Developing design literacy through brand-based artefacts

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The brand is a powerful representational and identification-led asset that can be used to engage staff in creative, sustainable and developmental activities. Being a brand the result of, foremost, a design exercise, it is fair to suppose that it can be a relevant resource for the advancement of design literacy within organisational contexts. The main objective of this paper was to test and validate an interaction structure for an informed co-design process on visual brand artefacts. To carry on the empirical study, a university was chosen as case study as these contexts are generally rich in employee diversity. A non-functional prototype was designed, and walkthroughs were performed in five focus groups held with staff. The latter evidenced a need/wish to engage with basic design principles and high willingness to participate in the creation of brand design artefacts, mostly with the purpose of increasing its consistent use and innovate in its representation possibilities, whilst augmenting the brand’s socially responsible values.

Keywords: Branding, Participatory Design, Design Literacy, Employees, Higher Education Institutions

Introduction

The brand no longer fits Shannon and Weaver’s traditional model of information transmission, mostly because unidirectional branding approaches have been supplanted. This reorientation required from companies a new kind of dominant philosophy, which had to, necessarily, be assimilated by all employees, as individuals. Besides the fact that these must be minimally familiar with the brand identity they represent and with which they commit themselves, they must also realise that their participation in the brand’s organic structure means the constant conversion and maintenance of the brand itself. Marty Neumeier states:

\textit{Unlike the old corporate identity paradigm that prized uniformity and consistency, the new brand paradigm sacrifices those qualities in favour of being alive and dynamic. (…) Brands can afford to be inconsistent — as long as they don’t abandon their defining attributes. They’re like people. (…) A living brand is a collaborative performance, and every person in the company is an actor (Neumeier, 2006, pp. 133-136).}

The establishment of an institutional philosophy of this nature requires an investment in training collaborative individuals. Employees (being these all the individuals that, as some point, provide institutions with their work and capabilities, either full-time, part-time, no term, casual or voluntary) should, therefore, exploit their own brand knowledge and be confronted with any wrong brand assumptions they potentially have. Neumeier’s ‘collaborative performance’ is only possible when the brand is flexible enough to support the diversity of emerging associations, meanings and artefacts, and as long as these do not turn into instances of infringement.
or misappropriation. For employees to experience the brand and collaborate in internal branding activities, brand management efforts must, first of all, be internally-centred, allowing employees to present brand ideas they consider relevant and about which no one has ever thought about (Schultz & Hatch, 2006). Employees that concede themselves to know and align with the brand tend to act in a more consistent way and according to the ideal the company wishes to be perceived by its diverse audiences (Oddie, 2015, Ind, 2017).

This way, the creation of ‘brand schools’ (Schultz & Hatch, 2006) or ‘corporate universities’ (Ind, 2007) are interesting benchmarking tactics because they allow the involvement of new groups of individuals, who are expected to be engaged with the brand, whilst enhancing the understanding of what the brand represents (Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Aurand, Gorchels & Bishop, 2005; Schultz, Hatch & Ciccolella, 2006; Ind & Bjerke, 2007; Harris, 2007; Streader & Whitehouse, 2008). However, none of these strategies explore the brand and what it represents from a design perspective, and design literacy (and visual literacy, for that matter) is not part of their curricula. In fact, most of the literature on Branding theorises the brand as a Marketing elaboration and only few consider the design thinking from which a brand should emerge.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to propose a communication platform for institutions to encourage employees to produce and share their own brand representations and, potentially, select and integrate these artefacts in the brand’s identity system, considering the most creative, authentic and appropriate ones – being appropriateness, in this context, understood as a developed sense of design. Such a participatory or co-design approach (Lee, 2008; Fischer, 2012; Oswal, 2014) would contribute to brand equity and to the tangible circulation of intellectual capital but, most of all, to the externalisation of brand knowledge. This research also suggests that computer-mediated communication systems can successfully support this user-generated content logic, whilst increasing inclusion, participation and development. The context of an online community, as defined by Preece (2000) and Preece and Maloney-Krichmar (2003), and the use of Social Web interaction paradigms are considered suitable to support such a participatory internal branding approach. Therefore, the research question that guided this research was ‘What participatory design platform can support the development of design literacy by engaging staff in brand artefacts co-creation?’

