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Homogenized Branding: A Semiotic and Cultural Inquiry into Visual Identity

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Abstract

This thesis explores the phenomenon of brand homogenization, examining its characteristics, underlying causes, and impacts on brand identity and differentiation. By analyzing from a visual semiotic perspective the visual characteristics as color, form, typography, and imagery, the study identifies common trends in contemporary rebranding efforts and investigates how these visual changes influence the meanings conveyed by brands. Through detailed case studies of four major rebranding initiatives, the research uncovers motivations such as simplicity, audience expansion, globalization, versatility, and digital adaptation, while also highlighting deeper implications related to abstraction and detachment from physical references.

The study situates these visual trends within broader socio-technological contexts, drawing on insights from psychotechnology, sociology, and anthropology, as well as visual semiotics. It identifies three key links between technological evolution and brand homogenization: the emergence of “cyborg” brands that align with social media formats, the impact of globalization necessitating universally understandable communication formats, and the rise of an abstract aesthetic that positions technology as a quasi-deific transformative force.

Concluding that brand homogenization is a real and significant trend, the thesis posits that this shift represents a fundamental change in the role of brand identity—from static identifiers to dynamic content curators. This transition poses challenges for visual diversity and raises important questions about the future of brand differentiation and societal impacts. The research suggests that this trend could prompt a resurgence of “punk” brands, which defy simplicity with detailed and expressive visual elements.

The thesis opens avenues for future research on the evolving functions of brands and the development of visual languages, emphasizing the need for brands to embrace diversity, foster creativity, and champion authenticity to maintain their distinctive identities and meaningful connections with consumers in an ever-changing digital landscape.

Keywords

Branding, Visual Identity, Brand Homogenization, Digital Culture, Sociology of Brands, Visual Diversity, Visual Semiotics.

Introduction

In the landscape of contemporary lifestyle, brands have become an example of identity, trust, and aspiration. From the moment we wake up until we retire to bed, we are immersed in a world shaped by brands.

At the heart of all branding activities lies a fundamental human desire: the quest to be recognized, to forge a unique personal and social identity, and to maintain a good reputation. This dual need to belong and to stand out is the driving force behind branding. Sign and symbol are central to this phenomenon, encapsulating both material and metaphorical forms. Branding applies to oneself, others, and property, and it can be perceived in both positive and negative lights (Bastos & Levy, 2012, p.349).

According to the American Marketing Association, a brand encompasses any distinctive feature, such as a name, term, design, or symbol, that serves as an identifier for goods or services. This definition underscores the multifaceted nature of branding, emphasizing the role of visual and conceptual elements in creating a unique identity within the marketplace. By encapsulating the essence of a product or service in a recognizable form, brands facilitate consumer recognition, differentiation, and loyalty, thereby fostering enduring relationships between businesses and their target audiences.

But brands are far more than just logos or labels: brands encompass more than just these tangible elements, they also embody intangibles such as identity, associations, and personality, they are living entities imbued with personality, values, and stories. Mercer (2010) elaborates on this by explaining that a trademark – a tangible item of intellectual property such as a logo, name, design, or image – serves as the foundation for a brand (p.3).

A brand is the sum total of every interaction, perception, and emotion that a consumer associates with a company, product, or service. It's the familiar jingle that plays in our heads, the swoosh on our sneakers, and the iconic packaging that catches our eye on store shelves. Thus, branding begins with a sign, a means of denoting an object's identity, and evolves into naming something, be it a steer, a slave, a prisoner, or a detergent. These names carry connotations beyond mere denotation, transforming into symbols of ownership and reputation (Bastos & Levy, 2012, p.349).

It is for this reason that brands should be studied in semiotic terms, since they are artifacts whose function is to consolidate a series of meanings and values, and the way in which they are constructed and achieve their objectives also respond to the rules and mechanisms of meaning construction that this discipline seeks to understand.

Branding involves marking: a mark placed directly on an object or indirectly on a label signifies ownership and status (Bastos & Levy, 2012, p.349). However, it can also serve as a positive sign of distinction, characteristic in which all the efforts have been done in the last century have been based on with the help of marketing, as an approach used by companies to promote and establish a brand in a market by creating a unique identity, values, and perceptions that differentiate it from competitors.

Derived from the act of burning, branding inherently suggests a range of intense experiences: searing, singeing, scarring, stimulating, arousing, compelling, fascinating, etc. The core idea of branding, rooted in the concept of fire, carries an intensity of meaning that generates feelings of partisanship and opposition, power and excitement. It announces identity and has the potential for beauty, devotion, and distinction (Bastos & Levy, 2012, p.352).

But why do brands matter so much? In a world teeming with choices, brands serve as trusty guides, helping us navigate through the maze of options. They provide a sense of reassurance and reliability, allowing us to make informed decisions amidst the chaos of consumerism. A strong brand isn't just a mark of quality; it's a promise kept, a bond forged, and a relationship nurtured over time. Brands are a multifaceted construct that plays a crucial role in shaping personal and social identities. It not only signifies ownership and status but also acts as a marker of distinction, capable of evoking strong emotional responses (Bastos & Levy, 2012, p.349). The interplay of positive and negative connotations in branding underscores its power and complexity, making it a vital element in the landscape of modern marketing and consumer culture.

Over the years, the concept of branding has transcended its initial application to products and expanded to encompass entire companies and organizations.

This evolution has given rise to the discipline of corporate branding, which involves the strategic management of a corporation or organization's identity. Also corporate branding goes beyond superficial elements like logos and colors to encompass the company's mission, values, and culture, seeking to align these internal attributes with the company's public image, fostering a cohesive and positive perception among stakeholders.

However, despite the growing recognition of the importance of internal alignment in corporate branding, many organizations still struggle to effectively implement this principle. Too often, the focus remains on superficial aspects of design rather than the substantive content that underpins the brand identity. This disconnect underscores the need to prioritize content over design in the practice of corporate identity design. Rather than striving to impose a predetermined visual identity, organizations must first articulate and embody their core values and mission. Only then can the visual identity effectively communicate and reinforce these underlying principles to stakeholders.

In contemporary branding practice, the identity of an organization cannot be fabricated or imposed from the outside. Instead, it must emerge organically from the organization's internal culture, values, and ethos. Attempting to force a visual identity onto an organization without considering its foundational content is not only ineffective but also risks alienating stakeholders and undermining the authenticity of the brand (Bell, 2004).

Yet again, brands are more than just economic entities for organizations. They are cultural touchstones, symbols of identity, and markers of status. Whether we realize it or not, our choice of brands often reflects our values, aspirations, and sense of self. From luxury fashion houses to humble neighborhood bakeries, brands shape our perceptions, influence our behaviors, and even shape our sense of belonging in society.

In today's hyper-connected world, the importance of brands has only grown more pronounced. With the rise of social media and digital marketing, brands have unprecedented opportunities to engage with consumers on a personal level, fostering loyalty and advocacy like never before.

But this newfound power also comes with challenges, as brands must navigate the delicate balance between authenticity and commercialism in an era of heightened scrutiny and skepticism.

In this context, a paradoxical phenomenon has been observed in recent years. Large companies have undergone rebranding processes, which constitute significant milestones of introspection where organizations redefine who they are and where they want to go. Often, these processes result in changes to their visual identity: logos, layouts grids, typography, colors, and more. However, as these outcomes have been unveiled worldwide, consumers and professionals in the fields of design and advertising have begun to critique an apparent homogenization of visual identities. Of particular relevance that gave a kick to this thesis is the commentary made by Erik Spiekermann, a renowned designer, who in late 2023 posted criticisms of modern rebrandings, even applying the negative epithet of “*blandification*” to this process (Spiekermann, 2023).

Internet voices echo Spiekermann’s sentiment. Gordon Young, Editor-In-Chief on The Drum, describes “*blandification*” as “*a scourge ossifying brand identity, driven by CMOs’ desire for clean, safe, and sensible work that is brave yet familiar and omni-amazing for an omnichannel world*” (Young, 2023). Jeffrey Oley notes that this trend in a post on Smart Company, in which he calls that “*blanding*” has been gaining momentum, with brands like Google, Uber, Airbnb, eBay, Saint Laurent, and Balmain replacing distinctive logos with basic wordmarks (Oley, 2019).

Michael Bierut of Pentagram, also cited by Oley (2019), observes that while intellectual differentiation is desirable, people often prefer familiar and safe designs: “*There is this real unease sometimes, where people are being challenged to do something that everyone kind of intellectually thinks is a desirable thing called ‘differentiation’. All brands should look different, they should all stand out. But people actually only partly want differentiation, they want it up to a point*”. Sarah Hyndman, designer and founder of Type Tasting, highlights the minimalist trend, describing modern logos as “*bold and blocky*” often sans-serif and stripped of ornamental details, relying on brand recognition to maintain emotional connections but losing distinctive personalities (Hyndman, 2023).

The phenomenon has even transcended the visual identity realm and has been related to fashion by Cassie Anderson, who in a *Cosmopolitan* article (2023) adds that “*bland*” design is more about relatability than boredom, focusing on everyday staples rather than extravagant items. This trend reflects broader cultural shifts towards practicality and familiarity in design choices.

The criticism around the phenomenon highlights a fundamental tension in contemporary branding practices. While the aim of rebranding is typically to refresh and revitalize a company’s image, there is a risk of inadvertently diluting its uniqueness in the pursuit of visual consistency or trendiness. As organizations strive to stay relevant and appealing in an ever-evolving marketplace, they may succumb to the pressure to conform to prevailing design trends or emulate the visual identities of industry leaders.

This phenomenon of homogenization in visual identities could underscore broader societal trends of our globalized world, in which information flows freely and cultural boundaries blur, and we could be observing a tendency for brands to converge towards a common visual language that is easily recognizable and palatable to diverse audiences. However, this drive towards uniformity runs counter to the principles of differentiation and authenticity that underpin effective branding strategies.

Another significant reason for this phenomenon may lie in the increasing relevance of social media over the last decade. It is understandable that the rise of social platforms would impact visual identities, prompting organizations to adapt their branding strategies to better resonate with these new media. However, the exact reasons why this shift is resulting in visual convergence and subsequent homogenization are not entirely clear.

The present thesis aims to undertake a comprehensive examination of the phenomenon of homogenization, shedding light on its cultural underpinnings and the ramifications it holds for brand differentiation and semantic richness, both at the individual brand level and within broader industry categories.

The thesis will document and analyze the phenomenon of homogenization utilizing semiotic methodologies and tools. By exploring the realm of signs

and symbols, this analytical framework will facilitate a deeper understanding of how visual identities converge and the implications thereof for brand differentiation and meaning generation.

Furthermore, the thesis will investigate whether digital culture and new technologies serve as the root cause of the homogenization phenomenon. Drawing on insights from disciplines such as psychotechnology, sociology, and anthropology, this inquiry will explore the transformative effects of technology and media on cultural norms, values, and practices. By situating the phenomenon of homogenization within the broader context of digital culture, the thesis will endeavor to uncover the underlying drivers and mechanisms driving this trend.

Through a rigorous examination of the cultural, semiotic, and technological dimensions of homogenization, the thesis seeks to offer valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities facing brands in the contemporary marketplace. By elucidating the factors shaping visual identities and meanings, the thesis aims to equip practitioners and scholars alike with the knowledge and tools needed to navigate the complexities of branding in the digital age.

0. The Evolution of Branding: A Historical Overview

Before analyzing the phenomenon of the homogenization of visual identities, it is necessary to contextualize branding and its evolution as a practice in the recent history of design and marketing.

The concept of branding, now a cornerstone of marketing, only emerged as a central focus in the twentieth century following the dynamic nature of consumer markets and the continuous efforts of businesses to distinguish themselves (Bastos & Levy, 2012, p.353). The term “*brand*” itself, according to Stern (2006), was introduced to marketing in 1922 as “*brand name*” signifying a trade or proprietary name.

In the early developments of the brand concept, Butler highlighted branding as a source of conflict among manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers who vied to position themselves as the preferred choice for consumers (Bastos & Levy, 2012, p.353). Cherington (1920) furthered this understanding by recognizing branding’s rise, driven by aggressive sales methods that included salesmanship and advertising. He emphasized the importance of quality, trademarks, and labels, noting that branding had become a standard method of sale in many product lines (p. 150). This point invites us to remember the etymological origin of the word *brand* summarized by Gianfranco Marrone in his book *Il discorso di marca* (2007):

The idea of an intentional and irreversible transformation of the physical world is, after all, already in the etymology of *brand*. In Franconian the verb *brennan* stands for «to burn», «to scorch», and *brand* stands for «fire», «thing that burns» and thus metonymically for «flaming sword». *Brand* is also by synecdoche, the glowing piece of wood, the «cinder». Thus, today the English *brand* can be translated as «cinder», «firebrand», «brand of infamy», «stigma», «trademark», «quality» (of merchandise), «sword» (p. 6, translation mine).

The significance of branding continued to grow, as evidenced by the comprehensive treatment of the topic in *Principles of Marketing* by Maynard, Weidler, and Beckman in 1927. This work underscored the role of branding in the distribution of merchandise from producers to consumers. A review by Daubman done in 1928 praised the work but noted that advertising and

salesmanship, critical components of branding, were somewhat underrepresented. But as Bastos & Levy (2012) show, there were other points of view at the time, such as Clark's (1927) who also published a *Principles of Marketing* in which he said that: Advertising and branding are important means of selling the standardized products of individual producers. Advertising, or other selling effort, tends to establish in the minds of prospective customers an idea of character and quality (p. 403).

Before the branding boom, many retail goods were sold as bulk staples without distinct brand identities. General stores offered commodities like coffee beans, cheese, and pickles in bulk. However, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a shift towards packaged and labeled products, adding a source identity to the utility of these goods. This period marked the beginning of brands becoming almost synonymous with their product categories. The early twentieth century saw the rise of nationwide magazines and radio, which, along with advertising agencies, played a pivotal role in branding. These agencies were instrumental in creating advertisements and orchestrating media plans, amplifying the reach and impact of brands (Bastos & Levy, 2012, p.354).

In the 1930s psychological theories and methods were introduced to marketing, enriching the understanding of consumer behavior. Concurrently, marketing research began to flourish as brand managers sought insights into the segmented mass market. This era laid the groundwork for more sophisticated branding strategies that considered consumer psychology and market segmentation.

The aftermath of the Second World War brought significant changes to the marketplace. The war effort had bolstered productive resources and capital, while pent-up consumer demand led to a “*Consumer Revolution*” in the late 1940s and 1950s (Bastos & Levy, 2012, p. 355). This period saw an explosion of goods and an intense competition among brands, prompting a proliferation of branding efforts. As Bastos & Levy explain, in this competitive landscape, emerging and smaller brands challenged established leaders. For instance, McDonald's and Burger King contended for dominance in the hamburger market, Pepsi-Cola intensified its rivalry with Coca-Cola, and Ipana was eclipsed by the rising popularity of Colgate and Crest.

A significant development during this period was the rise of the concept of brand image. Gardner and Levy (1955), in their seminal work *The Product and the Brand* highlighted the challenge consumers faced when choosing between brands that appeared indistinguishable, especially when these brands made identical claims of superiority. They illustrated this with examples from competing detergent brands, which all boasted similar promises such as, “No detergent under the sun gets clothes whiter, brighter”, “Washes more kinds of clothes whiter and brighter” and “Beats the sun for getting clothes whiter and brighter” (p.34).

Given this lack of product differentiation, Gardner and Levy (1955) emphasized the importance of understanding the social and psychological dimensions of products—whether brands, media, companies, institutional figures, services, industries, or ideas. They crystallized the insight that consumers are guided by their brand image, defined as a “governing product and brand personality that is unified and coherently meaningful” (p.39). They advised marketing managers to view every element of the marketing mix as a contribution to the complex symbol that is the brand image, highlighting that these elements are part of a long-term investment in the brand’s reputation.

The concept of brand image was further expanded by Levy (1959) in his influential work *Symbols for Sale*, which explored deeper into the symbolic nature of products and brands. This work is often quoted for the assertion that “People buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean” (p. 118). As mentioned by Bastos & Levy (2010), despite initial resistance and misunderstandings, Gardner and Levy’s insights had a profound impact on marketing practice and research, particularly by popularizing the term “brand image”.

The rise of brand image marked a fundamental shift in branding strategies. It underscored the necessity for brands to differentiate themselves not just through functional attributes but through the cultivation of a strong, coherent brand personality. This perspective encouraged marketers to focus on building a meaningful and consistent brand identity that resonates with consumers on a deeper, more emotional level, but as Bastos & Levy explain, the goal was to achieve this by means of a great logo and visual complementary elements.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the concept of branding experienced significant growth, both in its practical applications and theoretical underpinnings. Marketers began to explore the emotional and symbolic dimensions of branding, recognizing that brands could resonate with consumers on a level that extended beyond mere functionality.

