

# Exploring, Interpreting, and Applying Emotional-Driven Design in Brand Identity Development: A Design Student Case Study

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is a descriptive and qualitative case study of the emotional brand identity design process of an educational experience. The main goal concerns the exploration of methods, techniques, and approaches that visual communication design students use to interpret and apply emotion-driven design to two client-sponsored brand identity development projects—Center for Automotive Research and The Supreme Court of the Ohio. The participants in this study include twenty senior level students of a design program at a major university, the general public, the prospective users, and representatives from the client organizations.

This study examines the design and application of a range of tools and methods for expressing, capturing, and applying emotion-driven experience to a brand identity development process from the design students' perspectives during a 10-week academic quarter. In this case study, the emotional branding course outline utilized visual communication design problem-solving processes defined by four key design phases: Discovery Research, Design Definition, Design Concept, and Design Demonstration/Expression. The researchers of this study formulated a framework for the presentation of the various emotion-driven design tools based on adaptations of a reliable body of knowledge of pertinent literature. This study identifies emotion-driven design issues of concern to the participants and discusses the influences of these concerns on the design development of the selected projects.

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper is a descriptive case study of the emotional brand identity design process of an educational experience. The main goal concerns the methods, techniques, and approaches that design students use to explore, interpret, and apply emotion-driven design to client-sponsored brand identity development projects. The key participants of this study are undergraduate seniors of a Visual Communication Design major. Useful data are also collected from course instructors, the general public, and representatives from the sponsored clients and their audiences. Additional references in emotional branding and brand identity design are adapted from the reliable body of knowledge of pertinent literature and shared practice of the design professions.

## EMOTIONAL BRANDING

A brand is “a name, term, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, which is intended to signify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors” as described by Philip Kotler in his classic marketing textbook (1984, p. 482). The term “branding” became an integrated part of the marketing, business, and design language since *The Economist’s* December 24, 1988 cover story, “The Year of the Brand,” brought the attention of “Brand” to a broader audience. As new brand theories and strategies developed, the contemporary brand has been elevated to more than the functional aspects of “what the company is” or “what makes it different.” Brands are now perceived and interpreted on an emotional level (Gobé, 2002; Travis, 2000). By emotional, brand consultant Marc Gobé describes it as “how a brand engages consumers on the level of the sense and emotions; how a brand comes to life for people and forges a deeper, lasting connection” (2002, p. xiv).

Emotional branding is about “the wisdom of brands” (Travis, 2000, p. xiii). It’s about rational strategy and creative thinking in developing, building, and managing the brand to build loyalty, drive perceived quality, provide differentiation, and create credibility. David Arnold, educator and business consultant, identified three key elements of a brand: Attributes, Benefits, and Essence (1993). Brand Essence is the focal point of his brand framework that reflects the “personality” of the brand. The essence of a brand is the ultimate benefit to the customer that the brand emphasizes, and it is what the customers emotionally connect with or experience in using the brand.

Different schemes of branding are constructed by practitioners based on the size, scale, and complexity of different branding development cycles and scenarios (Wheeler, 2003). The scheme in Figure 1 presents the relationship of three key elements of a brand: brand perception of customers, brand experience by customers, and brand promise to customers (Chan, Molitor & O’Brien, 2000). Brand attributes are key components that create the perception of the company—who we are; they are the qualities or characteristics that the brand should personify in the way it interacts with its customers and employees. Brand tone of voice, brand attitude, and brand image are the three main components that evoke the customer’s brand experience. When perception and experience of the

components that evoke the customer’s brand experience. When perception and experience of the brand resonate and are in balance, a core promise is stated. A brand promise statement embodies the essence that sums up the total customer experience (Travis, 2000). Ultimately, how the brand speaks, how the brand acts, and how the brand looks are keys to the success of an emotional branding program.

