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# The social distancing visuals in brand communication

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*Communication is more than a money generator in businesses' life and brand communication must be an ally in the process of getting noticed, inspiring and pushing to action. This paper aims to exploit some visuals of the companies that changed their logos in order to promote their own brands in times of crisis, more specifically, a medical crisis, that of the coronavirus. In not more than one month, large companies transformed their classic brand logos into social distancing visuals. The objectives of this undertaking are to emphasize the importance of brand communication in this special time of medical and economic crisis, to determine how the big brands' logos transformed and to identify the goals of brand communication strategy through visuals. We attempt to see the new logos through a social semiotic perspective on visual and brand communication.*

Key-words*: brand communication, visuals, publicity, social distancing*

## 1. Introduction

Although the main goal of business is to sell and generate profit, many brands have addressed the coronavirus crisis with other types of online content and actions such as support programs, extended loyalty memberships, free access to content, donations and volunteering, each in their own way. Therefore, we have to learn that communication is more than a money generator in businesses' life and that brand communication must be an ally in the process of getting noticed, inspiring and pushing to action. In this paper, we aim to exploit some visuals of the companies that changed their logos in order to make their own communication in times of crisis, a specific medical crisis, that of the coronavirus. In not more than one month, large companies transformed the classic brand logo into a social distancing visual. Audi, MasterCard, NBA, Nike, Volkswagen, Starbucks or Mc Donald's have encouraged people to stay away because of the virus threat. Our

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objectives are to emphasize the importance of brand communication in this special time of medical and economic crisis, to determine how the big brands' logos transformed and to identify the goals of brand communication strategy through visuals. We attempt to see the new logos through a social semiotic perspective on visual and brand communication. Even if uncertainty is a word to describe what's going on in the marketing world during the coronavirus crisis, different brands around the globe (from international giants to local companies) are seeking new ways of running a business. In these times, in addition to running a business, brands have to support their communities and provide help or ways of resolving problems where needed. And the social distance imperative was a means to their purposes.

The first part of this article seeks to explain the key terms and the theories underpinning the approach to analysis. The interpersonal message is then analysed, along with a discussion on social distance and the representation of the medical crisis in brand communication.

## 2. Communication and social distancing during the medical and economic crisis of 2020

The COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic could be the defining global health crisis of our time and the greatest challenge humankind faced since World War II. Since its emergence in Asia late last year, the virus has spread to every continent except Antarctica. But the pandemic is much more than a health crisis, it's also a socio-economic crisis that developed as a result of the medical crisis.

During a crisis, communication doesn't have to serve only the present of a business but more likely the building of the future. Communication wouldn't be a money generator but a value generator, a connection between the service, the product and the consumer. A connection that should create experiences to the client and put the client's interests at the centre of the product/brand. A marketing strategy consists of three steps: understand the market, choose a strategy, and execute it. The COVID-19 crisis brought new and original ways of brand communication in the semiotic way (textual and visual). The first thing to say is that this situation wasn't considered a marketing opportunity in the old terms of this concept. In fact, brands shouldn't be looking at the COVID-19 pandemic as something to capitalize on but as something to go through together. But somehow *together* and *social distancing* is the idea that have structured our latest ways of living.

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Social distance is defined as the perceived distance, or perceived dimension of closeness between interacting individuals or groups (Dufwenberg and Muren, 2006, 42–49). It is an important concept in psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science and also in management and brand management more specifically. Akerlof (1997) points out that social distance needs to be incorporated into economic modelling to explain individual decisions bearing social consequences. But this specific medical crisis has brought a new face to this concept of social distancing. Acquiring and retaining customers, and growing customer engagement, rests on marketing, but brand communications in particular times seem to be the support for a continuum, for a connection beyond the restrictions.

## 3. Online visual communication for big brands during the COVID social crisis

The Covid-19 epidemic produces a lot of new signs, speeches, and images, text images, more or less pleasant, more or less funny, more or less decent, and more or less useful. An abundant iconography quickly developed online. Sometimes it was something expected, sometimes inventiveness took the place of the usual communication style. Even the expected, in nowadays picture, was surprising and inventive. The online suddenly became the only way of interacting with the specific and non-specific public. Social media, with its interactive features, has attracted millions to join Social Networking Sites (SNS) to connect with others. Social media users heavily rely on visual contents to communicate, an idea strongly supported by how social networks developed. This trend of online media picture can be fuelled by telling stories, entertaining one's friends or by sharing their emotions with others.

