

**Advertisements for German Wine:
A semiotic approach to the symbolic meaning of wine consumption**

Topic area:

Wine media and public relations

Keywords:

Wine advertising, symbolic consumption, semiotics

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Abstract:

Wine is open to diverse, complex consumption habits and symbolism. Especially, young and low involved people tend to perceive wine consumption as offish and elite. Indeed, insights from sociological, ethnological and anthropological sources second this. However, it is so far unclear if and how the wine industry itself fosters this image. Print advertisements, as the primary means of promotion in the wine industry, may add significantly to the perception of wine. This paper discusses the development of and the images communicated by German wine advertisements presented in public as well as in special interest magazines. A sample of 1046 advertisements was collected from two German special interest magazines from the years 1995, 2000 and 2004/2005. This sample was used to quantitatively analyse the advertising environment. The major contribution of this paper, however, is the semiotic analysis of 34 advertisements for German wine. The quantitative assessment shows that, for the two publications considered, the number of wine advertisements is generally declining. However, the number of German wine advertisements is falling faster than those of other nations. The semiotic analysis identifies the major categories (1) prestige, (2) sophisticated and (3) emotional hedonism, (4) tradition/production/heritage, (5) knowledge and (6) emotion. The majority of advertisements emphasised prestigious, sophisticated images of wine consumption, supporting the already apparent symbolism. Seven representative cases are presented. This concentration on a certain image might cause consumers to develop a generic image of wine consumption rather than clear brand perceptions of particular companies, regions or nations..

Acknowledgements

The author thankfully acknowledges the support of Prof. Dr. Ruth Fleuchaus from Heilbronn University during the project as well as the helpful and supportive feedback of Dr. Angela Tregear, Dr. Stephanie O'Donohoe and the proof reading done by Sarah Marshall all from the University of Edinburgh Management School and Economics. Acknowledgements also go to two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments.

Introduction

Advertising, independent from the product category, is aimed at long-term value and brand personality building. Generally, the fragmented nature of the wine industry, as a whole and particularly in Germany, impedes large-scale campaigns with enormous budgets. Thus, print advertisements are a common marketing tool for wineries, and even more so for regional or national wine institutions, to promote their products. The paper will show that wine and wine consumption are situated in a complex social frame. People tend to connect wine with connoisseurship and often with certain elite values. Seemingly, the bulk of the advertising used in the wine industry tries to emphasise these notions and thereby aims to separate the product from other alcoholic beverages. The present paper will look into this notion and discuss its usefulness.

The approach taken for this paper is grounded in the social frame surrounding wine and wine consumption. Based on the concept of symbolic consumption, the researcher will discuss the social implications of wine as a product as well as of wine consumption. The gained insights will set the frame for the analysis of a sample of wine advertisements from German magazines. This analysis utilises a systematic semiotic approach analysing and interpreting the advertisements in a denotation and connotation framework.

The objective of this paper is to identify if and how traditional social and symbolic meanings are communicated by German wine advertisements over a period of ten years. Equally, it wants to introduce semiotics as a research method into wine marketing research as a means to discern social and cultural symbols within the consumption and perception process of wine.

Development and background of German wine advertisements

An initial overview of German wine advertisements in public as well as in special interest journals found that more often than not the advertisements are not created by a single winery or cooperation, but rather by either a national or regional institution. Most often, especially in public magazines, one finds advertisements created by the DWI (German Wine Institute), Rheinhessen-Wein, or Pfälzer-Wein (both regional wine councils). This leads to various problems. Firstly, the recipient may not recognize these generic advertisements as promoting a certain, well defined type of wine, but rather wine in general. Secondly, due to the necessary consensus such campaigns always have to face constraints in terms of uniqueness and a high probability of emphasising a generic image. Therefore, it is interesting to find out if there are differences in the communication strategy for German wine or if all stakeholders more or less stick to a small set of generic messages, thus fostering a certain image of wine and its consumption.

