



**The inalienable value of visual identity.
An analysis of visual representations in the Italian Third Sector**

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**The inalienable value of visual identity.
An analysis of visual representations in the Italian Third Sector**

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Abstract

In spite of the current investment of organizations in social media and digital communication strategies we should not forget the role and power of traditional communication tools, first of all the brand identification system.

The literature of brand identity has long been focused on the visual strategies of companies and for profit organizations, as a result of the close attention paid by companies to restyling brands and logos. The aim of these investments was to promote a clear and coherent transmission of values, culture, history and identity. The public administration also devoted attention to the restyling brands and logos. Instead in the Third Sector the attention to visual identity has remained inadequate.

Currently, there is an important growth of the Italian Third Sector and an increasing number of civil associations, voluntary, non-governmental organizations. The competition for obtaining resources and engaging stakeholders are today important issue for non-profit organizations. Therefore, some of the main requirements of a good visual identity strategy (colours codes, originality, attraction, graphic quality, off and on-line transposition) are fundamental also for the non-profit sector.

What are the recurring characteristics of the visual identity strategies of the Italian Third Sector? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the visual identity strategy used by non-profit organizations? The contribution will answer the following questions starting from a quantitative and qualitative analysis on the visual communication strategies of the 81 networks adherent to the National Forum of the Third Sector, the main Italian network of non-profit organizations and associations.

Keywords: visual identity, brand identikit, reputation, Third Sector, cooperative.

Introduction

The Italian Third Sector is experiencing a season of exclusive renewal. From a legislative point of view: a new law of 2016 redefined the organizational structure of third sector entities, grouping all the types of organizations in a single label, Third Sector Entities, including seven different categories. The new law coincides with an important growth of the sector. The last two censuses of industry and services shows an increase in non-profit institutional units: from 235,232 in the first census (2001) to 301,191 in 2011, despite the period of crisis included in the last decade which, of course, has also affected the non-profit sector in Italy (ISTAT, 2011).

The communication strategies for the Third Sector, aimed at promoting social projects carried out by the various non-profit associations in our country, are now a serious object of study (Peruzzi, 2011). The focus is on the communication techniques used to establish positive relationships with stakeholders, but also to raise funds more easily. The recipients of social messages are, first of all, citizens and institutions.

Communication, however, is not only intended to carry out the task of promoting initiatives and activities, or raise awareness of projects and social problems. An important function of communication is the so-called corporate communication: making the organization known in its entirety and facilitating its institutionalization in the territory. Through communication, the organization becomes distinguishable and recognizable within a crowded market of organizations operating in the same sector. The most evident sign of this recognition is undoubtedly the brand, which contains the very identity of the organization, endowing itself with an aesthetic profile that it has an important function of recognition and engagement with the work of a specific organization. In spite of the current investment of organizations in social media and digital communication strategies we should not forget the role and power of traditional communication tools, first of all the brand identification system.

The literature of brand identity has long been focused on the visual strategies of companies and for profit organizations, according to a real attention of companies to restyling brands and logos (Melewar, Bassett, Simões, 2006; van den Bosch, de Jong, Elving, 2005; Grizzanti, 2011). The public administration also paid attention to the restyling brands and logos (Kotler, Lee, 2007; Rolando, 2005). Instead in the Italian Third Sector the attention to visual identity remain inadequate.

Currently, the increasing number of civil associations, voluntary, non-governmental organizations imposes a high competition for obtaining resources and for engage stakeholders for non-profit organizations (Peruzzi, Volterrani, 2016, Peruzzi, 2017). Therefore, the problem of identity affirmation and recognition by stakeholders are nowadays social issues that concern the non-profit sector on the same level as the other two sectors (public and private). Some of the main requirements of a good visual identity strategy (colours codes, originality, attraction, graphic quality, off and on-line transposition) are fundamental also for the non-profit sector (Binotto, Santomartino, 2012, Lombardi, 2017). This study aims at providing food for thought on the issue of identity and visual communication in the Italian non-profit sector, offering exploratory research on a representative sample of brands and logos belonging to the Italian Third Sector.

