Visual identity in organisations and impact on employees' motivation: a case study in a governmental organisation

A identidade visual nas organizações e o impacto na motivação de funcionários: um estudo de caso em uma organização governamental



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# ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to investigate whether the motivation of individuals in teams changes when organisations adopt a visual identity. The study is contextualised by theoretical references and conducts a case study with a team involved in the process of creating the project's visual identity in a public institution. The study concludes that the respondents' behaviour was motivationally enhanced due to the symbolic burden that the visual identity brought to the team, especially at the time of its approval and to a lesser extent during its use. Finally, the article highlights the importance of the designer's role as a strategic element in enhancing organisational performance.

#### **KEYWORDS**

visual identity; motivation; organisations;

#### **RESUMO**

Este artigo busca verificar se há alteração na motivação de indivíduos em equipes quando organizações instituem uma identidade visual. O estudo é contextualizado por meio de referenciais teóricos e realiza um estudo de caso com uma equipe que participou do processo de criação da identidade visual do projeto que trabalham em uma instituição pública. A pesquisa concluiu que houve um incremento motivacional no comportamento dos pesquisados pelo motivo da carga simbólica que a identidade visual trouxe para a equipe, em maior grau, no momento da sua aprovação e, em menor proporção, ao longo do seu uso. Por fim, o artigo traz à tona a importância do papel designer como peça estratégica para o incremento da performance organizacional.

#### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Materiais, Sustentabilidade, Design, Ensino, Histórias em quadrinhos

### **INTRODUCTION**

Visual identity (VI) and its components, such as symbol, logo, colours and typography, have almost always been studied in the literature because of their influence on consumer behaviour. On the other hand, the organisational environment also experiences behavioural changes through the introduction of VIs. Few studies have looked at this internal influence, while there is even less literature looking at the impact of visual identity on changing employee behaviour. As a contribution to a better understanding of this topic, this study investigates whether employee motivation changes from the time the visual identity is approved and also during its use.

The aim of this study is to examine the emotions perceived by employees before and after the approval of the VI and, in this way, assess whether there is a relationship between the emotions reported before and after the application of the identity and the change in the team's behaviour. The study will also investigate whether employees perceived motivational changes when the visual identity was introduced and during its application.

To achieve this aim, a case study was conducted on the Visual Identity designed for the National Strategy for Invasive Exotic Species (ENEEI) programme launched by the Brazilian federal government. The research technique chosen was the semi-structured interview, in which four members of the ENEEI team were interviewed in three blocks of thematic questions. In this article, questions about feelings and perceptions of behaviour change after the approval of the VI are presented. The reason for this is that user motivation has been placed at the centre of the article in order to better understand the relationship between visual identities and behaviour change in public institutions.

In addition, this text allows for a discussion of the strategic role that the graphic designer can play in organisations by recognising the effectiveness of their technical work in improving the motivation of individuals and teams. Following the reading of the theoretical framework, terms and contexts belonging to the knowledge areas of design and organisational management are introduced. Based on this information framework, we then present the case study and the discussion of the results obtained, before concluding the study with the final considerations.

### 2 VISUAL IDENTITY IN ORGANISATIONS

Visual identity is the combination of graphic elements that make up the visual personality of a name, idea, product, or service. (STRUNK, 2012) We can therefore say that we are dealing with a visual identity when a name or idea is visually represented to create a distinction through its unique visual elements, characterised by a logo (i.e. the nominal part of the logo consisting of fonts), a symbol, colours and typography.

These key elements that make up VI are developed by the designer from the result of a series of steps that enable intangible assets, such as reputation, belief, trust and story, to be transformed into tangible assets, such as logo, symbol, colours, packaging, signage and much more. In this way, these tangible visual entities must meet aesthetic, practical and symbolic requirements to represent the brand effectively. (SZABLUK and VAN DER LINDEN, 2018)

Therefore, one of the main goals of visual singularisation, formed by a planned system organised and integrated by visual elements, is the recognition and memorisation of the visual representation. In order to obtain symbolic associations that translate the values of the company, it is necessary to seek a clear and objective visual identification. (PEÓN, 2000) "A symbol is an image of a company, institution or idea that must convey, by a clear statement or by suggestion, the activity it represents", according to Norman Ives (translated from MEGGS, 2009, p.529), a leading author in the field of corporate design, who in 1960 described the task of the designer in creating identities in organisations.

