

The Rebranding of Volkswagen: Brand Identity & Strategy Change: Case Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide a case study on the 2019 rebranding execution of the global brand, Volkswagen (VW), after the company's environmental emissions scandal in 2015. Two research questions were formed: *How is Volkswagen rebranding itself? What are the degrees of brand identity and strategy change of Volkswagen's rebranding?* Research findings concluded that VW consistently rebranded itself through general themes of *revitalization, female empowerment, future-centered transformation, and environmental appreciation & responsibility*, among the rebranding materials. In summary, the reviewed literature provided the foundational understanding of crisis communication and image repair discourse, rebranding frameworks, and VW's crisis and response to the emissions scandal. Qualitative primary research was done to gain understanding on messages and themes found in VW's press releases, policy documents, print advertisements, and commercials. In addition, future qualitative content analysis research on VW's social media platforms would strengthen the study. Future research on internal and external customers' loyalty, commitment and understanding of new goals and strategies of brands undergoing rebranding would be valuable information to this study and the rebranding studies.

The Rebranding of Volkswagen: Brand Identity & Strategy Change: Case Study

No organization is immune to crisis. Crises within corporations happen every year, and often a corporation must make initiatives towards reevaluating their brand identity and values. It is after the crisis that a company is under watch for its next steps towards change. In the Fall of 2015, the global German automobile company, Volkswagen (VW), owned by the Volkswagen Group, lost its valued trustworthy reputation. VW faced a crisis when the U.S. Environmental Protection Act (EPA) found that VW's vehicles were emitting 40 times more toxic fumes than permitted. The company dealt with drastic financial and legal repercussions as major lessons from handling a global corporate crisis. Research suggests that a potential solution to VW's brand recovery and reducing negative publicity might be rebranding, although it's risky and expensive.

Rebranding can shift a focus past an exterior change such as turning VW into a company that is more "green", with better corporate social responsibility practices. This "new" company should focus on compensating for the previous emissions and should put forth a mission towards sustainable actions and reducing carbon emissions and energy consumption (Zhou, 2016, n. p). It was on Sept. 4, 2019, that VW expressed its initiative to rebrand the entire company as "New Volkswagen." With steps towards taking responsibility for the protection of the climate, the company has pledged to have a neutral carbon balance with its vehicles and its organization in general by the year 2050. This research paper will provide secondary and primary research on VW's rebranding efforts and how the company has rebranded itself and exemplified change in brand identity and brand strategy.

Research Question

Considering the extensive rebranding efforts of VW, it is necessary to conduct a case study. After studying literature in crisis communication, image repair discourse, and rebranding, questions of VW's goals and organization's intentions were brought up both by the media voice and research. The following research questions were formed: *How is Volkswagen rebranding itself? What are the degrees of brand identity and strategy change of Volkswagen's rebranding?* This study is guided by framing theory, semiotics theory, and the literature research that will help in analyzing the primary research content.

Theoretical Framework

An extension of the agenda-setting theory is Erwin Goffman's framing analysis, which was first referred in 1974 (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 104). The premise of the framing theory addresses "how an issue can be viewed from several different perspectives as well as be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations" (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 104). Chong and Druckman (2007) later define framing as "the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue" (p. 104). Specifically, in relation to communication studies, framing "organizes everyday reality" (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 105). Frames aid communication scholars in helping identify trends, media messages across multiple platforms, and many other uses. A specific frame within communication is defined in relation to a certain issue or event (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 105). The event of the rebranding of VW sets the frame and the goal of the study is to understand how VW has framed or reframed itself to the external public and internally within company culture.

While proceeding to interpret and analyze the data for the intended study, the perceptual theory of visual communication, known as semiotics, was deemed necessary. One of the earliest recognitions of contemporary semiotics was referred by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in 1916 (Chandler 1994). In summary, semiotics is the study of signs and interpreting the meanings behind the relationship of the sign and codes (Chandler 1994). Saussure clarified that sign consists of a signifier, the form in which the sign takes, and signified, the concept it represents (Chandler 1994). Throughout the research process, semiotics provided use in interpreting VW's rebranding. From a critical perspective, major semiotic signs were identified and developed into codes and meanings.

Rationale

Several corporate crises and scandals stick with the public and leave a dent in a company's brand image and reputation, especially environmental crisis that harm the Earth. It is crises, such as BP's Deepwater Horizon oil spill, that will forever be engrained in many people's memories. It is the commonality of previous companies, like BP, losing trust. Trust may be lost externally and internally and it is the company's responsibility to make efforts towards reviving its identity and earning back the people's trust. A case study is necessary in researching a company's rebranding, like VW, due to its history of an impactful crisis and initiative towards global rebranding. Most cases of environmental corporate crises have researched the crisis communication efforts, but not many evaluate if and how a company chooses to rebrand itself. The subject of climate change and environmental sustainability is predominantly present today and constitutes a new passion of VW (Millar et al., 2012, p. 490; Cavico & Mujtaba, 2016, p. 307). There is a niche in research on global rebranding in relation to environmental scandals, especially in efforts of revolutionary change such as VW's zero carbon footprint pledge by 2050.

It is worth studying VW's rebranding campaign as an example to other companies of what it could take towards fully recovering a global brand's reputation and researching if the rebranding efforts exceed past visual changes. Miller et al. (2002) acknowledge, "rebranding is itself a message, and should be the outward manifestation of some real change" (p. 1). This real change could be associated with VW's intentions of whether or not the company is focusing more on itself or on the public and the environment.

In order to potentially apply such themes and principles in rebranding practice, it is beneficial to learn the various multi-media efforts and themes identified from the case study of VW's rebranding. This study could be used for future reference on how companies will need to adapt or consider branding for the future. It is important to consider how a company will stand out and develop long-term organizational goals and sustainability changes (Millar et al., 2012, p. 490). Millar et al. (2012) even offer insight that with a company choosing to reflect sustainable action and organizational change, there is the potential aspect of stakeholders perceiving their relationship with the company as being "partners in change" (p. 496). Stakeholders' role can either help or hurt a company, therefore it is important that a company considers fully communicating to all stakeholders. Millar et al. (2003) emphasizes the importance of how leaders who lead sustainable companies must actually practice the ideas of what they are selling (p. 496). Therefore, considering the great demand for organizations to focus on sustainable efforts over the past few years, leaders of large corporations that presently leave a large carbon footprint may want to consider studying a case like VW.

Literature Review

Crisis Communication & Image Repair Discourse

Coombs (2007) defines crisis management as “a set of factors designed to combat crises and to lessen the actual damage inflicted” (p. 5). While some can be unexpected or expected, misfortunes, scandals, wrongdoings of organizations happening every year remind the world that no organization is immune to crises (Coombs, 2007, p. 1). The topic of crisis communication, an area of mass communication, roots back to 1913-1914 during the time of the horrible aftermath of the Colorado coal strike that left several innocent people dead and John Rockefeller, Jr., millionaire and owner of about 40 percent of the stock of Colorado Fuel & Iron Company (CF&I) to handle the publicity after the crisis. It was then that Rockefeller's consultant, Ivy Lee, introduced publicity tactics on how to respond to the shaken public. Lee advised Rockefeller that it would be unwise to use paid media, such as advertisements, to influence the attitudes of the public (Hallahan, 2002, p. 268). Lee's approach to the matter was to take full responsibility for the situation. Lee's most well-known communications strategy involved publishing a series of bulletins that were targeted at opinion leaders (Hallahan, 2002, p. 265). But, it was the exemplification of early PR tactics through efforts of changing the attitudes of Rockefeller by improving living conditions, listening to complaints, crafted press releases, and ultimately become more present in midst of the public concerns for the crisis. This is one of the earliest examples of how crisis communication has been ongoing for years and it is vital for management to react wisely.

