Clichés vs. Ingenuity for a Success Design

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Abstract. Human perception of visual objects in adults is on the most part grounded in cliché expectations based on previous experiences and knowledge. Hence, any visual object within a cultural context represents for a viewer rather a representation concept than a visual concept. That is, it is primarily interpreted for what it represents and only then for what it stands for – a singular set of meanings and connotations. In the consumer goods realm, even more so, the impact from designs is about conveying successfully the optimum balance between two distinct sets of codes - familiarization codes and de-familiarization codes. Familiarization codes are the set of category clichés that are activated at the first automatic 'scanning for safety' phase of visual assessment of any given design. These comprise category benchmark codes, important repetitive navigation codes, codes conveying important category anchorage territories. Visual codes of any design when interpreted by the consumer perception have primarily to satisfy the familiarization bias as a representation concept in order that ingenuity visual concept of such design be successfully accepted and perceived to have the desired impact. Understanding of the balance between familiarization and de-familiarization codes active in product categories is essential in order to develop success design launches. New Design Activation Mapping is suggested as a practical solution to pinpoint the potential impact of new design routes and timely introduce needed modifications at early stages of development prior to costly consumer research assessments.

Keywords: Semiotics · Design impact · Visual perception · Perception bias · Frame of reference · Visual concepts · Representation concepts · Familiarization codes · De-familiarization codes · Category anchorage · Design activation codes · Design activation context · New design activation mapping

1 Introduction

Multiple market research results on testing impact from designs across diverse categories show important tendencies. Whereas most of the creative effort often aims at originality, uniqueness and differentiation, that is, ingenuity, the research shows with remarkable consistency that when it comes to consumer response, in fact, the importance of ingenuity is over-rated, or at least its role and balance is not fully captured in many creative developments.

There is obviously a clear understanding that any visual object is perceived and assessed based on a certain frame of reference based on previous experiences and knowledge of similar objects. When it comes to perception and assessment of

consumer goods designs, market research comes into play to gather data on what and how potentially effects consumers, what is their perception bias in relation to certain products, visual stimuli, sets of codes. All the above is supposed to bring the needed alignment between creative effort, which in semiotic terms is about coding visually the intended meanings, on the one hand, and, on the other, successful de-coding of the latter by the intended consumer audience for the desired impact.

Furthermore, the research is often there to obtain the snapshot and understanding of the most recent totality of visual codes as perceived by consumers and to trace less cluttered and fresh territories that could serve as the springboard for the new offer, in particular, new designs that could better capture attention of potential target audience.

At the stage of construing new concepts, perception bias of the consumer is well accounted for. However, at the stage of new developments, specifically developments of visual representations of the products and packaging the focus is often shifted towards developing ingenuity design solutions, that would have most potential in capturing consumer attention. Whereas consumer aesthetic preferences are often taken into consideration at the stage of design creation, the product category context is often treated rather superficially, again, most frequently through the prism of general consumer perceptions and expectations.

Starting as far off as when it comes to pieces of art that are mostly about ingenuity, it is known that adult human perception would treat those as 'representation' concepts and not purely 'visual' concepts [1]. Visual concepts would be the perception type characteristic of children and of adults in some earlier human cultures. In contrast, people of normal socialization in any given modern culture starting with life stages of active socialization from school years and on, will have representation concepts as their major perception mechanism. That is, they would always have pre-conceptions about any visual object they are confronted with, with no exception. "Our experiences and ideas tend to be common but not deep, or deep but not common. We have neglected the gift of comprehending things through our senses. Concept is divorced from percept, and thought moves among abstractions. Our eyes have been reduced to instruments with which to identify and to measure; hence we suffer a paucity of ideas that can be expressed in images and an incapacity to discover meaning in what we see. Naturally we feel lost in the presence of objects that make sense only to undiluted vision, and we seek refuge in the more familiar medium." [1].

More so, when it comes to impact from designs in product categories that have rather pragmatic primary appeal to consumers, these are definitely perceived primarily as representation concepts. When treated by human perception as s a representation concept, designs would first automatically be scanned for familiar codes to get the clear unambiguous understanding what this object represents. Only after the 'safety control' scan results in clear categorization of the design codes as corresponding to the essential expectations of the product designs in the given category, the ingenuity codes are given a play to convey image-driven meanings and connotations that could differentiate the given product from the competitive offer.