**Literature review**

**Brand artefacts are design artefacts**

All organisations have a set of rules that allow them to perform their daily activities. These rules are partially codified and, as such, minimally explicit, but not to a lesser extent, they are also hard to articulate as they belong to the realm of assumptions – as opposed to the most tangible level, where we would find artefacts (Gagliardi, 2017). The study of artefacts takes us back to Schein’s work (1984) in which he depicts these levels of organisational culture and their interaction. Several authors followed Schein in exploring nuances of what defines an artefact in an organisational setting: Moingeon and Ramanantsoa (1997) refer to symbolic products (artefacts) as the resources for individuals to understand the governing methods, behaviours and routines that are supposed to be known by the members of an organisation. Masino and Zamarian (2003), state that all artefacts have a set of values:

- **Cognitive**, since they guide the representation of relevant knowledge in the organisation and the identification (or not) with it;
- **Social**, when representing experiences, forms of expression and meanings, shared by individuals who conceive, construct and use them.

Vilnai-Yavetz and Rafaeli (2006) argued on the existence of three dimensions in any organisational artefacts:

- The **Instrumental** dimension refers to the extent to which the artefact contributes to the performance of tasks or to achieving the objectives for which the presence of the artefact was thought for;
- The **Aesthetic** dimension deals with the experience and sensory knowledge that the artefact provides to those who use or contemplate it, enabling the generation of aesthetic judgments that are based on the individual notion of “beautiful”;
- The **Symbolic** dimension refers to the meanings or associations – since artefacts, as means of communication, can have symbolic consequences, both desired and unintentional.
These three dimensions seem to be highly relevant in defining satisfaction with imposed artefacts: depending on the adequate functional performance, the aesthetic virtue, and the meanings each individual will read in a specific organisational artefact, an emotional reaction will be determinant as to inform the way individuals will make decisions (Damásio, 1995) and include the artefact in their current and future routines, in a sustainable way. Such value seems to be the one missing in Masino and Zamarian’s representation of organisational artefacts and will link to both cognitive and affective constructs – such as identification, belonging and commitment – that historically have been considered essential for values enhancement in internal branding activities (Mahnert & Torres, 2007; Punjaisri, Evanschitzky & Wilson, 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2017), but also behavioural considerations – such as ethics (Dyrud, 2017) – building on awareness of quality, longevity and sustainability (Nielsen, 2017) and that will expectedly increase citizenship at organisational brand level (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005) and beyond.

A brand is a symbolic representation of the organisation's identity, expressed through a diversity of identity-led artefacts (Schultz, Hatch & Ciccolella, 2006):

- **Cultural artefacts**, constructed through the manifestation of perceptions and sensory competences existing in the organisation. Some examples of cultural artefacts can be found in the facilities’ decoration style, in the existence or not of more or less rigid dress codes, etc.
- **Strategic artefacts** typically serve to express, communicate, and guide the organisation’s purpose through vision, mission and value statements, and consist of the various resources used to make these tangible and operational (such as organisational posters, or enchanted stories filled with metaphors that allow staff to imagine and re-create organisational goals. Logo, signage, slogans and chromatic patterns are used as artefacts that deliberately convey what the organisation stands for and what it aspires to (Balmer & Greyser, 2002).
- **Image artefacts**, functional and aesthetic features that serve to express individuality through the transfer of meanings. Merchandising objects are probably the best example.

Hence, a brand is a whole, made up of symbolic, functional, aesthetic, tangible and intangible elements, grounded on cognitive, social and emotional values, duly articulated and systematised. It is a facilitator in the communication process – thanks to its virtue of stimulating the human ability to retain impressions and linking them to visual or verbal expression (Holsanova, Hedberg & Nilsson, 1998) – and an intellectual capital asset, vehicle of meanings, with which it is possible to establish relationships and create design solutions, through **design artefacts**:

“Design can be characterised as an activity where a designing subject shapes the design object by means of some design artefacts. The design object is the artefact formed in design; the outcome that design activity is directed to” (Bertelsen, 2000, p. 17).

