

Decoding wine label design: A study of the visual codes of Bordeaux Grand Crus

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- *Purpose: This paper aims to identify and analyze the visual codes of the wine labels of Bordeaux Grands Crus.*
 - *Design: A content analysis was used to identify the most frequent visual characteristics in matters of wine labelling among the Bordeaux Grand Crus population. 117 wine labels were analyzed by two coders. The most frequent visual characteristics were then analyzed through a semiotic approach.*
 - *Findings: The content analysis indicates that the Bordeaux Grands crus visual codes include specific kinds of colors, typefaces, illustrations and layouts. The semiotic analysis indicates that the meanings of those visual codes are highly relevant with the product category. However, the fact that most of the labels conform to the visual codes of the category produces a lack of differentiation.*
 - *Practical implications: This paper proposes a methodology, which could be used by winemakers to identify the visual codes of their product category. Therefore, it produces some guidelines to manipulate a brand's perceived typicality or design newness. Finally, through its semiotic approach, this paper provides a better understanding of the meaning of the Bordeaux Grands Crus' visual codes.*

Key words: design, packaging, perceived typicality, design newness, semiotics

Product designers and marketing managers both agree that there are visual codes, in terms of package design, that typify certain product categories (Fishel, 2003). Those categorial visual codes being the most frequent visual characteristics used in a product category (e.g. the white and blue colors in the milk category). The existence of such categorial visual codes requires further investigation by marketing researchers. Indeed, it seems quite obvious that this concept may be linked to the concepts of perceived typicality, design newness and the question of brand differentiation. The more a brand conforms to the visual codes of a product category, the more it will enhance the level of family resemblance and thus be perceived as typical of the category (Nedungadi and Hutchinson, 1985; Loken and Ward, 1990). Conversely, the more a brand differs from the visual codes of its category, the more it will be perceived as visually novel and reach a high level of “design newness” (Schoormans and Robben, 1997; Talke et al. 2009). In doing such, a brand can differentiate from the competition, communicate a distinctive positioning, attract the attention of the consumer and be more visible at the point of sale (Garber, 1995; Schoormans and Robben, 1997; Underwood and Klein, 2002; Underwood, 2003; Ampuero and Vila, 2006; Garber and Al. 2008; Orth and Malkewitz, 2008; Kauppinen-Räsänen and Luomala, 2010).

Despite the importance of these concepts, the notion of categorial visual codes is absent in the mainstream marketing literature. First, the concept appears in a limited fashion (Divard and Urien, 2001; Lawes, 2002; Rouillet and Droulers, 2005) and generally makes only quick allusions to the existence of categorial color codes. Other types of visual codes are not discussed. Second, the concept is never properly defined and its interest for marketing research and practice never specified. Third, the existence of specific visual codes for each product category is never verified from an empirical point of view by following a rigorous method of observation. Finally, the meaning of those codes is almost never analyzed (Ares and Al., 2011).

Therefore, this paper will: **(1)** propose a definition of the notion of categorial visual codes through a review of literature in marketing and semiotics; **(2)** empirically validate the existence of such visual codes and the relevance of the definition previously proposed by studying the Bordeaux Grand Crus category; **(3)** discuss the interest of the notion of categorial visual codes from a theoretical and managerial point of view.

1. THE NOTION OF CATEGORIAL VISUAL CODES

1.1. The categorial visual codes are not limited to colors

The majority of marketing articles that reference the existence of categorial visual codes refer solely to color codes (Divard and Urien, 2001; Lawes, 2002; Rouillet and Droulers, 2005). “Categorial visual codes” are simply defined as being the colors that are the most frequent within a product category. However, other articles, which do not refer to the notion of categorial visual codes, identify recurring patterns that are not limited to color. For instance, Ares et al. (2011), through a semiotic study on 32 brands of yogurt, noted that most of the packages of the category used the same kind of colors, typography, illustrations and global layout. A content analysis of 50 brands of children’s cereal conducted by McNeal and Ji (2003) observed that most of those packages use the same kind of illustrations and layout. Orth and Malkewitz (2008), observed that most Bordeaux wines use the same form of bottle and the same kind of typography. Schoormans and Robben (1997) established that most coffee brands use the same package shape and colors. Finally, Pantin Sohier (2009), discovered that product categories targeting men mostly use

