be stable, the CVI should, if the ideal is authentic visualization, be consistent across platforms and stable over time (Static CVI authenticity in table 1). The existing literature on CVI authenticity rests on an essentialist ontology requiring a consistent CVI across platforms and over time. However, still striving for authentic visualization but operating from a non-essentialist perspective, a CVI should continually be adapted to authentically visualize the dynamic nature of the organizational “essence” - supporting the argument against CVI consistency. In the table, this line of argumentation is referred to as dynamic CVI authenticity. The ontological debate over organizational essence is central to another identity concept, that of organizational identity, which in its basic form refers to “*who we are as an organization*” (Gioia *et al.*, 2013, p. 123). The essentialist ontology, on which the existing literature on CVI authenticity rests, resonates with the original conceptualization of organizational identity that sees organizational identity as central, enduring and distinctive (Albert and Whetten, 1985). However, this definition is often questioned and a number of scholars (see Gioia and Hamilton (2016) and Schultz and Hernes (2013)), argue in favor of perceiving organizational identity as a non-essentialist concept, which support the argument for CVI inconsistency to create dynamic CVI authenticity. What has in this paper been coined dynamic CVI authenticity overlaps with the concept of acceptable authenticity, which advances the notions that: “*...in an era of instant communications, authenticity continues to be constructed, challenged and re-constructed*” (Freathy and Thomas, 2014, p. 191). Summing up, conflicting assumptions about CVI

authenticity, rooted in the ontological debate over the existence of organizational essence, influence the weight given to the arguments for or against CVI consistency.

CVI management

The final arguments for and against CVI consistency is centered around management. In the traditional approach to CVI management, the manual approach, creating and upholding consistency across platforms and over time is seen as one of the primary objectives. In the battle against inconsistency, centralized power and brand manuals are among the preferred and recommended managerial weaponry (Simões *et al.*, 2005; Van den Bosch *et al.*, 2004). This approach builds on at least two assumptions: Media can be controlled to ensure consistency across platforms and consumers receive, decode and interpret the CVI as intended and in a consistent manner. Whereas, the last assumption ties into previous discussions on the nature of CVI communication and consumers, the perceived control over media is new. From this perspective, is it assumed that media are controllable to a degree that manuals for how to communicate in and across all platforms can be prescribed in a manual and thus controlled to ensure CVI consistency. Contrary to this, the post-manual approach to CVI management perceives full media control, especially online social media, as an illusion. Likewise, consumers are not seen as receivers of a centrally crafted CVI, they are seen as active co-creators of the CVI, either via active corporate involvement or via their own mandate to e.g. modify, use, re-use, re-interpret, re-construct and share the CVI. This alternative perspective, given its less strict managerial control, fosters CVI inconsistency. However, consistency is not abandoned altogether. Instead, the post-manual approach seeks to balance central control to uphold some level of consistency (reaping the associated benefits) with some level of inconsistency to cater for platform adaptations and consumer involvement. Again, conflicting assumptions, this time about media and communication, seems to influence the argumentation for and against CVI consistency. Rooted in conflicting assumptions, the traditional theory strongly advocates for a manual approach while the interviewed strategists and “deviant” theory, seem to favor a post-manual approach.

Arguments for CVI consistency	Arguments against CVI consistency
CVI communication: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sender/receiver (Stimuli/response) - All receivers will interpret a CVI the same - A consistent CVI creates identification, differentiation and recall 	CVI communication: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interpretative - Multiple interpreters will interpret the same CVI differently - CVI must be adaptable to interpreters and platforms
CVI communication over time: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sender/receiver (stimuli/response) - Receiver will interpret CVI the same way over time - A consistent use of CVI over time (CVI continuity) will create trust and uphold identification 	CVI communication over time: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interpretive - Over time, the same CVI will mean something new to the same interpreter - Over time, the same meaning will require a new CVI
Static CVI authenticity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ontologically, believe in a singular and stable organizational essence - CVI should consistently visualize the stable essence of the organization 	Dynamic CVI authenticity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ontologically, see organization as a non-essentialist and ongoing process - CVI should continually adapt to visualize the dynamic nature of organization
CVI management, manual approach:	CVI management, post-manual approach:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Controllable media - Consumers are receivers of CVI - Central power and control via manuals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Full online control of CVI is impossible - Consumers are co-creators of CVI - Balancing central control, consumer involvement and flexibility
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Table 1: Arguments for and against CVI consistency

Conclusion and Future Research

This paper set out to explore the dogma of CVI consistency. That is, to address the various arguments for and against developing and using consistent CVIs and to discuss what theoretical and managerial implications a more dynamic approach to CVI consistency might have. Theoretically, this was debated by reviewing CVI literature and by drawing on related fields like corporate identity and organizational identity. Empirically, it was explored via interviews with strategists from 10 different CVI agencies.

