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Narrative dimensions for the design of contemporary visual identities

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At the end of the 20th century, the so-called new media allowed a large quantity of information to move around within innumerable interconnected nodes. Non-conventional narratives and hyper-novels emerge, in which the story unfolding possibilities are virtually infinite and where the reader becomes an interactive participant. Contemporary brands also embrace a level of flexibility that allows them to develop and closely accompany a constantly evolving and participatory world. Following the assumption that a brand is a live construction (Neumeier, 2006), the objective of this ongoing research is to identify how contemporary brands approach narrative through their logos. The method consisted of a qualitative hermeneutical content analysis of dozens of contemporary visual identities. The structural/discourse elements were grouped, a code book was created and an organising matrix was created to allow the emergence of six main dimensions of visual identity narrative, with the extended benefit of increasing brand engagement and meaningful brand experiences by designing the most structurally appropriate visual storytelling. If in the past brands' main goal was to be recognised by their audiences, currently brands are mostly focused on creating meaningful experiences through the active involvement of their audiences.

Keywords: Narrative dimensions, brand design, visual identity, contemporary brands

1   Introduction

Mieke Bal argues on how narrative is "the most wide-spread semiotic mode of expression" (2016, p. 101), commending its social relevance, as it is pervasive to most human communication techniques. For that reason, the author states that looking at narrative in the different sorts of media can contribute to our understanding both of culture and cultural differences. In fact, narratives are essential for humans to learn about the world and about themselves and to exchange all sorts of information and knowledge:

Narrative is the primary way through which humans organise their experiences into temporally meaningful episodes (...) narrative is both a mode of reasoning and a mode of representation (Richardson, 1990, p. 118).

Given its human centrality and applicability, narrative has long been associated to design. Design Thinking approaches heavily rely on the power of narratives and storytelling for empathising purposes (Kankainen *et al.,* 2005; Hellström, 2007) and it is acknowledged that narrative has greater potential if it is to be used "beyond the experiential aspect of briefing" (Fritsch *et al.,* 2007, p. 6). For example, interior designers and architects use spatial narratives to tell a story about a place, including a predefined point of departure, a specific route, and a previsible end point, to "reflect the practices that make a place" (Ridge, Lafreniere & Nesbit, 2013, 178). Tools such as walkthroughs, storyboards, scenarios, user diaries, archetypes, personas, customer journeys, user stories and epics all lean on narratives for creatives, planners, developers and production teams to organise, systematise and represent insights, but also to anticipate future needs and contexts (Wright & McCarthy, 2010, p. 178).

> The ability of narratives to communicate ideas and to stimulate imagination allows design to go beyond functional purposes and opens new perspectives to imagine, discuss and propose scenarios for the future (Grimaldi, Fokkinga & Ocnarescu, 2013, p. 201).

In fact, traditionally, designers use narratives to start telling a story about a design artifact way before the artifact reaches the audience/user (Ocnarescu, 2012). Likewise, brand designers anticipate a great deal of storytelling, many of which can be experienced by the audiences in every interaction these have with the brands, from adverts to packaging. Hence the undiscussable importance of narrative for brands, mostly when in every interaction human beings have with brands, some small elements that one may think do not tell a story, are, in fact, telling more than one can expect. That shall be the case of logos in contemporary visual identities, where a set of multiple variations is designed/created, expanding the limits of the story being told.

The main objective of this ongoing research is to identify how contemporary brands approach narrative through their logos, and to what extent they renunciate the traditionally consistent and immutable storytelling. Following the assumption that a brand is a live construction (Neumeier, 2006), and grounded on Zadeh's (1996) idea that natural language is not easily translated into the absolute and dichotomic terms of True or False, or 0 and 1, in this research we assume that contemporary brands' narratives include the various states in between each of the binary options.

Thus, the research question guiding this research is: *What are the narrative dimensions structuring the design of brands' visual identities?*

2   Defining narrative

The first considerations on narrative (structure, creation, its effect on audiences) go back to the times of Aristotle (1987) and have been more recently developed by European structuralists (such as Seymour Chatman, Gérard de Genette) and Russian formalists (Roman Jakobson), but also by the futurist works advanced in

