Investigation into Visual Identity Management of Selected Companies in Ghana

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Abstract

This study investigates the visual identity management knowledge and practices of two small-scale companies, which have guaranteed their progressive development. The investigation employed a case study research design, following a qualitative research approach. The sample consisted of two companies located in the Accra metropolis that are owned by Ghanaians. A semi-structured interview was used as the data collection instrument. Qualitative content analysis revealed that the leaders of the companies studied knew a lot about visual identity and had set up a key mechanism to ensure that the companies' visual identities were managed well. It is recommended that the companies' leadership continue to update their knowledge of visual identity and support their visual identity management practices with regular research and monitoring.

Keywords: visual identity, graphic elements, visual cues, visual identity management, corporate identity

1. Introduction

An organisation inevitably develops relationships with society and the public. This is because an organisation may engage in some form of collaboration with segments of the public or audiences within society. The organisation will most likely have other corporate bodies as competitors. The various publics within the society or environment where the organisation operates will form opinions about all the organisations that exist in that society. It is important, therefore, that an organisation that wants to do well should consciously and strategically act to manage and control its various forms of communication that are controllable, with the intention that the organisation will be seen positively (instead of being seen negatively) by members of society, especially the target publics of the organisation.

Corporate identity and its management are important tools that organisations use in their attempt to create positive perceptions. The concept of visual identity manifests as a component of corporate identity. Visual identity, sometimes referred to as corporate visual identity, forms the focus of this paper. The effective management of visual identity plays a crucial role in the growth and development of an organisation (Simeos & Dibb, 2008; Van den Bosch, 2005). This paper examines how two Ghanaian-owned small-scale companies, Acumen Designs and Impressionist Prints, manage their visual identity.

Acumen Designs is an animation creation company in Ghana. The animation industry in Ghana is relatively young. The animation companies that are currently thriving were founded after 1999. Other animation creation companies in Ghana that are thriving include Parables Animation Studios, Colossal Toons Animation Company, Animax FYB Animation Studios, LoLGH Animation Company, Animate 24 Studios, 9th March Animation Studios, Tooli Animation Studios, Indigene B.R.O.S. LLC, and DNX Animation Studio (Respondent A, Chief Executive Officer, Acumen Designs - 5th December, 2023). Acumen Designs was established in 2018. Located in Accra, it attracts both local and international clients.

Impressionist Prints is a graphic design and print company that claims to focus on the principles of innovation and high quality. The company strives to provide high quality printing works to leave lasting memories in the minds of its clients. According to the Chief Executive Officer (C.E.O.)

of Impressionist Prints, the company achieves this quality measure by anticipating the needs of clients and providing them with concepts and prints at the highest possible quality, although the company's charges are affordable. Established in 2016, the company is located in Accra. Impressionist Prints competes for jobs in the local Ghanaian marketplace. It also has a record of getting jobs from some international organisations (Respondent B - Chief Executive Officer, Impressionist Prints - 12th December, 2023).

This study investigates how the two companies have managed their visual identity since their establishment. Scholars (Meggs, 2001; Meggs & Purvis, 2016; Olins, 1987) have suggested that establishing a strong visual identity through careful management can improve the overall identity and standing of a company, regardless of whether it is a big or small company. For that to happen, a lot will depend on whether those in charge of a company know what visual identity is, as well as the level of knowledge they have about visual identity and the proper management of visual identity. This study, therefore, investigates the visual identity knowledge and visual identity management practices of Acumen Designs and Impressionist Prints that have guaranteed their progressive development.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Corporate Identity

Scholars define corporate identity as the elements that distinguish and identify an organisation. It is the articulation of *what a corporate body (e.g. a company, or an organisation etc.) is*, including what the organisation stands for, what it does, and the way it goes about its activities (Foroudi et al., 2021; Tourky et al.,2017; Balmer, 2008). According to Kitchen et al. (2013) and Melewar et al. (2006), research over three decades has shown a wide variety of definitions of corporate identity. Melewar et al. (2006) state that initially, the definitions did look mainly at "the logo and other forms of visual symbolism used by an organisation", and defined such visual or graphic elements devised to represent an organisation as the sum total of corporate identity. Kitchen et al. (2013) corroborate this. Underscoring the above, Baker and Balmer (1997), Tourky et al. (2017) aver that for a long time, corporate identity was associated only with what is more appropriately called visual identification or visual identity.