Inspired by problematization (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013), the underlying assumptions of CVI communication, CVI authenticity and CVI management, which were all seen to argue for or against CVI consistency, were used to arrange the empirical and theoretical insights in two conflicting lines of argumentations (table 1). First, the argumentation for CVI consistency via managerial control to create identification, recall and reputation, resonating the traditional theory, is found to rest on assumptions of a stable organizational essence, CVI communication as transmission, consumers as receivers and media as controllable. Second, the augmentation for some level of inconsistency via delegation of power and control to enable adaptability, flexibility and co-creation, found in critical theory and the interview study, rests on assumptions of non-essentialist organization, CVI communication as interpretative/constructive, consumers as co-creators and media as platforms of only limited control.

In terms of theoretical and managerial implications, this paper develops a nuanced and reflected approach to CVI consistency. On the conceptual level, it suggests refining the polarized debate of consistent versus inconsistent by looking at the two as ends to be balanced rather than as ends that are mutually exclusive. In addition, it nuances the notion of visual consistency by differentiating between consistency across platforms and consistency over time (CVI continuity). Seen from a practical perspective, it seeks to inspire CVI managers, strategists and other practitioners to approach consistency in a more reflective manner, bearing in mind what assumptions the various solutions rest upon.

This paper has taken initial steps to unfold the conceptualization of CVI consistency in the direction of less polarization. In the future, much more can be done to further explicate and nuance the consistency dogma. As an example, the idea of a spectrum of various degrees of consistency, originally introduced by Melewar *et al.* (2001), could be usefully unfolded in order to establish a less polarized terminology needed to move this debate forward. Furthermore, inspired by the concepts of flexible integration (Christensen, Firat, and Torp, 2008) and common starting points (van Riel and Blackburn, 1995), future research could use alternative assumptions of CVI communication, CVI authenticity and CVI management to elevate the understanding of what the existing literature would define as weak, yet seemingly successful, practices that make use of some level of CVI inconsistency.

As an example of how an alternative approach to CVI communication can be used to develop the conceptualization of CVI consistency, inspiration can be found in Bolhuis *et al.* (2015, p. 4) and the possibility that CVI communication could be seen as constitutional for the organization or brand, not only representative. Although this might be controversial in relation to the current conceptualization of CVI communication, the notion of visuals as constitutional, instead of transmissional, is acknowledged in other fields (see Ashcraft *et al.*, 2009). Meyer *et al.* (2013, p. 494) thus suggest: “*Just as verbal language, visual manifestations not only express or represent reality, but also assist in constructing it*”. In other words, from this point of view, CVI is not merely regarded as a value-free or neutral communicative representation of the organization, but as an active and processual communication element. Perceiving CVI as constitutional, also brings about considerations in regards to ethics. For example, CVI could, like a corporate brand, be seen as a neoliberal instrument to be “imposed” on employees in the quest for corporate goals (Mumby, 2016).

A final future venue for debating and nuancing CVI consistency lies in exploring the concept of co-creation in relation to CVI consistency and management. Inspiration for such a discussion can be found in similar debates fruitfully undertaken within fields like corporate branding (Hatch and Schultz, 2010) and communication (Johansen and Andersen, 2012). In a CVI context, co-creation is often linked to developments within digitalization, especially social media, which provide consumers and other key stakeholders ample opportunities to play with and transform corporate visuals for their own amusement (e.g. Fournier and Avery, 2011). However, the implications of this co-creation appear to be absent or underexplored within the CVI literature. While highly important to the strategists interviewed, digitalization, and the opportunities offered for co-development and stakeholder involvement, is not currently part of CVI literature. Consequently, digitalization could inspire new research directions for CVI scholars.

[1] Google is ranked second on Forbes’ “The World’s Most Valuable Brands” list for 2016 (<http://www.forbes.com/powerful-brands/list/#tab:rank>), and Airbnb has been named Inc.’s 2014 Company of the Year (Helm, 2014)

[2] As this paper theoretically and empirically builds on work connected to a forthcoming PhD dissertation, overlap with other, unpublished material can occur

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