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# DOING VISUAL ANALYSIS

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# 5

## PACKAGING

### Introduction

In this chapter we turn our attention to packaging. Here we are interested in the kinds of boxes and bags used to carry and present our breakfast cereal, the variety of bottles and containers used for shampoo and deodorants, or any kind of packaging used to help sell products. Such packaging brings new kinds of challenges as regards analysis compared with photographs (Chapter 3) and document design (Chapter 4) which are only two-dimensional. Packaging is three-dimensional, having not only height and width but also depth. It comprises objects that we can pick up and feel, which we carry away from a shop and place in different rooms and storage spaces, such as the larder or fridge in the kitchen or a bathroom cabinet where we may interact with them as we use them. This calls, we show, for other types of tool kits than in the previous chapters.

Packaging draws on and communicates wider discourses about things like health, safety, gender, nature, learning and pleasure (Wagner, 2015). A shampoo can indicate a gendered use; a yoghurt can signal vitality; or a biscuit can tell us that it is something traditional. These are complex ideas, values and issues that, of course, are re-contextualized for the purposes of selling products (Ventura, 2015). For example, product packaging and branding invites us to participate in being responsible for the environment through a collection of minor consumer acts. We can buy coffee from a local Latin American producer who uses sustainable farming, a fruit drink where the container is made from recycled material, an organically fed chicken in a textured package with a card surround carrying images of an idyllic farm and portraits of the farmers. Yet what is not communicated here is that more environmental cost is accumulated in the production of a product, in its transportation, storage, in the creation of the complex packaging, the design of the brand, the promotional work, than can ever be recouped in its recycling. One might not unreasonably suggest that the environment might be best served by banning such

packaging in the first place, or by wholesale government policies. But recycling and saving the planet are sold to us as a kind of personal moral and even aesthetic choice. As regards things like the environment, gender or health, we might argue that it is through consumer products and their associated discourses that we most engage with them.

## Discourses of packaging

Packaging communicates by combining many different semiotic resources into a coherent whole, using the material package and its shape, be it small or large, angular or circular (Klimchuk and Krasovec, 2006). The material could be paper, plastic or aluminium, all of which have different textures and connotations. The packaging may carry a typeface that is ornamented and old-fashioned or modern and regular. Writing on packaging has many functions, such as carrying a slogan like 'Have a Coke and a smile' or formally stating the ingredients of the product. Colour too is important in communicating values and ideals, for example luxury, where often black and gold are used, or child-friendly by means of a bright colour palette. All these resources are combined into a whole to communicate to specific consumer groups or to communicate specific discourses about products. We begin by looking at three examples of how packaging draws on different discourses to address consumers and communicate values, specifically 'gender', 'innocence' and 'value for money'. We then present the tool kits for analysing packaging.

### Grooming products: communicating gender

In Figure 5.1 we see two grooming products that are very obviously gendered: a shampoo from Garnier Fructis and a shower gel from Axe. Without knowing anything about the contents of these packages, or having tested, smelled or touched the products that they contain, nor experienced the cleaning results they offer, we immediately, due to the packaging, sense that Garnier Fructis targets a younger female consumer, whereas Axe is directed to male consumers. Already the brand names suggest this. Even if, in principle, nothing hinders a woman from using an axe, we normally do not associate it with female beauty products. Also, the Garnier Fructis product name 'Strength and Shine', with for example 'Triple Nutrition' and 'Body Boost' also being part of the range, is to be compared with the product name 'Apollo', pointing to explorations of space and with 'Jet' and 'Anarchy' as other products of the Axe range. Both brands encompass a broad range of female and male grooming products with a recurring design and visual identity.



**Figure 5.1** A shampoo from Garnier Fructis and a shower gel from Axe (Photographs by author)

The communication of gender, however, goes beyond the names of the products and is found fundamentally in the shape of the containers. And these examples are a very good place to start with this kind of analysis, since, in a sense, they are so obvious. But we are less familiar with asking more systematic questions about three-dimensional shapes.