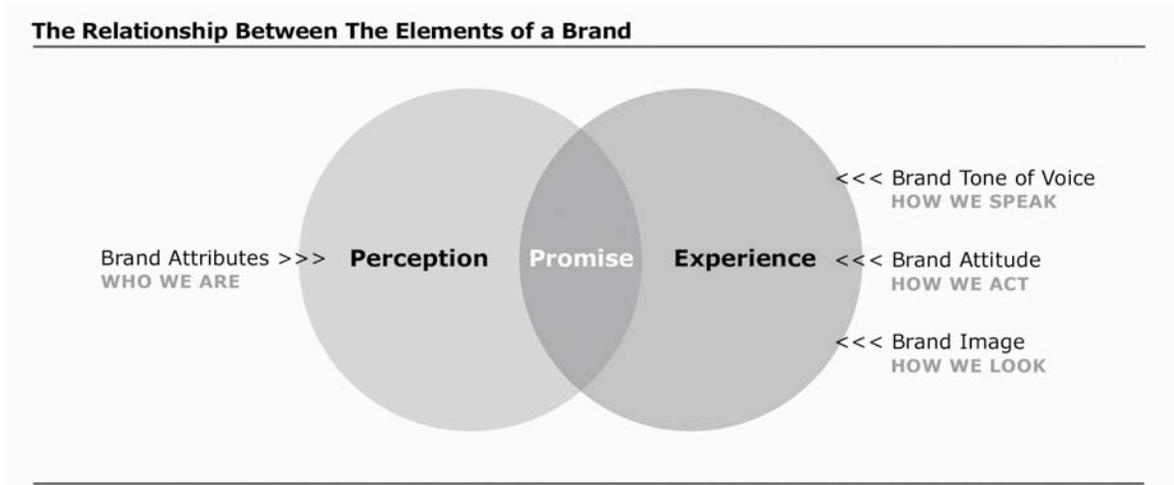


Figure 1: The Relationship Between the Elements of a Brand

**CLASS DESIGN AND COURSE OUTLINE**

In this case study, the emotional branding course outline was based on an adaptation of visual communication design problem-solving processes (Chan, 2003) that are defined by four key design phases during a 10-week academic quarter: Discovery Research, Design Definition, Design Concept, and Design Demonstration/Expression. These processes emphasize the user-centered and iterative design approach that starts with understanding the business goals, core value proposition, market, and mission statement of the sponsored organizations. Then, in the second phase, the approach progresses to identifying the brand attributes and brand strategy. The third phase progresses to developing brand identity design concepts, and finally demonstrating the brand expression to a range of hypothetical touch point applications in the design demonstration phase. Throughout the course, students are introduced to theory, principles and case examples of emotional branding with focuses on designing a brand identity mark and graphic system that reflect the defined brand perception, experience, and essence of the sponsored clients.

The class was divided into 10 collaborative teams with an average of two students per team. Five teams were assigned to one sponsored organization (The Supreme Court of Ohio) and the other five teams to a second sponsored client (The Ohio State University, Center for Automotive Research and Intelligent Transportation Research—CAR-IT). This arrangement allowed the teams who worked on sponsor-one to observe sponsor-two teams, and vice versa. In this way they could observe how they approached the design problems of different emotion and brand cycle scenarios. The course

was a combination of studio and seminar-style, incorporating class discussions, face-to face peer reviews, lectures, written and oral presentations, group work sessions, individual and group meetings, field trips, and required readings. At the end of each design phase, each team summarized the outcomes of each brand process with an oral and visual presentation accompanied with a printed report to the clients, the class, and design instructors. Sponsor clients met with the instructors after each presentation to discuss the progress and design of each team. The authors conducted two additional discussion sessions, one on week two and one on week eight of the quarter, to collect each team's experience with emotional branding design. A summary of these findings is presented in the following Discussion.

## **RESULTS/DISCUSSION**

### **Discovery Research**

The main objective of the first phase was for the students to understand the sponsored organization and the project goal. Each client conducted an introduction workshop at their respective facility during the first week of the class. The students were able to see the products and the environment, and most importantly to meet with key management, staff, and individuals who were affiliated with the organization. These interactions allowed the students to collect useful information regarding vision, mission, value, culture, history, products, services, market, competitors, expertise, and the existing brand identity program.

