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Article:

Marsden, JL (Cover date: Spring 2019) Visualising corporate brands: Towards a framework of landmark expression. *Journal of Brand Strategy*, 7 (4). pp. 377-388. ISSN 2045-855X

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Visualising corporate brands: Towards a framework of brandmark expression

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Abstract

Despite the increased attention in corporate brand identity, there remains very little conceptual apparatus for understanding the types of expressions that feature in a corporate logo (brandmark). In this paper the author proposes a conceptual framework that outlines the expressive dimensions of corporate brandmarks, and, in doing so, draws upon a thematic analysis of 243 archival documents. The results revealed that the framework had the capacity to accommodate 95 per cent of expressions from an expansive sample cases. The early indications are that brandmarks predominantly convey one or more of four types of organizational expression. Whilst further refinement in the specification and operationalisation of this framework is necessary, this research offers a preliminary step towards the development of a typology of corporate brandmark expressions, and therefore has relevance to scholars and managers.

Keywords

Brandmarks, corporate brand identity, visual identity, brand expression

Introduction

The corporate brandmark, referred to here as the combined unit of a brand name and its visual representation (i.e., logotype and/or symbol) is perhaps the most prominent manifestation of an organisational brand.¹⁻⁴ A brandmark's power resides in its ability to convey complex organizational associations in a distilled, symbolic form.⁴⁻⁶ It is this immediacy of expression that renders the task of designing and

redesigning an organizational brandmark a challenging and potentially controversial activity.⁷⁻⁹ Numerous cases serve to highlight how such activity can arouse stakeholder criticism, draw attention to managerial competency, and raise questions over the credibility of managerial decision-making.^{9,10} In addition, brand identity programmes typically incur substantial expense, such as the reported £50m for the rebrand of British Telecom in 1991, and more recently, in 2008, the \$1.4 billion cost to rebrand Pepsi.^{11,12}

While there is uncertainty attached to any process of change, such prominent cases of rebranding highlight the importance of the visual dimension of corporate branding. Previous empirical research has primarily focused on the broader remit of corporate branding, particularly the task of orchestrating the multi-faceted aspects of complex organizational brands.¹³⁻¹⁶ This pursuit of cohesion has led to the production of various gap-alignment models in which the purpose has been to harmonize the disparate facets of an organizational brand into a unified system.^{14,16,17} Although such frameworks inform our understanding of the holistic and relational aspect of organizational brands, these studies offer limited insight into the visual manifestations of branding.

Within the visual domain the literature has followed three streams of exploration. The first adopts a macro-perspective by examining the impact of consistency across an entire visual identity.^{18,19} These studies share similarities with the gap-alignment approach in that they generally seek to augment our understanding of coherence in brand expressions. The second stream of literature follows a micro perspective by focusing on distinct components of a brand's visual identity scheme. Typically such studies concentrate on specific features of a brandmark, such as the use of colour, shape, and symmetrical arrangement, and ask questions relating to the perceived meaning of these attributes.^{20,21} Although informative, such investigations are reduced to commenting on components in isolation rather than as a functional part of a larger system and therefore offers an incomplete understanding of brandmark expression. The third strand of research within visual identity has explored consumer interpretations of brandmarks, particularly in relation to changed or modified brandmarks (i.e. rebranding programmes).^{1,20,22,23} By focusing on these consumer perceptions research has attempted to address, indirectly, some of the issues connected to ill-received corporate rebrands.

Such studies, however, attempt to evaluate the graphic communication of brandmarks by exclusively focusing on the interpretations of a design without considering the intended meaning of a design. As a result there is very little empirical research that has focused on the intended messages embedded within the design of brandmarks. Accordingly we cannot explain how corporate brands attempt to define their organisations through their visual identity and, specifically, what message they seek to express through the design of their brandmarks.

The aim of this study, therefore, was to examine what corporate brands have expressed through their brandmarks, and in doing so propose a conceptual framework for capturing the intended expressions of corporate brandmarks. The starting point for this framework was to activate an Olins statement, in which he suggested that corporate identity could convey four dimensions of an organization: (1) who we are; (2) what we do; (3) how we do it; (4) where we are heading.⁵ After explicating these frames the study examined 243 documents relating to the explicit descriptions of 100 cases of corporate branding. Using extracts from the analysis of these cases this paper outlines the significant signifiers used to convey the four types of organizational expression.

