


# VISUAL BRAND COMMUNICATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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**Abstract:** COVID-19 has brought a number of changes in people's lifestyles as well as in business strategies. The consumers are moving towards social media and brands are forced to adjust their positioning strategies to retain existing and attract new customers. In generating the customer engagement, the brand content must match the visual preferences of its target group. This paper reviews a relevant literature of visual communication in the context of branding focusing on changes in terms of redesign and rebranding imposed by a crisis. The aim is to identify how companies successfully developed memorable, contextually-relevant and public-educational visual brand communication and strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The content analysis method was used in order to create a synthesized overview of brands' visual communication and their creative solutions during the pandemic. The results of this study highlight the importance of visual communication that can be taken by brands in dealing with crisis situations such as pandemic, and its effects on consumer behaviour in the new-normal era.

**Key words:** visual communication, branding, covid-19 pandemic

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant (negative) impact on the business and economic sectors. The marketing and communication strategies also evolved, particularly after the imposition of social distancing and the territorial lockdown. To survive in the midst of the corona virus pandemic, marketers must develop an adapted brand strategy to promote their products or services to consumers (Hadi & Rachmaniar, 2020). Business people optimize digital branding and online marketing communication as channels for reaching their target audiences (Hermanto et al., 2021).

In pandemic marketing, especially in branding activities, creativity and inventiveness is absolutely essential. The branding initiatives used during the Covid-19 pandemic range from CSR initiatives linked to the corona virus pandemic, home shopping campaigns, branding via online media, social media and official websites, to setting up online festivals with exclusive discounts etc. (Hermanto, 2020). A company can employ a number of measures to ensure that its brand and product positions will survive an unknowable pandemic.

The focus of this research is on creative strategies in the context of marketing communications of global brands during the pandemic. The aim is to identify how companies successfully developed visual brand communication and adapted creative strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic in order to create a memorable, contextually-relevant and public-educational content. The result of this research is reflected in the analysis of redesigned visible elements of the brand that communicate certain values that are socially responsible and important for crisis communication.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In order to understand the practical communication strategies that brands implemented during the pandemic, it is important to analyse the theory of visual brand communication and marketing strategies. The authors highlight the specifics of pandemic marketing in the context of consumer behaviour (Mitrović, Novaković & Spajić, 2021). Therefore, the need for research into the communication challenges imposed by this new era is increasing. This paper reviews the body of academic research on visual brand communication in relation to pandemic re-branding focusing on social media communication.

### 2.1 Visual brand communication

The rapid development of communication technologies has changed how people live. The consumers are moving towards social media and brands are forced to adjust their positioning strategies to attract new customers. The brand must differentiate itself by emphasizing the importance of its content to comprehend the visual preferences that their intended audience requires (Khamis et al., 2021).

The usage of *social media* in brand building and other interactive media emerge as platform in modern marketplace. With a two-way communication possibility, consumers are not only interested in the functions, price, and location of a specific product, but they also pay much more attention to the story, personality, and lifestyle behind a brand (The Pew Research Centre, 2020). Considering media functionality and user motivation, there are two major types of social media: relation-based and visually-based (Chen, 2011). The primary use of relation-based social media is to build and maintain interpersonal relationships and connections with other users (for example, *Facebook, LinkedIn, Yelp* etc.). Visual-based social media is more about self-expression, visual representation, multimedia storytelling, aesthetic communication and so on (e.g., *Instagram, Pinterest* and increasingly *TikTok*).

*Visual branding* involves successfully creating a memorable experience for consumers that makes them trust the company, which drives brand referrals, customer loyalty and positive word-of-mouth if the experience was great (Sardovski, 2022). Visual branding is one of the best tools companies have to communicate with their customers.

A *brand identity* is comprised of characteristics and attributes that form a unique set of associations that a company seeks to establish and maintain (Esch, 2008). Brand identity is a concept that creates relationships between the company and consumers, and from the customer's perspective it forms the brand image and lead to perceptions of brand personality (Aaker, 1997; Nikolić, Stanković, & Dejanović, 2015). When consumers interact with brands, they are exposed to visual stimuli such as logos, colors, shapes, typefaces, characters, styles, and other brand-image elements (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2008). Any of these visual elements may come to be associated with the brand and serve to identify it.

A study that explored the understanding of visual brand identity (VBI) from the art directors' perspective indicates that VBI is "the holistic look and feel of a brand, manifest as consistency among the brand, its strategy, and all its individual visual elements, ongoing over time" (Phillips, McQuarrie, & Griffin, 2014). For a broader understanding of the importance of this topic, it is important to acknowledge that brand advertising is created in a large group of professionals (marketing/brand manager, copywriter/art director team, creative director, account managers, media planners, research specialists, graphic designers). The visual elements identified as of primary importance for visual brand communication include the *brand's logo, typography, colour, and layout* (Phillips, McQuarrie, & Griffin, 2014). These elements are similar to those identified in the wide branding literature (e.g. Nikolić, Stanković, & Dejanović, 2015).