Communication and visual identity in the Italian Third Sector

The organizations are primarily physical and social spaces where people find, they negotiate, they build their answers doing their job. Therefore, identity is a valid dimension of analysis to understand the behaviours of the members of the organizations (micro level) and the informal aspects of the organizational processes (macro level). Identity has become a central problem of the organizations with respect to the very complex nature that characterizes the external environment in which they operate today (Albert, Ashforth e Dutton, 2000). In literature organizational identity is considered both as an objective entity and as a subjective entity. To the first case it corresponds to a positivist literature, influenced by the theoretical perspective of the Social Identity Theory and the Self Categorization Theory. According to this perspective identity is a "relational and comparative"

concept (Tajfel, Turner, 1985) and the individuals direct their actions to affirm the definition of themselves over the time and in different contexts.

In respect of identity as a subjective entity literature confirms that identity is socially constructed and defined by the meaning that individuals belonging to the same organization accept and build together through their interactions. A basic assumption, influenced by interpretative perspective, is that individuals strive to achieve levels of convergence on the meaning around them identity. Generally, the central problem is to understand how the members of organizations collectively build a knowledge of "who we are" and what tactics they adopt to reach an "optimal balance" between the various conceptions of oneself (Kreiner, et al., 2006) or to preserve a positive image (Dowling, 1986, Dutton, Dukerich, 1991, Dutton, Dukerich, Harquail, 1994).

The literature on identity considers under the term Business Identity three forms of this: visual identity, corporate identity and organizational identity (Balmer, 2001). This study focuses on the first element, linked to the Brand Identification System. The first contributions on the corporate image appear, in the United States in the fifties, and they essentially referred to the visual components (logo, colours, brands, symbolic coordination). Numerous and prestigious consultancy agencies specialized in Graphic Design appeared, but without considering the issue and problem of consistency between identity and image. The first to spread the idea that the management of the corporate image should be a real business function is Martineau (1958).

Finn (1961) is the first author to emphasize the competitive advantage that derives from the management of the company image. The author underlines the weight of a positive image in the decision-making process of "stakeholders" who decide to start a relationship with a company, especially when they do not know the tangible elements. Talking about images means considering different levels of analysis: the business sector and business strategy; products and services; territory, history and origin of an organization; core values, mission and vision. The aim of visual communication is to promote a clear and coherent transmission of values, culture, history and identity (Balmer, 2001). In particular, the visual strategy of organizations is characterized by its most important sign and immediately visible by stakeholders: the logo-mark. It contains the very essence of organizational identity. Logos and symbols are important in that they are used as "badges of identification" (Dowling, 1994) and also act as a mark of quality. A powerful corporate symbol may not only evoke an emotional response, but also make the task of formal corporate communications easier (Van Riel, 1995).

A corporate image may help stakeholders find or recognize an organization and raises awareness, recognition, and infuse confidence among stakeholder groups (Long- Yi, Ching- Yuh, 2010, Grizzanti, 2011). Visible elements of a brand, such as colour, form, and shape, which encapsulate and convey the symbolic meanings that cannot be imparted through words alone. In a broader (corporate) sense, it may include elements such as building architecture, colour schemes, and dress code. Basic elements of the brand identification system are: logotype, refers to words or the name of a business that is designed in a special way; logo-mark (brand), identifying mark or symbol that doesn't contain the business name; colour codes and lettering (graphic form and style).

Therefore, graphics and all the visual elements therefore play a fundamental role in attracting the attention of citizens, guiding them in the selection of information and their interpretation (Grizzanti 2011). They can also positively influence the identification of the most important contents, saving time and energy to people, resources perceived as increasingly scarce but increasingly important. Consequently, visual communication assumes an important role also in the Third Sector, must follow the principles of simplicity, transparency and participation in accordance with the reform.

