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Could The Adoption of Flexible Identity Systems by some Contemporary Designers Have Any Enduring Influence on the Field of Brand Identity Design?

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The first decade of the 21st century has seen the emergence of a new phenomenon within the field of brand identity design. The flexible brand identity has precedents in the tyre manufacturer Michelin's *Bibendum* or *Michelin Man* mascot conceived in 1898 [1] and Wolff Olins' identity for Hadfields Paint in 1969 (Van Den Bergh, 2009) but is widely recognised to have arrived in 1981 in the form of a logo [fig. 1] for the, then newly-founded, music channel MTV (Rawsthorn, 2007) (Burgoyne, 2009) (Romanos, 2010, p.18). From this point, an in increase in the number of identities with flexible properties has taken place, with a sharp acceleration during the 00's marked by the launches of the hugely publicised London 2012 Olympics logo in 2007, the rise of Google Doodles [2] and other high profile identities designed for clients such as Aol (2009), the Australian city of Melbourne (2009) and the Brooklyn Museum (2004).
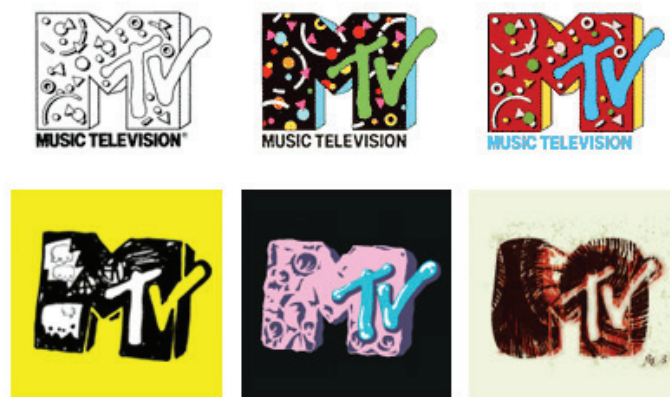

Fig. 1

[1] "First created in 1898 by the imagination of the Michelin brothers and the paintbrush of the talented poster artist D'Galop, alias Marius Rossillon, the Michelin Man was immediately a great success. Depending on the period and current tire innovations, he evolves to remain always in phase with his time." (Michelin.com : 2010)

[2] Google Doodles refer to the occasionally displayed bespoke Google logos which appear on the homepage to mark events and public holidays. 5 Google doodles were displayed on the Google home page during 1999 compared to 197 a decade later in 2009. (Google, 2010)

The flexible brand identity model is divergent from the traditional or 'static' one, in that, whereas the latter attempts to stimulate recognition through repeated exposure of a consistent visual element (termed a 'constant' [3]) such as a logo (Rawsthorn, 2007), the flexible identity is a system that uses a consistent visual element that displays, or is juxtaposed with, a varying visual element (a 'variable' [3]). The MTV logo practically demonstrates the model as the constant of its emblematic 'M' is used as a container to house the variable: an ever-changing plethora of images. This though, is a single, relatively basic example of a flexible identity and constant-variable interaction in other flexible branding is effected through a diverse array of techniques. Whilst the MTV identity essentially revolves around a customisable logo, other flexible identities do not conform to this relatively simple formula, instead, within the multifarious group of identities [4] which could fall under the umbrella term of 'flexible', a host of methods, devices, nuances and idiosyncrasies are evident. Flexible identities may: comprise of sign families [5] linked by rules or premises [6], fluctuate according to a live data feed [7], use algorithmic computer programmes to make them aleatoric, [8] be transformed by their context [9] or become an entire visual language in themselves [10] but intrinsic to all of these examples is a relationship between a constant element and variable element.

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[3] Ulrike Felsing's division of dynamic identities into the two elements of the constant and the variable helps to establish a framework for discussion of the flexible identity model (Felsing, 2010).

[4] An established set of terms for different types of flexible identity has yet to be authoritatively consolidated and defined but some include; 'moving brands' (Smith, 2010), 'dynamic identities' (Felsing, 2010) and 'living brands' (Vit, 2009a).

[5] Sign families are groups of signs which exhibit similarities in both signifier and signified "each member of a sign family may prepare the interpreter to initiate the same response sequences to denotata, since each sign has the same signification" (Charles Morris cited in Scott, 2004)

[6] In the case of the identity for the Kigali Conference Centre in Rwanda the '"rule" on the basis of which the variable factors can "come into play"' (Felsing, 2010, p.26) is the abstraction of a bird's-eye view of the landscape surrounding the conference centre.

[7] Neue Design Studio devised a brand identity to promote tourism to Norway's Nordkyn Peninsula that uses a live feed of weather statistics to change the colour and shape of its logo. This is updated every 5 minutes on the website and is captured at a point in time relevant to the application when required for analogue media (Vit, 2010).