In other words, in order to avoid subsequent fiascos at design tests at market research stage, new designs could incorporate a proper balance of 'hot'/'cold' stimulation [3] or proper balance between ingenuity and clichés at the stage of their developments for a desired impact. Along with incorporating aesthetic preferences of

the potential audience, novel trendy visual solutions, ingenuity differentiating codes when creating a new design, semiotic approach could help to pinpoint the codes that constitute the important frame of reference for the target audience in perceiving designs in the given product category. Luckily enough, when it comes to product categories, the representation concepts are quite predictable, as the perceptive bias is distinctly coded through category clichés that can be observed, categorized and taken into account as early as developing or fine-tuning the design prior to costly consumer research.

2   Category Clichés and Anchorage

Consumer frame of reference or representation concepts comes into play with regards to response to existing visual stimuli. Category designs undergo certain evolution in consumer perception, where benchmark designs and popular design codes of the past and the present of the category existence activate certain visual codes as having unified unambiguous meanings and triggering rather concrete expectation towards the product thus forming category clichés. The most obvious examples of category cliché codes would be category recognition codes, SKU navigation codes, etc.

Furthermore, category usage experience, certain category benchmarks, culturally specific biases with regards to the product category form in consumer mind certain understanding and expectations of the category that correspond to certain semantic clusters, meanings closely related to the category in the perception of most active consumers. These semantic territories that correspond to the most basic generic aspirational attributes related to a particular product category constitute category anchorage. Category anchorage speaks directly to important consumer expectations about such category, often regardless of particular price segments. Among most frequent and clear examples are expectations of 'naturalness' with regards to most dairy categories and juices or 'outspoken masculinity' with regards to most spirits and men's care, though quality understanding requires closer focus with regards to culture, market saturation and price segments.

Examples of possible miss-outs are not rare [2]. Consider a youth targeted juice brand aimed at presenting consumers with fun images, contrasting fluorescent colors to meet the consumer at their aesthetic territory. Yet, for juice category context in the given culture the essential category anchorage would be 'naturalness' - where 'aggressive' fluorescent colors obviously completely violated the essential connotation for codes and resulted in very lukewarm response to the appeal of new designs. If it was about energy drinks or party beverages, the needed clichés and anchorage would be in a very different place.

Many big-scale companies when confronted with an objective to introduce singular design at different markets will often see the need to pinpoint the hazards, which are directly linked to differences in category anchorage in different market cultures [2]. Beer and cigarettes are among the categories that could provide many examples of this kind, where anchorage territories of 'masculinity', 'authenticity', 'cosmopolitan vibe' along with some others would often come to the surface in different proportion and in relation to different sets of clichés in different markets.

On the one hand, cliché codes would convey momentarily the messages of comfort, trust, safety, ensuring at the automated perception level that the overall first impression of the product would fit the important 'safety' profile – 'This product is OK, reliable, I can use it'. Hence, by function category clichés would form the basis of familiarization [4] codes. As the above 'familiarization' scanning for safety occurs within first few seconds of design observation and its mechanics often cannot be fully rationalized and articulated by the perceiving party, it is rather important that these codes are well selected and are the ones that are activated instantaneously in consumer perception, convey clear uniform meaning, trigger minimum or no connotations and obviously convey the right and precise messages about the product.

Focus on daring stand-out and being original if combined with low attention to the above aspects of 'grounding' new designs with respect to 'automatic' consumer expectations could result in missing on important charge of the intended design impact.

3 Preconditions for Design Activation – Codes and Context

Analyzing across best impact designs an important tendency comes to the foreground that could be considered prior to creative developments and subsequent testing of new designs. For any new design, the desired impact would source from proper balancing of two quite different sets of culturally conditioned codes (Cf. Table 1).

There are obviously different categories of products with different needs in and potential for stand-out that are image-driven to different degrees, yet, for any given category product designs need to integrate the proper balance of familiarization and de-familiarization codes.

Codes of familiarization are the grounding codes based on category clichés and anchorage, that have the primacy in that they provide clarity and acceptance needed at the very first instants in the process of design perception, those are the gateway for further differentiating assessment. The correct familiarization codes, that are in essence 'safety' codes, need to be in place in order to keep the attention further for the 'fun ride' in perceiving and appreciating the ingenuity part of the design. In fact, when the 'normalcy' and 'safety' foundation is well laid with familiarization codes, the 'stand-out' or de-familiarization codes can play their fullest [4]. Balanced familiarization and de-familiarization codes make for stronger more consolidated design impact and the intended competitive advantage.

The analysis of the balance between the familiarization set of codes that speak of important category expectations and de-familiarization codes of self-image that consumers derive from design stand-out and ingenuity could be further explored through cross-analysis of design impacts in different categories. Such analysis brings about further understanding of how the interplay between two sets of codes works in different categories.