many different domains of human sciences (fine arts, literary studies, narratology, film studies, architecture) and by contemporary psychology research and practice. Thus, narrative, as a concept, is (and will be) open to diverse interpretations, mainly because it is so relevant in everyday practice and, therefore, impactful in both many different disciplines and in personal and professional approaches. It is, therefore, rather difficult to find a single definition but, according to Berger's (1997) review, narrative includes the description of a sequence of events, throughout a time period and, for Murray (1998), action is the vital element because it introduces change. Chatman (1978) explains that a narrative has two components: a *story*, that encompasses the content related to actions, happenings, characters and items of setting, and a *discourse*, which defines the means by which the content is communicated to the audiences. The story comprises the WHAT in a narrative (i.e. the substance), whilst the discourse comprehends the HOW (i.e. the form). Hence, the minimum WHAT-related elements are the existence of characters, their depiction/details, the action taking place, the location and spatiality, and the story resolution and elicitation of emotions (Abbott, 2008), whilst other frequent aspects to consider as part of a narrative are HOW-related elements such as the duration of the sequence of events that constitutes a plot, the order and frequency of the events (Genette, 1980), the role of the narrator, and the narrative genre (Berger, 1997). Chatman (1978) also distinguishes narrative events in terms of their hierarchy, explaining that classical narrative uses mostly major events (*kernels*) that, working as structure nodes, advance the plot by raising and answering questions and cannot be deleted without damaging the narrative logic. On the other hand, minor events (*satellites*) are created to add details to kernels and some can be eliminated (or not even created) without affecting the plot.

The sequential aspect attached to action seems to be of utmost relevance and, alongside the story resolution being reached, it is what distinguishes narratives from non-narratives (Berger, 1997). With an illustrated book the reader is given the narrative's representational details in the textual resources, which are accompanied by images that depict only one (or part of an) action, usually capturing a single moment in time. Hence, traditionally, with the exception of comic strips made up of frames capturing different moments in time, drawings, paintings, photos and all sorts of stand-alone static imagery are not understood as having narrative content (idem), seemingly contradicting what others define as visual narratives.

2.1   Visual narratives
Few authors have been dedicating their efforts and research to the definition of visual narrative (VN). Murray (1995) defines narrative illustration as the pictorial representation of one or more events that, taking place through a period of time, cause some sort of change in one or more characters. Neil Cohn (2013) has been developing the theory of Visual Narrative Grammar, but very much focused on comic strips, hence a sequence of images defined by panel borders simultaneously displayed in the same medium and concerned with a navigational component that

explicitly tells the audience where to start and how to progress through the sequence.

Pimenta and Poovaiah (2010) summarise VN as a visual that essentially and explicitly tells a story. The authors organise VN into three major types:

- *Static Visual Narratives*, in which the visual is fixed on the surface of the medium and the spectator, who has prior knowledge of the story (usually due to the support of other kinds of narrative, such as text) can decide the speed and sequence of viewing (precisely what Berger calls non-narratives), providing as examples of this category comics strips, picture books, narrative scrolls, infographics, among others.
- *Dynamic Visual Narratives*, in which visuals are replaced and succeed at the same pace, being both the speed of viewing and the sequence of visuals predetermined by the author/creator and where the audience does not need to know the story prior to viewing. Examples of these are animation, movies and puppet shows.
- *Interactive Visual Narratives*, in which visuals appear to be fixed but can be replaced by other visuals through a triggering feature, where the audience may need or not prior knowledge of the story, as in some cases the viewer decides how the narrative evolves, hence with the possibility of manipulating both the story contents and its sequence and form. Examples would be interactive e-books and interactive games, where AI and augmented reality can play a part.

Hence, visual narratives do not differ much from text-based ones: they tell a story through other sorts of graphic elements, which replace the written (or spoken) word, still providing the audience with the idea of continuity.

3   Postmodern times

Postmodernism recognises that human perception and interaction are necessarily subjective and that constant change, ubiquity and mobility are the *status quo*. At the end of the 20th century, the so-called *new media* allowed a large quantity of information to move around within innumerable interconnected nodes. Hypertextuality emerges in its open-ended and ever-developing fashion (Riffaterre, 1994). By the end of last century, some authors propose non-conventional narratives, hyper-novels in which the story unfolding possibilities are virtually infinite and where the reader becomes an interactive participant with increased ability to take part in the narrative, which becomes, as life, "a complex, heterogeneous assemblage" (Cotrupi, 1991, p. 280).

Transmedia storytelling and hybrid narratives emerge with the new century. Scolari (2013) argues that, besides allowing the expansion and distribution of contents throughout different platforms, they also facilitate the real-time participation and involvement of audiences in the construction of the narrative itself. Design and use/fruition time fuse into a single simultaneous moment, as described by Fischer and Herrmann (2015), following a meta-design approach which aims at encouraging designers to support users/audiences as active and creative contributors. With such configuration, narratives evolve and expand, allowing different meanings, creation times, media and authors, becoming more and more distant from its traditional linearity and loyalty to the original plot, clearly embracing a more fluid and organic

philosophy, giving room to the development of cognitive features and meaningful/emotional experiences.