Wine and wine consumption in the light of social and symbolic behaviour

In general consumer behaviour research, there exists a broad stream of literature discussing the social and symbolic sphere of consumption. (e.g. Belk, Bahn, & Mayer, 1982; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Levy, 1959, 1994; Levy & Rook, 1999) For the case of wine and its consumption there is only scarce literature available within wine marketing domain. For instance, Charters (2006) presents a comprehensive historic review of the numerous symbolic values that have been connected to wine and its consumption delivering a broad basis for a more symbolically oriented discussion of wine consumer behaviour. However, most papers in the field only broadly mention the social constraints surrounding wine (e.g. Fattorini, 1994; Gardner, 1999), sometimes especially related to guests and acquaintances (Thompson & Vourvachis, 1995). Groves et al. (2000) draw upon Holt's typology of consumption (they use the term taxonomy). They discuss wine consumption and its special sphere of social interaction in Western society. Indeed, wine just as baseball used in Holt's original example

offers manifold opportunities to interact with the object as well as with each other. Thus, wine consumption can be a purely autotelic experience in evaluating and accounting for the quality of wine within the appreciation of the art of wine making. People can engage in play while communicating and socialising through wine consumption. They use it as a means to integrate in the sense of assimilating into an exclusive community – wine enthusiasts. Consumers also may get involved in the process of production either by making their own wine or by broadening their knowledge and engaging in wine-maker bonhomie. They widely personalise their tasting practices and construct their own reference schemata. Moreover, wine consumer can classify themselves through objects or knowledge. Consequently, wine and its consumption not only bear manifold symbolic traits, but are also a highly emotional issue – just as sports.

In order to get a deeper insight into the more constructivistic perspective towards wine, one has to consult anthropological or ethnographical papers predominantly stemming from the social sciences. On the basis of numerous papers published about alcoholic beverage consumption in this area (for an overview see Heath, 2003), it becomes obvious that most symbolic values surrounding wine stem from its alcohol content. Alcoholic beverages of any kind refer to many social concepts ranging from very positive perspectives as social lubricant to extreme negative thoughts related to addiction and misuse. Leaving the original field of classic marketing and entering into the ethnographic literature, de Garine (2001) briefly summarises the development of studies in terms of alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinking. He constructs four broad categories in which drinking alcohol is seen today: (1) pleasure induced, mild inebriation during social gatherings; (2) permanent, everyday alcoholisation where mild tipsiness is accepted, but intoxication is frowned upon; (3) binge drinking; and (4) despair drinking, deliberately seeking intoxication to flee from life. Wine, however, is most commonly related to the first category. Sometimes, especially in the case of the (former) French culture, it is also associated with the second one. Moreover, also coming from an anthropologic perspective, Demossier (2005) notes that “wine has increasingly become a noble drink and a sign of ‘distinction’.” (p. 133; original quotation marks)

Demossier’s work has been most influential in this area of research. Based on her initial work on people in the wine region Burgundy (Demossier, 1999) and inspired by anthropological and constructivistic approaches, Demossier (2005) has conducted a ten year participant observation of wine culture in France. She interprets wine consumption as an identity building activity pointing out that wine drinking has separated from the meal and has become an entity in itself. Wine knowledge transmits power hierarchies as does the understanding of foods and drinks as pleasure activity in the sense of Bourdieu (1986). “Drinking has become a marker for an increasing social differentiation”. (Demossier, 2005, p. 141) In the same vein, Demossier (2004) points out that wine choice and drinking behaviour are, in spite of a growing convergence of consumption patterns, still largely driven by cultural backgrounds and norms. She also enforces the relationship between eating out and wine choice, requiring cultural and objective background knowledge. “Matching food and wine remains above all the privilege of the gourmet and the gastronome.” (p. 100) Thus, she distinguishes two basic types of consumers – high vs. low cultural resources. The latter she describes as not fearful of mass consumption, whereas the first group in her eyes construct “what they perceive to be a unique, original style through consumption of objects.” (p.103)

Within the marketing context this may lead to certain problems. As also evident in the research by Thach and Olsen (2006), especially young or unsure consumers, who are crucial for the future development of wine consumption, may perceive it as elite and offish. So the

question arises if and how wine advertising seconds and strengthens this image of wine in the long-term perception of the consumer.

Semiotics and advertising analysis

Semiotic analysis offers a powerful tool to explore these different layers. It bases on the works of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles S. Peirce who independently at the beginning of the 20th century investigated the relationship of signs and their meanings. Since then the method of semiotics has been widely applied in numerous research fields. (for comprehensive overviews see Lagopoulos, Gottdiener, & Boklund-Lagopoulou, 2003; Nöth, 2000) As this study is based within the field of advertising research we shall further only discuss the literature relevant to this extent.