Thus, the design professional, when creating the visual identity project, must include visual elements that reflect the company's culture and values, in order to generate physical and tangible recognition for the organization. (BARTHOLMÉ; MELEWAR, 2011)

# 2.1 VI and its influence on employee behaviour

Today's world is characterised by the exchange of information with symbolic content between people and organisations. Image formation is a subjective, unique process related to the experiences of individuals and, at the same time, to the sum of perceptions, sensations and relationships of social actors. In other words, organisational image is characterised by a holistic impression within an organisation. It can be considered a work in progress, as it is receptive and changeable, i.e. it is subject to change and the addition of new information. Furthermore, the symbolic meaning of the image may or may not change depending on the way in which and consistency with which new information is released, and how it is received and perceived. (ALMEIDA, 2009)

Both identity and image are processes in the construction of meaning, considering that organisational identity is a symbolic construction of itself and image represents interpretations of a given reality. As De Toni (2009, translate from Portuguese, p.235) explains, "images are one of the most important intellectual materials of human beings, as they can influence and guide their behaviour". The image of an organisation is therefore considered important for the functioning of that organisation because it is related to the reactions expressed in the attitudes and behaviours of the members of the organisation. It therefore has an affective effect, because by informing about the characteristics of an organisation, it can stimulate and sustain alliances between its teams, potential members and stakeholders.

In this way, many decisions made by individuals in the external and internal environment of the organisation depend on the image they have of it. These decisions can also lead to a variety of behaviours within the organisation, such as: motivation for a job well done; willingness to work in teams; effort dedicated to achieving organisational goals; favourable positioning in spreading a positive image, and cooperation and solidarity in times of crisis (DE TONI, 2009).

Furthermore, when visual identity in organisations is intentional, planned and professionally executed, each element of the VI (e.g. brand, environment, product/service and communication) is designed to indicate the style of the organisation in order to convey meanings that constitute the symbolic material that gives meaning to the purpose of the organisation. (ALMEIDA, 2009)

However, according to Stern, Zinkhan and Jaju (2001), the creation of this symbolism in service firms, such as those studied in this paper, can be a crucial factor in influencing decision-making due to the intangible nature of the product. Therefore, making employees aware of corporate symbols and their meanings is essential (Berry 2000), as the visual aspect of identity reflects the culture and values of the institution and should strategically guide employee motivation.

In this paper, the case study reported in the next section and the analysis of the data obtained from the survey will be used to verify whether there is a direct link between the creation and application of the VI of a public programme and a change in the behaviour of the employees who were involved in the design of the identity and are still in daily contact with it.

# 3 CASE STUDY: NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR **INVASIVE EXOTIC SPECIES**

To explore the impact of the visual identity system on employee motivation, a case study was conducted on the visual identity of the National Invasive Exotic Species Strategy - ENEEl programme (Figure 1). The programme, which was launched in 2018 in a federal agency and will run for 12 years, was chosen for the study presented here because it fits the assumptions of the study and because it is easier for one of the authors of this article to have access to the team interviewed and to the data and history related to the creation of the visual identity. The case, study method, results and discussion are described below.

Figure 1: ENEEI logo and application of visual identity in promotional materials





Source: By the authors.

# 3.1 The Visual Identity of the National Strategy for **Invasive Exotic Species**

The National Strategy on Invasive Exotic Species aims to control or eradicate invasive exotic species and guide the implementation of measures to prevent the introduction and spread of invasive exotic species and significantly reduce their impact on Brazil's biodiversity and ecosystem services. ENEEI is structured into six components aimed at developing the management and governance of exotic species in Brazil. An implementation plan has also been prepared, which is part of the national strategy. It contains priority actions divided into six components that guide the strategy.

