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**Fill up the bottle with iconic liquid**

A qualitative research conceptualising iconic packaging

*By Amanda Nordlander, Linnea Svensson, Emilia Möller and Isabell Schönström*

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# **Fill up the bottle with iconic liquid: a qualitative research conceptualising iconic packaging**

*Amanda Nordlander, Linnea Svensson, Emilia Möller and Isabell Schönström*

## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to investigate how a brand's packaging design becomes iconic through entering pop culture/art.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This paper is of qualitative nature, based on a traditional literature review along with multiple case-study research. This approach allows for deep analysis into the dimensions of iconic packaging. Finally, template analysis was made to analyse textual data.

**Findings:** The main finding of this research is that packaging can become iconic through specific iconicity assets, namely authenticity, longevity, packaging recognition, uniqueness, and symbolism. Interdependence between the assets was found, which led to the iconic features of the packaging.

**Research limitations:** One key limitation of this paper is that only a selected number of cases have been analysed. It should further be noted that the analysis has been done from an outside-in perspective. Another limitation is that the research method did not include primary data findings. The case studies are also focused on four specific examples, the results are not generalisable as such.

**Practical implications:** Logotypes and brand packaging can function as iconic symbols in art and pop culture, which by extension can contribute to brand equity and value.

**Originality/value:** This paper can contribute to the research within the field of cultural branding, and extend the knowledge of how brands become iconic through their packaging design.

**Keywords:** Cultural branding, iconic brands, packaging design, brand equity, brand identity.

**Paper type:** Research paper.

## Introduction

Due to cultural changes and the emergence of consumers having countless choices, a unique set of attributes, both tangible and intangible, that compose a distinctive value proposition has never been more important (Kapferer, 2012). The growing competition from low-cost players and the fact that the superiority of a product alone is no longer sufficient enough represents a key challenge in today's attention economy (Kapferer, 2012; Melin, 2002). Only brands that are managed strategically, and look for other, more sustainable means of competition have a fighting chance of success (Melin, 2002). Branding is a fundamental part of marketing for many products and corporations. Though, packaging can have an immense impact on customers due to its communicative aspects (Draskovic, 2007). Packaging is not only a means of informing the product's physical characteristics but also a way to convey its intangible attributes (Pereira, 2021). Packages are used as advertising discourses in visual communication strategies, for promoting a brand's products, and these communication strategies are part of a process in which the packaging is a tool for distributing symbols and values (Pereira, 2021).

Iconic brands have been an often recurring theme in literature, focusing on how brands use cultural branding to reach iconic status (Holt, 2004). Whether or not something is iconic is dependent on the individual and one's view may not correspond with another's (Norris, Swayne, Taylor & Taylor, 2021). This can also be connected to the understanding of what a consumer perceives as iconic in a brand. Furthermore, components of a brand include many aspects, such as its products, its brand concept, and the visuals such as the logo, however, one aspect of the brand and its iconic status not often

discussed is the packaging design (Kapferer, 2012). Packaging design is usually seen as a tangible functional asset, but it is the intangible that drives the emotion, which aligns with how art functions (Kapferer, 2012). The process of becoming iconic through the packaging design indicates that there is some sort of intangible added value (Kapferer, 2012). Thus, this paper intends to investigate how packaging designs and companies have managed to obtain intangible values and thus created packaging icons.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the research topic, this paper provides a traditional literature review on brand as icons, cultural branding, art, and packaging design. Within the methodology section, the use of a qualitative research approach is described and justified. The four brands examined in this paper, namely, Heinz, Coca-Cola, Absolut Vodka, and Solstickan have packaging that has reached iconic status. While each story is unique, there are various aspects the packages have in common that have elevated them to a point where they have become the brand or at least a significant part of it. Following, the research findings are presented and analysed to draw conclusions. Key dimensions of iconic packaging design will be determined, and managerial implications will provide insights into iconic packaging's stretching capabilities.

## Literature review

### *Brands as icons and cultural branding*

Current literature and authors that investigate cultural branding believe that using cultural forces can build strong brands which ultimately become brand icons that have extra added value due to their symbolic strength (Heding, Knudtzen

& Bjerre, 2008; Holt, 2004). Emphasis is also put on what impact branding and brands have on culture (Heding, Knudtzen & Bjerre, 2008). The phenomenon when a marketing or brand manager intentionally gives a brand cultural content or aspect is what we know as cultural branding. “Embedded in the symbolic universes of branding” (Heding, Knudtzen & Bjerre, 2008, p. 211) refers to the idea that the consumer exists in the constant space between imperialism, globalisation, and finally cultural standardisation where the brand will relate to the consumer through their cultural background. This means that the brand ultimately is perceived as a compilation of cultural identity triggers such as myths, stories, and traditions meant to initiate consumption (Heding, Knudtzen & Bjerre, 2008).