3.1 Postmodern brands

According to Dubberly (2008, p. 2), current design practice has been adopting and replicating such postmodern "organic-systems ethos" and similar changes have been taking place within the domain of brand design. From a modernism perspective, brands have been known to ease recognition due to the implementation of consistent communication and design strategies. By the end of last century, the brand was commonly defined through rational statements: classic authors used to define a brand by grounding it on its products/services, and with the main function of differentiating these from their competitors' (Kotler, 1981; Aaker, 1991; Al Ries, 1993). However, contributions to the neurosciences – namely with Damásio's work (1995) on the relevance of emotions in decision-making processes – changed the way we perceive and conceive the world of brands. In fact, contemporary authors such as Lindstrom (2007), Gobé (2010), Batey (2016), Troiano (2017), among others, consider the brand as an emotional asset, a "gut feeling" (Neumeier, 2006, p. 2), that facilitates the involvement of audiences and, through that, build their preferences systems.

3.2 Brand storytelling

A brand can only be memorised when it becomes part of its audiences' lives and stories. For that reason, brands and their associated "experiences, that are memorable or engaging, are mentally structured in narrative form by the user (Grimaldi, Fokkinga & Ocnarescu, 2013, p. 201). Brand storytelling has been extensively explored by brand practitioners and academics. It consists of a communication strategy aiming at sharing knowledge and creating bonds, using either a factual or fictitious narrative to connect the brand to its audiences, linking the brand's values to the ones it shares with its customers. Accordingly, Fog, Budtz and Baris agree that "storytelling becomes an effective tool for creating an entire brand concept: one that stays with us, because it touches our emotions" (2003, p. 47). When it comes to traditional popular stories circulating at a global scale, brands tend to create adapted versions by assimilating local idiosyncrasies that define the different cultures and communities (Rogojinaru, 2011). Brand storytelling is, therefore, subject to flexible localisation strategies. As a consequence, when the audiences are personally involved in the storytelling process, they get to better understand the values embedded in the narratives, incorporating them due to the increased and eased identification (Batey, 2016).

In contemporary brands, the storytelling hero is decreasingly the brand itself (which used to push its attributes) and is increasingly being embodied by the brands' audiences (who are pulled by the brand that merely guides them). Therefore, brands that adapt to the context in which they operate and where they know their audiences will be, embrace a level of flexibility that allows them to develop and closely accompany a constantly evolving world, hence disregarding the need of a strictly consistent approach (Lelis, 2019).

3.3   Brands in mutation

In the early 2000s, Kreutz (2001, 2005) identified two main visual brand identity systems: one where she would group brands labelled as *Conventional*, which main characteristics are standardisation, linear progress and fixedness, and another one that the author categorised as *Non-Conventional* or *Mutant*, where brands would present as multimodal, plural, fragmented and heterogeneous – postmodern. This very approach has also been researched by other authors, although recurring to different labels: *flexible* (Campos, 2007; Hewitt, 2008), *variable* (Kopp, 2002), *fluid* (Lapetino, 2011); *dynamic* (Felsing, 2010; Nascimento & Kosminsky, 2012; van Nes, 2012), *liquid* (Elali, Keiser & Odag, 2012), *elastic* (Muscianisi, 2017).

Nevertheless, Kreutz (2018) explains her preference towards the adjective "Mutant": it was due to the clash between 21st Century living generations, with emerging technologies and distinct systems of perception and sense making. The world was changing, but the word mutation was still associated to aberration and anomaly, when in fact, all the evolution in Earth has been intimately linked to biological mutations and ecosystem adaptations. Humans are naturally mutant beings in their capacity to self-reinvent and self-manage, as described by Maturana and Varela (1997) when they introduced the concept of *autopoiesis*. Interestingly, for Dubberly (2008) design shares with biology a focus on information flow, on networks of actors operating at many levels, and exchanging the information needed to balance and develop communities and systems. Design promotes mutation.

Within the Mutant group Kreutz found that these could be split into two visual identity categories: *Programmed*, where brands would respond to pre-established, scheduled or fixed in time variations (Figure 1), and *Poetic*, where brands can, potentially, be completely free of rules, only following the designer's creative and imaginative intent, in close communion with the audiences, constantly interacting with the brand (Kreutz, 2005) (Figure 2).
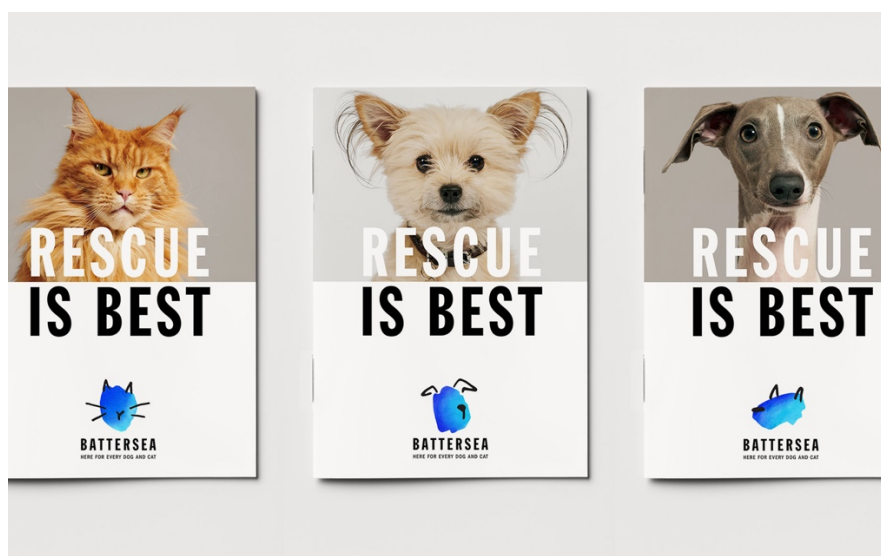

