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Types of authenticity in champagne: The brand manager's view

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Abstract

Purpose *The aim of this paper is to consider how authenticity is structured in champagne brands in the view of those who create and manage the brands, and how ideas of authenticity related to the view that champagne is a luxury product.*

◦***Design/methodology/approach****: Documents relating to the heritage of two champagne houses (of contrasting styles although with shared ownership) were analysed followed by in-depth interviews with seven staff members responsible for the brands.*

◦***Findings****: The brand managers consider that authenticity lies in both the product attributes (appellation, savoir faire, a unique style, quality and consistency, and honesty and transparency) and the brand image (heritage and myth, including the founder, restraint and brand promotional integrity), and that different brands may focus on one or the other of these.*

◦***Practical implications****: Synthesising these approaches is important for brand managers – but if anti-marketing becomes more dominant then brand authenticity may be less successful than product authenticity – particularly for high volume wines – although it may be that brand authentic champagnes trade more on the territorial brand of champagne gaining product authenticity in this way.*

Key words: (3-5): champagne brands, luxury, authenticity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The branding of champagne is often perceived to be a case apart from other wines; product consistency, and the high recognition levels of major brands make it unusual in a world that is generally very fragmented (Salolainen 1993). Additionally, two other factors make consideration of champagne interesting. The first revolves around issues of authenticity – increasingly important for modern consumers (Jones et al., 2005), and particularly for quasi-aesthetic and placed based products such as wine. Secondly, champagne is perceived to be a luxury product (Beverland 2004) which adds another dimension to its marketing.

Some consideration has been given to the branding of champagne, but other than the work of Beverland (2004; 2006) it has not been examined in much detail. This paper seeks to explore champagne branding further, to elucidate different categories of brand, and to place them in the context of luxury goods. This is done by way of research with the professionals who market two brands, both in the same 'family' but with very different styles. The comparison of the two enables conclusions to be reached about the differences between product authenticity and brand authenticity as moulded by the brand managers– especially as the two brands are of different size and require different market positioning.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Branding Authenticity

Beverland identifies six attributes of authenticity applied to the luxury wine trade (Beverland 2006). These include: heritage; stylistic consistency; commitments to uncompromising quality; relationship to place, and; downplaying commercial moves. Beverland (2006) further demonstrated that authenticity involves elements both intrinsic and extrinsic to the product. Creating authenticity implies being confronted with a number of paradoxes. A balance has to be made in between industrial and traditional product commitments. A key theme is the fact that a champagne brand has to appear both perfectly modern to the society of the day and at the same time laden with history (Kapferer and Bastien 2009).

Alexander (2008) argues that some of Beverland's six attributes of authenticity are more fundamental than others. He suggested that place was the key attribute promoting authenticity, and that quality commitments, production, heritage and pedigree were all implied. However, his research focused on a regional beer, and may not be generalisable to all products.

In *Brand Culture* Schroeder and Salzer-Morling (2006) note that consumers live in a branded world: brands infuse culture with meaning, and exert a deep influence on contemporary society. Therefore, the most authentic form of marketing would be anti-marketing. Alexander (2008) developed this idea by asserting that the desire for authenticity is said to be a response to standardization and homogenization in the marketplace.

Beverland and Farrelly (2010) identify three identity benefits emanating from authenticity cues. The first benefit is control: that which is related to an individual's desire to achieve personal sovereignty over consumption choices. The second benefit is feeling connected, which is linked to the importance of attachment to a community or place which can be associated to personal enrichment by being close to other members of a community. The last identity benefit was feeling virtuous by staying true to one's morals.

2.2 Luxury Brands and Luxury Wine Brands

There has been considerable research into luxury products and branding and what follows is only a summary of the most relevant. Kapferer and Bastien (2009) demonstrate that building luxury wine brands implies using a defined set of rules and methods that run counter to classic marketing theories. Moreover, they define the key success factors of a luxury brand; it must be incomparable to others and show evidence of social stratification. However, they also add that social status issues are not enough to guarantee the success of a luxury product but that it needs to be rooted in place and have a particular cultural context. Vigneron and Johnson (2004) complement Kapferer's theory by evoking the contradiction that luxury brands face when increasing exposure and sales. While doing so, they must maintain a fragile perception of limited supply. Brands were once traditionally targeting the wealthiest consumers and now have launched new product lines, new brands or product extensions to market their products to middle class consumers (Vigneron and Johnson 2004).