However this new horizon clashes with the lack of a culture that is aware of the need for action that designs and coordinates means, supports and styles of communication based on the needs of citizens. The elements that relate to visual communication involve different areas: the design and organization of the elements in a space, the layout, lettering, the editorial rules and paratextual elements.

Actually, the current investment in communication made by no profit organizations is in social media and digital communication strategies. Most of Italian no profit organizations have an account in several social platforms - Facebook, Twitter, Youtube (Peruzzi, Volterrani, 2016, Lombardi, 2017). But, social media we should not forget the role and the power of the traditional communication tools, first of all the brand identification system. The power of brands and symbols can create a durable identity and at the same time transmit information about the nature and objectives of an organization, emotionally influencing audiences and attract their attention.

Research questions and method

As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, the activity of researchers in Italy has focused on the analysis of the visual communication strategies of public and private organizations, in the absence of studies that take into consideration the main characteristics and visual metaphors of logos and brands in no profit organizations.

What are the recurring characteristics of the visual identity strategies of the Italian Third Sector? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the visual identity strategies used by non-profit organizations? These are the questions that have guided the research presented in this paper. In Italy some attempts at analysis have been conducted taking into consideration mainly cases of paradigmatic study, and they provided a partial picture of the situation. An evident difficulty certainly lies in the continuous redefinition of the categories and types of organization belonging to this sector and the excessive heterogeneity in terms of the size of the organization and its activity within local, regional, national and international networks.

For these reasons, it was decided to consider the Third Sector National Forum: it is recognized in the Italian Government as a most representative network on the Italian Third Sector, according to the number of member organizations. At the time of the survey (September-December 2017), the Forum included 80 networks for a total of over 113,000 organizations (Peruzzi, 2017, Peruzzi, Lombardi, 2018). Each network, and therefore each organization, has been submitted to a content analysis of visual image. The elements (logo, trademark, payoff) of the visual identity of the organizations were collected and an analysis form was constructed to study its aesthetic and symbolic content (Losito, 1996, Tipaldo, 2016). The form consists of closed and open-ended questions to which the researcher has responded after observing the visual elements relating to each organization. The questions were intended to investigate: shape and colour of the brand; structure and type of the logo; payoff; symbols and visual metaphors.

Corporate Visual Identity in the Italian Third Sector: characteristics, meanings, experiences

The logos and symbols analyzed that belong to 80 networks and therefore comprise over 100 thousand organizations connected to them, do not represent the entire universe of Third Sector organizations in Italy, but certainly reflect a highly representative reality.

The first collected elements concern the main characteristics of the symbol used by organizations and identify the “area of respect” that indicates an area surrounding the logo to be preserved against the “visual competition” of other graphic elements. In most cases a logo is inscribed in a rectangular geometric shape (69%) and only one main colour (35%) is used; another 41% use a double colour and the rest of the organizations still use a mixed system of colours, in some cases also very varied. In fact, a wide use of natural elements (rainbow, landscapes) is emphasized without any stylization attempt. The most representative colours are red and blue. Two colours, in their meaning, which evoke different images and value systems. Blue is the synthesis of theological virtues (Grizzanti, 2011): it symbolizes truth, wisdom, loyalty, fidelity, confidence, reputation, peace. It is the colour of sea abysses and depth. It produces a soothing peacefulness and relaxation. On the contrary red represents fire, passion, love, heat, energy. But also ferocity, blood, renewal, power and courage. It is an emotional and intense colour and with high visibility.

As to the name, organizations use their full names in their logos (79%) avoiding strategies of synthesis through acronyms or synthetic names easily memorized. Of these, as many as 75% are in fact “descriptive naming” as they describe the type of organization (association, cooperative, social promotion, etc.) and their offer (the service or the social sphere in which they operate). Only 19% of organizations use an “associative naming”: common use words that refer to a recognized collective imaginary (Cellotto, 2005). The “patronymic naming” (5%) is not used: it is understandable if we consider that, with the exception of some religious associations dedicated to important and charismatic figures, in most cases it is rare to find founders who lend their name to the association.

