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Is less more or a bore? Package design simplicity and brand perception: an application to Champagne

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ABSTRACT

Packaging design as a medium for brand communication has a strong impact on the point-of-purchase decision. Therefore, marketers need a keen understanding of how packaging design influences brand perception. Although many studies have investigated the impact of design elements like color or typeface, few have examined the impact of holistic variables like the degree of elaborateness. This study proposes to fill this gap by investigating the influence of the degree of simplicity/complexity in package design on brand perception. The topic is first investigated through a multidisciplinary approach mobilizing the fields of semiotics, art history and marketing. Then, we conduct an experiment in which three bottles of Champagne operationalizing three levels of simplicity/complexity are tested with a sample of 305 consumers. The results indicate that the simplicity/complexity of a package design has a significant impact on brand perception, with simplicity being associated with modernity, reliability, authenticity, success and sobriety and complexity with seniority, joy, imagination, charm, femininity and sophistication.

1. Introduction

Packaging design is a communication medium that strongly influences both the physical and online point-of-purchase decision (Silayoi and Speece, 2004; Wells et al., 2007; Khan, 2017). Often referred to as "the first medium of the product," its role is to attract attention, facilitate identification, contribute to differentiation, and communicate brand identity (Dano, 1996; Clement et al., 2013; Magnier and Crié, 2015). Underwood (2003) explained the importance of the communicating dimension of packaging design within the retail context. Through its experiential, functional and symbolic benefits, it contributes to developing and strengthening the relationship between the consumer and the brand. It also helps create a bond of trust and can generate a positive attitude toward the content (Underwood et al., 2001; Rossi et al., 2015; Thomas and Capelli, 2018). As a "salesman on the shelf" (Pilditch, 1972), packaging design is an integral part of commercial brand success (Lee et al., 2010), and it is therefore essential for marketers to better understand (i) how packaging design influences brand perception and (ii) which visual elements can be manipulated to communicate the desired image (Orth and Malkewitz, 2008; Limon et al., 2009).

Many studies have investigated the impact of packaging design on consumers (Rettie and Brewer, 2000; Underwood, 2003; Silayoi and Speece, 2004; Boudreaux and Palmer, 2007; Rundh, 2013; Wang, 2013; Hamlin, 2016; Salem, 2018). The majority have been experimental, studying the impact of the constitutive variables of packaging design such as color (Burke et al., 2000; Labrecque and Milne, 2012; Barchiesi et al., 2016; Lick et al., 2017; Magnier and Schoormans, 2017), shape (Folkes and Matta, 2004), typography (Doyle and Bottomley, 2004; Van Rompay and Pruyn, 2011; Velasco et al., 2014), texture (Magnier and Schoormans, 2017) and label position (Machiels and Orth, 2017). Orth and Malkewitz (2008) described these constitutive variables as design elements, and they further noted that a "design is more than the sum of its parts" according to the principles of Gestalt theory. These authors therefore recommend adopting what they call a holistic approach to study the impact of higher-order variables related to the overall aspect of packaging design.

Among the higher-order variables identified by Orth and Malkewitz, the degree of simplicity or complexity (i.e., degree of elaborateness) in packaging design is particularly interesting. Indeed, several research studies in marketing, design and semiotics suggest that the degree of simplicity or complexity in packaging design has an impact on the consumer's perception of brand image (Pracejus et al., 2006; Cavassilas, 2007; Orth et al., 2010; Pieters et al., 2010; Orth and Crouch, 2014; Thomas and Capelli, 2018). Packaging design is part of the brand elements used to express brand identity (Kotler and Keller, 2012). Similar

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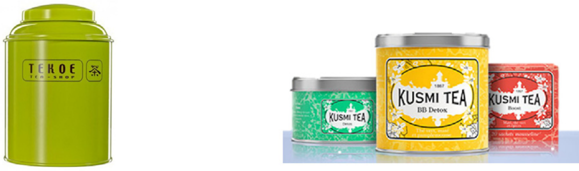
YŪLI
Baïja
KUSMI TEA

Brand of cosmetic products: Yüli

Brand of cosmetic products: Baija



Brand of tea: Tekoe

Brand of tea: Kusmi Tea

FAIR
DON PAPA
RUM

Brand of rum: Fair

Brand of rum: Don Papa

Fig. 1. Coexistence of simple and complex graphic styles across different product categories.

to the use of one color over another, the choice of a simple versus a complex design falls within the brand's plane of expression and serves to communicate different brand messages to the consumer (Cavassilas, 2007). Despite the importance of this issue, no work to our knowledge has yet explained and empirically tested the impact of the degree of simplicity or complexity in packaging design on brand perception. The current knowledge on the subject is therefore insufficient to help marketers to anticipate the consequences of choosing a simple over a complex design for their brand image, even though these two graphic styles coexist in most product categories (see Fig. 1). This paper proposes to remedy this situation by focusing on the impact of the degree of simplicity or complexity in the graphic design of Champagne labels on brand perception.