Figure 1. Battersea, a London-based animal rescue centre, uses a collection of ten hand-drawn watercolour dogs and cats (designed by Pentagram).
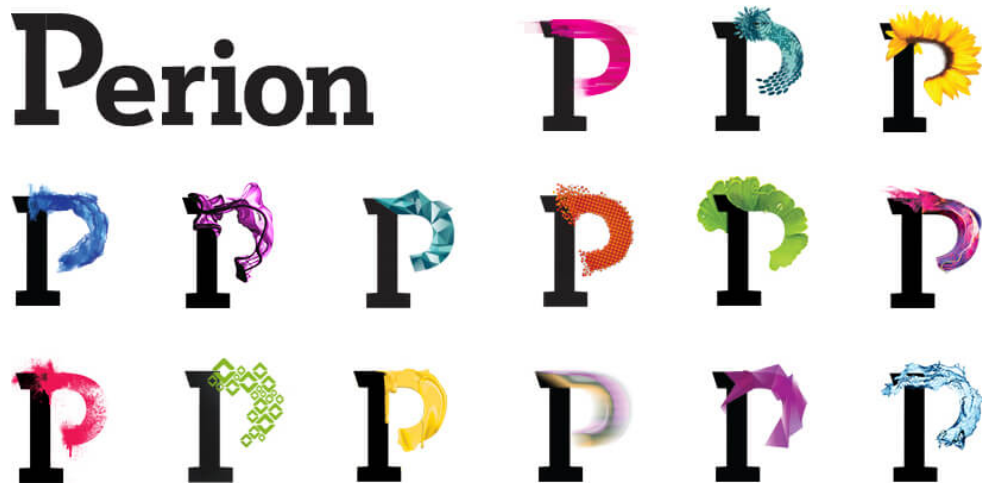
Figure 2. Perion invested in a "living P", an ever-changing symbol, open to infinite visual possibilities (designed by Ro&Co).

3.4 On brand poetics

Kreutz and Heck (2016) mention that Jakobson's poetic function of language, frequently used by brands in advertising, is a way of enticing the audience. Intensifying emotions as the authentic source of aesthetic experience is at the very nature of poetry. Shelley (2012) defines poetry as "the expression of the Imagination" and, according to Richard Rorty, a contemporary American pragmatist, for the romantics it is the poet (broadly speaking, the imaginative genius), who prevents humans to fall into communication finitude. The author states that:

> We should try to think of imagination not as a faculty that generates mental images but as the ability to change social practices by proposing advantageous new uses of marks and noises. To be imaginative, as opposed to being merely fantastical, one must both do something new and be lucky enough to have that novelty adopted by one's fellows – incorporated into their ways of doing things. […] On the pragmatist view I am putting forward, what we call "increased knowledge" should not be thought of as increased access to the Real, but as increased ability to do things – to take part in social practices that make possible richer and fuller human lives (Rorty, 2007, pp. 107-108).

Such openness to new communication opportunities would expectedly have more or less impact on postmodern brands' narratives and corresponding visual discourse. In fact, this rising ability to poetically do things is increasingly being embraced by contemporary visual identities, mostly through the diversification of visual-based expression, or via the combination of visuals with other sensorial modes. Therefore, it seems appropriate to understand visual identity narrative (VIN) in the context of these more or less poetic orientations in branding.

4   A tentative model for Visual Identity Narrative

The working framework is grounded on Lotfi Zadeh's Fuzzy Logic (1996), which supports approximate modes of thinking rather than exact ones, acknowledging the virtues of imprecision, very much common in human life complexities. Therefore, with a focus on narrative discourse and form, HOW-related elements explained through discrete labelling units – such as the type of narrator and the narrative genre – will not be considered.

