

# Design for b(r)and identity

Exploring visual concept building within the metal music genre

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**Abstract:** In this paper, we explore how visual signature elements are used in the music industry to support the bands' musical concepts, with a particular focus on the Finnish heavy metal bands. First, we suggest an initial analysis framework to locate the signature elements. Second, the paper briefly reports on visual strategies used by two Finnish metal bands; Amorphis and Stam1na. We describe how the bands reason about their musical concepts and how these are transformed into visual representations. Third, on the basis of our analyses, we present tentative constructions that underlie the communication strategies of the bands. The paper increases understanding of the visual design strategies used in the music industry, which may be applicable to other branches of creative industries as well.

**Key words:** *Brand identity, design, music industry, visual concepts*

## 1. Introduction

Creating strong and consistent brands and products through distinctive and meaningful visual identity has been the key interest of companies in various fields. This topic is also well documented in the management and design literature [5,6,16,18,19]. There appears a good understanding of brand-specific product features (often called “design cues” or “signature elements”) and their use in creating and nurturing favorable brand and product identity. Identity building is a central concern not only for large companies with mass-produced consumer products, a view dominating in the literature, but also for the smaller players within various creative industries. The global music industry is a creative field of a specific interest. It has gone through drastic changes in recent years due to the technological and structural development in music production and distribution. The artists, bands and their various stakeholders are facing an increasingly growing competition in the quest for international recognition. Visual identity is a key competitive element for many bands, as it is used to support and create additional meanings to the musical concept.

Visual stories are strongly nurtured within the genre of heavy metal. In general, the dawn of Heavy Metal as a genre has generally been traced back to the establishment of the British band Black Sabbath in 1968 and their

debut album released in 1970 [1,12]. The genre thus has a 40 years long history, with various sub-genres and bands emerging and fading out, and popularity ranging from underground to mainstream depending on time and country. The music and its culture have been strong and prevailing, and also documented as an important cultural phenomenon [20]. This genre [8] also comprises a richness of specific symbols apparent in band logos, visual imagery, mascots, and other visual attributes [8,9,10]. Such visual symbols are important recognition elements for the bands.

The field of heavy metal is particularly interesting from the Finnish point of view, as the Finnish music export has substantially increased in recent years. Most of this growth originates from the growing success of the Finnish Metal bands in international markets. Our initial analyses and observations in the field suggest that many Finnish bands that are successful in the field, such as HIM, Children of Bodom, Nightwish, and Amorphis, are paying careful attention not only to creating strong and distinctive musical concepts but also to the communicative aspects of their musical and visual product to support the concept. The bands nurture unique visual aspects that often stem from their Finnish origins.

## **2. Objectives**

Despite the rich data basis within heavy metal, there appear little academic research on the role of visual identity and mechanism of symbolic value creation in this field. Such a view of design management within music industry is explored in the BogFires research project (2008-2012), conducted in the Helsinki School of Economics and funded by the Academy of Finland. The project comprises three main areas of inquiry, of which “contents, concepts, and brands” is one. The purpose of this part is to explore how visual and musical concepts are built in the music industry, within the genre of heavy metal in general, and in the case of Finnish metal bands in specific.

In this paper, we suggest an initial analysis framework for analyzing the visual communication of the bands. In addition, the paper briefly reports on visual strategies used by two Finnish metal bands; Amorphis and Stam1na. We describe how the bands reason about their musical concepts and how these are transformed into visual representations, the “signature elements” of the bands. Data is collected through interviews with the members of the bands and their stakeholders, analysis of their visual communication, as well as secondary sources such as public interviews, articles, and other publications. Our main focus here is on the album covers and related visual materials. Initial interpretations of data gathered from other bands and the industry in general are also integrated in the paper. On the basis of our analyses, we also present tentative constructions that underlie the communication strategies of the bands.

## **3. Visual communication and signature elements**

As a generic approach, we regard concept building and visual communication through the basic product communication model that has been used in various applications in design research and related areas [2]. The model distinguishes three main parts in the (process) of communication: intent, media, and response. First of all, the company and/designer (in our case the artists/bands and their stakeholders in music production) build and nurture a product concept that has a specific strategic intent. This intent is then communicated through the

various products of the company that, in other words, function as communicative media of the strategic intent. Finally, end users respond to the communicated meanings and construct their own image of them. In this paper, we focus on the relationship between the intent and media. With regard to the communicative media of the bands, we have tentatively identified four main categories of analysis on the basis of our initial data: musical identity, visual identity, behavioral identity, and co-branding (see figure 1).

