Semiotic Analysis Case Study: UK Water Packaging
What is Semiotics?

Semiotics: the analysis of symbols and what they stand for

A symbol stands for something beyond its immediate meaning – a shell is more than a mollusc’s vacated habitat – it represents holidays, warmth, faraway places….

Semiotics is complementary to qualitative / quantitative feedback from consumers – an “expert” view of the interpretation of the signs and symbols used in marketing activities
We all use semiotics everyday

To speed up communications

To project an image to others

To help navigate choice
Why Semiotics is important for packaging success

- Semiotics provides *practical learnings* on the communications symbols, materials, textures, colours, sensory perceptions and design elements related to a specific category.

- This category knowledge gives designers a vital edge in an environment where *visual communication creates the crucial first impression with the consumer and accounts for over 80% of communications intake.*
Semiotics – Residual, Dominant and Emergent codes

When analysing a market sector using semiotics, themes become evident. We split them the following ways:

► **Residual**: long-established, from the past, less used today (sometimes revisited by brands looking to re-inject basic category values)

► **Dominant**: the most common codes used by leading brands

► **Emergent**: new codes being used by a few brands
Semiotics – typical feedback from clients

Semiotics added a deeper layer of insight to our understanding of the category.

I can now explain more clearly the reasons behind our design ideas.

Using semiotics at an early stage saved us a lot of time in the later stages of the project.

I learnt more about the fundamental design elements for our brand in the last two hours than I have working on it for the last two years!

I now ask more questions about the significance of the elements included in our brand designs.
UK Water packaging

Semiotic analysis
Early residual themes: round shapes and opaque unbreakable materials

As carrying water when on the move is such a basic need, residual elements in this category go back a long way, with some strong military connections.

Key early residual themes:

► Rounded shapes: circular vessels have a fundamental link to any eating or drinking as well as a practical role in funnelling the water flow into the mouth

► Flat profile; easy to hold and carry

► Drunk from the bottle

► Opaque, unbreakable, light materials: leather, aluminium, PVC

► Attached lid for multiple usage occasions
Glass is the more recent residual material for bottled water; now used primarily by up-market restaurants / bars or for special editions.

Key later residual themes:
- Smooth rounded shapes (links to an earlier residual theme)
- Fine dining e.g. Hilden reflects wine bottle shape
- Glass reflects the drinking vessel used – not drunk from the bottle
- Transparency – encourages refreshment appeal and shows water clarity / light reflection
- Vibrant colours as well as clear...
Plastic has become the dominant material, but its issues are becoming more evident.

Plastic offers practicality and a degree of clarity, but recent developments signal its sustainability issues.

Key dominant themes:
- Mainly round or square with rounded edges
- Light and easy to carry
- Unbreakable
- Sports cap reflects drinking on the go habit
- Ridged sides give ease of holding and represent water ripples / light refraction
- Crushability and new thinner bottle design remind us of this material’s long-term issues
Paper – a more sustainable way forward, but water values less evident

Paper cartons or moulded paper materials are now coming forward to resolve the plastic bottle’s long-term sustainability issues.

Key emergent themes:
- Mainly round or square with rounded edges / profile
- Light and easy to carry
- Unbreakable
- Shaped shoulders reflect dominant and residual bottle forms and differentiate vs the more basic kids’ fruit drink brick-style cartons
Recommendations from semiotic analysis for paper water packaging:

► Maintain the rounded shapes as these have important links to fundamental water packaging semiotics.

► Look to introduce a sports cap that will communicate “on the go” drinking offered by plastic bottles.

► Surface design should seek to redress the loss of clarity / refreshment appeal vs plastic or glass.
To find out more about semiotics – workshops, analysis and how it could help your next packaging project, please contact us

enquiries@thepackhub.com