**Participatory design and design literacy**

Organisational identity and, in this case, the brand as an instrument of identity, are good examples of organisational knowledge made available to all employees within an organisation, and it is true that employees no longer only react: they are interpretive communities and potential sources of innovation. Therefore, some authors argue on the importance of employees to know the brand as much as they should live the brand, participating in its construction, in order to integrate collective knowledge and to make explicit/tangible the abstraction that usually characterises cultural artefacts (Ind, 2007, 2017; Jensen & Beckmann, 2009; Watkiss & Glynn, 2016).

Non-designers’ involvement in design processes is a topic under discussion and research since the 1970s (Mambrey, Mark & Pankoke-Babatz, 1998). According to Fischer and Ostwald (2002), participatory design (PD), also known as collaborative design, has been characterised by focusing on the development of systems, more specifically at the design stage, gathering specialists and users in order to better develop new contexts of use and to design, together, the artefacts which the latter shall use. Similarly, co-design helps defining innovative solutions, as much as empowering participants in the solutions that will directly impact their lives (Sanders & Stappers, 2016).

In the PD logic, design is no longer to be practiced in isolation by the designer, but involving a range of other entities in the visualisation of concepts, plans and ideas, and in the production of sketches and models of the design artefact to be achieved. One of the deeper principles of PD is that all individuals can – and should – be designers (Muller, 2003). Some organisations are already involving their audiences (including internal
audiences) in design processes. These entities are aware that supporting and fostering the collective human
capital existing in the community they already hold gives them real and creative content. But the strategies
of support and development of design literacy are sparse or even non-existent, namely when the contribution of
design to the economy is increasingly valued due to the relevance of design skills to the so-called fourth
industrial revolution (The Design Council, 2018).

From this perspective, a requirement for these contributing audiences would be a minimum sense of design
purpose and basic systems of enquiry in the context of design. Hence, as clarified by Pacione (2010), they
would have to be design literate, which involves “... basic skills in inquiry, evaluation, ideation, sketching, and
prototyping. We are not talking about mastery of more specialised forms of knowledge that a graphic or
industrial designer might employ” (p. 9), but also the consideration of production efficiency (time and energy)
and efficacy (e.g. sustainability-led artefacts) (Nielsen & Braenne, 2013). Thus, our understanding of design
literacy follows Nielsen’s (2017, p.2): “a broad concept that encompasses visual literacy, materiality
knowledge, ICT literacy, ethics and design education for citizenship. It includes the creation of ideas and
technology to create both artefacts and solutions, as well as interpretations and reflections on these designs.”

Moreover, brand co-designers can only take part of this if they get to know the brand deeply, and if
appropriate infra-structural resources are made available. Currently, much of these communication, skill
development-led and co-creation environments have become computer-mediated and follow interaction
paradigms common to the Social Web. Cao, Guo, Vogel and Zhang (2016) state that the use of social media in
work contexts fosters employees’ social capital and, subsequently, furthers knowledge transfer. Hence, the
context of an online community, as defined by Preece (2000) and Preece and Maloney-Krichmar (2003), and
the use of Social Web interaction paradigms are considered suitable to support the development of design
literacy by engaging staff in brand artefacts co-creation.

**The proposed system**

About a decade ago, the ideals of PD together with the conditions generated by computer-mediated
communication (CMC) led to the arousal of user-generated content, defined as interventions on pre-existing
content, in a process in which new content is continually being used as the basis for other creations, resulting
in constantly under development projects (Bruns, 2008). This is very much aligned with Neumeier’s
perspective that “A living brand is a collaborative performance, and every person in the company is an actor”
(2006: 136) and Schultz, Hatch and Ciccolella’s view that the ‘perfect artefact’ must allow the renewal of
perceptions, so as to ensure contemporaneity and the evolution of the entity’s interactions (2006).