Product identity		Signature elements	
			Band name
			Band "theme"
Musical identity	Music		Tonality & structure
			Instrument use
			Song structure
	Lyrics		Vocal style
	Album concepts		Themes and style
Visual identity	Visual features (print & e-) ... album covers ... posters, ads ... web pages ... accessories ... videos Stage design  Band looks	Band logo	
		Typeface	
		Motifs	
		Pictures	
		Graphics, colours	
		Details	
		Motifs	
		Architectural elements	
		Lights, pyros, smoke, etc.	
		Gear	
		Gimmicks	
	Gear		
	Wear		
Behavioral identity	Media presence & behavior		
Co-branding (meaning transfer)	Gear endorsements		
	Co-op artists		
	Accessories		
	National, local		

Figure. 1 Initial typology of product identity and signature elements to be used in our case studies

Musical identity is in most cases functioning as the most important product aspect and media of the band. The elements of the musical concept can be supported by visual features, media presence and behavior, as well as various means of co-branding (like endorsement deals with musical instrument providers). In all of our cases, music itself is of course the bands' main communication media and often the key determinant of the whole identity [15]. Therefore, in addition to visual communication, we need to analyze bands' musical identity in terms of music (tonality and structure, instrument use, song structure, vocal style, etc.), lyrics, and album concepts.

Concerning visual identity, our analyses focus on the visual features the band uses in its album art, print and electronic media. Visual communication in the concert context (named here "stage design") is another key area of concern. Band looks (personal style, gear and wear) is the third focus point. It is important to ponder how the visual features work in interaction with the signature elements of the band's musical identity. In our analysis, the purpose is to identify the most important elements of product communication, the signature elements of each studied bands.

#### 4. Case Amorphis

In order to take a closer look into the visual design strategies of heavy metal bands, we next explore the examples of two Finnish metal bands, Amorphis and Stam1na. Established in 1991, Amorphis has been one of the pioneering Finnish metal bands in international markets. The band has released nine albums and toured in a number of different countries. What has made Amorphis particularly interesting for many Finnish and foreign fans, and help the band to create a distinctive concept, is the approach of using Finnish folklore and mythology as the basis for the musical identity. These “prog-death experts ... with strong folk leaning” [17] have particularly used the Finnish national epic “Kalevala” (compiled in 1835) as a key ingredient of most of their albums. As told by the band’s guitarist and founding member Esa Holopainen in an interview [13], that ingredient was brought to the band’s music in the very beginning of the band’s history. When recording their first album (“The Karelian Isthmus”, 1993), the band came with the idea of integrating folk melodies with the death/black metal sound environment. The Karelian Isthmus also bared a name reference to a historic Finnish battleground, but otherwise the album’s lyrics contemplated universal themes of warfare and religion, drawing on Celtic mythology rather than the traditions of Amorphis’ own native land.

The symbiosis of folk melodies and death metal seemed to work well, and soon, when writing songs for their second album (“Tales from the Thousand Lakes”, 1994), the band came up with the idea of using some stories from the Kalevala, because they felt that the folk melody lines and lyrical themes were well connected. Ever since, with the exception of the albums “Am Universum”, 2001, and “Far from the Sun”, 2003, Amorphis has based its album lyrics on the Kalevala and nurtured folk music influences in its music. The latter, for instance, made a folk-oriented journey into Turkish and Persian territory. The latest three Amorphis albums are also consistent in incorporating the Kalevala theme. The lyrics on the “Eclipse” (2005) album were written on the basis of “the story of Kullervo”, the most tragic character of the epic (written by Finnish poet and writer Paavo Haavikko). The successor “Silent Waters” (2006) continued the story, recounting the tale of Lemminkäinen, another central character in Kalevala, and his hunt for the Swan of “Tuonela”, the underworld in the epic. The most recent Amorphis album “Skyforger” (2009), in turn, told Kalevala stories wrapped around the character of “Seppo Ilmarinen”, the god-like figure of Kalevala who had forged, among other things, the canopy of the sky and the “Sampo”, the mystical device generating all the riches of the World.

