



Image by: Angélica Navarro

Design Tools and Processes Prior to the Creation of a Brand.

Las herramientas y los procesos de diseño previos a la creación de una marca.

Abstract:

The aim of this article is to point out the relevance of the processes and tools prior to the design phase in the creation of a brand. To do so, we have broken down all the phases prior to the development of the visual identity, explaining the function and purpose of each of them, see: the concept map (or mindmap), the visual map (or moodboard) and the concept book. Our purpose is to emphasise the order of these, their hierarchical and cultural power and their importance in the construction of a brand's identity.

Keywords: Mind maps; visual map; moodboard; design; brand identity; concept books; branding.

Resumen:

El objetivo de este artículo es señalar la relevancia de los procesos y las herramientas previas a la fase de diseño en la creación de una marca. Para ello hemos desglosado todas las fases anteriores al desarrollo de la identidad visual, explicando la función y el objetivo de cada una de ellas, véanse: el mapa conceptual (árbol de conceptos o *mindmap*), el mapa visual (o panel de inspiración, *moodboard*) y el libro de concepto (o *concept book*). Nuestro propósito es recalcar el orden de estos, su poder jerarquizador, cultural y su transcendencia en la construcción de la identidad de una marca.

Palabras clave: Árbol de conceptos; mapa visual; *moodboard*; diseño; identidad de marca; libros de concepto; *branding*.

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1. Introduction

When we are faced with designing or redesigning a brand identity, we must take into account many different factors. It is essential to build the new brand identity on a solid foundation, which will allow us to develop the branding –that is, the process through which we create the identity of a brand– enabling its visual execution, after having used the appropriate tools to give depth to our visual proposal. To that end, we will present the different processes, systems, and tools that will allow you to visually position the identity within the market space selected for its implementation.

We will devote the first part of this article to elucidating these tools –namely, the concept map and the visual map. We will then shed light on a largely lesser-known tool in the field– concept books. These remain underexplored and often misunderstood within the field of design, often confused with sketchbooks or inspiration books, which are so common in fashion design. There is only one reference in the field of communication: the one developed in 2008 by Pete Barry, though linked to advertising. His proposal was published by Thames and Hudson under the title *The Advertising Concept Book. Think Now, Design Later: A Complete Guide to Creative Ideas, Strategies and Campaigns* (Barry, 2012). But, beyond this publication, the subject of “concept books” as tools for brand-building –what we know as branding– has rarely been explored. For this reason, we consider it relevant to explain the methodology that will allow you to use them in your professional practice.

2. Tools, systems and processes

To successfully carry out the creative processes prior to the development of a brand, each team adapts the tools to fit the following aspects: their own systems and capacities; the type of client, product, and context (conceptual, physical, economic); and the consumer, user, or fan. Design studios, consultancies, and agencies are usually reluctant to reveal their “secret formulas” to outsiders. We, however, have developed our own model, which we have been implementing and sharing for more than a decade. Our starting point is James Webb Young’s *A Technique for Producing Ideas* (1982), which we have complemented over the years with the processes of various design studios, such as Pentagram in London. Today, we know that studios such as Summa Branding, Clase BCN, and Morillas use similar techniques and tools.

In the time since the first outline, we have made adjustments, modified some parts, and eliminated others. The system is continually under review. You may adapt it to your needs and objectives –or even disregard it altogether. Next, we present an execution chart– a timeline we apply when developing commercial identities. We will then define the first two phases, which are where the environment that the brand will occupy is created, structuring its identity through a graphic system that anticipates the brand’s future needs and applications.

In the execution chart (Figure 1), we have divided the most relevant processes and tools in the construction of a brand’s identity into six blocks, and arranged in chronological order. For the first time, we introduce foundational concepts present in the first phase after receiving the client’s commission: the concept map (or mind map), the visual

map (mood board) –a tool that helps us shape and organize our ideas before formalizing the proposal– and the concept book. This last one is likely the least known and, according to our system, is the result of expanding and developing the first two: the concept map and the visual map.