In the present age of web-based social networking, visual communication assumes a key role in business and public communication. Brand communication in social networking (with its astute features) must have the ability to pull in numerous clients and consumers to interface with them all the time, even if the crisis took the possibility for commercials to interact directly in stores. Visual communication plays a key role in the online and offline engagement behaviour, social media further adding to sales. The high-quality visuals improve visibility in the social networking sites and are being selected as organization's key activity. Several theories (like the Structural Equation Modelling[2], Uses and Gratification

[2] Structural equation modeling (SEM) is a multivariate statistical framework that is used to model complex relationships between directly and indirectly observed (latent) variables. *(12) (PDF) Structural Equation Modeling*. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/ publication/ 221808236_Structural_Equation_Modeling [accessed Sep 13 2020].

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Theory[3]) have been used to validate the effect of visuals with informative, entertaining content on consumer engagement further leading to consumer-brand relationship. For example, the "Uses and Gratifications Theory" has been adopted to study the customers' behavioural response in relation to consumer engagement in social media context.

Visual communication can be considered as one of the major tools used to enhance social media engagement, publicity and even sales. Visual content on the web has become a necessity. Visuals do carry a lot of power, especially for brands on social media, since the elements of visuals allow marketers to create deeper connections with the customers (Neher 2014). Moreover, since a lot of information is available on social media, the users prefer to skip many informative contents until they find them more attractive, more visual, simpler to absorb and to retain and until they are convinced that they are useful to them. The high-quality visual also assures visibility in the SNS as it is eye-catching and conveys the idea quickly (Brubaker and Wilson 2018).

Visual communication can be used for disseminating information and ideas by using symbols, imagery, signs, graphic designs, films, typography etc. According to Manic (2015), visual contents can be categorized into three major types:

- Illustrations - the composition of static visuals that includes drawings, photos and latest introduced visuals - memes; illustrations are usually very easy to understand.
- Comics - the collections of images and text; this type of visual content may include infographics and visual stories and is a good storyteller and easily remembered.
- Videos - the collection of moving images in the form of clips or short films with a clear story and a short message.

In order to establish their social media presence and continuously pursue engaging their potential customers, the corporates use social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, YouTube etc. The growing popularity of such online media is a very good motivation for the companies so that they can maintain a friendly relationship with the customers. In spring 2020, all these social networks were highly used to keep the connection with their public, to implicate in the world medical crisis and to try not to lose so many clients because of the economic crisis which could be result of the medical crisis of COVID19.

[3] The Uses and Gratification theory discusses the effects of the media on people. It explains how people use the media for their own need and get satisfied when their needs are fulfilled, https://www. communicationtheory.org/uses-and-gratification-theory/ [accessed Sep 13 2020].

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For this purpose, the corporates who already had their own pages on various social media platforms have used brand-related contents and even their logos is order to stay connected with the old and the potential customers. This allowed followers to express their opinions in the form of like, comment and share.

According to Svensson and Russman (2017), sharing visual contents relating to brands has become an integral part of the social media activities and this shift towards visuals arguably transforms how we relate to each other and the world around us, as well as how we perceive and construct our sense of self" (2017:1). Visual content communication is a powerful means to grow or to maintain the presence of brand on SNSs because it is more influential than text messages (Brubaker and Wilson 2015). So, even more in a specific context like an economic crisis (determined by the COVID19 medical crisis, with the lockdown and the impossibility to purchase directly from the offline stores), visuals were meant to provide vivid and concrete representations of information and of emotions, of a "together" very different from that already knew by every part of the social contract of selling. It was a necessary communication means in these different and weird times, when the companies were looking for a way of building deeper connections, increasing the believability of marketing efforts and establishing a new communication form adapted to the new conditions.