Hence, as a frame of reference underpinning the definition of VIN, this research proposes the following, as depicted in Figure 3:

- *Static visual narrative* (or non-narrative) does not fully apply to Poetic VI, where logo variations and potential hypertextuality are allowed and welcome. This sort of visual narrative would easily apply to Conventional brands, in some cases being adopted by Programmed brands.
- The cases in which each logo variation can be replaced by a succeeding one at a regular/irregular pace would fall within the scope of *dynamic visual narratives*,
- Cases relying in a triggering feature, which can be predetermined and mechanical or unforeseen and poetic, allow the active participation of those that are no longer mere spectators – but mostly expectant audiences, now empowered with the capacity to co-design the logo and its VI – follow the characteristics of *interactive visual narratives*.
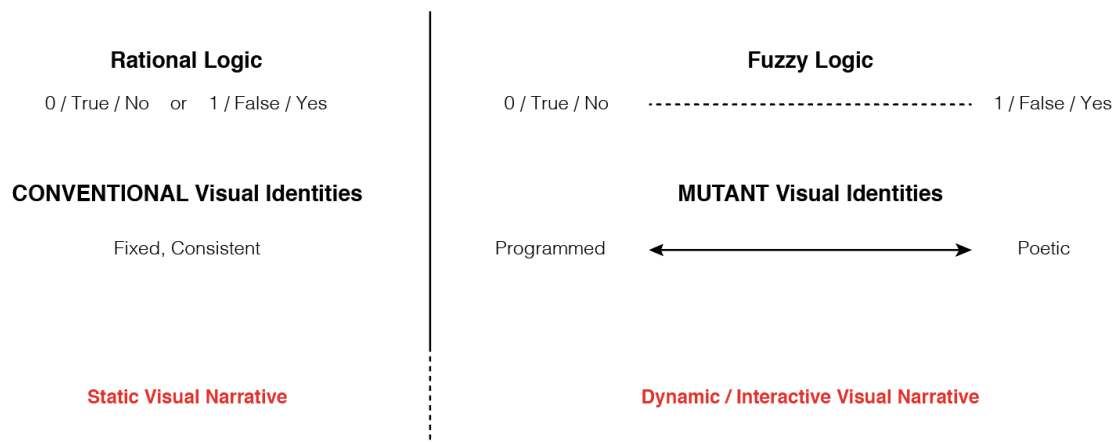

Figure 3. Proposed framing model of Visual Identity Narrative.

5   Method

This research followed an inductive reasoning, within the interpretive paradigm, aiming at adopting a post-structuralist perspective in order to deal with puzzling facts that emerged in the recent years, while both researchers had encounters with empirical phenomena that were not being explained by the existing range of theories, typically structuralist by nature. Therefore, the 'best' explanation among many other possibilities was chosen with the purpose of organising the complexity of the topic, or finding clarity in the identified problematic.

The method consisted of a qualitative hermeneutical content analysis. Because the discursive dimensions defining narrative in the context of visual identity (VI) have not been identified, the utmost goal was the definition of such dimensions within the context of contemporary brands, following the overall definitions of narrative and visual narrative found in the literature presented above, but also insights from previous works in this subject (Leitão, Lelis & Mealha, 2014a, 2014b).

Although this approach had no intention to generate a precise labelling or classification system and moves beyond the self-sufficient ideals of structuralism, each dimension is explained through the use of binary oppositions, as in a semantic differential. This allows the conceptualisation of a mapping tool where VIN can be conceived somewhere (anywhere) between two polar positions.

The starting point was grounded on the analysis of a wide range of brands (80+) conducted by the researchers throughout the years (Kreutz, 2001, 2005, 2009, 2018; Kreutz & Arévalo, 2013; Leitão, Lelis & Mealha, 2014a, 2014b; Leitão, Lelis & Mealha, 2015; Kreutz & Heck, 2016; Lelis 2019).

From these, 10 brands were shortlisted for analysis, all of them widely acknowledged as having dynamic visual identities (or allowing dynamic graphic ventures) and that were collected from the most up-to-date informal online resources of specialist knowledge (Underconsideration and The Branding Source websites) or from the online public and published portfolios of major communication agencies (e.g. Pentagram, Wolff Olins, among others). This guaranteed a minimum of credibility in both the strategic aspects and the design concerns of such brands. The 10 brands were Apple, City of Melbourne, Google, Melissa, MTV, NYC, OCAD University, Oi, Rio 450 and Russia, hence representing a wide range of sectors (ICT, Tourism, Fashion, Entertainment/Culture, Education and Telecommunications).