Meenaghan (1995) succinctly summarized this shift, stating, *“At a more emotional/symbolic level a prime function of advertising is to achieve for a brand a particular personality or character in the perception of its market. This is achieved by imbuing the brand with specific associations or values. A particular feature of all great brands is their association with specific values, both functional and symbolic”*(p. 27). This perspective highlighted that successful brands are not only defined by their practical benefits but also by the emotions and values they evoke in consumers.

Additionally, the notion emerged that brands possess personalities akin to those of people. This anthropomorphic view of brands suggested that consumers could form relationships with brands, similar to how they engage with other individuals (Bastos & Levy, 2012, p. 357). During this period, branding strategies integrated various elements aimed at fortifying brand identity and personality. The quest for effective logos and the utilization of visual and auditory symbols became central to branding initiatives. These elements were meticulously crafted to embody the brand’s character and distinctive appeal, enriching the brand image and making it more relatable to consumers.

This shift in the significance of branding for consumers, along with the acknowledgment of this shift by managers and marketing researchers, manifested in various ways. This transformation spurred interest in qualitative research methodologies and contributed to the emergence of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) as a distinct area of study and an increasing demand for specialized services. Thousands of brand consultants now offer guidance on achieving the paramount goal of establishing a strong brand image.

Over the past 55 years, the functions and perceptions associated with branding have evolved significantly. Initially centered on ownership and reputation, branding has evolved to encompass broader concepts such as brand image,

symbolic values, fantasy, and relationship building. Notably, the twentieth century witnessed the democratization of branding, with brands becoming more receptive to inputs from a diverse array of actors beyond their immediate creators. This inclusive approach has led to brands becoming more dynamic entities, capable of adapting to changing consumer preferences and cultural trends.

In today's landscape, branding has become more than just marketing—it's about cultivating and steering an identity. In many circles, branding has taken precedence over the term marketing, possibly to circumvent some of the negative connotations associated with the latter.

By way of closing, it is important to return to the etymological exploration made by Marrone (2007) presenting how from the french word *marque*, a profound relationship between the material and cognitive nature of brands can be extracted:

“Halfway between English and Italian is the French *marque*, which, assimilating (italian terms) *marca* and *marchio*, indicates «material sign, imprint made on a thing in order to distinguish it, to recognize it», «infamous sign imprinted on the skin of a condemned person», «distinctive sign applied to a thing by the one who fabricated it». In short, in these cases, too, the cognitive nature of branding - linked to distinction and consequent recognition - is linked to somatic and social factors: the forcibly public use of the body, its violent cultural transformation, is at the same time the establishment of a difference between things, the possibility of some cataloging of the world. The immaterial of meaning emerges through the social inscription of the flesh. The body becomes a place and vehicle of signification.” (p.6, translation mine)

In this way, branding encapsulates not only the essence of a product—its tangible features, functionalities, and benefits—but also the intangible elements that surround it. This encompasses its visual appeal, accompanying sounds, tactile sensations, and the immersive fantasy it weaves into the cultural fabric, intertwining with societal and customer narratives (Bastos & Levy, 2012, p. 360).

At its core, a brand is considered a sophisticated composition, an intricate tapestry of experiences, reminiscent of a symphony resonating within the minds of consumers. It evolves over time, shaped by the guidance of astute directors, stimulating the imagination and leaving an indelible mark on those who encounter it.

1. Introduction to Semiotics

As mentioned, brands are vehicles of multiple personal and cultural meanings so, in order to analyze the phenomenon of homogenization we will use semiotics as a discipline that will allow us to delve into the construction of meanings.

One of the broadest definitions of semiotics is that of Umberto Eco, who states that “*semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign*” (Eco, 1976, p. 7). This shows us the centrality of signs and their role they take to represent and communicate meanings in various cultural and social practices. Ferdinand de Saussure, shows us this link the cultural context when he states that semiotics is “*the science of the life of signs in society*” (Saussure, 1916, p. 16). With this broad definition, we can see how semiotics as a discipline can encompass a wide range of areas of study, from language and communication to art, advertising, and popular culture.

One of the fundamental principles of semiotics is based on the understanding of signs and symbols as fundamental elements in human communication. Signs, in the context of semiotics, are fundamental elements that represent something to someone in a given context. As stated by C. S. Peirce, a sign is “*something that stands for something, to someone in some capacity*” (EP2, p. 478). This definition highlights the relational nature of the sign, in which meaning is determined by the relationship between the sign and its interpreter.

In practice and following Eco’s definition of semiotics, signs can take various forms, including words, images, gestures and symbols, and their meaning can vary according to the cultural and social context in which they are used. This diversity of forms and meanings makes the study of signs a complex but essential enterprise for understanding human communication in all its dimensions.

Semiotics also focuses on the structure and organization of signs within a system, which allows us to understand how signs interact with each other to produce meaning. Algirdas Julien Greimas, the founder and one of the main exponents of narrative semiotics, proposed the theory of actants, which identifies the functions or roles that signs play within a narrative or discourse, and moreover, the generative trajectory of meaning: described by him as a process for discourse production developed in various stages, each with a syntactic and a semantic subcomponent, beginning at the deep level with elementary structures and extending over more complex structures at the higher levels (Greimas & Courtés, 1979).

A brand is “*a phenomenon (or rather, a complex set of phenomena) of an eminently semiotic nature*” (Marrone, 2007), comprising a complex array of signifiers that connect to specific meanings, generating diverse impacts on people and objects. At its core, a brand functions as a mark—a sign that initiates a series of intricate considerations extending beyond mere economics, market dynamics, and consumption. These considerations encompass communication strategies, the creation and reception of social narratives, and the cultural conditions that facilitate the circulation of texts. As Marrone mentions, contrary to the notion that a brand is inherently schizophrenic, torn between material and immaterial realms, it is actually a discursive process. This process forges relationships between things and values, creating them as distinct, independent entities through their interconnectedness.

The applications of semiotics in brand analysis offer a unique perspective for understanding how meanings are constructed and communicated through the visual and textual signs that represent a brand. Jean-Marie Floch in *Visual Identities* (1995) explained “*the creation of visual identity through bricolage*”(p. 2) in which he argues that “*we can find, in bricolage itself, a particular form of enunciative praxis*” (p.4), meaning that this is to call a number of already established forms, some of which already have their own forms, creating entities independent of both previous meanings and the author’s own control (“*bricoleur*”).

Semiotics offers tools and methodologies to analyze the signs that make up a brand’s visual and verbal identity. From logos and slogans to colors and typographies, each brand element can be examined from a semiotic perspective to understand its impact on consumers’ perception and interpretation of the brand.

In a semiotic sense, signs can be words, images, sounds or any other medium that represents something. This diversity of forms and meanings allows semiotic analysts to explore how a brand uses different signs to communicate its brand values, attributes and personality, to try to consolidate a brand’s own meaning. More importantly, semiotics allows us to understand the context in which these meanings are created and how they evolve over time in their interaction with people, other brands, social and cultural contexts.

1.1 Signs and Symbols

For the purpose of this thesis, it seems important to have a more in depth understanding of what signs are, and how they work in the creation and communication of meanings in human life. As we mentioned, Charles Sanders Peirce, offered a triadic perspective of the sign in which he distinguished between the sign (representation), the object to which the sign refers, and the interpretant, which is the interpretation or understanding of the sign by the receiver. This sign-object-interpretant triad is fundamental in Peirce's semiotic theory.

When we talk about the sign in the triad, we need to understand that they can be of a wide variety of nature, as Noth states in the chapter on Sign:: *“Every object, event, or behavior is thus a potential sign. Even silence can have the semiotic function of a zero sign. Everything can thus be perceived as a natural sign of something else, and by prior agreement between a sender and a receiver, every object can also serve as a conventional sign”* (Nöth, 1990, p.81) This wide variety of forms and media allows us to understand how signs are used in human communication, from verbal language to visual art and music.

As for what the sign represents, i.e., its referent, it can be anything from a relation that some would call “natural” to great abstractions, whose relation to the sign can only be understood in conjunction with the third component of the triad, the interpreter. It is not surprising that semiotics has its origins in semantics. Are not words an abstraction par excellence? Nothing can explain in a direct way the relationship between a flower we see in the street with the word /flower/, but it is important to understand that this link is made by man together with all his cultural and social context.

In the relationship that the sign has to the object, we also have Peirce who distinguishes between three kinds of signs: “iconic” (where the sign resembles that which it represents), “indexical” (where the sign is somehow connected with that of which it is a sign) and “symbolic” (where the sign is only an arbitrary link) (Peirce, 1931-58, §§ 2.233-71).

It is important to understand that in all these definitions, the role of man and his communities are fundamental for the meaning to be effective and/

or shared. From a word that is shared by millions of people who speak the same language, what a particular person means within a family or the meaning that I give to an object that I keep with affection. In all these cases the role of the sign is fulfilling its function in the creation of meanings, but the universality of these meanings is not always the same.

This is a fundamental aspect to take into account, since brands always seek to generate a meaning that reaches people and manages to group them around a common identification.

1.2 Interpretation, denotation and connotation

Now that we have established certain notions of what a sign is, we must delve deeper into how meaning is constructed and interpreted in these cultural and social contexts we were talking about.

One of the fundamental principles of semiotic interpretation is the concept of “*denotation*” and “*connotation*”. In traditional semantics, connotative meaning is a secondary meaning which a sign may have in addition to a primary, standard, or core meaning, called denotative meaning. Bloomfield defines connotations as “*supplementary values*” (Nöth, 1990, p. 102). Roland Barthes (1915-1980) argued that signs have two levels of meaning: the denotative level, which refers to the literal or surface meaning of a sign, and the connotative level, which refers to the meanings associated culturally or symbolically with the sign. For example, in an advertisement, the image of a watch may simply denote the physical object, but it may also connote ideas of status, timeliness, or luxury.

Following the connotation principle, we can also encounter the concept of myth, defined by Barthes as a “*second order semiotic system*” (Barthes, 1957/1991, p.113). Myths consist of connotative meanings which are, so to speak, engrafted in a parasitic fashion onto a denotational level of meaning. Barthes defined myth as a type of discourse that transforms the culturally specific into something universal and naturalized. By examining myths in contemporary culture, Barthes identified how certain objects, persons or

practices become symbols of broader and deeper meanings. For example, the figure of the “*hero*” in popular culture can be a myth that represents values such as courage, bravery, and determination. As such, myths appear in advertising, films, business life, or the daily food of a given culture which is why this concept is so important when analyzing brands (Nöth, 1990, p. 376).

1.3 Narrative Semiotics

Finally, in order to make a semiotic analysis of the visual identities of brands, we must explore into some fields of the discipline that have developed the tools for this.

To arrive at the interpretation of the visual elements, a fundamental piece is the so-called “*Structural Semiotics*”, a current within semiotics that focuses on the analysis of the underlying structures of signs and sign systems. In this field, signs are analyzed in terms of relationships and differences within a larger semiotic system.

A.J. Greimas was the main exponent of Structural Semiotics. In his semiotic theory, influenced by structuralism in linguistics, Lévi-Strauss’s anthropology, and early formalist theories from Propp and Souriau, seeks to apply structural linguistics methodologies—such as phonology, semantics, and syntax—to text analysis, which he refers to as discourse. Drawing from Saussure’s and Hjelmslev’s ideas, Greimas develops a semiotic model known as the generative trajectory (Nöth, 1990, p.315).

The generative trajectory is a model that explains how discourses are produced within any semiotic system. Greimas distinguishes three main areas of interpretation within this model: semio-narrative structures, discursive structures, and textual structures (Greimas & Courtés, 1979, 133). However, textual structures—being primarily about expression rather than content—are positioned outside the generative trajectory.

The generative trajectory describes the production of discourse through various stages, each comprising a syntactic and a semantic component.

Generative Trajectory			
		Syntactic Component	Semantic Component
Semiotic and Narrative Structures	<i>Deep Level</i>	<i>Fundamental Syntax</i> Operations and relations in the semiotic square	<i>Fundamental Semantics</i> Semantic investment of the semiotic square
	<i>Surface Level</i>	<i>Narrative Syntax</i> Narrative schema: actants and modalities	<i>Narrative Semantics</i> Semantic investment of the actants and the modalities
Discursive Structures		<i>Discursive Syntax</i> Discoursivisation <i>actorialisation</i> <i>temporalisation</i> <i>spatialisation</i>	<i>Discursive Semantics</i> Thematisation Figurativisation

Figure 1. Image from Trope, R. (2018). A Model for Defining the Concept and Practice of Translation, from the Perspective of Greimasian Semiotics. Articles hors thème.

This process starts at the deep level with elementary structures and progresses to more complex structures at higher levels (Greimas & Courtés, 1979, 275). The trajectory outlines structures that govern the organization of discourse before it manifests in a natural language or non-linguistic semiotic system.

On Greimas's model, the semio-narrative structures are considered universal and code-independent, forming a fundamental grammar divided in two levels. At the deep level, it places fundamental semantics and fundamental syntax, while on the surface level, narrative syntax and narrative semantics. Doing so, the elements can be organized into narrative trajectories, reflecting the progression of discourse.

Discursive structures are responsible for transforming surface structures into actual discourse. Discursive syntax organizes actors within a temporal and spatial framework, effectively localizing narrative actors in time and space. Discursive semantics, though less explored, involves thematization and figurativization, linking abstract themes with concrete figures.

In this way, as we can see in **Figure 1**, Greimas's generative trajectory provides a framework for understanding the production of discourse in any kind of semiotic system through a layered approach, integrating deep and surface structures and bridging semantics with syntax in both narrative and discursive dimensions.

1.4 Visual Semiotics

As the study of semiotics progressed, there arose a pressing need to comprehend visual language as a semiotic entity. While linguistic theory had meticulously dissected the mechanisms of meaning generation in verbal communication throughout the twentieth century, semiotics, as a broader science of signs, embarked on the endeavor of investigating visual language among other forms of communication.

Drawing inspiration from structuralist linguistic approaches and the seminal work of Ferdinand de Saussure, who dissected verbal language as a semiotic structure, early semioticians grappled with the question of whether visual images could be construed as a systematic “*language*” akin to verbal communication.

The initial challenge lay in the concept of similarity or likeness between images and their referents. Critics argued that this perceived similarity was not inherently motivated but rather governed by cultural codes and conventions, which dictated the recognition and interpretation of images, thereby codifying the relationship between the image and its referent.

Another hurdle emerged in the notion of a singular and finite system of signs within images. Could visual signs be categorized and combined in a manner analogous to the finite units of natural languages? Could painting, for instance, be considered a sign system despite its resistance to reduction into a code? Semioticians grappled with these questions, recognizing that for any language to be considered as such, it must comprise minimal units that combine to form meaningful constructs.

The evolution of thought led to a pivotal realization: the study of images necessitated an exploration of their internal logic. Semiotics transitioned from focusing solely on sign systems and their minimal units to delving into the inner workings of images themselves. Figures like Hubert Damisch and Louis Marin contributed significantly to the development of a semiotics tailored to the arts, emphasizing the importance of iconography in assessing the validity and uniqueness of semiotic inquiries into visual culture.

Ultimately, semiotics, in its examination of the *life of signs* and the mechanisms of signifying systems, aimed not merely to decipher the meaning of images but to illuminate the intricate processes of signification in which artworks served as both the locus and potential culmination (Damisch, 1973, p.19).

The transition from the semiotics of the image to the development of visual semiotics, introduced by Algirdas Greimas in his work *Figurative Semiotics and the Semiotics of the Plastic Arts* (1984) and then developed also by the Paris School, marks a significant shift in the understanding of how meaning is generated through visual communication.

In figurative semiotics, the traditional notion of iconic signs closely resembling their referents undergoes scrutiny. Rather than viewing resemblance as an inherent quality of the image itself, scholars argued that it is mediated by cultural frameworks. Resemblance between the image and the “world” occurs at the level of the signified, facilitated by a shared reading grid between the world and visual artifacts (Greimas, 1984, 632). This reevaluation leads to the emergence of figurative semiotics, which focuses on transforming visual features into recognizable figures termed “figurative formants.” These formants evoke varying degrees of reality, depending on the density of their visual traits.

However, figurative semiotics alone proves insufficient in fully unpacking the richness of meaning within visual texts. Visual semiotics challenges the primacy of figurative readings, recognizing that images possess multiple layers of meaning production. Thus, alongside figurative analysis, plastic semiotics emerges as a secondary language derived from the figurative dimension of images.

As mentioned before, at this point in his work *Figurative Semiotics and the Semiotics of the Plastic Arts*, Greimas explored how signs can represent abstract concepts through concrete images. Greimas argues that images can have symbolic meanings, in which the relationship between a visual feature carries a conventional and culturally constructed meaning (i.e. gold = holy in Medieval religious paintings), or semi-symbolic, in which there is a homology between two oppositions. For the case of visual semiotics, these oppositions are, by one side, of the sensory (perception), and on the other side, of the conceptual (understanding) (Hébert, 2006).

Plastic semiotics explores the materiality of the image's signifier and investigates the semiotic modes inherent in the "*logics of the sensible*" (Greimas and Courtés, 1986: "Plastique, sémiotique" ad vocem). It encompasses not only planar images but also volumes, light dynamics, and other visual qualities. By scrutinizing the form of the visual signifier, plastic semiotics reveals a sense that transcends mere lexicalization, offering a rich and nuanced understanding of visual communication.