The big brand SNS pages have been successful in engaging consumers with their visual contents in the beginning of the medical crisis in Romania, March-April 2020. During that lockdown period, in Romania and in many other countries around the world, the online contents have become a prevalent form communication on various SNSs. The visual contents, especially images and videos, were implemented on Facebook timelines, suggesting that social distancing was one of the keys to stay safe. Instagram has also found huge success with the simple feature of sharing images with friends and other followers adding minimal or no text to the posts. Visual images used in social media evoke in a many ways emotional reaction and can "portray" information more efficiently than text. Thus, visual content is vital to build company/brand engagement. Moreover, a blog by More (2014) describes three important reasons for driving engagement through visual contents: (i) it communicates information quicker and more efficiently; (ii) it builds trust; (iii) it is easy to engage with. Following these principles, brand communication in times of crisis used online visual communication, becoming even more multimodal as they now host pictures, videos, hashtags, emoticons as well as written text.

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## 4. Analytic tools for visual analysis: multimodal semiotic construction of ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions

This section combines linguistic and image analysis to determine the meaning-making of advertisements used in brand communication during the COVID-19 medical crisis. Although linguistic text and image have inherent differences in their semiotic modes, both these modes have meaning potential. The text and the image have different types of interactions with the customer. The analysis focuses on 10 international large companies[4] that changed their logos in order to "explain" to their customers that during the pandemic period social distance must be kept. Even if the ads have an international target audience, each major company has already established a pool of customers, usually loyal customers, so that they address them in a highly personalized manner, aiming to strengthen a relationship based on trust not only in the good, normal, times, but also in times seen as atypical.

Visual components in discourse in general and in publicity more specifically, play a vital role in establishing a social relationship with the audience / the consumer. Social semiotics view language and visual communication as building a system where both are jointly creating meaning. Although both have their own specific meaning-making potential independently, not everything that can be achieved through language can be achieved through image and vice versa. Meaning is expressed by speakers, writers, photographers, and they are first and foremost social meanings, they are meanings which arise out of the society in which people work and live. But meaning starts from a visual, a text, a message, an oral discourse or a written one. Visuals in brand communication must achieve a connection between the source (the brand) and the final point (the client).

Visual social semiotics is defined by Jewitt and Oyama (2001) as involving the description of semiotic resources, what can be said and done with the images (and other visual means of communication), and how the things people say and do with the images can be "interpreted". Visual Semiotics offers a framework for analysing images and opens up the means of these visual images within Halliday's (1978) systemic functional linguistics according to the metafunctions he sets out, which are the **interpersonal, the ideational and the textual**. In order to evaluate the visual of social distance, we use in our research the ideational, the interpersonal areas and the texts that accompanied the visual on the online network of the brand communication for some big names in the industry.

[4] Audi, Mercedes-Benz, Volkswagen, Nike, Nokia, Orange, McDonald's, Starbucks, MegaImage, Sephora.

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### 3.1. Multimodality: a social semiotic approach to contemporary communication

Each brand needs to ensure that their customers will understand the meaning potential of these semiotic resources. The linguistic choices, along with the meaning potential that results from these choices, change as the power relations shift.

Brand communication must adopt a social perspective because of the way consumerism is structured: in a social context, culture and specific. According to Halliday (1978) and Kress „the field of social semiotics addresses how messages are used and exchanged in specific social groups. Social semiotics emerged as a means of interpreting the social dimensions of meaning and the power of human processes of signification an interpretation in shaping individuals and societies" (Kress 2010, 54). The same author believes that meaning arises in social environments and through social interaction: “brands use social practices to convey meanings to their customers within the social environment” (Kress 2010, 54). A variety of semiotic resources in their own specific fields, and where they undertake specific social practices.

Here we are in the area of social semiotics which opens to „approaches centred on the study of ‘the pragmatic conditions’ of communication exchanges” (Drăgan 2007, 232) and takes into account “how people produce and communicate meaning in specific social settings” (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006, 266). Here is the space of action of multimodality, which is “the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, 20).

#### *3.1.1. Ideational in Visual*

Visuals, like language, can show patterns of experience and are shown through processes, participants and circumstances. The **ideational metafunction is about people, places and objects within the image and the process involved**. These create an understanding of what the image is actually about (Hopearuoho and Ventola 2009).

This metafunction conveys to the reader the message that they are to take from the image. The process in a clause is the centre of the world of experience and contributes to the ideational meaning in a clause (Butt et al. 2009). Image analysis includes the same process as linguistic analysis. The circumstance provides extra information and illuminates the process in some way; it gives additional information on who to, what, why, and when the action occurred. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006, 40) stipulate that any semiotic system has to represent aspects of the experiential world outside its particular system of signs.

