VISUAL RECOGNITION WRAPPED: STUDENT EXPLORATIONS OF PRODUCT PACKAGES AS BRAND MESSENGERS

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ABSTRACT
Design for visual brand recognition is of increasing strategic importance for companies. Specific focus is often on product packages that have strong communicative power. The package is used to inform about the product it covers or supports, to point out specific product qualities and, in specific, to create unique brand experience. In design education, new practical approaches are needed to engage students in exploring the possibilities of visual brand building and creating communicative and distinctive package solutions. In this paper, a student project is described and discussed to illustrate how package design can be approached from a brand communication perspective in the educational context. In addition to the overall description of the project and its phases, we briefly discuss one of the cases more in detail. In this case, a student group analyzed premium chocolate brands and developed a new fictive brand in this category by paying specific attention to the communicative qualities of the product package. We found that such a practical approach towards brands and their diverse aesthetic and symbolic qualities can provide a fruitful learning experience for design students.

Keywords: Brand identity, package design, design education

1   INTRODUCTION

Creating visual brand recognition through distinctive design features is considered strategically important for an increasing number of companies. In many product categories, product package is often focused as the key marketing element of the product, and the first contact point between product and customer. In the case of low-involvement products, the package is often the sole ingredient of brand building. Many of these daily consumer products are bought frequently and with a minimum of thought and effort. But package also takes the role of a messenger in several high-involvement product categories, i.e. products that require a considerable cognitive effort from the customer before the purchase decision. In the latter case, the package can be used to point out specific product qualities and to reinforce the unique brand experience.

The growing interest towards package as a strategic brand medium sets new challenges not only for companies and practitioners but also for design education. New practical approaches are needed through which students can explore the possibilities of visual brand building and try out practical means to create communicative and distinctive package solutions. In this paper, a student project is described and discussed in which various approaches were applied to analyze and design product packages from a brand communication perspective. This student case illustrates one way of teaching the complex nature of package design, which we believe is a relevant example for many design educators working in the area of strategic design and brand communication.

2   PACKAGE DESIGN AS VISUAL BRAND COMMUNICATION MEDIA

Over the past few years, interest towards package design has been growing in practice and academia. Package design is generally understood as the visual appearance of a product package and having two basic components, graphics and structure [1]. The recent development of consumption culture towards a more comprehensive "dream society" [2] and "experience economy" [3] and even beyond, have brought along more multifaceted and holistic interpretations of the product concept. Product success is increasingly dependent on the positive meanings and associations communicated by the brand [4], [5]. Expressive package designs are deployed to support the marketing communications and the brand

strategies of consumer products [6], [7], [8]. Underwood [9] argues that package communicates brand personality via multiple structural and visual elements and suggests that package is an essential brand communication vehicle. Also later studies [10], [11], [12], [13], [14] emphasize the role of packaging in marketing and brand communication.

It is generally accepted that the visual aspects of a product or its package have the most crucial role on the consumer decision at the point of purchase [8], [11], [15]. Colour is recognized to be the most powerful one of the package design elements (in comparison with shape and graphics). Colours help buyers to categorize products and recognize brands. Brand colours attract attention, evoke aesthetic response, and convey meanings on the product and product class [12], [16]. In addition to colours, a good package design must find the right balance between verbal and visual elements [17], graphic variables [10], and pictures [18], [19]. Such a holistic view on package as a brand medium, and emphasis on the branded experience through package design, needs to be addressed not only in the industry but also in educational contexts where new designers and marketers are being taught.

To highlight the importance of package design for branding, a student group project was initiated in autumn 2009: *Brand identity analysis + creation of a new fictive brand and design of a package product*. The project was part of the annual course of Visual Brand Identity and Product Design in the Industrial Design Engineering Master Program at Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg, Sweden. The goal of the course was to provide students with an understanding of the role and aspects of brand creation and management through visual design features. Specific emphasis was put on aesthetic and symbolic product package qualities that can be used to support and communicate the visual identity of brands. The course was organized around a series of lectures and a design project. In the lectures, students were introduced to a range of design and branding theories, which were complemented with practical insights from high-level professionals from industry. In the group project, students applied the material introduced in the course in the analysis of existing brands and their product package. The outcome of the analyses was further used as a starting point for designing and branding new products and their packages.

3   PROJECT OVERVIEW

In the project, nine groups of 4-5 students worked with nine different package products, each group within one product category. Both low-involvement and high-involvement products were included in the assortment. The project involved two major parts. First, the student groups analyzed the visual communication features of two existing brands in their respective categories. Secondly, they created a new fictive brand for this category and designed a product package (and product in some cases) for this brand (see Figure 1).