Then, by elaborating on the work of Leitão, Lelis and Mealha (2014a, 2014b) and using the reviewed literature on literary narrative and visual narrative, the minimum structural requirements for logos to be considered a narrative (or narrative containers) were identified, originating a preliminary code book with a large number of descriptors of structural/discourse elements (Figure 4). These were polished (in the sense in which related/similar categories were grouped and, whenever possible, reduced to one), and an organising matrix was created (Table 1), showcasing the emergence of six dimensions, their bi-polarities and their corresponding (and opposing) descriptions.
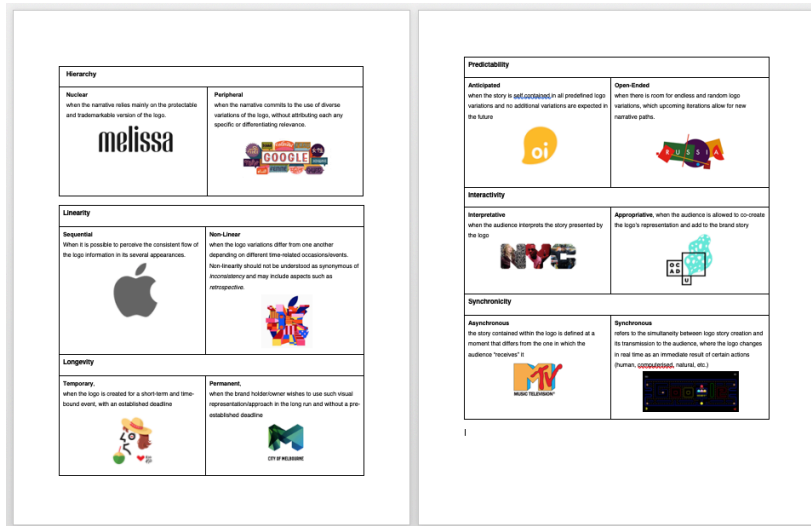
Figure 4. The 10 shortlisted used in the code book

Table 1. Conceptual organising matrix

Discourse elements of narrative	Dimensions of VIN	Analysis-led Semantic Differential		
Hierarchy of events	Hierarchy	Nuclear		Peripheral
		The narrative relies mainly/repeatedly on the protectable and trademarkable version of the logo.	I I I I I I I I I I I I	The narrative commits to the use of diverse variations of the logo, without attributing each any specific or differentiating relevance.
Sequence and order of events	Linearity	Sequential		Non-linear
		It is possible to perceive the consistent flow of the logo's information in its several appearances.	I I I I I I I I I I I I	The logo variations differ from one another depending on different occasions/events.
Duration and frequency of events	Longevity	Permanent		Transitory
		The brand wishes to use such visual representation or approach in the long run and without a pre-established deadline.	I I I I I I I I I I I I	The brand's logo is created for a short-term and time-bound event, with an established deadline.
Plot strategy	Predictability	Anticipated		Open-ended
		The narrative is self contained in all predefined logo variations and no additional variations are expected in the future	I I I I I I I I I I I I	The narrative is explored through endless and random logo variations, which upcoming iterations allow for new paths.
Hypertextuality	Interactivity	Interpretative		Appropriative
		The audience interprets the story presented by the logo	I I I I I I I I I I I I	The audience co-creates the logo's representation and adds to the brand story.
Creativity time	Synchronicity	Asynchronous		Synchronous
		The narrative contained within the logo is created at a moment that differs from the one in which the audience "receives" it	I I I I I I I I I I I I	The narrative contained within the logo is co-created or changed in real time as an immediate result of audiences' interventions

6   Narrative dimensions in contemporary visual identities

The presented dimensions were created to simplify the immense corpus on narrative theory, combining it with the scarce literature on visual narratives and intersecting it with the notions of brand storytelling and the current practice of visual identity design. The main objective was the proposal of the pivotal discursive dimensions of VIN.

6.1 Hierarchy

Ranging from *Nuclear* to *Peripheral*, this dimension describes the dependency relation between the trademarkable version of a logo and its possible variations. Nuclear cases are those where the narrative relies mainly (or uniquely) on the protectable version, such as IBM. Peripheral are the ones where the narrative commits to the use of diverse variations of the logo, without attributing each any specific or differentiating relevance, like Google, with its thousands of Doodles. However, it is expected that all brands will have a nuclear version, for trademarking purposes.

6.2 Linearity

Intimately related to Hierarchy, Linearity refers to the perception of sequence the logo usage and application provides the audiences with, ranging from *Sequential* to *Non-Linear*. Sequential cases are those where it is possible to perceive the consistent flow of the logo's information in its several appearances. Usually, nuclear approaches tend to follow a sequential or programmed VIN. Non-Linear cases occur when the logo variations differ from one another depending on different occasions or events (time-related or not), again, being Google a good example. However, non-linearity should not be understood as synonymous of inconsistency and it may include aspects such as retrospective, *analepsis*, *prolepsis*.

6.3 Longevity

This dimension ranges from *Permanent* to *Temporary*. Permanent refers to the time duration of the narrative associated to a specific visual identity; in others words, for how long will the logo be telling its story. These cases are those when the brand's visual representation lasts for a long period, without having a pre-established deadline. As an example, we could point to IBM, which basic design has remained unchanged since 1972. Temporary cases are those of a brand's logo created for a short-term and time-bound event, with an established deadline, such as the case of Apple, with its Special Event in October 2018, which, for the first time, used dozens of different Apple logos featuring unique artwork, exclusively to promote the event.