Lelis and Mealha (2015) developed a supportive procedural model for brand artefacts co-creation which would
respond to the needs of employees in service-oriented contexts, to encourage purposeful creativity around
the brand. This model proposes three domains of interaction (Figure 1): Mentoring, by collaborative brand-
related learning experiences, Co-Design and Transfer, through opportunities for participation, and Evaluation
via the creative and sustained brand exploration with the shared responsibility towards both a wealthy and a
healthy brand.

![Figure 1 — The interaction structure for brand artefacts co-design – adapted from Lelis and Mealha (2015)](image)

Accordingly, a digitally-mediated platform for developing design literacy by engaging staff in brand artefacts
co-creation could be governed by these domains of interaction that should be considered in an iterative
manner:

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1454
• Mentoring towards brand knowledge — staff can interactively experiment the brand’s functional visual attributes and applications, exploring and developing basic skills essential for design literacy through, preferably, tangible brand artefacts, as their explicitness and objectified existence facilitate recognition (Watkiss & Glynn, 2016).

• Co-design and transfer of brand artefacts — staff can co-create brand-related ideas (artefacts, associations, meanings) which can be categorised, stored and published, increasing the existing brand knowledge and sense of design.

• Evaluation of brand artefacts — staff can participate in the critical assessment process of these ideas, in an advanced environment where the proposed brand artefacts, subject to open scrutiny, can be further analysed and discussed, considering their design features and functional, aesthetic, symbolic and socially responsible characteristics.

Such an open to participatory design and instructional digital platform, incorporating a three-dimensional approach like the one presented above does not exist. The same authors performed a study covering brand centres’ main features (Lelis & Mealha, 2014) which revealed that these include specialised content only, which is previously established or selected by specialists, hence far from the participatory ideology. These researchers also found that critique and evaluation processes are disregarded in most online brand centres. Moreover, this study also states that brand centres tend to be repositories of existing designs and resources, storing standards, guidelines and brand prescriptions and restrictions, not necessarily preoccupied with brand learning, brand tangible experimentation, and design literacy development. With the proposed platform we aim at creating a space where individuals can develop basic design abilities such as ideation, materialisation of ideas and designerly inquiry (Christensen et al., 2018).

Methods

This research is grounded on the social constructionist, interpretive paradigm, with greater focus on the way humans interpret their social world in specific contexts. It fits under the 19th century German hermeneutics tradition and symbolic interactionism which, coined in 1969 by Herbert Blumer, is a meta-theory explaining that individuals act before others according to meanings that derive from social interactions, which, in turn, are rooted in shared symbols and language (Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001).

Considering that this research is pertinently supported by employee participation in the design of brand artefacts, only within a real institutional context could a deeper empirical analysis be carried out. A qualitative case study was considered as the most appropriate method, since it allows a holistic view and is more opportune when analysing eclectic and motivational themes, such as participation and identity (Gummesson, 1991). A Higher Education Institution (HEI) seemed to be an appropriate and rich environment, where several domains of knowledge cooperate and cohabit, with high levels of expertise. The University of Aveiro (UA), in Portugal, highly ambidextrous (given it is framed under the new trend of managerialism in HEI), is home to one of the authors and, as an institution not only composed by a great diversity of employees but also holder of a recently redesigned brand, was completely in line with the objective of this research.

In this context, we chose the classic case study that corresponds to the exhaustive analysis of a unique case (Yin, 2014). The objectives of this case study were 1) to illustrate and materialise a communication infrastructure for the design, planning and management of a brand, involving employees (academics and non academics), offering them opportunities for developing design principles awareness, through creation and co-creation, giving them the shared power and responsibility over the brand they represent, and 2) understand how can a HEI value its brand through the development of their employees’ design literacy, grounded on both the creation of new and the appropriation of existing brand design artefacts.

An extensive brand artefacts’ audit covering all the existing brand applications was performed, and a set of exploratory semi-structured interviews with 14 specialists (practitioners with academic activity in the fields of branding, design, and communication technologies) was conducted, mostly as means of diagnosis. The information then obtained allowed the identification of:

• the procedural needs that UA’s employees face when having to use or appropriate the brand (e.g., via its visual identity) and the difficulties they face;

• the anticipated constraints and advantages of a potential platform for brand artefacts co-design.
Based on the produced insights and results, a prototype for a web-based Participatory Brand Centre (PBC) was designed, considering the definition of a) the essential user interfaces and b) the interaction narratives and main functionalities. The method of prototyping did not resort to any hyperlinks and, for such, it was objectively a non-functional prototype; however, it makes use of careful and detailed visual language features, providing most of the reference system with concrete user narratives.