Additionally, Beverland (2004) evokes the main paradoxes one is confronted with when positioning a luxury wine brand. Firstly, the notion of quality and style of a wine is personal and variable. Moreover, most brands do not fit the requirements of the modern wine market with its emphasis on consistent product quality and pricing, strong relationships with distributors, targeted promotion, and the movement to global sourcing. Lastly, many of these brands' owners are notoriously opposed to aggressive marketing, often criticizing the emergence of mass produced wines. Beverland (2004) identified six luxury brand components in the wine industry. Significant among these are: *product integrity* (the attention to detail); *historical events* associated with the firm; how *production processes* lead to enhanced product quality; *culture* and *history* (according to Beverland the most important components with firms deliberately drawing on their histories in their marketing) and; *low product volumes* and *an unconditional commitment to quality*.

3. THE PROCESS

This paper is based on a study looking at the perspective of brand managers, intermediaries and consumers of two related brands – although the current paper only reports on the perspective of the brand management. A qualitative case study of two brands (Brand S and Brand R) was chosen for several reasons. First, these two brands, although belonging to the same owner, have two very different strategies with respect to the importance of authenticity in their brand positioning. Second, conducting research on two relevant brands will allowed a very precise comparison of strengths and weaknesses which may not have been available in a larger study. The two brands are historically significant (Brand R dates from the 18th century and brand S from the 19th) and both are reasonably well-known, although Brand R is much more visible, and has a much higher production.

The research comprised two parts. (1) A detailed analysis of the two houses' historical patrimony, which was concentrated on the positioning of the brands since their creation. Advertisements, promotional material as well as magazine clippings were analyzed. (2) Several interviews with the joint team responsible for both brands, including those responsible for making the wines, and brand managers in two other countries. Seven interviews took place in total. The main interview themes were champagne brand positioning, and authenticity both as a general concept and in champagne brand positioning.

The interviews were all audiotaped and then transcribed by the first researcher who then analysed them, creating themes and sub-themes by a process of cross-comparison. Triangulation was achieved by using interviewees from a range of roles and origins, and by having findings and analysis evaluated by the second researcher who could provide

alternative readings and interpretations. The two approaches were then synthesized into a whole.

4. FINDINGS

The findings consider what the brand team generally felt authenticity in champagne is, and then examines two ideas which emerged from their discourse: product authenticity and brand authenticity, and the distinctions between them.

4.1. What is Authenticity for the brand team?

The brand team agreed that authenticity is a central element of luxury products. Furthermore they asserted that because of the recent economic and social crisis consumers had a tendency to go back to products which conveyed traditional and fundamentally authentic values. Thirdly, they felt that the authentic values of a brand are what make it reassuring and must be part of the visual identity of the brand.

Whether or not communicating on authentic values could be a distinctive element was seen in two different ways. For some, communicating on the authenticity of champagne could not be a means of differentiation because all champagne houses were under the obligation to meet the same quality requirements imposed by the appellation. Others argued that with the rising competition of other sparkling wines, communicating on champagne's authenticity as an appellation is the only way of justifying high prices and protecting its market positioning.

> I think it would be an enormous strategic error to stop speaking of the wine, because today you see the explosion of sparkling wines … What will we do tomorrow to stress the difference from New World sparkling if it isn't on the excellence of the wine? (Female, Brand S Brand Manager).[1]

The last point that was brought up during the discussion was the balance between creativity and authenticity in the positioning of a champagne brand. Both elements were considered as important in the development of brand identity. For Brand R, authenticity was regarded as the reassuring element which could justify high prices so that creativity and audacity could differentiate it from the other brands and allow it to be competitive.

> When we talk about a brand like Brand R, which certainly in its positioning tends to put value on the elements of audacity and creativity you can get the impression that it separates itself from authenticity. I think it would be a mistake to do that completely (Male, Brand R Brand Manager).

The definition of authenticity was the first question that was asked of all the interviewees at the beginning of each interview. According to the interviewee's role and their commitment to one brand or the other the definition they had and the importance they attached to this concept varied. This revealed the fundamental difference between brand authenticity and product authenticity when referring to champagne.

> Are all champagnes authentic? That depends on whether one is talking of the brand or the product itself. (Female, Communication Manager, Brands R&S).

4.2. Product Authenticity

What we call 'product authenticity' regroups most of the key themes found by Beverland (2006). The key themes that were identified when interrogating the brand team were: The appellation as an origin of place, the people behind the product, the quest for a unique style, quality and consistency and honesty and transparency.

The champagne appellation conveys authenticity because it guarantees a unique name and origin. The brand team agreed that the appellation guarantees an intrinsically authentic product and they also considered that authenticity emanates from a specific natural resource and is transformed by a unique human know-how which contributes to its uniqueness. This theme can be associated to the previous one in the sense that it applies to all champagnes. This savoir faire involves harnessing distinctive terroir with raw materials to create a great product.

Brand S is often described as having a distinct style. For some of the members of the brand team Brand S's authenticity results from this unique style. Thus, the house's willingness to achieve a unique and distinctive style generates specificities in the production process.

> Brand S is authentic because it's a house which looks for a specific style … it is
>
> very rich, complicated, costly (Female, Communication Manager, Brands R&S).

