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What does your wine label mean to consumers? A semiotic investigation of Bordeaux wine visual codes

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ABSTRACT

A large body of research has shown that the graphic design of a package influences the perception of the corresponding product and brand. Marketing as well as semiotics literature have therefore acknowledged for a long time that the graphic design of a package is a critical tool for managers to use to communicate about their brands. Yet, the concern remains for managers to understand how the visual aspect of a package does indeed produce the desired meanings among consumers. More research is still needed to provide concrete guidelines on this topic, despite the several studies that have recently contributed to fill this gap.

The research presented in this article contributes to the existing body of knowledge by applying a semiotics-based approach to the Bordeaux wine category. The authors conducted content and semiotic analyses of the visual codes for Bordeaux wines. They then tested four labels representative of the Bordeaux wine category with a sample of 932 French respondents through a free-word-association task.

The results confirm that semiotic studies can anticipate most of the idea associations that a package's graphic design is likely to produce in consumers' minds. The results also demonstrate that the associations of ideas generated by package designs are stable across gender, generation, and product expertise. More important, semiotics provides an understanding of which visual attributes are likely to produce which idea associations and why. Therefore, a semiotic approach appears to be a reliable tool for managers to use to help them define their package designs according to the brand's meanings they seek to communicate to their clients.

1. Introduction

Many authors have demonstrated that the visual aspect of a package affects how the corresponding brand and product are perceived by consumers (Ares et al., 2011; Boudreaux & Palmer, 2007; Orth & Malkewitz, 2008; Pantin-Sohier, 2009; Van Rompay & Pruyn, 2011). Such an impact is notably important for food products (Ares et al., 2011; Becker, van Rompay, Schifferstein, & Galetzka, 2011; Mizutani et al., 2012; Rebollar, Lidón, Serrano, Martín, & Fernández, 2012; Sester, Dacremont, Deroy, & Valentin, 2013; Velasco, Salgado-Montejo, Marmolejo-Ramos, & Spence, 2014; Westerman et al., 2013). Thus, it has been shown that modifying package designs affects the perception of brand personality, its perceived sustainability, its perceived quality, and, consequently, consumers' willingness to pay and their purchase intent (Ares & Deliza, 2010; Garber & Hyatt, 2011; Magnier, Schoormans, & Mugge, 2016; Mueller & Szolnoki, 2010; Orth & Malkewitz, 2008; Pantin-Sohier, 2009; Steenis, van Herpen, van der Lans, Ligthart, & van Trijp, 2017; Westerman et al., 2013). In the specific case of food products, modifying the package design can also affect

taste expectations and perception of naturalness and healthiness (Becker et al., 2011; Garber, Hyatt, & Starr, 2000; Guichard & Muratore, 2011; Magnier et al., 2016; Mizutani et al., 2010; Piqueras-Fiszman & Spence, 2011, 2015). Based on these findings, it can be stated that package design is a critical tool for marketers to use to communicate about their brands and products (Underwood, 2003; Underwood & Klein, 2002; Underwood & Ozanne, 1998). It gives them the opportunity to communicate to their clients the positioning of their brand and even suggest a specific taste for a food product.

Acknowledging these facts, several studies have been conducted to understand how the visual aspect of a package communicates meanings and influences the consumer product perception (Ares et al., 2011; Orth & Malkewitz, 2008; Pantin-Sohier, 2009; Velasco et al., 2014; Westerman et al., 2013). These studies help build a theoretical basis that is likely to provide concrete guidelines to brand managers and help them to define the visual aspect of their package according to the messages they want to deliver to their audience.

Many researchers (Ares et al., 2011; Bobrie, 2009–2013; Cavassilas, 2007; Dano, 1996; Gollety & Guichard, 2011; Guichard & Muratore,

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2011; Jeanneret & Souchier, 1999; Piqueras-Fizman, Ares, & Varela, 2011; Smith, Møgelvang-Hansen, & Hyldig, 2010; Spinelli, Masi, Dinnella, Zoboli, & Monteleone, 2014; Spinelli, Masi, Zoboli, Prescott, & Monteleone, 2015) have shown the interest of semiotics to fulfill this aim. Semiotics grew out of the seminal works of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (Mick, 1986). It can be defined succinctly as “the theory which describes and analyses the mechanism by means of which a sign system produces meaning” (Kehret-ward, 1988). Since the works of Barthes (1964a, 1964b), semiotics has been notably used to study the phenomenon of visual communication in a commercial context, a field of investigation that has then been developed by many other researchers, such as Cavassilas (2007), Floch (2000, 2001), McQuarrie and Mick (2011) and Oswald (2012, 2015). It therefore provides a conceptual and theoretical framework that offers an understanding of how the visual aspect of a package generates meaning for consumers.

However, several criticisms have been addressed at semiotic studies, specifically, that they are too centered on the analysis of communication materials (text-centered approach) and not enough on their actual reception (Mick, Burroughs, Hetzel, & Brannen, 2004). The purpose of such analyses is to identify the possible interpretations of the text that may or may not be “actualised” by readers. For this reason, a semiotic analysis is supposed to be much wider than the interpretation that people actually make. Yet, some researchers point to the fact that such analyses present the risk of being subjective and could be disconnected from what common people would derive (Schröder, 1994; Tissier-Desbordes, 2004). Therefore, several researchers have called for a “semiotics of reception” and have encouraged the development of research in which the conclusions of semiotic studies are put up against consumer perception (Hetzel & Marion, 1993; McQuarrie & Mick, 2011; Mick et al., 2004; Tissier-Desbordes, 2004).