Another way to trigger consumption, or base a marketing or branding campaign on, is to address cultural icons (Holt, 2004). These icons are anchored in politics, different types of advertisements, articles or journalism, and entertainment. Their iconic features fit the criteria since these often are seen as a society’s foundational compass and are symbols that a large majority of an entire nation can relate to. In these symbols or iconic features lies a significant level of trust and people are prone to be more accepting if they receive information through them. Furthermore, a cultural icon can also be a person or figure, preferably seen as a representative for some kind of movement or institution that is considered worthy of appreciation and respect (Holt, 2004). The “icons” play an important role when analysing marketing or branding in these aspects. They can be further explained as exemplary symbols in the way that they connect with customers - not only in the sense that the consumer can identify themselves or feel a connection with the icon, but also that they manage to offer the highest level of relevance and value, at a certain given time. Brand icons can also be described by this concept. The

key factor has to be that they, in the best way possible, relate to the most relevant and overall known concerns or issues. Furthermore, in comparison to the identity brand, the brand icons must achieve an even better trigger to identification with the consumer, by representing even more influential myths in each relevant culture (Heding, Knudtzen & Bjerre, 2008).

Furthermore, Holt (2004) uses a cultural branding model to distinguish seven key axioms to explain iconic brands and how they over time evolve and are sustained:

1) Iconic brands are the source of extended identity value since these kinds of brands are aiming towards collective desires and anxieties that a nation shares (Holt, 2004). These common anxieties between individuals derive from responses to the same historical changes a nation is influenced by;

2) Every day, people are exposed to different types of mass media, which leads to personal anxieties. Holt (2004) indicates that brands perform myths and that these myths soothe the anxieties that are a result of the social disturbances, and helps individuals to identify a certain purpose in life and establish the imagined identity;

3) As brands act as myths, the receivers will comprehend that these myths are vested within the brand’s markers, e.g., their logo, names, elements, and designs (Holt, 2004). The brands become embodiments and personifications of the myths, thus, consumers experience the myths while using the products. While holding on to a product, the customers lessen their burdens arising in their identity, which eventually leads to them forging emotional ties to the brand;

4) Identity myths are most often found in populist worlds, which are other places than everyday life, or the realities of commerce (Holt, 2004). Individuals within these worlds share particular ethos and give them inducement for their actions;

5) Iconic brands encourage people to think of themselves differently. Also,

the iconic brands with the most power promote cultural change (Holt, 2004). It lies in the power of truly strong and influential brands to make individuals prone to question themselves;

6) Iconic brands by their performances become hugely wanted (Holt, 2004);

7) When iconic brands are delivering a significant myth, which consumers regard as applicable when they establish their identities, this identity value constructs a cultural halo (Holt, 2004).

### *Art and packaging design*

According to Klimchuk and Krasovec (2012), several contributing factors make a product marketable, particularly structure, colour, form, materials, typography, and knowledge about laws and regulations regarding ancillary design. There also exists an ambition with packaging design to reach marketing goals by ensuring that the customer is aware of the function or personality of the product. Klimchuk and Krasovec (2012) further explain the importance of touchpoints in packaging design. Touchpoints refer to the components of a brand that consumers can easily identify as being a cornerstone of the brand in question, and are firmly connected to the consumer's mental image of the brand. The key elements of packaging touchpoints include photography, typographic design, illustration, or patterns, and can often only be considered touchpoints after having been linked to the brand for an extended period of time (Klimchuk & Krasovec, 2012). The packaging design can also represent the cultural values of a specific market or society, hence, one should not overestimate cultural values and beliefs and the impact they have on a consumer's purchasing decisions. Some cultural values can be reflected in a packaging design, which are trends, fashion and art, upward mobility, consumer age, groups, and ethnicity (Klimchuk & Krasovec, 2012).

Furthermore, according to Schroeder (2005), the world of brands and the world of art cross each other in many ways. Artists who succeed eventually become managers of their brand (Schroeder, 2005). Schroeder (2005) also describes that advertising has been developed closely to art and continues to have a connection to it. Therefore, many artists know brands since they are constantly creating emotional connections and work with image management. According to Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) consumption now involves more creativity in terms of fantasy and emotion.