The sixth component of the ENEEI with the theme "Environmental Education and Communication" aims to develop environmental education and communication initiatives on invasive exotic species and their impacts for different target groups. Furthermore, one of the specific objectives of this component is to propose and implement measures and communication strategies to raise public awareness on this issue.

In order to start implementing this action and due to the need to publicise the ENEEI, the staff within the public entity that were responsible for the agenda proposed to create the visual identity of the National Strategy. The designer responsible for creating the identity also worked in the department and had extensive experience in creating logos and corporate visual identities, having worked as the coordinator of the institution's core communications consultancy before joining the staff of the department responsible for the exotic species agenda.

At the beginning of the VI production process, a briefing meeting was held with the team to obtain the guidelines, the expectations of the results, and the tangible and intangible impressions of objective and subjective importance that the professional should take into account in the production of the visual identity. Then, based on the observations made by the group in the previous phase, two different proposals were elaborated. One of them was unanimously chosen by the team members. During the meeting, some specific changes to the approved visual identity were also requested, for example in the colour tones of some shapes of the symbol.

To complete the production process of VI, the ENEEI Visual Identity Manual was created and presented, containing all the rules for the application of the logo, such as standard and secondary typology, horizontal and vertical version of the mark, colour palette, application grid, variations in one shade and greyscale, and prohibitions for the use and application of the VI.

In order to investigate whether the behaviour of the members of the exotic invasive team has changed with the establishment of the VI of the ENEEI, this study will conduct an empirical analysis of the group's responses to the questions posed by the researcher based on a semistructured interview.

### 3.2 Method

In order to test the validity of the hypothesis that staff work motivation has changed due to the implementation of the visual identity of the National Invasive Exotic Species Strategy (ENEEI), semistructured interviews were conducted with all five members of the exotic species team of the Species Department of the Ministry of Environment.

All interviews were conducted via Google Meet and with the consent of all participants, and the meetings were recorded, taking place in

March 2022. The nine questions were divided into three blocks, each consisting of three questions. In the first block, entitled 'The choice of VI", we sought to understand how each interviewee perceived aspects of the logo production process (briefing, approval and final delivery) and what tangible and intangible attributes of the chosen logo influenced the approval of the visual identity.

In the second block, "The use of the logo over time and changes in behaviour", the questions aimed to understand whether the motivation of the exotic invaders team has changed since the creation of the brand and during its use. The last block, "The impact of IV on actors outside the team", aimed to verify whether the introduction of the logo had, according to the interviewees, had an impact on the species conservation department and the actors within the national strategy.

Of the five participants, only one was not involved in the logo production, as she only joined the team at the end of 2020, when the visual identity had already been established. Therefore, due to the lack of previous history, this person was invited to participate in a pilot study that integrated the last two blocks of questions applied to the other respondents, which were not directly related to the VI approval process - a step that this person did not witness. Otherwise, the answers from the pilot interview were discarded when measuring the results.

The following section presents the results of the interviews on the questions asked in block 2: "The use of the logo over time and the change in behaviour", which aimed to explore the motivation and feelings of the respondents in specific temporal situations that are the focus of this article.

### 3.3 Results

In order not to identify the respondents, the names of the individual members are given with the letters of the alphabet A, B, C and D. Then the main thoughts of each member are explained to highlight the similarities and differences between their answers. The purpose of the block of questions was to check whether respondents had noticed any changes in their behaviour over time in applying the VIs approved for the Strategy. The results are broken down by question below.

## 3.3.1 Motivation through the approval of the VI

With the first question, we wanted to find out if the motivation of the ENEEI team members was influenced in any way when the visual identity was approved. Participants B, C and D confirmed the influence of the establishment of the logo on motivation. According to interviewee B, his biggest motivation came from "the perception that the work agenda has become more professional with the introduction of the logo." As an example, he mentioned the emails and messages sent with the IDV application.

A greater motivation for perceiving more professionalism was also noted by respondents C and D. The former reported that the issue was more obvious as the promotional materials were labelled and stamped with the constructed identity. Finally, the respondent stated that the theme with VI gives the impression of greater seriousness, competence and a longer duration of the project compared to an agenda that does not have an established brand. Furthermore, VI gives implicit power to the agenda and professionalises it.