squared forms for their packages while Gollety and Guichard (2011) affirm that the products targeting young children are using rounded shapes and soft textures. There is clearly evidence to suggest that categorial visual codes should be extended beyond color. Therefore, one should assume that the visual codes of a product category should not be limited to the colors used, but could rather include other visual characteristics such as the kind of typography, layout, material, texture, illustrations and overall form.

1.2. The categorial visual codes are linked to the notion of perceived typicality

Categorial visual codes should be defined as the packages visual characteristics that are the most frequent within a product category. It appears as though they are strongly linked to the notion of perceived typicality. The notion of perceived typicality emerges from studies carried out by Rosch and Mervis (1975) in cognitive psychology. According to these authors, everything people recognize is stored in their memory as part of “cognitive categories” and is ranked within these categories according to their degree of perceived typicality, i.e. according to their capacity to represent a given category. The act of judging typicality is therefore part of a cognitive process involving an evaluation of the extent to which a given object represents a given cognitive category. These notions of cognitive categories and typicality judgement have been extensively used in the literature on consumer behavior (Nedungadi and Hutchinson, 1985; Loken and Ward, 1990; Veryzer and Hutchinson, 1998; Campbell and Goostein, 2001). It is generally accepted in marketing that product categories constitute natural cognitive categories for the consumer, and that brands are ranked within these categories according to levels of perceived typicality. Packaging can therefore be perceived as more or less typical of a given category depending on whether it is perceived as more or less representative of that category.

A few studies have been able to establish that the level of perceived typicality of a given object in relation to a natural cognitive category depends on its level of “family resemblance” to the other objects belonging to the same category (Nedungadi and Hutchinson, 1985; Loken and Ward, 1990). The greater the family resemblance, the more an object is judged to be typical of a category. It has already been established that the visual codes of a product category are defined as those that are most used within that category. Logically, packaging that conforms with the visual codes of a product category is more likely to display a family resemblance to other products from the same category, and it is more likely to be perceived as being typical of this category. Conversely, the more a brand differs from the visual codes of its category, the more the brand will enhance its level of visual novelty and level of “design newness” (Schoormans and Robben, 1997; Talke and Al. 2009; Celhay and Passebois, 2011). Therefore, it’s possible to argue that categorial visual codes works as “category cues” for the consumer (Goode et al. 2013) and define a “dominant graphic design” for the product category (Dell’Era and Verganti, 2007). Then, studying and identifying the visual codes of a product category is likely to provide concrete guidelines on how to manage a brand’s perceived typicality.

1.3. The categorial visual codes have a significance to the product category

It is important to note that the visual codes of a product category may have a meaning for the consumer. The use of the word “code” implies that there is something to “decode”. That is to say: a meaning or a significance. Understanding this concept requires the introduction to semiotics. Semiotics is *“the theory and study that describes signs and the mechanisms by means of which a sign system produces meaning”* (Kehret-Ward, 1988). According to this theory, a sign is composed of two facets: the signifier and the signified (Glen Mick, 1986). The signifier is the

physical manifestation of the sign. It could be a sound (for a verbal sign) or an image (for a visual sign). The signified is the meaning associated to the signifier. For instance, in France, a red screwcap on a milk bottle is a signifier associated to the signified “full cream milk”. A blue screwcap is another signifier associated to the signified “semi skimmed milk”. A red bull symbol on a soft drink can is a signifier associated to the signified “this drink is highly energetic and will make you as powerful as a bull”. A hand script typeface on a jam package is a signifier associated to the signified “this jam is as good as a handmade one” (Cavassilas, 2007).