Compared with the traditional static identity, the above examples of flexible identities seem more avant-garde and sophisticated. However, some may question whether, within this label of '*avant-garde*', is manifested a prediction of the longevity of the flexible branding model as the phrase is synonymous with the fleeting phenomena of the 'trend' (Wordnik, 2010). It may be tempting to view the morphing signifiers that constitute flexible identity systems as merely an interesting, eye-catching counterpoint to the more established, static identities that dominate mainstream brand design and to assume their popularisation will be swiftly followed by a return to static branding [11]. Such a dismissal may seem too hasty when flexible identities are examined with reference to contextual factors such as sociological change, technological development and movements in culture. These can be seen to have influenced the formulation and increased presence of the flexible identity, thus suggesting that the development of flexible properties is, perhaps, necessary in order for brand identities to adapt to, and function in, a much changed world. This essay investigates whether this observation is indeed correct and we are seeing the movement away from the monolithic brand model, prevalent for the majority of branding's inception in 2250BC [12] or if, instead, it is little more than a short-lived deviation from this.

One initial response to the notion of the flexible brand is to invoke the adage that the brand identities require consistency and repeated exposure to facilitate the recognition and memorability that generates its value [13] and that surely, if the identity appears

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[8] Saks 5th Avenue is a large New York department store whose identity, created by Pentagram, features the company logo split into 64 tiles, shuffled and rotated to create a unique pattern in each instance. According to Pentagram's Michael Bierut the number of combinations exceeds "the number of electrons in the known universe" (pentagram.com, 2006).[9] Stefan Sagmeister's logo for the Casa De Musica in Portugal uses a bespoke piece of software that analyses the colour values of any image accompanying it. It then generates a colour scheme for the logo harmonious with the image. (Vit, 2007)

[9] Stefan Sagmeister's logo for the Casa De Musica in Portugal uses a bespoke piece of software that analyses the colour values of any image accompanying it. It then generates a colour scheme for the logo harmonious with the image. (Vit, 2007)

[10] "with a bit of hard work and a good idea an organization stops being about just a logo and gains a complete visual and verbal language" (Johnson-Banks, 2007).

[11] "if flexibility becomes the new norm then of course inflexibility may become attractive again." (Johnson-Banks, 2007).

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to change each time it is seen, repeated exposure cannot be achieved. While there is validity to this argument, in that, repetition is key to the memorisation and subsequent recognition of any stimuli (Buzan, 2005, p.57), it is also true that when we perceive a given stimuli, we do not merely perceive it as an amalgamation of constituent parts, we perceive an holistic entity defined by the dynamic relationships between these parts. This is a key principle of Gestalt theory which advocates the idea that "we always experience perceptual wholes, not isolated parts" (Behrens, 1998). Extended to the study of brand identity, this theory implies that the alteration of a part (or even parts) of a brand signifier will not render it unrecognisable, as long as the whole remains intact [14] This theory is seen in practice in the MTV logo, which is not degraded in its recognisability by its flexibility due to the remaining relationships between its constituents such as the proportions of the M, the spray-painted 'TV' and 3D perspective. Conversely, when seen enough times for the viewer to surmise that this logo changes, its variable behaviour becomes an anticipated part of the brand identity [15]. The application of Gestalt theory vindicates the flexible model as it explains that it is not inherently flawed in producing brands with that integral attribute of recognisability as the logic of the static model might suppose.

However, it also provides an important caveat to the use of flexibility, in that, 'Gestalt' describes "the essential, the elemental" (Felsing, 2010, p.22), (or overall character of something) and how it cannot be made indistinguishable simply by altering one (or more) of its parts. The constant of a distinctive overall character is crucial to any brand identity to differentiate its company, individual or product from similar ones [16].

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[12] Karl Moore and Susan E. Reid present evidence of the practice of 'branding' in the Indus Valley in 2250BC in their paper The Birth Of Brand: "The Harappan cities were home to craftsmen working in stone and bronze, who created little square seals, which they sold to merchants. There are hundreds of square seals with animal figures, used as trademarks, found at Mohenjo-daro, Harappa, and Lothal" (Moore and Reid, 2008)

[13] "brands with positive appeal and vast exposure are at the forefront of customer purchasing decisions" (Hembree, 2006, p.149)

[14] "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" (Behrens 2002).

Functional flexible identities withstand variation because this overall character clearly anchors [17] them within a single, recognisable sign family. If they lack this, individual differences between members of the sign family are liable to be greater than what remains constant. Consequently the identity becomes diffuse through variation as the ability of the audience to group its elements into a single, unified sign family clearly denoting the brand, is impaired. In the extreme, this will cause complete disintegration of the flexible identity, in which recognition and memorisation of it are impossible and it becomes unable serve its purpose as the visual link that associates a company, individual or product with their goods, services or communications.