### *Iconic packaging design*

Holt (2004) examines a few cases where brands have tried to reach authenticity through the art world. He further explains that the brands had to adapt to the disdain of the mass culture and the specific advertising used. As previously mentioned, to build iconic brands there is a need for a compelling identity myth that resides in the brand's cultural icons. As well as with brands, art can become iconic, and packaging as a component is also seen as mythmaking (Kniazeva & Belk, 2007). When these two aspects are combined, we often find examples such as Andy Warhol's portrayals of different packaging designs incorporated in his art (Schroeder, 2009), where he gives the packaging a new context. These examples contribute to brand building since the visuals of the packaging are seen in another context. As mentioned, cultural icons are representative symbols that constitute a particular kind of story, an identity myth (Holt, 2004). By bringing packaging into art, the artists create an identity myth by the packaging design that furthermore creates added intangible value to the packaging and brand itself.

### *Brand equity*

Brand equity, in its simplest terms, consists of a marriage between behaviours and associations that influence the brand's consumers, the parent corporation, and channel members which in theory will allow the brand to collect larger margins of profit than they could without such associations (Kapferer, 2012). According to Keller (2013), the meaning of branding is to bring empowerment to products and services through brand equity. Another definition of brand equity is the effects on marketing that can be traced back to the brand. The author also explains that brand equity illustrates the difference in success between branded products or services and generic ones. When a brand invests large amounts of capital into marketing their product, it will often lead to new increases of value, and this added value can be referred to as brand equity (Keller, 2013).

### *Brand identity*

Brand identity conveys to the consumer what the characteristics of the brand's value and uniqueness are (Kapferer, 2012). The identity of a brand includes the brand's meaning, aim, and self-image. Today, the concept of brand identity finds itself as a hallmark of most advanced marketing companies that have pursued their identity-based strategies along with proprietary models (Kapferer, 2012). Furthermore, Greyer and Urde (2019) argue that for a brand to have a clear purpose and direction, it needs to have a strong brand identity. This will allow the company to increase the standing of its products, help them attract more personnel, and provide security to the company's reputation during hard times. A strong brand identity can help ensure stability in the company's vision, and aid in the consumer perception of various brand-associated products (Greyer & Urde, 2019). Understanding brand identity is important for companies as it defines

every attribute that the brand encompasses, from tangible to intangible (Kapferer, 2012).

## **Methodology**

This paper will use an inductive reasoning approach through the use of qualitative research. The foundation is built on a traditional literature review of iconic brands, cultural branding, art, and packaging. The purpose of the literature review was to enable a historical interpretation of the subject in relation to the research question and to gain an understanding of the research areas to divulge the connection between the fields (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson & Jaspersen, 2015). Furthermore, the literature review provided a basis for the assets used in the iconic packaging bottle, which is introduced in the analysis.

In parallel, a qualitative multiple case study was adopted (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The case study research allowed for an in-depth analysis of dimensions of iconic packaging and how it has evolved throughout history (Farquhar, 2012). The use of this approach enabled an understanding of iconic packaging in a specific context and allowed us to gain insight into this field of research (Farquhar, 2012). Furthermore, the choice of case study research was particularly applicable in this study since the aim was to investigate *how* (Farquhar, 2012), a packaging design becomes iconic. Four cross-case comparisons were made, as the number represented multifariousness in the analysis, which improves the building of theory since this approach enables investigation of additional events within the research field (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Moreover, the cross-case comparison was adopted to improve the validity of the findings (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Cases were handpicked through purposive sampling (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Three criteria were used:

1. The product packaging was regarded iconic by the authors;
2. Element(s) of the packaging design had somewhat been turned into art;
3. The products had been available for at least five decades, allowing for analysis of iconicity drivers that emerge with time.

Data analytical techniques used were template analysis (King, 2012; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson & Jaspersen, 2018), which is a flexible way to analyse textual data (King, 2012). In this study, codes that appeared during the case study research and analysis were used to understand and make the data coherent. When conducting template analysis, one can use both predetermined and determined codes (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). In this study, the particular assets that were found to be contributions of how a packaging design becomes iconic were not determined at the beginning of the study. These assets were distinguished as the study emerged, and were defined and highlighted in the analysis. The predetermined codes consisted of the understanding of iconic packaging design. With this approach, inductive and deductive reasoning took place since a balance between existing theory and theory building appeared (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Secondary data of the four brands were collected from different sources including company and industry reports, academic journals, websites, and other literature (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Conclusions were formulated through cross-case comparison and integration with the findings from the literature review.