As most of research results reveal, there are gratification biased categories that would primarily require stronger accent on familiarization codes as well as self-image biased product categories where designs need to be considerably stronger in de-familiarization codes. Mineral water and perfume would be the categories that are

Table 1. Preconditions for design impact - activation codes

DESIGN IMPACT = activating in proper balance 2 sets of codes	
FAMILARIZATION CODES **Product Gratification Codes**	**DEFAMILARIZATION CODES** **Self-Image Upgrade Codes**
'Product is OK, reliable, I can use it'	*'Product offers added value, RW to buy it'*
Stricter, clearer codes Simplistic Based on popular category clichés – i.e. repeated through designs by different brands, often based on benchmark designs across segments Interpreted by consumers momentarily (triggering minimum connotations) Conveying meanings on important generic product features – format, taste or flavor, etc.	Less predictable, innovative Elaborate Ingenuity – fresh, new in the category, differentiated from the competitive offer, also those sourced from new trends, TA aesthetics Enigmatic, intriguing, offering richer associative interpretations Conveying meaning on image and product distinction – special quality, added-value attributes, emotive appeal, etc.
Category & Segment Clichés **SKU Navigation Codes**	**Unique, Symbolic** **Brand Differentiaton Codes**

rather conspicuous in many cultures as being gratification biased and self-image biased respectively [2].

Obviously, concrete focus and expert opinion is needed for any category in any given culture for proper understanding, but having the general initial guidance in place in the right time saves much effort. Most of FMCG categories in many markets would be very close to rather even proportion in terms of balance requirements between the two sets of codes [2].

Signs are interpreted based on context. Semiotics always relates any impact from visual stimuli back to the very concrete context where these visual stimuli are originated from and/or will need to function. The interplay between familiarization and de-familiarization codes of product/pack designs is understood when analyzed in context of concrete markets, categories and segments.

Hence, it is further important to consider that perception and streamline impact from product designs much depend on their standing vs. the whole of the shelf and consumer experience context (Cf. Table 2). This context visually is represented by: (1) visual identity of direct competition products, (2) visual identity of 'clutter' competition – i.e., designs by similarly priced or next-choice segment propositions, (3) benchmark designs and designs by more expensive and aspirational offer that form new noticeable tendencies and clichés within the category.

The above categories of visual stimuli that create the background for new design perception and impact are the most direct and essential context to consider for the preliminary analysis of potential impact from the new design launches.

Table 2. Preconditions for design impact - activation context

DESIGN IMPACT is activated vs.:		
Direct competition	Clutter competition	Benchmarks and Out-of-segment
Visual identity of direct competitor products as reflected by actual market situation of date	Designs of similarly priced or next-choice segment propositions on the market – regardless of their actual sales and market standing – that adopt noticeable tendencies and clichés and thus create the visual 'clutter' for certain codes	Designs of more expensive and aspirational offer that are noticeable and form new, noticeable tendencies and clichés or are early followers of such noticeable tendencies and clichés

4   Design Impact Pre-test Analysis

The interplay of design impact activation context and relevant active codes could be taken into consideration at the stage of new design development and prior to costly market research tests. As a means of offering a practical solution for the preliminary analysis of new designs for comparative impact within the given category, there could be applied a mapping that will take into consideration the above need in balance between sets of familiarization and de-familiarization codes.

The semiotic square that has been in use for some time across research and showcase studies in one of its variations could represent the primary grid for such pre-test analysis of new design impact potential and the basis for the design context activation mapping. A version of the semiotic square with basic descriptive attributes per quadrants is provided in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1. Semiotic square as the basis for design activation impact pre-test mapping

The quadrants of semiotic square serve as the basis to cluster visual codes and related senses for a particular product category in a given market. Further on, the visual objects that form the context for activation of a new design are placed following a distinct layout that reflects key parameters that provide the needed precise reference to pinpoint the potential position and corresponding potential impact of a new design route (Fig. 2). The Design Activation mapping shows the position of new designs with respect to balance of two sets of codes – familiarization and de-familiarization codes to ensure that the prospective launch is neither perceived as 'too strange' by using to maximum differentiation codes, nor as 'too blank' by following closely the existing category clichés.

In the frame to the left:

─Position closer to punctured line would mean more balanced designs with respect to familiarization/de-familiarization codes interplay

─Position closer to diagonal axes → signifies more consolidated codes relevant to quadrant connotations and senses