From a semiotic perspective, a package design is a combination of several signifiers which communicate to the consumer some information. The categorial visual codes are the visual characteristics that appear most frequently in a product category. A semiotician would consider them as signifiers conveying some signified information relative to the product category or to the kind of consumers that are supposed to consume that product category. For instance, by using saturated vivid colors and dynamic layout (structured with diagonal lines), children’s cereal brands are suggesting that they bring energy and fun to the consumer. By using cartoon characters as an illustration, they signify that they are targeting young consumers (i.e. Smacks or Frosties cereals). When the brands are targeting a teenager or adult audience (i.e. Crunch or Fitness cereals), those kinds of illustrations disappear. In the same way, by using metallic colors, squared forms and massive letters, some deodorants are signifying that they are for men, while others, by using pastel colors, rounded forms and thin cursive letters are signifying that they are for women.

Therefore, it’s possible to refine our definition as following: *“Categorial visual codes are the forms, colors, materials, typefaces, layout, styles and themes of illustrations most used within the product category. These visual characteristics define the level of family resemblance of each package of the category and thus, their level of perceived typicality. These codes have implied meanings to both the product category and consumers.”*

2. THE BORDEAUX GRANDS CRUS VISUAL CODES

Various studies have observed recurrent themes in package design across different product categories. However, there is no empirical study verifying the existence of categorial codes through the application of a detailed content analysis that studied the visual characteristics of all the products of one specific category. This research will achieve that through the investigation of the visual codes of the Bordeaux Grands Crus. The first objective is to demonstrate that categorial visual codes exist and can be precisely identified. The second objective is to verify the relevance of the definition previously proposed.

2.1. Methodology of the study

Identification of the visual codes of Bordeaux Grands Crus was derived from a content analysis following the procedure and recommendations proposed by Kassarian (1977). Content analysis is defined as *“a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication”* (Berelson, 1952). It has been widely used in marketing research to analyze the content of writing communications, advertising and packagings (Kassarian, 1977; McNeal and Li, 2003; Humphrey, 2010; Toncar and Fetcherin, 2012). The procedure involved in the methodology is presented in five steps, which could be summarized as following:

The first step is *“to select from the available population of documents to be studied, a reasonably sized sample for study (...) that is representative of the defined universe such that*

generalizations are possible". The Union des Grands Crus de Bordeaux is composed of 117 châteaux producing red wine. As the number of châteaux is not too important, all the members of the population were selected. The guide edited by the Union des Grands Crus de Bordeaux in 2011 provides reproductions of the labels of each château. Therefore, it was used in order to analyze the visual characteristics of the 117 labels.

The second step is to determine "*the unit of measurement, whether it be words, overall themes, or simply the existence or nonexistence of some event or claim*", which is relevant regarding to the objective of the study. This requires the material to be investigated to be broken down into different elements. The unit of measurement is defined as being the different visual characteristics of each label. A package's visual appearance is defined by the choices made in matters of materials, forms, colors, typography, illustrations, layout and global composition (Ampuero and Vila, 2006; Ares and Al, 2011). Each of these visual characteristics is addressed in the analysis.

The third step determines categories that allow qualification and classification of the different units of analysis. The objective is to create a tool, such as a theme dictionary or an observation grid, which permits the analysis of the treated communications. The tool needs to be clear in order to allow for objective analysis because different coders using the same tool theoretically should produce the same results. An observation grid was created to qualify and classify the visual characteristics of the different labels of our population. The grid is composed of 4 different parts: a part relative to the colors, a part relative to the typography, a part relative to the illustration and a part relative to the layout. The grid includes 20 multiple choice questions and allows the coder to enter visual characteristics such as the type of font used for the brand, the type of font use for the region, the theme of the main illustration, the style of the main illustration, the background color of the label, the color of the text, the color of the borders, the form of the label or the kind of layout... To qualify the typeface families used on the labels, we used the Maximilien Vox classification (1954) as a point of reference. According to Blackwell (2004) and Pohlen (2011) it is the one adopted by the International Typographic Association, and more widely used across the world. This classification contains 10 font families. However, in order to simplify the content analysis, we used Blanchard's work (1980) to determine 5 more generic families (including the 10 of Vox). Therefore we classified the fonts as: **(1)** the serif fonts (Humanes, Garaldes, Réales, Didones, Mécanes, Incises), **(2)** the sans serif font (Linéales), **(3)** the formal scripts fonts (Scriptes), **(4)** the non formal script fonts (Manuaires) and **(5)** the gothic fonts (Fractures). Furthermore, we noted if the letters are capitalized or not.