The students applied various research tools and methodologies they had learned previously in their junior design research class to collect internal (client) and external (market) perspectives of the sponsored organization. These tools included interviews, surveys, observations, usability testing, literature reviews, and audits. Not every team utilized the same set of research tools; however, most teams gathered a large amount of information. The course instructors formulated a framework (Figure 2) for each design team to use in organizing key data. The framework emphasized the internal client perspective on one side, the external market perspective (i.e., audience) on the other side, and the student/designer's interpretation and analysis in the middle column. Across the three columns, four specific content zones were identified as: cognitive/today, cognitive/future, emotional/today, and emotional/future. The "cognitive" data describes what the participant "knows" and the "emotional" data describes what the participant "feels." The students gathered information from historical facts, statistical figures, the mission statement, brochures, the Web site, comments, opinions, and strategy reports as "cognitive" level data. They grouped what they gathered in stories, body language, associations, metaphorical descriptions, personal expressions, memories, wishes, want-to-be statements and even humorous jokes as "emotional" level data.

The framework also served as a unified format across all teams for presenting their research findings to the class and clients. In the interviews with the students during the last phase of the process, the authors learned that utilizing this framework helped the design teams to state design problems and formulate conclusions efficiently based on the rational and emotional perspectives of

the stakeholders. Most of the student teams said that they could readily distinguish between cognitive and emotional data and they found the distinction to be useful to the brand elements development process in the next design definition phase.

The students were encouraged to record their prior perception and experience of the sponsored organizations in brief written descriptions or visual collages before they started their design research activities. Then, they were asked to repeat this process by reflecting on their new understanding of the subject at the end of the discovery phase. Some students found no difference, and some were surprised by the disparity of their perceptions before and after the discovery—such as their stereotyping, subjectivity, and generalization of the organization or customer. They thought that going through this exercise heightened their awareness of their initial assumptions and bias on the subject. Subsequently, later on in the process whenever they saw the records of this exercise, they were motivated to approach the design problem with a fair balance of logic and intuition.

**Discovery Research Visual Summary : Cognitive/Emotional Perspectives of The Supreme Court of Ohio**



Figure 2: Discovery Research Framework

**Design Definition**

The second phase of the emotional branding process was to define the brand strategy. The key learning activities for the students were creating visual and verbal attributes that echo the future positioning and personality of the sponsored organizations. One of the key goals of this process phase was to inspire and unify each design team through interactive creativity and collaborative thinking about a strong brand essence (Gobé, 2001). Verbal attributes are defining adjectives distilled from research analysis and strategic thinking that describe the characteristics of the brand.

Visual attributes are presented in a collection of images (photographs, illustrations, icons, and graphic elements) that reflect the spirit, style, look and feel, attitude, mood, and visual language of the brand.

The design teams presented their defined verbal and visual attributes with image boards (Figure 3). It seems to be a simple task to compile found images; however, getting the right or ideal images that represent or portray the brand emotion demands time, experience, creativity, objectivity, cultural awareness, and visual literacy. It is tempting for the designer to get easy and quick access to images by using a search engine on a stock image Web site. It may be for this reason that we see so many images of water drops, holding hands, or a person jumping up with excitement on a blue-sky background. The stereotype and canned emotion of a generic or overused stock image defeats the quality of differentiation and aspiration of a unique brand strategy and emotional brand experience.

**Brand Attributes : Defining The Supreme Court**



**Brand Attributes : Defining OSU CAR-IT**



Figure 3: Defining Visual and Verbal Attributes

In the professional environment, brand identity practitioners often invite clients to participate in brand attribute definition brainstorming sessions, for it is important to include their vision and point of view on their future brand in the early stage of the design definition phase. Since most clients are not familiar with brand identity design, it can be helpful for designers to articulate in layperson terms some of the key components and creative processes of brand and visual design. In most situations, these interactions allow the design team and the client to share their knowledge, express their emotion and rational thinking, and develop mutual respect. Paula Scher, design partner of Pentagram, states that design is a “social activity” and it “involves other people, their opinions, comments, egos, conceits, jealousies, and fears” (2002, p. 157). Scher says when clients have been involved with the identity design process, “they are often much better behaved clients.