A less extreme instance of this process can be observed in Wolff Olins' flexible logo for Aol. The logo was devised to be a visual metaphor for Aol's service: the delivery of differing content to differing audiences, (Wolff Olins, 2009) and to be "deliberately disruptive, deliberately unlike what is being done by other media businesses" (ibid). In this capacity it succeeds through its use of around sixty logos, each comprising of the Aol logotype reversed out of one of a host of images of everything from a goldfish to rock music's symbolic 'horns' gesture [fig.2]. However, as a brand identity, at some point, the key function of communicating a tangible point of difference for this service must be fulfilled, and in this capacity, the identity does not entirely succeed. Although the constant of the punctuated Aol logotype is evident throughout the sign family, its basic, white geometric sans serif (which bears strong resemblance to the widely used *Futura* typeface) does not exactly exude distinctive essential character. Furthermore, the variables dominate it as the element that anchors it as the logo of Aol recedes into

[15] Neuroscientist Jeff Hawkins emphasises that human brains are particularly adept at recognising and memorising patterns of stimuli in order predict the behaviour of similar stimuli in future encounters. "we experience the world through a sequence of patterns, and we store them, and we recall them, we match them up against reality, and we're making predictions all the time" (Hawkins, 2003).

[16] "it identifies and distinguishes the company or product from its competition, thereby building customer recognition" (Hembree, pg.149).

[17] 'Anchorage' is a term coined by Barthes which denotes the use of a device that attempts to aid the reader in extracting the intended of meaning from a sign. (Chandler, 2003).

the background (to which it is matched due to its setting in white) and is also dwarfed by the larger images that subsume it, which according to the well established visual convention of the hierarchy [18], will immediately suggest to the audience that it is less important. The behaviour of the variables cannot even contribute to the establishment of an ever-present Gestalt as the spatial inter-relation of the two elements and the signification of the images is unpredictable, not forming any apparent pattern (other than 'anything is possible') or creating between the logos, any strong 'family resemblances' [19]. The indistinct, recessive nature of the company signifier coupled with the visual emphasis placed on the variable images serves to create a sprawling, diffuse front for an identity which could, from a traditional standpoint on branding, be said to have failed as, instead of using a distinctive visual Gestalt to differentiate the brand, Aol is being visually portrayed through so many signifiers, each with their own separate, diverging and polysemous [20] significations and connotations, it starts to become generalised. Though the 'generic' or 'all-encompassing' are relevant traits to

Fig. 2

[18] "Hierarchy refers to the apparent importance of the design elements, which can be determined by size, spacing or colour" (Ambrose and Harris, 2007, p.44)

[19] 'Family Resemblances' is a phrase originating with Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein which denotes the likening of resemblances in physical attributes between members of the same biological family and the resemblances between signs in sign families as they are both variable, sometimes rooted in subtlety, sometimes abundantly obvious. "we see a complicated network of similarities over-lapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail" (Wittgenstein cited in Felsing, 2010, pg 149)

[20] All signs are 'polysemous', meaning that they simultaneously signify different things and are open to audience interpretation (Baldwin and Roberts, 2006, p.36).

be associated with a service used in different ways by a large swathe of the world's population [21] as identified by the designer (Wolff Olins, 2009), it is questionable as to how effectively the logos perform in emphasising that Aol is the provider of this all-encompassing service.

The flaws inherent in the Aol logo demonstrate that the flexible identity is a complex mechanism which requires designers to understand its many internal processes in order to construct it in a manner conducive to its appearance as a unified sign family. Furthermore, the points at which potential disintegration of this sign family can occur do not exist only within the preliminary stage (of the configuration of its visual components) but provide pitfalls throughout its ongoing implementation.

One unique selling point of the flexible identity is its ability to continually adapt to new contexts [22]. Whereas any new facet of a static identity will have its appearance governed, sometimes rigidly, by a set of brand guidelines, [23] the individual changes made to a flexible identity demand the acute observation of the identity's Gestalt and pattern of behaviour and an execution that successfully preserves all its intricacies so as not to destroy its cohesiveness and distinct character. Complicating this process is the fact that changes may not be implemented by the initial creator of the identity (potentially an externally-sourced, specialist branding agency such as Wolff Olins, who will most likely subsequently transfer the management and use of the identity to an in-house design team and/or freelancers) but by another party, which necessitates the communication via some means (such as a guidelines manual) of how the identity should be varied without being excessively rigid (so as to negate the unique aspect

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[21] 28.7% of the world population uses the internet (internetworldstats.com, 2010).

[22] Romanos defines the flexible identity system by its "ready capability to adapt to new, different or changing requirements." (2009, p.23).

[23] or, as Hembree names it, a "graphic standards manual". This is serves to "instruct a client on the appropriate and consistent use of the elements of their corporate identity. Guidelines are created so that anyone designing materials will know the 'rules' of how the company's logos, colours, layouts etc should appear to maintain consistency across their program (2006, pg 179).