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*3.1.2. Interpersonal in Visual*

Images represent aspects of the world; they take into account social relations and are realised in ways that are cohesive and coherent. As social semiotic – the study of how semiotic systems are shaped by social interests and ideologies, and how they are adapted as society changes, the grammar of visuals describes the way in which depicted people, places and things combine into visual statements (Hopearuoho and Ventola 2009).

The article examines the two dimensions of both **the visual and textual publicity** discourse in times of coronavirus crisis, the interpersonal and ideational metafunctions, to understand how brands use these to establish a social connection with the consumers. The interpersonal metafunction represents the way that the addressor and the audience interact.

The interpersonal metafunction cover **the relationship / interaction established between the addressor and the audience.** The interpersonal metafunction in visual communication is concerned with ways in which the image interacts with the audience.

*3.1.3. Textual in Brand Communication Visuals*

The textual function that I have chosen to emphasise is, in fact, a complementation of the visual, inasmuch as the social networks allow the presence of a not so lengthy text, also altered by the pandemic, alongside an image (which may or may not contain bits of text). Therefore, for NIKE the slogan “Do it!” has turned into “Don’t do it!”, for AUDI, “Stay together” has become “Keep your distance”. McDonald’s added McDelivery, in view of letting their customers know, by employing the same semiotic basis, that they can still consume their favourite products by ordering from their homes. Starbucks added a mask to the image on their cups, adding the message “We miss you too” in order to give their customers a sense of their being relevant, but also to send the message that they know that their products are missed, but the situation requires distancing. Needless to say, that, although the idea was one of social distance, the messages actually focused on bringing together their consumers, buyers and faithful fans. The texts added to the changes made to logos aimed to keep the distance relationship as warm as possible.

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### 3.2. Applying the tools: brand logos in times of COVID 19 medical crisis

Images are very an important means of communicating the interpersonal with the reader. In social distance, additional factors such as the size of the frame and the percentage of the human body are examined. The modality can be expressed through the type of colour used or the shapes included in the images.

To analyse the visual metafunctions such as interpersonal, ideational and textual, a proposed **template** shown below has been developed by adapting the work of Amanda Janssen (2017) and fill in with the information regarding the visual brand communication in the medical crisis of 2020. The first section of this table describes the **ideational metafunction** to demonstrate the way this metafunction can be represented in images. This template divides the image into **structure and process**. **The structure is divided into narrative and conceptual**. A narrative image shows "unfolding actions and events, process of change" to the viewer (Kress and Leuween 1996, 57), or show what is happening or going on as the actions change (Jewitt and Oyama 2001). The images are static, and the processes can be relational or existential.

For the interpersonal metafunction, the visual is analysed in the second section of the template. The two parameters used for illustrating the interpersonal metafunction are the **mood** and the **modality**.

The two metafunctions are correlated with the textual metafunction, so that we chose to use the texts with the visual. We must to specific that the text is either in the picture, or in the post made by the big companies on social media. Mostly are included in the visual (Volkswagen, Audi, Orange, Sephora, LinkedIN, Nike).

**Table 1.** The Interpersonal and Ideational Metafunction in Visual Brand Communication during the 2020 Pandemic Crisis

| Ideational | Interpersonal |
|---|---|
| **Structure**<br><br>**Narrative***:*<br>*Participants:*<br>**AUDI**<br>* Keep YOUR distance<br>* Stay Together (YOU)<br>* Thank you for standing together<br>**VOLKSWAGEN**<br>*We are many | **Mood**<br><br>***Declarative, Imperative and exclamative mood***<br>*declarative*<br>* Good things are still happening<br>* People all around the world joined the #FourRingsChallenge to show solidarity in solitary. The results were amazing. |