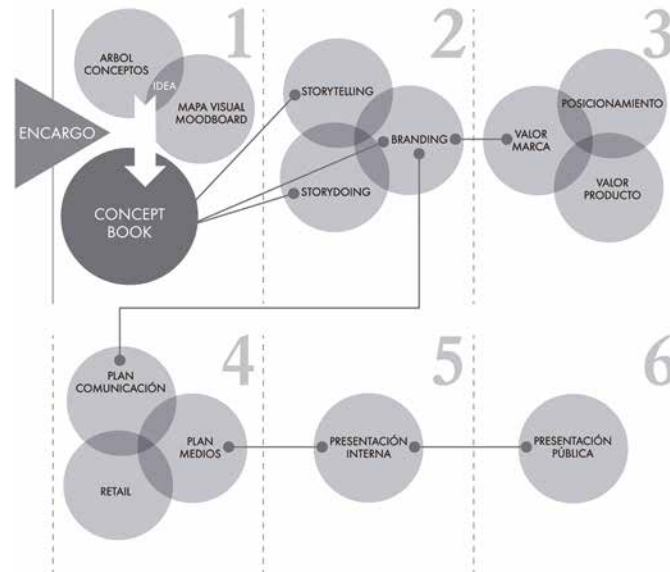


Figure 1. Phases, processes, and tools for creating a brand identity.

Source: Author (2025).

The closest equivalent to the concept book is a travel book, where we record everything that happens to us, everything we see, feel, and experience during a journey. In it, we collect photographs, museum or event tickets, newspaper clippings, brochures, wrappers, and business cards, among countless other items. We make small drawings and write down thoughts and sensations that capture the moment. We include everything that defines and recounts our journey –combining cultural, anthropological, aesthetic, historical, political, social, and economic aspects. It is our own *Grand Tour*. The notebook describes our entire experience, and constitutes a subjective and unique vision of the place we have visited. It creates a distinct identity that emerges from speculation and the subjective interpretation of the experience.

Of the many possible identities that a place can offer, the curious, observant, and attentive traveler recounts a single, specific, and unique version –distinct from those of other observer-narrators. This is the version they share with the world– first within their inner circle, and later to anyone willing to listen –publicly sharing a view of a place,

its people, habits, and customs. The travel book constructs a narrative that reflects– also in the mirror sense of the word –the “6 Ws”: why, what, who, where, when, and how. The concept book applies this same logic to build a brand identity. We will now explain how to create one, keeping in mind the travel book as a reference. Before developing the concept book, we first produce two preliminary elements: the concept map and the visual map.

2.1. The concept map

Most design students have, at some point, created a concept map to begin developing a project. The question is: how deep can we go in their conceptual interrelations? And how deeply can we push their structure and meaning? As an example of this kind of conceptual interrelation, we present two concept maps. The first one was created by design student Sílvia Vallhonrat, analyzing Boris Vian's book *Le loup-garou*, as a preliminary process for an editorial design project (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Concept map developed by Sílvia Vallhonrat Munill during the 2015-2016 academic year. Esart (Barcelona). Editorial project. Source: Author (2016).

In the second example (Figure 3), we see the concept map developed by students Luca Chemello, Alberto Hidalgo, and Manel Pla for the Lékúé brand redesign project.

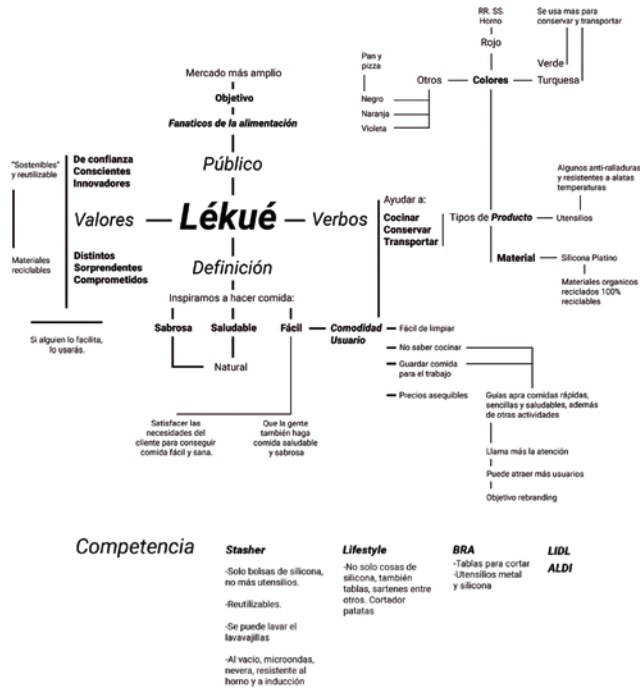


Figure 3. Concept map developed by students Luca Chemello, Alberto Hidalgo, and Manel Pla for the Lékué brand redesign project, during the 2022–2023 academic year. Elisava UVic (Barcelona).
Source: Author (2023).