3.1 Brand analysis

For analysis, the groups received some recommendations the two brands from the project instructors, but they had a freedom to select also other brands in the respective product category that they saw interesting from the design points of view. The address the two main dimensions:

1) *What does the brand and their products stand for?* What are the brand's core values and brand essence by which the brands are recognized and differentiated from competitors? How is the brand positioned against its major competitors? What are the main visual identity elements of the brand? How does the brand define their target customer group/s? Do the packages address them? What is the role of heritage for brand identity?)

2) *How is the brand's strategy reflected in (visual) product and package design?* How do the brands define their product identity and how is this identity visible in their products and packages? What design features constitute the brand's visual product identity, concerning explicit and implicit cues? How does the package support the product design and the brand's identity, in terms of value-based and arbitrary design cues? What is the role of the brands' design history in their current strategies?

Material for the analysis was acquired through publicly available resources, such as the Internet, companies' brochures, magazines, literature, shops, fairs, adds etc. In addition to the frameworks and methods presented during the course, students were encouraged to be innovative and develop their own methods or to further develop the introduced methods and run additional studies when needed.
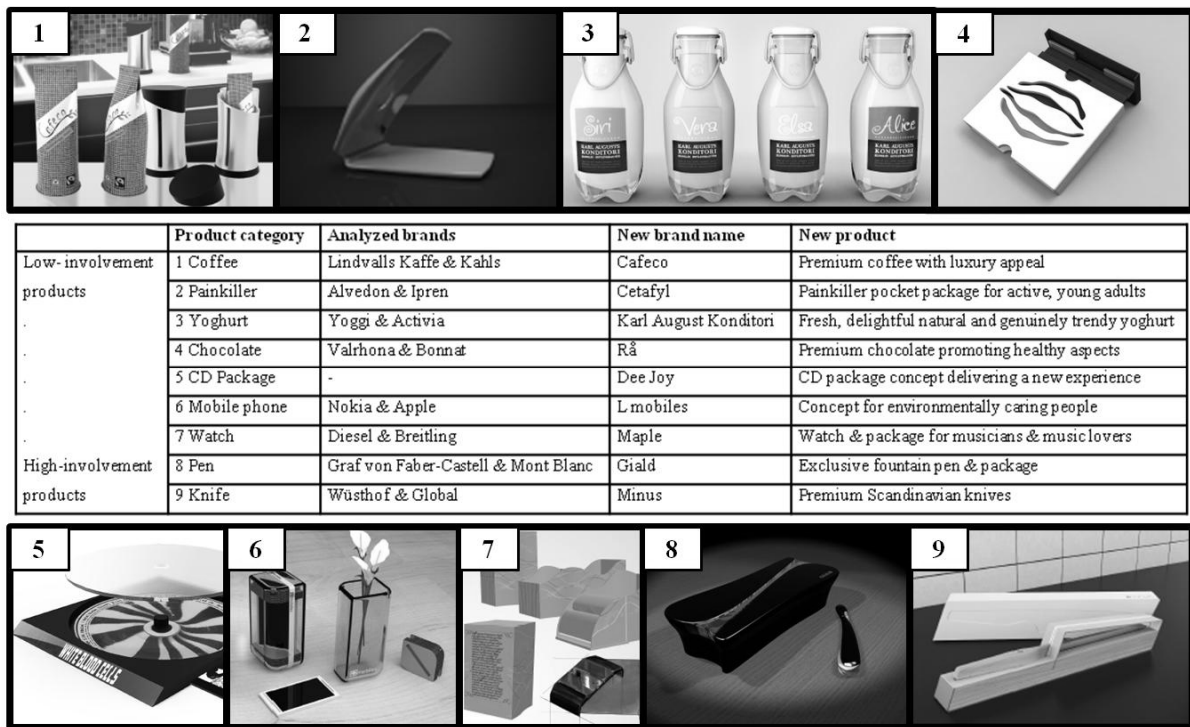
	Product category	Analyzed brands	New brand name	New product
Low- involvement products	1 Coffee	Lindvalls Kaffe & Kahls	Cafeco	Premium coffee with luxury appeal
.	2 Painkiller	Alvedon & Ipren	Cetafyl	Painkiller pocket package for active, young adults
.	3 Yoghurt	Yoggi & Activia	Karl August Konditori	Fresh, delightful natural and genuinely trendy yoghurt
.	4 Chocolate	Valrhona & Bonnat	Rå	Premium chocolate promoting healthy aspects
.	5 CD Package	-	Dee Joy	CD package concept delivering a new experience
.	6 Mobile phone	Nokia & Apple	L mobiles	Concept for environmentally caring people
.	7 Watch	Diesel & Breitling	Maple	Watch & package for musicians & music lovers
High-involvement products	8 Pen	Graf von Faber-Castell & Mont Blanc	Giald	Exclusive fountain pen & package
	9 Knife	Wüsthof & Global	Minus	Premium Scandinavian knives

Figure 1. Products and brands analyzed and created in the project

3.2 New brand creation and package design

On the basis of their analyses, students were asked to create a new fictive brand and product package that would be distinctive in visual terms and clearly differentiated from the two analyzed brands. The key issues addressed in this part were the following.

