Visual brand communication during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Introduction

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 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 content analysis method was used in order to create a synthesized overview of brands' visual communication and their creative solutions during the pandemic. 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.

Problem Description

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). 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.

Methods

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 analyze 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). 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.

Results

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.
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 (eg. CNN Business, 2020; Graphic Design Forum, 2020; Marketing Interactive, 2020).
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. Physical distancing helped limit the spread of COVID-19, and hopefully brands did the same by separating the visual elements within their logos. In addition, some of the analyzed VBI used a face mask symbol as one of the most important items during this pandemic, some of the brands changed theirs tagline, and others communicated the importance of self-isolation.

Brand	Pandemic VBI	Modification in VBI
Nike		Changed tagline.
Audi		Changed graphics.
McDonalds		Changed graphics.
Volkswagen		Changed graphics.
Coca-Cola		Changed typography.
Corona Extra		Changed name.
Starbucks		Changed graphics.
Olympics		Changed graphics.
NBA		Changed graphics.
US Open		Changed name.
MasterCard		Changed graphics.
LinkedIn		Changed name.
Good Year		Changed name.
Intel		Changed tagline.
YouTube		Changed graphics.

Table 1
Brands' refresh communication during the Covid-19 pandemic

Discussion /Conclusion

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.
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.
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.
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 analyzed cases of modified VBI in this paper.

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