Less understandable is the absence of “evocative naming” (1%) that would facilitate the memory and recognition of organizations, also using short names that could rise to an identifying mark, just as is the case for the profit sector. The third sector, using names with an average of 6 or 7 words, does not facilitate immediate recognition and often names are also very similar because they simply represent the dissolution of acronyms used for the legal recognition of the organization. Choosing an appropriate brand name is a crucial decision, largely because that choice can influence the early trial of a new brand and affect future stakeholder volume. Indeed, brand names have been described as the “cerebral switches” that activate images in target audiences' collective minds (Shimp, 2008).

Before entering into the realm of different meanings and brand categories, even metaphorical ones, which evoke logos and symbols, it is worth highlighting a series of additional features that we chose to detect in the analysis form. They are important dimensions that reflect a wide range of meanings and values to which the logo could be associated. For examples, they do not use celebrative logos (4%): decorate the logo of the foundation year of the organization or of an important anniversary that testifies to the stable and permanent presence of the organization in a given territory or within a specific service sector (Lombardi, 2015, Urde, Greyser, Balmer, 2007). Another collected element is the use of the “pay off”: it is a verbal element that accompanies the logo of a organization or a service/product. It has the task of summarizing in a very simple sentence the real essence of the organization (Ariely, 2016). The pay-off is used by 14% of organizations. These are incisive phrases that insist on the issue of inclusion and democracy. There is no explicit reference in the name to the territory in which the organization operates. Only 8% decorate their logos with an indication of the city or place of reference, to point out a close link with the territory or the community. The same assumption is found in the reference to the size of the national network, or membership in a larger network of reference.

The amount of information that a brand can convey and its likelihood of memorization are strongly determined by its technical and visual structure. There are different categories of brands that

describe the elements used in the organization's visual identity strategies. The category most frequently used by organizations is figurative brands (31%): when a service/product is marketed without a nominal connection to the organization. Secondly, the "word brand" (20%) where the logo consists exclusively of the lettering of the name without adding any other graphic sign. The name itself becomes a trademark. 19% of organizations use the "abstract brand" category: a symbol is defined as "abstract" when visually it does not represent anything recognizable in the collective imagination and its meaning (if any) needs to be explained. The other categories are less used. For example a "figurative logotype" (11%), in which the word mark is inscribed in a geometric form. 10% of organizations use the "illustrative brand" category, in which the logo is combined with a complex figurative element, such as an illustration or a photograph. The least used category is the monogram: indicating the particular typographic assembly of one or more initial letters of a name. It is used above all in acronyms.

Finally, we tried to detect the meaning of images to understand the most recurring visual metaphors in the aesthetic representation of Third Sector organizations. Three important categories of reference emerge: people; things; nature. Compared to the first category the most evident element is the use of hands and hugs. This is a "classic" reference used by social organizations in Italy, still linked to a Third Sector model mainly dedicated to help. An image showing "hands reaching out to the sky", needs to be updated even in style in a little distinguishable way, especially when the reference is used by many organizations, in a little distinguishable way. The second category is affected by a traditional background that links many organizations to its foundation connected on the one hand to the Catholic Church and, on the other, to Italian governmental institutions. In fact, the two most recurring objects in visual representations are the symbols of the cross and the Italian flag. The cross is used both as an explicit reference to the Catholic nature of the organization and to historically indicate a symbol of "help and assistance". The last category concerns the reference to natural elements. The drawings or photographs of the "sun" and the "trees" stand out: natural elements that symbolize life and good health. These are elements that are traditionally used to give a positive image and serenity.