In general, one can distinguish two major streams of semiotic advertising discourse. On the one hand we find myth-constructing approaches. (Barthes, 1957; Goffman, 1979; Williamson, 1978) Most commonly these authors tend to approach advertisement from a social perspective. They try to shed light on the underpinning constructs used by marketers to persuade potential consumers. The more marketing-oriented literature in this myth-driven stream also attempts to discover these underlying or hidden messages, however, their intent is rather to identify ways of enhancing advertising effectiveness. (e.g. Beasley & Danesi, 2002; Danesi, 1995, 2002) These approaches have been widely criticised for their reliance on the interpreter's skills and the fact that the meaning of advertisements strongly depends on the recipient's context (Mick & Buhl, 1992) and cannot be fully generalised. Moreover, difficulties arise from the fact that this approach more often than not draws on archaic impulses employing "idiosyncrasies of dining and dressing, sex roles, puberty and adolescence." (Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1986, p. 165) Not only might we be able to detect such references in almost any advertisement, but even more so it seems instead to be crucial to concentrate on the social constructs that are transferred by advertisement reflecting, anticipating and constructing consumption habits and experiences.. Or in the words of Goldman and Papson: "ads [rather] ask us to choose and construct our identities out of our consumption choices." (1996, p. 6)

On the other hand, there is a second stream of semiotic advertising discourse employing more systematic approaches. (Chapman, 1986; Leiss et al., 1986; Leymore, 1975; Wernick, 1991) These approaches also draw on the basic semiotic constructs describing the relationships between object, sign and interpretant (Peirce); sign (composed of signifier plus signified) and the process of signification creating an external reality of meaning (cf. Fiske, 1990); or Barthes three layers: (1) A verbal message, usually the text. The picture divides into (2) an iconic part showing the product itself (denotation) as well as (3) a connotative part implying the image connected to the product. (cf. Forceville, 1996) Leiss et al. summarise this as follows: "In advertising, the creators of messages try to turn signifiers (goods), with which audiences may have little or no familiarity into meaningful signs that, they hope, will prompt consumers to respond with appropriate behavior." (1986, p. 153) Thus, while these approaches are based on the same theories as the first stream, they overcome most of its shortcomings. This stream's studies employ traceable techniques like content analysis in their research. Moreover, they also refrain from enforcing archaically imprinted messages in most advertisements. Instead, they aim to understand the advertisements' impact on consumption.

The present research is situated in the second stream of literature. The researcher uses a random sampling procedure to find the advertisements for the final semiotic analysis. These advertisements are then put into categories based on their broad themes and settings. (Leiss et al., 1986) Henceforth, the current research wants to draw upon the richness of Barthes'

approach discussing advertisements representative of each category in depth within the framework of denotation and connotation.

In conclusion, issues of symbolic consumption have received only minor attention in the field of wine marketing. This is especially true in the connection to advertisements. Numerous studies exist discussing the meaning and symbolism of advertisements, however, none has yet directly engaged with wine advertisements. Thus this research seeks to add to the socially oriented wine marketing literature as well as the semiotic discussion of advertising by analysing if and how social and symbolic claims of wine consumption are displayed by advertisements for German wine. Conclusions will be drawn on how these by manifesting a certain myth of wine consumption might affect the success of wine marketing to different consumer groups.

Data Collection

Two print sources were used for the data collection of this research, namely two public and two special interest magazines.¹ Wine advertisements were assessed quantitatively. The public magazines generally showed extremely low numbers of wine advertisements. So any further meaningful quantitative analysis has been impossible. Contrarily, and in line with the expectation of the researcher, special interest magazines contained a high number of wine advertisements. For the volumes analysed, all of them were counted and sorted by their country of origin in order to form a general impression of the advertising environment. It has to be noted that the researcher could not access the 2005 volume of 'vinum' in full at the time of the research. The missing volume was replaced by the 2004 volume of the same magazine. In total, 1046 advertisements from 14 countries have been counted and sorted.