Coombs (2017) defines a crisis as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2017, p. 2-3). Briefly, crisis management has been

divided into a “three-stage approach”: pre-crisis, crisis event, and post crisis. In 1982, Johnson & Johnson's brand, Tylenol had to handle a tremendous crisis when an unknown person spiked several bottles with poison that killed several people. In 1989, the tanker Exxon Valdez spilled an estimate of 38,000 tons of crude oil off the coastline of Alaska. These two well-known crisis communication cases are examples, like many others, that have provided lessons for any company dealing with a crisis. While Tylenol's protocol to recall every single bottle on the market was deemed successful, Exxon's attempt to blame others as well as not reacting quickly enough was deemed to be an unsuccessful example of crisis management (Murray, E. & Shohen, S., 1992, p. 16). With the immediate speed of social media today, it is even more necessary to respond quickly to crisis in order to cushion the crisis impact for a company.

A global company dealing with crisis in multiple countries faces several challenges and complexities with crisis management (Coombs & Laufer, 2017, p. 5). Coombs and Laufer (2017) revealed that many leading theories behind crisis communication and image repair strategies do not adequately include in-corporate culture in their frameworks, or structures (p. 3). Image repair (restoration) theory originated from concepts of apologies, excuses, and justification of an action (Benoit, 1997, p. 177). This theory first comes first in evaluating the effectiveness of a communication activity, specifically communications associated with corporate crises (Hassan, 2019, p. 90). Image repair theory is a useful tool for understanding crisis communication cases and the reasoning behind an organization or a person's responses. Perceptions appear to be more valued than the reality of whether or not a business is responsible for the action. The most important question amongst a crisis is whether or not the public believes the action causing crisis is offensive. Image repair theory gives five strategies of restoring the crisis: denial, evasion of responsibility, corrective action, and mortification. This research is important, because it

addresses the idea that the public is reassured when a company takes steps towards to ensure a future without problem (Benoit, 1997, p. 177-180). Image repair theory provides insight into the preparation for persuasive messages (Hassan, p. 91, 2019). If the crisis was a tragic loss in reputation, these persuasive messages could lead to the possibility of taking further steps of corrective action towards rebranding. A company may choose to rebrand after crisis or failure due to reasons of recovering brand reputation and customer loyalty. One study analyzed “the effect of rebranding to the brand reputation and customer loyalty based on the real tragedies of Malaysian Airlines Berhad (MAB)” (Worlu & Ahmad, 2019, p. 20). Findings from Worlu & Ahmad (2019) revealed that “a good rebrand move will rebuild brand reputation and reinstate customer loyalty” after crisis (p. 20). Therefore, it is necessary to consider if any themes, similar to restoring reputation and loyalty, are found among the VW materials.

Rebranding Frameworks

In terms and practice of business, rebranding is frequently described as changing a name, changing the brand's aesthetics (logo, color palette, etc.), and/or the repositioning of a company brand (Muzellec et al., 2003, p. 32). This use of the term, “rebranding,” tied with any of those three events is “confusing and misleading,” because all of those events partake a role in the rebranding process (Muzellec et., 2003, p. 32). But, a brand exceeds past the physical name on a product; a brand gives meaning to stakeholders along with promises, values, and expectations to a consumer (Daly & Moloney, 2004, p. 30). Muzellec et al. (2003) define rebranding as, “the practice of building a new name representative of a differentiated position in the mindset of stakeholders and a distinctive identity from competitors” (p. 32). Coombs (2007) defines a stakeholder as “a person or group that is affected by or can affect an organization” (p. 3). Although, this definition only includes the components of a brand's visual identity and mainly

refers to rebranding as an effort in developing a new market position (Zhao et al., 2018, p. 2).

When “re” is attached to “branding,” this indicates the action (branding) is occurring for the second time. Rebranding exceeds past changing a company name but requires much research, funding, and intention (Goi & Goi, 2011, p. 445).

A study has concluded that through an integrated approach, corporate visual identity (CVI) can aid repositioning, or adjustment of the brand's status in the marketplace, for an organization and be used as a successful tool for managing a brand's reputation (Van den Bosch & de Jong, 2005, p. 12). Corporate visual identity (CVI) consists of the following: a name, a symbol, and/or logo, typography, color, a slogan, or graphic elements that have the potential to express organizational characteristics (Van den Bosch & de Jong, 2005, p. 1). Studies have proposed various models of corporate rebranding and its variables. Daly and Moloney (2004) suggest that a brand consists of “what may be termed tangible [the physical expression of the brand] and intangible, [values, image, feelings] elements. Daly & Moloney (2004) suggest that rebranding is a continuum that may consist of changing some or all of those elements (p. 32). Therefore, Daly & Moloney (2004) proposed a rebranding continuum, or sequence of elements, which categorizes rebranding into minor, intermediate, and complete change of format of aesthetics, reposition, and rebranding—or changing its name. Daly & Moloney (2004) suggest minor changes include the “change format” of aesthetics which includes restyling to revitalizing the ultimate brand appearance (p. 31). Second, intermediate changes include the “change format” of repositioning which suggests the use of marketing tactics such as customer service and communication techniques to favorably reposition, or adjust its status in the marketplace in favor of consumers (Daly & Moloney, 2004, p. 31). Lastly, complete change involves the “change format” of rebranding by making the name new to stakeholders in which “the values and image

of the new brand must be communicated to stakeholders through an integrated marketing campaign” (Daly & Moloney, 2004, p. 31). Yet, Daly & Moloney (2004)’s use of the term, “rebranding,” under the rebranding continuum provides much confusion and muddled language. Although, it is necessary to point out that this research is similarly intended to find out what intangible and tangible elements the VW brand might have changed. In subtle contrast of Daly & Moloney’s (2004) proposed continuum, Muzellec et al. (2003) suggest the rebranding process is composed of four stages that an organization must carefully consider. These stages include: repositioning, renaming, redesigning, relaunching (communicating the new brand) (Muzellec et al., p. 34, 2003). These four elements provide much clarification of the rebranding elements and its complex process.

The successful corporate rebranding case of Vodafone, a telecommunications company, took multiple communication stages leading towards its rebranding launch in March 2002 (Daly & Moloney, 2004, p. 34). With Eircell, the Irish cellular network provider and Vodafone’s original name, the company achieved success through following the corporate rebranding framework, or strategy, of analysis, planning, and evaluation. Most of Vodafone’s success was in result of careful planning, which includes identifying its target audience and considering both the internal customer, which are a company’s employees within an organization, and the external customer. Literature suggests that a corporate brand undergoing rebranding must consider the factor of internal communications, specifically changes of training company policies and procedures (Daly & Moloney, 2004, p. 34). Specifically, literature highlights, “when all members of an organization understand their brand identity, they are better able to enhance the likelihood of their activities supporting the desired identity” (Harris & Cheratony, 2001, p. 451). Therefore, this evokes the idea that research is needed to discover if or how VW considered to

include these internal company members. Harris & Cheratony (2001) suggest, "corporate branding requires increased emphasis the internal brand," which helps present and uphold a consistent brand identity to stakeholders (p. 453). Additionally, primary research is needed to determine if VW created a brand image that is consistent in its brand's internal and external communications.

With Eircell's successful rebranding, the company changed its name to Vodafone. Unlike Vodafone's new name, Volkswagen has chosen to keep its name, except for titling the rebranding campaign as "New Volkswagen." A brand's name holds much value as it is the basis for awareness and communications of a brand; a brand name both defines and represents not only the product but the corporate identity and its image (Muzellec et al., 2003, p. 34). Additionally, naming is a valuable asset that holds a vital position in the relationship between the consumers and the stakeholders (Muzellec et al., 2003, p. 34). In summary, studies imply that there are both upsides and downsides of corporate name changes (Muzellec et al., 2003, p. 35). This particular case of VW's rebranding efforts raises the question of whether or not a company that has cheated or participated in a global scandalous crisis, like VW's emission scandal, is still considered to be revolutionary if the name is not changed. More importantly, this raises the question of how committed the company is to rebrand itself and its promises.