These two plastic containers contain the same amount of liquid, 250ml, but we see that the Garnier Fructis container is tall and slender in comparison with the shorter and thicker Axe container. Such a design choice is precisely the kind of deployment of semiotic resources that interests us in this chapter. Consequently, the Garnier Fructis bottle needs a bit more protection or handling in the sense that it might fall, whereas Axe stands steady. Even if the actual product weight is the same, Axe appears heavier and more robust due to the packaging. But the difference is also about the way that the height and slimness gives a look more of elegance and aspiration in contrast to the more grounded and substantial look of the Axe container.

As well as height and width we find that the two containers deploy curvature and angularity differently. The Fructis container curves gently outwards from the base and then inwards towards the top. Roundness is clearly an important design principle for Garnier Fructis. Axe, in contrast, uses inward curvature, to create a 'grip' look, including angular cuts going upwards. The container is therefore

textured to the touch and feels tougher and more substantial. The grip, found on tools, machinery and motorbikes, helps to point to toughness and robustness. The lid too is thick and angular, alluding to the rocket theme, but also resembling broad shoulders. The angularity suggests something more aggressive than the gentle curves of Fructis.

Since packaging is three-dimensional it can communicate what is front, back or on the sides, or not do so. Garnier Fructis has a clear distinction between front and back with no sides foregrounded. The Axe container also communicates a clear back and front, also using the sides to create the grip look, integrating the two. As we will see in this chapter, these dimensions can be used in different ways. For example, we may find a design used to create a clear front, or an illustration, such as on a milk carton, can wrap around several different sides and so contain the whole product. What we find on the Fructis container is that the sides are reduced and not used to carry text in order to help communicate slimness. In the case of Axe the sides are used as part of the design of the grip.

Colour is also an important difference between the two containers. Garnier Fructis has a bright and shiny, lime-like, almost neon-green colour. This has a highly glossy quality that communicates qualities of the results of the product. The Axe container has a sober black nuance and cold colours, grey and aqua blue, in the angular graphic symbol, with possible associations with power and calculation.

The typeface of the Fructis brand name has curvature and letters with a low weight and thin strokes, including a dot over the upper case 'I', giving extra ornamentation, with possible associations with elegance and emotions. Another ornamentation is the characteristic knob on the lid in darker green. In the latter and male case we find large and broad letters in the brand name, where the length of the horizontal strokes gives a distinct graphical identity to the brand and makes it stretch out in space, following an overall Axe design principle that has been called the 'square round edge' and devised to give a sense of sophistication, no doubt with sexual undertones, to their male grooming products.

On the two containers we also find iconography. On the Fructis container we find a round icon that has the appearance of a cutaway of fruit labelled as 'Grapefruit Extract'. We also find this round icon repeated at the top of the container. Here the emphasis is on roundness and the natural, but the cutaway suggests something more connected to processing and science, rather than an organic kind of natural. On the Axe container, we find a symbol resembling lightning is used, alluding to energy and movement. This symbol has angularity, which relates to the angularity in the shape of the container. We could ask how the women's product would communicate differently were it in a smaller, fatter,

squat container, or if the men's product was taller, slimmer and more elegant, with gentle curves.

### Honest branding: communicating innocence

Since the 2000s 'honest' branding has become widespread, which in the case of packaging means that the 'natural' and 'organic' are visually communicated in new ways. This can be seen as a response to the increasing awareness of environmental threats and healthy eating and also to low consumer trust, where scandals such as horse DNA traces found in beef burgers in British supermarkets or minced meat being re-packed in Swedish grocery stores and given new best-before dates. It is also related to a rise in interest in ethical and healthy diets. Scholars have suggested that these more natural kinds of food are interrelated with a middle-class notion of taste, status and power (Shugart, 2014).