1) *Creating a new brand and a believable story for it*: naming the brand, formulating the brand strategy (brand essence, positioning, target customers, mission, and vision), and defining the visual design philosophy for the brand.

2) *Designing a new product package for the new brand*, paying specific attention to those design features in their package that are supposed to support the core values of their newly invented brands. The package design should imply a strong differentiating concept that supports the underlying brand story. In addition to specific brand communication features, the groups were asked to nurture a specific focus on good functionality of the package. Furthermore, recommendable focus was on package types that are innovative yet realistic and manageable in terms of complexity.

The projects were presented in a classroom seminar in various different visual formats. In addition, written project reports were compiled. The examination was based on the quality and consistency of the presentations and the reports. The originality and creative impact of the new brand and product package design were also assessed, as well as the quality of the overall appearance of the work and of the process management.

4 PROJECT EXAMPLE: PREMIUM CHOCOLATE BY "RÅ"

Out of the nine student projects, one is next selected for a closer review. This case of premium chocolate serves as an illustrative example of effective package design for branding. In this product area, many brands have a long history and take strong pride in manufacturing high-quality products for demanding customers. Even though the quality and ingredients of the chocolate itself seems essential, product package is used as a strong key communication and differentiation media between brands.

4.1 Brand identity of Valrhona and Bonnet

To explore the essence of premium chocolate and it's branding, the group started the project with a study of the premium chocolate brands in the market. They conducted investigations through Internet and magazine searches as well as expert interviews. From the position map of the brands (organised in accordance to the two polar qualities; common vs. unique and low-end vs. high-end), the group chose two French brands, Bonnat and Valrhona, for a closer analysis. These two brands emerged as an interesting pair for comparisons. Bonnat represents old family business, which is reflected in their friendly and old-fashioned package design. Valhrona, in turn, is quite modern in its appearance. Both

brands are market leader in their categories, even having their own brand stores in many cities to educate customers in the use of fine chocolate. In the analysis of the product design, and its relation to the identities of the two brands, students used various methods such as Design Format Analysis (DFA) [20], [21] and Semantic Differential (SD) [22], [23] (see examples in Figure 2).
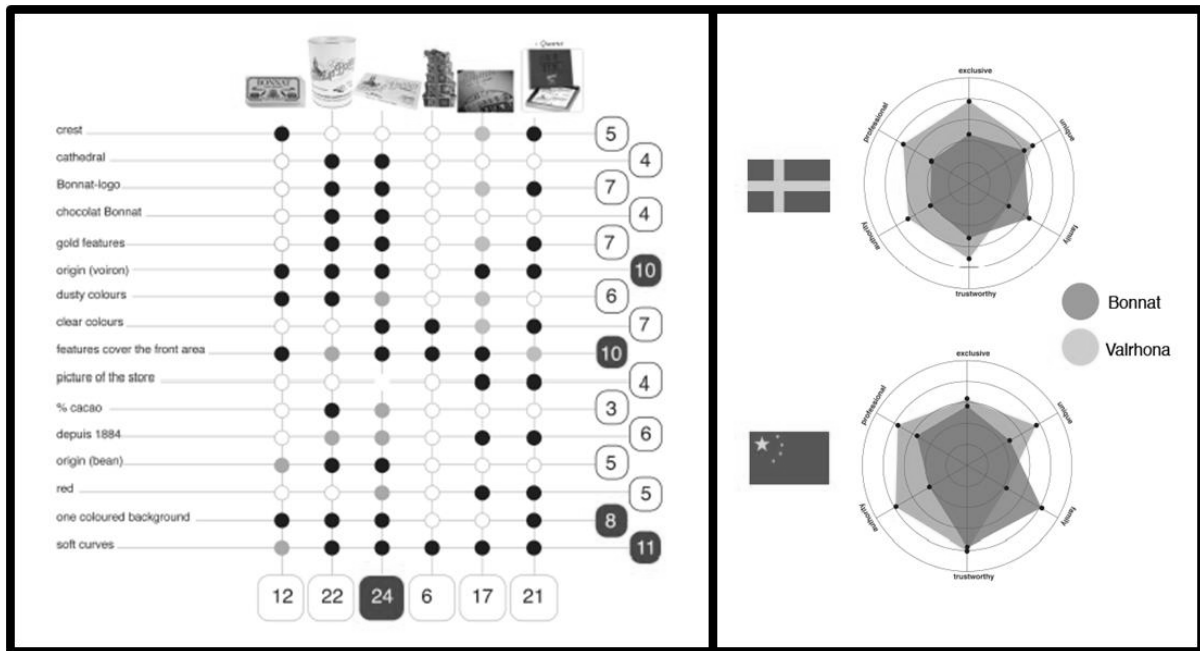