## **Case study research and findings**

### *Case 1 - Heinz ketchup*

Heinz was founded by Henry J. Heinz in 1869. Although Heinz Tomato Ketchup is by far the most well-known product today,

the company began as a producer of horseradish, bottled in clear glass to demonstrate its purity. The story of how Heinz has become one of the world's most relished brands is primarily associated with consistent quality which is one of the key elements that has made this product an intercontinental icon (Verhaaf, 2011).

Heinz has throughout history maintained a consistent vision for the purity and quality of their products, together with the importance of marketing, advertising, and sales. The outcome has been one of the world's most notorious icons, the octagonal ketchup bottle. Only a small number, if any, can compete with Heinz on the consistency of their packaging design (Verhaaf, 2011). Furthermore, the shape of the Heinz label is regarded as the most iconic dimension of the brand. Although being used for multiple products, when applied to the octagonal bottle, it is instantly recognised as Heinz ketchup. Even without a logo or text visible on the label, one would still recognise the product (Verhaaf, 2011).

Being unique in appearance, it almost took over customer perception of what a ketchup bottle should look like. The iconic packaging design has further been recognised by artists across the globe and has been transformed into pop art objects, namely 'Ketchupsaurus' in 2004, ketchup dunny figure in 2010, and pop art paintings. In most parts of the world, the Heinz brand is almost synonymous with ketchup. This comes with no surprise given the success the product has had for decades (Verhaaf, 2011).



**Figure 1:** Evolution of Heinz ketchup bottle (Verhaaf, 2011).

### Case 2 - Coca-Cola

Coca-Cola may be the most famous iconic brand in history (Hodgson, n.d.). One of the first marketing efforts made by Coca-Cola was to give out free coupons to customers to let them have a taste of the drink. Later on, they experimented and included fun and happy elements within their advertisement as part of their brand personality (Hodgson, n.d.). The most significant element that Coca-Cola always has maintained is its core values, which always have remained the same even though the market has changed. By uniting the brand core and the elements of happiness, community, inclusion, and joy, a timeless brand that has the power to survive in decades, has been created. Moreover, its festive connections and the belief that Coca-Cola is the creator of the Santa Claus as we know him today, linked to the Coca-Cola trademark of red and white colours have truly been successful in their brand awareness strategies (Hodgson, n.d.).

Coca-Cola's design is often connected to its distinctive logo, iconic packaging, and well-known colour, and it is the combining of these components that have made Coca-Cola one of the world's most valuable and famous brands (Butler & Tischler, 2015). Coca-Cola has successfully established a packaging design, the contour bottle, which is an established aspect that forms an integral part of the brand identity (McCormack,

Cagan & Vogel, 2004). While these elements play an important role, it is still the invisible factors that play the most crucial part (Butler & Tischler, 2015). In this case, a consistent design and shape have been maintained throughout the product development. The brand identity has been sustained throughout this progress which could only be done if an established understanding of the value of the packaging shape and design was common for the different departments, such as marketers and designers within the company (McCormack, Cagan & Vogel, 2004). For example, understanding the emotional elements associated with the design and different combinations of shapes that ultimately compose the brand (McCormack, Cagan & Vogel, 2004). Although Coca-Cola has tried different types of logos over the years, the classic serif script has always found its way back (Hodgson, n.d.). The typography is designed by Frank M. Robinson, who also invented the logo and named the beverage.



**Figure 2:** The Coca-Cola logo over time (Hodgson, n.d.).

What has made Coca-Cola one of the most famous iconic brands is its focus on consistency (Hodgson, n.d.). Since they have chosen to keep their logo with the same scripted font, as well as maintaining the red colour along with advertisements always including the same message of happiness and joy, has enabled Coca-Cola to create an enduring imprint in consumers' minds. Furthermore, to be wary of big changes, meaning one should not make big changes without careful consideration, and stay relevant and know the power of your brand, has also been

crucial for Coca-Cola's success (Hodgson, n.d.).

### *Case 3 - Solstickan*

The sun match boy, originating from the company and foundation Solstickan, has become a well-known iconic symbol in Sweden since its launch in the 1930s. The company's fundamental idea was to sell matchboxes, and with each sold matchbox donate some of the winnings to the foundation to help children and elders with diabetes and rheumatism. The sun match boy was created by the artist Einar Nerman and has since then continued to decorate its packaging and other design items in Sweden under the ownership of the corporation of Swedish Match AB (Solstickan design, 2021a).