They have a basis for making visual judgments that has been depersonalized and has become more objective” (2002, p. 161).

In this case study the class did not have the opportunity to work directly with the client on the brand attributes exercises. Students arranged additional individual team meetings with sponsors, and they utilized electronic mail to communicate with stakeholders. In order to integrate client and external perspectives into these exercises, some design teams employed the methods of creating customer profiles and scenarios, and other teams used metaphorical descriptions (Gobé, 2001; Fulton Suri, 2004) for the organization in their online surveys (Figure 4) by asking the participants: If CAR-IT (sponsored organization) were a tool, what kind would it be? These techniques allowed the design teams to efficiently gather additional information on stakeholders’ and customers’ perceptions and emotional connections to the organization, and consequently helped the students to develop appropriate and effective brand strategies and design solutions.

Other exercises that took place during this phase were the ongoing and iterative research on the organization and market, internal audit and competitive audit, benchmarks, brand architecture, and development of the brand positioning statement. The instructors described each step of the process, presented case examples, and made recommendations on design approaches to the class. Each team summarized the design definition phase in a brand design briefing report that clarified the design objective, identified the design approach, and determined the design direction for the next design concept phase.

**Survey : OSU CAR-IT Stakeholders’ Perception**

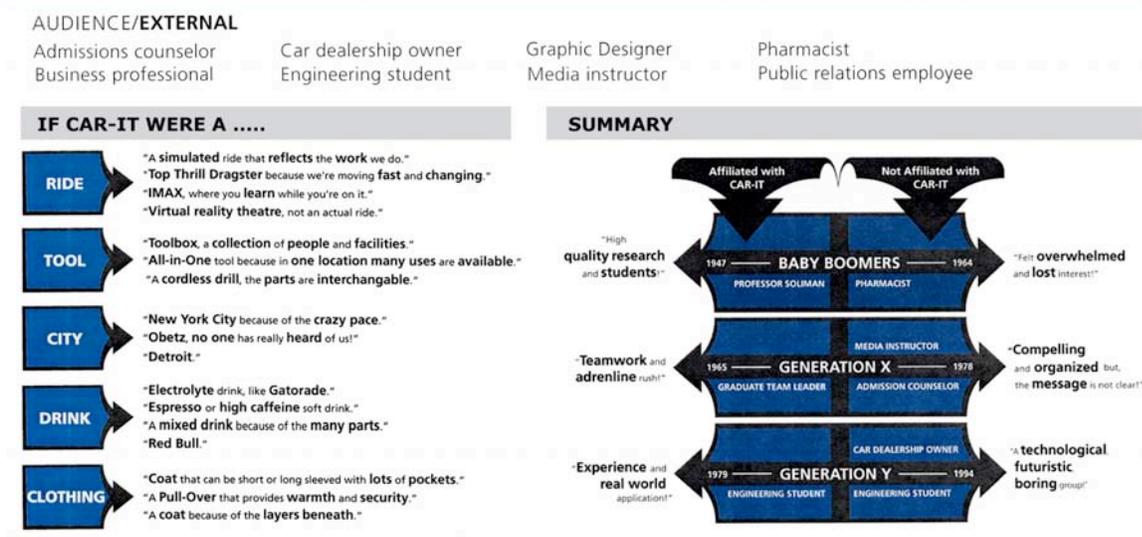


Figure 4: Results of Online Survey using Metaphorical Descriptions

### Design Concept

The third phase of the emotional branding course started after the mid-term of the quarter. The class focused on the design development of identity concepts to translate the rational and emotional brand attributes that were defined from the previous phase of the process. The students in this case study had already acquired the essence of identity design knowledge and practice from their junior design studio course. They had learned that a brand name of an organization could be expressed as a straightforward typographic logotype, a more visual and conceptual graphic symbol, or a combination of letterforms and pictorial symbol. Therefore, the learning objective for this phase was to integrate their identity design knowledge and skill into the larger scope of an emotional branding design process.