Participant D added that the beauty of the brand and the layout work on the materials enhanced ENEEI's products, giving a greater impression of importance and professionalism of the agenda, which motivated him more. He also mentioned that "from the moment the logo is put on different agenda materials, the VI is strengthened and gives a sense of belonging".

Interviewee A stated that his professional motivation did not change, although he admitted that his interest and motivation for routine tasks such as sending emails to the National Strategy staff was aroused as the layout of electronic messages was boring before the VI, and this changed with the logo as the parts forwarded to the partners now receive more attention.

## 3.3.2 Motivation in the use of VI

The second question in this block was intended to investigate whether individuals felt more motivated over the course of one and a half years of using the logo after its implementation. Respondents B and D felt more motivated during this period. Participant B said that his motivation came from the association of the logo with the work plan.

Respondents A and C reported that they did not perceive any major motivation. However, respondent A reported that the VI "awakened the spirit, brought more spirit and made ENEEI's communication more attractive". Respondent C said that he had difficulty answering the question as many factors had influenced his motivation since the launch of the brand. However, when analysing the general context, he did not feel more motivated, as "the current situation in the country seems to be unfavourable for motivation". On the other hand, according to respondent C, his motivation would probably have decreased even more if the strategy logo had not been produced. So the VI acted as a buffer or a means to cushion his drop in income, and the small gains the agenda made over the period provided some motivation, but his continues to drop.

# 3.3.3 Qualification of feelings towards work before and after the production of VI

The third and final question of the block aimed to qualify the team members' motivation before and after the production of the logo. The four members expressed different views on this issue. Interviewee A stated that before the VI production, everything was "black and white". Afterwards, he said, the brand brought more life and awareness to ENEEI's communication. Interviewee B, on the other hand, confessed that since the introduction of the logo, he finds his work "more chic". Another impression he described was that the logo gave the project an aspect of greater duration and solidity, i.e. that it gave, in his opinion, the institution's approval of this work agenda and that it therefore provided the impression that the project would last longer and would not suddenly die out.

Nevertheless, Participant C said that he "felt a greater sense of professionalism with the establishment of the VI, especially because the agenda had previously been abandoned". After resuming the agenda and production of the brand, he noted that "the theme gained the impression of greater seriousness, professionalism and longevity". According to the interviewee, which is in line with Participant B's opinion, the construction of the VI also helps to anchor the agenda, as the logo gives the impression that it is more difficult to abandon it. In this way, the brand would act as an anchor that takes the issue seriously.

Finally, Interviewee D said that "before the logo there was a sense of greater dilettantism, and now the strategy has a colour palette that makes all the materials nicer. This even strengthens the relationship with partners who notice the change and take the agenda more seriously".

### 4 Discussion

We begin this section by interpreting the answers to the last block of questions. Next, we will analyse the first two blocks jointly. This method has the intention of logical concatenation of arguments and thoughts, so that the third block of questions demonstrates the cause and origin of the phenomenon reported in the other blocks - motivation. Table 1 shows the feelings reported by the interviewees before and after the creation of the visual identity for the ENEEI. It is possible to identify that there was mention of positive feelings, such as "highlight", "solidity", "professionalism" and "seriousness", by team members when asked about their emotions after the VI approval process.

Table 1: Feelings reported by respondents in the moments before the VI and after the VI

**Employee feelings** 

#### **PARTICIPANTS** Before the VI After the VI Α black and white highlight solidity В professionalism C abandon D

amateurism

Source: Interview with members of the ENEEI team

seriousness

This situation shows the importance of creating and properly using symbols, the logo and its variations that come together in the visual identity, with the aim that the organisation creates and transmits the meanings used in its communication to represent the symbolic material that gives meaning to the purpose of the organisation and transmits it internally. (HATCH; SCHUTZ, 2000)

However, for employees to internalise and report such feelings in order to express the emotional experience they had, they had to be guided by stimuli involving attention and perception, also known as bottom-up processes, as shown by Eysenck and Keane (2017). Furthermore, the same authors show that this emotional recognition by the team depends on processes involving the evaluation of the situation based on knowledge stored in the history of similar situations they have already experienced, a scenario resulting from top-down processes.

