



## **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 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 can now explain more clearly the reasons behind our design ideas

I now ask more questions about the significance of the elements included in our brand designs

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





**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*



**Residual**



# Glass is the more recent residual material, now used to add a touch of class

Residual

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

**Dominant**

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

Emergent

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

Emergent

## Recommendations from semiotic analysis :

- ▶ *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](mailto:enquiries@thepackhub.com)