Finally, five focus groups (FG) were held, with UA’s teaching and non-teaching staff (n=32), to whom the PBC prototype was presented for the first time and with whom it was discussed. In order to guarantee impartiality, the invitations for the FGs were sent to a maximum of four employees of different employment categories of each of the 16 departments/schools and six university services.

The sessions had an average duration of 107 minutes. After a brief introduction and review of the topics, the first questions to be discussed were of general character and easy approach, to allow the immediate participation of all (Morgan & Hoffman, 2018). To ease the participants’ contextualisation, each one received an academic chocolate, a fictitious merchandising brand artefact, composed of a dark chocolate bar and institutional packaging designed on purpose for the research, in which UA’s visual identity was clearly adopted. After that, the participants had contact with the prototype via a straightforward walkthrough, using scenarios or recurrent situations, with design and interaction features copied from the institution’s website. Hence, a sequence of images representative of the PBC was presented, accompanied by a verbal description of its main functionalities, exemplifying situations of use or representing certain tasks, providing clues of interaction, thus avoiding merely conceptual (sometimes abstract) representations that are, usually, more difficult to share and interpret.

The prototype and its findings

The access to the PBC would have to occur through an initial and public interface, embedded in the internal context of the organisation, and following the current university portal, to ease recognition of major interaction paradigms. It was suggested by some employees that this entry area should include highlights to relevant brand-related ideas and contributions from employees (providing them with public visibility as a means of recognition). This generic and public area, accessible to all audiences, would also make available and explicit what the university brand is, covering all the brand guidelines’ topics. Each topic would be described in its own page, with the contents related to it and with links that allow to further expand the information contained therein. As an example, the guidelines for colours are typically described using various colour systems and colour normalisations (CMYK, RGB, Pantone®, etc.). However, as this platform would be incorporating mostly non-specialised people, neither in brands, nor in design jargon, some users may not be able to interpret the technicality underlying this information; still, it was mentioned by several participants that it may be the case that some staff would like to learn what a “Pantone” is. Thus, it should be considered the possibility of broadening the knowledge about the subject through additional resources, e.g. available on the Web.

The access to the staff area would require a staff member login. As a consequence of using the interaction structure for brand artefacts co-design (Lelis & Mealha, 2015), this platform would equally comprise three main areas (Figure 2):
The Studio's main objective (first module in Figure 2) would be the orientation of individuals, providing them with opportunities for experimenting with tangible and visual attributes of the brand’s logo, and get an approximate sense of what its standards are, using a context of both simulation and playfulness. In the presented prototype, the Studio area allows the user to click, drag, import, using languages and forms of interaction very close to what they would be accustomed to as regular users of information and communication technologies (Figure 3).

Within the Studio, the user can either create sketches or experiment and exploit the graphic elements of the brand. The free creation and manipulation of own and/or shared sketches, and learning the norms that are inherent to and that govern the brand by trial and error, was very much appreciated by all the participants. This was, in fact, the most popular feature of the entire PBC: the platform would help the user in the process of brand experimentation, allowing the use of basic image editing tools and techniques, managing the constraints associated with the brand’s logo, and through a contextual user comprehensible traffic-light metaphor, issuing visual and written explanatory alerts should mistakes be detected (e.g. modified image ratio, lack of readability/contrast, unaccepted typography, etc.). Simultaneously, the user would be presented with the visualisation of correct uses and the options of decision to be made: ‘Amend as Suggested’, or ‘Ignore and Proceed’. Guidelines would, therefore, be provided where any visual elements of the brand logo/symbol were somehow misrepresented. However, the user would be free to follow on and continue their brand artefacts creation process, but already aware (hence, with developed brand design literacy) that their experience is not in compliance.
Community

Community (second module in Figure 2) is an internal and contextual social network, through which employees manage and share their contributions, and where they can also see, evaluate, comment and create links to their peers’ ideas (Figure 4). In this section, users have access to all artefacts that are published in the Community, by the community. They can filter these by using the PBC predefined categories used to name artefact galleries (such as ‘merchandise’, ‘learning & teaching resources’, ‘entertainment’, ‘end-of-year showcase’), or any other labels associated to occasional activities, launched by the institution to promote, for example, participation.

