

## **Visual communication as a means of affecting consumer behaviour**

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<p>Recent technological developments, the widespread use of the internet and the shift to constant connectivity have affected the way people communicate. To some extent, visual messages have started to dominate the world, as people have become more accustomed to receiving visual messages instead of written or verbal ones. Nowadays visual communication is also an integral part of the fast-changing business environment.</p> <p>The purpose of this study is to provide insights into the field of visual communication and advertising. The study indicates the importance of visual communication for organisations and examines the multiple ways that visual communication can be used to enhance business efficiency. Advantages and benefits of using visual communication are identified and evident examples provided. In addition, this paper joins a growing body of work on the influence of advertising on consumer behaviour by viewing some of the most fundamental characteristics of visual images. Moreover, it demonstrates tactics used by organisations to convince and persuade people to purchase a certain product or service, and explains how culture influences consumer behaviour.</p> <p>The research is written in a descriptive manner and conducted as a literature review. Therefore, it is based on previous works regarding visual communication and consumer behaviour.</p> <p>The paper has benefits for both business managers and marketers wishing to improve their communication efficiency by means of visual images. The study provides general information and a global perspective on the use of visual images in a commercial sense.</p>	
<p><b>Keywords</b></p> <p>visual communication, visualisation, advertising, consumer behaviour</p>	

## Table of contents

1	Introduction .....	1
1.1	Objectives and research questions .....	1
1.2	Methodology and sources .....	2
1.3	Structure of the paper .....	3
1.4	Limitations of the study .....	3
1.5	Further research .....	4
2	Visual communication .....	5
2.1	Visual communication in organisations .....	8
2.2	Brand communications: the role of visualisation.....	9
2.2.1	Corporate image .....	11
2.2.2	Corporate identity.....	11
2.2.3	Brand logo.....	12
3	Visualisation: a cultural perspective.....	14
3.1	Colours .....	15
3.2	Signs, symbols, icons.....	16
3.3	Packaging design.....	17
3.4	Humour and metaphors .....	19
4	Consumer behaviour .....	21
4.1	Motivation .....	21
4.2	Perception.....	22
4.3	Learning and memory .....	23
5	Dimensions of consumer behaviour .....	25
5.1	Culture .....	25
5.2	Social groups .....	27
5.3	The study of the individual .....	27
6	The impact of visual advertising on consumer behaviour .....	28
6.1	Visual persuasion.....	29
6.2	The internet advantage .....	31
7	Ethical issues in visual advertising .....	33
8	Conclusion .....	35
	References .....	37

# 1 Introduction

The widespread use of the internet and penetration of digital technology into everyday life have affected the way we access, communicate, store and process information. Venues for communication change and new ones are being created along with the evolution of technology. Technological advances have also influenced business communication, which resulted in increased use of visual messages. (Bovée & Thill 2014.) The world has become more and more dominated by visual images. In recent years, due to new devices and the rapid growth of the internet usage, visual communication has gained significant popularity, as people have become more accustomed to receiving visual messages instead of verbal ones. (Harris & Lester 2002.)

Visual messages can generate a wide range of emotions and responses in the mind of the message recipient. (Ramsey & Deeter-Schmelz 2008; Sturken & Cartwright 2009.) Images being encountered on the daily basis possess strong influence on the viewer. They are able to mystify, persuade and make people remember something, or they can either provoke to action or calm down. A particular visual image can meet a number of purposes, appear in multiple contexts and have plenty of interpretations.

Nowadays consumers have a better variety of media and services from which to choose making them significantly more difficult to reach for companies. In order to ensure effective communication with customers, organisations have to adapt themselves to technological developments. As consumers face a great amount of both visual and verbal information every day, it is essential for marketers, advertisers and business managers to understand how information is acquired, digested and retained. (Ramsey & Deeter-Schmelz 2008.)

Changes in advertising and communications environment have had a major impact on consumers. Therefore, the way in which consumer behaviour is being shaped by these changes must be reviewed. (Fill, Hughes & De Francesco 2013, 366.)

## 1.1 Objectives and research questions

The purpose of the study is to provide insights into the field of visual communication and advertising, and raise awareness of their influence on consumer behaviour. The paper has benefits for both business managers and marketers wishing to improve efficiency of their communication to customers by means of visual messages. The study provides

general information and a global perspective on the use and the effect of visual images in a commercial sense. Examples are used to explain certain issues more comprehensibly.

This paper examines the impact of visual communication on consumer behaviour and demonstrates how organisations take advantage of this powerful business tool by using images to convince and persuade customers to purchase a certain product or service.

Thus, the main research questions that this paper seeks to answer are the following:

- What is the importance of visual communication for organisations?
- How do organisations influence consumer behaviour through visual advertising?

The correlation of factors influencing decoding of visual messages and consumer behaviour will be investigated. The role of cultural differences will be observed. Special attention will be paid on characteristics and qualities of effective visual (organisational) communication and the role of psychology in consumer-targeted visual messages. Here, the main focus will be on visual advertising.

There are a few terms that are repeated frequently throughout the paper, and therefore require explanations. *Visual image* or *visuals* mean any form of an image, picture, illustration, chart, or graph that can be attained by sight. *Organisation* is referred to an institution, social unit, or association with mutual collective goals, which is dependent on its environment. The terms consumer and customer might be confusing. By *consumer* is meant user of a product or service, whereas a *customer* is a buyer of a product or service.

## **1.2 Methodology and sources**

The study is made as a literature review. As stated by Hart (1998, 13):

A literature literature review is a selection of available documents on the topic, which contain information, ideas, data and evidence written from a particular standpoint to fulfil certain aims or express certain views on the nature of the topic and how it is to be investigated, and the effective evaluation of these documents in relation to the research being proposed.

Therefore, this paper is built on previous researches regarding visual communication and its connection to consumer behaviour. It is conducted as a review of existing theory and information regarding the topic. The choice of study method was determined by research questions.

Relevant literature is used to provide an overview and form an understanding of the topic. Data is collected from suitable academic journals, books, articles and research reports. Special effort has been put in search for corresponding academic journals, them being the most reliable and competitive source of scientific knowledge. (Chandy & Williams 1994.) Multiple electronic databases were used to find suitable articles in the field of business, marketing, communications and psychology.

Sources are selected critically and special attention will be given to credibility of publications, as well as objectivity and respectability of authors. Currency of the data is considered important and the reviewed literature is up to date.

### **1.3 Structure of the paper**

This paper begins by description of visual communication and explanation of its role in organisations. General principles of successful visual communication will be characterised and the role of visual images in branding will be acknowledged and illustrated. Then, the discussion moves on to perception of visual images and factors affecting it. Here, various cultural differences will be analysed. Next, consumer behaviour will be portrayed and factors influencing it will be outlined. Dimension of consumer behavior will be presented and cultural issues determining consumer behavior will be the explained using the famous Hofstede's framework on cultural dimensions. Afterwards, the link between visual communication and consumer behaviour will be exposed by evaluating the impact of visual messages communicated by brands on consumer behavior. In addition, the topic of visual persuasion will be observed and advantages of the internet for brands in relation to communicating the value by means of visual images will be shown. In the final part of the paper ethical issues concerning visual communication will be demonstrated. Conclusion will summarise the topic.

The paper is written in cohesive and descriptive manner and multiple examples will be provided to support given information.

### **1.4 Limitations of the study**

The nature of this paper leaves several limitations and opportunities for further research. The largest limitation is related to the scope of the topic. This study encompasses a number of major topics: visual communication, cultural differences, consumer behaviour, advertising, and ethics of advertising. Each subject is challenging and broad enough to merit its own coverage in several books. However, the purpose of the study is to provide an outlook. Thus, the components of the topic are not discussed thoroughly.

Moreover, there are not enough examples of risks and disadvantages of visual communication. The importance of visual literacy is not highlighted, and skills of communication managers in terms of producing effective visual messages is not discussed.

### **1.5 Further research**

Visual communication is a relatively young study. It would be interesting and advantageous for organisations to monitor its development. As we live in a fast-changing environment, new visual techniques are likely to be created enabling even more efficient representation of visual information. Further research can also include investigations on future industry trends and the impact of globalisation on perception of visual images by different cultures.

## 2 Visual communication

The world of today is filled with screens, advertisements, signs, and pictures designed to be looked at. People communicate and negotiate through visual images, and their lives are heavily dominated by the visual and by communication technologies (Sturken & Cartwright 2009, 1). Information is largely provided in visual form, which enhances the role of visual communication. Before looking in more detail at the field of visual communication, it is good to revise the process of communication.