The current position regarding corporate identity is that it extends beyond

the earlier view that limited it to visual or graphic cues. It is posited that in addition to (i) visual or graphic cues (i.e. visual identity), the coverage of corporate identity includes (ii) behaviour, (iii) corporate culture, and (iv) corporate communication, among other components. The argument is that all these components point to the identity of an organisation. Therefore, some argue that the concept of corporate identity has evolved. It is a broader phenomenon than previously thought, and it is multidisciplinary. Not only that, it also shows the concept of corporate identity as comprising both external and internal components (Skinner & Melewar 2018; Foroudi et al., 2021; Tourky et al., 2017; Otubanjo et al., 2008; Melewar et al., 2006; Melewar & Jenkins, 2002).

Each component contributes to shaping corporate identity, or the identity that people will associate with a corporate body. *Behaviour* refers to the behaviour of those in charge of an organisation (i.e. those in management positions), and the behaviour of other employees, as well as the organisation's general corporate behaviour. Some authors, for example, Foroudi et al. (2021), Tourky et al. (2017) have highlighted the important role of behaviour and its connection with the overall corporate identity of an organisation because people will judge an organisation by its actions and how its workers conduct themselves. Greyser et al. (2006) assert that behaviour by workers and/or those in charge of a corporate body that is considered inappropriate can adversely affect that organisation's identity. Appropriate behaviour, on the other hand, would create positive impressions in terms of the identity that people would associate with that organisation. *Corporate culture* alludes to organisationally shared values, philosophy, mission, principles etc. that drive the operation and activities of an organisation. It is clearly a component or dimension that defines the distinctive characteristics of an organisation. Tourky et al. (2017) argue that corporate culture is fundamental in terms of shaping the identity of an organisation; and it (corporate culture) can be credited as a strand that offers guide to corporate behaviour. The classic definition of *corporate communication* that many scholars often refer to is the one provided by Van Riel (1995). According to this definition, corporate communication is an instrument through which all consciously used forms of internal and external communication are harmonised effectively and efficiently with the intention of creating a favourable identity for an organisation in the minds of people (Van Riel, 1995). As can be deduced from the definition, it is vital that corporate communication is also handled properly, because it can

elevate or damage the way people think about an organisation, depending on whether the organisation handles its corporate communication properly or poorly. If corporate communication is handled poorly, the intention of creating a favourable identity for the organisation in the minds of people cannot be achieved.

Corporate identity overall is therefore very important (Foroudi et al. 2021; Tourky et al., 2017; Melewar et al., 2006; Schmidt, 1995), considering that having a positive and consistent identity can have a direct link to an organisation's success by shaping peoples' thoughts positively about the organisation. It has been argued that corporate identity, in its entirety, plays a pivotal role that addresses four questions, namely, "who you are, what you do, how you do it, and where you want to go" as an organisation (Melewar et al., 2017; Olins, 2002).

2.2 Visual Identity

Visual identity (or corporate visual identity) has been defined as the visual or graphic expressions of an organisation's essence and identity, often consisting of the corporate name, logo, corporate typography and corporate colour, among others (Foroudi et al., 2014: Tourky et al., 2017; Dowling, 1994; Foroudi et al., 2021; Philips et al., 2014; Drucker & McVarish, 2009; Van den Bosch, 2005; Tambani, 1999; Olins, 1987). Other scholars such as Meggs and Purvis (2016), Melewar et al. (2006), Simoes and Dibb (2008), Wheeler (2013), and Melewar and Saunders (2000) underline this position by indicating that visual identity is made up of elements such as the name of an organisation or company, its logo, corporate colours, the website design of an organisation, corporate photography, corporate videos and animation, corporate typography, corporate packaging, corporate wear or uniforms, corporate flyers, billboards, electronic and print ads, etc. of the brand or corporate body. Visual identity (referred to in some scholarly works also as corporate visual design or corporate design) is a vital component of corporate identity (Foroudi et al., 2021; Van den Bosch, 2005; Skinner & Melewar, 2018; Tourky et al.,2017; Simoes & Dibb, 2008; Myersen, 1996).