In these circumstances, the PBC would cumulatively be the repository of all unofficial brand artefacts of greater or lesser applicability. The FG participants found it interesting but were intrigued with the purpose of storing “not-in-compliance” cases. It was then clarified that, in this prototype, one of the predefined categories was titled Pirate, intended to bring together all the brand artefacts designed by employees and which, deliberately, did not follow the brand standards or brand values. It was further explained to the participants that, depending on the organisation and its culture, it might be interesting to save and retrieve such records, which may, in certain moments, turn out to be great ideas, grounded on the perspective that current standards are not, necessarily, the ones of tomorrow. Users can also participate in the artefact’s evaluation process using assessing languages common to Social Media, such as Like, Emoticons, Favourites, five-star rankings, insertion of comments, among others. Interestingly, one of the participants mentioned she would like to have a Dislike option available, to allow “a more rigorous evaluation”.

Explorer

Finally, the Explorer (third module of Figure 2), allows activity monitoring and analysis according to interest criteria, such as the number of users participating in one’s design and evaluation process, the links/interactions established between contributors, the authors involved in a creation, the most recurrent categories, the validation status of their artefacts, among others (Figure 5).
The FGs confirmed that the university brand is highly cherished among staff but there is an apparent inability to understand and relate with the brand guidelines that were made available after its redesign: all participants had experienced compelling situations when using the brand’s logo, for not understanding basic design principles. Therefore, participants were very positive mostly regarding the Studio feature that they considered “extremely innovative” and “really helpful”. Its perceived playfulness linked to the development of design skills were seen as the most relevant aspects of the entire platform. However, such a system is useless without proper recognition and incentive actions — through which a culture of knowledge development and sharing would be awarded and promoted — as much as a reasonable amount of time dedicated to activities that could easily fall within staff development plans, including, in this case, the development of design literacy.

Discussion

The ultimate intention of this research was to propose a participatory design platform that would integrate, in a multi-directional way, internal branding activities, conceptualised in accordance with participatory design assumptions, providing a context in which design literacy could be developed and where the creation of brand-related and design-informed artefacts could be carried out with the participation of any employee.

A pedagogical dimension is needed to raise employees’ brand awareness, which does not happen if investments are limited to unidirectional and imposing communicational approaches, such as through the provision of prescriptive templates. Thus, this instructional informal learning domain should promote and clarify what the brand is – because a brand is, foremost, the result of a design exercise – and the employee would be given the opportunity to embark into an actual design process as an insider.

When employees are invited to assess brand-related ideas provided by other members of their community, these processes must be as transparent as possible, for staff to have a very concrete idea of the value of their own contribution (not only in the design of potentially valuable artefacts, but also in the scrutiny of artefacts designed by others), allowing the community to a) know more and better its brand and how it should be applied in its various contexts of use, and to b) understand the immense design possibilities every brand entails. And, although described in a linear fashion, the interaction structure is always iterative (as depicted in Figure 2).

There is some preliminary evidence of the supporting model's potential, but not enough to completely validate it as a structure to support design literacy. The process of participation, which is, by its very nature, a social and communicational process, enhances, from a cognitive perspective, the flow and use of brand-related information existing in the organisation, hence constantly creating new knowledge, potentially contributing to more design literate individuals: those able to code and decode functional, aesthetic, symbolic and socially responsible artefacts.