Other researchers have named rebranding as brand revolution. Merrilees (2005) defines brand revolution as "revitalizing a brand and its role in leading to corporate success" (p. 201). Based upon a case study of a major Canadian retailer, Canadian Tire, Merrilees (2005), developed another framework, or structure, of brand revolution as a trilogy: rebranding vision, brand orientation, and brand strategy implementation (p. 204). Specifically, Merrilees (2005) recognizes the strength of launching rebranding corporate media materials in correspondence to

an integrated marketing communication (IMC) strategy, including promotional tools such as advertising, direct marketing, PR, print/broadcast media, etc. (p. 205). In attempt to gather as much insight on VW's rebranding as possible, this research intends to analyze a combination of IMC tools such as VW's press releases, policy documents, print ads, commercials, etc. In summary, research on the topic of rebranding provides several repetitive rebranding models that have not been updated or combined into new models. In addition, there are not many recent case studies that have provided insight on specifically rebranding after a crisis, such as VW's. Although, one study proposes two detailed criteria on rebranding in terms of two changes that will guide this research study (Zhao et al., 2018, p. 795).

Zhao et al. (2018) analyzed 215 rebranding announcements and concluded that rebranding suggests that "rebranding decisions, on average, are associated with positive abnormal stock returns and investors use cues, like the fit among rebranding dimensions, firm competitive position, and industry competitive intensity to make informed evaluations of firm future cash flows" (p. 795). As much as this research study analyzed important information, the overall purpose of this particular study does not align with communication studies. Literature suggests that while rebranding may be driven mostly by finance/sales or corporate strategy, the execution of rebranding is usually done involving repositioning, renaming, redesign, and relaunch (Muzellec et al., 2003, p. 39). This intended study is not able to measure VW's rebranding performance, or success, in terms of profit and sales, but to closely analyze the rebranding elements and themes generated from materials. Although, one part of Zhao et al. (2018)'s study supports a proposed two-dimensional continuum of rebranding composes two elements: brand identity change and brand strategy change (Zhao et al., 2018, p. 796). Brand identity change refers to a change of corporate name or visual identity elements while brand

strategy change refers to changes in brand promises, original positioning, value proposition, or targeted customers (Zhao et al., 2018, p. 796). Particularly, Zhao et al. (2018)'s study evaluated brand identity and brand strategy change through two different coding criteria. The degree of brand identity change was measured on a scale of 1 to 10 and the degree of brand strategy change was measured on a scale of 0 to 10 (Zhao et al., 2018, p. 801). The number, 0, was used instead of 1 because some rebranding announcements did not mention changes in brand strategy at all (Zhao et al., 2018, p. 802). This particular degree of identity and strategy change criteria used for Zhao et al. (2018) guided the researcher with developing its data processing that intends to answer the RQ.

Goi & Goi (2011) acknowledge that a company can rebrand for multiple reasons, especially the intent of a company wanting to “erase any previous brand identity and replace it with completely new imagery and messaging” (Goi & Goi, 2011, p. 447). Needs for rebranding can vary, but these needs mostly involve something in a business that has changed, such as a signal towards change in direction, focus, attitude, or strategy. One of the key components and reasons behind a company rebranding is its “means of communicating to stakeholders that something about the organization has changed” (Muzellec et al., 2003, p. 33) Muzellec et al. (2003) identify the main drivers, or decisions, events, or processes, of rebranding into four categories: a change in ownership structure, corporate strategy, competitive position, and external environment—such as a crisis or catastrophe (p. 33). These drivers, or events, can vary from sudden complete management transformation to gradual deteriorating market share or reputation from competitor demands (Muzellec et al., p. 33, 2003). However, a direction towards changing corporate culture is not completely acknowledged as a driver behind rebranding as well. Muzellec et al. (2003) studied a sample of 166 companies collecting data on a company's

industry, the new and old name, origin, and reasons for rebranding (p. 36). Out of 12 different industry types derived from the North American Industry Classification system, the transportation and warehouse classification accounted for less than five percent of rebranding announcements (p. 36). Although this study was published in 2003, this provides insight that rebranding within the transportation industry is less uncommon than other industries (Muzellec et al., 2003, p. 37). This study supports the rare and revolutionary rebranding of the automobile industry, specifically, VW.

Volkswagen's Crisis & Response

Several corporations have suffered from crises and the loss of brand reputation, especially the German automobile company, Volkswagen. A study on the evaluation the marketing strategy of VW and its application to the image repair theory, concluded that the company is still in the post-scandal period. The beginning of the scandal began on September 18, 2015, when the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the U.S. issued an evaluation against the car manufacturer company as a Notice of Violation of the Clean Air Act of "defeat device" (Hassan, 2019, p. 87; Cavico & Mujtaba, 2016, p. 303). A few days later on September 22, VW admitted that there were 11 million cars across the world that had been fitted with a defective part, which was not a device but a programmed software within the vehicles. VW, and other shared brands within the Volkswagen group, were built with software that falsely showed that these vehicles were emitting lower levels of harmful emissions than they actually were (Hassan, 2019, p. 87; Cavico & Mujtaba, 2016, p. 304).

The EPA caught that these vehicles were emitting 40 times more toxic fumes than permitted on the roads (Mujtaba, 2016, p. 304; Topham et al., 2015, p. 1). Particularly, these toxic fumes are NO_x (Nitrogen Oxide), which is a family of poisonous and highly reactive gases.

An analysis from EPA calculated that VW could be responsible of 250,000 to 1 million extra tons of NOx emissions being pumped into the air each year (Topham et al., 2015, p. 1). In addition to the extreme pollution and hidden damages to the environment, an excessive exposure to these toxic fumes can cause inflammation of the airways and breathing for everyone. Therefore, this global corporate scandal was serious and needed attention (Topham et al., 2015, p. 1). The company was ordered to recall affected cars, paying 15 billion dollars towards the problem, and watched share prices drop sharply. VW had to initiate plans towards reducing impact on the company's stakeholders, who make up the company's consumers, retailers, investors, and manufacturers (Hassan, 2019, p. 87). Qualitative research assessed VW's marketing communication strategies and response to the scandal through connection to the image repair theory. Hassan analyzed press releases, advertisements, the 2015 annual report, monthly sales reports, share price charts, and an interview regarding the emissions scandal. Hassan (2019) concluded that after the scandal, the company responded to the crisis through strategies of mortification, reducing offensiveness, and corrective action (p. 87).

Changes started within the management team, specifically a change in CEO leadership and the public relations manager. VW hired BP's Oil Spill lawyers as a form of corrective action "against legal matters" (Hassan, 2019, p. 94). In addition, the company tried to reduce negative impact by initiating a marketing campaign, "We've lost the most important part of our company, your trust," which provided a link to find out if an owner's car included a defective part (Hassan, 2019, p. 94). Hassan (2019) revealed that the new CEO of VW hinted about modern transportation and the implementation of a "2025 strategy" (p. 94). This corrective action message supports the significant rebranding announcement and the importance of evaluating the company's goals and intentions. This new role of leadership over the past few years is moving

forward in creating an ethical organizational culture that supports moral behavior and earn back the integrity and trust the company once had (Cavico & Mujtaba, 2016, p. 307). These motives raise the question on how VW's media across various platforms will genuinely reflect the brand's motives with loss of reputation, consideration of multiple consumer cultures, and truly standing out as being authentically environmental.

This research helps direct thoughts towards how the company will take further steps of repairing their image. Additionally, especially since Hassan predicted that the company experienced instability for some time and proposed that there is not a clear answer to whether or not VW managed to recover the company's brand image as of May 2019 (Hassan, 2019, p. 98). Therefore, this leads to the necessary case study of VW's new rebranding announcement that rolled out in September of 2019 in Europe. There has not been much research conducted regarding the connection of rebranding a company after a global crisis and its consistency of brand identity and strategy (Merrilees, 2005, p. 201; Coombs & Laufer, 2017, p. 3). In the summer of 2019 in the U.S., the media voice framed VW by reminding the audience of its scandal when the company launched a new campaign (McDowell, 2019).