2.2. The visual map

The second tool we'll refer to is the visual map. It serves as the visual counterpart to the concept map. Whereas the former uses words, the latter uses only images. From the combination of both emerges a preliminary idea that, like a storyboard, guides the initial development of the concept book. An example of this is the mood board (Figure 4), developed by Maia Díaz, Sara Mallén, Mireia Martín, and Linda Piekiewski, also for the Lékué brand redesign project.

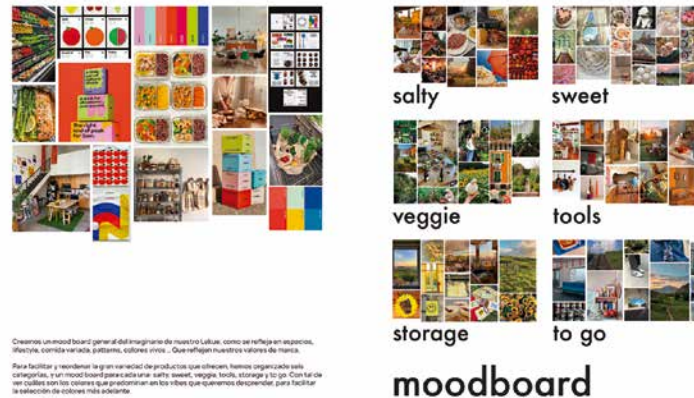


Figure 4. Mood board developed by students Maia Díaz, Sara Mallén, Mireia Martín, and Linda Piekiewicz for the Lékué brand redesign project, during the 2022–2023 academic year. Elisava UVic (Barcelona).

Source: Author (2023).

3. The concept books

What is a “concept book”? Most professionals in the field have, at some point, heard about concept books. Some of us have developed or used them, but for the most part, they remain largely unknown. A concept book is a tool through which we can build a brand from scratch, or reposition an existing one. Its function is to define the identity of the brand, product, service, or company we want to represent. To do so, it employs all the expressive resources commonly used by communicators: words (*logos*), images, color, materials, touch, sound, and smell.

In the concept book, identity is represented both verbally and visually. In a sense, it is the primordial spark from which everything else develops. The full narrative that structures identity through storytelling: “the bridge that builds the narrative links that allow the subject to identify with the models and protocols established by the storytellers” (Sallés Diego, 2023, 206). Naming –the creative process of giving the brand its name; branding, already defined in the introduction; and storydoing, the user’s experience when interacting with the brand and its products; as well as the values associated with the brand, and its future positioning– all emerge from this narrative. It influences all company departments: R&D, sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, retail, human resources, and so on. It thus establishes the strategic direction that will be implemented in the communication and media plan. It defines and selects the brand’s intrinsic values, its user, and the intimate environment in which they live and work. All this is done to create an emotional connection with the consumer through the humanization of the new commercial identity –leaving aside rational arguments and objectivity, and instead emphasizing distinctive traits and deep subjectivity.

Creating a new identity *ex novo*, or redefining an existing one, is not an easy task. Brands, products, and organizations, over time, refine their narrative –and thus their identity. The aim is to create a tailor-made world in which they can exist. That’s why the concept book answers the questions of why, what, who, how, when, and where. Besides the travel book, another possible equivalent could be a manifesto, in which the most relevant characteristics of the identity of the movement it represents –whether artistic, mythological, or political– are expressed both visually and terminologically.

Its values must be genuine and unique –this is its character, its strength, which will distinguish the new identity from its competitors. Every decision we make will influence its development and implementation. The name we choose will shape its trajectory, just as will the environment in which it unfolds. The new identity selects its symbiont through a bidirectional discourse: it seems that the receiver has a choice, but in reality, they don’t –the new identity is built to fit them, through a customized, ‘tailoring-like’ approach embedded in the concept book. This process adapts tools and methods to the specific needs of each project.