Emotional Branding is about going beyond designing a visually attractive logo or brand mark. The mark design needs to exemplify the guiding principles for defining a brand: credible, aspirational, relevant, and distinctive. The students needed to interpret the attitude, point of view, and look and feel of the brand and design them into graphic and typographic forms to embody a meaningful symbolic representation. In designing a strong brand identity symbol, the designer must carefully examine these aspects: “meaning, attributes, acronyms, inspiration, history, form, counterform, abstract, pictorial, letterform, wordmark, combination, time, space, light, skill, motion, transition, perspective, reality, fantasy, straight, curve, angle, intersection, and patterns” (Wheeler, 2003, p. 81).

It is not the intent of this paper to fully describe the comprehensive design conceptual development of the brand identity symbol. An overview of the preliminary concept sketches, design attributes, recommended concepts, and user perceptions of the concepts from a selected design team is shown in Figure 5 below.

#### Design Concepts and User Testing : OSU CAR-IT Brand Mark and Logotype



This concept was inspired by an abstract aerial view of a highway system intersection. The mark represents integration, teamwork, and passion.



Figure 5: Design Concepts and User Testing Results

### Design Demonstration/Expression

The students refined the design concepts and presented the core concepts in a selected range of touchpoint applications (Figure 6) during the last phase of this case study. The main purpose of this design exercise was to express the intangible emotional quality of a brand through tangible applications of key identity elements. The list of touchpoint applications varies across different organizations, industries, and media. The key identity elements usually include brand mark, color palette, typography, images, and graphics. The learning objective for the students was to apply their visual communication design capability to finalize these identity elements and create a unified visual language through consistent and flexible applications.

The final products of this exercise could be used for user testing of the brand identity design before final selection or design implementation. Focus groups, surveys, and eye tracking are some of the useful research tools for testing the perception and emotional quality of a brand identity. Most students expressed the need and importance of user testing, but they discarded the process because of lack of time and team members to do it. There were only two design teams from the class who used a survey to test their design in order to gain additional stakeholders' input for final refinement. They understood that there are constraints along the process, and their approaches to overcome them are critical parts of their learning experience.

Finally, the design students needed to understand that the process of designing brand identity does not end at this phase. Implementing and managing phases of the brand identity are the subsequent phases of the brand process. They are as important as the defining and designing phases. Brand management is a common topic at business, marketing and communication programs at most universities. This is a subject area in which visual design programs can collaborate with other brand management programs to broaden the scope of learning about branding for design students.

### Design Demonstration/Expression : OSU CAR-IT Brand Identity Touchpoint Applications



Figure 6: A Selected Range of Touchpoint Applications

## CONCLUSION

In this case study, the students were introduced to principles and case examples of designing brand identity with the main focus on the discovering and identifying (understanding and clarifying) the design problems and objectives throughout the course. The students learned that achieving a meaningful brand identity design requires: first, a rational and analytical research of the sponsor companies and their market; second, a strategic interpretation and definition of the brand design objectives; third, an emotional connection to their audiences through visual and verbal attributes; and finally, a consistent, flexible, and appropriate design expression approach.

The emotional branding design exercises inspired the design teams to observe and examine the brand project from a broader perspective that touched on trends, economic, socio-political, and geographic implications. Students recognized that their level of confidence about their design recommendation had increased with the support of grounded research data and a strategic focus. They acknowledged that the new emotional branding vocabulary that they learned allowed them to communicate more effectively with the client and the class. Students also described their learning experience on the design definition phase as a new challenge that required them to practice the left-brain that serves verbal, analytical, sequential, and intellectual thinking. Most of the students did not comprehend the benefit of this approach until the later stage of the course when they juxtaposed the left-brain thinking with the right-brain thinking that serves the visual, Gestalt, and symbolic intuition to create both logical and emotional design solutions. The learning experience of the class on applying emotion-driven design to client-sponsored brand identity projects can be captured by Mark Gobé's insight on the world of Emotional Branding—"a dynamic cocktail of anthropology, imagination, sensory experiences, and visionary approach to change!" (2001, p. xv)

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