When VW aired their limited campaign in June 2019, "Rebirth," much media criticism and attention was directed towards VW's intentions and future brand (Hsu, 2019, p. 1). This campaign featured a new VW commercial, that aired in the U.S during the NBA finals, called "Hello Light," which opens with a dark room while playing news broadcast clips about the 2015 scandal. A spotlight follows a designer sketching a new electric vehicle with the song, "The Sound of Silence" playing in the background (Volkswagen of America, 2019). The chief executive of VW's American unit revealed that this advertisement is not about the apology but "the reassessment of the brand, of the company, and how we want to move forward" (Hsu, 2019,

p. 1). Hsu explains the company's need for "soul searching" after its emission scandal and how VW has a history of clever advertising tactics that have been seen to be revolutionary. In reminder of the brand's previous print 1960s iconic advertisement, "Lemon," the brand released a print ad, "Lemonade" with the copy stating, "even the sourest situation can be turned into something sweet" (Volkswagen of America, 2019).

The media critiqued that this "Rebirth" campaign VW does not go "into internal cultural deficiencies that enable the cheating," but does acknowledge VW's steps towards culture change (Hsu, 2019; Schultz, 2019). In August 2015, only a month before the company's rebranding, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) banned VW's commercial for the electric eGolf that depicted harmful gender stereotypes. The conflict emerged from the fact that the ad featuring males engaged in adventurous activities alongside women sleeping or caring for a child (Volkswagen, 2019; Sweney 2019). With all of these different advertisements leading up to the rebranding announcement, VW has not been totally clear on identifying its audience.

After the official rebranding announcement from VW in September 2019, media critics brought up the company's controversial history once again and gathered feedback from designers of the VW's new logo and visual identity. McDowell (2019) revealed that one design blogger called the new logo "damage control" that broke many design rules (p. 1). Whether or not VW's new visual identity fully reflects the company's internal culture has yet to be researched. Therefore, this media criticism directed questions towards VW's new visual identity, intentions, and how the company will move forward with its new rebranding campaign, "Drive Something Bigger Than Yourself", in relation to environmental benefits (Schultz, 2019).

The reviewed literature highlights, not only historic crisis communication and rebranding cases, but acknowledges, the several factors that play into repairing a company's image,

reputation, and identity. Literature confirms that corporate visual identity (CVI) does indeed aid a company's reputation through dimensions of distinctiveness, authenticity, transparency, and consistency (Van den Bosch & de Jong, 2005, p. 1). Yet, research studies yield to analyze a new rebranding case in which the situation of repairing corporate identity after crisis arises.

Additionally, not much research has evaluated global consumers' levels of brand trust and customer loyalty after rebranding post-scandal. Lastly, much of the reviewed literature provides findings on if and how a company attempted to repair image during and shortly after the crisis. Research on VW's emission scandal is limited to the company's marketing strategy during the crisis stages and the legal, ethical, and practical consequences of the scandal (Hassan, 2019, p. 87; Cavico & Mujtaba, 2016, p. 303). Yet, studies have not evaluated VW's official global rebranding announcement of September 2019. Although, there is a gap of research on following companies that later choose to rebrand. With the rising attention of climate change, there is a gap of case study research on evaluating brand strategies and explanation on how a company will adapt to "green standards," or sustainable actions.

Methodology

In summary, the reviewed literature points out the general importance, role, and process of rebranding. However, a global rebranding, in response to an environmental scandal caused by internal efforts of deception, needs to further be investigated. Therefore, the research questions, *"How is Volkswagen rebranding itself?"* and *"What are the degrees of brand identity and strategy change of Volkswagen's rebranding?"* were answered by primary research and helped fill the knowledge gaps of the secondary research reviewed. Secondary and primary research helped with analysis and explanation behind the facts. Qualitative content analysis was deemed the most appropriate methodology due to the qualitative nature of the subject and the necessary

inclusion of background and the use of general themes to address the research questions. Primary sources gathered to conduct data analysis were: VW's new and old logo design, 15 press releases, 9 print advertisements, 5 commercials, and 6 policy documents. Researcher examined sources from the *Volkswagen Newsroom* website to various multi-page PDF's of the Volkswagen Group's documents ranging from policy and mission statements to guidelines and codes of conduct.

Considering the limited frequency of releasing group policy statements and the transitional period of the VW's rebranding, policy documents were collected from all months of 2019. Press releases and advertisements were collected from September 4, 2019 to December 31, 2019. Considering the vast amount of content produced during this period, press release, policy, and report sources were narrowed down in relation to either the mentioning of the company, specifically the title of the rebrand: "New Volkswagen" and/or its company mission. Through the qualitative content analysis, the researcher kept framing theory in mind for data interpretation. Particularly, framing was taken into consideration when analyzing press releases, which exhibit VW's global external communications, and policy documents that reveal VW's global internal communications. Semiotics theory was used to recognize signs that were developed codes into themes, and meanings. Additionally, after semiotics was conducted on the materials, thematic analysis was used by the researcher to organize common themes and messages. With the research questions as the focus, previous literature was used to help develop a coding scheme with relevant key terms and phrases. Coding was open to any common or important themes mentioned in the materials. For measuring the degree of brand identity and strategy change, coding was in relation to the visual identity terms, the past and the future, corporate culture terms, and mission statement terms. After identifying several relevant themes, the researcher

proceeded to reduce data to abstract depictions through relating back to the research question.

After data were reduced, the researcher interpreted the data and proceeded to further discussion for conclusion.

Discussion & Data Analysis

The following discussion provides detail on how VW is changing its brand visual identity and strategy. According to the study of Zhao et al. (2018) on brand visual identity change criterion, the degree of change in brand identity was rated on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 indicated the lowest degree of brand identity change and 10 indicated the highest. The visual identity change of VW's new branding identity was measured by the degree of changes in brand identity-related elements such as the brand names, logo, color, and slogan. There were a number of visual elements that did change in the new VW logo (See Appendix A). The new VW logo is reduced to a simpler form than its original design. VW shifted into a thinner typeface than its previous typeface. The new color of the logo is dark navy blue and is the inverted colors of the previous VW logo (See Appendix A). In comparison with the old VW logo, this new logo is flat and two-dimensional in shape. The arrangement of the logo elements is similar, except there is much more space between the "V" and "W." In addition, the "W" hovers over the bottom of the circle, which is significantly different from its previous logos in history. Since there is no name change but other elements of visual identity changes were made, the VW logo's visual identity rates a 4 out of 10 on the Zhao et al. (2018) scale of *minor* brand identity change.

According to the study of Zhao et al. (2018) brand strategy change criterion, VW's brand strategy change was rated an 8 out of 10, a high, or *major*, degree of brand identity changes due to the company providing detailed information about the new plan or goal of the company and its overall tone as "future centered." Semiotic analysis was applied to VW rebranding materials and

the following four themes, from thematic analysis, were deemed prominent and consistent in the order of importance: *revitalization*, *female empowerment*, *future-centered transformation*, & *environmental appreciation & responsibility*.

Revitalization

This particular theme generated the idea that VW is “revitalizing” its brand from crisis and transforming its brand to be more modern and relatable to the human-experience. To *revitalize*, means “to give new life or vigor to” (*Merriam-Webster.com*). Ultimately, VW is giving “new life” to its brand’s identity and strategy. The theme of *revitalization* was developed from the generalized ideas of openness, light, energy, and new beginnings. With VW’s “new brand experience,” the company is focusing on a new corporate identity and strategy with new content, attitude, and goals, along with new products that will also align with VW’s principles. Therefore, the brand’s consistent language of “reduced to essential components,” “reinvent,” “reorientation,” and “realignment” suggest that VW is reframing, not framing, its brand.

VW frequently mentions the new brand’s design as “new,” “modern,” “simpler,” and “clearer” (Volkswagen, 2019). VW exemplifies a change in corporate visual identity (CVI) with its redesign of a logo that illustrates simplicity, flexibility, and light. VW emphasizes that the new design is “reduced to essential elements” that will allow for “flexibility” and “variation” (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). This design aligns with the brand’s intentions of launching a new global website in effort to be “navigable” and “personalized” for individuals based on specific interests and needs for individual users (Volkswagen Communications, 2019).