2.2.1 Importance of Visual Identity

Company names are important for many reasons. They can provide a starting point for creating brand personality (Klink & Athaide, 2011). They can help position a company in the minds of its target audiences and members of the general public (Kohli, 2002; Lupton, 2001; Ries &

Trout, 1981). They can also influence the judgment of potential clients and customers (Hillenbrand et al., 2013). Scholars, including, Foroudi et al. (2014), Kaur and Kaur (2019), Baker and Balmer (1997), Dowling (1994), Shi and Jiang (2022), Van Riel (1995), and Van den Bosch (2005) also point out that logos are important. For example, Foroudi et al. (2014) state that it is widely acknowledged that logos are important for companies and that a logo is an important company asset. Logos are used as 'badges' of identification by organisations (Dowling, 1994). An effective logo may evoke not only an emotional response but also make official corporate communication easier (Van Riel, 1995). In addition, Baker and Balmer, (1997) posit that a logo can act as a mark of quality, among other things. Kohli et al. (2002) have mentioned that logos are very important because apart from providing instant recognition, they help companies and organisations to transcend international boundaries and language barriers because of their "visual" character. Generally, it can be argued that logos play a significant role in corporate visual identity, potentially bringing great value to the company. Kaur and Kaur (2019), and Mollerup (1999) aver that a well-thought-out and well-designed logo can influence the perception of a brand in a positive way, leading to a positive consumer reception. Colour is also important; it can move people to respond (Ferrao, 2022; Jin et al., 2019; Labrecque & Milne, 2012; Dowling, 1994). According to Ferrao (2022), research has shown that colour plays a major role in helping people to recognise brands and organisations. Colour has the ability to create brand image, as well as attract consumers and shape their perception and purchase decisions (Ferrao, 2022; Akcay et al., 2012). It can also make people connect with certain feelings, and is a tool that can attract people's attention towards an organisation's visual identity (Ferrao, 2022; Hynes, 2009; Madden et al., 2000). Typography is an important instrument in visual identity. For instance, typography is employed to create logos as well as distinctive corporate documents, among others. The purposeful use of typographic elements in visual identity often helps to articulate consistency, uniqueness, and recognisability. It is worth emphasizing the point, therefore, that typography can also assist in visually making an organisation stand out and be noticed (Lelis et al., 2020; Henderson et al., 2004; Childers & Jass, 2002). In general, visual identity is considered very important to the extent that Foroudi et al. (2021), report that some scholars have described it as "arguably the most tangible facet of corporate identity". It is argued that possessing a positive visual identity is fundamental to the growth of a company (Melewar & Saunders, 2000).

2.2.2 Visual Identity Management

Effective management is necessary to reap the greatest benefits from visual identity. Many scholars echo this point. Regarding this point, Simoes and Dibb (2008), Van den Bosch (2005), and Schmidt (1995), to name a few, have asserted that the visual or graphic expressions of an organisation require management, given that they play an important role as vehicles for transmitting the visual dimensions of corporate identity to various audiences.

Overall, visual identity management has significant business implications, according to Foroudi et al. (2021), Schmitt et al. (1995), Schmidt (1995). When managed well, visual identity can significantly improve an organisation's chance of being able to establish the image it desires, help create an emotional connection with customers, unify a brand's messaging, make people instantly recognise the brand, thus boosting brand recognition and brand awareness, and build brand trust (Simoes & Dibb, 2008; Van den Bosch, 2005; Schmitt et al.,1995; Schmidt,1995; Meggs & Purvis, 2016; Drucker & McVarish, 2009; Melewar & Saunders, 2000).

3. Methodology

The research is qualitative. It employed case study, focusing on one animation creation company, Acumen Designs, and one design and print company, Impressionist Prints. The Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of the two companies formed the sample for the study. The purposive sampling method was employed to collect data from the two CEOs who head the management teams of Acumen Designs and Impressionist Prints. These people were selected because they could provide insights and information that would be useful for the study (i.e. insights and information that relate to visual identity management by Acumen Designs and Impressionist Prints). Interview was used as an instrument to collect relevant primary research data for the study. Regarding this, face-to-face interviews were conducted with the two CEOs. The interviews adopted a semi-structured approach to allow the researcher to be able to follow up on ideas, probe responses, and go beyond the stated questions. Qualitative content analysis was used as data analysis tool. The researcher obtained informed consent from the interviewees to address ethical concerns. The researcher ensured that the interviewees fully understood the purpose, methods, risks, and benefits of the study. The interviewees were informed that their identities would be hidden, to cushion them from potential risk implications. They were also