The fourth step aims to ensure and measure the reliability of the study. Kassarian (1977) recommends for objectivity that, at least, two different coders run the analysis and then verification of the reliability of the results by calculating the interjudge reliability. The interjudge reliability is defined as the percentage of agreement between several judges processing the same communications material and a commonly used measure of reliability is the ratio of coding agreements to the total number of coding decisions. In this study, the visual characteristics of the wine labels were analyzed by two different coders. The inter-judge reliability was equal to 92.25% (on a total of 1872 judgments).

The last step involves quantification of the results and then analyzing them. In this study, we calculated the frequency of appearance of the different visual characteristics in order to identify the most frequent displays and then analyzed their meaning using the semiotics literature.

2.2. Results of the study:

2.2.1 Composition and layout

The content analysis demonstrated strong recurrences in composition and layout across the population. 96% of the labels used a centered layout with all label elements (texts and illustrations) centered on a central and vertical axis. Furthermore, the brand name, defined as château, and all other textual mentions appear on horizontal straight lines in 95% of the cases. Finally, the brand position on the label is observed in the full middle of the label in 56% of the cases, at the top middle in 49% of the cases and at the bottom in only 12% of the cases.

Ares et al. (2011) state that “*the type of lines that are used in the labels communicate a lot of information to consumers and evoke different associations*”. A graphic composition structured among horizontal straight lines usually suggests calmness, security and stability and so, by extension, an impression of seriousness and trustworthiness (Ballinger, 1970; White, 2011). Moreover, Cavassilas (2007) affirms that the use of a centered layout (versus left alignment, right alignment, justified or asymmetric composition...) is a signifier generally associated with the signified of classicism and tradition. This interpretation relies on the fact that the seek of symmetry is considered as a “classic ideal” in art history (Hurlburt, 1977) while asymmetrical layout were used more recently in the history of printing and graphic design (Robert and Thrift, 2002). Finally, the brand position on the label produces meanings of prestige, importance, self-confidence and notoriety. As explained by Ambrose and Harris (2007), a text composition follows principles of a visual hierarchy. Therefore, the position and the size of each mention indicate their relative importance. As, in occidental cultures, writing is from left to the right and from the top to the bottom (Ares and al. 2011): the most important mentions usually appear at the top-middle or in the full-middle of a package facing. Thus, for Cavassilas (2007), positioning the brand logo in the full-middle of a product facing is a way to symbolize the importance and the notoriety of the brand. Moreover, because it’s so central and visible on the facing it also signifies a brand, which is a reference in its category. So, a brand with a great expertise, competency and self confidence.

Therefore, the Bordeaux Grands Crus labels, regarding to their layout and global composition, communicate **seriousness, classicism, tradition, prestige, notoriety, and expertise**.

2.2.2 Colors

Regarding the colors, the content analysis allows for verification of the existence of two families of labels in the sample. A first group includes 52 % of the labels. Those labels use a pristine white background, then black, Bordeaux/red, grey and gold for the text, the illustrations and the frames. The second group includes 44% of the labels. Those labels use a yellowing white, (or a pale yellow) as background color then black, Bordeaux/red, grey and gold for the text, the illustrations and the frames. At the end, it appears that the most of the labels use the same range of colors: white, pale yellow, ocher, Bordeaux/red, black, grey and gold. Others colors such as green, blue, pink, violet are almost never used.

