From One to Diversity: Explore the Design Principles of Flexible Branding Visual Identity and Its Application on Design Practice

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ABSTRACT

As a new trend in visual design, Flexible Branding Visual Identity (FBVI) holds the overwhelming advantage in its being adaptable in situation, flexible in application and rich in connotation, and therefore adopted by increasing number of brands in the building and promotion of visual image. Much attention has been drawn to this field but without much reflection on its usage and the theory behind. This research aims to explore the methods and skills for the use of flexible branding visual identity. Drawing on the theories of visual psychology as well as visual thinking, the research makes a comparison between the traditional and newly-developed approach in brand design in terms of advantage and disadvantage. Along with the review of a great number of cases, the research formulates the idea of overall perception advantage, arguing that flexible logo has the potential to impress the viewers as a self-contained system instead of an individual element. Based on the above discussion, the research concludes some principles about FBVI as guidelines to design practice. In the end, the case of visual identification of Cantonese Temple Fair is to exemplify how the principles are applied to a visual promotion project that addresses the problem of incorporating varieties of local culture into a coherent system.

Keywords: Flexible branding visual identity, Visual communication, Cantonese Temple Fair

1 BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Flexible branding visual identity (FBVI), also known as dynamics branding identity, or adaptive identity, is a new trend in today's brand design. More and more visual identity designs are shifting their focus from a single logo to a systematic group of variant logos. Formally speaking, flexible brand image design often takes a mother structure or core pattern as the main axis and presents a range of graphic styles with similarity through a variety of form principles, utilizing the systematic and recognizable graphic forms for brand image building and brand value dissemination. In recent years, flexible identification design is commonly used in major brands, especially in cultural and artistic brands, because its rich visual expression highlights the multifacetedness of brand image and reinforce the brand impact on people's minds. Secondly, the multiform visual identification system has a natural fit with the Internet. With the help of digital media technology and mobile network platform, the new promotion means is more inclined to the colourful and dynamic presentation, and the visual language under the combination of multiple forms is more conducive to the construction of dynamic brand image than the traditional single form.

Local cultural activities are the active carrier of local culture, which integrates material culture and intangible culture, and combines modern leisure tourism and traditional folk customs into one. Therefore, the influence of cultural activities plays an important role in building cultural soft power. The initial intention of the research is to optimize the brand image, promoting Guangfu cultural activities by invoking the new means of design thinking. We take cultural activities as the source of radiation, traditional Guangfu culture, and driving the cultural industry. At the same time, the subject combines the interdisciplinary fields of marketing, branding and design, to find the modern representation of traditional Guangfu culture, traditional folklore to make the traditional folk cultural activities glow with new charms, to attract more young people to pay attention to traditional folk activities.

2 THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF FBVI

At the beginning of the twentieth century, brand visual image design was mostly influenced by the modernist style, emphasizing the design concept of "less is more", in the form of simple and clear, the overall consistency of the main, flexible brand image design is not common. The earliest flexible branding can be traced back to 1959 when graphic designer Karl Gerstner created his first brand. The earliest flexible branding can be traced back to graphic designer Karl Gerstner's 1959 identity for the Bo te à musique store in Basel, Switzerland, as shown in Figure 1. It is worth noting that Gerstner's design concept was quite forward-looking, he wanted to establish a flexible visual image that could be applied to different applications and wanted the brand to be remembered not as a figurative graphic, but as an overall atmosphere and tone, which can be said to be the germ of the overall perception advantages of flexible brand visual design. With the continuous development of network and media technology since the middle of the last century, more and more brands realized the weakness of a single logo in image communication. Until the 1980s, a number of classic flexible brand image designs emerged in the fields of radio or internet companies, such as MTV in 1981, NAI in 1993, and Google in 1998, as shown in Figure 2. The most notable feature of these early flexible image designs was the varied styles of the logos. In Asia, the concept of brand visual identity came to Asia later, in the second half of the twentieth century before the Asian countries gradually applied to the brands, flexible brand image design is a latecomer. Among many Asian countries, South Korea is a frontier in the research and practice of flexible brand design. There are many enterprises and organizations boldly use flexible logo, such as Seoul's new city image logo, South Korea E-MART supermarkets and the National Museum of Modern Art, etc., there are a number of design researchers in the theoretical level to do some exploration and summary. According to the author's observation, China's local brand image design, the use of flexible design thinking and successful practice in marketing is not much. As early as 2012 years ago, there are Shenzhen designers Liu Yongqing, Guan Pucha some attempts, and then the 120th anniversary of the University of Zhejiang University in 2017, using flexible design approach to the creation of the activities of the logo and so on.
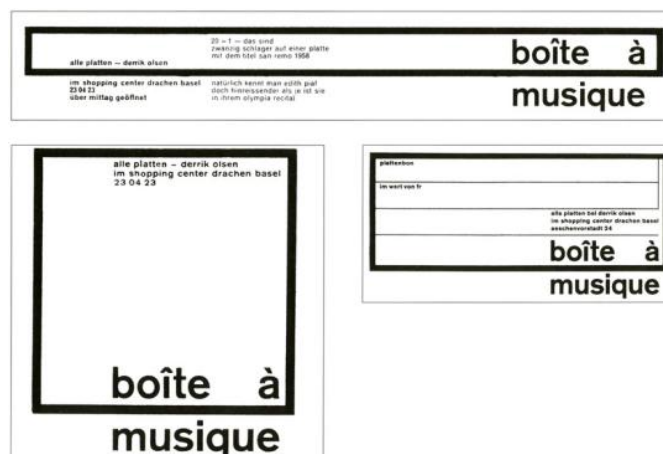