Between the “Tales...” and “Eclipse” albums, Amorphis became known for sometimes quite drastic musical changes and innovative experiments in its music. The songs ranged from death metal to progressive rock, and new instruments such as saxophone and flute were used. This changing nature became a certain signature element of the band and was explained by the band as stemming from their own willingness to test new ideas and develop their music into various directions. Interestingly, the band name foresaw these changes. Amorphis is namely derived from the word “amorphous” which refers to something shapeless, without determinate form.

The references to the Kalevala and Finnish nature are reinforced not only by the band’s musical identity but also by the visual themes of the Amorphis albums and related artifacts (see Figure 2). The visual representations have changed throughout the years, reflecting the changes in the musical concept of the band. The first two albums followed the typical rich imagery of heavy metal, the old logo resembling many other typical death/black metal

logos of that period. The major leap from the death metal of the “Tales...” to include more mellow progressive rock influences of the “Elegy” (1996) was highlighted by the visual ingredients of the albums. Not only was the band logo redesigned, but also colors and the overall atmosphere of the album reflected more “moody” feelings.



Figure. 2 Amorphis album covers (from top left: “The Karelian Isthmus” (1993), “Tales from the Thousand Lakes” (1994), “Elegy” (1996), “Tuonela” (1999), “Am Universum” (2001), “Far From the Sun” (2003), “Eclipse” (2006), “Silent Waters” (2007), “Skyforger” (2009)

In the last three albums, the musical identity of Amorphis has remained rather consistent. Moreover, the albums’ visual appearance (designed by the American artist Travis Smith) has been more coherent than in the previous albums. The pictures and graphics of the albums are used to support the storylines of the songs and their lyrics. In overall, the visual looks of the album is regarded as increasingly important aspects in the current market environment of the music field with diminishing record sales. As noted by Esa Holopainen [3]: “Bands should pay more attention how the visual side of the album looks which makes the album worth of buying.”

## 5. Case Stam1na

As a further illustrative example of, we take a brief look into another Finnish band Stam1na, established in 1996. The band has been one of the most successful Finnish metal bands in Finland in recent years, hitting the chart tops and receiving numerous acknowledgements and awards in the industry, including first positions in many categories in the Finnish Metal Awards 2008 and 2009.

In terms of the musical identity, Stam1na may be categorized into the box of thrash metal with progressive elements, although it has created a rather recognizable sound and song structures. Different from Amorphis, Stam1na, according to their singer and guitarist Antti “Hyrde” Hyyrynen (our interview), is not incorporating the Finnish background into its music in an explicit manner. Melancholy that often characterizes many Finnish metal bands like is lacking from Stam1na’s music that, instead, has a more humorous and energetic undertone. According to Hyrde, the band uses lots of influences from the traditional western heavy metal, particularly the American one, but spiced with a modern touch, which altogether creates a sound landscape of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In short, Stam1na’s musical intent may be described in Hyrde’s words as “to create something new with old tools”.

The Finnish language is a strong differentiating element in Stam1na’s music, while similar Finnish singing bands are rare. The band started as an English singing group, but the decision to shift to Finnish was made before the first album, the self-titled “Stam1na” (2005) was released. The choice of the language may explain part of the huge success in Finland but, at the same time, is a challenge in international markets. The language, however, works as a differentiating element within this area in which most of the bands are using English. As Hyrde comments, the Finnish language fits well in Stam1na’s music, and heavy metal in general, while it sounds sort of aggressive with strong R’s and other hard consonants, which. In overall, when the type of aggressive thrash metal with mostly roaring singing style, which Stam1na is cultivating especially in the band’s latest albums “Uudet Kymmenen Käskyä” (2006) and “Raja” (2008), is concerned, the language has arguably smaller role than within more vocals-led music styles. The Stam1na name is also in line with the band’s musical concept. Stamina literally means energy, endurance, resistance, strength, and determination, which well describes the music and concert appearance of the band. The number “1” in the name has simply the meaning of making the band name more unique and differentiating the name from other bands and brands.