For the semiotic analysis, the researcher sampled the advertisements from one public as well as one of the special interest magazines. The German wine advertisements shown in the public magazines are in most cases either the same pictures developed by the DWI (the German Wine Institute) or were also published in the special interests magazines. Consequently, only advertisements that had not appeared in the special interest magazine sample have been chosen from public magazines – 3 from 1995 and 1 from 2005. For the sample from the special interest magazines, the researcher selected the magazine 'vinum', as it seemed to offer a greater variety of German wine advertisements. To ensure the randomness of the sample, the last ten advertisements for German wine that had at least the size of a half page were selected and analysed for each volume. Duplicate advertisements were omitted. In total, the sample for the semiotic analysis consisted of 34 advertisements – 30 special interest magazine and 4 public magazine advertisements. Due to the shortness of this paper it will only be possible to show examples of these analyses.

Methodology

In the first part of the analysis, the researcher analysed the advertising environment in two German special interest magazines. Here, the researcher used descriptive quantitative methods. The ads were sorted by country of origin of the wine promoted and proportions were analysed across the three time periods and two publications under discussion using cross-tabulations and χ^2 -tests.

For the major part of the research, however, the researcher applied semiotics. This qualitative method has been chosen because classic information processing approaches fail to take account of manifold social and symbolic contents important for the perception and usage of

¹ public magazines: 'FOCUS' and 'Der Spiegel', both: volumes: 1995; 2000; 2005; special interest magazines: 'vinum'; volumes 1995, 2000, 2004 and 'Alles über Wein', volumes: 1995; 2000, 2005

products. (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) “We can view advertising as a cultural system, and individual advertisements as a species of secular ritual, that is, an enactment or performance manifesting the larger system..” (Sherry, 1987, p. 447) Ads act as schemata, reflecting and construing the social world. Semiotics is capable of discovering these underlying schemata. Indeed, as it has been shown, semiotics suffers from much criticism. However, mostly these criticisms draw upon the conduction of studies rather than the actual method itself, which has been widely applied in advertising and consumption contexts. (e.g. Fiske, 1990; Gaffey, 2004; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1993) Within the described systematic stream of literature (particularly Chapman, 1986; Leiss et al., 1986) investigating advertising discourses, this research tries to overcome many of these methodical shortcomings.

Similar to many semiotic studies (e.g. Goffman, 1979; Williamson, 1978) only one researcher was responsible for the interpretation and coding of the data. Consequently, the study represents only a singular view of the material discussed. The major shortcoming of most semiotic studies namely the selection bias of the data was approached by a random sampling procedure as shown above. The 34 advertisements (10 per year from special interest magazines; 4 from public magazines) have, somewhat similar to Leiss et al. (1986), been firstly sorted into categories relating to their particular settings and broad themes. The researcher conducted a Phi-correlation of these two categories in order to investigate their relationship. In a second step all advertisement texts were analysed semiotically. The semiotic approach relates to Barthes’ tradition of *denotation* and *connotation*. Thus for each wine advertisement a formal description of the picture and the text is provided. (*denotation*) Then, the researcher summarises the connotations and myth/meanings that the ad communicates forming its theme. (*connotation*) This allows us not only to construct an overview of the dominant settings and themes of the advertisements for German wine, but on an individual level offers deeper insights into how these advertisements construct and reflect the symbolic sphere of wine consumption. The semiotic approach enables a comprehensive analysis of these issues as well as moving beyond the frozen moment of the advertisement into the “events or the ‘world’ it implies.” (Dyer, 1982, p. 129)

Results

Results from the quantitative analysis

In public magazines the number of German wine advertisements in general is very low. Usually, one finds about 10 or 15 ads within a whole volume of the magazines in the sample: ‘FOCUS’ and ‘Der Spiegel’. These advertisements are usually promoting sparkling wine, which is probably due to the consolidation in that part of the German wine industry, or ads by the DWI (German Wine Institute) or other regional wine associations. However, this number does not differ greatly from the numbers of advertisements from other wine growing countries, which are represented in German public magazines. For the quantitative analysis of the advertisements from two special interest magazines two hypotheses can be formulated:

H_{0a}: *The numbers for the countries do not differ between the two magazines in the time periods 1995, 2000 and 2004/2005.*