Figure 1 The brand visual identity of Bo te à musique store
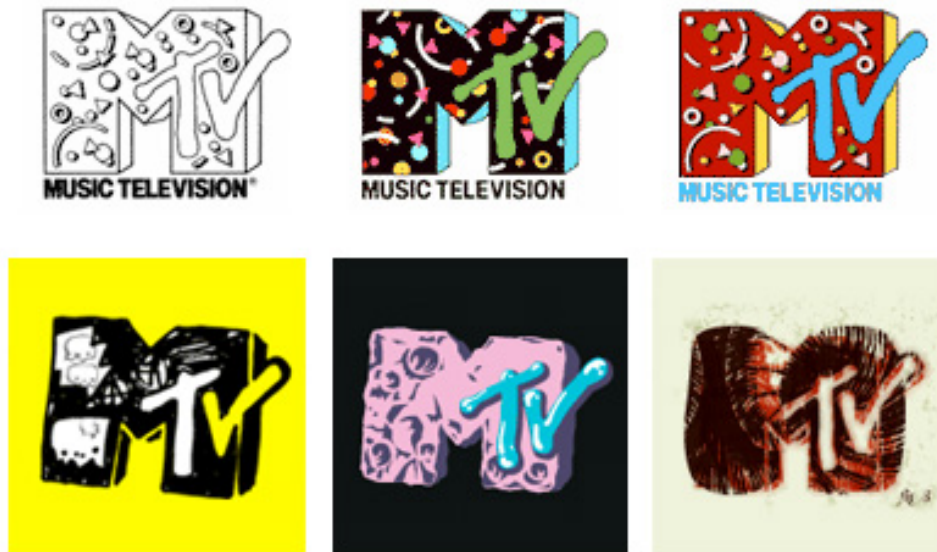(Source: Karl Geatner, 1964, Copyright Consent: Permissible to Publish)

Figure 2 The logo design of MTV CHANNEL
(Source: Tang Wenguang, 2012, Copyright Consent: Permissible to Publish)

3. THE OVERALL PERCEPTION ADVANTAGE OF FBVI

3.1 Visual Interpretation Analysis of Traditional Brand and Multiform Brand Image

In the traditional brand visual identity design theory, it is generally believed that the logo should be as simple as possible, too complex shape is not easy to memorize, and in the process of communication, the logo should be consistent, and appear repeatedly in different brand touchpoints, creating a link between the logo and the brand it denotes, so as to successfully make the brand image impressive. At the same time, the spirit and culture of the brand carried by the environmental setting, such as the interior design of the store, the package of goods, the advertising poster, slowly penetrate the target audience. According to this theory, a simple and recognizable single graphic is the first choice for a logo. However, on the contrary, the multiform brand image logo is not confined to a single shape. They are based on a stable inner connection and develop a rich and varied form, these forms in a variety of application scenarios are not repeated replica but change moderately due to the situation and change. These two very different methods of operation embody the two ways of understanding in Gestalt theory. Wertheimer, M., the founder of Gestalt, once summarized the way we understand graphics into two categories: one is to analyse the whole schema in terms of its "parts" and use this as a starting point to gradually transition to the analysis of the combination of the schema; the other is to analyse the overall structure as a start, and then gradually analyse the subordinate parts sequentially (Rudolf Arnheim, 1954). The "bottom-up" mode of understanding is the theoretical premise of traditional brand visual design. Each brand scene contact of the audience is an interpretation and digestion of the brand logo, and different brand touch points provide the opportunity to superimpose the impression and understanding of the depth of understanding, and thus gradually form the overall perception of the brand in the consumer's mind. flexible brand image design does not put all brand demands on a single logo, but presents a flexible system, the viewer needs to use a bird's eye view to feel the diversified visual language within the system, to achieve consensus among differences and similarities, and then to perceive the whole brand, and further to understand the specific meaning conveyed by each graphic when reviewing each different form. The viewer's experience is more in favour of the "top-down" interpretation path.