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| Ideational | Interpersonal |
|---|---|
| * We have stood strong through more than one crisis<br>* We did this together<br>* We did this by standing shoulder to shoulder<br>* We did this by being close to each other<br>* We are colleagues, friends, a family<br>* We now face another crisis<br>* We are Volkswagen and in order to overcome it<br>**MEGAIMAGE**<br>*#ReusimImpreuna (#WeSuccedTogether)(WE)<br>**STARBUCKS**<br>*WE miss YOU too<br>**ORANGE**<br>*conectează-te la tot ce contează, stai acasă (connect to all that matters, stay at home) (YOU)<br>Allows viewers to create a story about the represented logos in which he is included, he is part of it.<br><br>**Conceptual:**<br>*Relational process*<br>**NOKIA**<br>*connecting people, disconnecting people<br>**NIKE**<br>*do it, don't do it<br><br>***Symbols***: the hand (Nokia), the face with a mask (Starbucks), some additional spade for Volkswagen, Audi, Mercedes Benz, McDonald's, Coca Cola logos, the heart (Sephora, Mega Image and Orange)<br><br>**Processes**<br>***A**ctions*:<br>*We **HAVE STOOD STRONG** through more than one crisis<br>*We DID this together<br>*We DID this by standing shoulder to shoulder<br>*We DID this by being close to each other<br>*We now FACE another crisis<br><br>*Classificatory*<br>- We ARE colleagues, friends, a family | *imperative*<br>*We need to keep our distance! (*Audi*)<br>* Staying apart is the best way to stay united! *(McDonald's)*<br>* Stay at home (Mercedes Benz)<br><br>*exclamative*<br>*Thank you for standing together (exclamative sentence)<br>*Thanks for keeping your social distance<br><br>*OBS. No interrogative sentences, because of the incertitude that overwhelmed the entire world.*<br><br>**Modality**<br><br>***Design***<br>The brands chose to keep the whole design, but one or two changes, regarding the logo (Audi, Volkswagen, Mercedes, Starbucks, Coca-Cola, Nokia, Olympic Games) or the slogan (Nike "Just do it –Just don't it", Nokia "Connecting people, disconnected people").<br><br>*OBS. The interpersonal metafunction consist of a familiarity feeling that the brands want to keep in the consumers mind.*<br><br>***Colour**:* The different used colours are in accordance with the usual colours that has been already fixed in the consumer visual memory:<br>*red for Coca-Cola, Mega Image and McDonald's.<br>*Blue for Volkswagen<br>*Black and white for Audi<br>*Orange for Orange |

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| Ideational | Interpersonal |
|---|---|
| - We ARE Volkswagen and in order to overcome it<br><br>*Analytical:*<br>*Good things are still happening<br>*We see stories of our customers and partners (employees) going the extra mile every day, but during this time these little acts of kindness shine even brighter. | *Green for Starbucks<br><br>*OBS. The same colour is a means of keeping the change to the minimal variable.* |

German automakers Audi, Mercedes-Benz and Volkswagen are among those who have temporarily tweaked their logos. In response, Audi has released a message along with a video, wherein its four rings were separated from each other with the caption: 'keep your distance'. The message was 'stay at home, keep your distance, stay healthy, support each other – we are in this together'.

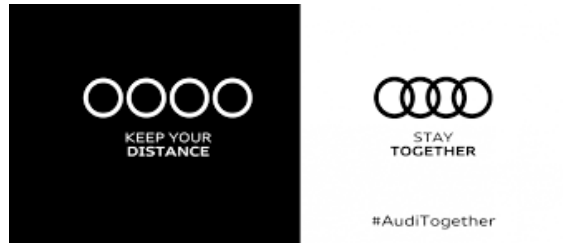



**Figure 1.** Audi logo in March-April 2020

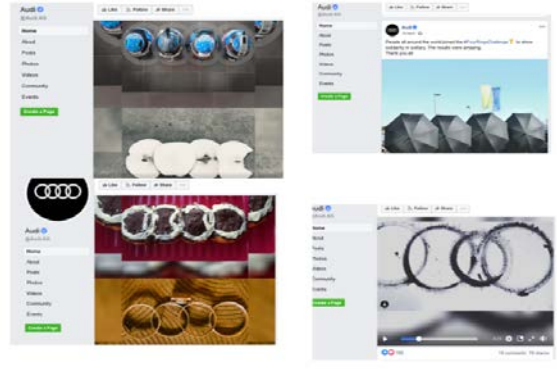


**Figure 2.** Audi logo challenge

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Volkswagen too released a similar style logo with an increased gap between the V and the W in its recently unveiled flat logo, accompanied by the words 'thanks for keeping your distance'. Mercedes-Benz also put some additional space between its famed three-pointed star and the ring that surrounds it. In a message, Mercedes-Benz thanked everyone for keeping distance, and then said, 'by acting together and #stayathome, we can successfully combat the virus.'