The branding expressed in the concept book is a strategic idea –far removed from the tactical communication or product marketing trends– and speaks to us of the future. It outlasts advertising campaigns, which are designed to serve a mnemonic function related to the brand or its associated products. The concept book is a long-term investment which –like any investment– can be renegotiated or adapted to its environment, but it cannot forsake its essence, which is part of the founding identity of the company, brand, product, or service. When applied to the creation of brand environments, it defines the distinguishing factor that sets it apart from competitors –placing it on a parallel, alternative path. It equips the brand with various evolutionary tools and increases its chances of success. This emotionalization transforms the brand into a living presence– capable of establishing authentic, human relationships with users and other identities. Once humanized, it interacts with other identities –whether commercial (brands) or biological (people)– on equal terms.



Figure 5. Explanatory chart of preliminary research processes.
Expansion of the first phase and its result on the second phase. Source: Author (2025).

3.1. Preliminary research

As shown in Figure 5, preliminary research is required to clarify the nature of the commission (the chart shows the expansion of phase one and its outcome in phase two). Once this is complete, we can develop the concept and visual maps, from which a concentrated idea will emerge –like the concentrated essence of a distilled perfume (Figure 8). After completing these two initial phases, we will be ready to develop the concept book, which we divide into four sections: environment, user (internal and external), aesthetics, and narrative. These blocks are interrelated like interconnected vessels.

3.2. Expression of the idea

In the section dedicated to the environment, we define –both verbally and visually– the place where this new identity will be born. Among many possibilities, we choose a country, a city, a neighborhood, a street, a house, a language (or several), thereby creating a clear point of origin, unique and distinct from other identities (Figure 5). It's not the same to reference Quito, Mexico City, Barcelona, Delft, or the island of Kyushu in Japan. Each location has distinct characteristics, and therefore, the emotions and experiences tied to the question “where” also differ. We associate each place with different customs and habits previously outlined in the concept map and fully developed in the concept book. By answering the “where,” we reveal the tangible origin of the concept we are developing, offering the user an initial anchor point for the new identity. We've all seen verbal clarifications accompanying brands such as *Made in Italy*, *From Barcelona*, or simply the city name. By tying a place to brand or product, we infuse the identity with cultural values.



Figure 6. Front and back view of the Tap'dNY bottle and the four points of the manifesto developed by Craig Zucker.

Source: http://www.packagingdesignarchive.org/archive/pack_details/2109-tapd-ny

An exaggerated example of the power of “where” is found in the brand Tap’dNY (Figure 6), which in 2008 bottled tap water from the city that never sleeps, and sold it. The idea came from Craig Zucker, who in his four-point manifesto urged his customers to “drink tap water whenever possible. Buy locally bottled water when tap is not convenient. Support NYC and our award-winning water [...] [and] always refill and recycle your bottle (it’s part of the deal).” A sleek bottle and a bold story allowed Zucker to sell cases of twenty-four Tap’dNY bottles for thirty-six dollars each, using the slogan “Free refills at 500,000 New York faucets.” The story’s entire value stemmed from the mythic aura of Manhattan.

Starting from the epicenter defined by “where,” we establish relationships with increasingly specific locations – gradually narrowing the scale from the city, to the neighborhood, to the street, and finally to the (real or metaphorical) home where our (external) user will reside.

3.3. Internal and external user

We follow the same procedure for the internal user, which leads us to define the workplace –where the product (a tangible object) or services (intangible) are created. Both locations must align in terms of values and experience. Their functions differ: the internal user develops the products or services associated with the brand (and may also consume them), while the external user consumes them (but typically cannot produce them). However, the experiences must be positive in both instances to maintain a coherent and balanced internal and external narrative –one that, under no circumstances, should contradict itself.

In the verbal and visual definition of the user (internal and external), we answer the question of “who”. As Carlos de la Guardia and Ana María Enrique (2017, 33) rightly point out, internal users (employees) have a great interest in generating brand value, as they are: “the transmitters of the brand promise, the point of contact between the customer and the brand; they are a strategic and target audience, as well as agents of change in organizations and brand advocates”. To delve deeper into the external user (the consumer), we construct their profile. We recommend choosing a well-known figure that embodies the user’s lifestyle and values. If the chosen person is unknown, we will not be able to communicate their values clearly to all the actors who will manage and implement the new identity. The reference figure may be real or fictional –a character from a novel, a TV series, or a film. Their value as a symbolic and mythological reference remains the same. They are not endorsers or opinion leaders. Through this figure, the artificial identity we are constructing is humanized, serving as a connector –via the symbol they embody– between the product and the user. We are interested in the values and experiences associated with this character, as they help us build and present the new identity. This figure acts as a guide within the concept book and does not need to be used in advertising communications. Choosing Martin Luther King Jr. as a model would result in entirely different concepts than choosing Donald Trump. These are polar opposites with conflicting symbolic and mythological charges. Though

they appear real, both figures are artificial identities –constructed from within (the subject itself) and from without (the receivers of the identity)– that together shape the myth associated with them, whether positive or negative. That is why it doesn't matter whether the reference character is real or fictional –these paths frequently intersect. In the popular imagination, the character of Charlot is more real than the actor who created him, Charles Spencer Chaplin.