3.2 Comparison Analysis of Visual Application in The Traditional Brands and Flexible Brand Images

According to their interpretation mechanism, the two paths of interpretation have their own advantages and disadvantages. For brands with a single stable concept and strong cohesion, using a logo symbol and relatively simple application specifications to convey the brand spirit is conducive to the clear establishment of the brand image in the minds of consumers, and the visual language with less information enables the viewer to obtain precise and specific brand knowledge (Kevin Lane Keller, 2011）consists of two parts: brand cognition and brand image. Therefore, brands using this kind of visual system generally emphasize the constancy of their business philosophy and the robustness and reliability of their image, and are mostly found in large enterprises or official institutions with strong professionalism in their business fields; in contrast, the top-down bird's-eye view experience guided by the flexible visual system will make it difficult for the viewer to focus on thinking because of the large amount of information in a single communication. Given this premise, in the above-mentioned case study of the music store in Basel, it is easy to get a macro and vague sense of the tone or atmosphere of the brand during the first contact with the brand, and it is only after several contacts that the brand can be understood in terms of its specific claims. This kind of characteristic is very suitable for brands with rich concepts and strong diffusion power.

Therefore, flexible brand design is mostly applied to media, culture and art related organizations or activities, which emphasize on the creation of atmosphere, enrichment and expansion of connotation, and dissemination and influence of culture, and flexible brand image design can help them to enhance the cultural charm, and even trigger the interactivity so as to create more topics. In summary, the applications of both are summarized in the table below:

Table 1 The comparison analysis of two types of branding design (Source: by author)

	Traditional Branding Visual Identity Design	Flexible Branding Visual Identity Design
Applicable Brand Characteristics	1.Strong cohesion of the concept, the connotation of a single. 2.Emphasizing constancy, stability and reliability. 3.Large enterprises or official organizations with strong specialization in a single business or operation field.	1. Strong conceptual diffusion and richer connotation 2. Emphasizing the creation of atmosphere, enrichment and expansion of connotation 3. media, culture and art related organizations or activities
Effectiveness	Accurate-perception: the visual language is less informative but specific, obtaining precise brand knowledge and multiple brand scene contacts to feel the atmosphere	Perception - Specific: The visual language is informative and complex, leading to a sense of the brand's tone and ambience, and then to an understanding of the specific claims.
Visual perception	"Bottom-up" from part to whole	"Top-down" from the whole to the parts

In practice, the advantages of multiform visual system are often applied to the following branding solutions:

1. Multiform visual system has the flexibility to extend the content, which is very suitable for business expansion of the brand image design, or the establishment of sub-brand, the overall consistency of the relevance and can clearly identify the brand hierarchy. For example, when many broadcasting stations expand their channels, the new logo will follow the main body of the original visual system and add elements that characterize the channel on this basis.

2. The rich visual effect of the multiform branding system creates a strong atmosphere, which can quickly attract viewers, and the varied styles can cater to the aesthetic trends of different groups and different times. For example, in the classic case of MTV channel's visual system, with constantly repeating the three letters of M, T, V three-dimensional modelling, the main body boldly tries the style of the visual effect, everyone can find their own favourite in this system, just as the channel plays a variety of music. In addition, there are even brands that view the visual system as a "container" that allows everyone to fill in their own personal style of "content" and create their own brand logo through interactive creation.

3. The variable nature of flexible branding makes it easier to meet the ever-changing communication means and media in the future,   apart from the traditional forms of print media, but also mobile media with a wide range of audience (Li Nan, 2014). In addition, a number of flexible visual systems are extended from dynamic branding design or insrpired by each frame in dynamic motion. In turn, flexible branding provides dynamic branding with key frames of change on the timeline and provides dynamic branding with a direction of inspiration for change.