informed of their rights to withdraw at any point without penalty. In addition, pseudonyms were used to represent the names of the companies. After the data collection phase, the transcript was given to each interviewee to read through the transcribed information to make sure the information was an accurate reflection of what they intended to say. Each interviewee was provided with only the portion of the transcribed information relevant to their own interview. Permission was also sought from the interviewees before publishing the findings of the study for academic purposes.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings of the investigation revealed that those in charge of the two companies (i.e. Acumen Designs and Impressionist Prints) are knowledgeable about visual identity. The CEO of Acumen Designs spoke extensively about how beneficial it is to build a strong visual identity, asserting that a good visual identity design propels an organisation to "showcase uniqueness and add a competitive edge" that helps it stand out from the crowd. He explained that in a saturated market, a company's uniqueness can shift attention toward itself (the company). The CEO of Acumen Designs added that a consistent visual identity can build trust, and a well-recognised, consistent brand appearance can promote the idea that a company is dependable. Another point that the CEO of Acumen Designs made was that a consistent visual identity creates a sense of cohesiveness that makes it easier for audiences to remember a company. He also mentioned that growth and stability become feasible when a company's visual identity is well-defined. The viewpoint of the CEO of Acumen Designs is consistent with the position of scholars (Meggs, 2001; Van den Bosch, 2005; Meggs & Purvis, 2016; Drucker & McVarish, 2009; Mollerup, 1999) who posit that well managed corporate visual identity comes with numerous benefits.

Similarly, the CEO of Impressionist Prints spoke about how a company's visual identity effectively differentiates it. He stated that creating a consistent and effective visual identity can greatly impact a company's marketing efforts. He added that an effective visual identity conveyed consistently to the public can increase brand awareness and recognition. Citing the case of Apple company and its logo, the CEO of Impressionist Prints went on to explain that visual identity can trigger feelings and create an emotional connection or bond among clients towards a brand or company; not to

mention that an effective visual identity can differentiate a company from its competitors and give a strategic advantage in a market to the company. He added that by adhering consistently to a well-defined visual identity, a company ensures coherence and continuity in its marketing messages. This is confirmed by scholars (Foroudi et al., 2014; Van den Bosch, 2005; Melewar & Saunders, 2000; Relph-Knight, 1996).

Another important finding of the study was that those in charge of Acumen Designs have taken steps to ensure the professional rendering of visual identity elements made up of the company name, logo, corporate typography, among others. To demonstrate the commitment of those in charge of Acumen Designs, regarding this matter, a visual identity guide had already been created for the company. This visual identity guide is used by the company as a yardstick to ensure that the company's visual identity is communicated consistently. At Impressionist Prints, the story was similar. As was the case at Acumen Designs, the professional rendering of the company's visual identity guide was available. Consequently, the visual identities of the two companies (from items such as business cards, letterheads, invoices, and receipts, as well as their souvenirs, their signage, and generally across all their marketing communication channels) show ample evidence of consistency.

It was also found that no scientific investigation has been conducted by those in charge of Acumen Designs, in connection with the company's visual identity efforts, and research has also not been done by those managing Impressionist Prints.

While consistency could be seen in the communication of the visual identity of each of the two companies because of the existence of their respective visual identity guides, a significant problem exists. The problem is that the absence of scientific investigation to elicit feedback, has resulted in a situation where those in charge of Acumen Designs and Impressionist Prints cannot be certain if their visual identity management efforts have, for example,

- boosted awareness of their brands among the public and increased their companies' profiles (and if so, to what extent)
- helped to build emotional connection with customers (and if so, to what extent)

- helped to build brand trust for their companies (and if so, to what extent).

The three points mentioned are among the benefits that are likely to accrue to a company that takes its visual identity management activities seriously, without skipping anything important.

In addition, the absence of research means the two companies have no research findings to help them push further any advantage(s) their visual identity efforts might be yielding. In the same way, they do not have any research findings to also remedy or correct visual identity problems that might be afflicting the companies (in a subtle and non-glaring manner). Such problems, if they exist, might continue to afflict and adversely affect the companies. That would be the case in such a situation: that is until the problem grows bigger and perhaps becomes conspicuous. By which time a lot of harm might have been done. Van den Bosch (2005) has argued the need for constant research in corporate visual identity for better management output.

5. Conclusions

Visual identity is key to the growth of organisations. It is Important that those in charge of organisations harness and utilise visual identity to assist their organisations to develop and flourish. This study revealed that the CEOs of the two companies studied possess admirable knowledge of visual identity. The fact that the CEOs of two small-scale companies in Ghana have that much knowledge about visual identity and have taken some steps to ensure the management of their companies' visual identity deserves commendation. The study praises the leaders of both companies for knowing so much about visual identity. However, the study also revealed that the companies did not use research, and critical feedback that can emerge from research, to support earlier actions the companies had taken to assist their visual identity efforts. The study recommends that they persist in updating their visual identity knowledge and bolstering their visual identity management practices through regular research and monitoring. It is also hoped that there will be more research on visual identity and visual identity management among organisations in Ghana, so that the findings

will enrich scholarship and inform practitioners. That way, there can be a significant contribution that can come from the angle of visual identity to assist the growth of corporate identity knowledge and practice in Ghana.

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