Jean-Marie Floch, another leading semiotician, has also contributed to the study of figurative semiotics. In his work *Visual identities*, Floch explores how visual signs and visual communication can convey meanings through their form and structure. He argues that the way visual signs, such as logos or advertising images, are presented can have a significant impact on the interpretation of the message. Floch takes the notion of families of plastic categories proposed by Greimas, which are sets of visual elements that share common semantic characteristics: "*Starting with the conventional observation that on a painted surface we find both colors and forms, the distinction between chromatic categories and eidetic categories might appear as a simple terminological flourish*" (Greimas et al., 1989). These plastic categories are analyzed in terms of their cultural and symbolic meanings, as well as their influence on perception and interpretation.

Thanks to the understanding of figurative semiotics, it was possible to develop a *Plastic Reading* of visual elements, as a methodology to perform semiotic analysis of visual objects, such as works of art, advertisements, logos and graphic design, focusing on the visual structure and formal elements that make up the work. This methodology is based on the idea that visual signs can be analyzed in a similar way to linguistic signs (although there is not an alphabet for images), breaking down the work into its basic components and examining how these elements interact to convey meaning, but always keeping in mind Floch's idea of Bricolage, in which although we can identify certain elements that make up the image, whether visual or discursive, we cannot separate them and study them, but they will always be part of a whole that expresses a meaning of its own. This resonates with Marrone's view in *Il discorso de marca* (2007), which explains that brand logos, images and other visual assets cannot be considered as isolated signs,

but as many textual elements which, connecting together in a coherent whole of meaning, are characterized “*to be the tip of the iceberg of an underlying discursive flow and narrativity*” (p. 256, translation mine).

Plastic reading in semiotics involves a series of methodological steps, including the identification of the key visual elements of the work, the analysis of its formal structure, and its relationship to the cultural and social context in which it is produced. Jean-Marie Floch, in his work *Visual Identities* applied a systematic approach to the analysis of objects, including aspects such as form, color, composition and space as a way to decode the meaning through their visual elements. Following his example, a way to perform the plastic reading can be organized by analyzing the “*plane of expression*” of the image through the plastic categories: Topological, chromatic and eidetic observing with detail how the elements manage to create figures and enunciation marks such as perspectives, points of view or engagement strategies. After that the “*plane of content*” can be explored, which can only be done properly if the context in which the work was created, its author and its environment are considered.

Visual semiotics posits that images function as signifying objects embedded within a semiotic system. Analyzing paradigmatic visual objects leads to the identification of plastic categories and operations governing their meaning generation.

Having understood what semiotics is, what signs are and their role in the construction of meanings, and with the latter with respect to plastic reading, we can conclude the theoretical basis that was necessary to be able to enter into the analysis of the phenomenon of homogenization.

2. Visual characteristics of homogenization. An overview

In order to understand the phenomenon of homogenization in detail, we will go deeper into the different elements that give shape to a logo by incorporating more examples that will allow us to verify and define the specific attributes that converge to build this trend. It is worth mentioning that examples were chosen to represent certain categories, but this does not mean that their characteristics of homogenization are not observed in the other categories too.

2.1 Homogenization in typography

Typography is a fundamental part of the way we communicate. Typography surrounds us: it adorns the buildings and the streets through which we pass, it is a component part of the ever-expanding variety of media we consume - from magazines, to television and the internet - and we even increasingly sport it on our clothing in the form of branding and symbolic messages (Ambrose et al., 2006, p.6).

“Fonts are not symbols that represent voices, they are communication tools with cognitive qualities that aid telling stories. Therefore the designers focus not only on what is being said but also on how it is delivered” (Nakilcioğlu, 2013, p.39).

Regarding our analysis, the main comment received by brands that are criticized for their homogenization is the fact that brands have been gradually leaving behind serif typefaces: those that have a small extension in their shafts, arms and endings. In the presentation of its new logo in 2015, Google comments how the new visual identity takes the best of the brand, defined as simple, uncluttered, colorful, friendly, *“but for the Google of the future”* (Yehoshua, 2015), the latter referring to the ecosystem of interactive icons they were launching for their various applications in order to integrate them visually.

Another case that stands out for its change in typography is the already iconic “I (Love) NY” logo designed by Milton Glaser for a 1977 campaign to promote tourism in New York State. The new logo launched in 2023 presents 3 important changes: from “I” to “We”, the heart and the typography. On the latter



The Google logo from 2013 to 2015, featuring a blue 'G', a red 'o', a yellow 'o', a green 'g', and a red 'le'.

2013 - 2015



The Google logo from 2015 to the present, featuring a blue 'G', a red 'o', a yellow 'o', a green 'g', and a red 'le'.

2015 - Present

Figure 2.
Homogenization
in typography



The 'I Love NY' logo, featuring a red heart between the letters 'I' and 'NY'.

1977 - 2023



The 'WE Love NYC' logo, featuring a red heart between the words 'WE' and 'NYC'.

2022 - Present



The Balmain Paris logo from 1983 to 2018, featuring the word 'BALMAIN' in a serif font above the word 'PARIS' in a smaller serif font.

1983 - 2018



The Balmain Paris logo from 2018 to the present, featuring a stylized 'B' inside a circle above the word 'BALMAIN' in a bold sans-serif font above the word 'PARIS' in a smaller bold sans-serif font.

2018 - Present

Graham Clifford, the designer and art director who oversaw the new logo, said the idea was to “*give it more of a modern twist*” (Stewart, 2023). By seeking to resemble the typography present in the signage of the metro system. In this case we can also see how a serif typeface, which made reference to the old typewriters with all the meaning and connotation that can bring with it, is replaced by a sans-serif in pursuit of a more contemporary vision, and in Clifford’s own words, more flexible and adaptable to its environment: “*you can have Wall Street types sitting next to construction workers. It’s a place where you can bring everybody together, and we’re cognizant of that*” (Stewart, 2023).

The latest example of typographic change is that of the Balmain brand, in this case in the fashion industry, which in 2018 went through a rebranding process that modified its logo. You don’t have to be a designer to observe the clear change in the choice of typography, in which again the serif with beveled details was left behind, to replace it with a wide stroke sans-serif. Regarding this change, Olivier Rousteing the creative director mentions that times have changed and “*Balmain is now a fast-growing brand relying on new media to communicate to a global audience*” (Harper’s Bazaar, 2018). In this case, we can see that a change in the brand strategy, strongly related to reaching more people through new technologies, would be the reason to look for the simplification of the logo.

2.2 Homogenization in color

If we now look at the color use, we can see that the landscape of corporate branding has seen a notable evolution. As every rebranding effort, these shifts are not merely cosmetic; they reflect strategic decisions aimed at refreshing brand identities, capturing evolving market sentiments, and asserting distinct visual identities in crowded marketplaces.

Taking as an example Itaú, the Brazilian bank which in 2024 launched a whole new identity made by Pentagram. In this new visual identity, the banking giant transitioned from a traditional blue and yellow palette to a striking, radiant orange. This new logo, in addition to presenting the initial “I” of its name in lowercase, features a single-color dominance, coupled with the incorporation of quintessential Brazilian hues like yellow, blue, green, and pink, signifying a departure from the previous dual-tone identity, emphasizing simplicity and vibrancy (Pentagram, n.d.).

Similarly, Wise, formerly known as TransferWise, underwent a rebranding process in 2023 by the hand of Ragged Edge. About the color change, the studio said: *“A vibrant green – a symbol of both money and progress – replaces the blue so beloved by financial institutions”* (Ragged Edge, 2024). Complemented by punchy secondary colors like vibrant oranges and deep blacks, the new palette aims to *“mirror the dynamic and diverse nature of the global landscape it operates in”* (Warboys, 2023).

Channel 4 also underwent a major transformation in 2023, guided by Pentagram. The iconic number four was retained, ensuring continuity and brand recognition. However, the most significant change was the removal of the previous multicolored palette—red, blue, green, yellow, and purple. This was replaced with a sleek black and vibrant green color scheme. As mentioned on the presentation of the new branding: *“The brand’s touchpoints are anchored by a vibrant green ‘4’, reflecting the alternative spirit of the channel, which navigates the viewer through a wider color system of immersive gradients and worlds that reflect the rich diversity of Channel 4 content”* (Channel 4, 2023).



2021 - 2023



2023 - Present



2016 - 2022



2022 - Present

The logo features the word "Itaú" in a yellow, lowercase, sans-serif font, set within a blue rounded square, which is itself centered within a larger orange square.

Itaú

2003 - 2023

The logo features the word "itaú" in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font, set within an orange rounded square.

itaú

2023 - Present



1982 - 2023



2023 - Present

Figure 3. Homogenization in color

Similarly, **BOLT**, a pioneer in e-commerce solutions, revamped its branding strategy by the hand of Koto Studio in 2023, embracing a bold, acid yellow. This departure from a black and blue palette to a singular, vibrant color was aimed to reflect, as the studio states, the company's commitment to flexibility and innovation (Kuruvilla,2023).

These shifts in color palettes across prominent logos offer valuable insights. The transition from multi-color to monochromatic schemes underscores a preference for simplicity and clarity, which could facilitate instant brand recognition in an increasingly cluttered visual landscape. Moreover, the adoption of brighter, more vibrant hues show us a departure from traditional norms, signaling adaptability, innovation, and a keen understanding of contemporary consumer preferences. For our analysis, we cannot fail to mention the fact that this strategy of simplifying the number of colors and the use of brighter-vibrant shades may be useful for those who carry them out beforehand, but in view of the phenomenon we are analyzing, they are only one more element that could be considered as homogenizing for contemporary visual identities.

2.3 Homogenization in shapes

Another element to observe in the homogenization phenomenon is the simplification of shapes, evident in various corporate rebranding efforts.

Starting from Mastercard's 2016 rebranding by Pentagram, we can see the iconic intersecting circles, once intricate and detailed, underwent a significant simplification. The total removal of words, follows the elimination of extraneous lines and the flattening of colors at the intersection point resulted in a cleaner, more minimalist design. This approach prioritizes clarity and simplicity, ensuring instant recognition across digital and physical platforms (Pentagram, n.d.).

Similarly, HP's logo redesign in 2016, executed by Moving Brands, highlights the trend towards simplification. The previous logo, featuring a circle with the letters H and P, gave way to a minimalist composition of four diagonal strokes forming the brand's initials abstractly. This reduction of complexity seeks to rationalize the visual identity, making it more versatile and adaptable to different applications, even when there may be doubts about the cost of eliminating a well-known logo for one that takes the ability to be recognized to the limit (Moving Brands, 2023).

Nickelodeon's 2023 identity refresh also showcases a move towards simplification. While the typography had been previously updated, the most significant change was seen in the transformation of the iconic "*splat*" into a simplified version ruled by a so-called "*circular grid*" (Roger, n.d.). This simplification strategy enhances brand coherence and ensures consistency across different media platforms.

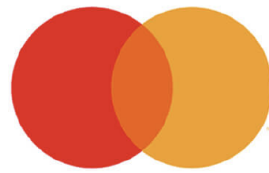
Also Airbnb embraced simplification in its 2014 logo redesign by DesignStudio. Despite its multifaceted conceptual underpinnings, the formal execution remains simple—a single continuous line with subtle folds, which in word of their creator allows for easy customization and aligns with the brand's ethos of simplicity and accessibility (Howarth, 2014).

Overall, we can observe the simplification of shapes in recent logo designs and how they underscore a broader trend towards minimalism and clarity. By reducing complexity and focusing on essential elements, companies aim to create visually impactful identities that resonate with audiences in an increasingly cluttered visual landscape.

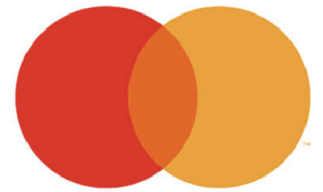
Figure 4.
Homogenization
in shapes



1996 - 2016



2016 - 2019



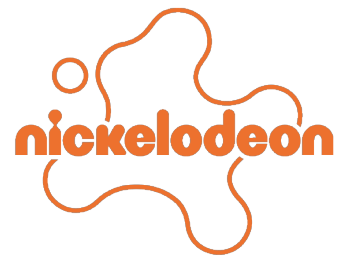
2019 - Present



1984 - 2009



2009 - 2023



2023 - Present



2009 - 2016



2016 - Present



2010 - 2013



2013 - 2014



2014 - Present

2.4 Homogenization in figures drawings

One last element that is worth giving a look is the transformation of the drawings or mascots within brand identities. It is important for this section to take into account figurative reading of visual objects (Greimas, 1984, 634). In the essay, Greimas comments that when reading an image in a figurative way, the observer takes into account certain elements present in the image to “construct” the figure, so that figuration ends up being a problem of density and organization among these elements, and therefore, “*iconization*” (the image most faithful to reality) and abstraction, are nothing else but degrees and levels of figuration. Let’s explore some examples to understand this shift further.

Mailchimp’s 2018 rebranding by Collins saw a simplification of its well known monkey mascot. The colorful rendition gave way to a single-color caricature, streamlining the visual identity while retaining the essence of the brand’s character.

Pringles, under the creative direction of Jones Knowles Ritchie (JKR) in 2021, underwent a bold makeover. The familiar face of Mr. P was reconstructed using flat, monochromatic shapes, emphasizing essential contours to maintain recognizability. We can explore the intent from the words of the design team, “*the intention with the new look is to simplify and modernise the design, giving the brand’s mascot a bold makeover and highlighting the stackability of the crisps across the range*” (Wong, 2021).

US Open’s 2018 redesign by Chermayeff & Geismar & Haviv (CGH) witnessed a similar evolution. The iconic imagery of the flaming tennis ball and the U.S. Open flame was distilled into a simplified representation, employing three yellow figures, reducing two objects (flame+ball) to one. In words of the design studio “*This minimalist approach aimed to convey the energy and spirit of the tournament while optimizing the logo for diverse applications*” (Chermayeff & Geismar & Haviv, n.d.). It is worth to mention how they talk about the new visual identity as “*while modernizing the look, providing a more youthful appeal, and optimizing the identity for applications on everything from apps and Instagram to billboards, print ads, and swag*” (Chermayeff & Geismar & Haviv, n.d.).

Figure 5.
Homogenization in
figures drawings



2013 - 2018



2018 - Present



2009 - 2020



2021 - Present



1997 - 2018



2018 - Present



2011 - 2020



2020 - Present



2007 - 2019



2019 - Present



2014 - 2019



2019 - 2023



2023 - Present



2005 - 2017



2017 - 2023



2023 - Present

In 2020, Petco embarked on a strategic rebranding initiative, shifting its focus beyond pet products to a more holistic perspective. As part of this evolution, the company bid farewell to its longtime mascots, Red Ruff and Blue Mews, symbolizing a departure from representational figures in favor of a more abstract brand identity. It is also worth to mention the case of Dunkin's 2018 rebranding by JKR Global, that not only removed the word "donuts" from its name (and with this, also all the "O's" that could have left us some reference to their precious product) but also got rid of the iconic coffee cup traditionally associated with the brand. This strategic move aimed to capture the essence of Dunkin's vision for the future while modernizing its visual identity.

In general, there is a trend towards a greater degree of abstraction, seeking to reduce the elements that give rise to a figurative reading to a minimum, in some cases even eliminating representative figures in logo designs. This change means a move away from literal representations in favor of more versatile visual identities, as they do not necessarily contain figurative elements in their logo, but figuration can be used in a more conscious way.

However, it's worth noting two exceptions that stand out—the 2023 rebranding of Android and Reddit. Both brands opted for a three-dimensional treatment of their mascots, diverging from the aforementioned trend and reflecting a nuanced approach to digital representation. This contrast prompts reflection on how elements from the digital realm are depicted with increasing realism compared to their physical counterparts, adding layers of depth to brand identities in the digital age.

Figure 6.
Figures drawings in
technology related
brands

3. Four cases of Semiotic Analysis of Logos

So far, we have focused on the visual characteristics that shape the phenomenon, but we cannot stay only at the level of what is represented, since rebranding initiatives usually entail deep semiotic implications. To delve deeper into the phenomenon of simplification and homogenization, we will examine in depth four brands to understand the phenomenon. The criteria for selecting these first examples were that they were of different categories, recognized in each of them, and that they had modified their visual identity in the last 4 years.

For each of these brands we will start with a plastic reading of their logo in which, following Floch's example in his work *Visual Identities*, we will review the evolution to identify elements of continuity and differences, as he explains:

“Visual identity means *difference* because it ensures the recognition and proper positioning of a commercial enterprise and because it is an expression of the company's specificity. On the other hand, visual identity means *continuity* because it testifies to the ongoing industrial, economic and social values of the company. Continuity cannot be seen here as mere repetition but rather as a kind of ‘becoming’ with its own logic and directional sequence” (Floch, 2005, p.33).

