

Cut to the c(h)ase

Communicating strategic brand intent through visual package design

Toni-Matti Karjalainen* and Sanna Honkaniemi**

* *Helsinki School of Economics, International Design Business Management Program
Helsinki, Finland, toni-matti.karjalainen@hse.fi*

** *Helsinki School of Economics, International Design Business Management Program
Helsinki, Finland, sanna.honkaniemi@hse.fi*

Abstract: In the paper, visual package design as a media of communicating strategic brand intent is explored. The paper has two major parts and objectives. First, we discuss brand and package communication in the light of existing theoretical perspectives to create an overall understanding of the topic and identify a general framework to be used in further studies. Second, we report on an empirical student project in which explored visual brand communication through packages in practice. In particular, a design process for analyzing improving the package communication of Fiskars garden tools is presented. In addition to a theoretical contribution to the fields of brand management and design, the paper offers an exemplary student project to be utilized and further developed in design education.

Key words: *Brand recognition, design education, design semantics, package design*

1. Introduction

Communication of strategic brand intent (brand essence) is a major communication objective for companies operating in competitive markets. Companies have set out to achieve brand recognition and consistent brand communication through various means. Product design is considered a key ingredient in fostering a strong visual identity for a brand [18,19,36,41], and in creating brand value [4]. In addition to the communicative contents of products in branding context, product packaging has gained wide research interest. As one of the earliest studies in the packaging field, Pilditch wrote about the supermarkets' silent salesmen and illustrated the marketing potential of consumer product packaging in 1961 [33]. He argued that package is the connecting link between company and consumer, and consumer's purchase decision is dependent on the package.

1. 1 Brand communication through product packages

There exists a number of more recent studies showing that the role of packages in marketing and brand communication is central [2,5,20,30,39]. Expressive visual designs are employed to support the communication and the brand strategies of consumer products [27,46,47]. In branding, successful product packaging hinges on visual creativity, strong communication, and understanding of customers' perceptions, needs and desires [38]. Packaging is regarded as a topical concern of marketing and product decisions at least from three main

perspectives. First, given the amount of brands and products that consumers face, companies are forced to differentiate their products clearly from competitors. In cluttered markets, distinctive package design is an effective way to gain consumer notice [3,14,26]. Second, it is shown that product decisions are often made at the point of purchase through rapid processes of perception, which proposes that packages need to embody strong visual elements to enable recognition [5,20]. Third, it seems that traditional means of advertising are losing their power as the result of the overflow of messages within various media channels. Only few advertising messages stay in consumers' long-term memory, and purchase decisions are more often made at the point of purchase [42,46,47]. In such situation, positive brand associations supported by package design can have a significant impact on purchase decisions. Market success is increasingly dependent on the positive meanings and associations that products communicate [7,16,42], which has increased companies' interests towards more expressive package designs. Packages need to support the symbolic story telling that is characteristic of the contemporary "dream society" [15] or "experience economy" [34].

1.2 Research gap and objectives

Most studies on package communication are found within the field of marketing management, with strong consumer focus and emphasis on quantitative data. The perspective of design – how the communicative aspects are created in packages – has been in smaller focus. The process of transforming the brand essence and strategic intent into visual forms and representations should be more studied. During the process, designers make choices regarding product characteristics, decide how to mix different design elements, and determine the desired level of congruity among them [3,30]. Such a holistic view on package design is not often dealt in current studies that often focus on specific isolated characteristics such as colors and logos. Empirical qualitative studies are needed to gain deeper understanding about the holistic meanings created through package design.

In this paper, we discuss visual package design as a media of communicating strategic brand intent, particularly from the design point of view. The paper has two major parts and objectives. First, we discuss brand and visual package communication in the light of existing theoretical perspectives to create an overall understanding of the topic and identify a general framework to be used in further studies. Second, we briefly report on an empirical student project that explored visual brand communication through packages in practice.