Ares et al. (2011) and Piqueras-Fizman et al. (2011) precisely followed this direction of research. They first identified the visual codes of a specific product category through an inventory of packages available on the market. Then they interpreted the meanings associated with these codes through a semiotic study. The final step included an experiment in which several packages using the visual codes previously identified were tested with consumers through a free-word-association task. The results indicate that using semiotic analysis is a good way to anticipate consumer idea associations generated by a visual element. Thus, semiotic studies appear to be a relevant tool for marketers to guide them in the design of their package or logo. Yet, the empirical verification of the conclusions of the semiotic studies is not vain. It enables the comparison of designer communication intent and consumer reception (Crilly, Good, Matravers, & Clarkson, 2008; Crilly, Moultrie, & Clarkson, 2004; Mick et al., 2004), the opportunity to observe and comment on possible differences, and to develop a deeper knowledge of visual communication phenomena by studying how the individual characteristics of consumers affect their understanding of the package’s visual aspect. For instance, Ares et al. (2011) studied the impact of consumer cultural background by comparing the perception of respondents from Spain and Uruguay. Piqueras-Fizman et al. (2011) studied the impact of consumer age by comparing the perception of respondents under 35 years old with the perception of respondents over 65 years old, suggesting that different generations would have different perceptions regarding package designs.

This approach presents several advantages. First, the empirical results could be explained in the light of semiotics literature. It is thus possible not only to observe an impact of a visual attribute on the consumer perception but also to understand why such visual attributes of the package may produce one or another set of specific meanings. Second, this approach enables taking into consideration the package’s visual attributes separately (e.g., colors, typography, forms, illustrations, materials, etc.) and the overall aspect of the package (i.e., variables related to its holistic perception: overall visual level of complexity or simplicity or novelty or typicality, level of congruency among the

different visual attributes, equilibrium of the composition, hierarchy among the different elements, etc.). Finally, because the perception of the package is tested through a free-word-association task, the results are less likely to be constrained by a specific set of dimensions and items included in a preexisting scale (such as the brand personality scale, for instance). The idea associations generated by the package design are thus less likely to be determined by the tool that is supposed to collect them.

However, this approach suffers a lack of replication. The two studies of Ares et al. (2011) and Piqueras-Fizman et al. (2011) used the same experiment materials and analyzed the visual codes of the same category (yogurt packages). Additionally, the sample of respondents for both studies was relatively small: 202 respondents for Ares et al. (2011) and 101 respondents for Piqueras-Fizman et al. (2011), therefore limiting the possibilities to test the moderating impact of individuals’ characteristics.

This study aims to contribute to this body of knowledge by applying this methodological approach to a new product category—wines of the Bordeaux region—with a larger sample of respondents. The objective is triple. First, we aim to extend the results of Ares et al. (2011) and Piqueras-Fizman et al. (2011) by verifying—for a different product category—whether a semiotic analysis can give us the opportunity to anticipate the association of ideas that a package design is likely to generate among consumers. Second, we aim to add to the existing body of knowledge about package design visual communication by studying the meanings of different visual codes relative to a different product category (Bordeaux wine instead of yogurt). Third, we aim to extend our comprehension about how consumers’ individual characteristics affect the understanding of the tested packages. Indeed, although some researchers have found stable associations of ideas resulting from different package designs across individuals (Ampuero & Vila, 2006; Ares et al., 2011; Parise & Spence, 2012; Piqueras-Fizman, Velasco, & Spence, 2012), others suggest that the perception of package design may be influenced by consumer’s individual characteristics.

This idea is especially interesting to investigate regarding the perception of wine packaging according to gender. Indeed, although some authors found a similar representation of wine in women and men (Simonnet-Toussaint, Lecigne, & Keller, 2005), others found differences in behaviors and attitudes (Barber, 2009; Thach, 2012), indicating that men and women may share different references relative to wine and therefore could interpret differently labels design.

Piqueras-Fizman et al. (2011), then, make the hypothesis that consumers from different age groups may interpret package designs differently because “they share different past experiences and traditions that might shape their present conventions.” In the specific case of wine, contradictory results have been found. When Mueller, Renaud, and Chabin (2011) didn’t find any cohort effect on wine choice and behavior, Lorey and colleagues supported such an idea (Lorey & Albouy, 2015; Lorey & Poutet, 2011). These authors built on the generational segmentation proposed by Excousseau (2000) – “heritage” (born before 1945), “baby boomers” (1945–1970), “X” (1970–1980), and “Y” (born after 1980) – and found that the social representation of wine changes across these generational cohorts. Therefore, extending the work of Piqueras-Fizman et al. (2011) through studying whether generations, rather than age, affect package perceptions makes sense. According to Excousseau (2000), there is indeed “a coherence among generations, a solidity of its own and consequently a kind of different and collective personality.”

Finally, Alba and Hutchinson (1987) explain that consumers differ in terms of product expertise. Consumers with greater product expertise present more detailed cognitive structures with a greater number of instances in memory. They process new stimuli more easily and have developed different beliefs relative to the product category compared to non-experts. For these reasons, it could be expected that the same package could generate different associations of ideas depending on the consumer’s expertise in the category. In the specific case of wine, this

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