

From Pure Water to Rebellious Identity: A Semiotic Analysis of Liquid Death's Visual Branding and Brand Storytelling

Xinrui Sun

*High School Attached to Northeast Normal University International Curriculum Center,
Changchun, China
sulissun7@gmail.com*

Abstract. The aim of this article is to explore how Liquid Death converted an ordinary product into a rebellious consumer identity. Bottled water brands usually adopt traditional brand design methods, such as blue packaging, transparent cans, natural landscape images, and the concept of water purification. However, Liquid Death is different from this trend and successfully created a unique brand image: black aluminum cans, gothic fonts, skull patterns, dark humor, and the slogan concept of "Murder Your Thirst". Therefore, Liquid Death did not shape the traditional brand image of bottled water, but innovated an unconventional image of a rebel, whose style is closer to a heavy metal concert rather than an ordinary and healthy water brand. To achieve the research objectives, this article will combine semiotic analysis methods and secondary market research methods and use publicly available company performance data for the study.

Keywords: Liquid Death, semiotic analysis, visual branding, consumer identity, symbolic consumption

1. Introduction

When consumers enter a supermarket, the brand of the bottled water may be overlooked most of the time. It is because water is normally considered to be a necessity that should be clean and functional. When it comes to branding bottled water in supermarkets, blue labels, clear bottles, pictures of natural surroundings, and words such as "pure", "fresh" or "natural" are often used to represent the product. This is by no means an accident. They actually help form consumer's understanding of bottled water as safe, calm, and close to nature.

Liquid Death falls into this serene product category, but its style is completely different. It does not portray water as a symbol of softness or tranquility. The brand packages water in aluminum cans and promotes the product with a strong sense of humor and the slogan "Murder Your Thirst". As shown on its official website, the brand claims to be a "better-for-you beverage company" and links it with humor and anti-plastic concepts [1]. It is this contradiction that gives the brand its unique charm. The uniqueness of Liquid Death lies in the tone it conveys about water, rather than the product itself.

Previous studies have explored the symbolism behind brands and products. Products are not just used for their functional value but can also be used by consumers to express themselves and convey

messages regarding who they are and how they like things to be. The theories of symbolic consumption, brand personality, and cultural branding will form an effective basis for the present study. Compared with research on fashion, luxury goods, and established lifestyle brands, less attention has been paid to how symbolic branding operates in ordinary product categories with limited functional differentiation.

Water, on the other hand, is a good example, since the product itself does not provide much scope for functional differentiation. In a situation like this, visual aspects and meanings become increasingly significant. The analysis of Liquid Death thus also contributes to the general debate in brand management about whether a firm can generate competitive advantage in an established market by modifying the meaning of a product, as opposed to its functionality.

This article therefore asks: How does Liquid Death reverse the traditional visual codes of bottled water to transform canned water into a symbol of rebellious consumer identity?

This article argues that Liquid Death creates symbolic differentiation through category-code reversal, transforming water into a visible identity product while commercializing the appearance of differentiation.

To answer this question, this study combines literature analysis, semiotic analysis, and comparative visual analysis. The research analyzes the packaging, font, images, slogans, humorous elements, and environmental language of Liquid Death, and juxtaposed it with the traditional visual symbols of bottled water. The publicly available market indicators were only used to provide commercial background information. This study aims to illustrate how visual and textual symbols construct a rebellious consumer identity, and how this identity transforms resistance into marketable brand resources.

2. Literature review

Research on the symbolic meaning of consumption helps to understand how everyday products gain significance. McCracken argues that consumer goods can transfer cultural significance from the broader world into consumers' lives [2]. Belk further posits that it is possible for objects to belong to the extended self of an individual [3]. The reason for the importance of the above-mentioned theories is that Liquid Death is not only about hydration.

The theory of brand personality is also relevant to the situation. Brands have humanlike attributes that set them apart from one another [4]. Thus, there are sincere brands, exciting brands, and sophisticated brands. Liquid Death attempts to be daring, funny, and somewhat menacing. The brand acts not as a typical water business but rather as an entertainment brand. Such personality of a brand becomes memorable and distinctive for its category.

The semiotic analysis of branding provides an approach for analyzing the visual strategy. Brands should be understood by the means of cultural and visual codes [5]. This approach is helpful in the context of Liquid Death, since its meaning is constructed by signs – such as the black can, heavy metal aesthetics, the skeleton appearance, violence, and anti-mainstream aesthetic. Such signs are not just used as a decoration. They communicate the right attitude to the brand.

There is also a critical side to this. Subcultural style can work as a form of resistance, while Holt explains how brands often absorb cultural tensions and turn them into market value [6, 7]. "Liquid Death" is an excellent example of this contradiction. It seems to be contrary to the mainstream, but at the same time, it is one of the rapidly rising commercial brands. This article will focus on the following contradiction: Liquid Death is not merely a humorous water brand.

