

Sisters, not Twins

An Investigation of Visual Brand Identity Cohesion across a Product Portfolio

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B.Mgmt (Mktg), B.IntlSt, M.Bus (Research)

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

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March 2021



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Acknowledgements¹

I've come to realise that this thesis is not a book at all, but a bookend that marks three years in my life. To the people who shared those years, your handprints are forever pressed within these pages.

To my supervisors with wisdom and patience in equal measure, thank you.

To Joanne, my ride or die. We did it.

¹ Ella Ward's PhD research received support from an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship, and from the many sponsors of the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute's fundamental research.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university and that to the best of my knowledge it does not contain any materials previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in text.

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March 2021

"Started making it. Had a breakdown. Bon Appétit"
-James Acaster, The Great British Bake Off

Abstract

In today's cluttered marketing environment visual brand identity is a crucial means to differentiate a brand from its competitors (Buil et al., 2016; Jain, 2017; Kapferer, 2004; Vinita et al., 2021). Comprising clear, proprietary cues, the purpose of brand identity is to unify disparate brand elements in a manner that feels seamless to consumers (Perry & Wisnom, 2003; Sample et al., 2020; Wheeler, 2013).

Representing both an opportunity and a threat to building a brand's identity are line extensions, that is, when a product is launched under an existing brand name into the same category.

To communicate a strong visual brand identity, all products within a portfolio need to be connected to one another in terms of design (Nguyen et al., 2018). It is this unified visual message that enables consumers to perceive the products as members of a single brand family (Boatwright et al., 2009; Nguyen et al., 2018; Olins, 1989). A crucial means to achieve this cohesion is the visual similarity of Distinctive Brand Assets such as logos, colours, shapes, typefaces, characters, and styles (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2008). When effectively built and linked to the brand, these brand assets act as powerful mnemonic devices to improve brand learning, retention and accessibility from memory (Childers & Houston, 1984; Hartnett et al., 2016; Perry & Wisnom, 2003; Romaniuk & Sharp, 2016). Akin to a mental short cut, well established Distinctive Assets form heuristic devices that help shoppers to find their brands on-shelf (Gaillard et al., 2005; Hartnett & Romaniuk, 2008; Keller, 2003a).

When branding assets are used inconsistently across the portfolio, the brand identity becomes fragmented, creating several versions of a visual brand identity that must each be supported. This fragmentation can cause siloed marketing efforts targeted at each line extension, rather than focusing on the strength and development of a holistic Masterbrand identity. Thus, without a cohesive Masterbrand strategy, resources must be split, and different marketing tactics allocated to uphold these divergent identities (Koschmann & Sheth, 2018). As fragmentation increases, the level of support required by these disparate identities can eat into the resources required to maintain and build the Masterbrand (Farquhar et al., 1992). Hence excessive fragmentation can cause resources to be spread too thin, such that no one identity is adequately reinforced. Simply, trying to support too many versions of a brand's identity can be "a recipe for inefficient and ineffective brand building" (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000).

Despite widespread agreement that consistency is an important aspect to building, fortifying and preserving a brand's identity (e.g. Aaker, 2014; Beverland et al., 2015; Keller, 1993; Park et al., 1986), to date, consistency of branding across a portfolio

remains unexplored. With a new product launched in the USA every two minutes (Nielsen, 2019), portfolio branding is a research area of key relevance to industry and academia. This thesis presents three studies which investigate the coherence of visual brand identity, as well as key drivers of fragmentation, across products in a branded portfolio. In total, the scope of this research spans over 2100 products from 211 brands in 11 categories and three markets.

Study One

Study One considers the role of Distinctive Asset types in creating brand identity cohesion across a branded portfolio. A framework for coding pack images is developed and an original measure of Portfolio Branding Cohesion (PBC) is proposed. In total, PBC scores were calculated for 125 brands across nine categories in the United Kingdom. This involved calculation of 465 consistency scores across the six Distinctive Asset types measured.

Key findings determine that average PBC is 58 out of a possible 100, suggesting brands will use their Distinctive Assets across 58% of their portfolio on average. It is found that high consistency in the use of logos contributes the most to this cohesion, whilst the inconsistent use of colour contributes to brand identity fragmentation. Investigation into the factors affecting cohesion determine that the number of Distinctive Assets used across the portfolio explains the greatest portion of variance in PBC scores. Number of sub-brands, and whether the brand is private label are also found have a negative relationship with PBC, whilst the presence of a corporate brand on pack has no effect.

Study Two

Study Two continues the investigation into drivers of brand identity fragmentation by quantifying the extent to which products use similar design elements to signal the category or variant type to consumers. Spanning three consumer goods categories (Toothpaste, Fabric Conditioner, and Chewing gum), pack design prototypicality was measured across three markets; the USA, China and the UK. In total, 1394 SKUs belonging to 224 brands were evaluated.

Results establish 15 category prototypes, used by $\geq 50\%$ of products and brands, including colour and pack styles. However, these prototypes do not necessarily reflect the vast majority of products in a category, as up to 40% of products do not use these prototypical designs. This suggests that the perceived importance of these prototypes for category inclusion and purchase is overstated. Prototypical use of pack style to signal product variety is also low, with only 6 pack style prototypes documented across 68 variant groups. Comparatively, 78 prototypical colours are found. This indicates that colour is a design element commonly used to signal a product's variety to consumers.