2. Products as communication

Our focus is on the visual features that are used as communicative media to transform the brand's strategic intent to a mediated user experience. The communicative potential of products may be approached from five different perspectives [8]: (1) Product as employing a language that consumers read, (2) Product as a part of a sign system, (3) Product as an instrument or persuasion or argument, (4) Product as a component of social interaction, and (5) Product as the message or medium in a sender-receiver process. These views are integrated in practice, but offer alternative points of focus for research purposes. The fifth one is the main perspective in this paper. Traditionally, the sender-receiver process has been approached by different types of diagrammatic models [8]. One of the earliest and most famous models in the design field is the diagram of Krippendorff and Butter [24]. The Krippendorff and Butter (KB) model, presented in figure 1, is interesting for us while it highlights the

involvement of design, engineering, and marketing parties in the design process, the realization phase, and notices the symbolic channels of communication in side with the technical ones.

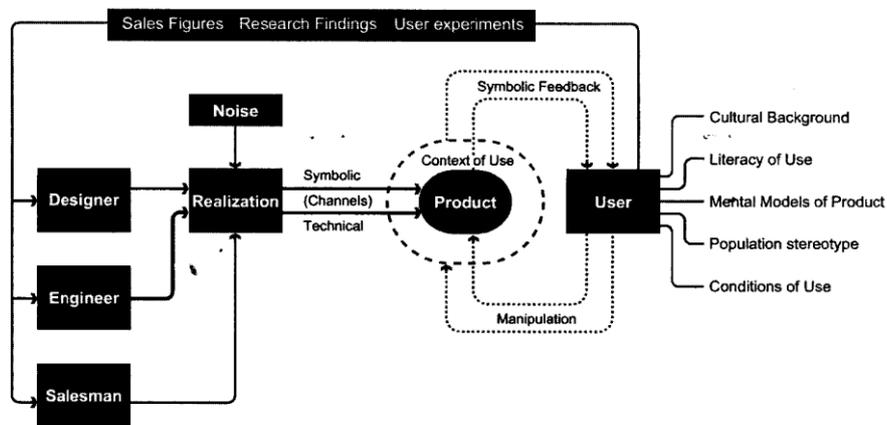


Figure. 1 Krippendorff and Butter model [24]

2.1 Transmitting and creating meanings

The KB model and most of the similar communication models view meaning creation as one-directional process. Such approaches suggest that producers can thus use their products intentionally to transmit meanings to potential target audience. However, despite the possibilities to manipulate perception, how and what meanings are eventually created within product-user interaction is eventually out of the producer's control. In communication research, this model of one-dimensional transmission is often challenged by the view that emphasizes the role of the user-product interaction, the one of shared meaning creation [9]. This view is also supported by the contemporary marketing and branding literature that increasingly discusses "co-created" meanings and symbolism within specific physical and virtual brand communities. In this context, co-creation can occur, for instance, through "tribal marketing" [6,21] and joint (cultural) meaning production of marketers and consumers [31,32]. The notion of co-creation also refers to the modern comprehension of branding and identity building, so-called holistic perspective on branding [1,12,13,17,25].

As a mere methodological choice, intentional transmission from the producer to the user is our primary context of analysis. In practice, of course, the perspective of "co-created" meanings cannot be neglected, and it functions as a given construction at the background of our study. Acknowledgement of various meanings that may be created in the product-user interaction is also embedded in the realization phase of the KB model. Within the communication process, hence, the focus of our paper is on the relationship between the sender (company with strategic intent that is realized through the brand) and media. In specific, we are interested in how design can communicate the brand essence through strategic acts of „semantic transformation' [18]. Through these acts, qualitative brand descriptions are transformed into value-based design features, and these generate the intended meaning of products. The notion of semantic transformation is derived from the field of design semantics that comprises a variety of approaches towards design as communication media [18,19,22,23,28,29,40,45].

2.2 Visual package design as communication media

Package design includes various complex aspects, ranging from engineered functional attributes (ergonomics, durability, recyclability, manufacturability, etc.) to visual and tactile attributes, i.e. elements that create the perceived appearance of the package [30]. On the generic level, visual package design can influence consumers' choice through six "appearance roles" [7]: Communication of (1) aesthetic, (2) symbolic, (3) functional, and (4) ergonomic information, (5) attention drawing; and (6) categorization. A product's appearance can have aesthetic and symbolic value for consumers, communicate functional characteristics and give a quality impression (functional value), and communicate ease of use (ergonomic value). In addition, it can draw attention and can influence the ease of categorization of the product. There are several studies suggesting that the process of creating attention and categorization are strongly affected by the visual messages of packages [2,5,10,11,20,30,42].

