

## **Types of authenticity in champagne: The consumer's view**

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□ *Purpose: the aim of this paper is to consider how authenticity is structured in champagne brands in the view of those who consume it.*

□ *Design/methodology/approach: Four focus groups were run, with high and low-involvement consumers both from France and with non-French; stimuli were used in the focus groups to elicit specific responses in relation to authenticity.*

□ *Findings: The consumers 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. Low-involvement consumers were more likely to engage with brand authenticity and medium and high involvement consumers with product authenticity.*

□ *Practical implications: Synthesising these approaches is important for brand managers, who need to take account of whether they are primarily marketing brand authenticity or product authenticity.*

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Key words: (3-5): champagne brands, product authenticity, brand authenticity

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Champagne branding is often seen to be different for the branding of other wines; consistency of product and a high recognition level for major brands mean that it is unusual in a category that is usually very fragmented (Salolainen 1993). The issue of authenticity – increasingly important for modern consumers (Jones, Anand et al. 2005), and particularly for quasi-aesthetic and place based products such as wine (Beverland 2004) – also makes a particularly interesting topic to study.

Some attention has been paid to the idea of authenticity in champagne, but beyond the studies undertaken by Beverland (2004; 2006) and some very exploratory studies by Charters and others (Kniazeva and Charters 2011; Muraz and Charters 2011), champagne authenticity has not been considered in detail. This paper aims to explore the consumer response to champagne branding further, in order to elucidate different brand categories, and especially to examine whether the ideas of product authenticity and brand authenticity are useful ways of understanding consumer perspectives. This is done by way of some exploratory focus groups, which particularly concentrate on two brands of champagne, which belong to the same ‘family’ but which offer very different styles of wine. The comparison of the consumer response to these two brands enables us to reach conclusions regarding the differences between brand authenticity and product authenticity particularly as the two brands are of varying size and need to have varying market positioning.

## **2. CONTEXT**

### **2.1. Consumer Perceptions of Authenticity**

Why do consumers seek authenticity in products? Beverland and Farrelly (2010) suggest that there are three identity benefits which result from authenticity cues. The first of these is control: which is linked to an individual’s need to achieve personal mastery of consumption choices. A second benefit is that of feeling connected. This is related to the significance of place or community attachment which can be linked to personal development because it enables the consumer to feel close to other members of that community. The third identity benefit is feeling virtuous as a result of remaining true to the moral beliefs one accepts.

Beverland (2005; 2006) identified six authenticity attributes applicable to the trade in luxury wine, which includes champagne. These comprise: heritage; stylistic consistency; commitments to uncompromising quality; relationship to place, and; downplaying commercial motives. Beverland (2006) moreover showed that authenticity includes elements that are both extrinsic and intrinsic to wine. Seeking authenticity implies being faced with many paradoxes. Brand managers have to create a balance between traditional and industrial product commitments. Thus a major theme is that champagne brands must be perceived as simultaneously both imbued with history and tradition and completely modern to contemporary consumers (Kapferer and Bastien 2009).

Alexander (2008) argued that some of the six authenticity attributes that Beverland posited are more significant than others. He proposed that place is a major attribute and that production method, quality commitments, pedigree and heritage were all implicit. Nevertheless, his study concentrated on a regional beer. It is possible that is not generalisable to wine.

Additionally, Beverland (2004) presented the main paradoxes of authenticity that consumers are faced with when considering the positioning a luxury wine brand like champagne. First, the idea of quality and the style of a wine are variable and very personal. Additionally, the majority of brands do not conform to the expectations of the modern wine market which has an emphasis on consistent pricing and product quality, targeted promotion, building strong relationships with intermediaries and distributors and a move to global sourcing. Finally, many of the owners of these brands are renowned for being against aggressive marketing, and often criticize the emergence of wines which are mass produced.

## **2.2 Product authenticity and brand authenticity**

The notion of authenticity in consumer behaviour is highly contested, is very hard to pin down, and may be very diverse (Leigh, Peters et al. 2006). Some would consider authenticity to be concrete or objective, rooted in the nature of the product, but increasingly it is seen to be existential, or based on the consumer's subjective experience (Kolar and Zabkar 2010). Other approaches are also used for categorising authenticity, including indexical (innate in the product) or iconic (symbolically representative) (Grayson and Martinec 2004). Nevertheless, while in practice authenticity may be socially constructed and have a representational or experience-based nature (Peterson 2005), it is clear that consumers tend to see it as objective and external to themselves (Beverland 2006).