In effect, this paper proposes a way of conceptualising corporate design through four types of organizational frame. By describing the indicators of these frames the paper draws attention to the specific signifiers of a brandmark. This in turn enables brandmark expressions to be captured, classified, and subsequently examined against the underlying factors that drive particular expressions to be prioritized. The intention is that these contributions shift academic debate from the recipient interpretation perspective to the organization definition perspective and, in the process, provides the catalyst for further enquiry on corporate brandmark design.

The paper is presented as follows. Brand alignment is outlined as a dominant theme, extending to visual consistency and recipient perceptions of brandmarks. To augment the prior literature this paper argues that organizational definition has been instrumental in brandmark design, and as such facilitates a clearer understanding of the framing of brandmark expression. Building on this proposition the paper describes the operational characteristics of the conceptual framework and outlines the process for gathering empirical data. Case extracts are used to illustrate the application of the framework. After discussing the boundary conditions the contributions are articulated, along with the implications for future research.

Brand alignment

Corporate brand identity has received considerable attention in recent times, with the prevailing concern being the concept of brand alignment.^{13-16,24} This preoccupation with harmonising disparate facets of a brand (e.g. culture, image and vision) reflects an implicit view of corporate brand scholars: a brand is only as strong as its weakest link, an incongruent touch-point could compromise the overall proposition.^{13-16,24} Prior research has focused on mapping the scope of a corporate brand and advocated the orchestration of facets into a cohesive system, leading to the emergence of numerous gap-alignment models.^{13,14,16}

The influence of this alignment approach can be seen in the work that has focused exclusively on the consistent application of a brand's visual identity. Previous studies have advocated that, in order to facilitate strength of recognition and recall, the design manifestations of a brand should be consistent in both the meaning and the application.^{1,20} Accordingly research within the visual identity domain to date has concentrated on either coherence *across* the broader range of visual manifestations (e.g. advertisements, signage and website) or coherence *between* individual visual components (e.g. the shape of a corporate symbol in relation to the phonetic symbolism of a brand name).^{2,18–23,25} The strength of the gap-alignment concept is that it enables us to encompass a holistic and relational view of all of the facets of corporate branding. This approach, however, offers little insight into the design perspective of corporate branding, beyond the promotion of striving for consistency across touchpoints.

Components in isolation

As graphic devices brandmarks are constructed from a combination of distinguishing features, such as shape, composition, colour, and, conventionally, a typographic rendering of a brand name. With such variance in expressive features, prior work has typically isolated these variables by focusing selectively on specific components.^{1,20} One notable study examined the pictorial elements of brandmarks (not including colour or brand name) and discovered that brand devices featuring depictions of natural forms were more recognizable to respondents than abstract brandmarks (pictorials with an unfamiliar reference, such as a geometric shape).^{1,20} Similar studies have confirmed respondent appeal to natural and figurative depictions, even when presented in original colours.²³ However, as subsequently acknowledged, literal depiction within brandmark design, although useful for recognition and recall, is less relevant because brandmarks operate symbolically as receptacles of associations (thus their meanings evolve).²⁰

The aforementioned studies focused solely on the pictorial element of brandmarks, but excluded a key element of the majority of brand identities – the logotype. As a distinct arrangement of letterforms that visualize a brand's name, logotypes receive less scholarly attention. Whilst one study focused on examining consumer perceptions of upper and lower-case lettering in relation to brand personality traits, the emphasis was on the character formatting of a single font.²⁶ Strictly speaking, this research was not specifically directed at logotypes but nevertheless provided implications for logotype design and selection. Although research involved in font appropriateness would logically reside within the typographic literature, it currently remains unconnected to brand logotypes.²⁷

By contrast the use of colour has been investigated in relation to the visual identities of brands. Within the context of brandmark design colour is considered to be a

powerful tool.^{21,28} Research has shown, for instance, that the colour of a brandmark can facilitate the assignment of brand personality traits.²⁸ There is also evidence to suggest that colour can influence how an organization is perceived in terms of its attitude towards the environment.²⁹ Moreover parallels can be drawn with the role of symmetry, where symmetrically balanced brandmarks can influence audiences to hold a more positive association of an organization, such as being perceived as more environmentally responsible.^{29,30} However the fundamental limitation of examining components in isolation is that the meaning of such symbolic devices is context dependent, and therefore investigating components in isolation is not only artificial but an inaccurate representation of how we consume such visual stimuli.