Comparing the terms mentioned by three of the four participants, which are constant in the column "before the VI", with the feelings indicated in the column "after the VI", it can be concluded that for the group studied, the VI has contributed to changing the image of the organisation from negative to positive aspects. Almeida (2009) also states that image formation in organisations is a subjective, unique process related to individual experiences and, at the same time, formed by the sum of the feelings, perceptions and relationships of the social actors.

The author also explains that, as in the case studied, this positive image refers to an impression that is experienced holistically in the organisation. Part of it is the result of a process of constructing meaning that is carried out by the employees, a situation that can be linked to the active participation of the entire ENEEI team in the briefing and approval phase of the logo, a fact already reported in this research.

Therefore, the evaluation of positive feelings towards the work agenda may also be related to the communication processes carried out by the work agenda, whether these are formal or informal, with greater or lesser control, in a systematic way or not, and in a sporadic or constant manner, explains Almeida (2009). This condition occurred in the example studied, as the use of visual identity in the Strategy's

promotional materials created a greater perception of professionalism, respectability, prominence and solidity by team members, which can also be observed in greater detail in the testimonies transcribed in the previous topic.

On the other hand, according to Eysenck and Keane (2017), cognitive processes influence when and which emotional states are experienced in a given situation. They consider situation appraisal to be the most important of these processes. Appraisal theories assume that "emotional responses are generated when the body evaluates the relevance of environmental changes to its well-being" (BROSCH, 2013, p.370). This statement is consistent with the differences in the answers given by the respondents when they were asked about their feelings at two different moments they experienced in the organisation, namely before the creation of ENEEI's visual identity and after its implementation.

Looking at the responses in Table 2, we can see that most team members felt motivated when the logo was released. However, only half of the group noted greater motivation over time when using the VI. This result is consistent with the observations of Eysenck and Keane (2017) in the sense that our perception, memory, interpretation of language and decisions are influenced by emotional factors.

Table 2: Identifying employee motivation when approving VI and throughout its use

PARTICIPANTS	At VI approval	Throughout VI use
Α	NO	NO
В	YES	YES
С	YES	NO
D	YES	YES

# The employee felt more motivated

Source: Interview with members of the ENEEI team

The analysis of the responses in the first column "the employee felt more motivated when the VI was approved", in which three of the four participants felt more motivated, can begin with an observation by Lester (1995, p. 73): "Visual messages are a powerful form of communication because they stimulate intellectual and emotional responses - they make us think as well as feel." Thus, we can say that employees felt greater motivation at the beginning of using the visual identity, not only because of the novelty factor, but also as a result of the feelings that arose when comparing the scenarios before and after setting up the VI, as mentioned above.

Barry (1998) explains that the emotional reaction comes first, so that below the level of rational consciousness the individual begins to react emotionally to the visual environment before they can analyse it critically. This prompt emotional reaction can also be related to the responses in the first column of Table 2, because in the responses from the interviews conducted, it can be seen that the team members were positively surprised, especially by the greater perception of professionalism that the team found in the institution's VI.

Moreover, as Parkinson (2011) notes, these feelings largely arise from active social interaction and are also influenced by the emotional responses of others. Moreover, from the positive reaction of most respondents, we can conclude that there may have been an emotional contagion among team members, which in turn may have triggered a motivational chain reaction among respondents.

Also, in the second column of Table 2, "the employee felt more motivated while using the VI", we see that there was a division between the responses of the ENEEI members, that is, half of the interviewees felt more motivated and the other half did not. Thus, Weber (1978) and Berger and Luckman (1985) help us to understand these results, since they verified in their sociological studies that the image of an organization is defined as "real" to the extent that there is an adherence on the part of the individual. Consequently, this exerts a programmatic effect on him; that is, for half of the interviewees, the initial motivation, verified in the answers of the first column of Table 2, remained. In this way, the motivation of these individuals, initially the result of the emotion that started with the approval of the visual identity, crystallized and became part of their work routine, through the use of VI.