H_{0b}: *The numbers within each country do not differ in the time periods 1995, 2000 and 2004/2005 in general and for each of the magazines under discussion.*

In special interest magazines, there is naturally a much larger number of wine advertisements in general as this allows a much more targeted approach towards the highly involved group of wine drinkers. This allows a closer look at the development of the number of wine

advertisements stemming from different wine producing countries. A χ^2 analysis was not feasible for all countries since a large percentage of them had expected counts below 5. Consequently, these were removed before the analysis. Thus only the countries (1) Germany, (2) France, (3) Italy and (4) Spain could be used for the cross tabulation. Thus, the original number of 1046 advertisements collected was reduced to a sample size of 888. Frequencies for the four analysed countries are shown in table 1. When comparing the two magazines in the sample over the years, a χ^2 test reveals that we cannot reject the null-hypothesis H_{0a} for the years 1995 and 2004/2005 (1995: $\chi^2=4.160$; $df=3$; $p=.245$; 2000: $\chi^2=32.738$; $df=3$; $p=.000$; 2004/2005: $\chi^2=6.381$; $df=3$; $p=.094$). So overall, there seems to be little evidence for preferences of certain countries for advertising in a particular magazine. A second cross tabulation which omitted the different magazines and simply analysed the representation of the aforementioned countries over the three different years resulted in a relatively secure rejection of the null-hypothesis ($n=888$; $\chi^2=72.684$; $df=6$; $p=.000$). These results are also robust over the two different magazines in the sample ('vinum': $\chi^2=73.825$; $df=6$; $p=.000$; 'Alles über Wein': $\chi^2=16.123$; $df=6$; $p=.013$). (referring to H_{0b}) Therefore, the trends for the four countries under consideration seem reliable. The numbers of advertisements for Germany and France have been declining over the analysed time period. Italy and Spain experienced a boom in the year 2000 with declining numbers for the years 2004/2005.

Table 1: Crosstabulation of country by magazine by year; N=888

Year	Country	Magazines				Total	
		Vinum		Alles über Wein		Count	%
		Count	%	Count	%		
1995	Germany	126	63.0	107	62.6	233	62.8
	France	41	20.5	42	24.6	83	22.4
	Spain	18	9.0	7	4.1	25	6.7
	Italy	15	7.5	15	8.8	30	8.1
Total		200	100	171	100	371	100
2000	Germany	39	23.5	80	51.3	119	37.0
	France	41	24.7	34	21.8	75	23.3
	Spain	36	21.7	25	16.0	61	18.9
	Italy	50	30.1	17	10.9	67	20.8
Total		166	100	156	100	322	100
2004/ 2005	Germany	47	37.0	33	48.5	80	41.0
	France	32	25.2	20	29.4	52	26.7
	Spain	14	11.0	7	10.3	21	10.8
	Italy	34	26.8	8	11.8	42	21.5
Total		127	100	68	100	195	100

own depiction

Results of the semiotic analysis

The first broad analysis of settings and global themes of the 34 advertisements in the sample which was conducted similar to Leiss et al. (1986) resulted in two categorisations. First of all the settings of the advertisements were analysed and put into the groups: (1) Product, (2) product and person, (3) product setting, (4) person setting, (5) product person setting, (6) setting and (7) text. Generally, German wine advertisements tend to focus on the product, which most often is the only content of the picture. However, the recent time periods show a

trend towards emphasising persons with or without showing the product. Setting and text only advertisements are rare. (see table 2)

Table 2: Setting Categorisation of the Advertisements

Year	Magazine	Product	Product Person	Product Setting	Person Setting	Product Person Setting	Setting	Text
1995	SI	6	0	0	0	2	1	1
	PM	1	2	0	0	0	0	0
2000	SI	4	2	0	0	3	0	1
2004/5	SI	2	1	0	5	1	1	0
	PM	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Total		13	5	2	5	6	2	2