Recipient interpretations of brandmark design

As recent cases have shown, stakeholder perspectives of corporate design are instrumental to the success of rebranding activity.⁷⁻¹² As a reflection of the importance of this perspective a significant proportion of research papers offered contributions based on consumer preferences of visual identity components.^{1,2,20-23} This concentrated effort on consumer perceptions is particularly relevant for understanding any modification of a prominent brand expression(s), especially where existing consumers have an established relationship with a given brand.^{8,22,31} However very few research papers seek interpretations from a representative group of prioritized stakeholders. Instead, many studies rely upon eliciting student responses from out-of-context visual stimuli as an apparent substitute for stakeholder interpretations.

Furthermore there seems to be a preoccupation for research studies to evaluate recipient interpretations whilst neglecting to consider the intentions of a brand expression. When too many studies adopt such an approach there is a disproportionate assignment of greater attention to one perspective. Thus, if the interpretation of a brand expression is disconnected from the intention of a brand expression, then we can be confident of gaining an incomplete picture of the communication exchange. Unfortunately, to date, there is a paucity of empirical research within the literature on the strategic intentions of brand expressions. Consequently we are unable to explain how corporations attempt to define their organisations through their brandmarks and the broader visual identity system. Therefore the construction of brandmarks – arguably the most prominent manifestation of brand – remains theoretically underdeveloped.

In an attempt to reconcile this imbalance in the literature this paper concentrates on the intended expressions of corporate brands. The aim of this study, therefore, was to examine what corporate brands have expressed through their brandmarks, and in doing so propose a conceptual framework for capturing the intended expressions of corporate brandmarks.

Method

The purpose of the study was to identify the types of expressions embedded within the design of corporate brand marks. To this end a broad purposive sample of 100 cases of corporate brand identity programmes was selected for analysis. To ensure maximum variation of expressions the sample was collected from an expansive range of industries and from an extensive period of activity, the 1960s to 2010. A critical mass of branding activity occurred throughout this 50-year period and therefore presented a substantive range of eligible cases. A total of 100 cases were sampled, with an equal representation of 20 cases from each of the five decades. The selection of cases had to satisfy three criteria: (1) the case was a corporate brand and not a product brand; (2) the case involved reputable design intervention; (3) the case had sufficient descriptive documentation available in order to facilitate a thematic analysis.

The first criterion introduced an essential condition to the sampling frame by focusing solely on cases that constitute organizational branding programmes, not product brands. The assumption here was that organizational brands are likelier to be independent and visually free from endorsement (i.e. a parent brand would operate independently whereas a product-level brand frequently features an endorsement by a parent brand). This condition established a more comparable basis for eligible cases, in the sense that the cases would exhibit greater commonalities than that of a mixture of organizational brands and product brands, with distinctly acknowledged differences. The second criterion, the need for cases to have involved reputable design intervention, ensured that the analysis would solely involve the capturing of best practice in the translation of corporate expressions into the design of brandmarks. This condition directed attention towards either (1) prominent, global consultancies that typically have multiple offices and an established reputation for specializing in corporate brand identity programmes, or (2) a highly esteemed designer with the responsibility for creating a brand identity programme, as happened in many of the cases in the formative period of corporate identity design (e.g. Paul Rand, designer of the IBM logo). The third criterion was primarily a pragmatic consideration: to be eligible a case must have accessible descriptive documentation to facilitate a content analysis.

Since the aim of this analysis was to discover the intended expression(s) of a brandmark, as opposed to an audience's interpretation of a brand mark, it was essential to use first-hand descriptions of the intended meaning of the design from those directly involved in the production of the phenomena. In this regard the primary source of information was cases studies of prominent corporate identity programmes. Numerous descriptive accounts of relevant cases were available in the corporate identity design literatures. Specialist brand consultancy websites were an additional source of case descriptions. Finally the LexisNexis database was used to

access explanatory press releases from large corporations engaged in brand identity programmes. Multiple documents were sought for each case in order to triangulate for greater accuracy, where feasible.