The packaging design of the matchbox is a cultural iconic symbol in Sweden, that is seen on posters and various housing items in multiple homes in Sweden. According to Swedish Match, it could be seen as one of the most famous artworks in Sweden (Swedish Match, n.d.). In the 1970s, 70 per cent of the matchboxes sold in Sweden were from Solstickan, making it a prominent brand with the image of the sun match boy at front. The piece of art on the matchbox became almost synonymous with matchboxes as a concept (Aronsson & Sandin, 1996). The sun match boy has become a design symbol for further brand extensions due to its success as an iconic symbol. The idea is to preserve and carry on the classic Swedish symbol and continue to support the foundation (Solstickan design, 2021a).



*Figure 3: Poster 50x70 cm (Solstickan design, 2021b).*

### *Case 4 - Absolut Vodka*

In the marketing world, a well-known case is Absolut Vodka, and the main facet of the brand's success is the design of its bottle (Radic, 2013). In the 19th century, a man named L.O. Smith set the bedrock on what a whole century later became the successful brand, Absolut Vodka (L.O. Smith, 2018).

When Absolut worked with the development of their today world-famous bottle, they adopted the approach of designing the bottle with the name as the title at the top of the bottle, which was then followed by a label explaining the traditions and history of the company located lower on the bottle. All of this had the effect of looking somewhat reminiscent of an old-fashioned advertisement (L.O. Smith, 2018). This design has greatly helped in ensuring that the bottle has become an iconic mainstay (Radic, 2013). It is expressed by Radic (2013) that Absolut Vodka has always made sure to put the bottle at the centre of attention in their marketing, and it is the design of the bottle, and alterations made to the bottle that have been used to convey such concepts as stories, thoughts, visions and ideas. Having established this as a core method of their marketing strategy,

Absolut Vodka would later develop their strategy further by including collaborations with artists of different creative fields (Radic, 2013). According to Scott (2012) the creation of the “Absolut Warhol” that was made in collaboration with Andy Warhol, is expressed to be one of the most famous collaborations that Absolut has done. This new way to market by collaborating with artists that were based in different creative areas was up until this point rarely seen, and the fine artistry allowed for Absolut Vodka to reach out to new target groups (L.O. Smith, 2018). It proved to be a symbiotic relationship between advertisers and artists, as it allowed them to use the works of talented artists in their ads, as well as acting as a way for the artist to market their work. This type of collaboration also proved that it was possible to combine art and advertising (Scott, 2012).



**Figure 4:** Absolut artworks by Andy Warhol and Keith Haring (Widewalls, n.d.).

It is clear that Absolut Vodka’s approach in their marketing strategy, of using a broad variety of different types of collaborations in the markets they are present in, has been very successful (Radic, 2013). Another example, in which Absolut Vodka is a perfect role model, is to use storytelling and let consumers know more about their history. For this, they use many different symbolic elements such as music, fashion, art and people and it is important to incorporate this in the marketing strategy to keep the brand fresh, relevant and attractive (Radic, 2013).

## Analysis

Melin (2002) emphasises that established brands are valuable assets for companies and that it can be found that brands constitute intangible values. Furthermore, brand packaging, design and brand identity chase visual aspects that create a unique brand image, which proves that brands are intrinsically visual (Schroeder, 2005). In this segment, five assets found in each of the packaging designs will be discussed and subsequently used in a framework for future research.

### *Authenticity*

A present theme that can be found in the studied cases is authenticity. Authenticity calls for holding on to original traditions, principles, nature, and functions (Beverland, 2009). All cases have evidence of conforming to their original core values - especially in the case of Coca-Cola, where a consistent packaging design has evolved to be an integral part of the brand identity (McCormack, Cagan & Vogel, 2004).

Moreover, the brands all have a close connection to art, due to the portrayal of each packaging in different artworks. Holt (2004) discusses populist worlds as a phenomenon where people’s activities are motivated by belief instead of interest as part of cultural sites and not commerce or politics. Therefore, the mentioned packaging brings added value due to its distance from commercial contexts when it is portrayed in art. Being part of populist worlds instead of commerciality gives the myths true authenticity and credibility (Holt, 2004).