4 DESIGN PRINCIPLES OF FBVI

It can be seen, through comparison, that the flexible brand image design can play a better role than the traditional brand design as long as it is used properly. To successfully build a flexible brand visual image, it is necessary to find out the guiding design principles, as are shown in the following three points.

4.1 Stability of Core Subjects

The overall perception advantage of flexible brand identity design depends on the effective establishment of a visual system. The famous art theorist Rudolf Arnheim mentioned in his book "Visual Thinking": How does an image come together to make a meaning through its various components? One of the simplest laws upon which the organization of these relationships (i.e., the relationships between parts) relies, is the law of similarity (Rudolf Arnheim, 1969). Therefore, the establishment of similarity through a certain law in the visual elements of different forms is the key to constructing a flexible brand image design, and it is only through similarity that the imagery communication function of the combination of individual elements can be maintained. The basis for this similarity of the internal visual elements must be a stable kernel of connection, which must run through all the pattern variants, so that the flexible combination system is consistent, and this connection should be obvious enough for the viewer to easily perceive. If the connection or similarity is too subtle, the flexible visual design system is bound to become loose and messy. Similarly, brand image visual system, a variety of colourful graphics are derived from the core body. The core body is divided into two categories: one is a fixed structural modelling; the other is a fixed composition logic.

4.1.1 Stable structure modelling

The overall graphic outline or modelling framework is fixed, and the variants continue to enrich the content by filling or replacing additional elements without changing the stable structure. In several successful cases, the core body is highly stable, giving rise to similar combinations of graphic styles. For example, the visual identity of the urban neighbourhood Tigre Sur adopts a flexible branding

approach, using the initials "T" and "Sur" as the source of inspiration to create a series of exciting and vivid graphics (Fig. 3), from which it can be seen that, regardless of the other visual elements of the graphic, it is not the same as the other visual elements. As can be seen from the figure, no matter how the other visual elements of the graphic change, the letter "T", the downward arrow and the triangles on both sides form the core of the visual system, and this fixed modelling combination is always present in each graphic variant, so that the different patterns produce correlation, and the viewer perceives the whole graphic combination through the correlation, thus experiencing the fun of the brand. The viewer perceives the whole graphic combination through the correlation, thus experiencing the fun of the brand.

Figure 3 City Neighborhood Tigre Sur: Visual Identity Design for a Renovation Project (Source: https://www.behance.net/gallery/53881143/DISTRITO-TIGRE-SUR)

4.1.2 Stable compositional logic

Compositional logic consists of the constituent elements and the way they are organized, and the elements are constantly deconstructed and reconstructed around the underlying logic of the graphic combination. Even if no additional elements are introduced, variant graphics centred on this type of body are usually more varied and can even be extended into auxiliary patterns with great adaptability. For example, a network company called FOUND, mainly engaged in website optimization and improve search engine business, they brand visual identity design as an interesting game, the rules of this "game" is to use the dotted line to the F-O-U-N-D four letters in series, respectively, at the beginning of the line and at the end of the line to write "YOU HAVE" and "WEB AGENCY" at the beginning and end of the line respectively. This "rule of the game" is regarded as a fixed underlying logic of graphic composition within the visual system, around which designers have developed a series of interesting logos. Around this logic, designers have developed a series of interesting logo graphics, each of which resembles a road map for a treasure hunt (Figure 4). Individual logos seem to be loosely organized and thinly shaped, but when this compositional logic is fully developed in application scenarios, the powerful recognition and adaptability of the brand visual system is fully revealed and combined with the meaning of the brand name FOUND, the creative concept of the visual and the playful and relaxing atmosphere can be immediately perceived.
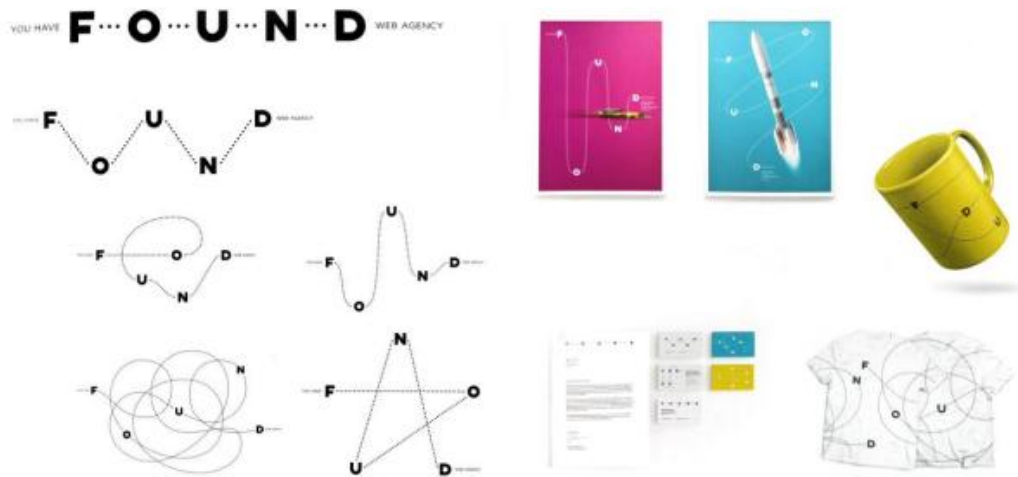
Figure 4 Brand visual identity design for web agency FOUND
(Source: Chen Jinming & Wang Xiangliang, 2018）