Communication can be defined as a transfer of meaning by means of messages. It is a series of essential activities between the message sender and the message receiver that include designing a message or encoding, transmitting the message by means of a medium, receiving a message, decoding the message, and attributing a meaning to the message (Schramm 1955). The message receiver may also send feedback to the message sender. The challenge within communication process lies in creating an understandable message. Source composes and transmits a message. A source can be either an individual or organisation. A merger of suitable stimuli, such as text, visuals, symbols, or music, is selected by source to convey the message to be sent (Fill et al. 2013, 32).

It must be remembered that the meaning of a message may differ depending on how the message is formulated by the sender, and how it will be understood by the receiver. At any stage of the communication process noise can occur. Mallen (1977) stresses that noise distorts information, but it can rarely be avoided. Table 1 reports some of the most frequent causes of barriers to communication.

Table 1. Common barriers to communication: causes and examples.

TECHNOLOGICAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Technological failures</li><li>• Slow internet connection</li></ul>
PHYSICAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Poor equipment , bad lightning</li><li>• Distance, environment</li></ul>
PHYSIOLOGICAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fatigue, stress or disability (e.g. blindness)</li></ul>
PSYCHOLOGICAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Opinion, perception, prejudice, judgment, selectivity</li><li>• Emotions (e.g. fear, lack of trust)</li></ul>
CULTURAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Cultural diversity, different values or behaviors</li></ul>
LINGUISTIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Jargon, dialect, strong accent, foreign language</li></ul>



Noise or barriers to communication prevent the message receiver from getting the message or a part of it. In order to overcome barriers to communication it is important to understand reasons behind them. Barriers to communication may occur from a number of different factors of which technological, physical, physiological, psychological, cultural, and linguistic are, perhaps, the most common ones. Effective communication implies minimising noise. Blundel, Ippolito and Donnarumma (2013) introduce a few particularly adequate activities for overcoming noise or the barriers. They suggest to take the message receiver more seriously, pay attention on formulating the message more precisely, and, finally, to deliver the message skilfully. (Blundel et al. 2013.) In order for communication to be effective, efforts to understanding is required from both parties.

Visual communication is a multidisciplinary research field that has roots in graphic design, communication studies, and social sciences. The study of visual communication is relatively new (Messaris 2003, 551). An accurate and precise definition for visual communication is hard to find or formulate, as the concept is young and often viewed as graphic design, visualisation, visual arts, visual perception or visual rhetorics. Logo, signs, icons, packaging, receipts, books, and advertisements are some elementary examples of visual communication. Visual communication examines the way visual images can be used to convey information, ideas, and messages. Messaris (2003, 551) pointed out two major issues that confronts visual communication:

First, on a theoretical level, visually oriented scholars need to develop a sharper understanding of the distinctions among the major modes of communication (image, word, music, body display, etc.) and a clearer appreciation of the specific role that each plays in social processes. Second, on the research front, there is a need for more sophisticated ways of exploring visual meanings and investigating viewers' responses to images.

Over a decade has passed but the issues highlighted by Messaris (2003) remain the same. The role of images in communication process to customers is not taken seriously enough by organisations. Visual communication may be used to convey messages, ideas, and values to stakeholders. Process of visual communication can be independent, but it can also be activated or reinforced by other types of communication. For instance, visual images are often accompanied with text.

Perception of images is influenced by knowledge, attitude, behavior, and culture of the audience. Compared to verbal or textual communication visual communication has a greater ability to inform, engage and attract attention. Visual image helps the audience to retain the message even after the stimulus is gone. (Blundel et al. 2013.) The simpler the visual is, the better it will be understood.

Blundel et al. (2013) claim that one of the most significant functions of visual communication is to reinforce spoken or written words. Visual image can also simplify a long or complicated message, and encourage understanding of its meaning. While written communication is dependent on grammatical systems and punctuation, use of images can be particularly beneficial when communicating with audience with low or limited literacy skills. In such cases, images can replace words in message delivery. On top of that, a successful picture conveys more information than a textual message. (Gerard & Goldstein 2005.)

A picture is certainly worth a thousand words. Visualisation helps to enhance cognitive abilities for interpretation, evaluation and problem solving. (Larkin & Simon 1987; Tversky 2005.) While textual information relies on argumentation, visual information relies in associations. Well-implemented visual can reinforce delivery of the message. Visual messages can even dominate verbal ones, as they are easy to remember. Compared to verbal information visual message is easier for people to remember for people process verbal information visually. Clow and Baack (2005, 179) explain that the human brain keeps visual images as both pictures and words from the message: "The dual processing makes it easier for people to recall the message. Visual images are usually stored in both left and right sides of the brain, whereas verbal messages tend to be stored in only the left side of the brain." Kotler, Keller, Brady, Goodman and Hansen (2009, 696) conclude that efficient communication achieves four things: "establishes a connection, promise a reward, inspire action and stick in the memory"

The digital environment of today highlights crucial role of effective visual communication. Audiences have high expectations of the way organisations present themselves visually. Visual images influence emotions of the reader by creating a feeling of motivation and engagement (Huff 1990; Buzan & Buzan 2002). Well-designed visual image is stimulating and intriguing. When communicating visually organisations reflect their identity through visual images, thus marketers need to remember to use those visuals that support their organisational values.

However, visual communication can also generate unwanted problems. If a visual image is not properly designed for its intended use and audience, it can lead to a breakdown in communication. Blundel et al. (2013) identify three potential sources of problematic results: inconsistency, inherent unsuitability, and context-related meaning. A visual image may not be consistent with the text or the aspects of the message. A picture may not represent the "reality". In addition, some visual images may become unsuitable and unable to reach their intended objects. Often such matter appears when the image has

been used too frequently and it has become over-familiar. Difficulties also occur when the meaning of the visual message is interpreted in unplanned manner, which may cause offence or unpleasant feelings and emotions.

Language plays a vital role in marketing and communication, therefore the relationship between culture and language must be understood. (Mueller 2008; de Mooij 2010.) Whorf (1956) states that a culture cannot be thoroughly understood without understanding the language spoken by its people. People are different and both visual and textual message can be interpreted in multiple ways. When designing a visual message, issues such as colour, typography, proportions, and shapes must be evaluated in order to ensure appropriateness of a visual in a cultural context. Designing of visuals most frequently requires professional skills and knowledge.

Recently, the subject of visual literacy has become evidently important. Visual literacy refers to a capability to understand and figure out cues in visual images (Blundel et al. 2013). According to Avgerinou (2009, 29), a viewer with visual literacy skills must ascertain knowledge of “visual signs and symbols and their socially agreed meanings (within the western culture)”. Visual language differs notably from verbal language. (Messaris 1998.) Knowing fundamentals of visual literacy is crucial for businesses. According to Harris and Lester (2002, 4), marketers need to know how to “sense, select, and perceive a visual message”.

## **2.1 Visual communication in organisations**

Technological developments and several social factors have contributed in increased use of visual communication and helped it to become an essential part of business communication. Modern technology makes it relatively easy, fast and inexpensive to produce visuals, which allows business managers to reach wider audiences. (Gerard & Goldstein 2005.)

Many scholars indicate importance of visual communication in organisations. Fong, Valerdi and Srinivasam (2007) report that visualisation is an effective tool for supporting collaborative tasks. Images help to keep people’s attention and therefore help the audience to understand the meaning of particular message. Platts and Tan (2004) note usefulness of visualisation in strategising, Bresciani and Eppler (2007) in knowledge sharing, Phaal and Muller (2008) in planning, and Isenberg, Bezerianos, Henry, Carpendale and Fekete (2009) in collaborative social network analysis.

Information visualisation techniques, such as charts and graphs, support problem solving by exploiting person's visual and special abilities. (Tegarden 1999.) When familiarising with previously unseen or unread text, busy people often jump to images in order to get the idea of the text. Key factors displayed in figures, bar charts, diagrams or pie charts enable to visualise the data. Graphics are particularly helpful tools to show relationships or processes that otherwise would not be easy to convey in text. (Blundel et al. 2013.) However, graphical data can also be used in the wrong way with the intention to confuse the public. Inappropriate type of image may be selected to illustrate the data or the image may be constructed incorrectly (Tufte 1990).

O'Donnel, Dansereau and Hall (2002) acknowledge that use of visualisations "reduces cognitive load, enhances representation of relationships among complex constructs, and provides multiple retrieval paths for accessing knowledge". Green and Petre (1996) and Suthers (2001) add that visualisation has a direct impact on organising and structuring of information, as well as on determining salience. Lurie and Mason (2007) claim that visuals can be used for delivering the company's strategy, coordinating group assignments, visualising competence and decision-making process.