Further research on packaging provides additional support for this strategy. The study shows that packaging symbols can influence the brand's image and quality perception in consumers' minds,

while visual elements such as color, material, and font can be used to trigger specific reactions [8, 9]. Although this study did not explore "Liquid Death", it can be used as a starting point to analyze how its black aluminum material, Gothic font, and skull pattern constitute a symbolic system.

In addition, recent research has been devoted to using such ideas as resistance, controversy, and value communication strategically as a brand resource [10, 11]. The perception of the deep meaning of a brand is influenced by its consistency, obvious behavior, and the reasons it represents [12]. Therefore, although the brand "Liquid Death" lacks consistency, it is not regarded as a brand of social significance.

The "Liquid Death" case is usually associated with three viewpoints in existing literature: the product may show cultural values; the brand can establish an identifiable identity; and the spirit of resistance in subcultures may be integrated into commercial brands. However, these viewpoints have never been considered simultaneously, and most of them have been applied separately to fashion, luxury goods, or traditional lifestyle product categories. This study explores the integration of these three viewpoints and analyzes how category code reversal works in the context of limited functional differences within the bottled water product category.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative case study method, with Liquid Death as the main case. Liquid Death was chosen not because the brand dominates the market, but because this brand positioning creates a clear contrast with the conventional water brand image. While the traditional water brands usually use the ideas of purity, health, cleanliness, Liquid Death uses dark packaging, heavy-metal aesthetics, aggressive humour, skull-like imagery, and anti-mainstream language. This strong and clear contrast makes the Liquid Death particularly suitable for examining how visual and verbal codes can change the meaning of a common product. The main analytical method is semiotic analysis, supported by secondary market evidence.

The main information sources include the packaging design, slogans, names of the products, public information about the environmental impact of the company, its website and certain visual promotional materials of Liquid Death. Comparison sources include the official packaging design of brands like Aquafina, Evian, and FIJI Water since all these brands usually employ transparent bottles, blue colors, nature-related images and language related to the concept of purity. The sources were chosen because they represent the image of the brands through certain visual and linguistic elements. It is also important to mention other famous bottled water brands cases, particularly those employing transparent bottles, blue colors, nature-related images and purity-related language.

Semiotic analysis is used as the main analytical tool. According to semiotic theory, brand characteristics can be regarded as symbols that connect the physical form with the cultural-related meanings. In this article, the focus will be on examining the symbolic aspects of the following brand components: packaging, color, font, image, slogan, product name, humor, and environment language. The selected brand components are symbolic as they carry meanings like rebelliousness, uniqueness, entertainment, and resistance against healthy brand activities. The selection of these brand components is based on their existence within the communication process of the "Liquid Death" brand.

By conducting a visual analysis, Liquid Death was analyzed about the entire range of bottled water products. The combination of its black aluminum packaging, gothic font, skull print and slogan "Murder Your Thirst" formed a strong contrast to the standard blue color of labeling, transparent plastic bottles and nature-based images of traditional bottled water products. The innovativeness of the product within the traditional product range, and the influence of these

innovations on the formation of a rebellious brand identity can be analyzed with such a comparative analysis.

The theoretical basis of this methodology lies in the scientific theoretical principles of symbolic consumption, brand personality, cultural branding, and subcultural styles, thus offering theoretical ground for understanding the brand identity in a non-functional context. The public information of this brand in the case study shows that the brand positioning is unique enough to attract attention, but this does not mean that it has managed to create a brand image.

In general, with the help of this methodology, we are able to find the link between the brand visual identity and its cultural meaning, therefore analyze the impact of the reversed category codes on the construction of rebellious consumer identity.

4. Findings

The first discovery is that Liquid Death has completely overturned the traditional language of water products. Ordinary bottled water attempts to incorporate the concepts of purity and nature, adopting a neat, transparent and harmless style. However, Liquid Death completely breaks away from these traditions. It uses black opaque cans and refuses transparency, as transparency is often regarded as a symbol of purity. Its Gothic font is inspired by heavy metal music, pulling the product away from the image of health and wellness and introducing it to a completely different world.

This is related to the product's functionality and has not changed much in itself. The product still has the moisturizing effect. The truly innovative aspect is not the water itself, but the interpretation of the product. Here, "the jar" is a symbol. The symbol's reference is the dark design and the strong sense of humor, while what the symbol refers to is rebellion, anti-mainstream identity, and an interesting attitude towards life.

Another discovery that can be related to the brand narrative is that Liquid Death created the opposite of the brand. Here, drinking water is depicted as an object that has been killed. The plastic bottle is regarded as an enemy of the environment and must be opposed. This continuous conflict gradually develops into a storyline, making drinking water a form of rebellion.

The second finding is that this brand has clearly distinguished itself between the healthy drinking experience and the usually associated calm and composed image of being healthy. Many products related to health have used cool, clean and responsible language, which might be helpful, but it could also become rather stereotypical. Liquid Death offers consumers an alternative option: consumers can enjoy drinking water without playing the role of a "healthy person".