Figure 2. Example of analysis methods: DFA (left) and Semantic differential (right)

DFA implies a systematic analysis of a wider product portfolio to trace the brand-specific design cues and to map the occurrence of different design features in the product/package of the brand. SD is a useful tool in investigating the perceived appearance of brands and products/packages in terms of quality characteristics. To evaluate the brand further, the group also organised a focus group study in which the Repertory Grid method [24] and free association techniques were used to define the profiles of Bonnat and Valrhona among different user groups. As a result, the group found out that the design identities correspond to a large extent to how their package designs were perceived on the market. Bonnat's visual identity reflects the brand's position in the low-end/unique quadrant, and Valrhona clearly represented the high-end/common category of premium chocolates.

4.2 Basis for the "Rå" brand

On the basis of the brand analyses and a wider positioning study among the premium chocolate brands, the basic idea for a new brand came up. In defining the brand essence, various verbal and visual methods were used (see Figure 3). The group worked on defining a clear statement of who should eat this specific chocolate, and why and when. The core essence, the aspirational mindset, the interaction with the product package and the emotional function were considered in depth. The brand, named "Rå" (meaning "raw" in English), was particularly targeted for young active adults.

Figure 3. Example brand definition (left, persona description (middle) and logo development (right), the final logo on the bottom

The brand Rå should promote the health aspects of premium chocolate and its nature as a source of energy. Moreover, Rå customers should feel unique when purchasing and consuming the product. The product should also evoke curiosity in the marketplace. "Empowering, Confidence, and Curiosity" were defined as the brand's core values to be reflected not only in the chocolate quality but also in the visual appearance of the Rå product package. To reflect the Rå brand ideas, the package should be easy to open and close ("four times a day"), and pique consumers' curiosity.

4.3 Rå package design

The visual analyses of reference products resulted in an innovative package solution (see Figure 4). The intention was to depart from the traditional appearance of package in the premium chocolate category, for instance by avoiding the typical black colour. Instead, the group decided for a scheme of glossy white combined with exotic purple to create a fresh feeling. The connection to the raw material of cocoa, an important link in premium chocolates, was made apparent by using a styled figure of the cocoa bean on the top. The Rå brand name together with the white clean surface is also representing the Scandinavian origin of the brand. In overall, the distinctive package design aims to communicate that the brand is an exciting newcomer in the chocolate category. In addition its prominent visual appearance, the package presents a structure that certainly creates curiosity among users. The two parts structure gives the product a different look when closed, opened and placed in different positions. Since the package is also very functional, it represents the Scandinavian design heritage of the brand and exclusiveness at the same time. To create attention and market the new brand, the group also designed a "pop-up brand store" that appears in selected cities in a surprising manner and stays in the spot for a limited time only. The store and its various extra services are designed in the same style as the package.

Figure 4. Example of inspiration board (top left), concept sketches (top right), final Rå product (bottom left), and Rå "Pop-Up Store"

5 FINAL REMARKS

In this paper, we have presented a brief overview of a useful approach for teaching the integration of design and branding in design and marketing coursework. In this and similar projects, we have found that such a practical approach towards brands and their diverse aesthetic and symbolic qualities can provide a fruitful learning experience for design students. According to their feedback and course evaluations, the students have found the project rewarding and motivating, albeit also challenging and time consuming. Analytical and practical approaches are needed, in particular, when new ways are sought to explore the perceptual and experiential aspects of product package on a deeper level. Furthermore, this project was successful in highlighting the multifaceted functions of product package

in both low- and high-involvement product categories. A good package design is not only a nicely decorated surface to draw attention, but it also must meet the functional and informational requirements at the point of purchase, as well as during transportation, storage, use and disposal. By integrating different functions into a holistic experience, the package serves as a crucial interface between the brand and the user.

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