Eppler and Burkhard (2005) sum up six biggest advantages of visualisation for businesses with the acronym CARMEN (figure 1). These are coordination, attention, recall, motivation, elaboration, and new insights.

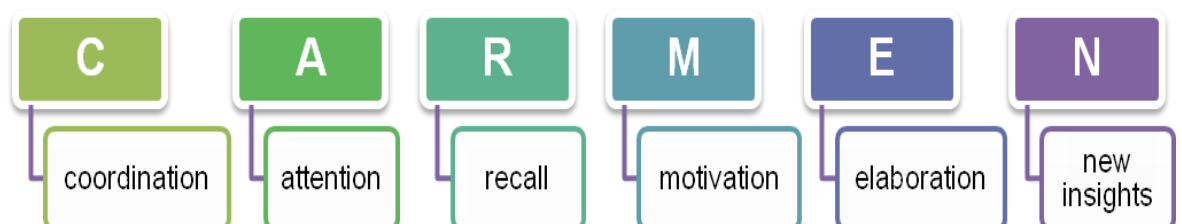


Figure 1. Six biggest advantages of visualisation

## 2.2 Brand communications: the role of visualisation

Communication plays a vital role in the development of successful brands. Based on the fact, that a human brain receives and processes visual images faster and more easily

than words, it can be concluded that visual symbols and logos are effective branding tools.

Building a brand is an expensive and long-lasting process that requires great expertise. A brand can be built either based on one strong product or it can consist of a wide range of products. A brand is a name given by a company or an organisation to its product(s) or service(s). A brand helps customers to distinguish a particular product or service from its rivals. Kotler et al. (2009, 425) believe that “a brand is a name, symbol, logo, design or image, or any combination of these, which is designed to identify the product or service”. A brand is not only a result of marketing, but also of consumers’ reaction to marketing activities. Consumers create brand associations based on their experiences and encounters with the brand. Strong brands can evoke feelings of love, attachment and belonging. For instance, the Harley-Davidson brand evokes feelings of freedom, independence, adventures, and individuality. Both organisations and consumers are involved in the branding process. As the role of consumer in the concept of branding has become more crucial and powerful due to their ability to assign meaning to brands, Batey (2008, 6) concludes that a brand is a “consumer perception and interpretation of a cluster of associated attributes, benefits and values”.

The stronger are consumer’s intangible mental associations about a brand, the stronger is the relationship between the brand and its consumer. (Batey 2008.) Visuals enhance and reinforce memorisation of the brand. The degree of brand’s success depends on this relationship, which is in turn affected by a number of issues such as product formulation, packaging design, and advertising. The brand-consumer relationship is influenced by consumer’s expectations about the brand.

Selection of a suitable name for a brand is a subject of much importance for marketers, as brand name plays a decisive role in providing cues about the meaning attached to the brand. Successful brand names are relatively easy to remember. By assessing general principles for evaluating brand names, Batey (2008) points out that a desirable brand name can be kept or retrieved from memory without causing difficulties, thus boosting recall and recognition. He then continues by adding that a brand name is appropriate when it favours creation of images and associations connected to the intended brand meaning. It is advantageous to use high-imagery words over low-imagery words in brand names for their superior quality to enhance recall. High-imagery words generate intense visual references in consumers’ minds. (Batey 2008.) In addition, Robertson (1989) suggests using nouns with tangible and visual referents as they provoke mental images more easily compared to low-imagery, abstract words.

Brand names that enjoy pleasant yet powerful associations and connotations prompt emotions and positive feelings. (Batey 2008.) This is particularly evident if the product is of emotional category. Therefore, when thinking about brands representing emotional products such as perfumes, lotions, candles, or jewellery, it is easier for consumer to remember emotional brand names (e.g. Joy, Hope). Iconic brands share certain common characteristics, such as the ability to evoke distinctive feelings, emotions, and experiences in consumers. They are as role models representing ideals, values and cultural characteristics.

### **2.2.1 Corporate image**

Visual images are particularly useful for conveying a corporate image of an organisation. Bernstein (1984) explains that corporate image is an outcome of the interaction of the experiences, beliefs, feelings, knowledge, and impressions that people hold about a company or an organisation. Martineau (1960) presumes that a corporate image is an accumulation of attitudes of different stakeholders.

The most efficient means of visual representation of the values of corporate image is the brand of the organisation. Keller (2013, 44) claims that corporate image can be defined as “perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory...associations come in all forms and may reflect characteristics of the product or aspects independent of the product itself”. Successful brands are unique and have strong image. They have plenty of loyal customers, thus, they have high brand equity and brand value. Aaker (1991, 4) stresses that brand equity is “a set of assets such as name, loyal customers, perceived quality, and associations that are linked to the brand and add value to the product or service being offered”:

### **2.2.2 Corporate identity**

Like people, brands have their own personalities and identities. Olins (1978) depicts that a sense of identity is mandatory and needed by any social group. After an organisation is established, it grows, evolves, matures, and, eventually, develops its own corporate culture.

Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006) define corporate identity as organisation’s presentation to its stakeholders. “It is what makes an organisation unique and it incorporates the organisation’s communication, design, culture, behaviour, structure, industry identity and strategy” (Melewar & Karaosmanoglu 2006, 864). By means of corporate identity, a company or an organisation identifies itself, its products or services.

Kotler et al. (2009, 426) highlight the importance of corporate identity and stress that it “should be diffused in everything the company does, from the way staff behave, to the design of annual reports, brochures, catalogues, packaging, company stationery and business cards...”.

Kotler (2003, 326) presumes that corporate identity “comprises the ways that a company aims to identify or positioning itself or its product”. Corporate identity is a sum of physical and behavioural visual cues by help of which an audience can distinguish the company. Recognition by an audience is crucial as familiarity grows into favourability (Bernstein 1984). Corporate identity is related to branding, as the purpose of both is to create a favourable and positive image.

It can be argued that the terms corporate identity and corporate image can be quite confusing. Corporate identity means the essence of the organisation, whereas corporate image is what consumers think of the brand. However, perception of brands varies across cultures, as cultural differences affect the meaning assigned to brands by their customers. (de Mooij 2010.) The term corporate identity is usually not understood and thus relatively seldom used in Asia (Temporal 2001), where brands are connected to identities of entertainers and public figures. On top of that, the concept of brand identity does not work in Asia for characteristics of uniqueness and originality are not part of the culture.

In order for a company or organisation to succeed, it needs to have a clear and distinct identity. Schmitt and Simonson (1997) emphasise that visual identity both builds and implements organisation’s corporate identity. Visual identity enhances recognition of the organisation, creates awareness, and triggers associations and mental images of the organisation. (Dowling 1994.) Visual identity is made up of logos, typography, and colours that are used by an organisation for communicating its values and fundamental principles (Melewar, Hussey & Srivoravilai 2005).

### **2.2.3 Brand logo**

A logotype or logo consists of the name of the brand usually written in unique style and font size, and is accompanied with a trademark. For customers brand logo is a salient visual component. When designing a brand logo a number of factors must be evaluated. Besides cultural preferences and differences in perception of visual elements, colours and a shape of a logo need to be analysed. Henderson, Giese and Cote (2004) argue that the more rounded the shape and details of logo are, the more harmonic and reasonable it appears to customers. Therefore, brands are not particularly enthusiastic about using

sharp and angular elements in their logos. Roundedness is associated by customers with approachableness, kindness, and harmony (Berlyne 1960), whereas angular objects signal hardness, strength, and power.

The brand logo is a vital part of the brand. Peters (1999, 41) identifies the significance of a strong brand logo: "Humans think visually. A picture is really worth a million words. And great brands have readily identifiable icons – just ask Nike or Apple or Shell – strong simple images that connect with customers". Brand logo incites associations and thoughts about the brand in customers' memory (Keller 2005). This is why redesigning of a logo is usually perceived negatively. Consumers who are strongly committed to a brand tend to see logo changes as a threat to their relationship with the brand. (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant & Unnava 2000.)



### **3 Visualisation: a cultural perspective**

There is no doubt that certain distinguishable features of visual communication are universal. Images are able to pass language barriers and can be used in multicultural settings. However, the role of cultural differences in interpretation of visual images is often overlooked. (Nisbett 2005; Eppler & Ge 2008.) Ideas, values, behaviours, emotions, and actions are cultural products. De Mooij (2010, 49) proposes that people are “individuals under the guidance of cultural patterns, historically created systems of meaning”. These systems of meaning are reflected by advertising that, in turn, mirrors people’s thoughts, feelings, motivation, habits, and even lives.

Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) found over 160 various definitions of culture. An early definition by Taylor (1871, 1) recognises that culture is a “complex whole, which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom, and many other capabilities and habits acquired by individuals as member of society”. Since then, many new definitions have been created. Terpstra and David (1991, 12) indicate that culture is a “learned, shared, compelling, interrelated set of symbols whose meaning provides a set of orientations for members of a society”. Society, organisations, and individuals are all defined by culture. Geertz (1973) sees culture as a collection of mechanisms designed to govern behaviours, which consists of plans, recipes, rules, and instructions. Culture orders people’s behaviour and individuals are dependent on it. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005, 3) recognise culture as “the collective mental programming of the people and an environment. Culture is not a characteristic of individuals; it encompasses a number of people who were conditioned by the same education and life experience”. People are results of their culture and their environment influence their behaviour and their actions. Language, time, and place are fundamentals of culture. (Geertz 1973.)

The majority of images have various connotations or associations. Different people associate a particular picture with different things. The cultural background of the viewer influences traditional connotations of an image. In some cultures, people are used to receiving contextual messages and are able to understand hidden meaning in visual images. (de Mooij 2010.)

Communication with people from diverse cultures is one of the biggest challenges in marketing communications. (Ricks 1988.) Cultural differences among nations and sometimes even in various areas of the same country are notable. Effective visual communication implies awareness of symbolic meaning of images. In order to succeed

marketers need to be culturally sensitive and have a solid knowledge of cultural differences.

### 3.1 Colours

Colours communicate psychologically by building mental associations. (Klimchuk & Krasovec 2006.) Marketers must know what associations a culture has in relation to use of colours and the impact they can have on visual advertising. The importance of colours in visual communication is apparent, as “the human eye sees colour before the brain recognises imagery in the form of shapes, symbols, words, or other visual elements” (Klimchuk & Krasovec 2006, 105). Connotative meanings of colours, signs and symbols are culture-bound. Colours can have both negative and positive associations. Jacobs, Keown and Ghymn (1991, 21) criticise that “like language, marketers in particular nation often take colour for granted, having experienced certain colour associations all their lives, and do not even question whether other associations may exist in different societies”. Colours are crucial elements of an image as they have various associated meanings. (Madden, Hewett & Roth 2000.)

Nisbett (2005) highlights that there are underlying variations in the perception of colours used in visual images specifically between western countries and East Asia. Red, for instance, symbolises love, appetite, attention, or even danger and negativity in the Western world, whereas in China red is a sign of happiness, luck, and prosperity. Red happens to be a colour at the lowest frequencies of light that a human eye can recognise (Batey 2008). Due to its visibility, red is commonly used in traffic signs.

In Buddhist countries yellow and orange are colours of religion and god (Hogan 2007), whereas in the United States of America orange is mainly associated with service sector. As for Switzerland, the colour is widely used by groceries and supermarkets. Like red, yellow is a highly visible colour and, therefore, is frequently used in warning signs. White is the colour of death and funeral in East Asia, which is a total opposite to its symbolic meaning in western countries, where white is connected with purity, sophistication, cleanliness and weddings. Green is associated with trees, nature, youth, freshness, and hope in the Western world. Waiting rooms and hospital halls are often painted green as the colour has an ability to calm down. On the other hand, green can also symbolise jealousy.

In Western cultures, the colour black mostly accounts for negative perception. Various physiological and psychological factors have contributed to the fact that black is

considered somewhat evil (Batey 2008). Black is, for instance, associated with darkness, mourning, nightmares, and danger. However, when it comes to packaging design, black adds sophistication and a sense of style. It can be said, that the safest and the most common colour used by international marketers is conservative yet elegant blue, as it seems to have mostly positive associations in diverse cultures. (Bresciani & Eppler 2010.) Blue is widely associated with relaxation and calmness, but at the same it signals stability. Nevertheless, in China blue represents immortality. (Klimchuk & Krasovec 2006.)

Colour can be viewed as a successful tool for brand recognition. (Batey 2008.) The majority of products are noticed by the colour used in the packaging design. The colour is a vital element both of the personality of the product and brand image. Colours affect purchasing decisions, as they help consumers to recognise the product they wish to buy by the colours used in the packaging: Coca-Cola is red, while Pepsi is blue. Colour enhances the personality of a product, attracts attention to its characteristics, and helps the product to differentiate itself from competitors. (Klimchuk & Krasovec 2006.) Colours may highlight certain features of a product, such as flavour or ingredients. On top of that, appropriate use of colours can break product categories and show diversity of product varieties. (Klimchuk & Krasovec 2006.)

Certainly, colours can be used not merely for differentiation, but also for many other reasons. Colour can help consumers to identify cues and generate emotions, which contributes in relationship building between brand and consumers at unconscious level (Batey 2008). Colour can affect impression that consumer receives about the attributes of a product. For instance, it can manipulate the taste of a product. (Batey 2008.) The use of green colour on packaging may mislead consumers thinking that the product is natural, organic or environmentally friendly produced. Similarly, white might make people think that the product does not contain saturated fat or any additives.

Madden et al. (2000) signal that customising colours according to the cultural normalities is advantageous for organisations, as local inhabitants may feel related and appealed to the brand.

### **3.2 Signs, symbols, icons**

The lack of shared symbols causes difficulties to cross-cultural communication. (Mueller 2008.) Symbols, signs, icons, and numbers can mean different things to different people, thus it is important to detect contradictory cultural meanings. (Klimchuk and Krasovec 2006.)

Blundel et al. (2013) state that an icon is a basic symbolic representation of an object whose purpose is to communicate a message. Globalisation has led to increased use of icons because they are not always linked with language and help with faster information processing. While some icons are truly universal, such as icons used at international airports and railway stations, many symbols differ from culture to culture. In order to ensure effective communication, symbols and icons must be thoroughly analysed before being selected to be used. For instance, the icon of knife and fork which represents food or a place to eat in the Western world, must be replaced by chopsticks in Asian countries. Analogously, the same abstract icon of man and woman cannot be used across the globe, as clothing and appearance, especially of woman, is heavily influenced by cultural norms and values.

The meaning of symbols is something that must be learned. Ability to recognise and decode signs and symbols is influenced by culture. Some cultures use symbols more often than others. According to de Mooij (2010), Japanese people (particularly students) prefer using images and symbols instead to language, especially if they language is not their mother tongue. Symbolic language is considered more important than verbal language in many cultures. As the opposite of Western countries, in Asia numbers possess strong meaning. For instance, in China, number four has an extremely bad reputation and represents bad luck and negativity. On the other hand, the number eight is considered favourable and lucky, which had an obvious impact on the selection of the opening day for The Olympic Games hosted in Beijing in 2008. The opening ceremony took place on 8 August 2008. Some symbols may change over time. Some may become more popular, but other may lose their meaning and eventually disappear from use.

De Mooij (2010) provides some examples of cultural differences related to the use of signs and their meaning. The American OK sign represents “zero” in France and Hungary, but in Japan, it means “money”. The thumbs-up gesture is a widely used gesture all over the world, but in some cultures, it is unknown or not accepted. Marketers need to pay attention when designing signs to be used in advertising. A visual advertisement containing an illustration of a man putting his feet up on his desk is considered normal in some Western countries, whereas in Asia and Arab countries it is offensive and vulgar.

### **3.3 Packaging design**

Packaging design links form, structure, materials, colours, imagery, typography, and secondary design elements with product information, making a product appropriate for marketing. (Klimchuk & Krasovec 2006.) The main role of packaging design is to contain,

protect, transport, distribute, store, identify, and distinguish a product from its rivals in the marketplace. (Klimchuk & Krasovec 2006.) A successful packaging design transmits information about the function and personality of the product to consumers. When modifying package design or launching new products colours must be thoroughly evaluated. (Hannele & Luomala 2010.) Colours are identified by consumers before any other visual feature of a package. (Klimchuk & Krasovec 2006.)

Product design encompasses not only the appearance, but also functionality and ease of use. (Johansson & Carlson 2014.) For instance, Apple emphasises simplicity and elegance in its design yet its products are practical and easy to use. In the words of Steve Jobs, the co-founder and former CEO of Apple Inc: “Design is not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works (Walker 2003).

Packaging design is influenced by a number of factors. These are consumer behaviour, technology, legal issues, production manufacturing, distribution channels, competition, economic factors, and social and cultural issues (figure 3).