3.4. Aesthetics of the environment

In the third block—the aesthetics of the environment –we also provide a verbal and visual definition. This time, the focus is on the 'what' –the objects– in order to focus on their role as actors in the identity narrative. By describing the aesthetics of a new identity, we are building its home –detailing every room and corner: the furniture, small objects, collections, artwork, appliances, clothing, and car. We open the closets and the fridge, because every object matters in shaping the identity narrative. These items serve as visual cues that reinforce the identity within a specific aesthetic boundary."

To understand the communicative power of objects, we only need to observe the prominent role they play in any television series or film –which is precisely why brands try to insert their products into narratives, aligning them with characters with whom they maintain a symbiotic relationship. The power of this bond facilitates endorsement, where a celebrity or socially relevant individual becomes a living mannequin on whom brands place their products in exchange for money or goods. Similarly, product placement is an advertising technique that involves embedding a message, product, or brand into the storyline of a film, series, or TV program.

A clear example of product placement –remarkable in this case because of its impact, though not the first (that was Hershey's Chocolate in the 1927 film *Wings* by William A. Wellman)– occurred in the 1980 film *American Gigolo*, directed by Paul Schrader and starring Richard Gere and former model Lauren Hutton. The film opens with Gere driving the iconic Mercedes Benz 450 SL, with both a summer and winter top. For nearly three minutes, the car is the protagonist, overshadowing Gere himself (Figure 7), whose character is overshadowed by the product endorsement. The first shot is of the front right wheel, cutting to a close-up of the model's signature brake lights. Then, we get an overhead front view of the Mercedes and its driver, followed by a subtle zoom into the actor's Adonic profile, ending in a wide shot of the car pulling up to a high-end clothing store in Los Angeles. There, Gere's character shops for the outfits he'll use in his profession as a high-end male escort –two-piece suits designed by Giorgio Armani.



Figure 7. Opening credits designed by Dan Perri for the film *American Gigolo*, directed by Paul Schrader in 1980. Author's montage.

Sources: <https://www.danperri.com/> and Movie Titles, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HS-L4UAmuFI>

The entire sequence unfolds to the song *Call Me*, selected for the soundtrack by Giorgio Moroder as the film's theme song. The track was co-created by him and Debbie Harry for the band Blondie in 1980. In addition to the Mercedes' iconic value, it was Paul Schrader who asked Giorgio Armani to design the character's wardrobe. As Alejandro Bernard (2018) points out, "the suits worn by Gere as he walks the streets of Los Angeles in the film captivated audiences, and Armani's clothing broke into the American market," turning Armani into "a synonym for global style." Bernard adds that Armani's success in Hollywood likely stemmed from this appearance, since "shortly after the film's release, the Italian designer's clothing appeared prominently in other cinematic productions."

Another example is the work of photographer Todd Selby, who for years has produced meticulous photo essays of the homes of unique individuals, published on his website (theselby.com). His only request is that the subjects don't change anything about their daily routines or clean more than usual. The result is a collection of authentic, character-rich images, far from the clichés and stereotypes shown in magazines, blogs, or interior design programs. Through these snapshots, we see the intimate identities of the residents, who often appear in the photos –confirming the bond between objects and identity.

3.5. Narrative associated with the brand

The final section is the narrative, where we define what this identity will represent, what concepts will represent it, and what visual language framework we will use to present it to others –based on everything we have defined in the previous sections. To formalize the commercial version of the identity– out of which storytelling, naming, branding, storydoing, and ultimately the brand itself will emerge –we present both visual and verbal representations, using elements such as typographic, chromatic, photographic, material, textural, olfactory, and auditory styles. This is the point at which the visual-aesthetic framework –used by the design teams– must be clearly articulated. Because beyond trends and fashions, as the philosopher Alain de Botton (2008, 86) points out, "even in something as small as the letters of a particular typeface, we can detect fully formed personalities –about whose lives and daydreams

we could easily write a story.” He also argues that, “contrary to the romantic belief that everyone naturally knows what beauty is, it seems our visual and emotional faculties actually require constant external guidance to help them determine what to focus on and what to appreciate” (258) –designers included. Through the resulting identity, we answer the question of why we do what we do, what makes us different, and what our manifesto is. The “when” will depend on the company’s strategic and financial planning and on all the stakeholders involved in unveiling the new identity.