─Distance from the center → signifies differentiation level

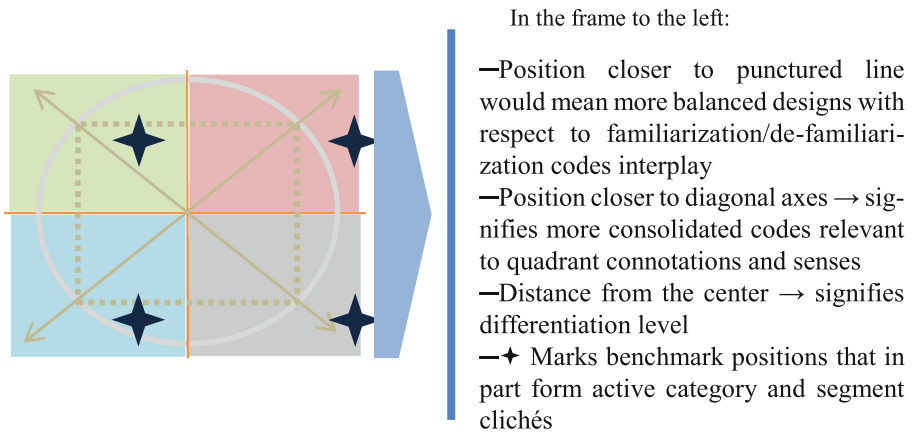─✦ Marks benchmark positions that in part form active category and segment clichés

Fig. 2. Basic grid for new design activation impact pre-test mapping.

The Design Activation Map as suggested above allows to clearly position and identify for further usage in relation to prospective design launches the following aspects of design activation context:

– zones of active code clusters (e.g. category variations of traditional 'quadrant' of perspective | multi-perspective | positional | causal codes);
– clichés /benchmark designs;
– strong positions of properly balanced designs;
– 'weak' designs of lower stand-out;
– designs with overly 'bright' stand out that disrupt important category codes to the extent when consumers do not have sufficient trust towards tangible category attributes being present in the product.

The full mapping would incorporate all of the essential elements of the category context: (1) designs by direct competition; (2) designs by clutter competition; (3) category benchmarks positioned with respect to the role they play in the new design activation context (Fig. 3). The new designs are placed in relation to the active category

context, where it becomes visible how well the balance of familiarization/de-familiarization codes is respected by the new design, where its standing is vs. the direct competition and the whole of the category offer, as well as prospective better-off positions for the new designs in the category.
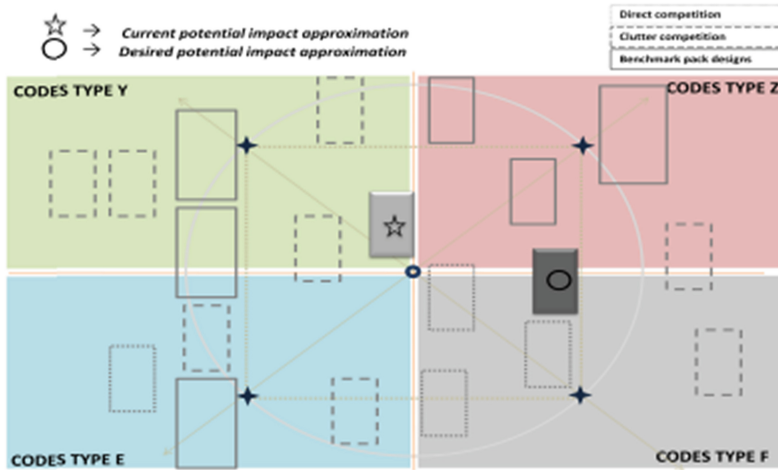

Fig. 3. A sample of new design activation impact pre-test mapping

The above example suggests that the standing of the new design (marked with the star symbol) in its current execution shows insufficient de-familiarization codes strength for the category (placed below punctured line) and hence is not differentiated enough, it is furthermore stands further off from essential clichés and codes of benchmark designs if compared to the standing of direct competition, thus it could easily trigger confused perception as out-of-segment offer and could remain unnoticed mixed in clutter competition perception cluster field, in this way, conveying at perceptive representation level senses and connotations that are not relevant for the active consumers in the intended segment.

It is also important to observe that clutter designs, which are primarily designs by brands that do not show considerable sales within a market often find themselves at the positions of 'extreme' expression of de-familiarization codes, showing minimum or none continuity with familiarization category clichés. This repeated practical observation across research in different categories and markets [2] once again suggests the primacy of familiarization codes in conveying the overall sensation of 'safety' and 'quality' that are essential pre-requisites for choosing a product. Respect to familiarization codes also creates the proper foundation for the de-familiarization codes to have their full play and intended impact.

The suggested mapping for pre-test design impact activation allows for clear vision of new design potential, it also shows the directions to reconsider design modifications with reference to existing codes, clichés, clutter, benchmarks and 'fresh' territories for better differentiation.

Certain universality of the suggested map distribution principle aids to extrapolate similar mapping to further assess the consolidated impact from advertisement and other related new launch activity. It helps to extend the strong impact from well balanced visual identity further to ensure maximum impact from the whole of the brand DNA.

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