In one particular commercial, “The all-new Golf: Where life happens,” VW shows codes of bold colors, light from darkness, energy, and new beginnings in life (See Appendix B). The focus is directed towards the VW vehicle itself as a bright yellow, which exemplifies the codes

of light and color (See Appendix B). Signs of instances of marriage, having a child, or even becoming close to a car accident, when VW states, “you look ahead,” closely associate with new beginnings (See Appendix B). Later in the commercial, a woman is seen walking on dark street towards her car and turns it on (See Appendix B). Contrasting and colorful light is shown here through the ambient lighting inside the vehicle and the phrase, “where light can brighten your mood.” With the consideration of the company’s previous crisis history, analysis of contrasting light and darkness suggests VW is reframing its brand as the “light coming out of the darkness,” or *revitalization* from such a crisis. Signs include lyrics saying, “I’m charged up, they say I’m ready for greatness,” the phrase, “where your journey is twice the fun,” fast-pace filming sequences, and individuals featured in the commercials looking or acting youthful created the meanings of energy (See Appendix B). These codes of bold color, light, energy, and new beginnings reveal how VW illustrates its brand’s *revitalization* towards making products ready for not only the VW brand’s new beginning but possibly even the consumer’s new beginning or stage of life as well. VW exemplifies codes of new beginnings and ownership of a VW vehicle. This creates the idea that VW intends to create a sense of desire and personal connection to the brand by giving the that partaking in new beginnings start with VW, or specifically vehicles such as the all-new VW eGolf. This idea of new beginnings is also illustrated in VW’s billboard advertisement stating, “Farewell to the world’s most recognizable car: 1938-2019” (See Appendix G). By including simply, the silhouette of the VW Beetle model, universal codes of understanding and appreciation for this well-known vehicle are apparent. This advertisement referring to the years, 1938 to 2019, associates with life, starting with birth and ending in death. This signifies a discontinued vehicle. The idea of “new beginnings” generates from the idea of VW discontinuing its beloved Beetle in light of producing something completely new, or even

better. With frequent expression of *revitalization*, it is clear that VW aims to revitalize its company's voice by additionally shifting to "female."

Female Empowerment

With much assistance using semiotics, the researcher evaluated materials that evoked underlying themes of *female empowerment*. VW reveals the brand's shift to female by presenting that a woman with a "warm," "pleasant," and "confident," voice will speak on behalf of VW going forward from 2019 (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). Therefore, this sign closely associates with meanings of trustworthiness and appearance. With a change to a female voice across all markets, VW launched a "Software is female" advertising campaign for recruiting software developers and gaming experts in October 2019 called "Hello Possible" (Volkswagen Communications, 2019; See Appendix C). Appendix C includes one of the many advertisements from this "Hello Possible" campaign that features only VW female employees in its visual graphics. In the advertisement included in Appendix C, the first sign noticed is a female, a VW designer, as the only image on the advertisement. Second, the woman's eyes are directed towards the viewer. This is a universal code of eye contact which is often associated with the idea of communication. This supports the idea that VW is representing communication through a *female* voice.

Another sign is shown through this woman's pressed lips, which is a universal facial expression that communicates determination. This idea of determination could exemplify communicating the determination of achieving VW's new goals. The woman's body language closely aligns with the idea of forwardness which could relate to the direction towards the *future* of the brand. Additionally, signs of purple, blue, and pink reflections surround this woman, which imply of light or good. Light, a common theme in VW's rebranding, could signify the new

good that comes from working for VW. Lastly, the German words, translated to English, state below the ad, “Do you have usability in your blood? VW is looking for digitalization, electrification and IT expertise (female/male/diverse.) Apply today...” (See Appendix C). These signs create the codes of diversity and expertise. Here, VW reframes itself as a company that appreciates diverse talent, intelligence, and expertise in whatever form, or *gender* in which it comes. In a press release, VW explains this campaign focuses on “people with the right mindset” and the “facilitators, thinkers, mavericks and innovators” (Volkswagen Communications 2019). These signs closely associate with the ideas of nonconformity, innovation, trust, and expertise. Therefore, it is clear that VW’s recruitment campaign, featuring only women, is representing and empowering females who are normally underrepresented in the work place. Although this VW advertisement does represent a woman not necessarily doing an activity, VW using only one female and the close-up shot gives signs of personal communication, trust, and connection with the viewer.

Unlike many advertisements in automobile advertising history, VW is revitalizing automobile advertising through its equal inclusion and empowerment of females and by not strictly featuring women leaning against a car. For example, two commercials show women in the driver’s seat driving or about to drive either with a male present or not at all (See Appendices B & D). If narration is done over music, a female’s voice is used, signifying the female voice of the brand (See Appendix B). These signs of women driving and VW using a female voice generate the code of females “in control.” Meanings of trustworthiness, nonconformity, innovation, and females in control, provoke the theme of *female empowerment*. It is clear that VW intends to earn its trust back from people through the brand’s shift towards not only females being more in control, representing the brand, but also evoking *change*.

Another advertisement features the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team player, Megan Rapinoe, wearing her VW sponsored jersey, as the center image extending her arms. In one press release, Volkswagen of America describes Rapinoe's passion to fight for equality and the promotion of social change (See Appendix E; Volkswagen of America, 2019). This image is surrounded by smaller images of individuals of various races and genders who are gesturing the same way. The arm extension of these individuals suggests the universal code of "bigger" that aligns with the text, "When you stand for something bigger than a game, others will stand with you" (See Appendix E; Volkswagen of America, 2019). The multiple images of the same pose generate the code of the ripple effect and spread of action. These two codes imply the theme of not only *female empowerment*, but going forward, or *transformation*, towards something bigger. This transformation could provide meaning towards VW associating themselves with not only transformation towards the future but freedom of voice within their company and the world. This advertisement's two underlying themes lead into the third theme recognized: *future-centered transformation*.

Future-centered Transformation

Through just visual rebranding materials alone, VW reveals brand identity change through the theme of *future-centered transformation*. With the new VW logo design's use of space, it closely creates the code of "open," or "bigger" (See Appendix A). In a press release announcing the brand's new design, VW shares that "the logo will be positioned flexibly with the new moving frame in the future" (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). This suggests meanings of flexibility and mobility that imply VW's rebranding visual identity is reframed towards the future. Several visual advertisements represent a VW car being placed in open space (See Appendices F- L). This open space varies from white space, a desert, cityscape, or an

evening landscape on an open road. This collection of open space with a car on a road generates the code of the “American open road” that has become much associated with the idea of “freedom.” Additionally, in all print advertisements, light surrounds the VW vehicle which clearly represents the previous idea of “light coming out of the darkness,” or *revitalization* (See Appendices F- L). Two advertisements, picturing three VW vehicles directed towards the viewer, state, “We transport your future” and “Tomorrow’s mobility is what drives us today” (See Appendices F & K). The three signs of “transport,” “future,” and “tomorrow” create the code of forwardness. Codes relating to being open, bigger, freedom, and forwardness generate the idea that VW’s plans are centered towards moving forward in direction of not only “your future” but the mission of transformation towards success, or something bigger, in the future.

VW reveals major brand strategy change (Zhao et al., 2018) by providing a future-centered tone by explaining the brand’s long-term plans for the upcoming 10 years. Codes of “goals of improvement after the VW emissions crisis” are recognized through references of “progress towards attaining the target of improving manufacturing productivity by 30 percent over the period of 2016 to 2025” (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). VW’s references in press releases of the brand’s “pact for the future signed in 2016,” “fully connected” future, and brand’s discipline of “having a positive impact” create the idea of effort towards commitment (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). The brand often mentions its “new chapter of automotive history,” which offers new electric vehicles such as the VW ID.3 model and new Golf model (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). VW explains its “investment” in the future through “planning to spend 19 billion euros on the future specific areas of technologies through 2024 and 11 billion euros on the development of electric mobility” (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). One of the VW brand’s major goals is to be the most sustainable volume brand in the world by

2025. VW hopes to achieve this by aiming to produce several million electric vehicles by 2025 (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). VW frequently mentions “global brand experience” on all media channels with much detail on how the company plans to transform its brand (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). One press release announced that the “brand is boosting e-mobility in China” and the continuation to produce “high-efficiency combustion engines” (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). With language centered around “mobility,” the brand continues to emphasize its commitment and levels of productivity towards the brand’s “ambitious targets” of a neutral carbon balance (Volkswagen Communications, 2019).