In the context of *visual brand communication*, some dimensions are of particular importance (Khamis, et al., 2021):

- *Visual literacy*. The Toledo Museum of Art states that visual literacy is the ability to read, comprehend, and write visual language (Toledo Museum of Art, 2016). It is centred on the notion that pictures, and videos can be read, and that message can be passed through a process of reading (Fahmy, Bock, & Wanta, 2015). This skill equips viewers (or content users) to comprehend and evaluate the contextual, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, intellectual, and technical components in a visual element (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2011). People are constantly exposed to images and other multimedia information from various sources, such as social media, television, and street billboard screens (Choon-Lee, 2019). Companies frequently use images in their offline and online marketing communication because they have a much greater impact on customers than text does. Therefore, visual brand communication was crucial during the Covid-19 pandemic in order to send effective and socially responsible messages to their target audiences.
- *Digital visual engagement*. According to Dhanesh (2017) and Muntinga et al. (2011), digital engagement represents an active online behaviour that is defined by intense personal participation with the information, organizations, brands, or causes that are promoted in online public spaces. In addition to liking and commenting, there are distinct levels of users' involvement with branded digital content that are categorized into three types of active online behaviour: contributing, creating, and consuming (Muntinga et al., 2011). Companies are increasingly interested in enhancing their digital communications through visual content that is engaging. Visual brand communication can contribute to positive corporate reputations and purchase intentions (Zerfass, 2017). Powerful images and multimedia with evoking emotions and cultural meanings have a persuasive impact on consumers and influences digital users' decision making (Dhanesh, 2017). Thus, visual brand communication during the pandemic had to use specific codes of colour, tone and public context to convey and evoke emotions of safety, care and necessary social distance.

- *Social media.* Social media represent a very effective and efficient tool for brand to use to create, communicate, deliver value, and exchange offerings to its stakeholders (Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2015). Different social media platforms are available and different content of visual communication can be presented by the brands depending on what the company is aiming to achieve. More than a half respondents of *Edelman* research believed corona virus information from brand social media and 84% used social media channels to facilitate a sense of community and offer social support to people during the pandemic (Edelman, 2020). People were spending a lot of time on social media during the Covid-19 pandemic, thus visuals were very important part of grabbing users first attention to the content and communicating specific values for particular global crisis.

Studies in visual communication and graphic design often use experiments to observe visual components like colour, shape, or view perspective then analyse the changes in branding influences induced by visual variables (Krause, North, & Heritage, 2014). Media and advertising studies frequently examine how the symbolic significance and representation of visual branding affect brand building (Smock, et al., 2011). This paper highlights the creative visual and communication solutions of global brands during the pandemic, which managed to convey a strong message in times of crisis and strengthened their brand image.

## 2.2 Marketing challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic is being used as a new marketing strategy (White, Nieto, & Barquera, 2020). The new scenario should be seen as an opportunity to observe changes in consumer behaviour and virtually get in touch with them in new ways (Khare & Singh, 2020). Brands use the data they have about their consumers and listen carefully to recognize new demands and succeed in personalizing their brand (Salah, et al., 2020). The key to success in these situations lies in understanding what value means to customers as they establish new buying routines (Knowles, et al., 2020).

Consumers expect brands to explain their larger purpose and how each serves the greater good. A consistent branding strategy fosters familiarity, maintains loyalty, and demonstrates to consumers that their trust is earned (Harvey, n.d.). However, branding efforts must be adapted to match the current context and environment. With those changes in the marketing environment comes the need to develop strategic agility before, during, and after the pandemic (He & Harris, 2020). As critical as thinking about immediate, short-term survival needs is, it is equally important to anticipate the outlook for brands in the new normal market (Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2020).

Social media are becoming the primary source of information, news, but also the primary tool for promotion (Palupi & Svalov, 2020). Consumers demand different communication during the crisis caused by Covid-19, as well as presentation adapted to the situation. Thus, almost two-thirds of the respondents (65%) of the *Edelman Trust Barometer* research claim that "the way in which brands respond to the pandemic will have a huge impact on the likelihood of buying their products" (Edelman, 2020). This research states that 1 of 3 respondents have punished brands that did not respond well during the pandemic, while 84% of respondents consider that brands should serve as information source, use their power to educate and bring people together. In uncertain times, success will be achieved by those brands that show a willingness to put their consumer first. Brands need to communicate with emotion, compassion and facts.