The yield of this archival search comprised of 243 documents, relating to 100 cases of corporate brand identity. Accordingly the data was collected and subjected to a thematic analysis, whereby the case descriptions were examined to accurately establish the intended expressions of each brandmark. The analysis was structured around four conceptual themes that reflect an organisation's search for definition: (1) 'Who we are': Provenance expressions, where there is explicit indication of organizational heritage; (2) Activity expressions, where there is explicit indication of an organization's core activity or principal industry of operation; (3) Values expressions, where there is explicit indication of a sense of organizational personality; (4) Vision expressions, where there is explicit indication of an organizational aspiration. In addition to these four conceptual themes, a final category, labeled 'other,' was created for the unconventional cases that could not be allocated to any of the previous four themes. Table 1, below, illustrates how specific case extracts correspond to each of the four conceptual themes.

Pivot	Extracts from cases	Keywords and/or key constructs
Who	‘It has taken the bold leadership and countless contributions of people around the world to form the leading global organisation Ernst & Young is today. Our roots go back to the 19th century and our founders Arthur Young and Alwin C Ernst.’	Reference to ownership or origin, typically involving the surnames of an organisation’s founder(s) or the placename of the originating geographical location.
What	‘Rand’s challenge was to transform the shield into a modern image. He streamlined the contours, introduced balanced gothic lower case letters, <u>and placed an outline of a package with a bow on the top of the shield as sort of a crown.</u> ’ ‘The new identity conveys BT’s focus, <u>the human communications business</u> , with a symbol that can be understood cross national borders.’	Explicit references to the visual manifestations literally – or metaphorically – signifying core organisational activities. Definition becoming less specific: from the category of ‘telecommunications’ to a higher substantive category of ‘human communications’.
How	‘ <u>Our new identity is a symbol for all that is best in customer service. The ideas of service, fidelity and promptness suggested the notion of a dog retrieving a ball ...</u> ’ ‘ <u>The new identity needed to express the EIB’s values</u> and proactive approach to economic and monetary union ...’ ‘Embedded within the primary design is an arrow, <u>symbolizing the company’s speed and efficiency.</u> ’	Explicit references to organisational attitude or performance indicators. Keywords: • Values (core) • Differentiation • Point-of-difference
Where	<u>The globe, of course, is a commonplace among logotypes these days when every corporation aspires to be a “global corporation”.</u> ’ ‘ <u>The final design symbolized the American landscape – woven from our diverse heritage ... The symbol was both American flag and arrow to the future.</u> ’	Explicit references to generic or specific aspirations. Keywords: vision, mission, global and future. Explicit references to right-facing devices as an indication of a future-focused organisation.

Table 1. Title: Semantic units and corresponding pivots.

Findings

From the analysis of data, where the aim was to identify the intended expressions of corporate brandmarks, the majority of cases (95 percent) exhibited expressions that could be classified as a combination of four types: (1) provenance or ownership, (2) activity, (3) values, and (4) vision. These four classes of expression each had specific indicators that related to either the brand nomenclature or a graphical depiction, which could be identified within the case descriptions.

A provenance expression typically involved the use of brand nomenclature as the primary device to convey notions of either origin or ownership. Expressions referencing origin can be seen in the cases of British Oxygen Company and Bank of America, where the nationality of the brand provides a strong sense of location and heritage. The visual language of the Bank of America further reinforces the nation of origin, in its clear depiction of the stars and stripes set in the colour of the national flag. Ownership orientated brands, where the nomenclature is derived from the surname(s) of the founder(s), can be seen in the cases of Pfizer (Charles Pfizer) and Merrill Lynch (Charles Merrill and Edmund Lynch).

As the above examples illustrate, provenance expressions have the capacity to convey a sense of individual and collective pride, and, through the implicit reference to heritage, suggest a deeper brand story. Both of the above-mentioned cases reflect a common approach to brand nomenclature whereby origin and ownership is frequently used alongside an activity signifier. The former case includes the word 'oxygen' in its name, which suggests the core activity is industrial gases, while the latter uses the word 'Bank' to indicate that the organization operates within the financial industry. Descriptive nomenclature was the primary device for expressing organizational activity in 43 percent of all cases. A further 40 percent of cases that featured activity expressions used a contracted form of descriptive nomenclature, such as an abbreviation (IBM), an acronym (Alcoa: Aluminium Company of America), or a portmanteau such as in the case of Amtrak (a truncated form of American rail-track). Visual devices also functioned as signifiers of organizational activity. An example of an activity expression can be seen in the extract below, in which the case explanation for BP clearly articulates how the symbol is intended to express the notion of natural 'energy'.