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of the flexible identity), whilst providing enough guidance to maintain consistency. To this end, there must be some mechanism for filtering anomalous results within identities whose variations are either: based on a loose rule, welcoming of individual designers' own idiosyncratic interpretations [6] or subject to a generative system such as an algorithm or a set of data [9]. Similarly, flexible identities that exhibit visual language-like qualities must also be policed in their continual application to avoid their dissolution into a group of signs with imperceptible links to one another (Felsing, 2010, p.218.).

The constant regeneration of flexible identities, whilst allowing them to perform functions impossible within a static identity system, creates various points at which the identity can become undone thus necessitating perpetual maintenance and scrutiny during its use [24]. Alberto Romanos writes In Non Fixed By Rules:

> **it would be naive to believe that any identity could be accurately applied without supervision during the implementation process. (Romanos, 2009, p.60)**

This seems to go as far as to suggest that guidance in the form of a manual is not sufficient and that the continued consultation and oversight of the original creator is needed, which, especially if this was an externally sourced expert, will exert additional pressure on the client's resources [25]

The numerous pitfalls during creation and ongoing management of a flexible identity

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[24] This notion is echoed by Identityworks.com writer Roger Van Den Bergh: "Discipline during implementation and ongoing maintenance is essential." (Den Bergh, 2009).

[25] "A visual identity that responds flexibly and distinctly to special events is considerably more time-consuming and expensive" (Felsing, 2010, pg 222).

in addition to the inevitable extra resources they demand, will potentially discourage clients and designers alike from incorporating flexibility into brand identities and precipitate the return to the well-trodden path of the simpler, static identity. Further support for this assertion can be seen in the other obstacles encountered exclusively by flexible identities. Critically, their adaptability to litho printing, used to produce a large proportion of print design due to its ability to produce large runs economically [26], is problematic as the nature of the process dictates that it can only accommodate a single, fixed image per print-run. Additionally, a requisite of flexible identities is relatively higher exposure to both avoid the audience aberrantly reading a single variant as the identity in its entirety [27] and establish the behaviour of the variable and character of the sign family (which is important to facilitate future recognition [15] and, in language-like identities, to create a framework within which specific things can be communicated).

On the other hand, these obstacles of communication of guidelines, constant oversight and mechanisms for distribution presented during the ongoing implementation of a flexible identity, could easily be remedied or become a standard part of the design process if flexible identities prove their worth and proliferate, as the processual infrastructure, currently geared towards the conventional static identity could easily adapt to meet to the unique challenges they create.

Based on vacillating public and critical receptions of different high-profile flexible identities, it is difficult to gauge whether this proliferation will be realised. Branding agency Landor's identity for the Australian city of Melbourne [fig.5] has enjoyed the

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[26] "Offset Lithography is the least expensive way to print quantities of 500 to 100,000 pieces." (Hembree, 2006, pg 56).

[27] Due to the overriding convention for the identity to behave in a static way, unless we are made aware of an identity's variable behaviour through seeing variations and drawing a link between them, we are likely to interpret an isolated instance of the flexible system as constituting the whole brand. Felsing notes this process in her description of the illustrated characters that define the flexible identity for SSH Utrecht "repeated in the various media, as a whole the characters have a stabilising effect" (pg 149, 2010).

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recognition of being featured in the 2010 D&AD annual and has attracted critical acclaim from prominent branding blog *Brand New* whose author, Armin Vit, describes the identity as "very appealing and avant garde" (Vit, 2009b). The extent of the praise enjoyed by Landor's identity, however, is exponentially dwarfed by the criticism endured by another, now infamous, flexible identity. The outpouring of hatred for Wolff Olins' identity for the 2012 olympics in London was, at the time unprecedented. The media and public seemed to be unanimous in their negative reaction upon its unveiling, as indicated in headlines such as: "The London 2012 Logo- The Blogosphere is angry" (*Metro*, 2007), "Please Look Away….It's The 2012 Logo" (Glendinning for *The Guardian*, 2007) and "Olympic Logo Triggers Epilepsy" (White for *The Sun*, 2007) and a public petition to change the logo which gathered 50,000 signatures (Go Petition, 2007). The controversy courted by the identity will surely result in designers and clients both seeking to avoid creating any association with the London 2012 identity, a factor which would impede the flexible identity model's ascent
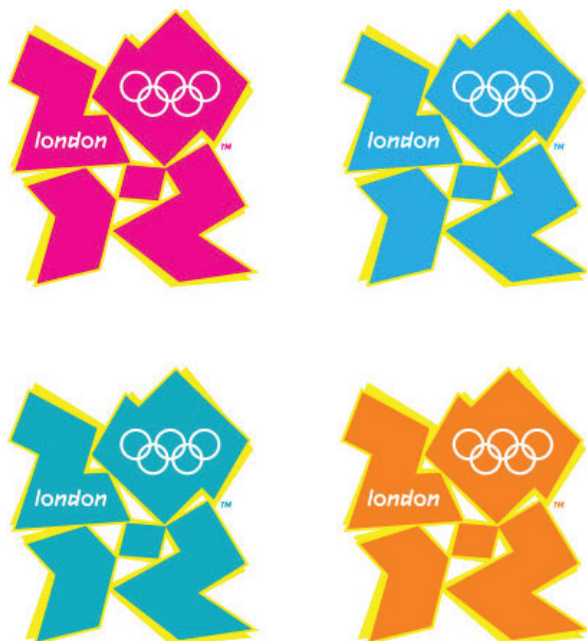