Concerning the meaning of pristine white, Blanchard (1980) explains that the degree of whiteness of a paper was traditionally an indicator of its level of quality. A pristine white paper, therefore, signifies a paper of high quality and could - by extension - signify a premium product. Cavassilas (2007), on her side, remarks that white materials (textile, papers...) yellowish with

time. Then, a yellowish paper constitutes a way to signify the age of a brand, its traditional dimension and seniority. Moreover, it's possible to observe that a yellowish paper could signify a more rustic, traditional and ecological paper as evocating a recycled paper. This kind of paper and background color could therefore be congruent for organic or biodynamic wines. Finally, it's possible to observe that labels using yellowish or other backgrounds would produce a warmer and more convivial impression comparing to the white background labels as yellow is a warm color. Concerning the other colors, the use of red or Bordeaux is of course metonymic of the product category, while the alliance of white, black and grey produce signified of classicism and elegance (Ares et Al, 2011, Cavassilas, 2007). Finally the gold color, which is used by 73% of the labels (mostly for the text and/or for the illustrations), produce signified of luxury and social distinction (Lawes, 2003). Indeed, to Cavassilas (2007), *“the gold color signifies concept such as luxury, preciousity, refinement, rarity, and wealth. (...). The gold color also produces meanings concerning the consumer: “high social class”, “wealthy””*.

Therefore, the Bordeaux Grands Crus labels, regarding to their colors, communicate **luxury, social distinction, classicism, elegance and tradition**.

2.2.3 Typography

Concerning the typography of the wine's brand, we observed that 68% of the labels use capital serif letters, 15% formal scripts letters, 5% capital non serif letters and only 3% gothic letters. We also observed that the wine brand use thin font in 82% of the cases, typefaces with stroke modulations in 94% of the cases and that it appears in italic only in 18% of the cases. Finally, if we take in account all the mentions on the labels, formal script typefaces are used in 32% of the cases. Therefore, the content analysis produces 4 main observations for the brand typography: **(1)** capital letters are preferred over lowercase letters, **(2)** serif letters are preferred over non serif letters, **(3)** Thin letters with stroke modulations are preferred over bold regulars ones and **(4)** Roman fonts are preferred over italic ones.

Regarding the use of uppercase letters for the brand name, Blanchard (1980, 1998) but also McCarthy and Motherbaugh (2002) and Ares et al. (2011), observe that using capital letters is a way to give more importance to the word which is capitalized. A “grand vin de Bordeaux” would seem more “GRAND” if it appears in capital letters. Therefore, the use of capital letters for the brand and the region is a way to signify the greatness, the prestige and the importance of the wine and its region of origin. By extension, the systematic use of capital letters could generate a signified of pretension while, by contrast, the use of lowercase letters for the name of the brand or the name of the region could generate a signified of modesty.

Concerning the preference for serif letters over non-serif letters, Blanchard (1980) and Pohlen (2011) remark that this kind of typefaces could evoke the antique roman letters which were engraved on the monuments' pediments. Beside the impressive and monumental effect of those « capitalis romana » (or « capitalis monumentalis »), those typefaces carry a significance of classicism and tradition comparing to non-serif typefaces. Those last being perceived as more modern because being created and used more recently in the history of typeface design (Barnard, 2005; Bringhurst, 2004). It's what Blanchard (1980) calls a historic connotation in matters of typography. Moreover, it's possible to note that the serifs give a « seat » to the letter, therefore reinforcing the horizontal straight lines which structure the composition of the labels and so participate to the impression of stability and seriousness already produce by the choices made in matters of layout and composition.