In addition to identifying the most recurring images, we included each single image into a symbolic category: imaginary symbol; icon brand; elementary symbol; generic symbol. The most common category includes generic symbol (40%). They use images whose reference is easily confused and without any element of specificity towards the organization. There is a low possibility to find a graphic element that has the function of the "badge of identification" (Dowling, 1994) and allows stakeholders to immediately associate a graphic sign with the organization in their minds. About half of the organizations use "imaginary symbols" (24%) or "elementary symbols" (21%). There is a greater use of image stylization and the attempt to find an immediate visual reference to associate with the organization. Unfortunately, however, in many cases they are elementary symbols (cross, star, triangle, drop) used by several organizations and therefore the distinction lies in colours rather than form and meaning. The last category, the least common, is the "icon brand". A sign is an "icon" when it resembles the represented object (the design of a house represents a house by similitude). The icon-brand is therefore a meta-cognitive symbol, graphically stylized, capable of transmitting emotions and evoking conceptual values with a multitude of meanings - simple or complex - perceptively comprehensible, shareable and strategically predefined (Grizzanti, 2011). "Icon brand" have formal characteristics with a high connotative and emotional content.

Conclusion

The results presented in the previous paragraph show a substantial “homogeneity” of the visual representations among the organizations of the Italian Third Sector. This feature is evident from the superficial characteristics of the logo (shape, colour, styles) up to the symbols and meanings that are conveyed by the images. The low use of icons and the use of generic and elementary symbols underlines a weak creativity and strategy of differentiation, as well as a low emotional content in the images that are conveyed. Those elements are very important for the strength with which symbols evoke imaginaries and values.

The Italian Third Sector, considering its widespread expansion and acknowledged role also from a legislative point of view, and this should already start from the name. Labels are difficult to understand, often they are very similar to each other and focused exclusively on the description of the organization and the offer of services. In fact, the use of acronyms is unacceptable to a person who is not a specialist in this sector. An element of differentiation could be found in the greater use of visual metaphors and evocative names, which facilitate the association of ideas and memory in the minds of citizens and users.

The visual identity should, finally, embody the most important values of the organization. An element that is lacking and is considered as strategic is certainly the link with the corporate organization. In fact, there is a weak corporate strategy that would highlight, even graphically, the close link with the territory, the communities or the national networks of belonging.

The study underlines a weak strategy to define a clear corporate visual identity with a low function of recognition but in a rapidly expanding sector the homogeneity of forms and visual metaphors is a strength: it underlines the common affiliation to the Third Sector. Especially for the many small and medium-sized organizations, which accounts for a large part of this world, homogeneity can have an important function of belonging that of using standard visual metaphors that are easy to recognize with respect to the sector but not compared to the specificities of organization. The poor attention devoted by third sector organizations to their visual identity is perhaps also a consequence of the important investment they are making in terms of digital communication and new media. It is a clear attempt to update communication strategies and enhance the relationship with the public, using the appropriate languages and tools that make it possible to reach very large audiences with relatively low costs. Updating and the investment in new technologies are certainly correct, but what we want to underline here is that these strategies should always be secondary to a clear definition of identity, starting from a set of characteristics on which an organization is founded. After clarifying the identity profile within an organization, it is necessary to have an effective aesthetic profile that is coherent with the identity and mission that have been chosen.

In a phase of profound transition and redefinition like the one that the third Italian Sector is experiencing, there are reasons for believing that focusing on identity and the link to principles and values can be vital for organizations. In addition, this issue is also interesting for professional communicators and researchers. It is a poorly investigated subject matter but it reveals a whole range of suggestions to understand and redefine the visual corporate communication in the Third sector.

Binotto and Santomartino (2012) have built an analytical path on the visual identity of a non-profit organization and, in the study presented here, we tried to understand the recurring and characteristic elements in the aesthetic profile of a representative sample of Third Sector organizations. The future of research and professional communication in this sector must necessarily take into account the

strongly political dimension (Peruzzi, 2013). Social communication is the engine of vital social processes for the organization and development of democratic processes. The organizations witness this process through their concrete activity, but also through their communicated identity. Communication studies have long, not only in Italy (Downing, 2001), avoided taking seriously the evolution of new perspectives of social communication and the widespread diffusion of alternative and radical media (Peruzzi, 2011), interpreters of a cultural renewal that can be the driving force for a renewed identity of the Third Sector, and of social communication more generally.

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