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

towards becoming an enduring method with which to visualise a brand. Nevertheless, it is important to note that most of the criticism of the logo pertained to its form [28] as opposed to its flexibility [fig.4] as only four iterations of the logo were initially presented with a different fluorescent hue on each constituting the only variable [fig.3].

Furthermore, the Melbourne identity was conceived two years after that of London 2012, providing evidence that the flexible model is durable enough to weather the storm of criticism. The climate after the logo's unveiling would have made it more tempting than ever to revert to the staid, static branding model. After all, a singular identity which is laconic enough to summarise the brand in a singular colour scheme, visual style and graphic motif (the traditional fundamental components of an identity according to Healy [2008, p.4]) can sustain itself for decades [29] and by affecting
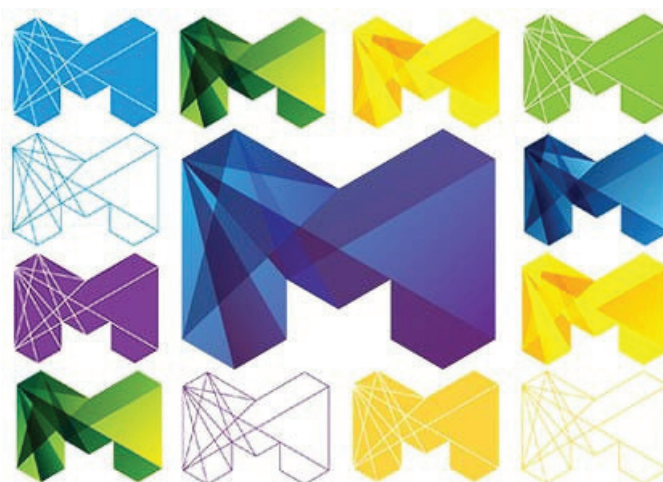

Fig. 5

[28] The incongruous form of the logo has drawn an array of unfortunate comparisons ranging from a 'broken swastika' to a certain character from The Simpsons engaging in a sexual act (Glancey, 2007).

[29] Coca-Cola's identity is the epitome of durability and consistency. Based around their trademark red and white colour scheme underpinned by an inimitable logo, it has served the company for over a century. "the Coca Cola logo has been hailed as one of the world's most successful brands. It is now 120 years old (in 2005), and if someone was interested in acquiring the rights to it, the brand alone would cost something like over $67 billion" (LogoOrange, 2005).

and maintaining such an identity, its timelessness should allow the client and designer to bypass the problematic rebrand with all its associated pitfalls and negative public and media clamouring. The fact this reversion did not materialise (various designers continued to pursue flexible systems in identity design) indicates that there is a clear scope for the flexible identity to endure.

Supporting this is the fact that a newly devised logo forming the basis of a new *static identity* for the clothing retail giant Gap recently fell foul of public and media opinion to the same degree that the flexible London 2012 identity did and, whereas the London 2012 identity was resolutely defended by client [30] and designer, Gap capitulated to popular opinion by quickly mothballing their new identity and reinstating its predecessor (Kuang, 2010). This evidences the recent trend for a public, afforded the ability to instantly broadcast information to potentially huge audiences (via accessible social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter), to increasingly vocalise opinion about identity design, especially fervently critical opinion [31]. The recent high-profile casualties of this trend mean that brands in the public eye are likely to adopt an increasingly tentative approach to creating or redesigning their visual identities which resists bold moves or stark changes to avoid the negative press of another public outcry over an unfavoured identity [32].

In addition to the increased ability for people to publish their opinions through the internet, current discourses, related to the ethos of web 2.0 [33] advocating individual interaction, participation and democratisation of media have fostered a

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[30] Lord Coe, head of the London Organising Committee for the Olympic Games rallied against the immediate negative reactions of public and media saying: "It won't be to be eveybody's taste immediately but it's a brand that we genuinely believe can be a hard working brand which builds on pretty much everything we said in Singapore about reaching out and engaging young people, which is where our challenge is over the next five years. If we don't do that, then frankly the whole project is unsustainable." (BBC, 2007)

[31] "Looking back over the past couple of years, we see Tropicana, Pepsi, AOL, and even Apple being raked over the coals for similar missteps" (MCcallion, 2010).