6.4 Predictability

As in a script-based plot, visual identities play with archetypes and narrative structures that can be more or less expectable, mostly when it comes to their story resolution, allowing both finite and incalculable versions, hence ranging from *Anticipated* to *Open-Ended*. Anticipated cases occur when the story is self-contained in all predefined logo variations and no additional variations are foreseeable in the future; this would be the case of MIT Media Lab, which dynamic visual identity, designed by Michael Bierut (Pentagram), presents its 23 research groups with their own logos deriving from the MIT Media Lab one. Open-Ended involve visual identities that acknowledge room for endless and random logo variations, which upcoming iterations allow for new organic narrative paths. Google is, in this case, the best example, where each one of its Doodles bring a great level of unpredictability, namely when it comes to the Doodle4Google contest, in which students from nursery to last grades of secondary/high school can submit their Google logo versions.

6.5 Interactivity

Grounded on hypertextuality potential of creating a network of several narrative pathways, this dimension spreads from *Interpretative* to *Appropriative*, referring to different possible levels of interaction between the brand's logo and the audiences. Interpretative visual identities are the ones in which the audience interprets the narrative presented by the logo without intervening in it, as in IBM, MIT Media Lab and in most brands' logos. Appropriative cases are those in which the audience co-creates the logo's representation or adds visual elements to it. This can happen both by invitation, strategically defined by the brand that welcomes this sort of collaboration, or as both a positive or negative manifestation that comes from the public and in which cases the brand has little will or control. The former can be exemplified by OCAD University (Ontario College of Art and Design) whose visual identity, created by Bruce Mau Design, is based on black-and-white modular frames to hold examples of actual student art and design work, being the students responsible for the integration of their own materials in the logo. The latter can range from passionate appropriations (such as the unofficial screen wallpapers using Apple's logo in complementary ways), or anti-branding appropriations, as in the case of BP's logo.

6.6 Synchronicity

This dimension refers to the alignment between the time of creation of the narrative (design time) and the time of reception of the narrative (use time) that can be misaligned or *Asynchronous*, or totally aligned, hence *Synchronous*. Therefore, Asynchronous cases are those in which the narrative contained within the logo is defined at a moment that differs (because it is previous) from the one in which the audience "receives" it. Most nuclear cases fall within this approach. Synchronous refers to the simultaneity between the logo's story creation and its transmission to the audience, where the logo changes in real time as an immediate result of certain actions (human – by intervention of both designer and/or audiences – computerised, natural, etc.). An example (of approximate synchronicity) is Nordkyn's visual identity, created by Neue Design Studio. Nordkyn is an arctic cold peninsula in Norway, where its extreme weather conditions play a huge role on the region's attractiveness from a touristic point of view. To represent such essence, the studio combined nature-based information with technology, developing a logo generator that allows the region's website to update the logo every five minutes, accurately representing the exact weather conditions of that particular moment according to the data constantly received from the Norwegian Meteorological Institute. Other synchronous examples include gamified logos, such as the Google Doodle created to celebrate Pacman's 30th anniversary.

7 The six dimensions within the fuzzy logic of Dynamic/Interactive VN

In order to better visualise how the six dimensions of VIN could be used to analyse and benchmark a brand's visual identity against, for example, its competitors, the authors created a representative visual map of contemporary dynamic place/destination brands considering their narrative choices and their position within

the fuzzy-logic spectrum of Mutant Visual Identities. For this exercise, official sources of brand application were consulted (brand/company website, brand manuals and standards and published/available social practices).

It was observed that the polar characteristics of the six dimensions that occupy the left-hand side of Table 1 are strongly related with Programmed VIs. In fact, adjectives such as *nuclear, sequential, permanent, anticipated, interpretative* and *asynchronous* are associated to the very idea of organisation, prediction and consistency, whereas qualifiers such as *peripheral, non-linear, transitory, open-ended, appropriative* and *synchronous* transport the reader to a context of instantaneous and multi-directional complexity, which is the extreme definition of a Poetic VIs (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Using the six Dimensions of VIN to map place/destination brands