Figure 3. Factors affecting packaging design

Despite the fact that all the elements mentioned above play their role in success or failure of the packaging design, and are unquestionably worth of attention, not all of them will be discussed or analysed. The purpose of the Figure 2 is to illustrate the scope of factors that need to be evaluated by marketers and the people involved in the process of design

creation. To stay on the topic, this section focuses on cultural issues related to visualisation and packaging design.

The importance of design of physical or tangible products is evident, but the role of design in intangible services is often underestimated. (Johansson & Carlson 2014.) Johansson and Carlson (2014, 234) claim that “the manner in which personal service is provided, the look and dress of the service provider, the style of the service premises, and so on, are all results of conscious design”. The promises that a particular brand commits to deliver shape the customers’ expectations. The design of both tangible products and intangible services can either confirm or neglect people’s expectations. (Johansson & Carlson 2014.)

Culture affects style and design. (de Mooij 2010.) Package design varies in different countries. Scandinavian countries, for instance, prefer minimalist and simple design. Textual information, the size and position of the product brand logo, typography, symbolism, shape, contrast and colours used in a package have cultural variations. (de Mooij 2010.) Packaging design functions through communicating to people from diverse backgrounds, different interests and experiences.

One must be aware that knowledge of anthropology, sociology, psychology, ethnography, and linguistics can benefit the design process and help to evaluate the best design choices. (Klimchuk & Krasovec 2006.) Design affects user experience. The associations of the packaging design are linked to reliability and trustworthiness of the brand. As packaging design is part of image of the brand, consumers need to be able to visually recognise and identify the values, qualities, features, and attributes of the brand. (Klimchuk & Krasovec 2006.)

### **3.4 Humour and metaphors**

In some cultures, humour is a widely used tool in advertising. Humour has a long history of being featured in advertising, as it has been frequently used since the 1930’s. (Pollay 1985.) De Mooij (2010, 240) indicates that humour is “a subversive play with conventions and established ideas; it is based on breaking taboos”. Humour is hard to define due to its multiple forms, this is why many scholars concentrated more on studying different characteristics of humour and its impact on an audience. Walter (1969) alleges that humour makes advertising more humane. (Sterntal & Craig 1973.) Humorous advertisements are noticeable and may attract more attention than serious ones. Humour not only increases attention, but it also enhances attraction to the advertisement.

However, it does not provide an advantage over a non-humorous ad and does not trigger customers' purchase intention in any special way. (Sternthal & Craig 1973; Weinberger & Gulas 1992.)

Humour can be of various kinds and it is affected by a great deal of factors, possibly remarkably stronger than any other emotion. (Weinberger & Gulas 1992.) Humour is, primarily, culturally dependent. Culture influences the category of humour used. Parody, for instance, is popular in countries of low power distance such as Austria, Canada and Sweden (in which authority is decentralised and equality is favoured), as it disguise the power of authority. (de Mooij 2010.) Chapter 5 provides more information on cultural dimensions.

While humour can be effective, it can also make damage to a brand. As humour encompasses cultural aspects, it can only be understood by those sharing the same culture. On top of that, humour can distract and make consumers forget about the commercial. In addition, advertisers must be aware and remember that here is a thin line between being funny and rude. Therefore, humour must be used carefully, as it can cause wrong interpretations, misunderstandings or even insult. (Barnard 1995.)

Visual metaphors support cross-cultural communication by their ability to provide "the path from the understanding of something familiar to something new by carrying elements of understanding from the mastered subject to a new domain" (Eppler & Burkhard 2005, 5). However, metaphors can properly function only if they are understood in multicultural environment. (Hogan 2007.)

Metaphors are used to convey the distinguishing features of an object or an animal (real, tangible) or an idea (abstract, intangible) to the brand by means of correlation. (de Mooij 2010.) In general, it can be said that metaphors are part of cultural legacy. Messaris (1997, 10) classifies visual metaphor as "the representation of an abstract concept through a concrete visual image that bears some analogy to that concept." A great portion of metaphors cannot be understood universally. Signs, symbols, and metaphors used in international advertising are impossible for everyone to decode. The Korean LG advertisement featuring a fish in the desert implies that technology makes everything possible. A Westerner will understand the idea and the message behind the ad, but he/she will not know that a fish symbolises luck and welfare in Korea and many other Asian countries.

## **4 Consumer behaviour**

Knowledge of consumer behaviour enhances the ability to understand the way consumers think and feel, and helps to evaluate aspects influencing their actions. Solomon, Bamossy and Askegaard (1999, 8) define consumer behaviour as “the study of processes involved when people select, purchase, use, or dispose of products, services, ideas, or experiences to satisfy their needs and desires”. It involves an exchange of value between the buyer and the seller and explains the reasons affecting purchasing decisions. Engel, Blackwell and Miniard (1986, 5) comment that consumer behaviour is “those acts of individuals directly involved in obtaining, using, and disposing of economic goods and services, including the decision processes that precede and determine these acts”. The study of consumer behaviour seeks to understand patterns of consumption and attempts to answer the following questions:

- What consumers buy (goods and services)?
- Why do they buy it (needs and desires)?
- When do they buy it (time)?
- Where do they buy it (place)?
- How often do they buy it (interval)?
- How often do they use it (frequency of use)?

A series of procedures influence a consumer prior a purchase, during it, and after the purchase is done. Pre-purchase activities may include recognition of a need or want, finding the ways to solve the need or want, searching and analysing the information about products or services that meet the consumer’s demands, evaluation of alternatives, and making a decision. Post-purchase activities consist of examining the purchased product or service. Purchase decision itself is affected by a wide range of factors. There are four psychological processes that influence consumer responses the most. These are motivation, perception, learning and memory (Kotler et al. 2009).

### **4.1 Motivation**

Motivation is “an inner drive that reflects goal-oriented arousal” (Arnould, Price & Zinkhan 2004, 259). Motivation offers a thorough look at consumer as an individual. Consumers have different motives and needs. There are three different widely used theories of human motivation developed by Sigmund Freud, Frederick Herzberg and Abraham Maslow. (Kotler et al. 2009.) We will take a closer look at the well-known Maslow’s theory of needs.



Maslow (1954) sought to explain human needs and attempted to understand what drives them. He put human needs in a hierarchical order. Figure 4 shows Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

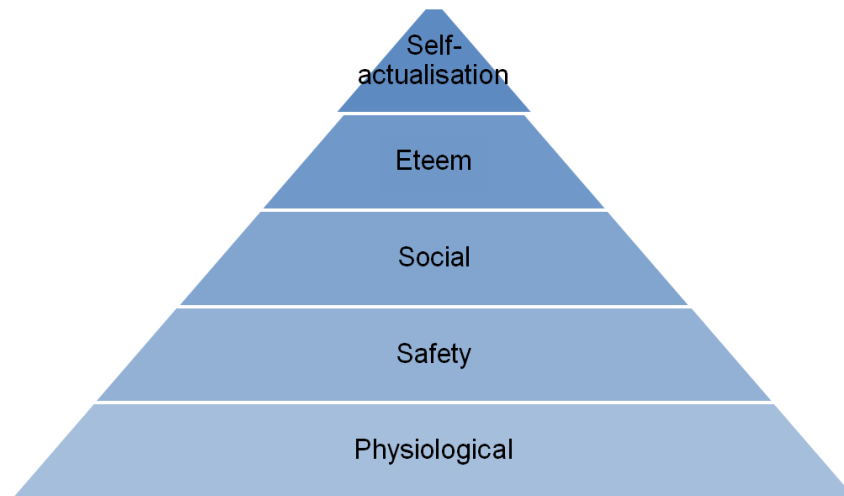


Figure 4. Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Maslow's hierarchical model includes physiological needs (food, shelter), safety needs (safety), social needs (feeling of belonging, love), esteem needs (recognition, status), and self-actualisation needs (self-development). His theory indicates that people satisfy their most important needs first. Thus, self-actualisation or social needs will not be preferred to basic, psychological needs when a person is faced with a choice. A thirsty person will not think about buying a theatre ticket instead of a bottle of water. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is considered a global mode. However, its cross-cultural relevance can be doubtful. (de Mooij 2010.) It has not been proved that universal order for non-physiological needs is as stated in the model. The ranking of needs (other than physiological) may vary depending on a culture.