Absolut Vodka has a strong connection to culture due to its long establishment and its portrayal by artists such as Andy Warhol in his edition of the Absolut Vodka bottle (Scott, 2012). The painting on the Solstickan packaging was initially created

by a well-known artist in Sweden (Solstickan design, 2021a), which in turn made the connection to art strong from the start. Heinz has been portrayed as the “Ketchupsaurus”, a statue with the bottle as inspiration (Verhaaf, 2011). Coca-Cola has its famous version of Santa Claus, created specifically for the brand itself with the packaging featured (Hodgson, n.d.). Santa Claus has a strong connection to populist worlds, aligning with culture that is set apart from commerce and politics in some instances. Due to these mythmakings in art, consumers tend to believe that the myth is not entirely fictional (Holt, 2004), which in turn increases the authenticity of the packaging.

### *Longevity*

Another common theme for each case was the fact that each packaging has existed for at least five decades in somewhat similar formats. Therefore, each packaging brings a longevity aspect to the brand. In all cases, we see that there is a historical value to each packaging, where the brand benefits from its original design due to its historical connection and mythmaking. The brands and their packaging perform as myths since they address desires within societies, which stretch along with all generations. There is a nostalgic element in drinking a Coca-Cola, to purchase matches from Solstickan, to add Heinz ketchup on your spaghetti bolognese, or mix your grog with Absolut vodka. These iconic brands, and particularly their iconic packaging, satisfy the need for consumers to soothe their desires that have evolved, which eventually leads to consumers having emotional ties to the specific brand (Holt, 2004) and packaging. The packaging, in particular, mythologises the brand by reflecting the past, a bygone era (Kniazeva & Belk, 2007).

When there is a culture change, what Holt (2004) names as cultural disruption, iconic brands must reinvent their myth. As social

challenges change, mythmaking has to follow (Holt, 2004). Reinventing the myth is somewhat contradictory to the historical value, but the brands all have in common that they still make use of historical elements in their alterations. Heinz is an example of this phenomenon, where they have changed the material of the bottle to fit in with current customer demands and needs. Even though small alterations have been made, Heinz still made sure to make use of its historical design. The same goes for Coca-Cola, who changed to plastic bottles and then redesigned them to look like the historical glass ones, to ride the wave of the old Coca-Cola myth (Holt, 2004).

Moreover, since the packaging and brand have long been established, the brand has created a history and nostalgia has been initiated. Solstickan provides an example of this phenomenon, where the packaging has been the same since its launch. Furthermore, since customers have been consuming these products for generations a certain desire has been established. An iconic brand addresses these desires and becomes a source of extended identity value (Holt, 2004).

### *Packaging recognition*

Another key component identified in the case studies was the importance of package recognition. Packaging is often the first impression a company has with its customers and helps convey brand image, trust, quality, and reputation (Kapferer, 2012; Greyer & Urde, 2019). Heinz, Coca-Cola, Solstickan, and Absolut Vodka are all trusted and highly recognisable brands which in turn has led to positive brand equity (Kapferer, 2012). The brands are particularly valued because individuals look to the brands to perform myths that sort out anxiousness in their lives. More specifically, they consider what the brands accomplish for their identities (Holt, 2004). The positive brand equity originates

from individuals' historical reliance on the brand's myths. As a result, customers are willing to pay a higher price for its products, although they could get a similar, if not an identical product, from a competitor (Holt, 2004).

Furthermore, brand awareness and brand associations are other highly influential factors that affect packaging recognition and consumers' decision-making abilities (Keller, 2013). Firstly, the companies have over time achieved high brand awareness and earned top of mind through maintaining distinctive packaging, but also through other proprietary assets such as patents and trademarks. For instance, the most cited examples of registered trademarks are bottles, which include but are not limited to Absolut Vodka and Coca-Cola (Melin, 2002). These assets are vital since they ensure that other brands cannot compete by operating under a similar name or packaging design (Mollerup, 2002). Secondly, individuals have throughout history predominantly associated positive attributes with the brands. For example, Heinz highly functional ketchup bottle and Coca-Cola's social benefit of 'happiness, community, inclusion and joy' (Hodgson, n.d.).

Furthermore, packaging that lacks authenticity can never become iconic, irrespective of being famous or not (Verhaaf, 2011). However, the brands have kept down the noise and stayed away from too many graphic elements, colours, excessive typography, and maintained authenticity. Especially, through unique designs whilst maintaining the basic layout over the decades. Their distinct visual identities have helped customers recognise the brands across product offerings and channels, and they have learned how to associate their brands with the qualities that they aim to convey through the development of functional added values (Melin, 2002). From the classic white and red script font of Coca-Cola to the label of

Heinz, brand consistency has provided not only an identification system but also a connection to the brand's key values (Verhaaf, 2011).