In addition to the unique and easily remembered name, Stam1na has built a very distinctive visual identity for its albums, for which the band is also acknowledged. They, for instance, won most of the prizes in the Finnish Metal Awards 2009, including the first prize in the album cover art category for their “Raja” album (2008). As figure 3 illustrates, the name and the tooth logo of the band are used as key signature elements. Ville Hyyrynen, graphical designer and the brother of Hyrde, has been in charge of the layout and design of the three actual Stam1na albums and related products. However, Hyrde himself has strongly influenced the visual appearance of the band by taking actively part in the design process. The strong graphical symbol, the tooth logo, is a strong signature element that the band is also consistently using in their various products. This symbol also has a specific communicative purpose. It appeared first in the cover of the “Väkivaltakunta” demo EP (2003). As Hyrde outlined in our interview, tooth is a very personal and intimate thing. In this case it is detached from its context (mouth) in a violent manner, which served well the storyline of the “Väkivaltakunta” song (translated as “Violent Empire”). By chance, the wisdom tooth of Hyrde was removed at that time, and they actually used the real photo of his tooth in the cover. The band then developed the idea further by pondering that the three roots of the tooth also represent the three establishing members in the band. The tooth next appeared as a graphical symbol in the “Stam1na” album. As summarized by Hyrde, the logo has proved very functional, while it is simple and organic and also very distinctive.



Figure.3 Stam1na album covers (from left): "Väkivaltakunta-EP" (2003), "Stam1na" (2005), "Uudet Kymmenen Käskyä" (2006) and "Raja" (2008)

## 6. Construction of the strategic intent

Finally, we outline the strategic intent of the bands in the form of four underlying constructions that have been identified in the early phase of our study. These constructions – personal ideology, heavy metal traditions and category definitions, cultural background, and competitive differentiation – seem to explain the constituents of many (Finnish) metal bands and their visual communication. These constructions will be further studied and modified as our project proceeds.

Firstly, strong **personal ideology** of the establishing member(s) and other stakeholders is the starting point and reason for existence for most bands. Personal ideology and aspirations also dictate the development of the band's musical, visual and media identity. In many cases, such as in those of Amorphis and Stam1na, personal ideology also dictates the musical and visual concepts that are created and nurtured throughout the bands' careers. Both bands have strongly stuck to the central role of the band member's in making all the central decisions concerning the band's music and related products. The artistic direction is usually in the hands of the band "leader". In Amorphis' and Stam1na, leadership is quite equally shared among the band members, but in the case of many other successful Finnish metal bands, there are strong single persons behind the band's concepts. For instance, Ville Valo of HIM, Tuomas Holopainen of Nightwish, and Alexi Laiho of Children of Bodom with their personal intent (at least to start with) all act as the main architects of defining and shaping the concepts of their bands. The reason to create and play music may range from expressing personal feelings, telling personal stories, to transmitting political, social, and other messages, or simply reflecting the idea of having fun.

Secondly, the **traditions of heavy metal** are either explicitly or implicitly carried on by most contemporary bands. In the Amorphis case, the death metal roots are still apparent, although the band has introduced the strong folk leaning and other innovative elements into their music. Stam1na, as discussed, in turn, even explicitly considers its musical elements carrying on the western metal traditions. Aforementioned other Finnish bands also often explicitly admit their connection to the genre. For example, Ville Valo of HIM often talks about Black Sabbath influences in HIM's music, and many elements in their musical and visual identity seem to continue the traditions of the genre. For instance, "Heartagram" the trademarked logo of HIM is a nice example of visual symbolism with strong references to heavy metal traditions, as it strongly denotes the "Love Metal" concept of the band by combining pentagram, the traditional heavy metal icon, with the heart symbol.