[32] "You gotta wonder: Are rebrandings -- whether bold and visionary or downright terrible -- impossible in the age of Twitter and Facebook?" (Kuang, 2010).

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greater proclivity to do so. These discourses are manifested in websites such as Wikipedia and Youtube which are composed of user-generated articles and videos respectively. They are also reflected in the cult of the Flash-mob, popularised by an ongoing T-Mobile television advertising campaign [34] and the phenomenon of 'crowd-sourcing' which opens up problems related to design, computing, engineering, [35] and myriad other fields to the public (in an attempt to harness the 'wisdom of the crowd' to attain solutions which certain professionals may not necessarily arrive at). At the core of the above examples is the value placed on openness and the input of the heterogenous individuals that make up the crowd (as opposed to the traditionally linear arrangement of singular authorship followed by audience consumption) that is integral to sustaining them. The recent prevalence of participatory media, evidenced by the popularity of sites like Youtube and Wikipedia (respectively reported as the 4th and 11th most visited websites in the world [Netcraft.com, 2010]) serves to perpetuate a general discourse that gives greater currency to crowd input in media and thus encourages people to impart their art, views or ideas more readily.

The multifarious channels of social media and web 2.0 populated with content generated by a vocal and heterogenous public serve to present the perfect conditions for the flexible identity to thrive as the model bestows the attributes of responsiveness, adaptability and plurality (and potentially participation) that are necessary for the communication and management of a brand in a media environment deftly portrayed in the following summary:

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[33] Web 2.0 essentially describes the evolution of the internet to allow it to be defined by its users as opposed to those who build and administer it. This is achieved through what internet publishing expert Tim O'Reilly describes as an "architecture of participation" (O'Reilly cited in Singel, 2005) whereby web designers create the tools for ordinary users to easily share and author content.

[34] The flash-mob treads the line between collaborative prank and performance art and involves a group of people privately organising to perform a pre-determined activity (singing a given song is a popular choice) in a public place. The T-Mobile flash-mob TV adverts depict several instances of these recorded in different public spaces and won the British Television Advertising Awards' TV ad of the year 2010. (Sweeney 2010).

[35] Crowdsourcing is a term coined in 2006 by Jeff Howe, writing in Wired magazine (Howe, 2006). It refers to the sourcing of ideas, solutions or work from the public instead of a pre-determined individual or group. Crowdsourcing has been used variously to try and solve the BP Deepwater Horizon mining disaster, to write computer operating systems like Linux (De Castella, 2010) and to complete graphic design briefs (99designs.com).

> **the world is changing: new media: We shrink back from conclusive judgements. No assertions anymore, only fragments, questions and experiments. (unattributed, cited in Felsing, 2010).**

Though the ramifications of social media and are an important contributing factor in the creation of a general zeitgeist and context that supports the flexible identity, movements and changes in other fields can also be identified as influences on its formation.

Generative art describes any art that is created by a system, devised or designated, "to which the artist cedes partial or total subsequent control" (Galanter, 2007) and, according to Galanter, has existed as long as "art itself" (ibid). The label 'generative art' is more recent however. Emerging fully around the latter half of the 20th century, it is more pointedly applied to works such as Hans Haacke's *Condensation Cube* created in 1963 [36] and the music of Brian Eno [37]. It is also evident in contemporary art. One example is the work of artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer whose recent pieces have included large scale interactive light installation *Vectorial Elevation* (displayed in the sky above Vancouver during its hosting of the 2010 Winter Olympics) and *Frequency and Volume*, an installation of 48 radios with a frequency and volume that fluctuated according to the motion of visitors inside London's Barbican gallery during its 2008 exhibition (Lozano-Hemmer, 2010). Generative art is part of a broad contemporary paradigm that also encompasses the flexible identity which has, at its core, the themes (clearly evident in both generative art and the flexible identity) of variability, systems, rules and a degree of independence from authorship. The

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[36] "A simple acrylic cube with a bit of water at the bottom and sealed shut, "Condensation Cube" becomes a miniature weather system as an ever changing display of condensation forms on the cube's walls. This work anticipated meteorologist Ralph Lorenz's discovery of chaotic strange attractors, and stands as a wonderful example of generative art." (Galanter, 2007)

[37] Brian Eno describes generative music in a talk in San Francisco in 1996: "What I am talking about tonight is an idea that really began for me about 25 years ago and has pretty much obsessed me ever since. It began as a musical idea, it began as something I heard in music and gradually I realised that in fact it was an idea that was occurring in all sorts of areas".

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implication of this is the suggestion that the flexible identity is not merely a trend confined to identity design and that it actually possesses a degree of resonance with contemporary culture.