Within this context it is interesting to examine the concepts of brand authenticity and product authenticity. These have been identified as the way in which certain brand managers categorise what they are doing (Muraz and Charters 2011), and it may be that these two categories of authenticity are also used by consumers. According to Muraz and Charters (2011) for wine, these brand managers suggested that the components of product authenticity include appellation, the production of a unique style, the *savoir faire*, honesty, transparency, quality and consistency; all of these are perceived to be innate in the product as it is consumed. Brand authenticity, on the other hand, is focused on extrinsic attributes: heritage and myth, the creator of the brand (in an 'idealised' version), restraint and brand integrity. It could be suggested that different champagnes will focus predominantly on one or other category.

## **3. THE PROCESS**

This paper is based on a study looking at the perspective of brand managers and consumers of two related brands – although the current paper only reports on the perspective of the consumers. 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 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 18<sup>th</sup> century and brand S from the 19<sup>th</sup>) and both are reasonably well-known, although Brand R is much more visible, and has a much higher production.

The consumer perspective was investigated with by using four focus groups, and the champagnes and their brand management were used as a medium to explore these concepts. The four groups of individuals were selected according to their degree of involvement in purchasing wine. In order to determine their degree of involvement a questionnaire of key involvement issues was handed out to the selected individuals. Furthermore, an international

perspective was included in the focus groups. The four groups of individuals were composed of low-involvement French consumers, low-involvement non-French consumers, medium-high involvement French consumers and medium-high involvement non-French consumers. The level of involvement was determined by a small questionnaire that the individuals were asked to fill out before being selected to participate in the given focus group which covered the monthly wine budget, consumption frequency and basic knowledge about wine.

The four groups were each made up of six individuals. The topics addressed in order were: the nature of authenticity, authenticity in champagne and authenticity in the two brands. In order to generate reactions to the last of these three topics visual stimuli were used. These comprised the following:

- Presentation of the labels of the two brands. Brand R has a label that is bright red with gold elements; Brand S is more restrained and predominantly blue in colour.
- Presentation of the two bottles (the basic brut, non-vintage wine of each brand) including the labels.
- Presentation of two promotional tools from past brand activities. In the case of Brand R this was a stiletto-shoe shaped champagne flute by the designer Christian Louboutin; in the case of Brand S it was a Riedel decanter. Each of these was directly linked to the brand and were chosen because they representative of the brand's positioning and strategic orientations.

The focus-groups were all audio taped and 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, ages 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 ATTRIBUTES OF AUTHENTICITY**

### **4.1 Low-involvement Consumers**

The first question that was asked during the focus group was 'what is authenticity to you?' The overseas low-involvement consumers identified authenticity in its uniqueness of origin and its un-copied originality and genuineness.

*Place of origin is very particular. (Translated from French by the authors).*

*An original – which isn't a copy. (Translated from French).*

Throughout the discussion, other authentic cues emanating from the products' visual identity were identified. The individuals were asked which label and bottle they found more authentic. Brand R's label was chosen as the most authentic when the labels were presented alone. One of the individuals associated the colours red and gold with authenticity which they linked to an image of a more artisanal company:

*The red is more authentic. It's more traditional and the blue is more royal. The red is more like a small traditional enterprise. (Translated from French).*

However, when the bottles were both presented Brand S was perceived as the most authentic. The last attribute of authenticity which was identified by the non-French low-involvement cohort was the explicit presence of gold on the packaging of the bottle.

*It has the gold ribbon which goes with celebration and success and happiness. It seems like this has a medal.*

The gold was thus associated to a form of success and therefore linked to the intrinsic quality of the product; for this consumer that quality showed an implicit link to its authenticity.

Some of the non-French low-involvement participants automatically linked higher prices, at least indirectly, to authenticity.

*The blue is more authentic. The blue is the more expensive. (Translated from French).* Thus there is an implication that more costly wines are more likely to be authentic than less expensive ones. This may be because the latter are more likely to be mass-produced, and mass production is one of the enemies of authenticity – but this is only a supposition. It is price that is the signal of authenticity here.

When presenting the decanter and the stiletto flute to the non-French low-involvement consumers, most of the members agreed to say that it was the former that was the most authentic object yet nevertheless they did show a clear preference for the stiletto flute, which intrigued them.

*[The carafe] is very fine and very beautiful. It's beautiful – but I prefer the shoe. [Yet] the carafe is more authentic. (Translated from French).*

French low-involvement consumers had different reactions to general definition of authenticity from the non-French consumers. Authenticity seemed to interest these consumers more than the previous group; the discussion around this theme lasted longer than in the previous group and included many subtopics. The first question, 'what is authenticity for you?' led to a number of answers which were referred to and detailed throughout the discussion. It is interesting to note the diversity of topics that were mentioned at this stage of the discussion. The words that were immediately associated to authenticity were: unique, old, a product with a history, something real, and something noble. A second phase of the discussion, which was approached in more detail, was about considering authenticity from a time scale point of view. This theme evolved around three varying axes of opinion: (1) that an authentic product is something which doesn't evolve with time, (2) it is something which remains constant, and (3) it is something which sticks to its initial values while evolving with time.