Results determine that use of an image to signal variety is not systematically higher amongst certain variant types; rather, variant imagery is used by only 56% of products on average. This suggests variant imagery is a tool used by some brands but not others across all products, rather than a device that is prototypical of certain variant types.

Study Three

To establish whether the packaging design prototypes recorded in Study Two mirror consumer expectations of variant signals, Study Three investigates the presence of associations between colours, images and variants in consumer memory. Using online surveys, data were collected for three categories (Fabric Conditioner, Chewing Gum, and Toothpaste) in the United States. In total, 1853 category buyers recruited via online panels were surveyed.

Findings of this study reveal that consumers hold colour associations for just over half of the 25 variant types tested. Yet alignment between the colours used on pack, and the colour expectations of consumers is just 16% on average. This overall lack of conformity between consumer memory associations and on pack behaviour indicates a disconnect between the cues utilised by consumers to distinguish variants, and those that are used by products and brands. Where there is conformity, it appears most strongly for flavours or scents with a clear link to the natural environment (e.g. lemon and yellow). This suggests that where a prototype does not have a clear link to the natural environment, it is the onus of the brand to teach consumers this distinguishing trait.

Results also show that for 23 of 25 variant types tested, more consumers associate images with variants than they do colour. With strong and direct links to variant types, images present a viable alternative to colour when signalling product variety on pack.

Contributions to Marketing Theory

Study One presents the methodological contribution of this research, a coding framework and original measure of Portfolio Branding Cohesion. Alongside this, the first known empirical benchmark of brand identity strength established.

It is found that logos contribute the most to visual cohesion across a portfolio, and colours the least, bolstering existing research into the competitiveness of these asset types (e.g. Hoek & Gendall, 2010; Major et al., 2014; Ward et al., 2020). This research examines six different Distinctive Asset types, contributing to theory by bringing together research that is commonly siloed by individual asset type. It also

extends existing knowledge by investigating how Distinctive Assets compete on pack within a portfolio, and not just against other brands.

Study Two contributes to theory with the largest empirical investigation of visual design elements to date. Results show limited evidence of category prototypes, contributing to theories of design by quantifying the existence, or rather lack thereof, of these design prototypes in a real-world setting. This research challenges the notion that appearing prototypical is an essential precondition to consumer consideration and purchase (Mocanu et al., 2012; Orth & Malkewitz, 2008; Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998).

Study Three finds prevalent use of prototypical colours to signal variety. Documentation of these prototypes contributes to the growing body of research which investigates the presence and parameters of colour-flavour associations in human memory (Ambrose & Harris, 2011; Garber Jr et al., 2001; Piqueras-Fiszman et al., 2012; Velasco et al., 2014b; Zampini et al., 2008). This research extends knowledge into personal and household care, where other dimensions of variety, such as scent and functional benefit, are considered alongside flavour.

Finally, this research contributes to marketing theory as it offers an empirical study of images on pack, an area notably under researched when compared to other pack design elements (Gil-Pérez et al., 2020). By establishing the presence of these prototypes in a packaged goods and branding context, and drawing upon Associative Network Theories, the Fan Effect and Theory of Cued Retrieval, Prototype theory, and theories of Cross-modal Colour-Flavour Correspondence, this research leverages schools of Psychology, Food Science, and Marketing to extend theoretical knowledge.

Implications for Marketing Practice

The framework and PBC metric developed provide industry practitioners with a method to objectively measure the cohesion of their portfolio branding and compare against established benchmarks. To best interpret the PBC metric, brands should consider the number of Distinctive Assets used to represent their portfolio, the number of sub-brands present, and whether or not the brand is a Private Label, all factors determined to decrease Portfolio Branding Cohesion.

Results find 16% of brands studied have a PBC of 100, suggesting that perfect branding cohesion is not only desirable, but attainable. To improve cohesion, it is recommended that all Distinctive Assets be given the same weighted importance as logos, the most consistently used type, during the decision-making process. Further, brand managers must be conscious not to fragment colour simply because

it is an easy and cost effective means to create distinction between products (Newstead, 2014). To further promote cohesion, industry practitioners should not prioritise perceived prototypical design elements at the expense of Distinctive Assets, as this research finds little evidence to support their widespread existence.

In fact, where pack design prototypes do exist, this research finds little conformity between consumer expectations of variant signals, and the colours actually used by brands to signal variety on pack. By comparison, variant images demonstrate clear links to variant types in consumer memory, present for a greater proportion of category buyers with far less ambiguity. Despite this, 44% of products do not use imagery to signal product variety, revealing a missed opportunity to effectively signal the variant without compromising visual brand identity.

Results of this research provide empirically grounded guidelines to help industry practitioners launch successful product line extensions. The findings of this research demonstrate how brands can use line extensions to build visual cohesion across their portfolio and ensure brand identity is strengthened in the long-term. Ultimately, this research helps practitioners to achieve the two critical, yet opposing goals of line extension packaging design. That is, to signal the product's membership within a visually cohesive brand family, whilst clearly articulating the way in which it is functionally different. As such, this research provides empirical evidence for how to effectively design product line extensions to look like sisters, but not twins.