It should be noted that a technological resource based on participatory design would demand a) tactics to reduce the perceived effort associated with participation in such a resource, aimed at avoiding frustrations and irreversible withdrawals, and b) a moderator, able to ignore the entropy and noise that will escort some of the contributions, making use of his/her own brand and design-related experience to systematise, (re)categorise and, eventually, validate ideas. A designer would be in the best possible position to assume such job, which would be very much aligned with some of the actions listed on the Report and Recommendations of the European Design Leadership Board (European Commission, 2012), namely:

- **Strategic Design Action 2**, “Positioning design within the European innovation system”, namely through “the public procurement of innovative solutions through the recognition, inclusion and implementation of design as a driver of user-centred innovation” (recommendation 9),
- **Strategic Design Action 3**, “Design for innovative and competitive enterprises” by recognising “training for generating world-class specialist and skilled crafts-people in traditional and emerging sectors with an increased awareness of design, as a driver of growth and job creation” (recommendation 15),
- **Strategic Design Action 4**, “Design for an innovative public sector”, considering the HE context, by increasing “the use of design/designers in public sector innovation” (recommendation 16) and
• Strategic Design Action 6, “Design competencies for the 21st century”, by increasing the level of design literacy for all the citizens of Europe by fostering a culture of design learning for all at every level of the education system” (recommendation 20).

Undoubtedly there is a societal challenge involved in this project: as publicly funded institutions, many European Universities do not rely on their low or inexistent fees to keep themselves active. For this reason, one may say that it is ethically correct to conceptualise systems that allow the received public money to be spent more with research and social services and less with outsourced agencies, especially when, sustainability-wise, a design school is one of the institution’s faculties. There is also a dilemma, which was addressed by some of the FG participants: freedom to create and to have a voice vs. intellectual property and authorship. The public area and the Community space were thought to, in a way, mitigate this, by providing contributors with full visibility, especially when their ideas were to advance to production stages. Finally, it is a complex problem as it involves multiple stakeholders with different views, potentially leading to conflicts concerning the nature of the platform and its solutions: on one hand, the employees, happy to engage with the suggested activities, on the other, the outsourced agency and designers that may feel their role is being minimised and taken from them.

As major limitation, this research used a single case study approach within the very specific sector of academia, in one country only. Nevertheless, the findings were presented to and discussed with eight communication directors and human resources managers from commercial companies (three of them among the biggest in Portugal and at least five fairly well internationalised). Out of the eight, seven found the approach very relevant for their own staff development context and one wanted to implement it straight away. In addition to this, the Studio area was designed to explore the experimentation of design principles based on interactions with the brand’s logo only, which, although permitting a considerable array of applications involving other design specialisms, is in fact only one of the several design resources a brand encompasses, hence, much more can be investigated within the same context and loyal to the same brand-based rationale. A functional prototype and a longitudinal, multi-institutional context study would gauge the implications and possible reciprocity between the development of brand knowledge and design literacy and the proposed platform.

Conclusion

Most of the existing work on internal branding is conceptual and based on small-scale studies grounded on managers’ views, rarely shedding light on design as a pivotal activity for brand success. Staff development activities that involve and motivate them to participate in the construction of brand artefacts are not design-led and tend to be individualistic, centred on the result achieved by each individual, without systematically contemplating the possibility of collective creation, nor of sharing. In addition to this, research in PD covering the design process of brands is reduced, if not non-existent.

The number of studies on the introduction of CMC resources to support brand awareness is also limited; online brand centres are typically unidirectional, only allowing the download of brand-associated features, and the completion of forms as means to request further information. Some research has been done on the contextual analysis of online platforms that have been used by big corporations to promote both the collection of brand strategy-led ideas from employees and the appropriate usage of the brand’s visual system, but no holistic ecologies were found supporting a combination of these activities. Finally, no studies were found where an explicit combination between a brand’s design artefacts and the development of design literacy is established whatsoever.

This research contributed to a better understanding of the potential that brand artefacts may have in the development of design literacy among staff, enhanced by the strong ties these develop with the brand they represent. Moreover, predictably, systems such as the presented can bring 1) a change in participation patterns and shared opportunities to express opinions and make decisions and 2) the democratisation of innovation, capitalising individual or collective brand-related and design-informed user-generated content, which can, potentially, be applied in the official brands’ product/service development, communication and marketing throughout, in a sustainable way.
References