The theme of historic authenticity was developed later on in the discussion when the group was asked to react to the stiletto flute as opposed to the Brand S decanter by Riedel. According to a member of the group, the association of Brand R to a modern and fashionable brand, Christian Louboutin, removed all attributes of authenticity from the stiletto flute.

*That Brand R associates itself with a shoe that is in vogue – for me that isn't authentic. Personally I associate authenticity with what is old, and that [product] is too mixed up with modern values. (Translated from French).*

Additionally, when comparing the stiletto flute and the carafe, the latter was perceived as being the most authentic. For some the perceived authenticity of this object was based on the real utility of the product versus the unnecessary nature of the stiletto flute.

Two contradictory reactions to the visual stimuli were displayed by a couple of members of the group. The first associated authenticity to its distinctive visual identity and the other argued that the perceived authenticity of a champagne emanated from the classic appearance of the packaging. In the first case Brand R was judged more authentic because of its distinctive colours and in the second case Brand S was considered more authentic because of the 'classic' aspect of its packaging. For these participants Brand S, which was identified as

an authentic product was perceived as having a higher quality, being more expensive and produced in smaller quantities. All of these elements were identified as authentic attributes of the product.

*It's a champagne of the best quality, so it's more expensive. Certainly it's produced in small volumes. (Translated from French).*

Although there are some differences between French and non-French low involvement consumers' understanding of authenticity, and their reactions to the two brands (particularly the reaction of the former against the stiletto shaped flute), both groups tended to focus on brand rather than product authenticity. For the non-French the notion is related to the size of the organization, it has distinct links to the visual identity (particularly colour and label style) and there is a hint that it may be positively correlated to quality which can be visually identified by the presence of gold. It is also worth noting that authenticity does not always generate interest and preference for this group of consumers. For the French low-involvement consumers it is necessary to have brand history and heritage and that its brand values must be preserved and integrity maintained – although for some of the participants it can evolve with time. As for the non-French participants, visual identity is fundamental – even though there was a difference between those who sought either a classic or a distinctive image. Place was also important for some of these participants – but it is hard to know if that was the very precise place offered by the concept of terroir (i.e. place which imbues the wine with a taste) or a more general sense of ‘somewhereness’: a culture and tradition which influences how the wine is viewed and made.

#### **4.2 Medium and High Involvement Consumers**

Medium to high involvement consumers were generally older than low-involvement consumers, they had more knowledge about wine and had a bigger monthly budget (more than 100€) for wine and champagne. It is important to note that the individuals who were selected to participate in these two discussions were both moderately involved and highly involved. Further, fewer variances were identified between French consumers and non-French consumers in this category. Brand Recognition was very developed in both groups and the identified attributes of authenticity were very similar.

It is interesting to point out that when asked what authenticity meant to them both the French and the non-French group came up with the same answers. Unlike the low-involvement consumers, these participants identified authenticity more in the intrinsic product rather than in brand attributes. One can therefore draw the conclusion that medium to high involvement consumers react to product authenticity rather than brand authenticity.

In product authenticity terroir was regarded as the most important attribute of authenticity for medium to high involvement consumers whether they were French or from abroad. In other words, uniqueness of origin and of the people who make it is what makes a product authentic.

*Authenticity for me involves terroir, origin, purity.*

Terroir is thus a specific place of origin which influences directly the taste of a wine, which in turn must be ‘pure’. Related to this the second theme discussed was tradition in the production methods – factors which control the style, and thus some of the intrinsic attributes of the wine. According to the discussions traditional production methods and product characteristics make a champagne authentic.

*Authenticity comes from a traditional recipe. (Translated from French).*

*I suppose you can't ignore the traditions of champagne, it is a sparkling wine, Champagne is relatively dry, it is blended wine with the attention that the sum of all*

*the parts is greater than the unique parts. I could argue that these values are authentic.*

Related to this traditional approach, according to these group discussions an authentic product must be 'true'. Associated with this theme were the ideas of natural and organic wine, and something which emanates from nature.

The last idea which was addressed when discussing authenticity in champagne was the importance of the producer. Some individuals in both groups associated authenticity with 'independent winemakers'. According to these individuals an authentic wine emanates from independent winemakers rather than big négociants. One can argue that this theme is related to the idea that authenticity lies in the winemaker's commitment to a particular style of wine.