Of the package design features, color is recognized to be the most powerful one (in comparison with shape and graphics) [2,5,11,20,39,42]. Colors help consumers to categorize products and recognize brands especially within the fields of high competition and marginal technical differences between products such as daily goods and other low involvement products. In addition to colors, package design has been studied, for example, with focus on verbal and visual elements [35], graphic variables [2], and pictures [43,44].

The aesthetic and symbolic aspects (or value dimensions) of a package design seem to be less studied, even though they have a significant influence on consumers' product choice [15,16,26,34]. In specific, going back to our basic communication model, more studies are needed on the role of packaging design as an aesthetic and symbolic carrier of the strategic intent and brand essence. In branding context, referring to the earlier mentioned comprehension of holistic brand experience, it is suggested that it is the holistic appearance that counts when meanings are being created. Meanings are not dictated by any individual elements like colors, graphical features and shapes alone but by the gestalt of all elements working together [30]. The impact of such holistic visual appearance on package perception at the point of purchase has been studied by many scholars [5,10,50,37], but not from the particular view point of brand communication.

It is suggested that brand essence can be transmitted via multiple structural and visual elements [42]. In general, it seems that building strong brands and evoking favorable consumer impressions often calls for strong and distinctive visual representations. In the overflow of visual messaging, simplicity is needed [38]. Brands that are boldly recognizable and distinctive and have simplistic package design seem often to perform better than their less distinctive competitors. Current understanding in marketing and branding literature, as well as in practice, is that brand communications should convey a single, clear message that is difficult to misinterpret. Therefore, companies need to work on clear definitions of strategic intent and brand essence and creation of strong and simple communications of the essence through visual references.

3. Experimental project on package communication

This challenge of communicating strategic intent and brand essence through package design was applied to an experimental student project. In the academic year 2008-2009, a multidisciplinary group of four students

(industrial design, graphic design, marketing, and engineering) worked on an assignment to improve the packaging of specific products for three Finnish companies: Fiskars (garden tools), Fazer (chocolates), and Kekkilä (soil and other gardening products). The student project was part of the International Design Business Management Program (IDBM) at the Helsinki School of Economics. It was conducted under the “VIP – Messenger Package” research project (2008-2010), a joint effort between IDBM, VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland, the Association of Packaging Technology and Research (PTR), and seven Finnish companies. For Fazer and Kekkilä, the objective of the student project was to introduce new package designs for their current selected product lines. In the case of Fiskars garden tools, the focus was on improving the overall product communication and strengthening the Fiskars brand message in the packages. In this paper, we report on the Fiskars case more in detail.

3.1 Design process

In the project, various methods were used. To define the strategic intent and brand essence, in-depth discussions and interviews were conducted with company representatives. In addition, a detailed review on current Fiskars packages was performed to identify strength and weaknesses in visual communication. Students also performed supporting research on package communication in different product fields, including trips to London Packaging and Brand Museum and the Emballage packaging fair in Paris. Secondary research was executed through literature review and analyses of various packaging blogs and websites. The analysis was then followed by a concept design phase that was further divided into ideation and development phases. First, students were mapping out the challenges and opportunities of packaging, brainstorming for novel ideas, and selecting most prominent ideas into further development. The development phase resulted in initial sketches and concepts, which were then revised in a number of iteration rounds. Finally, a number of mock-ups and other visual presentations were produced.

3.2 Studying Fiskars brand essence and strategic intent

In the case of Fiskars, devotion on product functionality was seen as the brand essence. Fiskars tools have a strong history and reputation of a producer of highly functional and ergonomic products. Fiskars well-known signature orange-handled scissors (in production since 1967) are a good example of excellent functionality. The development of Fiskars' gardening tools is also based on the same functionality and timeless design language the scissors have created. Fiskars products are lightweight and easy to use, including innovative mechanisms that enable people with even limited strength to use them effectively. Fiskars tools are recognized by their strong contrasting orange and black colors, giving them a powerful and reliable appearance. In overall, Fiskars product design is considered simple and honest.