We chose to focus on Champagne for our study, as packaging design is a particularly important attribute in this product category. Indeed, Champagne is a luxury (Guy, 2007) and experiential product, the consumption of which takes on an aesthetic dimension (Charters and Pettigrew, 2006). Thus, the design of Champagne bottles and labels contributes to the consumer experience and consumer satisfaction. In addition, being a luxury product, every detail has to be particularly well-thought-out and well-presented (Beverland, 2004), notably the visual aspect of the label, the main element conveying the brand's image (Rokka, 2017). Within this product category, different types of design are present both on the shelves of retail outlets and online. Some Champagne labels include decorative elements such as arabesques and other flourishes and adopt a generally highly elaborate visual (e.g., Dom Pérignon). Others, however, use few or no flourishes or embellishments for a simple and minimalist visual (e.g., Moët & Chandon). Still others can be characterized as intermediate, with some decorative elements and some empty spaces, creating a visual that is generally not very elaborate (e.g., Krug) (Fig. 2).

In order to study the impact of the degree of simplicity or complexity on brand perception, a literature review in semiotics, art history and marketing is presented in the first part of this paper. Semiotics provides a conceptual and theoretical framework for exploring why the level of simplicity/complexity of a package design is likely to communicate specific brand values. Art history is important to identify the values historically associated with simplicity and complexity in design. The knowledge from these fields, combined with the theoretical framework provided by marketing, offers a way to identify the variables that are likely to be influenced by the degree of simplicity or complexity in packaging design and to formulate hypotheses regarding the nature of this influence.

To test these hypotheses, we carried out an experiment, presented in the second part of this paper, in which three bottles of Champagne with more or less simple or complex labels were tested with a sample of 305 consumers.

Last, the results of the experiment and the implications of the research are discussed in the third part.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Semiotics as a conceptual and theoretical framework

Semiotics can be defined as “the theory that describes the signs and studies the mechanisms by which a system of signs produces meaning” (Kehret-Ward, 1988). In the introduction, we saw that packaging design is a medium for communicating meanings about a brand to the consumer. It is therefore logical to take an interest in semiotics to understand how package designs produce meaning (Mick, 1986; Cavassilas, 2007; Ambrose and Harris, 2011; Ares et al., 2011; Oswald, 2012, 2015; Lick et al., 2017). Semiotics stems from the seminal work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (Mick, 1986). According to De Saussure (1916), signs have two facets: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the material or physical form of a sign, falling within the expression plan. The signified is the meaning or concept attached to the signifier, falling within the content plan (Chandler, 2007).

From a semiotic viewpoint, packaging design is therefore a combination of several signifiers (such as colors, typefaces, composition, etc.) that are part of the brand's expression plan. These signifiers communicate specific signifieds (i.e., meanings) to the consumers that are part of the brand's content plan. They communicate messages about the brand's personality, values, or promise (Dano, 1996).

One of the basic principles in semiotic analysis is that formal differences in the expression plan (i.e., the packaging design) produce differences in meaning in the content plan (i.e., the messages communicated about the brand) (Chandler, 2007; Toncar and Fetscherin, 2012). The work of the semiotician is therefore to identify the binary oppositions or formal contrasts that will structure the discourse of brands through packaging design. Here, it can be argued that the formal opposition of simple versus complex designs will generate differences in brand meanings. The simple or complex nature of package design can therefore be considered as a signifier communicating signifieds to the consumers about the brand. This idea has been acknowledged in the design (Lidwell et al., 2003; Heller and Vienne, 2012) and marketing (Schroeder, 2005; Pracejus et al., 2006; Mazzalovo and Darpy, 2014) literatures, although the specific signifieds that are associated with a complex versus a simple design have not been much studied. The semiotician Cavassilas (2007) explained that in many cases the meanings associated with a formal opposition in design can be found in the history of art, having been initially associated with the development of a specific art or craft technique or with a specific art movement. She therefore recommended digging into the art history literature to determine which signifieds might be associated with a specific formal opposition in matters of package design. This viewpoint is also shared in the marketing literature. Thus, Mazzalovo and Darpy (2014), Pracejus et al. (2006) and Schroeder (2005) emphasized that the categories defined by art historians should be used to classify styles of brand visual expression and to analyze the values associated with these

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