## 3. RESEARCH OVERVIEW

In order to create an overview of brands' visual communication and their creative solutions during the pandemic, the content analysis method was used. Images that brands posted as visuals on social media during the pandemic were analysed. Visual analysis is an important step in evaluating an image and understanding its meaning (Campus Library, University of Washington Bothell & Cascadia College, 2022). The results of this paper highlight the importance of visual communication that can be taken by brands in dealing with crisis situations such as pandemic, as well as the significance of creative and symbolic brand refresh.

A brand refresh relies more on visual changes and is more a tactical manoeuvre unlike re-branding which represent a long-term marketing strategy. The level of complexity of brand refresh process depends on the extent to which company needs to change its image (Sardovski, 2022). Realizing that the crisis is an unpredictable situation and that the business response must be quick and agile, it requires a tactical

marketing solution such as brand refresh. By changing a brand voice, visual branding or customer service, brand refresh should have a distinct impact on the way that brand feels, sounds, and looks to target customers.

### 3.1 The research method

Content analysis is a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within some given qualitative data (i.e., text, images, news etc.). Using content analysis, researchers can quantify and analyse the presence, meanings, and relationships of such certain words, themes, or concepts. It is “a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (Berelson, 1952).

There are two general types of content analysis: conceptual analysis and relational analysis (Columbia Public Health, 2022). Conceptual analysis determines the existence and frequency of concepts in a text. The main goal is to examine the occurrence of selected terms in the data. Relational analysis develops the conceptual analysis further by examining the relationships among concepts in a text. Each type of analysis may lead to different results, conclusions, interpretations and meanings.

Given that the focus of this research is on the visual elements of brand identity, visual content analysis is used in evaluating the concept of changed VBI elements and understanding their meaning.

### 3.2 The research results

Governments, companies and consumers have implemented measures to curb the spread of the corona virus and mitigate the impact. Large companies and global brands tried to communicate the important message of social distancing. The brand response to crisis such as pandemic most often involved encouraging people to act or adopt a state that reflects consideration and empathy, and social responsibility with social distancing was the focus. Visual communication was crucial, because it is the most effective on people. In addition to the successful ones, there were also campaigns that were considered to be unacceptable. The subject of the analysis in this paper is only cases that had positive reactions both among users and among experts in the business world (e.g. CNN Business, 2020; Lundstrom, 2020; Graphic Design Forum, 2020; Marketing Interactive, 2020).

Logos are sacrosanct for brands but during the pandemic these were increasingly becoming tools to promote social distancing amid the corona virus outbreak. The reaction of brands implied a change in the tone of communication, special efforts towards building an emotional connection with consumers and strengthening social engagement; and all this within a creative visual. Table 1 provides an overview of changes and pandemic communication in VBI in times of crisis and how some of the most iconic brand identities have been modified to get the word out.

Table 1 (part 1): Brands’ refresh communication during the Covid-19 pandemic
















Brand	Pandemic VBI	Modification in VBI	Key messages
Nike		Changed tagline.	<i>If you ever dreamed of playing for millions around the world, now is your chance. Play inside, play for the world</i>
Audi		Changed graphics.	<i>Keep distance.</i>
McDonalds		Changed graphics.	<i>A little distance can unite us all.</i>
Volkswagen		Changed graphics.	<i>Thanks for keeping your social distance.</i>
Coca-Cola		Changed typography.	<i>Staying apart is the best way to stay united.</i>
Corona Extra		Changed name.	<i>No one wants a corona.</i>

Table 1 (part 2): Brands' refresh communication during the Covid-19 pandemic

Starbucks		Changed graphics.	<i>Keep safe, wear a mask.</i>
Olympics		Changed graphics.	<i>Physical distancing is a must. If the five continents can do it, you can do it too.</i>
NBA		Changed graphics.	<i>Take a break, stay home.</i>
US Open		Changed name.	<i>Just like everyone, US Open is now closed.</i>
MasterCard		Changed graphics.	<i>Physical distancing helps limit the spread of COVID-19, and hopefully limit our credit and expenses too.</i>
LinkedIn		Changed name.	<i>Polish that LinkedIn profile of yours that you created for years ago but never used.</i>
Good Year		Changed name.	<i>This is definitely not a good year for Goodyear and everyone.</i>
Intel		Changed tagline.	<i>Stay inside where you are safe from the virus.</i>
YouTube		Changed graphics.	<i>COVID-19 has stopped virtually everything... even the play button in the YouTube logo.</i>

Physical distancing helped limit the spread of COVID-19, and hopefully brands did the same by separating the visual elements within their logos. *McDonald's* have separated their golden arches within the logo and posted to its social media. The ad agency explained that despite the temporary separation between its customers and the company caused by closures of some of its restaurants, they "can always be together" through Mc-delivery and drive-thru. Two automotive companies that share ownership, *Audi* and *Volkswagen*, tweaked their logos for their social media accounts. *Audi* separated its four rings in a short video telling people to stay at home and keep their distance. *Volkswagen* also promoted a similar video with inspirational messages and separated the V and W. *The Olympic* logo design represents the union of the "five continents" of the world; however, physical distancing is a must, so *The Olympic Games* have separated their circles. *MasterCard* have separated two coloured circles, as well.