own depiction

For the themes, six broad themes emerged from the data. They are summarised in table 3. The vast majority of the 34 advertisements analysed fell into the three categories of hedonism, prestige and tradition/production/heritage. It has to be pointed out that most of the advertisements in the hedonism category still emphasise a certain sophisticated image. Therefore hedonism was sorted in two categories of either sophisticated or emotional hedonism. The prestige theme acts as a kind of mediator between those categories. Three ads mainly transfer knowledge to the recipient and therefore are clearly aimed at a highly involved audience. They consist mostly of written texts and rely heavily on the presentation of technical detail in order to communicate a comprehensive idea of the product. Only three advertisements were sorted into the (purely) emotion category which means that they communicate easy living and the fun connected to wine consumption. So overall, it becomes clear that marketers for German wine heavily emphasize the elite perception that is, as has been shown in the literature review, already apparent in common society. Naturally, these categories cannot be perfectly clear-cut, rather they overlap contributing to three overarching themes of (1) High Class, (2) Affection and (3) Commitment. These overarching themes form a continuum of meaning with each neighbouring categories somewhat overlapping with all other. They could be arranged in a circle where knowledge reconnects to the theme of sophisticated hedonism.

Table 3: Major categories identified in the semiotic analysis

Year	Magazine	High Class		Affection		Commitment	
		Hedonism sophisticated	Prestige	Hedonism emotional	Emotion	Tradition Production Heritage	Knowledge
1995	SI	1	5	0	0	2	2
	PM	2	1	0	0	0	0
2000	SI	1	4	0	2	2	1
2004/5	SI	2	2	3	1	2	0
	PM	0	0	0	0	1	0
Total		6	12	3	3	7	3

SI=Special Interest; PM=Public Magazine; own depiction

Table 4 summarises the 2 x 2 Phi correlation coefficients for the settings in relation to the identified broad themes. Overall we do not find many strong correlations. However,

especially a prestigious theme is strongly related to a product only setting. Indeed, the focus of marketers on the product more often than not goes hand in hand with gold and black colours as well as distinct imaging style connoting exclusivity. An equally strong relationship naturally exists between advertisements that consist of text only and knowledge as major theme since these advertisements go into the depth of the wine production process. Both hedonistic themes rely on persons shown in the picture. However, sophisticated hedonism actively includes the product wine in the related settings, whereas emotional hedonism as a theme tends to omit wine from the advertisement emphasising the person-setting situation. The tradition, product, heritage theme draws strongly upon a combination of all three elements – person, product, setting – in order to communicate a holistic story. However, advertisements falling in this category might as well as draw on product only or setting only images. For emotion no significant correlation to any particular setting has been found.

Table 4: Phi-Correlation Coefficients for Setting by Theme, N=34

	High Class		Affection		Commitment	
	Hedonism sophisticated	Prestige	Hedonism emotional	Emotion	Tradition Production Heritage	Knowledge
Product	-.364**	.812***	n.s.	n.s.	-.401**	n.s.
Product Person	.461***	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Product Setting	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	.342**	n.s.
Person Setting	n.s.	-.307*	.456***	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Prod. Pers. Set.	n.s.	-.342**	n.s.	n.s.	.528***	n.s.
Setting	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	.401***	n.s.
Text	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	.804***

n.s.=not significant; <.10; <.05**; <.01***; own depiction*

The following part will present a selection of cases that best represent the general results of the whole study. The analysis uses a fixed framework and for every advertisement the reader will find the following points discussed: (1) Medium, Setting, Theme; (2) Verbal description of picture (denotation); (3) Text,; and (4) Interpretation (connotation).

Advertising 1/1995 (see figure 1):

Medium: still photography in colour

Setting: product

Theme: prestige

Verbal description of picture: a photo of a black bottle of (white) sparkling wine lying in an arrangement of golden silk/satin

Wording: “ein wahrhaft fürstlicher Sekt“; translation: “a truly princely sparkling wine”

Interpretation: The signifying colours black and gold give the consumer an immediate link to exclusivity and high-class. The bottle leans to the upper right edge where it is partially covered by the silk/satin, strengthening the impression of exclusivity and implying a necessary privateness.

Advertising 10/1995 (see figure 2):

Medium: still photography in colour

Setting: product

Theme: prestige

Verbal description of picture: a photo of a black bottle of wine which blends with the equally black fond; in the lower right corner there is a yellow orchid in full bloom

Wording: “Ein guter Freund excellenter Menüs; translation: “A good friend of excellent menus”

Interpretation: Similar to Advertisement 1 one can find here the colours black and gold, symbolising excellence and exclusivity. The latter is supported even more by the yellow orchid which is known to be rare and precious. Apart from this, the orchid in full bloom implies a sexual adolescence or readiness to be picked. In conclusion, this advertisement tries to tell the reader that the shown wine is now ready to be drunk and offers an exclusive taste. The wording intends to set an occasion for this: an excellent menu.