The theme of *future-centered transformation* is exhibited through VW’s language suggesting improvement and connectivity. VW intends this through its frequent convincing language and mention of “digitalization, personalization, and positive improvement” (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). One press release suggests the brand’s new commitment to customers, or people, through references to practicing both “better service” and “communications” (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). Digitalization is often emphasized in press releases and commercials as the new form of communication and connectivity that VW is seeking for its brand. VW focuses on its company endeavors to become fully connected with people by making digital media as the key component for contact with customers. VW press releases consistently mention levels of progression and challenges towards transforming the automotive industry using language of “increasingly complex technology” and the reach towards “developing innovative and sustainable mobility concepts” for the future (Volkswagen Communications, 2019).

Lastly, VW exemplifies additional ideas of *future-centered transformation* by considering not only the external customer but the internal customer through frequent references

to “team performance,” “efficiency,” and “commitment” in describing the company’s employee workforce (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). At VW’s Wolfsburg main plant, employees were invited to bring family in appreciation of commitment to VW (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). These signs of family and the workplace create the meaning of commitment. This creates the idea that the VW brand made efforts to internally connect with its employees. Several leaders of VW explain the efforts of the brand’s strategy change by intensely working on the brand and product image, “decarbonization of the VW Group efforts,” “innovative” recruitment, and “transformative vocational training” (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). In alignment with the “reorientation of the brand,” VW launched a new recruitment marketing campaign for “new specialists” that targets drawing attention to VW’s focus on digitization, electrification, and expertise (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). In various press releases, VW emphasizes innovative and technological development, change of management, and training towards “skilled, committed, and team-oriented specialists” (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). This language generates codes of technological expertise and reliability. Therefore, these codes imply that VW is transforming not only the brand focus, but company culture and employee standards. After the brand’s 2015 scandal led to a damaged reputation and loss of trust, it is clear that VW potentially reevaluated more than the brand’s external communications.

The theme of *future-centered transformation* is additionally developed through the brand’s standards updated in 2019 in various policy documents. The Volkswagen Group, which is the VW brand’s head manufacturer, provides insight to the standards, rules, and responsibility all brand representatives must uphold while working under the company. Identified signs include the company’s deep emphasis on “social responsibility” to the following areas: compliance,

members of society, business partners, the workplace (The Volkswagen Group of Conduct, 2019). The combination of responsibility in accordance with all of these subjects creates codes of efforts towards maintaining trust, integrity, and honesty. Reviewed literature emphasizes that VW needed to rebuild trust and loyalty by working on the company's "legal, moral, and socially and environmentally responsible manner" (Cavico & Mujtaba, 2016, p. 309). Primary research reveals that VW shows signs of correction and compliance to the company's legal, moral, social, and environmental responsibilities. The Volkswagen Group ultimately strives for *future-centered transformation* by maintaining employee compliance with regulation and ensuring that all brands' standards align with The Volkswagen Group's principles.

Environmental Appreciation & Responsibility

An environmental theme is consistently referenced and exemplified in the rebranding materials of VW. Ultimately, VW exemplifies great *environmental appreciation & responsibility* by expressing commitment to climate protection by working as a sustainable and environmentally cooperative role model in the automobile industry. Although this theme could fall under *revitalization* and *future-centered transformation* due to the brand's historical environmental scandal, it is categorized into a separate category due to detailed efforts to revitalize its image in the area of environmental matters.

VW strongly expresses *environmental appreciation & responsibility* in many areas of its rebranding material, but this theme is not as apparent in its visual identity except in some commercials. Signs of a car and open space with natural landscapes and no people pictured, generate codes of the "American open road" and exploration (See Appendix B & H). These codes do not necessarily reveal *environmental responsibility*, but they do align with the theme of *environmental appreciation* and freedom to exploring possibilities with Volkswagen. These

possibilities could associate with the idea of something “bigger” such as VW’s efforts towards sustainability (See Appendix B & D). Two commercials feature individuals admiring natural landscapes, charging their electric VW vehicles, or simply walking outside (See Appendix B & D). Most print advertisements feature various landscapes and provide textual information implying how maneuverable, and environmentally sustainability, electric mobility can be with VW and the electric vehicle.

One commercial called “VW x The Conservation Fund: Drive Bigger,” illustrates the theme of *environmental appreciation & responsibility* of VW (See Appendix M). The first sign identified is nature, specifically the Cherokee National Forest, only an hour outside of Chattanooga, where one of VW's main plants is located. This commercial gives additional signs of both panoramic and close-up shots of the forest. These noticeable signs reveal the reoccurring meaning of “bigger” and a new meaning of “beauty” within nature, which generates several messages of appreciation for the environment. In this commercial, no vehicles or human faces are revealed, which clearly illustrates Volkswagen’s attempts to take the focus off of the brand’s products and focus on the new mission of Volkswagen: environmental conservation and sustainability (See Appendix M). VW reveals its partnership with The Conservation Fund to protect this land. The phrase shown at the end of the commercial, “Because Driving Bigger starts in your own backyard,” communicates not only the idea of environmental protection but the common theme of “bigger” and openness. Through interpretation of these semiotic signs and codes, it is evident that VW is trying to entice the viewer by offering the idea that the viewer has the opportunity to contribute in environmental conservation and change by driving “bigger.” By associating itself with The Conversation Fund in this commercial, VW is associating its brand with positive contribution to a worthy cause, such as forest conservation. Therefore, this

association with Volkswagen may lead a viewer to think that by purchasing VW products, they are doing something “good,” which may make themselves feel “good.” This commercial is an example of how VW is rebranding, or framing, itself as a company that plays a part in *environmental appreciation and responsibility*.

VW reveals major brand strategy change (Zhao et al., 2018) by expressing its plans and goals towards the future of climate protection. With the brand's previous history of an environmental global scandal, primary research reveals that the brand has sought to create, or improve, its environmental concern and sustainable culture. The brand ensures that the best route to transformation and climate protection starts with carbon-neutral electric vehicles (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). Conservative language in relation to climate protection and a carbon neutral focus is frequently used in documents. In context of the reoccurring theme of “bigger,” it is clear that VW is reframing itself as a participant in the Volkswagen Group's “bigger” goals towards taking responsibility in environmental protection. The Volkswagen Group emphasizes signs of “investments of with climate protection projects” and “energy efficiency and conversion to renewable energy” (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). Additionally, the Volkswagen Group addresses its forest conservation programs focused on “reducing atmospheric CO₂, providing long-term support for local communities, and helping address the climate crisis in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals” (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). These collections of signs from the Volkswagen Group generate codes of environmental conservation and guaranteed responsible action which closely align with the theme of *environmental responsibility*.

The Volkswagen Group's references to “environmental compliance,” “environmentally compatible products,” “reducing environmental footprints,” reveal codes of development and

sustainability (The Volkswagen Group, 2019). VW's messages of sustainability and *environmental responsibility* closely align with the Volkswagen Group's mission and efforts of achieving goals towards a sustainable company. In March 2019, the Volkswagen Group released its 2019 annual report, which revealed a section dedicated to "Sustainable Value Enhancement" (The Volkswagen Group, 2019). Specifically, this document provided information on how each of the brands must comply to the guidelines and principles in relation to "different aspects of sustainability in conjunction with the so-called mission statements" that reveal the group's "goals, programs, and measures" (The Volkswagen Group, 2019). Through collective signs of "minimize environmental impacts," "keeping ecosystems intact," and "mobility solutions" language, codes of solution and minimization are generated. The "gotozero" mission statement emphasizes four signs of action with detailed goals including: climate change, resources, air quality, and environmental compliance (The Volkswagen Group, 2019).