These values, the brand essence of Fiskars, and strong products should be supported by packages in which the products are displayed in stores. The aim of the analysis and concept design was to find new ways to enhance the visual communication of packages as well as to support and even further strengthen the Fiskars brand. The key attributes of Fiskars that should be communicated through package design were high quality, experience, nature, style, and professional. Moreover, packages should help consumers to easily discover the use purpose of the product.

3.3 Analyzing and improving Fiskars packages

The student group analyzed current packages to see how well they correspond to the Fiskars brand essence and clear recognition of the use purpose. Fiskars has a wide portfolio of gardening product families, and each product family contains a wide range of different type of tools. Consequently, communicating the use purpose of the product is a challenge. Just by looking at the product, a customer should clearly recognize the product as a Fiskars, understand what is the product used for, and how it should be used. These aspects are an eliminate part of Fiskars brand essence. From this viewpoint, a detailed analysis was performed on the various design features of the current packages. In this paper, we use the Fiskars Power-Lever® pruners (see figure 2) as an exemplary product.



Figure. 2 Fiskars Power-Lever® pruners and the current package

The analysis concluded, first of all, that the basic concept and shape of Fiskars package is rather idealistic in terms of material usage, information sharing, functionality, and creativity. However, development challenges were identified within the form and graphics that was regarded as not communicating the expertise of the company and the use purpose of the tools in the best possible manner.

In specific, three focus points for development were identified; the overall appearance, infographics, and colors. First, the overall appearance of Fiskars packages is currently very technical, which, on one hand, well reflects the functionality and technical performance of the products. On the other hand, a high number of technical details and complicated product names can easily alienate people. A more playful appearance could differentiate Fiskars products from the competitors and also invite potential customers to more easily approach the products.

Second, infographics are currently used to indicate the use purpose and functionalities of the products. However, they may confuse users as the visual formats vary and not all infographs are self-explanatory. If the infographics fail to serve their purpose, the user is easily misled, which is against Fiskars brand essence. The solution to enhance infographics would be to streamline and downsize them. Infographics should be clearer and all follow the same format.

Third, the current stands on which Fiskars products are displayed are easy to recognize by their strong orange and black color. The product also looks good in the package and reflects the values of strength and good quality. However, when the stand is looked at from a distance, the shape of the well designed product fades to the

similarly colored background. Moreover, it is difficult to distinguish different products from each other. One solution to enhance communication would be either to change the background colour of the package e.g. to white, which would more clearly detach the product and its shape from the background. Another possibility would be to change the proportions of colour usage (orange and black). Black is now perhaps too dominant since the product itself is mainly black. Hence, the proportion of orange colour should be raised.

These three areas were in focus when new package concepts were next designed by the students. In one concept, for instance, a more dynamic appeal was sought after by increasing the amount of orange color on the package. This was meant to highlight the beautifully streamlined figure of the product and to prevent the product from fading into the background. The product looks as good as it feels in hand, which the package should also emphasize. In another concept, specific background pattern were used for specific models in order to help the customer to recognize the technology in question. It was noticed that the true benefits of the technologies, (PowerGear, Power-Lever, PowerStep, etc.) are not communicated clearly by the current packages. Furthermore, the infographics were replaced by more expressive texts. Another concept addressed the issue of creating a more human and light-hearted appearance for the product. This was implemented by changing the background color to white and by adding a clearly written story about the proper use purpose of the product on the package. The white color was also used to emphasize the impressive figure of the product.

4. Conclusions

To review the concepts, a workshop was organized for the company representatives and other parties of the VIP research project. The workshop comprised moderated small group discussions and an overall round table review. The final concepts were seen to meet well both the communicative intent to enhance the visual communication of packages and to strengthen the Fiskars brand.