In overall, **category definitions** play an important role in the popular music discourse, and they are particularly debated within heavy metal by media and fans, and often by bands themselves. Categorization is a means to structure the band concept by building references to other bands with the same kind of music style. The number and list of sub-genres varies: two acclaimed books [1,17] characterize 20 and 30 categories, respectively, and it is easy to name a whole number of others used in the discussion of the field. Categorizations are often based on the music style (tone, speed, complexity, use of instruments, vocal style, etc), song structure and complexity, lyrics, visual identity, and so forth. In addition to those rather established genres (NWOBHM, thrash & speed, glam/hair, death, black, doom, etc.) new definitions are constantly introduced in the media. Characterizing Amorphis as “progressive death and folk metal” and Stam1na as “progressive thrash metal” gives an indication of the bands’ musical concepts, as references are drawn to the other and earlier representatives of those sub-genres. Categorization can function as useful indicators in marketing context, but while often subjective, they can also give misleading information of the bands’ true identities.

As proposed particularly by the Amorphis case, as well as a number of other Finnish metal bands, the **cultural (or national) background** of the bands seems to play an important role in defining the strategic intent behind their concepts. As commented by music researcher Pekka Hako in the context of classical music: “The strength of Finnish music lies in its originality... the roots of Finnish music go deep down into a unique national heritage. We may say without exaggeration that the national epic, the Kalevala (1835), forms the basis of all Finnish culture – including music.” [4] With strong evidence, this basis also affects many bands in the popular music field, particularly in heavy metal. The Finnish heritage and stereotypical mentality, as illustrated also in Kalevala, is often argued in the media to serve well the heavy metal symbolism [11,14].

Generally, technical talents and skillfully elaborated artistic concepts have become generally associated with music from Finland, a country with a highly developed system of music education and research [4]. Sharpe-Young [17] writes in the “Metal – The Definitive Guide” about Finnish Metal: “Over the past ten years or so, Finland ... has become awash with metal bands. And many of them are of such high quality that they have made serious inroads into the global market... The biggest acts to come out of Finland have spearheaded entirely new movements...” This statement applies to Children of Bodom, Nightwish, HIM, and Amorphis. In Finland, the cultural and national origins and background has played a major conceptual role for many bands as the band name, lyrics, visuals, and other aspects of the bands’ product include explicit or implicit reference to Finland in all our analyzed cases (e.g. in the Amorphis example).

Despite the history tracing only to the late 1980’s, Finnish Metal has also been recognized as its own phenomenon in various magazines in Europe, Japan, and US, as well as books [17]. Finnish Metal seems to be considered as an “umbrella brand” under which various bands with different music and style are positioned. The sources of uniqueness and the cultural disposition of Finnish Metal, have thus enabled **competitive differentiation** for the bands, which is a further construction addressed in our study. For Amorphis, the band’s distinctive and unique concept and its’ cultural specific meanings function as a means of differentiation and recognition building in international markets. According to Esa Holopainen, this story line seem to interest many Amorphis fans and make a difference for instance in US and Japanese markets [7].

## 7. Conclusions

In this paper, we have explored how visual signature elements are used in the music industry to support the musical concepts of the bands. In addition to the initial analysis framework, we reviewed the visual strategies used by Amorphis and Stam1na, two Finnish heavy metal bands. We described how these bands reason about their musical concepts and how the concepts are transformed into visual representations.

Our cases propose that in order to find new audiences and to get them committed, there is a need to create visually and musically distinctive concepts. Musical qualities form the core of the band's identity, but other media are needed to support the musical concept. There appears a variety of visual ingredients at bands' disposal that have a great communicative power and that can therefore be utilized to transmit the intended meanings to the audience. Designing distinctive band identities is particularly important in the current highly competitive markets. Bands and their key stakeholders (record labels, managers, promoters, and agents) are forced to consider various means through which the bands can be made to stand out from the mass.

Through the distinctive and unique concepts, as we argue, Finnish metal bands have been favorably adopted by specific audiences in international markets. Our tentative observations suggest that a considerable share of this success is based on the distinctive musical and visual concepts these bands have created and communicated. In addition to powerful individual concepts, these bands constitute a collective "Finnish metal" genre. This genre is not only tied to visual and musical traditions of heavy metal but also hold a strong foothold on the Finnish culture.

In the future, we continue our investigations of musical and visual concept creation through more case studies. We also aim to explore the perspective of the fan response by studying how Finnish bands are perceived in different market areas such as Europe, Japan and the U.S. We also attempt to apply the results to other branches of creative industries. Further, we seek possibilities to make comparisons between the creative design processes between the music industry and the fields of product and fashion design in which we are also conducting research projects.

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