Finally, according to Melin (2002), 80 per cent of the human brain has its primary function in the processing of visual stimuli. Therefore, the choice of design, colour scheme, and logo are of utmost importance for these attributes to contribute effectively towards visualising and individualising a brand. Accordingly, the companies have picked a memorable colour combination and used the same style of messaging and imagery. They display an instantly recognisable logo and distinctive visual identity which ultimately propelled the packaging to iconicity and top of mind (Melin, 2002). Heinz, Coca-Cola, Absolut Vodka, and Solstickan have mastered the art of aesthetics which together with consistency has established their competitive edge.

### *Uniqueness*

Another similarity identified in the cases was that all four brands work for uniqueness in the market through their packaging designs. In the Heinz case, the shape of the label is an iconic dimension of the brand. When the label is applied to the bottle it does not matter how the bottle is shaped, one instantly recognises it as Heinz ketchup from the unique shape of the label (Verhaaf, 2011). In this case we could identify that it is not the packaging as a whole that makes the product unique, but rather a distinct detail, like in this case the shape of the label that contributes to the uniqueness of the product.

In the Absolut Vodka case, it can be stated that they emphasise their uniqueness through the simple and attractive appearance of the bottle. During the 1980s, Absolut developed a restrained, clear and legitimate bottle with a unique shape that was going to be the representative of

something forward-thinking (L.O. Smith, 2018). What we can establish here is that it is the simplicity of the packaging design and the curiosity to constantly create something new that together make Absolut Vodka unique. The fact that the bottle's design was the primary reason the products' singularity could be accentuated through a variation and combination of visions, thoughts and storytelling is supported by Radic (2013).

In 1915, today's world-famous contour flask for Coca-Cola was created through a competition where the task was to create a bottle that would be recognizable in the dark or broken on the ground (Coca-Colacompany, 2021). As previously stated, several contributing factors make a product marketable. Some of these include structure, form, colour, materials and typography (Klimchuk & Krasovec, 2012). Coca-Cola has succeeded in connecting these factors, and we believe that thanks to the long history and careful thought behind the packaging design is what makes it unique.

Our beliefs about what makes Solstickan unique is its different image motive with strong colours that make it recognisable. In packaging design, the adoption of colour is closely connected to how it will survive on the market, and it is confirmed that the human eye catches colours before the brain notices the appearance of symbols, shapes, or words (Klimchuk & Krasovec, 2012). Solstickan has taken advantage of this in its strong choices of colours, and it can be assumed that this is what makes the packaging design of Solstickan so unique, which is a contributing factor that has led to it becoming one of the most famous packaging designs in Sweden (Swedish Match, n.d.).

### *Symbolism*

Solstickan has a clear symbolism in its packaging design. The packaging features

the sun match boy, which highlights the fact that each matchbox contributes to the health of children (Solstickan design, 2021a). Cultural icons represent important ideas and carry a symbolic load (Holt, 2004), which strongly aligns with what Solstickan is doing with their packaging design. The boy functions as a constant reminder of the brand's charity work and the fundamental idea of the product. The colours and the sun are strongly linked to fire and therefore also symbolise the product itself through the packaging. In this way, the packaging becomes a material personification of the brand's myth, triggering stories and traditions for the consumer (Holt, 2004; Heding, Knudtzen & Bjerre, 2008). It is iconic due to its close connection with cultural branding, delivering a strong identity myth in a populist world (Holt, 2004). The sun match boy functions as a cultural symbolic icon that is representative for the charity that is Solstickan and is therefore respected and part of Swedish culture.

Virtually, Coca-Cola has nothing to do with the cocoa bean. But when thinking of the shape of a classic Coca-Cola bottle, one can recognise the shape and see similarities with the cocoa plant. In fact, the features of the bottle are inspired by the appealing shape of the cocoa bean. The Coca-Cola company knew that they had a logo that was distinctive, but as mentioned before, the shape of the bottle did not signal that it was a premium product (Coca-Colacompany, 2021). They wanted the new shape to be distinctive, like the logo, and not easily confused with other types of similar beverages in indistinguishable bottles. The new shape was an illustration of the cocoa bean and applied to the vision of the company to remain recognisable forever, with an easily distinguishable bottle. The result of this act can be applicable for the theory of cultural icons, where Holt (2004) emphasises that symbols or icons function as a daily societal compass for the consumers, where

they find anchors of meaning. The premium version of the packaging thus helps the consumers choose a premium alternative to a replicable product.