'The Helios mark was developed, symbolizing the newly merged company. Bright and bold, the identity evokes natural forms and energy that represent, respectively, BP's position as an environmental leader as well as its goal of moving beyond the petroleum sector.'

In addition to stating the intention of depicting an activity expression, the above extract also reveals the intention to express the third theme: a values expression. The use of the term 'natural forms' unambiguously conveys one of BP's principal values and serves to position BP as an 'environmental leader'. Here the example illustrates how the expression of values can become a mechanism for distinguishing how an organization engages in its activities, and therefore contributes towards positioning an organization within its respective industry. The expression of values through the use of visual symbols was prevalent. For example, the case for Merrill Lynch used the visual device of a bull to symbolize 'aggressive financial optimism and prosperity'. In some cases there was a combined use of both nomenclature and visual device to convey an expression of values. One example of this can be seen in the case for Prudential, a UK financial services organization established in 1848 and subsequently rebranded in 1986. This particular case used brand nomenclature to convey its founding principle of 'prudence,' one of its stated four values, and further reinforced visually: 'personified as a woman holding a serpent and a mirror.' These cases illustrate how the expression of values serves to position organisations within their respective industries, and therefore promotes a point-of-difference.

The case extract for BP, stated above, also illustrates the identification of the fourth theme: the vision expression. This case explains that its 'Helios mark' conveys its organizational values and positioning, which signify the goal of 'moving beyond the petroleum sector.' BP's use of the sun as a visual device enables the organisation to symbolize its environmental values, declare a position BP seeks to occupy, and serves to reflect their vision of migrating towards a cleaner, sustainable energy source. This type of claim is not unique within the energy sector and to some extent is expected, however the BP expression is unconventional in the sense that it is one of the few cases that feature a 'specific' vision expression.

From the analysis of data, a generic, less specific, future orientated device was the most prevalent form of vision expression. The generic vision expression is simply a right facing, or right-orientated, graphic device. The apparent reasoning behind the use of right-facing signifiers is that movement to the right represents progression (i.e. based on the premise that western cultures read from left to right). An example of this form of vision expression can be seen in an extract from the case involving the rebranding of the Bank of America.

'The final design symbolized the American landscape – woven from our diverse heritage and suggesting security, passion, and courage. The symbol was both American flag and arrow to the future.'

As the above example suggests, the right-facing arrow is an accepted and frequently used device for indicating that an organization is future-focused. In 30 percent of all

cases a vision-type expression was employed; 80 percent of these expressions featured a generic right-facing device. Two examples are (1) the smiling arrow underscoring the Amazon logotype, and (2) British Telecom's 'piper' symbol leaping to the right. These exemplars illustrate the ease of depicting a non-specific vision through graphical devices. By contrast there were no incidents of cases using nomenclature to convey a vision expression. One minor allusion to a nomenclature expression was the case of BP. At the launch of the new BP identity, in 2000, statements were made to suggest that BP no longer was an abbreviation of British Petroleum but a suggestion of the organization being 'beyond petroleum'. However this explicit statement, which received widespread criticism for its inaccuracy, was considered as merely part of the awareness campaign for the new identity rather than as a nomenclature change.

Whilst the four themes of brandmark expression accounted for 95 percent of cases, there were five cases that contained non-standard expressions. These outliers involved cases for diversified organisations that sought to project a more abstract expression, which seemed beyond the scope of the four analytical themes. The case for Unilever, whose identity was designed to express the notion of 'vitality,' appeared to operate as a common denominator of a portfolio of seemingly disparate products. This expression was referred to as both a unifier and a purpose. Similarly the case for Diageo revealed a brand mark that sought to emphasize the notion of 'pleasure,' to unify the portfolio of alcohol beverage brands and convey the organizational vision. Whilst the outlier cases featured expressions described as visions, purposes or 'big idea,' these expressions also operated as encapsulations of existing activities.³² Given this overlap between the activity expression and the vision expression, it remains unclear at this stage the optimum method for framing these types of expressions.