**Figure 3.** Volkswagen logo during pandemic crisis

In Brazil, McDonald's altered its iconic golden arches logo in a similar manner. The company posted a picture on its Facebook page with the two arches separated and standing alone. Beverage maker Coca-Cola also separated its logo in an advertisement shown in Times Square with the message: 'staying apart is the best way to stay united.'

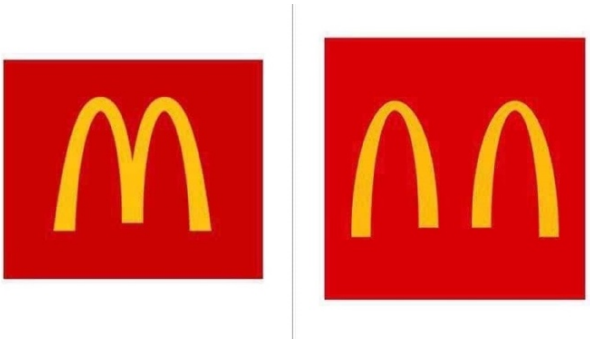


**Figure 4.** McDonald's logo during pandemic crisis

Mega Image is a brand that brought quite some changes to its logo in order to make it specific to the pandemic period, by preserving the red colour yet replacing the basic image with a chain of people represented by figures connected by a heart. Thys, the hands that should have united them are split apart now, but by a

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heart, which makes us think of unity through emotions, by maintaining social distancing. The change is quite big and the intent of Mega Image is to convey the idea that people are at the heart of this change and it is still them that can go through this crisis together.




**Figure 5.** Mega Image new brand logo




**Figure 6.** Starbucks new pandemic logo

Starbucks go with the message: „Check in with each other. We'll get through this together", referring to one of the social networks' functions, that of checking in, but this this the check-in is no longer at the visited place but at home, and not tied to a place but rather to other persons we interact with online, as long as there are movement restrictions. In March, Starbucks transmitted a multitude of messages: through images (mask on the face) or by the texts associated to images: „Good things are still happening. We see stories of our customers and partners (employees) going the extra mile every day, but during this time these little acts of kindness shine even brighter" (25.03.2020, Facebook).

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## 4. Conclusions

Apart from saying "We're all in this together", these brands are trying to resonate with the situation, use brand communication in an emotional way, and incorporate their services into the delivery of practical or entertaining content helping make it through the outbreak.

This article sought to identify and analyse external discourses used by big BRANDS in both written and visual modes by using Van Leeuwen Social Semiotic theory (1985, 2005, 2008, 2017) according to whom, the communication process can be interpreted within semiotic resources and social practices in discourses. Van Leeuwen (2005) states that "Social semiotics is a practice oriented to observation and analysis, to opening our eyes and ears and other senses for the richness of semiotic production an interpretation".

This article is concerned with the way brands use language and image to represent themselves and explores the ways in which the images and text are used to "cover" the pandemic period and to recover clients, friends and fans. It is based on Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2005) adaptation on Halliday's framework to analyse multimodal text. This mode identifies the ideational through transitivity, as a way of understanding the complementary interaction of text and image and the way these fulfil the role they are created for.

Iconic brands have altered their logos to send a message of solidarity and promote social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. German carmakers Audi, Mercedes-Benz and Volkswagen are among those who have temporarily tweaked their logos. In response, Audi has released a message along with a video, wherein its four rings were separated from each other with the caption: 'keep your distance'. The message was 'stay at home, keep your distance, stay healthy, support each other – we are in this together'.

Social distancing — reducing non-essential contact with others and maintaining a distance of around two meters from other people — has come into force around the world to combat the spread of coronavirus. So, big brands have adapted their super known-logos in order to respect this new way of interacting, of buying and of living.

The objectives of this undertaking were to emphasize the importance of brand communication in this special period of medical and economic crisis, to determine how the big brands' logos transformed and to identify the goals of brand communication strategy through visuals. We attempt to see the new logos through a social semiotic perspective on visual and brand communication.

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