Therefore, this research suggests as well that the six dimensions of VIN can be used to create and explore new dynamic VIs, and explain existing ones, either by informing or by being grounded on the Mutant Visual Identities framework (Figure 6) as per the proposed framing model of Visual Identity Narrative (Figure 3).
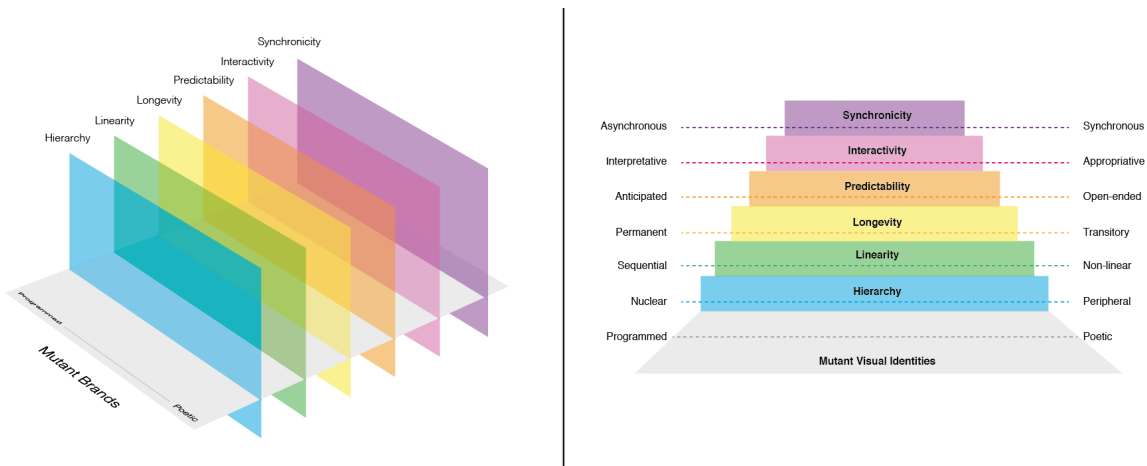
Figure 6. The six Dimensions of VIN and the Mutant Visual Identities framework

8   Discussion

It is important to emphasise that, within this framework, no pole or side of the semantic differential is meant to be understood as a better or preferable narrative approach as opposed to the other. Starting from each dimension and their qualitative elements of analysis, designers will be equipped to better assess and plan (or replan) a brand's visual identity according to its specific context. Notwithstanding, the poles on the same side of a poetic visual identity approach seem to rely on a democratised use of peripheral visual elements, varying in sequence according to their needs, following a swift and short-term kind of exposure hence increasingly unpredictable, especially if the audiences are given the opportunity to intervene, in real-time, on the spot.

As per the fuzzy logic framework, each VIN should be analysed and represented in terms of fuzzy sets, where each pole is always the crispiest possibility, but in between them one will find unclear sets, for which designers will try to find a nominal category – such as, for dimension Longevity, Less Permanent, Almost Permanent, Not Permanent or Transitory, Somehow Transitory, Very Transitory – and even micro fuzzy sets in between those categories, for the cases in which objective classification can be detrimental.

While it is clear that mobility and mutability is part of the way humans currently live it is not a good idea to adjust a brand's VIN every time a new trend emerges, without a contextual critical analysis. Surely design possibilities evolve thanks to the constant development of technology, and brand design is likely to become even more exciting in the years ahead. Throughout the history of design, many different trends were brought to scene, and yet they were not all necessarily good. An absolutely poetic approach may not suit all brands and all audiences.

9   Concluding remarks

By looking into the form/discourse of VIN, the answer to the proposed research question *What are the narrative dimensions structuring the design of brands' visual*

identities? is achieved with the identification of six VIN dimensions: Hierarchy, Linearity, Longevity, Predictability, Interactivity and Synchronicity, all structural and vital elements in a contemporary visual identity narrative. Therefore, this research provides insights for designers to look at how visual identities can be used to successfully support the brand storytelling, establishing or maintaining customer loyalty via synchronous or asynchronous practices, linear or non-linear stories, interpretative or appropriative approaches that last for longer or shorter periods and that can surprise more or less their audiences.

If in the past brands' main goal was to be recognised by their audiences, currently brands are mostly focused on creating meaningful experiences through the active involvement of their audiences, imaginative geniuses with an increased ability to do things. In a time where younger generations are becoming increasingly aware of and sensible toward societal issues, brands that augment their audience's ability to do things with their logos (which used to be a finished, untouchable and proprietary resource, and is becoming an always open-to-creativity canvas) may well be the ones that most successfully establish stronger emotional bonds with the public, by making possible richer and fuller human lives. A brand logo can hopefully be admitted as an element that can serve many other purposes than the mere and traditional identification one: it can, in fact, with a well thought structural discourse, be a gold mine of semantic and relational opportunities.

This paper is, therefore, a contribution to the knowledge of how just one of the many elements that form a brand (its visual identity, namely its logo), can still be conceived as a useful resource with so many other possibilities beyond the conventionally functional ones. And whilst some significant research in brand storytelling has already been done, most of it looks at the brand in its whole or uses one of the brand's intangible elements as frame of analysis (its culture or personality, for example, great assets for the development of representational and informational components of narrative), but no studies have considered the tangible and highly interactive element that the logo is, and how relevant it can be as a contributor and container of narratives itself.

So far, the value of this research resides in the identification and definition of the six main narrative dimensions of logos in contemporary brands, with the potential to allow future developments on a heuristic mapping and benchmark-led tool for a) better aligning the creative brief with the client's needs, and b) the extended benefit of increasing brand engagement and meaningful brand experiences by designing the most structurally appropriate visual storytelling strategy.

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