As introduced before, we will make a description of the plane of expression in three categories: topological, chromatic and eidetic. As Angela Mengoni summarize in her essay *Visual Semiotics* (2021):

Eidetic categories involve an “isolating and discriminatory” function that would be the characteristic of any element capable of tracing forms in the image. Lines, contours, strokes.

Chromatic categories rather account for the “individuating and integrating” function responsible for the filled surfaces, areas, and stains, which would be the characteristic of color, and also, more generally, of texture, or material.

Topological categories, such as high/low, central/peripheral, which account for the spatial relationships between elements.

This will be complemented with a figurative reading of the logos to understand the possible meanings they may have associated and the basic values they could be transmitting.

Finally, we will delve into the way in which these brands, in the context of contemporary marketing, build their identity in front of their audiences, which they certainly do with much more than their logo, but through content on social networks. For this purpose, we will include an excerpt from the company's Instagram, in order to count audiovisual pieces that can provide us with elements for the analysis of the logos and thus be able to generate a more complete reading of the plane of content.

3.1 Johnson&Johnson (Wolff Olins)

Johnson & Johnson is a multinational corporation based in New Brunswick, New Jersey, United States. It was founded in 1886 by Robert Wood Johnson I, James Wood Johnson, and Edward Mead Johnson. The company is one of the largest and most diversified healthcare conglomerates globally, operating in three main segments: pharmaceuticals, medical devices, and consumer health.

In the pharmaceutical segment, Johnson & Johnson develops and markets prescription drugs across a broad range of therapeutic areas, including oncology, immunology, infectious diseases, and cardiovascular and metabolic diseases. Some of its well-known pharmaceutical brands include Remicade, Invokana, and Imbruvica.

In the medical devices segment, the company manufactures and sells a variety of medical devices and surgical equipment used in procedures ranging from orthopedics and cardiovascular surgery to diabetes care and vision correction. Key products in this segment include orthopedic implants, surgical instruments, and advanced diagnostic equipment.

The consumer health segment encompasses a diverse portfolio of over-the-counter medicines, personal care products, and wellness solutions. Brands like Band-Aid, Neutrogena, Tylenol, and Listerine are household names under this segment.

Johnson & Johnson is renowned for its commitment to innovation, quality, and ethical business practices. It has a long history of breakthrough discoveries and advancements in healthcare, including the first commercial production of sterile surgical dressings, the development of the first prescription contraceptive pill, and significant contributions to vaccines and treatments for diseases like HIV/AIDS and COVID-19.

During 2023, they unveiled a new logo and visual identity designed by Wolff Olins, marking a significant departure from its traditional cursive script logo



 1887



 2023 - Present

Figure 7.
Johnson&Johnson last
logo change

that has been in use since 1887. The updated branding, as stated by the company, reflects the company's renewed focus on healthcare innovation and addressing global health challenges. Alongside the logo change, Johnson & Johnson announced the renaming of its pharmaceutical segment, Janssen, to Johnson & Johnson Innovative Medicine, and its medical technology sector to Johnson & Johnson MedTech. The consumer side of the business, encompassing well-known brands like BandAid and Listerine, will transition to the name Kenvue. This rebranding move is seen as part of Johnson & Johnson's adaptation to digital transformation, aiming for a more contemporary and personable presence across digital interfaces.

Plane of Expression Description

Topological: The rebranding maintains a centered composition, yet the new version employs a typography with increased X-height, expanding towards the edges. Notably, the ampersand gains prominence, occupying a central position in the logo.

Chromatic: The deep red color, a hallmark of Johnson & Johnson's identity, remains unchanged.

Eidetic: The most significant alterations occur in this dimension. The transition from a calligraphic typeface, allegedly based on co-founder James

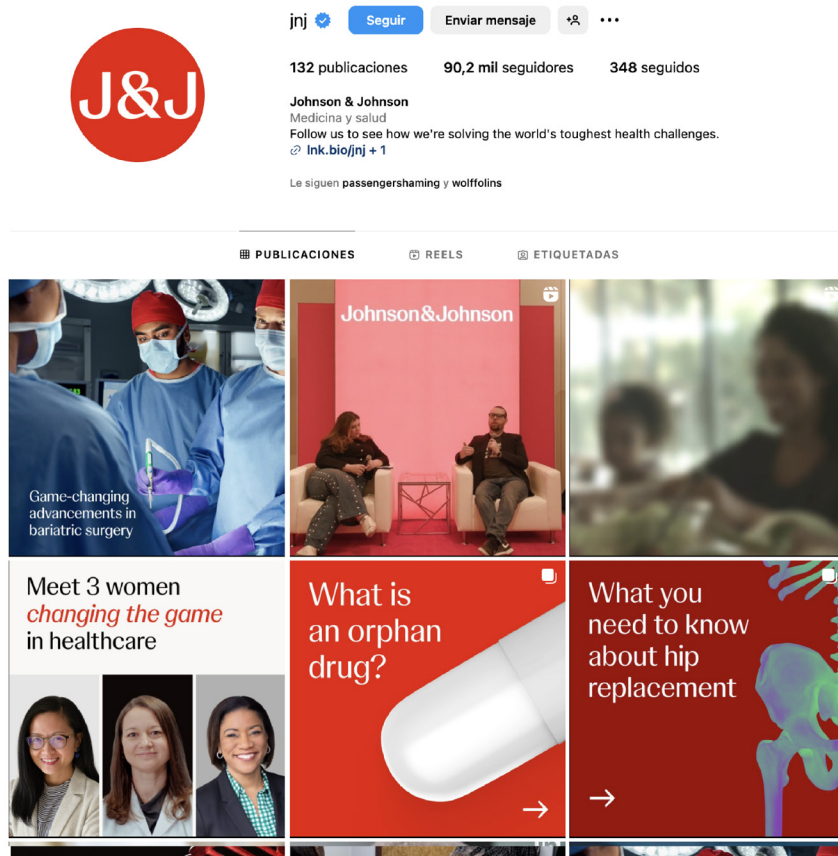


Figure 8. Johnson&Johnson's Instagram Official account feed.

Wood Johnson's signature, to a sans-serif one eliminates curved lines, reduces stroke contrast, and alters letter spacing. Additionally, the contrast between ascenders and descenders in lowercase letters is modified, alongside increased interior space in closed letters like O and the ampersand.

Going beyond the logo, we can see how the application of the new corporate identity in the official Instagram account adds new elements for analysis. On the one hand we see the presence of people: doctors in full operation, lecturers and professional profiles. We also see that the doctors are in an operation, not just posing for a photo; the same happens with the speakers, in the image of the event itself. The colors white and red are consistently present in the publications, either as a background for an image, highlighting texts or on the heads of the doctors themselves.

Another element are the texts present in the publications, although this could deserve a complete analysis in itself, for now we will stay with two ideas that we can capture: in two of the publications we can observe the concept "game-changing" and on the other hand, we see two contents that contain a question, which the user can solve by looking at the rest of the images of that publication. Finally, we observe how the logo in question is present in only one publication, and in turn, in the profile image we see the variation of the logo for small formats, which presents the "J&J" characters more clearly with respect to the previous one, without meaning that it is better per se.

Plane of Content Analysis

The observed changes in the plane of expression convey nuanced messages inherent in the rebranding strategy. The rectification of typography, reduction in contrast, and stability in letter heights project a more composed and serious brand image—attributes desirable in the technical and clinical realms of the company’s operations. Moving away from *“the signature”* of the founder to a contemporary typeface might also be aligned with Johnson & Johnson’s articulated goals of *“leveraging expertise in innovative medicine and medical technology to address complex diseases with smarter, less invasive, and personalized solutions”* (JNJ.com, 2023) for which the signature could have served as an “anchor” on old practices.

Simultaneously, the improved readability and spacious interiors in characters reflect a more open and globally accessible brand identity. Johnson & Johnson’s assertion that the new logo *“captures a caring, human nature”* (JNJ.com, 2023) underscores the aspiration for a universally recognizable symbol.

We can see these attributes consistently communicated in the instagram profile in which the presence of the medical staff and the game-changing concepts mark a clear intention to highlight the concepts of medicine, technology and innovation. The first image is particularly expressive when we notice that in the very head of the doctors, a symbol of intelligence and reason, J&J is present with its renewed red color, telling us how close they are *“to knowledge”*, containing or protecting it.

Finally, if we think in terms of oppositions following Greimas, we could place in the opposite of “innovative and technological”, the “homemade and traditional”, elements that we do not see in any way present and their very absence can make us reflect on how J&J continues to build its attributes. In that sense, the contents of solid backgrounds with clearly contrasted typographies and diagrammed in a way that leaves enough white space next to the image, show us a “clinical” or “aseptic” visual identity, but then with the images of people and written texts to share knowledge, seek to moderate this attribute and reach a balance for a closer content.

3.2 Fanta (JKR Global)

Fanta is a well-known brand of fruit-flavored carbonated soft drinks that originated in Germany. It was created by the Coca-Cola Company during World War II when the Coca-Cola syrup was difficult to import into Nazi Germany due to trade restrictions. To address this challenge, the German Coca-Cola team developed a new product using locally available ingredients. The result was Fanta, which was introduced to the German market in 1941.

Over the decades, Fanta has expanded its flavor range and global presence, becoming one of the most recognizable soft drink brands worldwide. It is available in numerous flavors, including orange, pineapple, grape, strawberry, and more, catering to diverse consumer preferences.

Fanta's branding and marketing have evolved over time to appeal to different demographics and cultural contexts. The brand is often associated with fun, youthfulness, and creativity, reflected in its vibrant packaging and advertising campaigns.

Today, Fanta is sold in over 180 countries and continues to be a popular choice among consumers, particularly in markets where Coca-Cola has a strong presence. The brand remains a significant player in the global soft drinks industry, competing with other major brands for market share and consumer loyalty.

In 2023, Coca-Cola's global presented a comprehensive rebranding effort done by JKR Global encompassing a new logo, custom typography, and illustrations, aiming to inject new energy and vibrancy into the Fanta brand. Rapha Abreu, Coca-Cola's global vice president of design, underscores the objective of the rebrand: to breathe new life into Fanta's brand assets and reignite the universal appeal of playfulness across all demographics. JKR Global's executive creative director, Lisa Smith, elaborates on the redesign strategy, highlighting the flexible and adaptable nature of the new logo, which retains brand consistency while allowing for versatility across various contexts and flavor profiles.



Figure 9.
Fanta logo changes

Collaborating with agencies such as Gretel for motion identity, Relative for packaging guidelines, and Tim Marsella and Martin Wonnacott for lifestyle and product photography respectively, Coca-Cola and JKR ensured a cohesive and impactful rollout of the new Fanta brand identity both in-store and online. This comprehensive rebranding effort signals Fanta's commitment to staying relevant and resonating with consumers in a rapidly evolving market landscape.

Plane of Expression Description

Topological: When looking at the current 2023 logo, we can see that the word “Fanta” is positioned at the top of the frame, leaving an inverted triangle at the bottom, which creates a perspective effect on the words “Fanta”, resulting in an upward or emerging movement effect. The typography appears complex and variable, with even the “A”s differing from one another. The entire logo features an irregular outline composed of letters and the triangle. Notably, the leaf that accompanied the logo for over 20 years has disappeared.

Chromatic: The blue color appears brighter than in previous versions, with no presence of orange or green. This change may be attributed to Fanta's

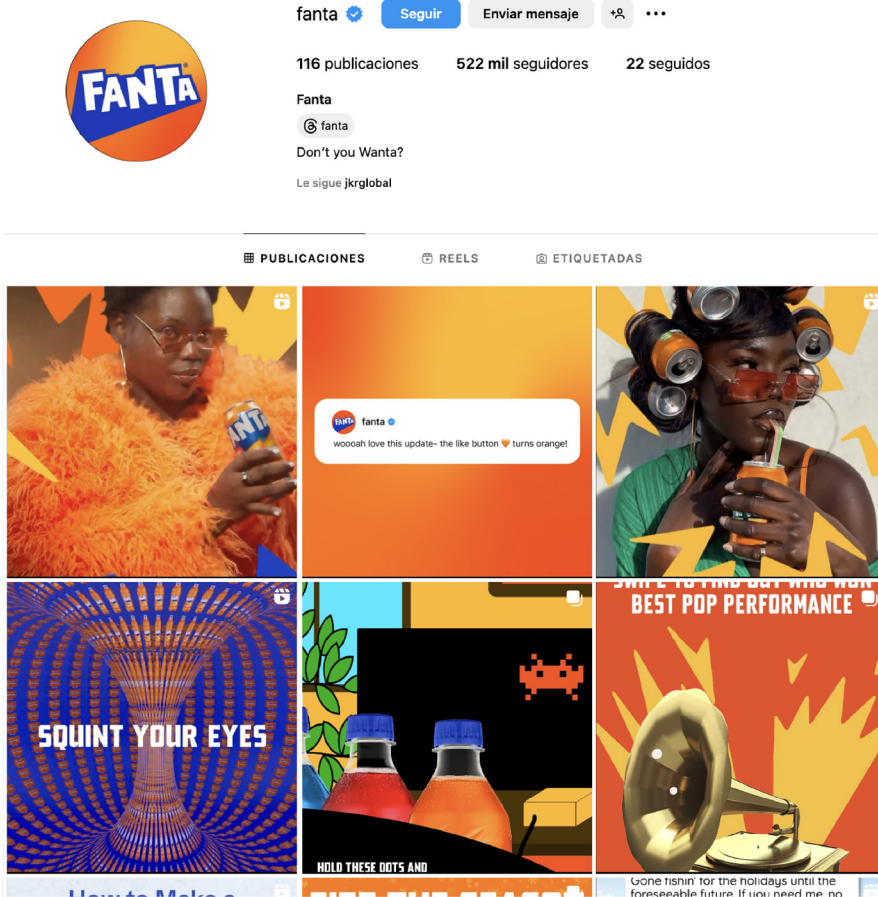


Figure 10.
Fanta's Instagram Official account feed.

expansion into numerous flavors since its inception in 1940, including pineapple, lemon, strawberry, cranberry, mixed fruit, and grape. Associating the brand solely with orange would be limiting.

Eidetic: The logo consists solely of straight lines, unlike its previous versions. Even the circle has disappeared. Despite being composed of straight lines, it remains dynamic due to complete asymmetry, from the characters to the scalene triangle at the bottom. In a general view we see a blocky logo, with everything added and well delimited.

Plane of Content Analysis

Considering the observations, the continuity of Fanta's "entertaining" message is evident, which cannot be contained within rules or structures. It maintains its dynamic nature with its upward movement. However, the disappearance of the leaf and the orange color from the logo signify an important change in the brand's strategy. There are no figurative elements in the logo, either in shapes or colors, indicating a desire for a more versatile brand not solely tied to its well-known orange flavor. Instead, it aims to be open and

adaptable to various strategies. JKR, the agency responsible for the redesign, emphasizes this shift: “*With a Fanta in hand, anything plain can become playful. That attitude can now be felt across multiple touchpoints, both virtual and physical, as well all markets*” (JKRGlobal, n.d.). This statement underscores the importance of new marketing mediums in shaping visual identity decisions.

If we now step into Fanta’s Instagram feed, we’re immediately struck by a captivating palette dominated by energetic oranges and purples. These colors aren’t mere accents but serve as immersive backgrounds, enveloping even the most mundane objects within Fanta’s fantastical realm. It’s a visual language that instantly transports viewers into a realm where the ordinary is transformed into the extraordinary.

But it’s not just the colors that captivate; it’s the surreal scenarios that unfold. Within Fanta’s digital domain, reality gets turned into a series of improbable scenes: people’s clothing defies conventional fashion norms, strutting about in ensembles that seem plucked from the pages of a futuristic fantasy. Hair-styles, too, defy gravity and logic, resembling intricate sculptures more than mere coiffures. It’s a world where the boundaries of possibility are pushed to their limits, where imagination knows no bounds.

Amidst this visual extravaganza, one can’t help but notice the presence of zigzagging figures that dance and weave across the images. These dynamic elements add an extra layer of depth and movement, further drawing viewers into Fanta’s whimsical universe. They serve as visual punctuation marks, emphasizing the brand’s dynamic energy and boundless creativity.

Ultimately, what emerges from this kaleidoscopic tapestry is Fanta’s ability to create a world entirely its own. It’s a world not bound by the constraints of reality but fueled by the brand’s distinct identity and values. In this alternate reality, Fanta isn’t just a beverage; it’s a gateway to a realm where joy, innovation, and limitless possibilities reign supreme. Through its Instagram feed, Fanta invites us to step through the looking glass and experience a reality where the only limit is our imagination.

3.3 Western Union (Love Street & Company)

Western Union is a renowned American financial services company with a rich history dating back to 1851. Founded as the New York and Mississippi Valley Printing Telegraph Company, Western Union quickly evolved into a leading provider of telegraph services across the United States. Over the years, it expanded its offerings to include money transfer services, becoming a global leader in facilitating cross-border payments and money transfers.