Our study of course has its limitations while it only reports one specific case. However, the Fiskars case highlighted many central themes discussed in the first part of the paper. The project showed that the role of package design in brand communication is central even in the case of high-involvement products like Fiskars tools. Although the primary role of the package is to support the message of the core product, it can have a great communicative power as such. In line with the earlier viewed studies, the holistic appearance was revealed to be central for communication. Also the aspect of creating simplicity, clarity, and strong messages was highlighted in this case. Colors were regarded perhaps the most important single element, particularly in the Fiskars case where they are one of the strongest elements of brand recognition. The case also illustrates that brand and product communication, when consistently used, can lead to a powerful mix of associations that point to the brand essence.

To sum up, successful product packaging hinges on providing customers with distinctive and clear messages, which means; defining and implementing solid brand essence, and creating product and package design that supports the brand essence. Visual package design needs to transmit distinctive, clear and recognizable messages that, in the contemporary market place with overflowing information, have the crucial ability to make a clear statement about the brand essence, to cut to the chase.

5. References

- [1] Aaker, D. (1996) *Building Strong Brands*, The Free Press, New York.
- [2] Ampuero, O. and Vila, N. (2006) Consumer Perceptions of Product Packaging, *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 100–112.
- [3] Bloch, P. H. (1995) Seeking the Ideal Form: Product Design and Consumer Response, *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 59, no. 3, pp.16–29.
- [4] Borja de Mozota, B. (2004) *Design Management: Using Design to Build Brand Value*. Allworth Press, New York.
- [5] Clement, J. (2007) *Visual influence of packaging design on in-store buying decisions*, Dissertation, Publications of Copenhagen Business School.
- [6] Cova, B. and Cova, V. (2002) Tribal Marketing: The Tribalisation of Society and its Impact on the Conduct of Marketing, *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 36, no 5/6, pp. 595-620.
- [7] Creusen, M. E. H. and Schoormans, J. P. L. (2005) The Different Roles of Product Appearance in Consumer Choice, *The Journal of Product Innovation Management*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 63–81.
- [8] Crilly, N., Moultrie, J. and Clarkson, J. P. (2008) Design as Communication: Exploring the Validity and Utility of Relating Intention to Interpretation, *Design Studies* vol.29, no. 5, pp. 425–457.
- [9] Fornäs, J. (1998) *Kulttuuriteoria*, Vastapaino, Tampere.
- [10] Garber, L. L. (1995) The Package Appearance in Choice, *Advances in Consumer Research*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 653–660.
- [11] Grossman, R.P. and Wisenblit, J. Z. (1999) What We Know about Consumers' Color Choices, *Journal of Marketing Practice: Applied Marketing Science*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 78–88.
- [12] Harkins, J., Coleman, O. W. and Thomas, G. (1998). Commentaries on the State of the Art in Consulting, *Design Management Journal*, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 35-40.
- [13] Harris, F. and de Chernatony, L. (2001) Corporate Branding and Corporate Brand Performance, *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 35, no. 3/4, pp. 441-456.
- [14] Hine, T. (1995) *The Total Package*, Little, Brown and Company, New York.
- [15] Jensen, R. (1999) *The Dream Society*, McGraw-Hill, New York.
- [16] Jordan, P. W. (2000) *Designing Pleasurable Products – An Introduction to New Human Factors*, Taylor & Francis, London.
- [17] Kapferer, J-N. (2004) *The New Strategic Brand Management – Creating and Sustaining Brand Equity Long Term*, Kogan Page, London.
- [18] Karjalainen, T-M. (2004) *Semantic Transformation in Design*, University of Art and Design Publications, Helsinki.
- [19] Karjalainen, T-M. (2007) *It Looks Like a Toyota: Educational Approaches to Designing for Visual Brand*