## 4.2 Perception

Motivation inspires action. The nature of action is determined by individual's perception of the circumstances and the situation. Perception implies awareness of sensory information, its selection, organisation and interpretation, which create a picture of the world. (Berelson & Steiner 1964.) Perception is dependent on physical stimuli and its relationship to the surrounding field (Kotler et al. 2009). Perception can be selective. Selective perception or selective attention encompasses focusing on certain properties of the environment. People are exposed to approximately 1500 advertisements or brand communications daily (Kotler et al. 2009). As people's mental resources are limited, it is impossible to process

all encountered information. Due to technological developments and information overload, consumers are nowadays especially selective in terms of objects of their attention. In attempt to explain which stimuli are likely to be noticed by people, Kotler et al. (2009) reported three facts. Firstly, there is a greater chance that people notice stimuli corresponding to their current need. For example, a person planning to purchase a tablet will notice advertisements featuring tablets, but he/ she is likely to ignore washing machine ads. Secondly, people are more likely to detect stimuli that they expect. For example, men are more likely to notice hammers in a hardware store, but they will not probably notice key fobs as they might think that the store does not sell them. Thirdly, it is possible that people will note “stimuli whose deviations are large in relationship to the normal size of the stimuli” (Kotler et al. 2009, 240). Thus, it is more likely for a five-euro discount coupon for make-up to be noticed by customers, but a coupon offering a discount of five euros on a smartphone is likely to be neglected.

Nevertheless, noticed stimuli are not always perceived as wished by the message sender. Selective distortion is people’s habit to interpret information according to their prejudices. Information is often distorted to be consistent with the brand expectations, experiences, associations, and beliefs. (Russo, Meloy & Medvec 1998.) Feelings toward a brand may change consumer’s perceptions about a product or service. Selective retention, on the other hand, helps consumers to keep the information related to their attitudes and beliefs in their memory (Kotler et al. 2009). Selective retention assists in remembering positive sides of a product of a loved and cherished brand and forgetting about good things in competitors’ product.

### **4.3 Learning and memory**

Human behaviour is largely learned. Learning changes consumers’ attitudes and behaviour. Schiffman and Kanuk (2009) hypothesise that consumer learning is a process of continuous evolvment and development that changes on the basis of new knowledge that might be acquired by the means of experiences, thinking, education, or observation. Consumer learning results in knowledge, thoughts, and opinion about a certain product or service.

Consumer’s perceptions, expectations, and associations are stored in his or her memory. As mentioned earlier, associations about a brand are formed through experiences encountered by consumer. Over time, these experiences and encounters create a collection of associations in the mind of consumer, which affect perceptions about the brand and evolve into an associative network called brand engram (Batey 2008). Brand

engrams can strengthen or weaken depending on repetition of elements and information connected to the brand. Brands that frequently communicate and repeat their messages to consumers reinforce their presence in consumers' minds.

## 5 Dimensions of consumer behaviour

The study of consumer behaviour can be split into three interdependent aspects: the study of culture, the study of social groups, and the study of the individual (Kotler et al. 2009). Each of these aspects can be analysed separately, but all of them are influenced by each other (Figure 5). There is a continuous interaction between these three dimensions and the environment.

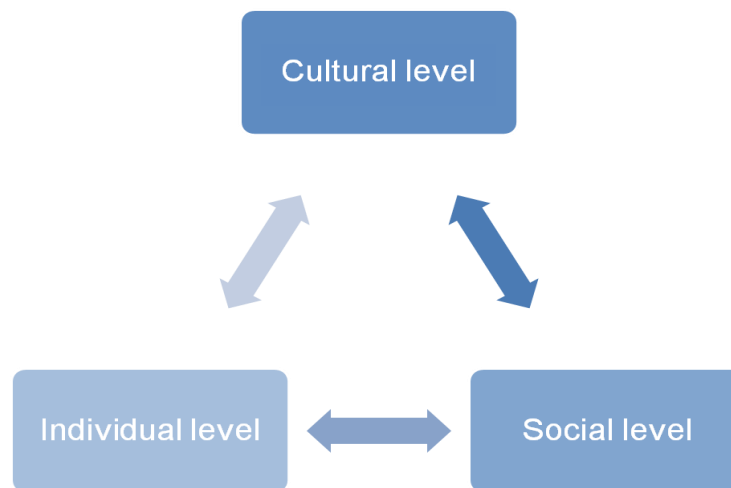


Figure 5. The interaction of the cultural, social, and individual level

### 5.1 Culture

Culture can be observed as “meanings that are shared by (most) people in a social group” (Peter, Olson & Grunert, 1999, 264). Every culture also consists of subcultures consisting of different nationalities, religious and racial groups, and geographic areas. Subcultures are considered by organisations when implementing a market segmentation to best identify and meet the needs of the market. Culture influences people’s attitudes toward consumption, their desires and behaviour. Culture has a direct impact on why people make purchases, an object of purchase, and a place where the purchase is made. Culture can even influence the way in which payment is done. The needs and desires of consumers differ across cultures, circumstances and individual characteristics (Kotler et al. 2009). As noted earlier under *Visualisation: a cultural perspective*, cultural values and norms determine guidelines for people’s behaviour. Technology, governmental policies, and demographical changes contribute in behavioural changes. (Fill et al. 2013.)

A great framework for understanding the impact of cultures on consumer behaviour was developed by Geert Hofstede. Hofstede introduced dimensions by which cultural

differences in relation to consumption can be analysed (figure 6). The five dimensions are named as follows: power distance, individualism or collectivism, masculinity or femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term or short-term orientation (Hofstede 2001).

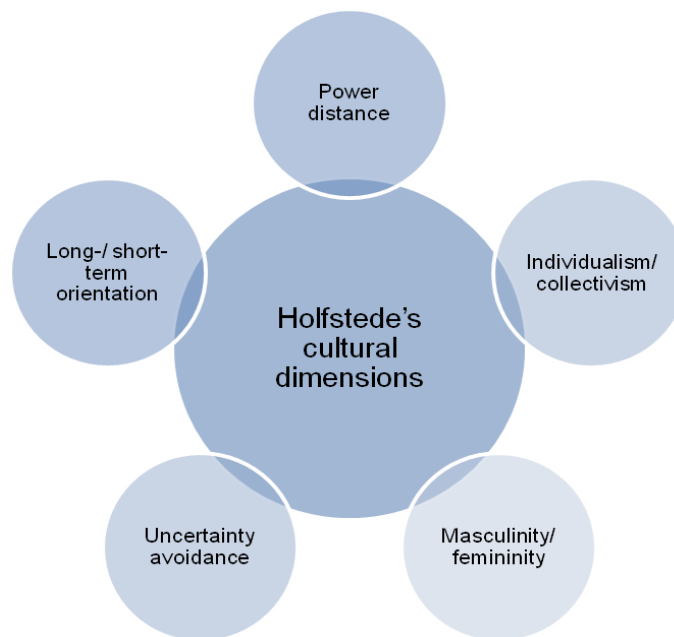


Figure 6. Hofstede's cultural dimensions

Individualist/ collectivist dimension suggests that individualistic cultures prioritise individual goals and personal needs to progress and be a good leader, (e.g. USA) whereas collectivist cultures highlight importance of a good group membership and mutual goals (e.g. Sweden). Masculinity/ femininity dimension refers to values and how emotional roles are divided between the genders. The values of masculine culture include achievement, performance, and success (e.g. Japan), whereas feminine cultures are caring and emphasise the quality of life (e.g. Norway). Uncertainty avoidance can either be high or low and it reflects people's response to uncertainty and unpredictable incidents. In cultures of strong uncertainty avoidance dominate plans, rules, and emotions (Germany). Low uncertainty avoidance cultures accept unpredictability and changes, and adapt to new situations easily (e.g. the United Kingdom).

Long-term-/ short-term orientation determines attitude toward time. Long-term oriented cultures are future-oriented and value persistence, ordering relationships by status, and saving (e.g. Taiwan). Short-term orientation is focused on the past and present, and features personal stability, traditions, and respect for social responsibilities (Australia). Power distance refers to the degree the power is distributed among members of society.

In high power distance cultures people are placed in a social hierarchy and accept authority (e.g. China), whereas in low power distance cultures the power is divided equally and independence is respected (e.g. Finland).

Failure to understand cultural aspects can lead to misunderstandings and barriers to communication, which results in business failures. (Mueller 2006.) Hofstede's theory helps to overcome difficulties that can arise when communicating with various cultures, and helps to avoid mistakes of a cultural character in advertising.

## **5.2 Social groups**

In addition to culture, Kotler et al. (2009) expouse several other factors affecting consumer behaviour. These are reference groups, family, social roles, and status. Reference groups are those groups with whom consumer communicates and interacts, such as family members, friends, and colleagues. Reference groups may change people's behaviour, attitude, and lifestyle. On top of that, they might shake feelings of belonging or conformity and relationships to brands. People may also get inspired by groups that they are not part of but wish to join and be influenced by them. For instance, a woman may purchase expensive, branded items for her child in order to get a reputation of a "good mother" (Thomsen & Sørensen 2006).