Today, Western Union operates in over 200 countries and territories, connecting individuals, businesses, and financial institutions worldwide. Its extensive network of agent locations, digital platforms, and partnerships enables millions of people to send and receive money securely and conveniently, whether they are in urban centers or remote areas.

Beyond its core money transfer services, Western Union provides a range of solutions tailored to the needs of businesses, including cross-border payments, foreign exchange services, and risk management tools. With a focus on customer-centricity and financial inclusion, Western Union continues to empower individuals and businesses worldwide by enabling them to access and manage their finances efficiently across borders.

Over the years, Western Union has come to stand as a symbol of global connectivity, facilitating financial transactions that bridge distances and empower communities to thrive in an interconnected world. Through its unwavering commitment to innovation, reliability, and customer service excellence, Western Union remains a trusted partner for individuals and businesses seeking fast, secure, and convenient financial solutions across borders.

In 2023, it underwent a significant rebranding initiative in collaboration with the agency Love Street & Company. The new design retains the company's iconic colors while infusing a fresh and bold perspective into its global identity. This comprehensive redesign encompasses changes in the logo, typography,

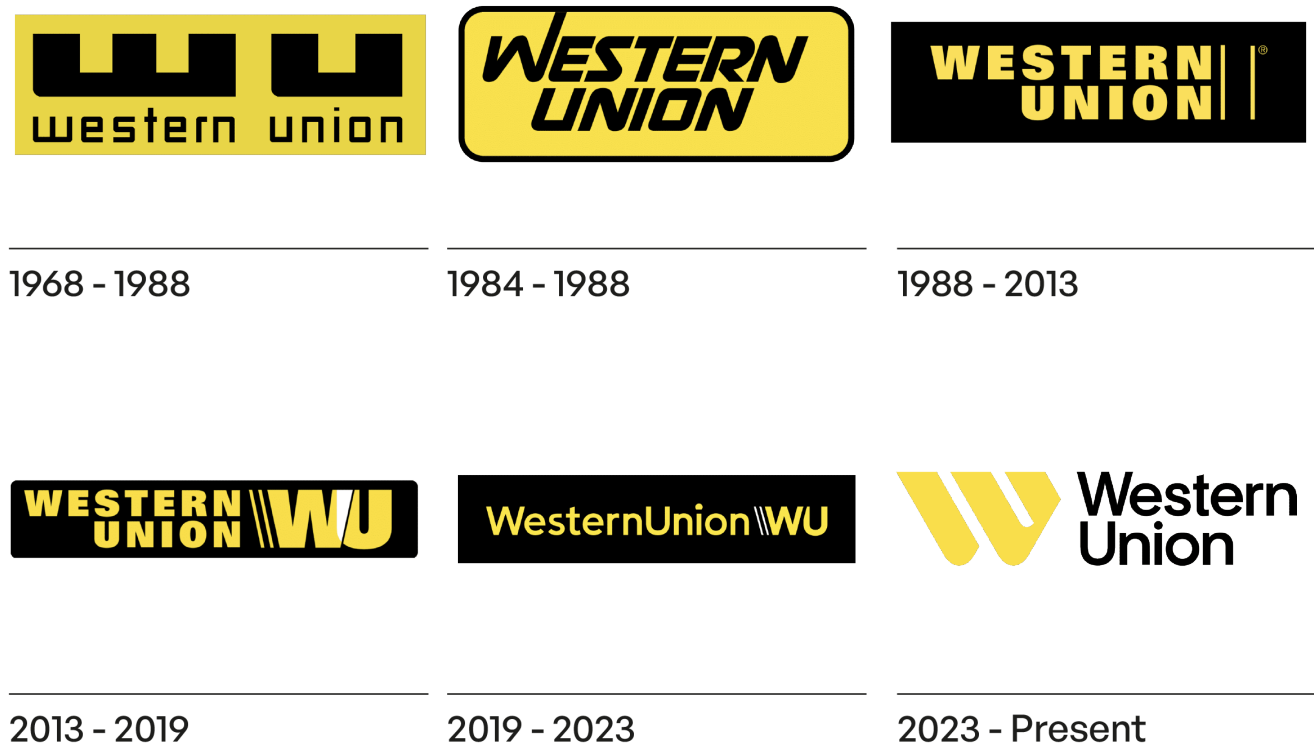


Figure 11.
Western Union logo
changes

design system, photographic style, and iconography. By reintroducing its full name into the logo, Western Union not only embraces its rich heritage but also reaffirms its commitment to innovation and progress.

Plane of Expression Description

Topological: The logo is positioned centrally within the frame, along a horizontal line, without the traditional accompanying box. Unlike its previous version, the symbol is now located to the left of the name, a positioning that may be perceived as more prominent in Western cultures. The new symbol consists solely of the letter “W,” omitting the “U.” This version presents a fuller figure with fewer white spaces within the double “W” letterform. Typographically, the letters have been slightly adjusted to increase the X-height and are closer together, resulting in a greater utilization of space.

Chromatic: The primary chromatic change involves the separation of the symbol from the logotype, with the characteristic yellow color of the brand retained in the symbol, likely to imbue this new figure with significance. Other chromatic changes include the shift from gray to black in the logotype, increasing contrast with white and yellow and eliminating any visual noise.

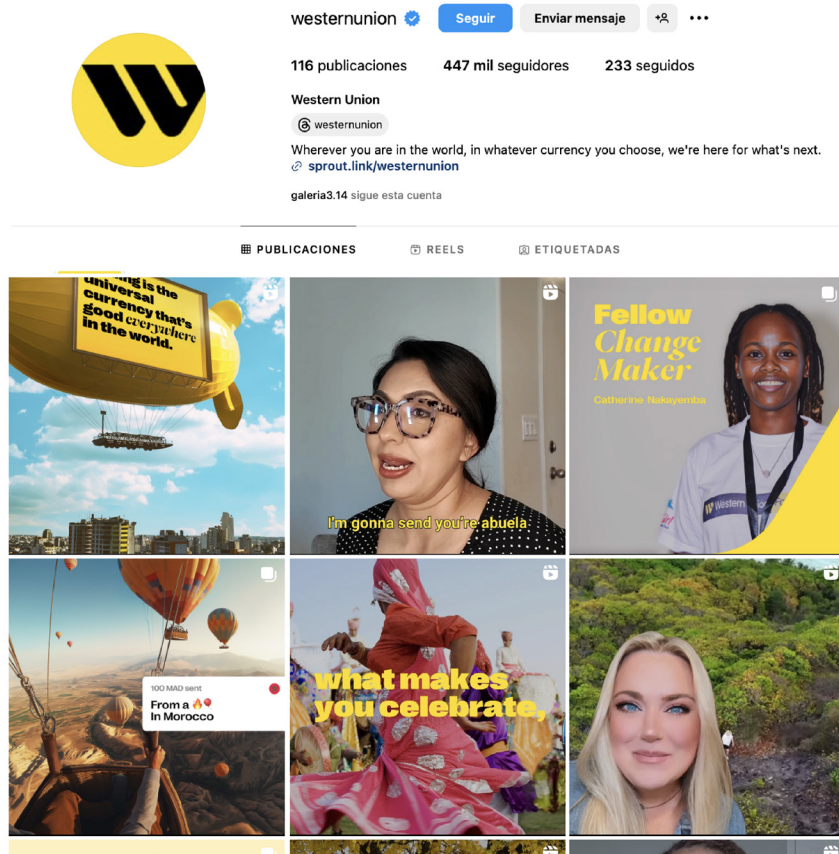


Figure 12.
Western Union's Instagram Official account feed.

Eidetic: Clear changes at the eidetic category are evident in the symbol, which sheds the “U” and the diagonal lines accompanying the “W,” seemingly repositioned within the letterform as spaces separating the yellow blocks forming the “W.” Additionally, the lower tips of the symbol have been rounded, creating a unique symbol unrelated to the original typography, as seen in the previous version.

Plane of Content Analysis

The plane of expression reflects a brand with increased legibility in typography and a symbol that appears more solid and contained, devoid of accompanying small lines. The removal of the enclosing box suggests a logo that stands independently. The symbol now takes center stage, being more assertive, distinctive, and facilitating brand recognition across various mediums. This indicates a brand poised for advancement, aligning with the company’s statement about looking towards “globality” and “a more integrated and progressive future” (Shapkin, 2023)

This is evident in Western Union’s Instagram presence, where we observe a notable shift towards portraying real-life moments, diverse cultures, and global connectivity. Images depicting everyday scenes - people, cities, and celebrations - take center stage.

The diversity of the depicted individuals is striking; from a Latina grandmother (as indicated by the caption “*abuela*”), to an African woman with the surname “*Nakayemba*”, and a blonde Caucasian woman. Moreover, an image capturing an Indian celebration adds another layer of cultural richness to the feed.

Throughout these snapshots of life, the color yellow prominently features, particularly in the first image where a yellow zeppelin, the most surreal element, dominates the scene. This hue not only adds vibrancy but also symbolizes the brand’s global presence and connection.

Western Union’s Instagram paints a picture of a truly globalized imagination, where people from all walks of life take center stage, and the brand seamlessly accompanies them in their endeavors. It’s a way of showing the company’s vision of fostering a more integrated and progressive future, echoing its vision of “*globality*” in every pixel of its digital footprint.

3.4 DK Publishing (Pentagram)

DK Publishing, formerly known as Dorling Kindersley, is a British multinational publishing company specializing in illustrated reference books for adults and children. Established in 1974 by Christopher Dorling and Peter Kindersley, DK Publishing initially focused on creating educational children's books with vibrant visuals and informative content. Their early works, such as the Eyewitness series, gained widespread acclaim for their innovative approach to non-fiction literature, blending photography, illustrations, and text to engage readers of all ages.

As the company evolved, DK expanded its catalog to encompass a wide range of subjects, including history, science, travel, cooking, gardening, and more. Their books are renowned for their high-quality production values, comprehensive content, and user-friendly layout, making them popular among educators, students, and general readers alike.

In the 1990s, DK Publishing experienced significant growth and international expansion, establishing offices in major cities around the world and diversifying its product offerings to include digital media, online resources, and educational materials.

In recent years, DK has continued to innovate in response to changing market trends, embracing digital publishing technologies and multimedia platforms to reach a broader audience. The company has also forged partnerships with other media organizations, licensing its content for television programs, mobile apps, and interactive websites.

In 2020, Pentagram, led by partner Angus Hyland and his team in the London branch, undertook a rebranding project for international publisher DK, refreshing its iconic open book icon and visual identity, which had originally been crafted by Pentagram. The new design features a change on the logo with a more streamlined rectangular shape, with a bolder yet smaller DK monogram. This modernization aimed to enhance legibility



Figure 13.
DK logo changes

across print and digital platforms while maintaining a nod to the original logo's serif detailing. Additionally, the new logo's flexibility allows for single-color application, complementing each book cover's design and seamlessly integrating as "an intrinsic part of the book's design." With the rebrand, DK sought to attract both new audiences and established readers, collaborating closely with Pentagram to refine and simplify their widely recognized logo and introduce the new brand tagline: "For the curious." In aligning the brand with the digital age while preserving its iconic status, the rebranding effort underscores DK's commitment to innovation and engagement in an ever-evolving publishing landscape.

Plane of Expression Description

Topological: The new logo is centrally positioned within the frame, comprising a red box with elongated edges resembling the shape of an open book, a motif carried over from the previous version. Inside, the letters "D" and "K" are presented in a subtly serif typeface, retaining a traditional serif characteristics as much as necessary so that it is not recognizable as a sans-serif font. The letters are centered within the square, unlike the previous version where they were centered on each page.

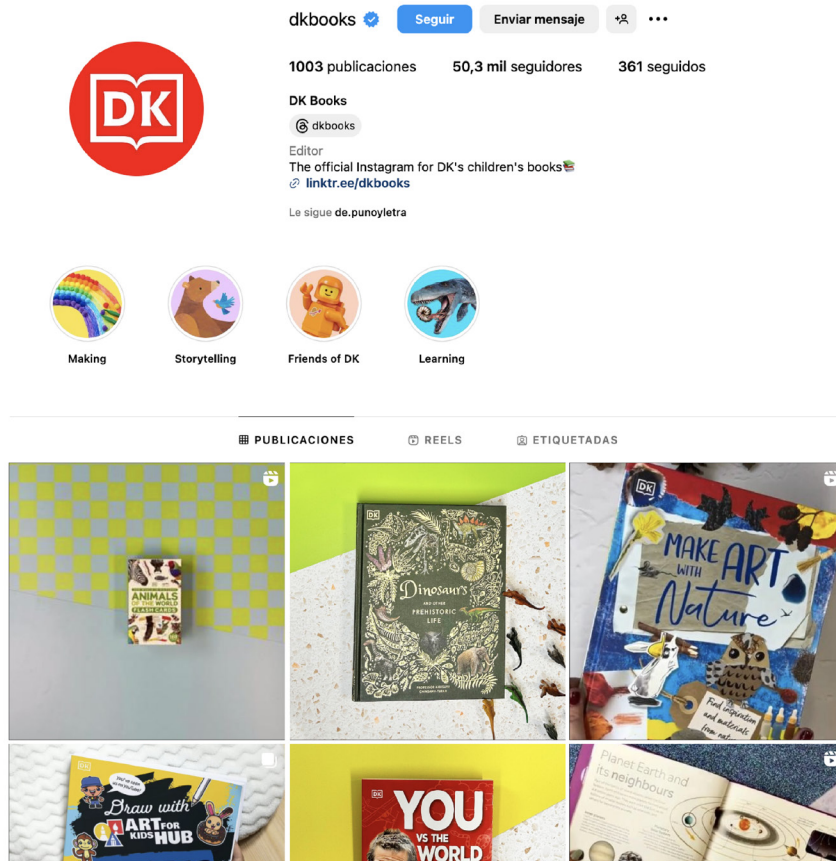


Figure 14.
DK's Instagram Official account feed.

Chromatic: The new logo adopts a single red color, discarding the black and white present in the pages. As noted on Pentagram's page: "Now a single color, the logo can now be applied in whatever colors and finishes best complement each book cover, and becomes an intrinsic part of the book's design."

Eidetic: Significant changes are observed from the eidetic category. The various subtle and curved strokes are replaced by a single stroke shared with the typography. Lines defining the cover, pages, and even the page grid are absent in the new version.

Plane of Content Analysis

Considering the observations, DK aims to present itself as more direct and clear in its design decisions regarding lines and typography. It seeks to portray itself as a flexible brand open to receiving and supporting any type of content, hence its identity is reduced and simplified. However, the tension between tradition and contemporaneity is noteworthy.

Observing the changes in the book and typography, it appears that to convey a contemporary image, the brand had to abstract the figure of the book. This raises questions about whether, in the digital world we inhabit, physical pages and a book have become signs of antiquity even for a publishing house. While the book remains present, it is in a simplified/abstract version, distancing itself from representation and becoming more of an idea. Conversely, the element that maintains the traditional aspect is the typography, an abstraction in itself. As mentioned when looking at the topological features, the initials are now aligned to the square and not to each page, which also “extracts” them from the book which reinforces the idea that the book is now something abstract, since not even the letters are restricted to its boundaries. Finally, the choice of the typography reinforces the message of the intersection of tradition and innovation.

Turning to the Instagram feed, we’re immediately greeted by a collection of tangible books, some open, offering glimpses into their contents. Positioned against vibrant and textured backdrops, these books are often accompanied by hands delicately holding them. While the brand logo occasionally makes an appearance within the book covers, the signature red hue remains exclusive to the profile image, as the rest of the visuals adhere to the color scheme of the featured book.

What’s particularly striking is the absence of contextual elements typically associated with the use of books. Despite their presence against real-world backdrops, there’s a notable lack of human interaction, bookshelves, or even desks. In this Instagram realm, the books seem to exist in isolation, disconnected from the contexts that give them value in their functionality.

Essentially, while the digital landscape may question the relevance of physical pages and traditional books, this portrayal on Instagram elevates the book to an almost mythical status. It becomes an object unto itself, divorced from its practical purpose and existing purely as an idea—a symbol of knowledge, imagination, and perhaps even nostalgia. In this digital realm, the book transcends its physical form to become a timeless icon, encapsulating the essence of the publishing house’s ethos in each meticulously crafted post.

4. General Overview of homogenization

After reviewing the rebranding of these 4 companies, we could say that all have succeeded in transforming their visual identities according to the demands of the context, and beyond our personal preferences, the visual results are appropriate for the evolution of the companies. However, for the purposes of this research, it is relevant to take a cross-sectional look to examine how each of these singular changes contributes to a global and cross-cutting imaginary of corporate identities, and if appropriate, to homogenization.

It's worth noting that this phenomenon is pervasive across various industries. In the automotive sector, as we can see in **figure 15**, the shift towards linear logos reflects a broader trend towards minimalism and sleek design. Renault, Volkswagen, and Citroen, once characterized by intricate emblems and figurative elements, now embrace simplicity, opting for clean lines and bold typography. This departure from elaborate detailing not only modernizes their brand image but also enhances versatility across various marketing channels. Renault's Instagram feed, for instance, strategically places their vehicles against vibrant backdrops, reinforcing the brand's dynamic and aspirational qualities while eschewing conventional automotive imagery.