Brand R, on the other hand, does not seek to distinguish itself through the style of its champagne. The champagne, which is often described as "easy to drink, universal champagne" does not have product authenticity.

According to the brand team, quality and the consistency of the product make up a champagne's product authenticity. Another house was referred to by the brand team to illustrate the correlation in between quality and authenticity: that house was seen to have lost its attributes of authenticity partly because the wine has decreased in quality. In this sense, Brand R's authenticity was also challenged when the consistency of the champagne was questioned. Product authenticity in the sense of quality and consistency is therefore not intrinsic to all champagnes, it can be destroyed and rebuilt.

One aspect of perceived quality was the idea that a champagne is authentic because it is scarce – although it was only mentioned by one member of the brand team. This idea implies that the big champagne brands, such as Brand R, do not have this aspect of product authenticity because of the high volumes of bottles that are produced and sold.

A house's transparency and honesty in the production process is the last attribute of authenticity which was identified. This attribute implies a clear communication policy on the strategic choices that are made along the production process.

> There is truth in authenticity; there is restraint (Female, Brand S Brand Manager).

4.3. Brand Authenticity

According to the brand team, a champagne's brand authenticity regroups all the other attributes which have nothing to do with the actual product but with the story of the house. We have identified heritage and the myth, the founder, restraint and brand integrity. A champagne's authentic brand attributes must be unique.

A champagne's brand authenticity lies in its heritage and its historical contributions. The brand team argued that Brand R is authentic because it was one of the first houses to be founded and it has greatly contributed to the construction of the appellation champagne.

> [It's] participated in the history of champagne, because it's one of the old houses,
>
> and I think it has worked to build champagne (Male, Brand R Brand Manager).

On the other hand the brand team argued that Brand S's brand authenticity is based on its founder. Thus, the founder's personality and vision at the creation of the house is the essence of the brand's message – he was a dynamic and much travelled promoter. Based on this idea, however, some brand team members argued that Brand R's founder is not now intimately linked to the creation of the house and so cannot be associated its brand authenticity.

Brand S is meant to be a discreet brand in its distribution strategy as well as in its marketing and communication strategy, there are very few dynamic brand promotional activities. Some argued that this restraint is an attribute of brand authenticity.

It's a wine which doesn't make a loud noise. It's a very restrained brand, even its authenticity is flamboyant in its discretion (Female, Brand S Brand Manager).

Brand R, on the contrary is positioned to be a bold and very creative brand. Some of the members of the brand team argued that the fact that the house had always been faithful to a unique and unusual brand identity made the brand authentic. There does, however, seem to be some internal conflict here. That Brand S has brand authenticity from its discretion and Brand R from its boldness seems to be contradictory.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Firstly, it is important to point out that authenticity is a complex concept that was approached and interpreted in many different ways throughout the research. In our literature review we highlighted the major attributes of authenticity which have been identified in past research. We have complemented past research by investigating the perceptions of authenticity in champagne. Our investigation led to the identification of two different perceptions of authenticity by managers: brand authenticity and product authenticity.

The attributes of product authenticity are the appellation, the savoir faire, the quest for a unique style, quality and consistency, and honesty and transparency. A champagne's brand authenticity on the other hand regroups the extrinsic attributes: heritage and myth, the founder, restraint and brand integrity. Different champagnes will focus on one or other category.

Given that Schroeder and Salzer-Morling (2006) claim that anti-marketing is the most effective form of post-modern marketing it is interesting to ponder whether or not a more flamboyant brand authenticity might lose its aura as authentic, whereas a more restrained wine, like Brand S, which focuses on the product, may retain its authenticity longer. Likewise, one can consider the three authenticity benefits proposed by Beverland and Farrelly (2010). The first, of personal sovereignty, could apply to either type of authenticity. The second, of attachment to place, may be more easily projected with a product (terroir) focus. The third, of remaining 'moral' may also arguably be more related to the depth of a product focus rather than the glamour of a brand focus.

Further, we have seen how types of luxury are changing as brands launch new products or reposition old ones to appeal to a new global middle class (Vigneron and Johnson 2004). The volumes required for this may tend to require a promotion of brand authenticity rather than product authenticity, but this too may become self-defeating, as the volume required undermines the genuineness of the product, itself partly a result of scarcity. On the other hand it could well be that the authenticity of such products resides both in the brand and in the territorial brand of champagne. The fact that the wine comes from this particular place with its own territorial reputation may guarantee its genuineness so that it can effectively ignore the paucity of its product authenticity – an idea which would accord with Alexander's (2008) notion that a link to place is the fundamental aspect of authenticity in products like this. In this way the product maintains what Kapferer and Bastien (2009) describe as its rootedness as well as its incomparability – even if its ability to mark social differentiation may be dissipating.

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[1] All quotations translated from the French by the authors.