The formal script letters are not often used for the brand and region typography however they are used by 32% of the labels if we take into consideration all the textual mentions. Since this kind of typeface imitates handwriting, it produces a sentiment of a hand-made product or craft work. Moreover, because this kind of typeface imitates slow and painstaking hand writing, they also produce signified of meticulousness and seriousness. The delicateness of their design and their ornamental presentation communicates refinement, elegance and by extension luxury (Blanchard, 1980, 1998). Finally, Cavassilas (2007) suggest that typefaces, known for their fineness, could signify a subtle and delicate taste with a long finish in contrast to the bold and large fonts which are more likely to signify a strong and powerful taste.

Therefore, the Bordeaux Grands Crus labels, regarding to their typography, convey signified of **greatness, prestige, classicism, tradition, and seriousness**.

2.2.4 Illustrations

Concerning illustrations, the characteristics of the main illustration of each of the labels was investigated on 2 aspects: **(1)** the illustration visual (i.e.: a castle, a vineyard, a coat of arms, an animal or a leaf) and **(2)** the illustration display format (i.e : an etching, a photograph or a painting). The content analysis identified strong recurrences. Concerning the visual of illustration, 55% of the labels contained a castle and 27% contained a coat of arms, monogram or crown. Concerning the display format of the illustration, 70% chose to represent their illustration through an etching.

The thematic visuals of illustrations which are used by the majority of the labels (castle, coat of arms or crowns) produce a sentiment of nobility and social distinction at the same time as tradition and history. Concerning the choice of etchings among other styles of illustration, it conveys signified of tradition and craft-work (Cavassilas, 2007). Indeed, comparing to photography or modern printing techniques, etching is an ancient technique and a craft-work.

Finally, the Bordeaux Grands Crus labels, regarding to their illustrations, convey **nobility and social distinction, tradition and history, craft work**.

3. DISCUSSION

A summary of the semiotic analysis of the Bordeaux Grand Crus visual codes is depicted in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The Bordeaux Grands Crus visual codes

Bordeaux Grands Crus visual codes		
	<i>Signifiers</i>	<i>Signified</i>
Layout and composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Centered layout - Composition structured among horizontal lines - Brand in the full middle of the label 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seriousness, classicism, tradition - Seriousness, classicism, tradition - Prestige, notoriety, and expertise
Colors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pristine white - Yellowing white/ pale yellow - Black and grey - Red - Gold 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High quality product - Tradition, seniority - Classicism, elegance - Red wine - Luxury and social distinction
Brand typography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Capitals letters - Serifed letters with stroke variation - Thin letters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prestige, notoriety - Tradition - Delicate and subtle taste
Illustration theme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Chateau or coat of arms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tradition, seniority, history, social distinction
Illustration style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - One color etching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tradition, seniority, Craft work

This paper presents a conceptual and theoretical contribution as it proposes a definition and an empirical investigation of categorial visual codes, which has been overlooked in the marketing literature. This research demonstrates its value to marketing theory by suggesting its links with the constructs of perceived typicality, design newness and brand differentiation. The content analysis permits verification of the existence of strong recurrences among the labels of the Bordeaux Grands Crus category. Color has already been established in the literature, but reaffirmed by this research. Furthermore, this study also establishes categorial cues for typography, illustrations, and layout. This research has empirically verified that categorial visual codes exist beyond colors. This conclusion supports the adapted construct defined in the first part of the paper. The semiotic analysis allows for verification that the visual codes of the Bordeaux Grands Crus convey meanings, which are highly congruent with the product category. Through a semiotic lense, it appears that those visual codes could be defined as signifiers producing signified meanings of tradition, classicism, prestige, social distinction or luxury.

This paper proposes a methodological approach in two steps. This approach could be useful for managers as it allows: **(1)** to precisely identify the visual codes of one product category (thanks to the content analysis and the observation grid) and **(2)** to analyze the meanings of those codes (thanks to the semiotic analysis). The identification of the categorial visual codes could provide guidelines to help manage the perceived typicality of a brand packaging. The knowledge of the meanings of those codes could help to anticipate the impact of a brand package on the brand perception.

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