Advertisement 5/2000 (see figure 3):

Medium: still photography in b/w

Setting: product, person, setting

Theme: emotion

Verbal description of picture: a b/w photo showing a table with a bottle of wine and two glasses, one of which has fallen down spilling its contents over the white table-cloth; the woman has crawled over the table to kiss the man; the slogan is written over the body of the woman, the slogan as well as the logo of the regional association are coloured

Wording: “Mehr Genuss als üblich”; translation: “More delight than usual”

Interpretation: This advertisement deliberately utilises an erotic content as main topic and eye-catcher. However, aside from the superficial level, there are some facts about the picture that are bewildering. The high contrast of colours – different shades of white (skin, wine, window) streaked with dark almost bodily black (clothing, bottle) – together with the obviously surreal setting of the table allows a rather interesting assumption: The woman is a figment of the man’s imagination brought upon by consuming the wine. The combination of innocence and sexual fulfilment seems to provide a visualization of the way that wine from this region is supposed to taste.

Advertisement 10/2000 (see figure 4):

Medium: text in b/w with one colour photo and one coloured depiction

Setting: text

Theme: knowledge

Verbal description of picture: the advertisement consists mainly of text, at the beginning of the text there is a depiction of a barrique cask, at the right bottom side of the advertisement one can find the logo of the wine region Pfalz: two cheering wine glasses

Wording: long text about the barrique barrel and its use for the region’s wine

Interpretation: The fact that the advertisement consists nearly completely of text points out that it is clearly aimed at a rather highly involved audience. The text tells the engaged reader about the revisited idea of using regional wood for the Barrique-casks in which the wine is made. It provides a connection between the past and a future promise of wine – a cask with 700 years of history and the two wine glasses at the bottom of the page. Equally, this advertisement emphasises sophistication and originality of craftsmanship.

Advertisement 1/2004 (see figure 5):

Medium: still photography in b/w

Setting: product, person, setting

Theme: tradition, production, heritage

Verbal description of picture: the advertisement has a white fond, a little up from the middle of the ad there is the b/w photo showing people of different ages sitting and standing around a table, on which there are four bottles of wine; they all have glasses of wine, either in their hands or on the table, the two women and the man on the left side have white wine, the two men sitting have red wine, they are all dressed leisurely and the sun is shining; in the background one can recognise an arch with a vine on one side

Wording: “Wenn unsere besten Weine mal wieder ausverkauft sind, ist daran bestimmt eine Jury schuld.“; “When our best wines are sold out once again, it’s certainly a panel of experts’ fault.”

Interpretation: The ad shows a group of people who could be a family or simply people who share the same taste. The arch in the background, in contrast to the people of different ages symbolises the combination of tradition and the passion of winemaking. Thus, it is probable that the people shown belong to a traditional winemaking family. The fact that everyone has a glass of wine emphasises a shared traditional wine culture across all generations.

Advertisement 5/2004 (see figure 6):

Medium: still photography in colour

Setting: person, setting

Theme: sophisticated hedonism

Verbal description of picture: the photo shows a man in casual clothing listening to music via headphones. He looks mature, has designer stubble and wears a silver ring on the small finger of his right hand. He is sitting on something red which is also the dominating colour of the unfocused background

Wording: “Manchmal spielt ein Württemberger nur die zweite Geige. Die aber umso eindrucksvoller.“; translation: “Sometimes a Württemberger plays only the second violin. But this even more impressingly.”

Interpretation: The man in the picture conveys an attitude of modest joy. By using the headphones he tunes out from the world surrounding him, focusing only on the music and his relaxation. The red wine – red being the colour of blood, life and passion – harmonises with the silver of his ring, beard and headphones which imply not only wealth but also sophistication and savoir vivre. This impression is intended to be transferred to the wine of this region.