Likewise, Absolut Vodka uses symbolism in its packaging by printing each bottle with a story. Using Andy Warhol as an artist further symbolises the product as artistic, with a strong connection to the art world. By adding these symbols to the packaging, Absolut Vodka is adding extra value to the actual product (Pereira, 2021), since art is closely connected to exclusivity and culture. The packaging thus becomes an icon that carries a powerful symbolic weight (Heding, Knudtzen & Bjerre, 2008; Holt, 2004). Furthermore, Warhol is also known for featuring iconic packaging in his art. Heinz is also seen in art through the example of ‘Ketchupsaurus’. By bringing packaging into art, the artists create an identity myth following the packaging design that in turn has created added intangible value to the packaging and brand itself (Holt, 2004).

#### *The iconic packaging bottle*



**Figure 5:** The iconic packaging bottle model

In order to distinguish what makes a packaging unique, we have assembled the iconic packaging bottle based on the five assets discussed above, found in iconic

packagings. Due to the previous focus in research on what makes the brand iconic and not the packaging, in particular, we found that there was a need for a model to clearly distinguish the packaging's intangible assets that furthermore make them iconic, solely on its own. The model is inspired by Holt's (2004) cultural branding principle. The concepts are without mutual order and are not equally present in the chosen cases.

Some of the assets showed to be strongly linked to each other. Particularly two assets have strong interdependence; *authenticity* is closely linked to culture and is often present when *longevity* can be identified within the brand and packaging design. This might be because when the packaging is long-lived it has had the chance to become part of cultural contexts. Other assets that we found to have a close connection are *packaging recognition* and *uniqueness*. What we can state is that for a product to gain recognition the packaging design has to be unique and be distinguishable from the competition. When considering a packaging design and also aiming to obtain uniqueness, it can be done by combining various elements in packaging; such as form, materials, colour, structure, imagery and typography recognised by Klimchuk and Krasovec (2012), in this sense, we believe that it can contribute to increasing the awareness of the packaging for the consumers.

As for the asset *symbolism*, we think that there is a correlation to all assets. Symbolism facilitates the process of mythmaking on its own. Through this asset, we believe that all packaging designs can express their stories and ideas, which ultimately produce feelings and emotions on the receiver's behalf. This contributes to the creation of iconic packaging.

Other assets that were distinguished that can make a packaging iconic but were not

equally influential as the assets described above, were consistency, superior customer experience, aspirational vision, decorative elements, and quality reputation. Though, we see that all these assets are combined with the other strong components.

Finally, we can state that the assets of the model are not necessarily required for iconic packaging, however, if all of them or any of them are present for the packaging design, it is easier to indicate its iconic status. *The fuller the bottle, the more iconic the packaging.*

## Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to investigate how a brand's packaging design becomes iconic through entering pop culture/art. However, as the study progressed, other aspects of packaging design were found to be of similar importance. Art is a contributing factor towards making your packaging iconic and incorporated in many of the assets that were found during the study, but is not the sole reason for it. A conclusion would therefore be that art is often an important factor that influences the packaging's iconic status and contributes to the brand as a whole, however, other intangible and tangible assets need to be taken into account as well.

According to the results of this study, packaging design has a considerable amount of intangible values that can be found in the *iconic packaging bottle*. The key assets found were authenticity, longevity, packaging recognition, uniqueness, and symbolism. Therefore, there is a need to recognise packaging as a source for increased brand equity and not just for its tangible values and functional use. Consequently, companies should

strive to '*fill up their bottle*' as a means to improve their brand equity.

## Managerial implications

The presented framework can function as a means to identify whether a packaging design is iconic and what it is lacking and contributes to the current absence of similar models. This can be done by both researchers and managers when evaluating packaging design and/or planning the design.

## Limitations and further research

This is a limited study, and the results are not generalisable as such. Nevertheless, they illustrate five forces that appear to be significant in relation to iconic packaging design. It should be noted that our conclusions are based on a multiple case-study of four brands, thus we cannot say whether the presented model is a general cross-industry. Hence, it is important to continue this research by looking at a broader sample of brands. One question is whether the five identified forces are the same across different brands. It should further be noted that the analysis has been done from an outside-in perspective, future research could thus include an inside-out perspective to increase the validity of the results. Furthermore, brands with a long history were selectively chosen for this specific study to ensure that it did not exclude iconicity drivers that have been developed over time. Consequently, the longevity driver was not fully explored. A final limitation is that the research method did not include primary data findings. In future research, data such as interviews and surveys would thus be advisable.

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