4.2   Organic Nature of The Core Body

The core body should have potential qualities that can be developed and extended relative to the derived variants, and should have a certain degree of openness to allow for more complementary possibilities, which requires that the core body in the modelling design cannot be a tight "closed loop", in common parlance, just as an organic stem cell, there is a continuous development and growth, and differentiation into different organs. The potential of differentiation into different organs. Therefore, in the case of multiform brand design, the core body generally has the following characteristics:

4.2.1 Simple and concise shape, showing abstract geometry.

The core body generally less use of complex or figurative patterns, the more specific images point to the meaning of the clearer, the more the structure tends to be self-complete, the more repulsive to change, any elements added, or the form of variation is bound to the destruction of the original form and change the imagery. Pure, abstract graphic patterns inclusive, more conducive to the form and meaning of further derivation. It is worth mentioning that the Chinese and English fonts are also often used as the main shape, and the stroke shape of the font is also in line with the principle of simplicity and geometry to a certain extent.

4.2.2 Awareness of grid system

Grid system is the law of layout design, the skilful use of grid can design a harmonious, unified and flexible layout, which is a good reference for flexible brand image design, therefore, many brands will introduce grid system in flexible logos, with grid rules as the logic of the composition, combining both flexible and harmonious variants. For example, in a cultural campaign called "Rotterdam 2001", the designers created a visual system to promote the overall image of Rotterdam's urban charm. In the visual system, there are only two simple elements, circle and square, but the ingenuity lies in the use of the grid system, the two elements according to different sizes and proportions and spatial location in accordance with the flexible combination of the grid arrangement, seemingly monotonous grids and elements, to interpret a strong sense of design and visual effects (Figure 5).
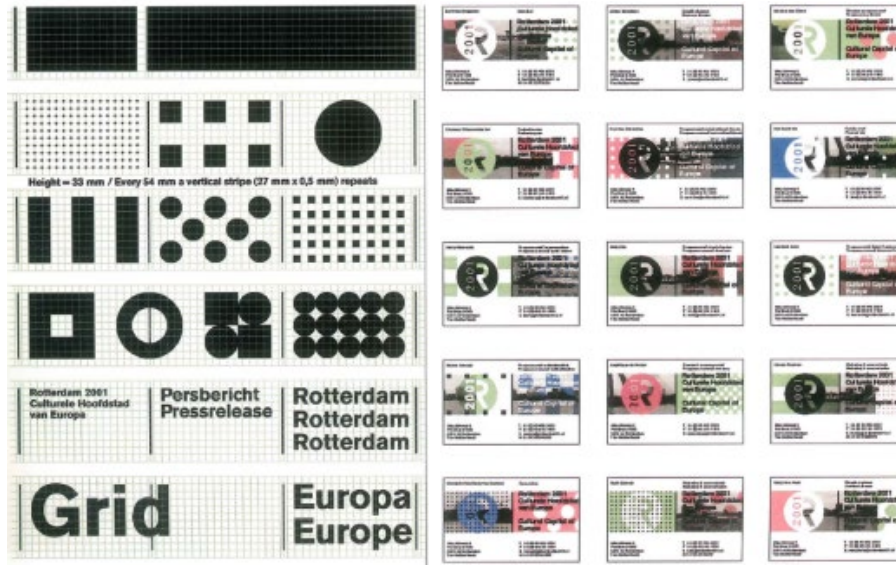
Figure 5 Design of the visual identity for the cultural promotion of Rotterdam 2001
(Source: Chen Jinming & Wang Xiangliang, 2018）