*Coca-Cola* has the most recognizable textual logo in the world, which has not been changed for decades. The brand typically celebrates togetherness and love in its ads, thus this visual change in typography with strong message has had a powerful impact on people.

Face mask was one of the most important items during this pandemic and everyone should wear on. *Starbucks* has transformed this potential problem while drinking a Starbucks coffee into a creative solution on their logo mermaid. The silhouette of *Lakers* great and Hall of Famer *Jerry West* has been standing and dribbling for over 50 years on *NBA's* logo. During the pandemic, this silhouette took a break and stayed home. *YouTube's* changed play button on its logo had a strong public impact as well, considering that people were watching more than ever before (since that's all they can do at the time).

Some of the brands like *Nike* didn't tweak its logo, but it launched a large social media campaign with its global roster of star athletes including *NBA* player LeBron James and golfer Tiger Woods. Sports grounded to a halt because of social distancing rules and the ban on large gatherings, like in stadiums. The campaign has encouraged people to play inside. Instead of going outside, *Nike* said: "just don't do it". *Nike* has created very powerful and meaningful message by modifying its tagline. *Intel* did the same: instead of their recognizable message "intel inside" the company has communicated key message "stay inside".

Self-isolation was crucial during this pandemic, and *LinkedIn* thought that it was the right time to polish the *LinkedIn* profile. With a word play, they conveyed a message about the importance of the lockdown, again fulfilling their purpose of networking people online. *US Open* and *Good Year* applied the same logic and came up with creative solutions as well. *US Open* become *US Closed* and *Good Year* has changed its

name and logo to a symbolical *Bad Year*. The brand *Corona Extra* faced a unique dilemma at the start of the pandemic due to consumer reluctance around the virus and brand's similar-sounding names (Gartner, 2021). The label has had to re-jigger its entire marketing strategy and tap into less-typical methods of innovation, like brewing up its own *Giphy* library and marketing its entire portfolio of beverages.

### 3.3 The research discussion

Several conclusions can be drawn from this research. First, people have a fear of the corona virus, which reduced their purchasing power and inevitably had an impact on producers and marketers. In order to brand remains popular in the community during the crisis, companies were implementing different strategies and tactics for handling the circumstance while following health regulations.

The Covid-19 disaster has encouraged the formation of what call *giving society* (Hadi & Rachmaniar, 2020). It forms a society that cares, full of love, empathy, compassion. A brand is also a corporate citizen that must care and be responsible for people who are in distress (Hermanto et al., 2021).

The communication brand strategy during the pandemic was threefold: taking advantage of the digital world, using resources efficiently and creatively and making an affirmative movement.

The crisis has imposed a new trend: the brand needs to be careful and offer a solution. Every brand must be an empathetic brand. This is a new commitment to consumers and a new normal. The tone of communication was changed, adapted to the crisis situation. It was communicated cautiously, with respect of newly created norms, adapted to current consumer requirements. Many brands have focused their communication on messages of gratitude to healthcare workers and all those who are unable to stay at home. Communication embodied a general "we're all in this together" vibe.

In a survey conducted by the *Edelman Trust Barometer*, 57% of respondents pointed out that they are against advertising or excessive communications that are humorous or cheerful tones (Edelman, 2020). Brands have recognized this, by communicating action, information or support. Advertising campaigns avoided showing human contact, and scenes of hugging, kissing or touching were absent. All this was accompanied by modified visual brand identities.

The creativity, passion, and thought that go into wanting to help, educate, and be a part of the physical distancing movement, represent the common denominator of the analysed cases of modified VBI in this paper.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

The Covid-19 pandemic has conditioned brands to make a special effort to maintain relevance. A specific approach to communication and an effort not to hurt any of the consumer's feelings come into focus. Most brands have adopted a positive tone by highlighting gratitude, motivation and support through its visual content, and the main communication has moved to digital platforms and social media. Special efforts were noticed in building an emotional connection with consumers and strengthening social engagement, given that crisis situations like pandemic require a customized approach and placing marketing goals in a more socially responsible framework. The period of new normality will be successful for those brands that have shown a willingness to put their consumers first in such uncertain times.

The role that visual element plays in brand communication suggests that this strategy has a great deal of potential to strengthen the brand's reputation. With social media as a platform, brand content can reach a wide audience of potential customers. Popular brands have a strong influence towards their customers and followers, and through a logo redesign they could easily engage everyone to stay at home, wear a face mask, practice social distancing, and follow all the safety guidelines to make people safe.

To be successful, brand familiarity on brand content must take into account the visual component in order to capture viewers' attention and maintain customer loyalty.

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