When presenting Brand R and Brand S labels and bottles both were perceived as being as acceptable by most of the individuals of the two groups. Because of the importance of intrinsic product authenticity and the minor importance of brand authenticity for these participants their reactions to the visual identities of both brands were rarely explicitly associated with authenticity. However, the French consumers did display some varying opinions about whether or not Brand R conformed to their visual expectations of a bottle of champagne. On the one hand, the packaging was considered as identifiable without transgressing the basic rules of champagne packaging and on the other hand some seemed uncomfortable with the red label, which was identified as an abnormal colour.

*This colour disturbs me... (Translated from French).*

However, the non-French consumers, who identified the same champagne bottle cues as the French consumers, agreed that the packaging conformed perfectly to their perception of a bottle of champagne.

Both groups were very intrigued by the stiletto flute. However, the reactions to it were very different for the French and non-French groups. The French group violently rejected the object whereas the non-French group was amused by it while remaining relatively emotionally distant from the object. The French group described the object as being vulgar, decadent, ugly and sexually connoted and clearly disliked with having such an object representing champagne.

*What a horror – this is the pinnacle of vulgarity. (Translated from French).*

Non-French consumers on the other hand had much less fierce reactions to the object. On the contrary they seemed rather amused and intrigued by it. Unlike the French consumers, they perceived Christian Louboutin as a chic French shoe designer and were not disturbed by the object. Nevertheless, it did not, for them, enhance the brand's image of authenticity.

The perceived quality of Brand S was also identified when presenting the Brand S Decanter by Riedel. Unlike the stiletto flute, this object impressed all the consumers because of its excellence.

*It's beautiful. I'd buy that straight away – its very high quality. (Translated from French).*

We can therefore draw the following conclusions on medium to high involvement consumers' perception of authentic cues. First, authenticity exists in the product's terroir. This is a precise, place-related attribute, which can be seen to directly affect the taste of the wine, and thus its intrinsic nature. In a similar way these informants also consider that authenticity is based on the traditional production process and product characteristics of a wine. Further, the authentic product is seen to be natural. The result of the foregoing is that an authentic product is 'true' for these consumers. This was underlined by those who averred that authenticity

emanates primarily from the product and not from its visual identity (and thus from the brand).

## **5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **5.1 Does authenticity in champagne lie in the brand or in the product?**

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

Attributes of product authenticity include the terroir as an origin of place, the people behind the product (to the extent that they shape the wine's style), the quest for a unique style, quality and consistency. A champagne's brand authenticity on the other hand regroups all of the other attributes which have nothing to do with the intrinsic product: heritage and the myth, the founder, visual image and brand integrity make up a brand's authenticity. Attributes of brand authenticity are unique to each champagne. However, it is also clear that consumer approaches to authenticity are informed by their involvement level with the product, as suggested for quality cues generally by Rao and Monroe (1988), with low-involvement consumers using extrinsic rather than extrinsic cues..

We can further suggest certain aspects of the behaviour of these two groups, extrapolated from the comments made previously. Brand authenticity-oriented consumers are driven by the need to make a status or personality statement when purchasing a bottle of champagne. When seeking for peer recognition this consumer, who does not have enough knowledge about wine to be able to differentiate champagnes according to the actual product, tends to choose reassuring brands with strong visual identities and/ or a high price positioning which will allow them to easily convey a message. This is the category of champagne consumer is the most brand loyal and covers a wide part of the market for it concerns low and part of medium involvement consumers as well as French and non-French consumers. Their brand focus means that they perceive authenticity in the extrinsic cues offered by the brand.

Product oriented consumers, who are more highly-involved consumers are knowledgeable enough about wine to be able to differentiate champagnes according to the actual product and therefore pay much less attention to branding. This category of consumers is only moderately brand loyal. Effectively we have established that more involved a consumer is, the less loyal he tends to be to a few champagne brands – although they may be potentially be very loyal to the territorial brand of champagne.

### **5.2 Limitations & Further Investigations**

Two major limitations to this research project were identified throughout investigation. First, the qualitative nature of the research and small number of focus groups make it hard to draw precise conclusions; no more than 'pointers' can be taken from the comments made by participants and we cannot draw generalisable conclusions. A quantitative study would add to the weight of the findings. Second, it is important to keep in mind that this research was



conducted with two brands. We have succeeded in identifying key elements in champagne brand positioning for these two specific brands which in our sense embodied two strategically different approaches to authenticity. It would however be interesting to investigate other big brands and extend the research to growers in further research.

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