## **5.3 The study of the individual**

Consumer's behaviour is also influenced by his or her personality and distinctive features. Age, occupation, financial resources, personality, life circumstances, lifestyle, and values are involved in the process of decision making in terms of purchasing (Kotler et al. 2009, 230). For instance, if an 18-year old woman wants to buy a dress, a number of factors will determine her choice of garment and influence her behaviour as a consumer. As she is probably a student and does not have a stable income, it is likely that the selection of dress will be based on the price. The occasion for which a new dress is needed will help her to evaluate a suitable style to look in a dress. Finally, her own personality, values, and possible role models will affect the choice of the brand.

## 6 The impact of visual advertising on consumer behaviour

Consumers are possibly the most valuable asset for any organisation, but they are hard to gain and keep. These days marketers and advertisers must work hard to receive consumers' notice, and thus should pay more attention on visual communication for its numerous advantages. There are various practical uses for visual communication. Advertising is one example of a field that is highly dependent on visual images.

Advertisers use the power of visualisation to communicate, persuade and convince. (Messaris 1997; Thorson & Duffy 2012.) An early definition by Definitions Committee of the American Marketing Association says that advertisement is "any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods or services by an identified sponsor" (Journal of Marketing 1948, 202). More recently, Richard and Curran (2002, 74) express that advertising is a "paid, mediated form of communication from an identifiable source, designed to persuade the receiver to take some action, now or in the future."

Visual advertisements have an ability to draw attention and arouse interest. On top of that, visual images are capable of simulating visual experiences undergone in real life by manipulating audience's viewpoint. Messaris (1997, vii) alleges that visual images play three important roles in advertising: they "can evoke emotions by simulating appearance of a real person or object, they can serve as photographic proof that something really did happen; and they can establish an implicit link between the thing that is being sold and some other image(s)".

The aim of advertisers is to gain public's attention and maximise recall of the advertising message. (Batra et al 1986; Gorn, Chattopadhyay, Yi & Dahl 1997; Rossiter & Percy 1997.) From the brand perspective, communication with consumers happens primarily through advertising, despite that there are other ways of delivering a message and maintaining a dialogue with the audience. Due to an overflow of information, consumers often neglect advertising messages. Marketers are forced to modify the ways through which they address their customers. The tasks of advertising images originate from underlying characteristics of visual communication, which explain the essence of images and differentiate them from the other forms of communication. (Messaris 2007.)

Marketers and advertisers have directed significant attention to study consumers' attitude toward advertisements and their effect on purchase intentions. Visual images are able to engage, change or influence people's emotions and attitudes toward a product or brand. Consumers shape their preferences based on feelings, liking, and emotions caused by an

advertisement. (Vakratsas & Ambler 1999.) These preferences construct consumers' attitudes that can be defined as "an enduring combination of motivational, emotional, perceptual, and cognitive process with respect to some aspect of our environment" (Krech & Crutchfield 1984). Consumer's favourable attitude toward the advertising message results in positive attitude toward the brand, which drives a decision to make a purchase. (Gardner 1981; Stayman & Aaker 1988; MacKenzie & Lutz 1989; Homer 1990.)

Culture plays a major role in perception. (de Mooij 2010.) Patterns of visual representation are set by cultural norms and traditions. As mentioned earlier, there are significant differences in perception of colours, symbols, icons, and design elements. Implementing Hofstede's cultural dimensions into visual communication directed to multicultural audiences can be particularly beneficial, as it will make a visual message more effective and appealing.

## **6.1 Visual persuasion**

A vital element of business success is knowledge and understanding of how and why people make purchases. Although a great part of purchases is conducted by consumers to satisfy their fundamental needs, there are plenty of other factors affecting buying decisions.

Consumers' identities are partly constructed through consumer goods. Through commodities, people demonstrate their social status, values, beliefs or place in society. Consumers rely on brands as they assume that brands can help them to verify and construct their identity. (Batey 2008.) Advertisements encourage people to think that commodities are essential tool for identity building. Visual images tend to give consumers false promises, such as a better appearance or more luxurious lifestyle. Ads frequently present an abstract world that is highly different compared to reality. Purchases are often conducted by people in attempt to fulfil their self-expression or in a belief that a certain product has the power to make them feel better, safer, wealthier, more sophisticated or more popular.

Advertising both mirrors and creates social values. As Richard Lippke indicates (1995, 108), "the ways in which individuals habitually perceive and conceive their lives and the social world, the alternatives they see as open to them, and the standards they use to judge themselves and others are shaped by advertising, perhaps without their ever being consciously aware of it".



Advertisements, which sell not only consumer goods, but also brands, attempt to present a picture of goods to be desired and life to be dreamed of. Ewen (1988) identifies the idea that the self and subjectivity of an individual are mediated and formed by means of consumption and use of commodities as “commodity self”.

The most effective persuasive messages are those that are especially designed to meet the needs of a target audience. In order to understand and identify audience needs it is advisable to consider audience demographics such as age, gender, occupation, income, education, and psychographics such as personality, attitudes, and lifestyle. (Bovée & Thill 2014.)

Andrews, Van Leeuwen and Van Baaren (2014) recognise efficiency of using people, especially celebrities or public figures, in advertisements to convey authority and credibility. Authority figures praising a certain product or service are influential and recognisable by public. While people trust and believe anybody who seems to be a credible source, celebrities are admired for their social status. (Andrews et al. 2014.)

AIDA is one of the most famous and referred models of advertising which was developed by E. St. Elmo Lewis in 1898 (Strong 1925). AIDA is an acronym for attention, interest, desire, and action. According to this approach, advertisement must first attract customer’s attention, then it will develop his or her interest by highlighting advantages, benefits, and solution to a problem, next it will generate the desire to have the product, and finally it will provoke the customer to take action and make a purchase (figure 7).

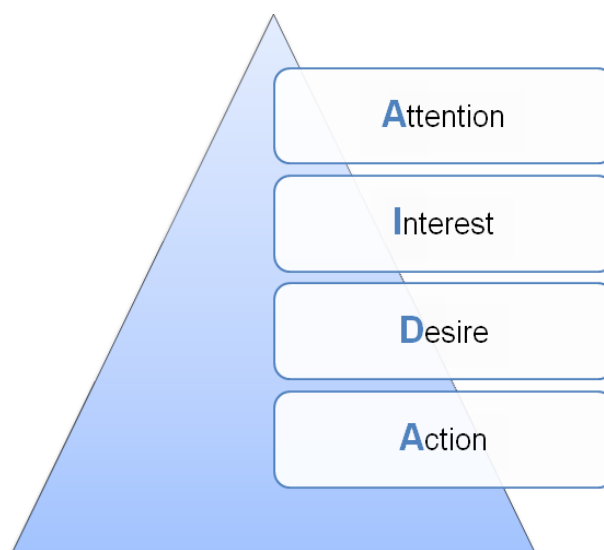


Figure 7. The AIDA triangle

## 6.2 The internet advantage

The web provides significant advantages to marketers and business managers. It is a cost effective channel for communication, marketing, advertising, and distribution of information and goods. Companies and organisations use images combined with words to communicate and engage with customers on the internet, as well as to improve their brand visibility. Numerous mobile applications, social media platforms, videos and images provide a variety of tools for enlarging market presence and keeping customers' attention. Marketers are constantly thinking about new innovative and creative ways to involve customers in product development or brand building.

Technological developments have made it possible to create a variety of advertising formats that can be used on the internet. Among different online advertising formats, banner is the most frequently used and can be found on all types of internet pages. Adams (2003, 186) identified banner as "a still or animated graphic object found on a web page, used to advertise a product, brand or company". Pop-up ads are considered as a more aggressive format of internet advertising. Pop-up advertisements attract the viewer's attention as they automatically appear between one website and another. (Stern, Zinkhan, & Holbrook 2002.) However, forced attention grabbing does not necessarily mean that the message will be successfully received and processed by consumers; conversely, it may irritate consumers and result in advertising avoidance. (Li, Edwards & Lee 2002.)

With the internet, geographic distinctions have become less noticeable. The web gives organisations an easy and efficient way of reaching audiences and communicating its visual identity. Nonetheless, technological advantages have also enabled consumers to control their media consumption and even produce their own. Internet has turned ordinary users into interactive participants and even power players of media. Modern consumers make product, price or manufacturer comparisons, search for information and reviews of a product online.