The Volkswagen Group as a whole, including the VW brand, is "committed to the 2 degree Paris Climate Agreement" and intends for the entire group to be carbon neutral by 2050 (The Volkswagen Group, 2019). By 2025, the group plans "to reduce its total lifecycle Greenhouse Gas Emissions of passenger cars and light duty vehicles by 30% compared to 2015" (The Volkswagen Group, 2019). Through maximization of resource efficiency, the group plans to "reduce the production related environmental externalities by 45% per vehicle by 2025" (The Volkswagen Group, 2019). The group hopes to "improve the local air quality" by 2025 through "the share of battery electric vehicles" (The Volkswagen Group, 2019). Lastly, the group aims to be "a role model for a modern, transparent enterprise in terms of integrity" (The Volkswagen Group, 2019). The sign of "effective management systems covering the environmental impacts of our mobility solutions" reveals the code of internal communication. This reference to

management suggests that the group intends to ensure that the integrity of the group is not lost through managing open and honest internal communications. Therefore, all of these codes of solution, minimization, action, management, etc., in the context of climate change and sustainability, suggest the Volkswagen Group's commitment towards *environmental appreciation & responsibility*. It is noticeable that VW knows the effort it will take to repair reputation and trust from the company's past of scandal. By rebranding the VW brand to a *future-centered transformation* of electric mobility, it is clear that VW wants to ensure compliance and transparent communication with the larger group's mission statement and goals.

After primary research was performed on VW's rebranding materials, it is necessary to recognize the ways in which literature aligned with or varied from these findings. Brand identity change and strategy change is identifiable in accordance to Zhao et al. (2018) criteria. Just as the reviewed literature suggests, VW made changes in the aesthetics, or corporate visual identity (CVI), of its brand by adjusting its symbol, logo, typeface, color and other graphic elements (Daly and Moloney, 2004; Van den Bosch & de Jong, 2005, p. 1). Reviewed literature proposes that "changing CVI should be part of an integrated approach," which will help manage a company's reputation (Van den Bosch & de Jong, 2005, p. 113). Findings show that VW does reveal visual identity change through an integrated approach which could lead to possible improvement of VW's company's reputation. According to primary research, the visual identity changes similarly align with VW's new brand strategy changes. This supports the literature that suggests corporate branding, requires effective communication and consistent messages about a brand's identity (Harris & Cheratony, 2001 p. 446; Van den Bosch & de Jong, 2005, p. 12). Similar to reviewed literature, the needs of VW's rebranding closely revolve around the brand's change in direction, focus, and strategy (Goi & Goi, 2011, p. 447).

Literature confirms that a company may choose to rebrand after crisis or failure due to common reasons of recovering the brand's loss of reputation, loyalty, and trust (Worlu & Ahmad, 2019, p. 20). From this primary research conducted, the needs for the VW are varied but findings from research can allude to VW's goals towards rebuilding trust after crisis and efforts of signaling external and internal change to the company's stakeholders (Worlu & Ahmad, 2019, p. 20; Muzellec et al., 2003, p. 33). Findings suggest that VW is directed towards the future of mobility and focused on the environmental responsibility of a carbon-neutral balance. It is necessary to recognize that VW's brand strategy is deemed as a major change despite not adjusting its brand name. Unlike Daly & Moloney's (2004) recognition of the successful Vodafone's branding, which included a name change, VW's rebranding campaign exemplifies prominent themes of transformation without changing the actual brand name. VW's major transformation of brand strategy and identity, offers value to future research on how a company globally rebranded itself after a corporate crisis without changing its brand name.

Conclusion

Four years after VW's 2015 global emissions scandal, the company officially initiated its rebranding rollout in September 2019. Secondary research provides knowledge on the crucial elements of crisis management and complex processes of rebranding but fail to provide much detail in the relationship of rebranding after crisis (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Laufer, 2017; Merrilees, 2005; Muzellec et al. 2003). While literature provides research on the consequences of VW's emissions scandal and the brand's marketing strategies, there has not been any primary research performed after the company has officially rolled out its rebranding materials in 2019. Previous research implies that after VW's various legal problems and plummeted reputation, VW needed to work on the company's "legal, moral, socially, and environmentally responsible

manner” (Cavico & Mujtaba, 2016, p. 309). Additionally, Cavico & Mujtaba (2016) suggested that VW should take much time of reflection and strategic planning in interest of both VW consumers and stakeholders. Ultimately, Cavico & Mujtaba (2016) emphasized that VW needed to reevaluate the company, work hard, fix what they did wrong, and “demonstrate that such deceptive conduct will never happen again” (p. 309). Therefore, this research paper provides data analysis on VW rebranded content and interpretation of how the company proceeded to reframe its brand after such a crisis. By performing qualitative content analysis, this research intended to answer the following questions: *How is Volkswagen rebranding itself? What are the degrees of brand identity and strategy change of Volkswagen’s rebranding?*

Through interpretation using semiotics and practice of thematic analysis, VW’s rebranding is categorized into the following major themes: *revitalization, female empowerment, future-centered transformation, and environmental appreciation & responsibility*. Through not only *minor* brand identity change, but brand *major* strategy change as well, VW is overall rebranding, or *reframing*, its brand towards transformation and improvement from VW’s history of scandal. General themes of light, color, and new beginnings reveal how VW is rebranding itself as *revitalizing* its brand. Considering the brand’s time of “darkness in crisis” from 2015 to 2019, messages allude to the idea that VW is rebranding itself as “the light coming out darkness.” VW is additionally rebranding itself as *female*, or *female empowered*. Underlying themes of females in control, females representing the brand’s voice, confidence, and technological expertise, suggest that VW intends to evoke change and earn its trust back from people through the brand’s shift towards *female*. Furthermore, through references of connectivity, the future, digitalization, and electrification, VW is rebranding itself as a company that is centered on *transformation towards the future*. Lastly, VW is rebranding its brand as

environmentally appreciative & responsible. With the brand's credible and detailed plan to become carbon neutral by the year of 2050, vocational training, partnership with The Conservation Fund, and new environmental mission and policy statements, VW is reframing its brand as being proactive in areas of sustainability and conservation. VW is reframing the brand's identity and strategy as being a new, sustainable, transformative, flexible and a progressive automobile company centered towards the future of the electric era. The brand has managed rebranding globally through redesigning its logo and graphic elements, providing extensive details of plans, and shifting its target audience towards people who ultimately care to contribute in its transformation towards the future and environmental commitments.

It is important to recognize the themes from this scholarly research study provide interpretation of VW's external and internal communication, including training or company policies and procedures. Literature confirms successful rebranding cases often involve much preparation and planning, initiating with identifying the brand's target audience alongside with equally communicating internally and externally (Daly & Moloney, 2004, p. 34). The case of VW's rebranding themes and messages were consistent between the VW brand and the Volkswagen Group's materials which may reveal that open and transparent internal communication is being practiced within the VW company. By examples of internal communication through vocational training programs, HR recruitment, and family-oriented workplace days, it is possible that VW employees are more likely to behave and contribute to activities supporting the VW's brand's desired identity (Harris & Cheratony, 2001, p. 451). Four months after the official rebranding, in December 2019, VW published a story on its website sharing "how" the brand globally reinvented itself (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). VW shared six principles that played a role in the rebranding process (Volkswagen Communications,

2019). These principles included “people first,” “digital first,” “new attitude,” “brand differentiation,” “total brand experience,” “global brand governance,” and “new brand design” (Volkswagen Communications, 2019). Although the six listed principles may relate to the themes developed from research, analysis was performed from a critical and neutral perspective, without studying any predetermined principles or themes. Additionally, this promotional story implies *external* changes of the brand and does not include much information on the *internal* changes of the VW brand. Lastly, it is necessary to recognize an omission from primary research. This research paper only performed analysis on corporate media sources, which could bias facts through omission of the brand’s level of honesty and commitment to carry out its reframed goals and efforts as a transformative and environmentally conscious company. Therefore, this raises the question: *Would there be any different themes from interviewing the internal customers such as employees or stakeholders?*

Limitations

This academic research paper is not without limitations. Many limitations to this research study can be highlighted as important. By reading the following limitations, studies can learn how to research better in the future on these topics. First, it is deemed necessary to recognize the limited time period of research as a student-researcher. Due to such limitations of time constraints, the amount of rebranding materials was limited and data processing was performed manually. With performing manual data processing and using semiotics with one interpreter, there was the risk of missing other signs and opportunities for interpretation. Certain signs may be more significant in different cultures or allude to different meanings depending on an interpreter’s knowledge and exposure to cultural perspectives. Therefore, there is the risk of potential unconscious biased outcomes. Second, due to limited access to computer software, the

quantity and quality of print advertisements and commercials identified was also limited. Third, due to VW's current global rebranding of VW, the researcher was limited to access of VW fully rebranded international materials. Print advertisements were mostly limited to Volkswagen of America. With consideration of such limitations, future researchers can learn how to properly primary research on global rebranding.