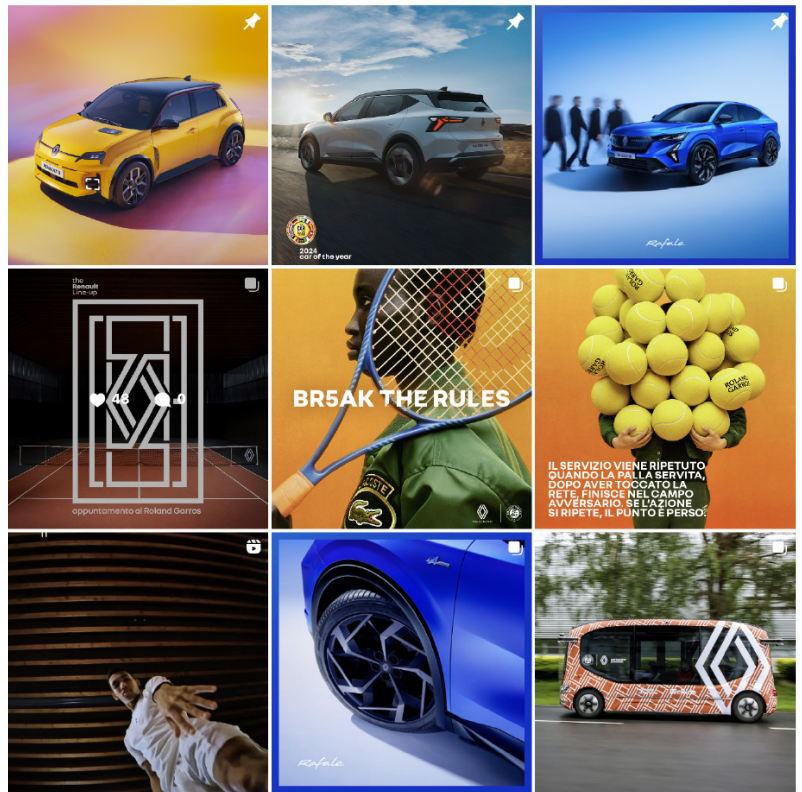
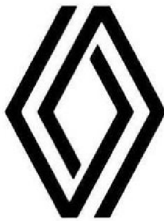
Within the fashion industry, as shown on **figure 16**, typography becomes a powerful tool for brand expression. The transition from serif to sans-serif fonts signals a departure from traditional elegance towards a more contemporary aesthetic. Brands leverage their Instagram platforms to showcase their products in carefully curated settings, blurring the lines between commerce and art. By presenting their offerings within the context of high-fashion photography or runway environments, brands like YvesSaintLaurent, Ferragamo and Balenciaga create an aspirational lifestyle narrative that resonates with their audience's desires for luxury and exclusivity.

In banking (**figure 17**), the evolution of visual identity reflects a broader shift towards transparency and accessibility. Sans-serif typefaces convey a sense of modernity and approachability, while muted color palettes evoke trust and stability. On Instagram, banks leverage a combination of real-life imagery and informative posts to demystify financial services and foster a sense of connection with their audience. BBVA's emphasis on lifestyle imagery not only humanizes the brand but also positions it as a partner in its

2004 - 2021



2021 - Present

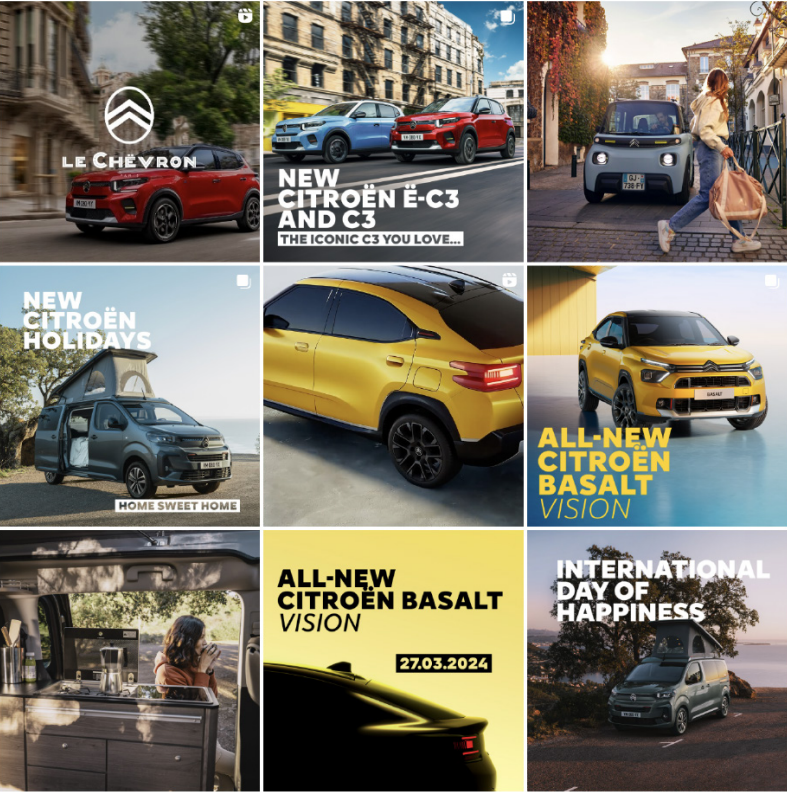


2012 - 2020



2020 - Present





2009 - 2016

2016 - 2022



2022 - Present



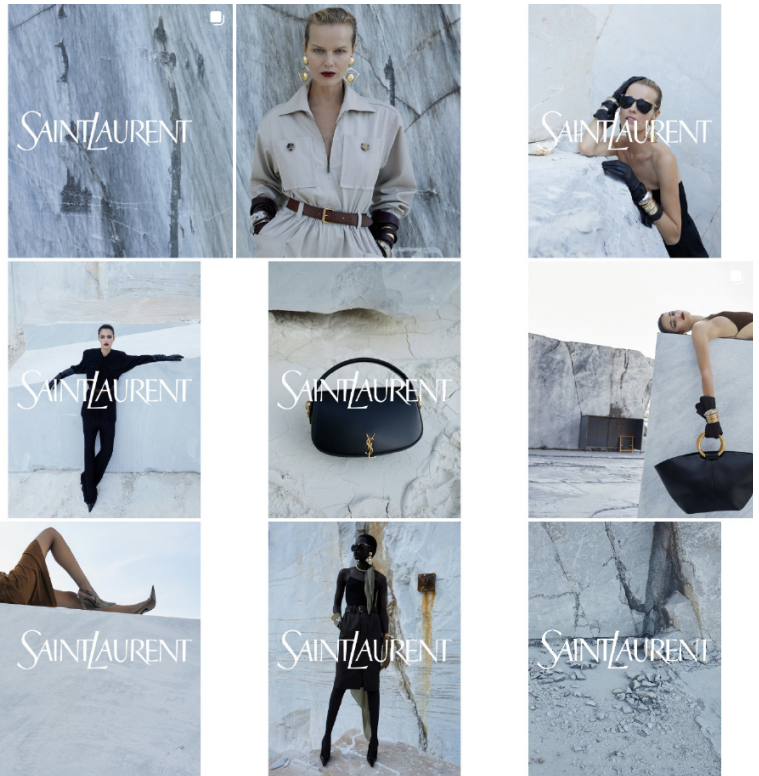
Figure 15. Automotive industry case studies

1962 - 2012


YVES SAINT LAURENT

2012 - Present

SAINT LAURENT
PARIS

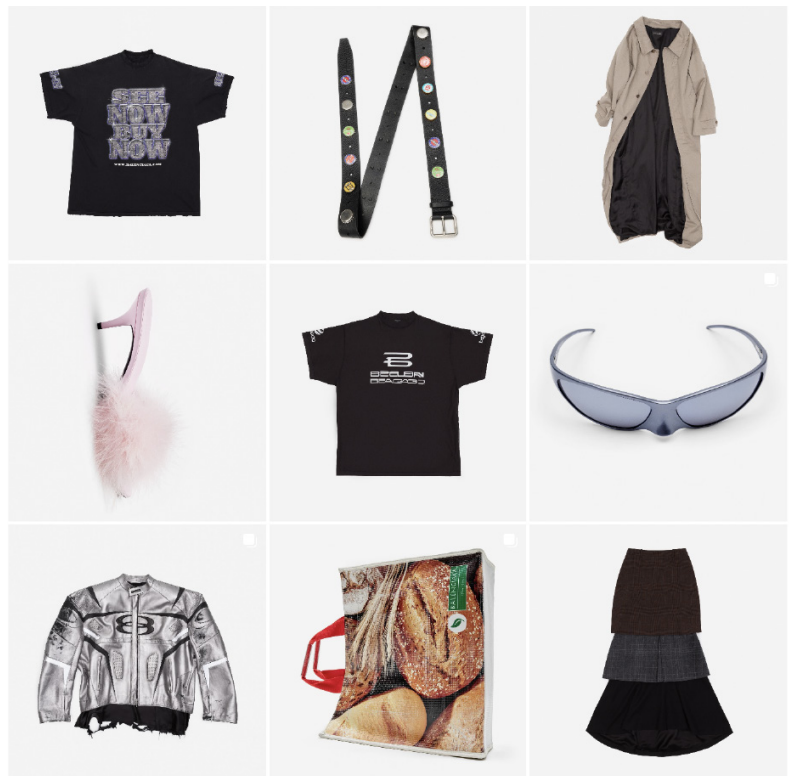


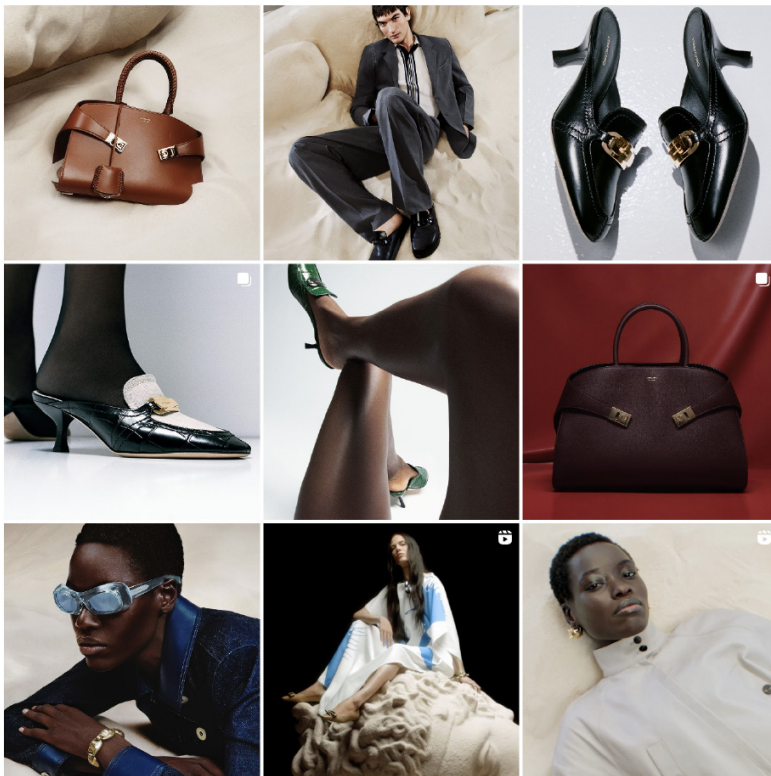
Before 2013


BALENCIAGA

2017 - Present

BALENCIAGA





1982 - 2022

Salvatore Ferragamo

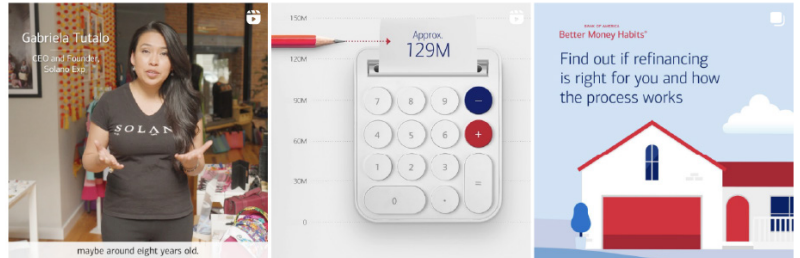
2022 - Present

FERRAGAMO

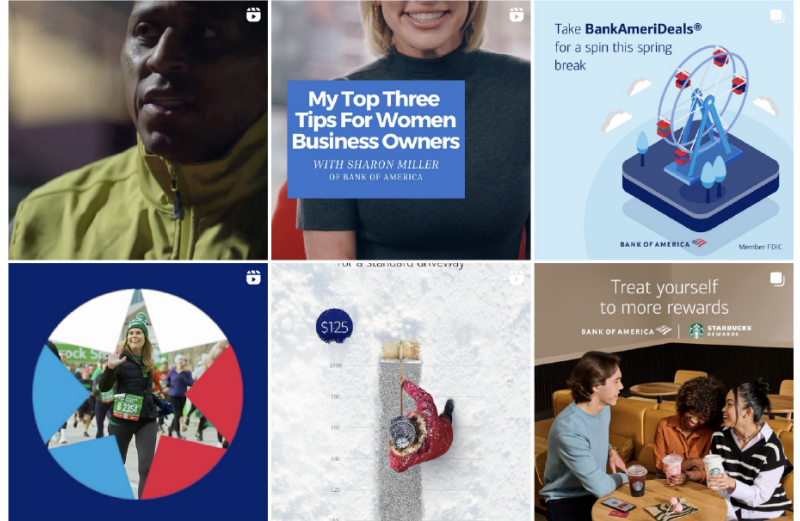
Figure 16.

Fashion industry case studies

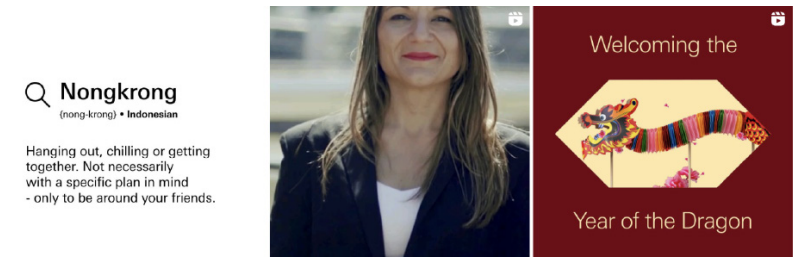
1998 - 2018



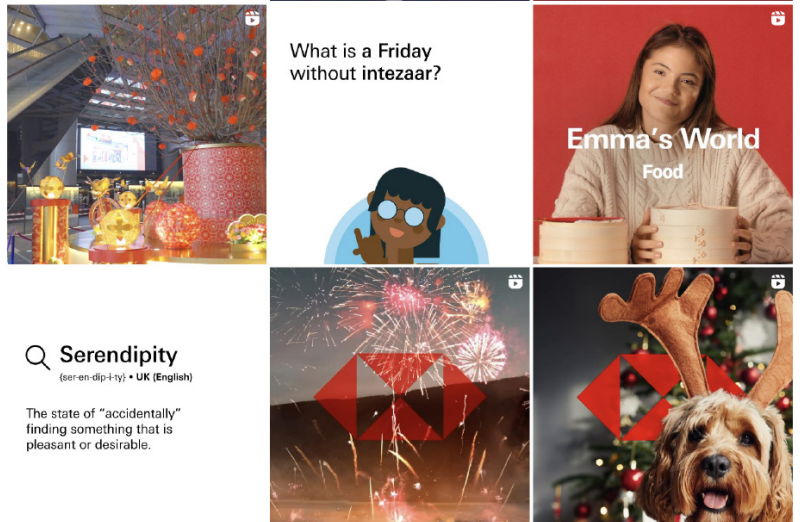
2018 - Present

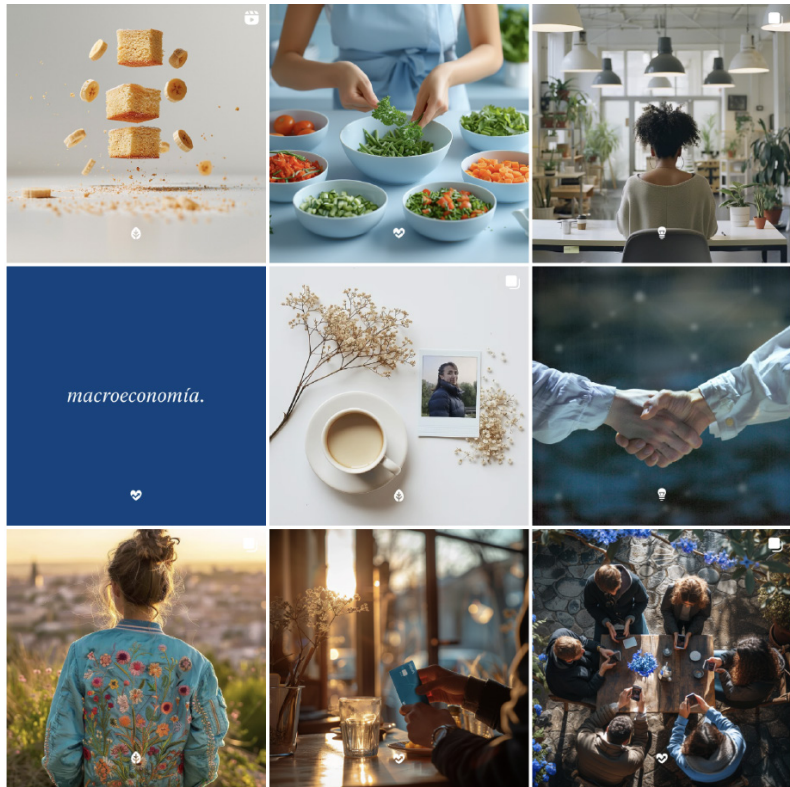


1983 - 2018



2018 - Present





2000 - 2019

BBVA

2019 - Present

BBVA

Figure 17.
Banking sector case studies

1992 - 2011



2011 - Present



1999 - 2021



2021 - Present





2002 - 2016



2016 - Present



Figure 18. Food & Beverage Industry case studies

customers' everyday lives, trying to broaden the traditional perception of banking as a purely transactional relationship.