Internet allows advertisers to target their messages more efficiently via behavioural targeting. (Thorson & Duffy 2012.) Behavioural targeting includes monitoring of web activity by the means of browser "cookies" or data generated by a website, which supplies the website administrator with information regarding customer's interest and preference in terms of a product. Then, computer programmes automatically locate advertisements that will most likely correspond to the customer's desires, taste and interests. Internet clicks report advertisers the number of website visitors and amount of people that have viewed a

certain banner or advertisement. Seeing an effective display ad or persuasive image can lead the customer to instant purchase of the product being advertised.

Nevertheless, there are factors that may cause barriers to communication on the internet. Language differences, low levels of IT literacy, poor internet connection, and physical disability can limit person's access to the web. (Blundel et al. 2013.) In addition, cultural dimensions must be considered and taken into account when designing a website. (Banarjee 2008.) Cultural perspectives on colours, symbols, and typography should be evaluated. Appropriate visual elements need to be chosen to transmit the message correctly. The challenge for businesses and digital marketers also lies in managing to abstain from annoying online customers and continuing to generate value.

## **7 Ethical issues in visual advertising**

Ethical issues in advertising is a subject of much concern for the public. (Fill et al. 2013.) Brands and organisations around the world face a great deal of challenges caused by criticism and discussion regarding their advertising practices. Moral, social, and ethical issues arise from multiple sources such as shocking or manipulating images presenting distorted reality, stereotypes, offensive or misleading pictures, and violation of privacy. Advertising can include untrue assertion, develop negative habits, inspire bad behaviour, and promote dangerous products. (Thorson & Duffy 2012.) Advertising that violates public's expectations can significantly damage image of an organisation.

Ethics can be described as a study of morality, which focuses on classifying what is wrong and what is right. Bovée and Thill (2013, 55) suggest that ethics are "the accepted principles of conduct that govern behaviour within a society". Ethical behaviour stresses organisations around the world because ethical questions attract a lot of attention. As advertising is a highly visible activity, it is especially vulnerable to criticism. (Mueller 2006.)

Advertising can be misleading. Advertisements may distort the truth or manipulate consumers in many ways. (Bovée & Thill 2013.) For instance, ingredient labelling of foods can be presented in inappropriate way or it may not include all information on compound ingredients. Packaging, on the other hand, may exaggerate or overstate the attributes of a product. Images in packaging representing products may significantly differ from actual products, which can be noticed by confused and disappointed consumers only after a purchase. As noted by Lester (2002, 52) image manipulation is easy to accomplish but hard to detect.

Advertising has always been widely accused of stereotyping. Stereotypes portray collective and false characteristics. Stereotypes of women, children, different nationalities, minorities, and family relationships often feature in advertisements. (Thorson & Duffy 2012; Mueller 2008.) For instance, advertisements frequently give the impression that women are obsessed with beauty, appearance, fashion, or cooking. Such type of advertising may shake people's beliefs and give an incorrect impression about average women's priorities and values in real life. In addition, stereotypes can be offensive and insulting. Stereotypical representation of gender, ethnic and cultural groups, age, physical characteristic and sexual preference is a result of laziness, ignorance, and racism. (Harris & Lester 2002.)

Advertising to children is a topic that attracts an array of attention. Many people have strong opinions and are particularly emotional about advertising to this vulnerable group. Children do not understand the tactics used by advertisers to create new needs and convince them to purchase a certain product or service. (Blackwell 2014.) Advertising makes children materialistic and causes obsession with brands. Advertising has also been criticised for contributing in commercialisation of childhood. (Blackwell 2014) In addition, the role of advertising in children's obesity is surrounded by much interest, debate, and obscurity. The major question is whether it is advertising of unhealthy food, or parents neglecting health and eating habits of their own children who should be blamed. (Blackwell 2014.) Another concern is the appropriateness and correctness of language used in advertising. Children can be exposed to swearing and foul language. Children clearly need more protection from advertising. Educating children is, perhaps, the most effective way to decrease the influence of advertising on children's behaviour.

The penetration of digital media and development of mobile marketing has enabled targeting of advertisements by individual and location. It made it possible for organisations to match their advertisements "to where consumers are and what they are doing" (Fill et al. 2013, 374). The challenge lies in understanding consumer behaviour to generate value from the internet advertising. Consumers do not want to be disturbed in their private lives. Some of the common problems faced by mobile advertisers are people's worries about privacy, security and the use of their personal data. (Truong & Simmons 2010.) Many consumers do not trust mobile advertising and fear that their personal data will be used in a harmful way or that it will be sold for commercial use. The relationship between the phone and its user is rather close and personal, thus organisations should "complement, and not intrude upon, the personalised relationship consumers have with their mobile devices" (Truong & Simmons 2010, 244).

The reputation of an organisation is becoming more and more dependent on its ethical and social performance, as public's interest in ethical issues is growing. (Mueller 2008.) Unethical advertising can harm organisations and provoke complaints. Ethical issues are easy to detect, nevertheless, it is impossible for advertisers to always produce completely ethical content. As pointed out by Lester (2002), fundamental ethical concerns are likely to remain the same. Spread of violent, provocative or incorrect images, failure to respect privacy, stereotyping and categorisation of individuals will stay present in advertising, journalism, and public relations.

## 8 Conclusion

The paper provided insights into the field of visual communication and explained the influence of visual communication in the form of advertising on consumer behaviour. The study attempted to determine the scope of importance of visual communication for organisations and assessed the influence of visual advertising on consumer behaviour. The following paragraphs will summarise the findings.

A number of scholars have indicated usefulness and benefits of visual communication. (Blundel et al. 2013; Bresciani & Eppler 2007; Buzan & Buzan 2002; Fong et al. 2007; Gerard & Goldstein 2005; Huff 1990; Phaal & Muller 2008; Platts & Tan 2004; Tegarden 1999; O'Donnel, Dansereau, & Hall 2002, etc.) Visual images is a particularly effective tool for organisations, as people process information visually. Visual communication can be used in a number of ways, such as for strategising, planning, and knowledge sharing. Visual images create feelings of motivation and engagement (Huff 1990, Buzan & Buzan 2002), inspire action, and help to remember presented data. Moreover, it can be used to organise, structure, and visualise information. The main role of visual communication in organisations is to convey messages, ideas, and values to their stakeholders.

Visual communication plays a crucial role in brand development, as organisations use visual elements to convey and reflect their identity. Visual images support brand awareness, as they constitute much of people's perceptions about brands. As visual messages are easy for people to remember, they reinforce memorisation of the brand, enhance recall, and stick in memory. Visual images paint mental pictures and associations in the minds of consumers, thus stimulate brand recognition.

Knowledge of consumer behaviour improves business performance, as it helps organisations to understand how consumers think, feel, and act. In addition, it reveals the aspects affecting people's purchase decisions, and exposes people's motives and fundamental needs. Consumer behaviour is influenced by cultural, social, individual, and psychological factors. Culture plays a key role in the study of consumer behaviour, as it guides people's behaviour, and shapes their attitudes and desires.

Advertising is a primary form of communication with customers. Visual advertising can persuade and convince people. (Messaris 1997; Thorson & Duffy 2012.) People's beliefs, associations, opinions, and experiences can be shaped through visual advertising. Visual images can be informative, educative, and persuasive. They have a strong ability to attract attention. Once the attention is gained, they provoke their interest that grows into

desire. Desires stimulate actions to purchase a desirable product. Advertising reflects and creates social values. It can manipulate consumers' opinions, and affect their emotions and feelings about a brand.

Nevertheless, one must remember that interpretation of visual images is subjective and depends on an array of factors. It is a misconception that visual images are understood across nations and cultures. This paper provided evidence for the role of culture in perception of visuals. Differences in interpretation and associations regarding colours, signs, icons, packaging design, humour, and visual metaphors depend on the cultural background of a viewer. It is important for organisations to take into account cultural factors influencing the market in which it operates in order to adapt its product or service. Culture influences people's values, norms, and behaviour. Understanding the fundamentals of culture and the causes of cultural diversity will assist marketing and advertising people in becoming aware of different interpretations and cues that people from diverse backgrounds may decode from a single visual image. It is impossible for a particular message to reach global audience, as global culture with identical values does not exist. (de Mooij 2010.)

Advertising is often criticised for unethical content. Advertisements may sometimes contain shocking, insulting, offensive, unrealistic, misleading, or inappropriate material. Stereotypes, racism, gender, and violation of privacy are some of the most common ethical issues in advertising.

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