Implications for future studies

Although findings from this particular case study generally provide insight on how has VW rebranded itself, these findings ultimately underline the greater importance of equally changing a company's brand identity and brand strategy after a crisis. Like literature suggests, the brand's changed visual elements should clearly align and be identifiable with the brand's new goals, plans, promises, and expectations (Daly & Moloney, 2004, p. 30). It is strongly suggested that further research needs to evaluate rebranding after rebranding has globally been achieved. In addition, content analysis on VW's social media platforms would strengthen the study.

Assessing a global brand like VW, which is currently rebranding itself, can be useful for future researchers in developing future studies on internal and external consumers' attitudes, levels of trust, and loyalty to the brand. Considering the limitation of sources provided that reveal brand strategy and company standards, further qualitative research of VW employees' commitment and understanding of VW's new rebranding principles would be valuable information to this study. Additionally, future research on the impact, reactions, and influence of international consumers on VW's new global rebranding could provide further insight to other companies undergoing crisis and considering rebranding. With a company reframing itself as environmentally committed and responsible, this raises questions related to the audience's influence, reactions, and concerns to these claims. By performing social media sentiment

analysis on VW's social media platforms in comparison to competitors, this type of future research could help develop deeper insight behind achieving a successful rebranding campaign for future companies.

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Appendices

Appendix A

The VW Logo Design



Appendix B

“The all-new Golf: Where life happens”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBnnb7C_G2I

Appendix C

“Software is Female: Hello possible” VW Recruitment Campaign Advertisement



Appendix D

“The all-electric ID.3—Now you can”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPjvgXWA78E>

Appendix E

“Bigger” Print Advertisement



Appendix F

“We transport your future” Print Advertisement



The advertisement features three Volkswagen commercial vans driving towards the viewer on a wet city street at night. In the background, two illuminated skyscrapers rise against a dark sky. The scene is lit with a cool blue tone, emphasizing a futuristic and urban theme.

We transport your future

Tomorrow's mobility is what drives us today

Electricity is the fuel of the future - not just because switching to electric vehicles is good for both your business and the environment. Thanks to compact batteries, short charging times and unrestricted access to ultra-low emission zones, you will have a head start in urban mobility. Where will your cars take you in the coming years? Let us be part of your journey.

volkswagen-commercial-vehicles.com

Appendix G

The Beetle Billboard Advertisement



Appendix H

VW Jetta Print Advertisement



Appendix I

“Shift your business into high gear” Print Advertisement



Shift your business into high gear, not high cost.

Meet the newly-redesigned 2020 Volkswagen Passat. Excelling beyond other midsize sedans, Passat offers a spacious and refined interior with premium materials and amenities throughout. You'll also find innovative technology designed for taking care of business, including standard App-Connect*, plus additional peace of mind with our available Driver Assistance features†. With credentials like that, choosing Passat is one executive decision that's easy to make.

vwcorporatefleet.com

© 2019 Volkswagen of America, Inc. *Always pay careful attention to the road, and do not drive while distracted. Not all features available on all operating systems. Standard rear and front-impact safety airbags. App-Connect* features require compatible device, operating system, and mobile apps. See mobile device and app providers for terms and privacy. †Driver Assistance features are not substitutes for attentive driving. See Owner's Manual for further details and important limitations.

**Corporate
Fleet Sales**



Volkswagen

Appendix J

“Satisfy” Print Advertisement

I completely satisfy.



Not as much as our fleet team.



Hungry for more? When it comes to your fleet, the VW Corporate Fleet Team can satisfy all your needs. From our personalized fleet solutions and dedicated account managers to our versatile lineup of cars and SUVs - like the versatile Tiguan - we're ready to settle your craving for something a bit different.

vwcorporatefleet.com

**Corporate
Fleet Sales**



Volkswagen

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Appendix K

“We transport your future” Print Advertisement



We transport your future.

Tomorrow's mobility is what drives us today.

Electricity is the fuel of the future – not just because switching to electric vehicles is good for both your business and the environment. Thanks to compact batteries, short charging times and unrestricted access to ultra-low emission zones, you will have a head start in urban mobility. Where will your cars take you in the coming years? Let us be part of your journey.

Commercial Vehicles

About Volkswagen Commercial Vehicles:

As an independent brand within the Volkswagen Group, Volkswagen Commercial Vehicles (based in Hanover, Germany) is responsible for the Group's worldwide activities in the area of light commercial vehicles, people carriers and camper vans. This includes the systematic further development, the production and the sale of the successful Transporter, Caddy, Crafter and Amarok model ranges (almost 500,000 sold units in 2018) as well as the development of new vehicle types, (digital) services and (electric) mobility solutions.

By doing so, Volkswagen Commercial Vehicles focuses on the individual transport and mobility needs of its commercial and private customers and contributes decisively to their economic success by offering added value for their work, their business models and their everyday lives.

Beyond that, the brand is responsible and will set the pace for the strategic future field of autonomous driving for the entire Volkswagen Group, aiming to become the leading company for individual mobility and interconnectedness by 2025.

Mission: we transport success.

Volkswagen Commercial Vehicles is fully concentrating its activities on the fundamental changes taking place in the industry and to the changing customer requirements. Therefore, we pursue a clear strategy for our future business – called GRIP 2025+ (Growth, Responsibility, Innovation, People) – allowing us to design the necessary transformation, to stay competitive and to secure the long-term success of our brand.

For all our products and mobility solutions, we aspire to minimize environmental impact along the entire life cycle – from raw material extraction until end-of-life disposal – in order to keep ecosystems intact and to create positive impacts on society. Compliance with environmental regulations, standards and voluntary commitments is a basic prerequisite of our actions.

Facing the task of shaping mobility in a cleaner, safer and more efficient way with our vehicles and services, Volkswagen Commercial Vehicles, too, just like the other brands of the Volkswagen Group, is committed to the target of the Paris Summit on Climate Protection, which aims to restrict global warming and to target a fully CO₂-neutral balance by 2050, for example.

The opinion and feedback of our customers is very important to us. That is why we always work closely together with them when developing new products. In addition, a huge capital employment enables us to consistently push the transformation towards zero-emission mobility. With the all-electric e-Crafter, ABT e-Caddy and ABT e-Transporter (the last two developed together with our strategic partner ABT), our portfolio contains solutions for urban traffic that are already sustainable now. Expected in 2022, the fully electric ID. BUZZ, which has entirely developed anew, will be one of our most important products for the future and is our technology carrier for autonomous driving.

In the end, working together responsibly in all areas of the organization, developing and involving enthusiastic and talented employees, and working together as one team with the best partners of the industry are the crucial things that enable us to live up to our promise: we transport success.

For more info on Volkswagen Commercial Vehicle's Fleet solutions, visit:
www.volkswagen-nutzfahrzeuge.de/de/geschaeftskunden/grundkundenkontakt-international.html

Appendix L

“Beautiful” Print Advertisement



Appendix M

“VW x The Conservation Fund: Drive bigger”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TB9gNR6tdbE>