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Abstract

This paper is a synthesis of the semiotic analysis of wines selected for the Wine Spectator's Top 100 competition over the last five years, which are published annually in the « Annales : Le vin et ses marchés » (2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013). This research aims to understand more effectively the building codes of wine packaging, as it is now an essential topic, instrumental to commercial success. However, although both practitioners and academic researchers agree on the importance of labelling and branding, the rules and the process of creating the packaging message are misunderstood, as they have been largely neglected in the various marketing studies. Most of them address the issue of consumer choice, faced with different labels and bottle styles, amongst other trade-off variables. However, the intrinsic relevance and effectiveness of the design of the message in “telling the story” of the wine is not really taken into account.

Conversely, our paper attempts to define how an efficient story can be developed to enhance the distinguishing qualities of a noteworthy bottle. From this corpus of high-end wines we identify the semiotic structure of a «typical narrative» which can be observed in all the wine producing countries in the winners list (between 12 and 15, from year to year) and which are establishing a worldwide standard for communicating about the quality of wine, that stretches far beyond the immediate results of the “Top 100”.

The semiotic analysis of the bottle is based on the principle that the shape, label, colour, illustrations, and all the verbal and non-verbal signs on the packaging provide a narrative of the wine for the «reader-consumer» that is targeted by this syncretic discourse.

According to Hjelmslev’s theory of planes of language (1943), all the elements of this discourse are considered to be signs built by the correlation between « the plane of the expression » and « the plane of the contents », which extend the Saussure concept of ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’ to the packaging discourse as a whole. The first part of the paper describes the main constituents of this theoretical framework when applied to the understanding of the packaging and branding of quality wines. This perspective prevents the evaluation of the performance of the discourse about the bottle based on a single variable, such as a particular colour, name or illustration, etc, as the latter are usually obtained through current quantitative research studies. In contrast, it suggests envisaging the efficiency of the message as the generation of a homogeneous complete narrative, insofar as the consumer is drawn in by a global meaning and not by an isolated sign, artificially set (and tested) as standing alone and taken out of its context.

Secondly, the observation of the corpus clearly shows that two major forms of discourses emerge year after year: (a) those which favour the story-telling of the wine starting from the competence of the “enunciator”, that is the producer-marketer of the bottle of wine; (b) those which favour the story-telling of the wine from the promise of satisfaction and pleasure provided to the consumer, “the enunciatee”. Here, we have used “endo-oriented discourses” to designate the first form, and “exo-oriented discourses” to designate the second. From 2008 to 2012, the corpus switches to a strong polarity of endo-oriented packaging discourses (from 82% in 2009 to 70% in 2012). These findings are in line with the need for trust in the quality of high-end fine wines, disclosed in many consumer studies, both in Europe and in the New World markets. This orientation expresses itself in a specific brand architecture which increases the
importance and visibility of the brand-name of the enunciator in the labelling, regardless of the status of this enunciator (winery, winemaker, estate, wine merchant) and reduces the place of the brand of cuvée, that is to say the name of the wine in the bottle. In general, the enunciator's brand is complemented by a “range brand”, which, in a majority of cases, is a geographical indication (I.G.) whatever the nature of the I.G. (international or regional mark of legal protection, collective brand, local or private claim, etc.). In the same way, the illustrative system enhances the importance of the enunciator-I.G. group of brands.

By comparison, the brand architecture of the fewer “exo-oriented” discourses promotes the brand of cuvée and reduces the visibility of the brand-name of the enunciator. However, as with the endo-oriented discourses, the brand of the cuvée must be enhanced by a complementary brand-name (designating a range), again most of the time an I.G. brand or a grape variety combined with an I.G.. Now, the cuvée-range group underpins the illustrative features. These exo-oriented discourses are most frequent in the USA and Australia, whilst remaining in the minority.

The exo-oriented discourses offer three registers of meaning: (i) the evocation of a poly-sensuality of the wine itself (organoleptic dimensions); (ii) the emotional representations shared by the wine drinkers; (iii) some depictions of a virtual better life for the amateur wine-taster.

Finally, all the discourses are based on a branding system which includes an enunciator's brand-name, a category brand (I.G. or an I.G. plus another qualification) and a brand of cuvée. However, the modulations of the importance of each of these elements, most of the time amplified by the illustrative, graphic and typographic effects, leads to two different narratives, the first celebrating the wine through the competence of the author of the discourse, the second suggesting a potential harmony of the sensory dimensions of the wine with the feelings of the receiver of the packaging message (enunciatee).

In the third and conclusive part of this paper, the results are discussed and the conditions for extending them to all types of wines are questioned. The ascendancy of the endo-oriented discourses is questionable for more common wines, that target a more hedonistic and simple consumption than the status of the tasters in special sharing situations. Further research must be carried out to take into account wines in the lower price ranges than the Top 100.

On the other hand, the design of the semiotic framework relies on two levels of analysis: the discursive orientation and the narrative contents. Both of these approaches should be deepened to understand more effectively the inter-type variations of the discourses - endo or exo-oriented - and the variety of the themes and motifs of the narratives connected with the two discursive stances. Future research will need to introduce other semiotic tools, such as “tensive analysis” which would enable the extent and intensity given to every meaning of a narrative to be evaluated.

The discursive and narrative analysis of the packaging messages gives access to the organization of the meaning and to the understanding of the links between each sign put in evidence. The qualitative and quantitative studies should be overhauled from these perspectives rather than relying on the evaluation of isolated signs. Certainly, it is a longer yet very necessary road to improving the packaging communication on wine.

Bibliographie