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to address the paucity of theory by proposing how such organisational expressions can be conceptually framed. In doing so this paper outlined the development of a conceptual framework designed to capture the expressions of corporate brandmarks. Empirical cases were analysed to test the framework, and extracts from the cases were used to illustrate the typical signifiers responsible for conveying each of the four frames. The following section discusses the contribution of this paper and subsequently highlights the implications by outlining the conceptual framework.

The strategic expressions of corporate brandmarks have received very little scholarly attention, thus there is no explanation of how these expressions are determined, prioritized and translated into a visual form. Prior research within the visual identity literature has engaged in three related areas. The first was the orchestration of the

broader visual manifestations of a brand.^{2,18-23,25} The focus of this literature is on the general alignment of messages across visual manifestations, with less attention on the collective design characteristics of the brandmark. This study addresses this gap by prioritising the expressive features of a brandmark and in particular its reference to organisational definition. The second stream of literature has sought to examine brandmark components in isolation.^{1,20,21,28} While such studies provide insights into how visual stimuli affect recipient responses, the findings typically remain disconnected from the underpinning strategies of brands. This study redirects emphasis from isolated visual components towards a more holistic framing, as this seems to provide a more logical connect between the brandmark, its context, and its reference to the intended message. The third theme within the literature has concentrated on recipient responses to brandmark stimuli.^{1,2,20-23} Numerous cases of negative stakeholder response to rebranding programmes serve to remind us of the need to prioritize recipient response.⁷⁻¹² However, as a communicative exchange, researchers need to consider both the intention of a brandmark alongside the interpretation of a brandmark. Integrating both perspectives will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the precise mechanisms and characteristics of visual communications in corporate branding.

By classifying corporate expressions according to their organisational frame of reference, this study seeks to initiate a more comprehensive consideration of brandmarks as a strategic expression. The currency of this conceptual framework is that it proposes a thematic landscape of the type of expressions commonly embedded within the design of corporate brandmarks. As such the author believes that by detailing the specific indicators of the four types of brand expression, this framework is an effective provisional instrument that has interest to both scholars and managers. A brief summary of the frames is presented below.

The first, provenance expression, relates to notions of ownership or origin. The second, activity expression, places emphasis on conveying the industry of operation. These first two frames present an unambiguous identity, in terms of expressing 'who' the organization is and 'what' they do in relation to their core activities. These two frames appear to offer greater utility at the formative stages of an organisation's evolution, when awareness of a given organisation is low and when an organisation is more likely to operate within a single industry. There is also the sense that the provenance and the activity expressions are more externally orientated, rather than as instruments for motivating staff.

The third, values-orientated expression, moves beyond signaling generic industries and conveys 'how' the organization operates within its respective range of activities. While this frame frequently occurred, it was more pronounced in diversified organisations whose operations spanned multiple industries. Accordingly, the expression of values was often used as a binding mechanism to convey a sense

organisational unification. Although this theme transmitted a sense of positioning, and was described as such in many of the case materials, the expression of values was an internally directed message that served as visual reinforcement.

The fourth, vision expression, was predominantly generic. Most cases exhibited right-facing devices as a visual shorthand for symbolizing that the organisation was future-focused. Admittedly, complex organisational visions can be difficult to distill and convey within the parameters of a brandmark. Exceptions to this observation, however, appear to mostly reside in the petroleum industry, with examples being the cases for BP, Repsol and Q8. Nevertheless, such coded expressions are primarily directed towards key stakeholders and therefore specificity would not seem to be particularly essential beyond that of a concise visual reference.

Five outlier cases were incompatible with the four conceptual domains. The difficulty of these cases was that they exhibited indirect indicators of activity expressions but did not a specific industry or precise activity. As diversified organisations they were unable to convey one single area of activity or industry of operation, and therefore sought to project a unifying concept that encapsulated aggregated activity in an abstract and beneficial manner. Accordingly the conceptual framework needs revising to better distinguish between singular and collective types of activity expressions, and to distinguish between the direct and indirect signifiers of organisational activities.

Whilst this framework is at a formative stage, the intention is to refine this further to accommodate the non-standard, outlier expressions and move towards the development of an extended typology of brandmark expressions. Taken further, a more detailed analysis of cases could reveal how brandmark expressions have changed over time, perhaps as a reflection of organisational lifecycle. A further extension to this research is the identification of the determinants of brand expressions and the relationship between the determinants and the expressions.

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