However, one of these respondents experienced a change in his motivation, while external and internal factors influenced the decline of this variable, as we can see from Participant C's responses transcribed in the previous section. Baudrillard (1972) contributes to our understanding of this change in interest reported by the participant, as the author states that the very essence of the organisation is not a true reality, but rather an image that the individual makes of this reality. Thus, in the case studied, the initially reported motivation was altered due to environmental conditions unrelated to the work in such a way that a new, less exciting reality became part of its existence.

On the other hand, it can be noted that participant A did not mention feeling more motivated when the VI was approved and during its use, either in the first or in the second answer. As a theoretical basis for understanding this scenario, De Toni (2009) states that the information that each individual receives comes from their beliefs, sensations and feelings. For this reason, and referring to the respondent's answers, it can be said that his motivation was not changed by the VI, as he experienced different processing on the three levels mentioned above from the other participants, throughout the process of identity creation up to its daily use.

#### **5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

From the results of the interviews, obtained both through the feelings and through the verification of the motivation stated by the ENEEI team members, it can be confirmed that the motivation of the employees increased with the approval of the visual identity of the ENEEI and, to a lesser extent, during its application. Moreover, based on the analysis of the responses, it is considered that the image created by the staff since the creation of a VI for the agenda they are working with is constantly changing, since the symbolism created by its elements - symbol, logo, colours, applications etc. - is receptive and changeable (ALMEIDA, 2009), so their meanings change according to the life and work history of each team member.

The contribution of this study to the field of design goes beyond examining the motivational factor in the ENEEI team from the institution and the use of VI. The study also brought confirmation of greater engagement in the work environment through the perception of employees' feelings after the moment of change, i.e. after the approval of the visual identity.

However, the word cloud (Figure 2) created from the respondents' answers to the three questions illustrates how comprehensive the meaning reported by the team was, and shows, as De Toni (2009, p. 243) states, that "the links between the data that compose a mental image become stronger and tighter through the operations of frequency, recency and vividness".

Figure 2: Word cloud



Source: Created on the online platform https://wordart.com, based on respondents' answers.

Therefore, the image, emotions and motivations perceived by the team in carrying out this study will be constantly modified and supplemented by new information, as the symbolic meaning carried by the VI may change. This will depend on the mode and constancy with which the new information is sent and how it is cognitively processed by the individuals in a first moment and by the group in a second moment.

This meaning-making process is continuous and subject to change through the actions and reactions of the organisation and the internal public. However, it appears that if the visual identity is consistent with the team working on the agenda, so that the VI represents the values and principles of the group, members will be more motivated to work, and this performance improvement can radiate outwards to other groups and hierarchical levels within the institution.

Another contribution of this study is therefore to analyse the role of the designer in organisations. According to Meggs (2009), design must be an integral part of the overall corporate activity in order to achieve visual continuity as a creative force and to reflect the overall corporate character. Therefore, the role of the designer should be considered strategic by the top management of institutions, because designers must not only develop complex graphic systems, but also manage the flow of information and the use of visual identity to help express and define the essence of the organisation, showing that even the image of a programme, action or event in the organisation can be created or redefined through design.

On the other hand, according to the results of the interviews and the analyses carried out as part of the research, there is an urgent need to appreciate and recognise the technical work done institutionally by designers, as colours, images, lines, symbols and texts are integrated through the work of these professionals. In this way, they are interpreted by the internal public as a significant whole, in order to increase individual motivation and improve company performance, as in the case studied.

The research presented in this article was conducted through a case study that took place in a programme within a public organisation. Such a singular context poses a limitation on the generalisation of the results obtained, but at the same time leaves room for further research of this kind in other environments and situations, such as private companies or other instances of public power. Finally, future studies that want to test the relationship between motivation and visual identity in organisations can use quantitative methods, such as questionnaires with scalable questions and answers about perceived changes in behaviour based on the application of visual identity, at the organisational, team and individual levels.

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