- Recognition, *International Journal of Design*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 68-81.
- [20] Kauppinen, H. (2004) *Colours as Non-verbal Signs on Packages*, Publications of the Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration nr.139, Helsinki.
- [21] Kozinets, R. V. (2002) The Field Behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities, *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 39, no. 1, pp. 61-72.
- [22] Krippendorff, K. (1989). On the Essential Contexts of Artifacts or on the Proposition that “Design is Making Sense (of Things)”, *Design Issues*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 9-39.
- [23] Krippendorff, K. (2006) *The Semantic Turn: A New Foundation for Design*, CRC Press, Taylor & Francis, Boca Raton, U.S.
- [24] Krippendorff, K. and Butter, R. (1984) Product Semantics: Exploring the Symbolic Qualities of Form. *Innovation: The Journal of the Industrial Designers*. vol.3, no. 2, pp. 4-9.
- [25] Louro, M. J. and Cunha, P. V. (2001) Brand Management Paradigms, *Journal of Marketing Management*, vol. 17, no. 7-8, pp. 849-875.
- [26] Meyers, H. and Gerstman, R. (2005) *The Visionary Package – Using Packaging to Build Effective Brands*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York.
- [27] Meyers, H. and Lubliner, M. (1998) *The Marketer’s Guide to Successful Package Design*, NTC Business Books, Lincolnwood.
- [28] Monö, R. (1997) *Design for Product Understanding*, Liber, Stockholm.
- [29] Muller, W. (2001) *Order and Meaning in Design*, Lemma Publishers, Utrecht.
- [30] Orth, U. R. and Malkewitz, K. (2008) Holistic Package Design and Consumer Brand Impressions. *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 72, no. 3, pp. 64-81.
- [31] Peñaloza , L. (2000) The Commodification of the American West: Marketer’s Production of Cultural meanings at the Trade Show, *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 64 (Oct), pp. 82-109.
- [32] Peñaloza L. (2001) Consuming the American West: Animating Cultural Meaning and Memory at a Stock Show and Rodeo, *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 28 (Dec), pp. 369-398.
- [33] Pilditch, J. (1961) *The silent salesman*, Harper and Row, London.
- [34] Pine, J. B. and Gilmore, J. H. (1999) *The Experience Economy*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston.
- [35] Rettie, R. and Brewer, C. (2000) The Verbal and Visual Components of Package Design. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 56-70.
- [36] Schmitt, B. and Simonson, A. (1997) *Marketing Aesthetics: The Strategic Management of Brands, Identity, and Image*, The Free Press, New York.
- [37] Schoormans, J. P. L. and Robben, H. S. J. (1997). The Effect of New Package Design on Product Attention, Categorization and Evaluation, *Journal of Economic Psychology*, vol.18, no. 2-3, pp.271-287.
- [38] Selame, T. and Koukos, P. (2002) Is Your Package Shelf-Evident? *Design Management Journal*, vol.13, no.

4, pp. 25–31.

[39] Silayoi, P. and Speece, M. (2007) The Importance of Packaging Attributes: A Conjoint Analysis Approach. *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 41, no. 11/12, pp. 1495–1517.

[40] Steffen, D. (2000) *Design als Produktsprache. Der "Offenbacher Ansatz" in Theorie und Praxis*, Verlag Form, Frankfurt (Main).

[41] Stompff, G. (2003) The Forgotten Bond: Brand Identity and Product Design, *Design Management Journal*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 26-32.

[42] Underwood, R.L. (2003) The Communicative Power of Product Packaging: Creating Brand Identity via Lived and Mediated Experience, *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, vol.11, no.1, pp.58–68.

[43] Underwood, R.L and Klein, N.M. (2002) Packaging as Brand Communication: Effects of Product Pictures on Consumer Responses to the Package and Brand, *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, vol.10, no.4, pp.58–68.

[44] Underwood, R.L, Klein, N.M. and Burke, R.R. (2001) Packaging Communication: Attentional Effects of Product Imagery, *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, vol.10, no.7, pp.403–422.

[45] Vihma, S. (1995) *Products as Representations - A Semiotic and Aesthetic Study of Design Products*, Publications of the University of Industrial Arts, Series UIAH A14, Helsinki.

[46] Young, S. (2004) Breaking Down the Barriers to Packaging Innovation, *Design Management Review*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 68–73.

[47] Young, S. (2008) Designing for the Shopper – Six Principles for Effective Packaging. *Brand Packaging Magazine*, April, pp. 38–44.

Acknowledgements

The authors want to thank the IDBM VIP student group – Sari Alén, Antti Kivinen, Maija Liiri and Jitan Patel – for their excellent work and deep devotion throughout the entire project. VIP project partners and companies, especially Olli Turunen and Marko Halttunen of Fiskars Brands are thanked for their great input into the project. We are also grateful for Tekes, Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation, for the financial support.