According to company's published data, Liquid Death recorded \$263 million in retail scanned sales in 2023, reached approximately 113,000 retail doors across the US and UK, and received a \$1.4 billion valuation following its 2024 financing round [13]. This represents the brand's visibility in the business environment; however, these pieces of information do not provide any evidence to suggest that it is a symbolic brand-building process that has led to such high enterprise performance. The value of Liquid Death does not lie in its market leadership position, but rather in the symbolic brand positioning and differentiation it has achieved, enabling it to stand out in mature market segments. This evidence does not prove a causal relationship between symbolic brand building and market performance; instead, it merely indicates that the brand's unique positioning has been noticed by the mature market. This evidence is regarded as supplementary information rather than proof of the visual brand-building outcome.

5. Discussion

From the outcomes of the study, it can be said that the research findings provide answers to the posed question on how "Liquid Death" challenged the symbolic meaning of bottled water and created identity for the rebellious consumers. The main point of success of the brand can be seen in the cultural meaning attached to water in the following way: regular bottled water has the cultural meaning of "I am clean and safe," while "Liquid Death" means "I am different."

The research results confirmed McCracken's theory of cultural significance transfer, that the meanings contained in heavy metal music and anti-mainstream attitudes were transferred to everyday consumer products [2]. At the same time, the research also expanded Belk's concept of "expanding the self", enabling consumers to showcase their identities through visible resources [3]. However, the commercial application of this rebellious style also confirmed Holt's view that brands can absorb and strengthen cultural resistance [7].

This also explains why "Liquid Death" has attracted attention in categories with limited functional distinctions. Functional products typically compete through price, convenience, taste, or health claims. However, "Liquid Death" adds another layer of meaning: symbolic identity. It transforms water into something that people can post, joke about, carry around, or use to express their taste. In this sense, the product becomes an identity currency. Therefore, it functions as an identity currency: a visible symbolic resource that enables consumers to convey their own tastes and maintain a distance from the expectations of mainstream categories. It helps consumers express certain information about themselves.

The even more important question here is whether the resistance exists at all. If it can be commoditized, then is it still the form of resistance at all? No, it is not. When the form of resistance gets commodified, it partially loses its meaning of resistance and becomes easier to consume and accept. "Liquid Death" does not ask consumers to fight against the system from a political perspective; instead, it gives them a sense of rebellion in a bottle of water.

However, it does not mean that the brand became obsolete for its consumers. Even when resistance gets commodified, it is able to form the identity of an individual. It is possible for consumers to use and wear these products and at the same time be aware that the brand markets their products. Thus, what "Liquid Death" offers is not really resistance, but the form of resistance with brand recognition which is interesting and safe to consume.

The research is limited by the use of publicly available brand data and secondary market data. Although the semiotic analysis reveals the possible cultural meanings of these logos, it does not prove that all consumers will accept this interpretation; the market data also cannot confirm the impact of visual branding on business success.

6. Conclusion

The research found that Liquid Death did not alter the functional properties of water, but rather changed the symbolic meaning attributed to water. Therefore, based on this conclusion, it can be showed that the main creation of the Liquid Death brand is not the liquid itself, but the identity it has created.

This discovery also indicates that creating a brand for a product is not merely about making the product more aesthetically pleasing in appearance. What is more important is that it is a way to help consumers understand the product through different symbolic systems and recognize the value it represents. Recent studies have also supported this view.

These principles have been applied to daily consumption environment in this research, thus proving that these techniques are applicable not only in promoting special products, but also in promoting ordinary products which are very common. A brand analysis technique that has never been suggested before has been introduced in this research. "Liquid Death" has shown that brand identity strategies can also be used for promoting regular products like bottled water. Results obtained in this research may give some ideas for other brand managers about food since product differentiation does not necessarily have anything to do with product performance.

At the same time, this example also illustrates another contradiction associated with the existing campaigns conducted by this brand: Liquid Death used the traditional approach to the language of the anti-authoritarian movement and has been using it in its marketing activities until today. Recent research conducted concerning brand activism, and resistance proves that a company may use opposition, controversy and values to position itself. It cannot be said that it is an activist brand, but in this case, it becomes clear that resistance can be transformed into strategic resource. Liquid Death does not have political resistance but has consumer resistance.

Further research should be conducted to study the symbolic approach in more detail in terms of understanding how the consumers perceive the offered brand. Using interviews, questionnaires, focus groups and experimentation, it is possible to investigate the impact of certain characteristics, such as black packaging, Gothic fonts, and radical slogans on the perception and behavior of consumers. Moreover, the comparative research could be carried out in order to investigate the impact of such an approach on the consumers' perception in case of its usage in relation to other general products. In addition, it should be considered whether the uniqueness of the brand will not change due to the anti-establishment position of the competitors' brands.

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