The flexible identity is also able to better exploit the technology such as the seemingly ubiquitous, zeitgeist-defining smart-phone and its technical capability to show, in high-resolution, motion or multiple still images. Furthermore, a new type of display technology termed 'electronic-ink' or 'electronic-paper', which allows for the display of high resolution digital images and video using a relatively low amount of energy and with a relatively low cost, is beginning to proliferate as a medium of choice for various applications. Of these, one of the most significant for the flexible identity is surely the billboard. The first electronic-ink billboard was displayed in Cannes in 2006 (Hanlon, 2006) and, as the technology has subsequently been developed, use of them has risen worldwide. Ogilvy and Mather advertising agency head of planning Russell Davies predicts that, within the next twenty years, "Video screens are getting so cheap and disposable that they'll be plastered everywhere we go" (Davies, 2011) which, if accurate, would imply that an infrastructure will exist that will provide an ideal platform for the flexible identity thus somewhat negating the aforementioned issues surrounding their physical application through traditional processes like litho printing.

The developments in art, social media and technology outlined above will not however, guarantee that the flexible identity becomes an enduring feature of brand identity design. Counter-trends and backlashes will, almost inevitably, occur against any popular phenomenon. Where radical change has altered our visual landscape in

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1. Under influential semiotician Ferdinand De Saussure's dyadic composition of a sign's elements (Chandler : 2009)

2. Not all signs are completely meaningless without a meaning previously constructed and conventionalised by humans. Influential semiotician Charles Peirce developed a 'fundamental division' of signs in which exist Iconic signs, which denote a physical object through its straightforward portrayal, symbolic signs which have come to signify something solely through convention and indexical signs, which can logically suggest things (smoke=fire) but the meaning derived from these has no other context if not framed by other signs to convey the significance of the icon or index and they are therefore very limited in what they can communicate in isolation. Saussure also talks of the relationship between signifier and signified as sometimes having a motivated logic. (Chandler: 2009)

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the past, this has often been preceded by movements that have sought to reassert more traditional practices and values. A recent example is the movement which rallied against the computer generated imagery that had become pervasive with the advent of the mac as a design tool, in favour of an aesthetic characterised by manual processes such as drawing, painting and craft. Poynor described this in 1999 as "the inevitable swing of the pendulum back in the other direction.", also propounding the view that "The keyboard-generated look has become predictable and trite" (cited in Hyland and Bell, 2003, p.8). The flexible identity is similarly susceptible to such a backlash which could impact on its longevity as a model for creating brand identities.

Intrinsic to the flexible identity though, are certain traits which may enable it to transcend any backlash or counter-trend. For instance, the flexible identity can more effectively command the attention of its audience, conducive to the maintenance of a conspicuous brand presence, through its ability to counter the process of habituation. Habituation is the psychological process by which "exposure to unchanging stimuli results in less attention after repeated exposures" (Wogalter and Mayhorn, 2006, p.788). In the context of brand identity design, the implication is that an identity which is static, or unchanging, will increasingly lose its ability to command attention and thus communicate, each time it is seen. Within the flexible identity model is the capacity to remedy this process as it permits variation which will prevent it from being perceived as 'unchanging' [38].

Another inherent benefit of the flexible identity model is the way it engages the innate human trait of taking pleasure in recognising patterns. Pattern recognition has proved

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[38] Furthermore, the nature of habituation means that the stimuli that we become habituated to is always specific in nature. This is to say that whilst we may become habituated to one stimuli, this will not habituate us to other stimuli related to it. This is illustrated in a study by Domjan and Grau who found that participants habituated to the taste of a lemon showed "invigorated responding when tested with the taste of lime at the end of the experiment (and vice versa)" (2010, pg. 41) In the context of a flexible identity, this suggests that each new variation will constitute a new stimuli.

advantageous to humankind as an evolutionary function as it aids us in making the predictions which constitute intelligent behaviour (Hawkins, 2003) [39]. As such, we have developed a mechanism which rewards us when we discern a pattern among any stimuli. Margulis and Sagan cite the "aha! feeling of discovery" as an example of this (1995, p.30) whilst evolutionary scientist Alistair Clarke describes how the experience of humour is a reward for recognising patterns (cited in Melville, 2008) [40]. Flexible identities engage this process when they present us with a sign family as they challenge us to recognise the underlying pattern that unites it and consequently appear to possess a human resonance than the comparably facile static model lacks [41].

A concept which, in some ways, relates to the pleasure of pattern recognition is that of the 'aesthetic experience'. Expounded by design writer Roy Behrens in his paper (2002), it describes how the term 'aesthetic' has undergone a semantic shift whereby it has become exclusively applicable to visual stimuli, a shift which Behrens seeks to revise by recontextualising the term using its opposite: 'anaesthetic'. Where 'anaesthetic' describes stimuli that is either, at one extreme, "benumbing" (dull, monotonous) or, at the opposite extreme, "stupefying" (confusing, excessively esoteric), aesthetic qualities are evoked when a balance between these two extremes is evident in a stimuli, creating an experience that is "striking or stirringly felt" (parallels can be drawn between this experience and the reward for recognising a pattern). This balance is termed variously in the paper as "unity in diversity", "strict wildness" and, more elegantly, the "harmonious disarray" and is best explained in a quote by the art

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[39] Margulis and Sagan also describe how, "Pattern recognition was such a useful trait for our ancestors" as it has essentially driven developments in science and art (1995, pg 30).