Advertisement 10/2004 (see figure 7):

Medium: still photography in colour

Setting: person, setting

Theme: emotional hedonism

Verbal description of picture: the photo shows a woman and a man, the woman wears a red and white striped top, the man wears a white pullover, the man covers the eyes of the woman with his hands, she is laughing

Wording: “Manchmal gibt es Spannenderes als einen Württemberger. Selten etwas Entspannenderes.“; translation: “Sometimes there is something more exciting than a Württemberger. Seldom something more relaxing.”

Interpretation: The couple in the picture convey an attitude of excitement and pleasure. Two colours dominate the ad: red and white – passion clashing with innocence – displayed in her shirt, her lips and teeth and the wine itself. The joy of life finds its liquid existence in the wine of this region.

Figure 1: (Source: vinum, 1995, 15(10), p. 89)



Figure 2 (Source: vinum, 1995, 15(9), p. 72)

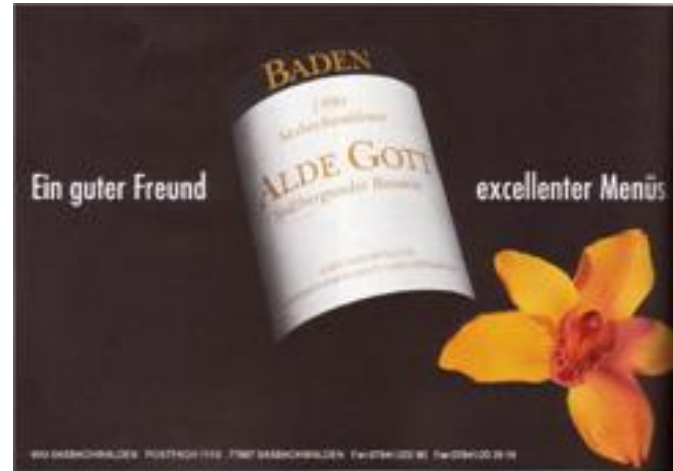


Figure 3 (Source: vinum, 2000, 20(8), p. 61)



Figure 4 (Source: vinum, 2000, 20(2), p. 59)



Conclusion

Generally, semiotic analysis enables the researcher to discover underlying patterns and symbolic constructs communicated by advertising. Within a wine marketing environment this enables us to gather deeper into how wine and wine consumption are actually communicated by wine advertisements mainly in special interest magazines. The identified broad themes will help researchers as well as practitioners to sort wine related communications, first and foremost advertisements, but possibly also other promotional material like brochures, price lists or labels. This will support further activities in the wine marketing research as well as related research fields. In a practical perspective the research will help to clarify particular brand position and benchmark promotional efforts.

The semiotic analysis clearly identified a certain position that is communicated by German wine advertisements in both public as well as special interest magazines in Germany. Whereas this may make sense in the highly involved environment of the special interest magazines for wine, it is probably not the right strategy to increase the number of wine consumers or the wine consumption in groups who tend to perceive the image of sophistication and elitism connected to wine as negative. This might be especially true for young or lay consumers. Moreover, the concentration on a limited number of advertising texts, such as those identified in the sample, may impede advertising effectiveness as the recipients probably will tend to perceive wine advertising as generic. Following such a strategy will presumably make it difficult to achieve a clear brand position or personality. Thus the results of this study call for a reconsideration of the actual image that is communicated by advertisements. On the other hand, of course, this offers plenty of possibilities for (re-)positioning brands and gaining a strong brand personality in comparison to the predominating, generic image.

Of course, one has to be aware of the limitations of the presented research. Probably the most pressing limitation of the present research is that it does not account for real consumer data. Basing on the insights gained from Mick and Buhl (1992) people – even when similar social background are provided – may view and interpret advertisements in very different ways. Thus, future research should engage more closely with actual consumer perception of wine advertisements in relation to their social background, consumption practices, wine expertise or involvement. Equally, this paper did not tap into the important field of advertising effectiveness. It might be interesting for future researchers to discuss the effectiveness of certain advertisement styles. Moreover, wine advertisement research might profit from a comparison with other alcoholic beverages in order to find out which major images these advertisements convey to the consumer or rather whether different countries of origin use particular themes. It might be particularly interesting to see how advertisements of new world wine producing countries differs from old world wine countries.

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