Within the food industry, we observe in *figure 18* that simplicity has also made its appearance as brands streamline their logos to convey a sense of freshness and authenticity. Starbucks, Burger King, and Subway, known for their iconic imagery, undergo a transformation to adapt to changing consumer preferences and market trends. On social media, these brands capitalize on visual storytelling to evoke emotions and create memorable experiences for their followers. Starbucks invites customers into its vibrant coffee culture, while Burger King injects humor and irreverence into its content, resonating with a younger, more digitally savvy audience. Similarly, Subway's emphasis on healthy living and customization aligns with the growing demand for personalized dining experiences, positioning the brand as a purveyor of fresh and nutritious options.

If we look back at the topological and eidetic categories, we see that for the most part, they maintain the original structures, but seek to reduce the number of elements as well as the complexity of the strokes. This results in an evident loss of diversity among the logos even when they belong to different categories. Whereas before we saw thick and thin lines, curves, calligraphic fonts, and figurative elements like leaves or books, now we see a greater similarity in stroke widths, among the same fonts, and the use of lines. All these characteristics present us with brands that seek to be "clearer" and more versatile when moving from one media to another, but at the same time more abstract or removed from their references. Visual identities seem to reduce their own identity characteristics so that the content they promote and to which they will be applied forms the entirety of the identity, eliminating any kind of connotation.

If we observe the way in which these brands communicate on their Instagram accounts, we see how each in its own way seeks to take something from our reality and create its own universe in which the brand and its values reign supreme, as we can see this in the cold tones on YSL, the fun and trendy Starbucks or the futuristic color hues on Citroen. This leads us to see their visual assets as elements that have the function of bathing or "anointing" the

realities to make them their own, creating a duo of “thematic” plus “visual identity” as a formula for communications. This formula shows an important shift on the way brands build meanings around them. Before, brands had some sporadic moments of interaction with consumers, in which the power of the name, the logo and some catchy slogans had the role of linking meanings to the brand, but now in a context of constant communication in the sea of content in social media, the relationship “content/container” (topic/brand) seems to be the main way to articulate meanings around the brand, in which the logo and name are no longer the main asset, but a label that gives a name to the whole.

The reason why this change has occurred transversally in the way brands and communication work will be explored in the following chapter.

5. Role of Digital technologies in homogenization

We have analyzed logos, and we have identified different phenomena that have occurred in the way brands are managed today. As we could observe in detail, they have resulted in the simplification of strokes and shapes and abstraction of images and icons, and in the regrettable loss of diversity in logos, which tend to a homogenization in their visuality.

What could be the causes for this phenomenon?

As we could see, from the different rebrandings we analyzed, we obtained official statements that justify the change from a strategic change, which in all cases is related to adapting to new technologies. Why has adapting to these new digital technologies become a visual homogenization?

This inquiry prompts us to widen our lens and explore the cultural shifts taking place due to the influence of information technologies, often referred to as the “*digital*” realm. It raises fundamental questions about how these technologies are shaping our society at its core.

Humanity’s relationship with technology is deeply ingrained. It’s essential to recognize that technology is not an external force but rather a natural extension of human existence (Accoto, 2018, p.27). Throughout history, humans have been inherently technological beings, continuously evolving alongside the technologies they create. This intertwining of humanity and technicity suggests that our identity and evolution are intrinsically linked with the technologies we develop and adopt.

Furthermore, the lines between technology, culture, and humanity have become increasingly blurred (Accoto, 2018, p.27). Technology doesn’t merely exist alongside culture and humanity; it shapes and is shaped by them in a dynamic interplay. As such, it’s challenging to differentiate technology from culture or humanity itself. They are interconnected facets of our existence, each influencing and being influenced by the others in complex ways.

In this context, understanding the impact of information technologies on society requires acknowledging their integral role in shaping not just individual identities but also cultural norms, values, and collective consciousness. As

we navigate this ever-evolving digital landscape, it becomes crucial to reflect on these interconnected relationships and their implications for the future of humanity and culture.

However, when we talk about the impact of digital or information technologies, a first answer could come from McLuhan, perhaps the most influential philosopher of recent times regarding the impact of digital, who comments “*that electric information systems are live environments in the full organic sense. They alter our feelings and sensibilities, especially when they are not attended to*” (McLuhan & Fiore, 1968, p.36), in which we can already see how with technology, at least at the level of people, individuals can be affected by it at a sensory (and emotional?) level, without even realizing it.

These ideas of the impact of information technologies on man, have opened the way to new disciplines that seek to study “*the psychological condition of people under the influence of technological innovation*” (de Kerckhove, 1997, p. 4), known as “*Techno-psychology*”.

The foundation of “*Techno-psychology*” rests on the premise that our psychological reality isn’t inherently “natural” but is shaped by our environment and technological extensions (de Kerckhove, 1997, p. 4). As individuals increasingly rely on external databases, recording tools, and intelligent analyzers, their private identities may diminish in substance and content. McLuhan’s observation, “*The more they know about you, the less you exist*” (McLuhan & Watson, 1971, p.13) underscores this erosion of personal identity.

From this perspective, these new digital technologies had come to allow humanity to outsource mental functions, like storing memory in databases, which from these perspective it also helps to empty our psyche of the cognitive strategies and knowledge that were once nurtured over centuries. This shift isn’t limited to memory; it extends to how we compose texts with word processors and how social media influences identity formation (de Kerckhove, 2019). These changes highlight the profound impact of digital culture on our core practices of reading, writing, conversation, and thinking. As brain plasticity and evolving social norms shape us, we increasingly adapt to be more comprehensible to algorithmic machines (Finn, 2018, p.191). This

transformation signifies a sea change in how digital culture, memory, and identity intersect and evolve.

The digital landscape has changed dramatically over the past few years, fundamentally altering how we interact, communicate, and see ourselves and our society. In just ten years, most traditional media have become “new media.” The advancements of the 1990s have spread to millions of people who now write blogs, upload photos and videos to sharing sites, and use free software tools for media creation that used to be very expensive (Manovich, 2013, p.1).

Thanks to companies like Google, we now use web applications and services that are always in a Beta stage, meaning they are never officially finished. These applications run on remote servers, so they can be updated anytime without users needing to do anything. For example, Google updates its search algorithm several times a day. Similarly, Facebook updates its code daily, sometimes causing temporary issues. Facebook’s motto, “*Move Fast and Break Things*” reflects this constant state of change. We now live in a world defined by ever-changing software rather than the stable, infrequently changing industrial machines of the past (Manovich, 2013, p.1).

Central to these changes is the evolution of the public sphere, a concept rooted in Enlightenment ideals of a space for rational debate and discussion (Finn, 2018, p. 173). Historically, this public sphere was seen as a domain where citizens could engage in disinterested, critical discourse. However, the advent of the internet and contemporary media has both expanded and complicated this notion.

Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have created new avenues for public engagement, offering spaces where individuals can share opinions, debate issues, and mobilize for causes, seemingly creating a modern-day agora. At times, anonymous forums and collaborative projects like Wikipedia also contribute to this democratization of information and discussion, fostering environments where diverse voices can be heard.

Yet, this digital public sphere is markedly different from its historical counterpart. It has turned the public sphere inside out, where the cultural data

that once constituted the arena of common concern is increasingly privatized (Finn, 2018, p. 173). The private lives of citizens have become commercial commodities, accessible to data brokers, social media companies, and other entities that trade in personal information. This shift means that the content of our lives, shared on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, is leveraged for commercial gain, making privacy a contested and often compromised value.

The influence of digital technologies on identity formation, especially among younger generations, is another profound change. Today's youth spend more time online, engaging with screens rather than printed pages, and this shift has significant implications for their development. They construct their identities in digital spaces, often through social media and selfies, externalizing their sense of self (de Kerckhove, 2019). This process can lead to a fragmented sense of identity, as the habitual actions on social media—such as liking and sharing—become semi-conscious routines that align more with algorithmic patterns than with deliberate personal expression.

Katherine Hayles' materialist theory of media highlights how physical actions, such as clicking and liking, produce *'incorporated knowledge'* (1999, p. 205) that becomes habitual and semi-conscious. This habitual nature of social media interactions can detach the act from its contextual specificity, reducing it to an automated response. The networked space of social media, fundamentally relational, shifts attention from the internal to the external, projecting and distributing identity across digital interactions.

The changing landscape extends beyond individual identities; it permeates the world at large, reshaping industries and economies. Venture capitalist Marc Andreessen's phrase, *"software is eating the world"* (Accoto, 2018, p.25) captures this transformative force of software. It symbolizes the pervasive development, distribution, and activation of software code that is metaphorically and even literally reshaping our world. This software-driven paradigm is not only altering the societal fabric but also challenging traditional economic structures and value creation methods.

One example of this shift extracted from Cosimo Accoto's book *In Data Time and Tide* (2018, p.12) is General Electric, a company with over a

century of history in industrial production spanning sectors like civil aviation, military equipment, oil and gas extraction, and medical technologies. Recently, General Electric has been transitioning into declaring itself as a software-driven company. This transformation underscores the universal impact of software, demonstrating that even longstanding industrial giants must adapt to thrive in this new digital era. As software continues to permeate every aspect of our lives and industries, its influence will only grow, further blurring the lines between the digital and physical realms.

The relentless pace of technological advancement has profound implications for our understanding of human nature and identity. Many people remain unaware of how these changes are subtly transforming their psychological content and strategies. There's a prevailing illusion that, apart from technological enhancements, human nature remains static. However, history tells us that human nature has evolved over time, and it continues to do so in response to our changing environment, including the digital realm (de Kerckhove, 2019).

The shift from an internal development of identity to an external projection of it online is so subtle yet profound that it challenges our traditional concepts of human nature. This transition makes us question whether there's a fixed human essence at all or if our nature is now more fluid and adaptable than previously believed.

Philosophically speaking, this shift can be understood as embracing a new digital ontology where "*To be is to be updated*" (Kyong Chun, 2017, p.2) Wendy Chun captures this sentiment aptly by stating that our existence in this digital age is defined by constant updates. Whether it's mobile applications, data platforms, or smart objects, these digital entities are perpetually subjected to updates—be it to correct malfunctions or address non-functioning programming (Accoto, 2018, p.20).

This idea extends beyond technology itself to how we perceive our identities and existence. In this new digital ontology, we've become creatures constantly in flux, adapting and evolving in response to updates and changes in our digital environment. It challenges us to rethink our notions of stability, identity, and human nature in a world where the only constant is change.

5.1 Cyborg-brands

This brings us to our first answer to the question regarding the relationship between digital technologies and the homologation of the visual identity of brands. If we look at the argument of the “*cyborg man*” (de Kerckhove, 1997, p. 3), the man who is half machine thanks to the externalization and dependence on digital technologies, we see that this affects brands even more, since the existence of brands, not having a single body, depends on the “*brand signifiers*” which are a series of communicational, physical and audiovisual elements that generate real systems that manage to build and structure their meaning (Oswald, 2012)

In this context and from our own analysis, we can say that today we observe true “*cyborg-brands*”, brands that live more and more in digital media and that build part of their identity based on the rules established by the platforms themselves. This has had an effect on marketing, where in recent times the *performance marketing*, focused on lead generation and *conversion* has taken a greater role by showing more clearly its impact, even if it does not necessarily contribute to the construction of brand attributes. For this reason, this trend has taken precedence over traditional brand building, understood as the way to fill a brand with meaning, but seen as a long-term bet whose direct economic impact for companies is difficult to quantify (Stengel et al., 2023). This could be the case for the brands we analyzed above, where content such as Western Union’s yellow zeppelin, DK’s book covers or Burger King’s memes may be more responsive to what rises the conversion rate.

In this tension between brand building and performance we can clearly see the transition towards cyborg-brands, where brands moved by the logic of the computable to measure the impact seek to create various types of content that work in the logics in which the platforms and the digital world is built, to capture the attention of users/customers in the most mechanical way possible, just like algorithms. In these platforms’ logics the space for expression is limited by rules: an email has a format, a number of characters for its subject and body, a post on instagram is more effective if it is audiovisual, if it has a certain length or if it starts in a certain way, and going beyond the forms, the same content can be more effective if it is associated with a concept that is being popular within them.

To conclude the first hypothesis on the phenomenon of brand homogenization, we could argue that it is possible that the existence of this regulated environment in which algorithms control the destiny of these “cyborg-brands” could be generating certain limitations for design, as it has to operate within a logic in which effectiveness and leads, what works and what does not work to capture attention, will be the decisive criterion when choosing a new visual identity.

5.2 Globalization

A second argument to grasp the impact of digital technologies on visual homogenization lies in the intensification of globalization facilitated by new media. Since Marshall McLuhan’s groundbreaking work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* in the 1960s, the concept of a global village has captivated imaginations worldwide. This metaphorical village implies not just physical proximity but also a shared psychological and social space, where boundaries blur and distances shrink.

McLuhan’s vision of the global village suggests not only a convergence of physical spaces but also a transformation of societal behaviors akin to those observed in traditional villages. This transformation, as noted by de Kerckhove (1997), is further propelled by the proliferation of psychotechnologies, particularly evident in the dominance of social media networks. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok serve as modern-day town squares, shaping collective perceptions of time, space, and societal norms on a global scale.

Beyond economic globalization, de Kerckhove emphasizes the profound psychological and social implications of this global interconnectedness. The transition from a society of individuals and masses to one of interconnected networks signifies a fundamental shift in how we perceive and interact with the world around us.

In the realm of branding, Wilk’s (1995) concept of global structures of common difference sheds light on the role of brands as vehicles for conveying

diversity within a framework of uniformity. Wilk underlines that he sees the global cultural system as one that promotes diversity in content but hegemony of form: *“Global structures organize diversity, rather than replicating uniformity [...] we are portraying, dramatizing and communicating our differences to each other in ways that are more widely intelligible”* (p.118).

From this affirmation we can see how while global culture celebrates diversity in content, brands serve as universally comprehensible symbols of corporate, product, and consumer identities.

This prompts a critical reflection on the evolving nature of communication in the global village. While globalization does not necessarily entail cultural homogenization, it involves the use of a variety of instruments of homogenization (armaments, advertising techniques, language hegemonies, clothing styles and the like), which are absorbed into local political and cultural economies (Appadurai, 1990, p.307). These instruments, assimilated into local cultural and political economies, contribute to a complex interplay between global and local identities.

This effect of the instruments of homogenization can be clearly seen in the cases analyzed above, in which although different types of products and services were presented, in a wide variety of categories (banks, beverages, books, pharmaceuticals), the way in which these are present in the culture in order to be chosen by consumers forces them to choose common media among them. When we talk about media, we refer on the one hand to channels and formats, such as social networks and the specific rules of each one, but on the other hand, to a battery of values that are no longer an objective in themselves, but are used as a vehicle to position something that seems more important, the brand that contains it.

Just looking at the instagram profiles analyzed, we can identify common patterns of communication: post with text in Johnson&Johnson and Fanta, portraits in Western Union, Fanta and Johnson&Johnson, product presentation in Fanta and DK, all of which must be contained in the square delivered by Instagram, with a limited amount of characters to comment.

As globalization blurs geographical boundaries and fosters interconnectedness, it fosters a convergence of cultural values and modes of expression. Brands, as cultural artifacts, can play a pivotal role in navigating this global landscape, serving as symbols of identity that transcend borders. In this context, the ability of visual identities to be useful when communicating with diverse audiences while maintaining a cohesive brand message becomes increasingly vital.

As a conclusion we could say that the impact of globalization on homogenization manifests on two fronts: the realm of ideas and the domain of forms de Kerckhove's concept of a global electronic psychology underscores how shared values and societal understandings are influenced by digital technologies, shaping our collective consciousness on a global scale. Concurrently, the convergence of communication mediums and expressive forms fosters a universal language of visual communication, necessitating adaptations in visual identities to effectively navigate these shared platforms. While globalization presents opportunities for cultural exchange and connectivity, we should consider that it also poses challenges in preserving diversity and cultural authenticity, and that challenges it's also being faced by brands in their visual identities.