Finally, we’d like to delve deeper into the concept of branding. Although we’ve referred to it repeatedly throughout this article, perhaps we haven’t highlighted its prominence strongly enough.



Figure 8. The concept of branding. Source: Author (2025).

Branding concentrates all the previous phases developed during the conception of the identity. It is a concentrated formula (Figure 8) –the essence of the product, the *poison*, in both of its possible readings: as the potent extract of a perfume, which masks our presence, or as a dangerous toxin that contaminates our identity. Branding is both a layered system and a unifying element. A reflection of the other, a promoter of affiliation and mimicry, it allows for individuality within the group –through nuance and customization– which, through personification, fosters an intimate relationship with the brand. Its power lies in the experience it delivers, activating the sensory world of the self, which triggers our cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses (Klein, 2018). Through emotional connection, branding creates groupies, fans, true brand

hooligans. This level of engagement occurs as a result of relational branding strategies, which encourage consumers to “establish a relationship with the brand and accumulate experiences that become part of their lives” (Hernández-Santaolalla & Rubio-Hernández, 2014, 44). As both authors note, it was Susan Fournier who first identified the existence of interpersonal relationships between brands and consumers in 1998. According to Fournier (1998, 346), “the relationship between the consumer and the brand is built upon a series of repeated exchanges between two parties who know each other well.” Both authors draw upon the very concepts we developed in the first part of this article, where we stated that subjects establish emotional relationships with the brands they consume. By using emotions to build connections between brands and consumers, long-lasting bonds –true love stories– are formed. Branding happens in the realm of the intangible, making it possible for intimate relationships between subject and brand to exist.

4. Conclusion

To sum up the discussion in this article, we want to underscore that the tools we have described are crucial for giving substance to a brand. Without them, we would focus exclusively on aesthetic issues, leaving aside everything that constitutes the emotional narrative associated with the brand. Through branding, these connections become intimate, promoting and encouraging immaterial, invisible, subliminal, and abstract links that enables what appears to be a two-way relationship between product and subject –always by means of and through branding. The brand acts as an active agent, just like the consumer.

Hernández-Santaolalla and Rubio-Hernández (2014, 44) stress that “acknowledging that an emotional relationship develops between a brand and a person implies that both parties agree to that relationship and establish mutual commitment,” and add that it is “a close bond formed between both parties, in which emotions, shared experiences, and a common story are key ingredients for its long-term consolidation.” Even if the relationship is hypothetically bidirectional, hierarchically it is not a horizontal one; it is not a relationship between equals, as the brand retains its power in relation to the consumer and their role as an object purchaser. The brand derives its strength through the formulas and systematized processes we have described. Nothing is left to chance–everything is premeditated. For this reason, we believe the tools we have presented here –concept maps, visual maps, and concept books– are indispensable tools for adding depth to the creation of a brand environment, what we know as *branding*. All of this enables the design team to craft a proposal tailored to the specificities and particularities of the commission at hand.

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Curricular Overview

Lluís Sallés Diego is a writer, researcher, theorist, creative copywriter, namer, lecturer, graphic designer, brand manager, and speaker. As a consultant in identity, image, and brand strategy, he has worked with both national and international companies. He is co-founder of Boixader et Salles and Bómb estrategias, and co-creator and co-director of the Creatus Dominus Festival. Sallés holds a degree in Graphic Design from Escola Massana in Barcelona, a BA in Humanities, a Master's in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, and a PhD in Literary Theory and Comparative Literature from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. He has taught at various schools and universities, and is currently a faculty member at Elisava (Escola Universitària de Disseny i Enginyeria), where he teaches in the undergraduate Design program. His courses include *Fundamentals of Graphic Design*, *Critical Theories*, *Identity and Branding*, and *Theory of Identity*. His research focuses on the construction of identity and narrativity in design.



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