4.2.3 Compositional logic has a high degree of freedom and openness

Compositional logic plays the role of the main axis in the system, and the basic elements, under the leadership of compositional logic, combine graphic patterns in a certain form. Therefore, the organization of the elements of the law cannot be too restrictive or too complex and affect the flexibility of the system. Compositional logic is generally the way of layout arrangement, through the development of a combination of forms to organize the size or location of the elements. In the context of new media art, many designers nowadays use data or coding as the compositional logic for generating graphics, which is a relatively new and flexible design concept, such as the flexible logo designed by the Ukrainian design firm BBDO for the Structure Urban Volunteers team, which abandons the figurative elements that represent the Ukrainian capital, Kiev, and boldly adopts a more experimental approach. The designers used real data as the basis for the logo. The designers used real data as the basis for the logo, placing different statistics such as population density, traffic, lighting, soil borne disease areas, dimensions, and noise on a map of Kiev, and then translating them into a design language (Figure 6).This way of generating graphics is very flexible and free, and according to the laws of data visualization, different data can generate different graphic patterns.
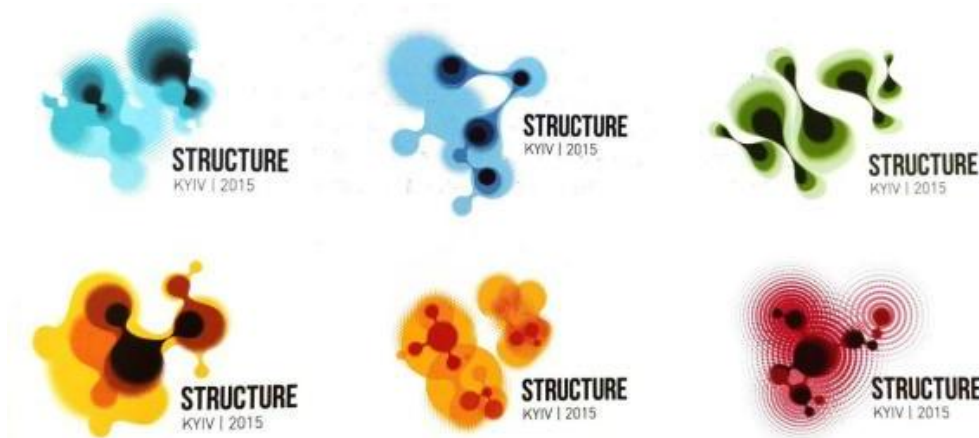

Figure 6 Structure City Volunteer Team Visual Identity Logo Design
(Source: Chen Jinming & Wang Xiangliang, 2018）

4.3   Adaptability of Visual System

Visual diversity should be reflected in the design of multiform brand image to adapt to different application scenarios as much as possible. With the development of media technology, cross-platform and cross-media communication is an important direction for brand promotion in the future. The traditional practice of repeating a single brand visual logo is obviously unable to adapt to the trend of media diversification, and innovative design tools such as dynamic branding have emerged. As a form of brand design between traditional brand and dynamic brand, flexible brand has the characteristics of static plane visualization, but also has the subjective experience of dynamic change, which can make up for the gap between the two very well. Therefore, when creating a flexible brand visual system, the needs of traditional print media should be fully considered to ensure that the brand image is conveyed in different application scenarios. At the same time, it is important to ensure that a flexible brand visual system provides an organic pattern of variation, with the flexibility to derive appropriate graphic styles based on the characteristics of the media. For example, the University of Applied Sciences in Hungary undertook a branding exercise after a name change, where the new acronym, MET, and variable graphics simulating classic architecture and cityscapes clearly distinguished the different faculty members, where the graphics flexibly adapted to different layout needs in different sizes of printed materials, and where the graphics cleverly maintained the identity of the core subject and correspondingly adapted to the characteristics of the outer contours of the core body in three-dimensional spaces and on other media such as web-based platforms. In other media, such as stereoscopic space and online platforms, the graphic cleverly maintains the characteristics of the core body's outer contours and makes more flexible changes, accordingly, providing vividness while maintaining a high degree of consistency and recognizability (Fig. 7).