5.3 The aesthetics of abstraction

One last argument for the visual homogenization to be directly related to the development of digital technologies is what Ed Finn calls "*the aesthetics of abstraction*" (2018, p. 97).

The evolution of new technologies and sophisticated algorithms has ushered in an era of unprecedented personalization. These technologies have the remarkable ability to sift through immense quantities of user behavior data, deciphering patterns, preferences, and tendencies with remarkable precision. This capability empowers platforms to craft bespoke user experiences tailored to individual tastes and preferences, effectively forging ultra-personalized relationships between users and digital interfaces.

However, the impact of personalization transcends the confines of individual platforms. It catalyzes a phenomenon known as *“liquid expectations”* (Bauman, 2000) wherein the standards and expectations cultivated in one digital environment fluidly permeate and influence expectations across diverse sectors and platforms. For instance, the seamless recommendation algorithms of streaming platforms like Netflix set a high bar for user experience, fostering a sense of anticipation and expectation among viewers. Consequently, users come to expect similar levels of tailored service and intuitive interface design across other digital touchpoints, including banking platforms.

Despite the profound impact of personalization and the omnipresence of algorithms in shaping our digital experiences, there remains a veil of mystery surrounding the inner workings of these intricate systems. While users reap the benefits of tailored recommendations and seamless interfaces, the mechanisms driving these processes often operate behind the scenes.

These algorithms function as *“black boxes”* operating beyond the purview of user understanding and scrutiny. As Ed Finn observes, platforms like Netflix epitomize this paradigm where the brand itself becomes synonymous with the algorithmic processes underpinning its operation. In this digital landscape, the brand identity is intricately intertwined with the computational magic driving personalized recommendations and content curation. This is what Bogost calls a *“computational theocracy”* that replaces God with the algorithm:

“Our supposedly algorithmic culture is not a material phenomenon so much as a devotional one, a supplication made to the computers people have allowed to replace gods in their minds, even as they simultaneously claim that science has made us impervious to religion” (Bogost, 2015).

Human involvement, once a cornerstone of traditional service provision, is deliberately marginalized in favor of algorithmic efficiency and precision. The human touch recedes into the background as algorithms take center stage, orchestrating user experiences with meticulous attention to detail and unparalleled efficiency, affecting our way of communicating, less and less based on language and alphabet, but rather on images, almost like early civi-

lizations. Behind the sleek interfaces and intuitive functionalities lies a complex network of algorithms, crunching data and optimizing outcomes with little human intervention.

Netflix's highly customized front-end serves as a quintessential example of a broader trend that permeates the algorithmic age—the aesthetics of abstraction. This phenomenon is not exclusive to Netflix but extends to tech giants like Uber, Google, and Amazon, each of which thrives on the principle of simplification. As Finn (2018) points out: “*For Netflix, the brand is algorithmic, the magic computational, and the humans are kept carefully out of the spotlight*” (p. 94).

In this era of algorithmic dominance, complexity is eschewed in favor of streamlined user experiences. Companies like Uber, with its ride-hailing platform, Google, with its search engine, and Amazon, with its e-commerce platform, prioritize user convenience above all else. They abstract away the intricacies and complexities inherent in their operations, presenting users with sleek interfaces and intuitive functionalities that belie the complexity beneath the surface.

By serving as intermediaries in every transaction, these companies engage in what can be described as *algorithmic arbitrage* (Finn, 2018, p.110). They leverage their algorithms to navigate the complexities of supply chains, logistics, and information retrieval, seamlessly managing the intricacies on behalf of users. Whether it's connecting riders with drivers, surfacing relevant search results, or facilitating online purchases, these platforms act as arbiters of efficiency and convenience, abstracting away the complexities of the underlying processes.

This emphasis on abstraction aligns with the broader ethos of the algorithmic age, wherein complexity is distilled into simplicity, and users are shielded from the inner workings of the systems they interact with. The aesthetics of abstraction prioritize clarity, efficiency, and seamlessness, fostering a user-centric approach that resonates with contemporary sensibilities. The success of platforms like Netflix, Uber, Google, and Amazon hinges not only on their technical prowess but also on the aesthetics of competence, trust, and openness that they project (Finn, 2018, p.97).

Finn argues that Netflix's ultimate goal is not simply for consumers to love its content, but to develop a deep affection for the entire Netflix ecosystem—the application, the service, and the platform itself (Finn, 2018, p.104). This encompasses a holistic appreciation for the seamless user experience, the intuitive interface design, and the reliability of the service as a whole. By cultivating a strong emotional connection with users, Netflix aims to foster loyalty and engagement that extends beyond individual pieces of content.

Drawing on Finn's insights, we can discern parallels between the approach taken by Netflix and the broader concept of algorithmic abstraction. Just as the opening credits of *House of Cards* serve as a poetic ode to the algorithmic abstraction of the political system depicted in the series, we can observe similar dynamics at play in the Instagram feeds of brands like Fanta or Johnson & Johnson.

In these brand representations, we witness a deliberate construction of worlds aimed at captivating and engaging audiences. Through carefully curated content and strategic brand messaging, these companies seek to immerse users in their own realms, where every interaction is meticulously orchestrated to elicit specific emotions and responses (see **Figure 19**).

By aligning their brand identities with the aesthetics of abstraction and leveraging algorithmic principles to shape user experiences, brands like Fanta and Johnson & Johnson could be able to forge deeper connections with their audiences. Just as Netflix seeks to engender affection for its platform as a whole, these brands aim to cultivate a sense of loyalty and affinity that transcends individual products or campaigns.

In conclusion, we could say that the rise of new technologies is profoundly influencing how brands present themselves to the world. These technologies, underpinned by our collective belief in their transformative power, have necessitated the development of an aesthetic that seeks to bridge the gap between what we expect them to be able to do and with what they can actually do. Despite the inherent limitations of their functionality, brands leverage this aesthetic to reinforce the perception of their capabilities.



House of Cards
2013



Fanta
Instagram Reel
May, 23rd, 2024



Johnson & Johnson
Instagram Reel
June, 6th, 2024

Figure 19
Aesthetics of abstraction in media

This aesthetic is characterized by attributes such as clarity, efficiency, and simplicity—qualities that have become universal values across all brands in response to the fluid expectations not only of consumers, but also of the algorithms that govern the digital landscape. In adhering to these expectations, brands could be undergoing a process of visual homogenization, where distinct identities are converging towards a standardized visual language.

This homogenization can be interpreted as a manifestation of our generation's need to tangibly support our belief in the transformative power of technology. By aligning visual identities with perceived attributes of technological prowess, brands are creating, deliberately or not, a visual narrative that reinforces our collective faith in the capabilities of these technologies. In the end, McLuhan was not wrong when in his book *Mechanical Bride* (1995) he commented that although in these times there will be a diversity of inventions for the production and distribution of myths or folklore (of industrial man), a great degree of cohesion and unity will be found, generated not consciously, but by a kind of “*collective dream*” (p.22). Collective dream that must be made visible in a certain way, and one of them would be branding.

6. Conclusions

Throughout this research, we have undertaken a meticulous examination of the phenomenon of brand homogenization, aiming to define it in more detail. This involved identifying its defining characteristics across various dimensions, including color palettes, geometric shapes, typographic choices, and figurative elements. By scrutinizing these elements within the context of brand identity, we have discerned patterns of convergence and standardization that permeate contemporary branding practices.

Moreover, our investigation has dive deep into understanding how these visual changes reverberate through the meanings conveyed by brands. Through an in-depth visual semiotic analysis of four rebranding case studies presented in Chapter 3, we have unearthed common motivations driving brand transformations, such as the pursuit of simplicity, broader audience appeal, globalization imperatives, adaptability to digital environments, and versatility. However, beyond these surface motivations lie nuanced layers of meaning embedded within visual changes. We have observed instances of abstraction and detachment from physical referents, wherein brands transcend their visual identities to communicate more profound messages. In these cases, the significance of the brand is not solely derived from its visual representation but rather from the narrative it conveys and the values it embodies.

Furthermore, we have compared these profound changes with insights gleaned from disciplines such as psychotechnology, sociology, and anthropology, which have studied the evolving relationship between individuals and emerging technologies. Within this interdisciplinary exploration, we have identified three potential connections between this socio-technological landscape and the homogenization of brands.

Firstly, we have observed the emergence of what we term *cyborg brands*, which exhibit a remarkable adaptability not only in their behavior but also in their identity to conform to the demands of social media platforms. In an era where digital presence is paramount, brands are increasingly required to seamlessly integrate into the digital ecosystem, adopting fluid identities that resonate with the ever-evolving preferences and expectations of online audiences. This phenomenon underscores the blurring boundar-

ies between human and machine, as brands assimilate digital technologies into their very essence, morphing into entities that navigate the digital realm with ease and agility.

Secondly, we have contemplated the impact of *globalization* on branding practices, as the world becomes increasingly interconnected and values become more standardized across diverse cultures. In this globalized landscape, communication formats must transcend linguistic and cultural barriers to resonate with a universally diverse audience. Consequently, brands gravitate towards common media platforms and visual languages, where diversity lies not in the format itself but in the richness of the content it conveys. This convergence towards standardized communication formats could be reflecting a broader societal trend towards cultural homogenization, as shared values and norms permeate global discourse and shape collective identities.

Lastly, we have explored the *aesthetic of abstraction*, which posits that technology has assumed a quasi-religious status in contemporary society, with individuals imbuing it with transformative powers akin to those of a deity. However, despite its perceived omnipotence, technology remains fraught with limitations and imperfections. In response, we have witnessed the emergence of an aesthetic that seeks to reinforce the notion of technology as a magical and transformative force, imbuing the digital era with an aura of mystique and wonder. This aesthetic of abstraction transcends traditional boundaries of representation, embracing simplicity and streamlining in order to archive a sense of awe and fascination towards the potentialities of technological advancement that contemporary organizations could be able to provide, although we must be alert to growing feelings of mistrust that have appeared with the abrupt arrival of artificial intelligence (Elliott, 2024).

Collectively, these three dimensions offered valuable insights into the complex interplay between technology, globalization, and cultural aesthetics, and their impact on the homogenization of brands. By situating brand homogenization within this broader socio-technological context, we gained a deeper understanding of the underlying drivers and mechanisms driving this trend.

With all of this in mind, we can confidently conclude that brand homogenization, and rightly called “*blandification*”, is indeed a tangible and pervasive phenomenon occurring within the contemporary branding landscape. While it may not be universally applicable to all brands, its presence is unmistakable, casting a discernible shadow over the realm of branding and visual identity.

This phenomenon can be attributed to a profound shift in the role of brands themselves. Whereas previously, brand identity was predominantly expressed through distinct identifiers such as logos, colors, and typography, today it is increasingly shaped by the content a brand curates and communicates with meticulous care. Brands are no longer static entities defined by rigid visual elements; rather, they function as dynamic aggregators of carefully selected content, assembling disparate pieces into cohesive narratives that resonate with their target audiences.

Drawing upon the metaphor of bricolage, as articulated by Floch, brands continue to construct narratives from an array of visual and textual elements. However, in the contemporary context, these elements extend beyond traditional symbols and icons to encompass the vast array of audiovisual components available in the digital age. Brands act as curators, selecting and arranging these elements to create a coherent and compelling brand story that transcends individual visual motifs. In this sense, the brand serves as the adhesive that binds together disparate elements, forging connections and associations within a new universe of meaning, fulfilling, as Marrone (2007) presents, a divine role:

“By acting on the body and shaping its features, not only does the brand claim its position of supremacy and dominion over them [people], but, much more profoundly, it ends up acting as an artificial entity, a perfect substitute for a God who created heaven and earth, of material but also of immaterial things.” (p. 336, translation mine).

This shift in the role of brands has profound implications for the practice of branding and visual identity design. No longer confined to static visual elements, brands must now navigate a dynamic and multifaceted landscape, where the lines between content creation, curation, and consumption are

increasingly blurred. Success in this new paradigm requires brands to adopt a holistic approach to identity construction, one that embraces the fluidity of digital media and leverages its potential to engage and resonate with audiences on a deeper level.

Moreover, this transformation underscores the evolving nature of brand identity itself. In the digital age, brand identity is no longer a fixed entity, but rather a dynamic and evolving construct that reflects the ever-changing needs, values, and aspirations of both brands and their audiences. As brands continue to adapt and evolve in response to shifting market dynamics and technological advancements, the concept of brand identity will likewise evolve, embracing new forms of expression and engagement that extend beyond traditional visual aesthetics.

This shift in focus poses a significant challenge or warning for visual identity, as it appears to be relegated to a mere “tint” tasked with identifying content, further exacerbating the evident loss of visual diversity, generating this sensation of *blandness*. This begs the question: should we address this issue? What do we stand to lose as a society when brands become increasingly indistinguishable from one another? Is it possible that we may witness a resurgence of *punk brands* in the coming years, challenging the norms of simplicity with bold typographies, vibrant colors, and intricate imagery?

Perhaps what is happening with visual identities is somehow reflecting the dynamics of the new media that McLuhan consolidates in his tetrad, where at the same time that some capabilities such as universality, flexibility and emotional connection are intensified, other things have become obsolete, such as figuration, or distinction through a strong logo. What will be the obsolete that will be brought back, the universal uniformity of books in the early days of printing or the desperate search for identity and meaning of the post-war era? (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, p.7)

The implications of brand homogenization extend far beyond the realm of marketing and branding; they resonate deeply with broader cultural and societal trends. At its core, the convergence of brand identities could reflect a broader societal tendency towards standardization and conformity, where

uniqueness and individuality are sacrificed in favor of uniformity and sameness. In a world where brands play an increasingly central role in shaping cultural narratives and collective identities, the loss of visual diversity poses a threat to the richness and vibrancy of our cultural landscape.

Moreover, the rise of homogenized brands raises questions about the nature of consumer choice and autonomy. When brands become interchangeable, consumers are deprived of meaningful choices and are instead presented with a homogenized array of options that offer little in the way of genuine differentiation. Instead, and exasperating the synaesthetic image of the *bland*, it becomes a menu of boring and tasteless dishes, which perhaps fulfill their function of feeding us, but fail to connect us with that potential joy that a dish can have when it is prepared with passion, either in a Michelin-starred restaurant or by our grandmother in the warmth of the home. This not only stifles innovation and creativity within the marketplace but also limits the ability of consumers to express their individuality and identity through the brands they choose to engage with.

In response to these challenges, we could speculate that we may witness a resurgence of *punk brands* – brands that eschew the conventions of simplicity and minimalism in favor of bold and unconventional visual expressions. These brands could be characterized by their rejection of mainstream norms and their embrace of subversion and rebellion. By challenging the status quo and pushing the boundaries of visual aesthetics, *punk brands* could offer a counterpoint to the homogenization trend, injecting much-needed diversity and dynamism into the branding landscape.

This thesis opens the door for further exploration of this subject matter, encouraging continued investigation into the evolving roles of brands in the future and the development of visual languages.

As branding continues to adapt to technological advancements, shifting consumer behaviors, and cultural trends, there remains a wealth of opportunities for researchers, practitioners, and scholars to delve deeper into the intricacies of brand homogenization. Future studies could examine the long-term effects of brand convergence on consumer perceptions, behaviors,

and decision-making processes, including a visual dimension to the analysis of interactions mediated by new technologies and the predisposition towards the interference of artificial intelligence, especially with respect to the awareness of its presence and influence. By analyzing how homogenized brands are perceived across different demographic segments, researchers can gain valuable insights into the underlying mechanisms driving brand preference and loyalty in an increasingly crowded marketplace.

Furthermore, there is a pressing need to explore the strategies and tactics that brands can employ to stand out in an era dominated by homogeneity. From innovative design approaches to experiential marketing techniques, brands must explore new avenues for capturing consumer attention and fostering meaningful connections. By embracing diversity and celebrating individuality, brands can craft distinctive identities that resonate deeply with consumers, transcending the limitations of visual aesthetics to create authentic and enduring brand experiences.

Moreover, the exploration of visual languages presents an exciting opportunity to push the boundaries of creativity and innovation within the realm of branding. By experimenting with new visual elements, styles, and mediums, designers can challenge established norms and conventions, paving the way for fresh and dynamic approaches to brand expression. From immersive digital experiences to interactive storytelling formats, there exists a vast landscape of possibilities for redefining visual languages and captivating audiences in bold and unexpected ways.

Ultimately, the study of brand homogenization is not simply an academic pursuit; it serves as a catalyst for brands to reconsider their approach to identity and differentiation in an increasingly competitive marketplace. By embracing diversity, fostering creativity, and championing authenticity, brands can reclaim their positions as vibrant and distinctive voices within the cultural milieu. As we look towards the future, let us seize the opportunity to shape a branding landscape that celebrates uniqueness, embraces diversity, and empowers brands to forge meaningful connections with consumers in an ever-evolving world.

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