[40] "An ability to recognize patterns instantly and unconsciously has proved a fundamental weapon in the cognitive arsenal of human beings. The humorous reward has encouraged the development of such faculties, leading to the unique perceptual and intellectual abilities of our species." (Clarke cited in Melville, 2008).

historian Gombrich, who states that "delight lies somewhere between boredom and confusion" (cited in Behrens, 2002). The flexible identity model is almost tailor-made for the creation of this as, simply, its constant component provides the unity, strictness and harmony whilst the variable element constitutes the diversity, wildness and disarray.

Conclusion

New developments in any sphere of life must convince those affected by them of their worthiness in order to be sustained. In a recent article by journalist Patrick Barkham on a campaign to put the UK's clocks forward by an hour this idea is cogently described:

> **When new ideas come up they are scrutinised for perfection. If that perfection is not found, they are rejected for the status quo, which if scrutinised in the same way would fare much worse. (2010)**

Though the flexible identity model is not 'perfect', it is difficult to see, in the wake of recent and impending developments in technology, society and culture, it disappearing in the same way countless other short-lived trends embraced by designers have done as the model is seemingly so appropriate to the current and foreseeable media environment in a way which the static identity is not. The flexible identity model

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[41] This human resonance is insinuated further in Gotz's comparison between the serial design model (which has many parallels with the flexible identity) and the biological process of evolution:

"This brings to light the second power source of the design series : differently than with the industrial production of identical objects of use, it functions in an evolutionary manner. It takes up the proven and familiar (for instance, the elegance and prestige embodied by the Mercedes logo and radiator grille), thereby testifying to the product's functionality and superiority. At the same time, it introduces targeted changes in order to adapt to new requirements and challenges. One could almost say that this enforces a process of creative selection, as outdated forms are discarded, whilst more sustainable, -i.e timeless- forms are retained and developed further." (2006, pg 8).

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possesses certain attributes and capabilities that give legitimacy to the argument that a brand identity developed in accordance with its principles may be inherently better at engaging and retaining the attention of its audience.

In the very recent future, hesitancy in the uptake of flexible identities by designers is foreseeable as they are likely to be dissuaded by some of the aforementioned obstacles present in the implementation of a flexible identity such as the relative complexity, higher cost and incompatibility with litho printing.

Even if these obstacles were to be overcome through changes to the design process to meet the flexible identity's requirements, it is unlikely that it will be applied universally as its appropriateness differs according context. For example, designer Bruce Mau remarked that a flexible identity is not ideal in the context of the branding of a bank as a bank, in his view, should appear "radically stable" (cited in Rawsthorn, 2007) which contrasts with the flexible identity's key principle of variability. Additionally, the hypothetical proliferation of the flexible identity would eventually result in the model itself developing into a widely understood code [42], which would give all flexible identities a common underlying signification (with changeable connotations derived from the manner in which the model is used) that may render it suitable or unsuitable in certain contexts [43]. This would suggest that, if the flexible model does endure, it would need to be used sensitively and pragmatically:

When we develop flexible identity schemes we need to consider how and why the identity changes, and even if it needs to change

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[42] Codes are conventions that are always used in decoding meanings from texts. Gillian Dyer's description of this process is that 'Codes organize our understanding of the world in terms of 'dominant meaning patterns' (1982 : p26). The flexible identity, if we are to accept that it is prevalent enough to already constitute a code, could, presently in its nascent phase, be read as a code for the concepts such as 'avant-garde' and 'contemporary'.

[43] In the event that it becomes prevalent, the flexible identity will be established as a type of medium. Mcluhan's famous phrase "the medium is the message" (Cited in Baldwin and Roberts, 2006, p.24) describes the implications of this as the message conveyed by the medium of the flexible identity will not be appropriate to all contexts.

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at all. This should be as important as the choice of colour palette or typeface. It's a design decision in its own right and, like colour and typography, its choice is loaded with meaning. (Hewitt, 2008)

There is also the latent possibility that flexible identities may be superseded by an entirely different method of communicating and delineating a brand, perhaps born out of necessity following unforeseen developments in media, technology, the environment or other areas.

However, though possible, this is pure conjecture and thus cannot constitute strong evidence to argue against the flexible identity's ability to remain a useful tool for the identity designer. A somewhat radical development would be required to prevent the eventual recognition, by designers, of the many positive attributes of flexible identity systems and impede their subsequent enduring influence on the field of brand identity design.

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Images

Fig.1.   Selected Variants of MTV Flexible Identity Logo.

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