Figure 7 Visual Identity Enhancement of the Hungarian University of Urban Applied Sciences
(Source: Chen Jinming & Wang Xiangliang, 2018）

5 FLEXIBLE BRANDING VISUAL IDENTITY DESIGN FOR GUANGFU TEMPLE FAIR

The Guangfu Temple Fair is a cultural event that combines the culture of praying for blessings, folk culture, food culture, trade and leisure. As an annual grand event, Guangfu Temple Fair and Spring Flower Market, Polo Festival and Beggar's Nest and other traditional folk activities, has a high degree of visibility and wider public participation, but from the nature of the activities of the positioning, the organization of the scale and the degree of importance attached by the government, undoubtedly with the name of "Guangfu" commanding the Guangfu Temple Fair has more potential cultural influence, more comprehensive strength to assume the responsibility of disseminating and promoting the Guangfu culture. Influence, more comprehensive strength to assume the responsibility of disseminating and promoting the culture of Guangfu. The temple fair was originally a religious ceremony for the gods in the north, and the Guangfu temple fair abandoned the traditional temple fair in the reward of the gods and entertainment of the gods in the background, in the beginning of the conception of the positioning of the cultural carnival relying on the City God Temple as the center, is the official sponsorship of a kind of "temple fair" in the form of a new type of cultural and leisure activities, combined with the folk culture of Guangfu.

Guangfu Temple Fair has been ten years, in the scale of activities and the richness of the program is constantly upgraded, however, according to the author's tracking observation, the organizers in the activities of the image of the management and positioning strategy is relatively weak. Specifically manifested in: (1) the overall visual image of the event is not prominent enough, vertical comparison, Guangfu Temple Fair in the main visual color and elements are very traditional, very easy to drown in the same period of the Spring Festival festival publicity design, horizontal comparison, the logo fails to establish a strong and distinctive recognition of the many temple fair activities in the country's logo; (2) the temple fair in Guangfu to provide a good vehicle for the propaganda of the Guangfu culture for the local people is a collective cultural memory. local people is a collective cultural memory revisited, for outsiders is a window to show cultural charm, but in the pre-event publicity strategy, failed to make full use of the advantages of the cultural carrier, strengthen the cultural content output, so as to create the brand memory of the cultural feast. In response to these problems, the introduction of a multiform brand image and a brand promotion strategy based on semiotics can amplify the infectious power of the visual image, externalize the cultural connotations, and contribute to the multidimensional dissemination of cultural activities.

Table 2: Various cultural elements applied in the branding design (Source: by author)

Cultural Features	Cultural Element		Aesthetic Inspiration	
Living	Manchurian window		The pattern and composition form in the window lattice	
Cantonese Music	Guangdong Opera		Opera mask、water-sleeve	
Cantonese Cuisine	Dim sum served in bamboo steamer		Bamboo steamer	
Cantonese Folk art	Guangzhou embroidery		The well-organized pattern	
CantoneseLuck Symbol	Lion dance		Sharpe color and artistic image of lion	
Cantonese mythology	The Stone Statue of the Five Rams		Abstraction of five rams	

6 CONCLUSIONS

Compared with the traditional brand visual image, the visual language of flexible visual identification system is flexible and multi-dimensional communication, which is more conducive to the brand to create atmosphere, enhance the sense of experience and enrich the cultural connotation. Guangfu Temple Fair is defined as a new type of folk cultural activity, which can incorporate all

kinds of cultural resources and provide the compatible function of cultural carriers. The brand system of multiform visual system has the advantage of strong adaptability, which can dock the image symbols in the brand framework of Guangfu Temple Fair, and present the cultural outlook, atmosphere and value positioning of the Guangfu Temple Fair in the three dimensions of cultural symbols, aesthetics symbols and value symbols more adequately. It should be noted that the relationship between flexible visual identity system and cultural activities is not "one-to-one", and there are many possibilities for the selection of cultural symbols and the refinement of aesthetic symbols. The introduction of this case illustrates on the one hand the feasibility of flexible visual identity system in cultural activities, and on the other hand, it provides a demonstration path for the subsequent research or practice. The case illustrates the feasibility of multiform visual identity systems in cultural activities on the one hand and provides a model for subsequent research or practice on the other.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author's individual work covers data collection, analysis and writing etc.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST / KONFLIK KEPENTINGAN

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