The organic must suggest slowness, the personal, the opposite of processing and impersonal manufacturing process. The idea of 'local' can also be important, which can be accomplished by a range of semiotic means and may be broadly thought of in terms of a less mediated form of product that goes directly from the farm to the table (Shugart, 2014). Such ideas are infused with romantic ideas about purity and innocence of nature and simpler ways of life (Hansen, 2002). The idea of honest branding therefore is to communicate messages such as 'nothing but nature', 'unadulterated food', 'clear conscience' (Burrows, 2013). As with the case of gender, packaging here is an important part of communicating this honesty.

In Figure 5.2 we see juice bottles from the UK brand Innocent, sold in many countries around the world. Important three-dimensional qualities here lie in the bottle being designed as a carafe with a neck and thick lid, evoking something home-made and also robust and authentic, as if we were being served a good wine in a rural area. Here too the stockiness of the bottle appears less elegant and more grounded. The transparent plastic material is also an important choice here, which, unlike the washing products above, unmasks the content, allowing it to speak for itself. As we know, an honest person has nothing to hide, and this trustworthiness is part of the brand message.

The plastic itself is thin. On the one hand the manufacturer promotes their aim to use less plastic in packaging and that it should all be from food-grade recycled materials. So on one sense this in itself brings more 'naturalness' and 'uninterrupted' association to the package. But on the other hand this also creates a different feel to the more robust thicker plastic of the Axe gel above. In the Innocent case the thinness of the plastic relates to the unmediated, 'just product' idea. It also in itself,

## Packaging



**Figure 5.2** Juices from the brand Innocent: a promotional photo to the left and drinks on the shelf to the right (Photographs by author)

once empty, appears insubstantial and a modest item to recycle. Again to draw out these meanings we can think of the effect were a male washing gel packaged in this transparent type of thin plastic container.

Given that Innocent exists in an already crowded market of juices the logo of the brand and package imagery are important. And given these juices are sold often at three times the price of other products some work must be done to show why. The logo here, shown in Figure 5.3, combines something almost childish to represent simplicity and innocence, with something more modern and measured. We see a face with a halo, where the uneven strokes seem drawn by a child, or at least someone not taking too much care to make it perfect, and the use of the halo of course suggests something guilt-free, pure of thought and intention.

The fonts used, in contrast, are even, regular and modern. Letters are rounded and gentle and are slightly spaced out, giving a sense of 'air' and 'room to breathe' as designers say. Such products communicate lack of artifice, serene moods and slower paces. It is also important that the font is rendered in black bringing more sober associations. This contributes to an overall limited colour palette which makes it clear that colours here are not combined to signal what is fun, but measure and restraint.



**Figure 5.3** The logo of Innocent

The label on the Innocent packaging divides the bottle into a clear front and two different sides. While one side contains the mandatory copy on contents, the other side is used for what is commonly called CSR or corporate social responsibility. On the front panel of the bottle we see a call-out with a hat and the text ‘the big knit’, with an arrow connecting image and text, a feature quite common in honest branding (Burrows, 2013). In this case the headline reads ‘Small hats, warm hearts’ and is about knitting a hat which you can then send to Innocent who may then put a photograph of it on the bottles. For each sold bottle wearing a hat Innocent donates 25p to Age UK. The light-green arrow connecting the image and the text is curved, connoting simplicity and informality, saying ‘see for yourself!’ and inviting consumers to take part.

In Figure 5.4 we see another example of honest branding that codes ‘innocence’ with a very different kind of package. Here we find two products by Ella’s Kitchen which is UK’s biggest baby-food brand and established in many European markets. In this case the aim is to promote baby food that communicates cleanness, being simple and unadulterated food. For their smoothies we see ‘the red one’ has a simplified strawberry symbol and ‘the yellow one’ has a stylized banana.

We find pure saturated primary colours which on the shelf create a lively colour palette. Here we see even the product names ‘the red one’ and ‘the yellow one’ avoid ‘strawberry’ or ‘banana’ as product names, which means that language is used for labelling in a way akin to a picture book, where a simplified illustration of a bright yellow or red car can co-exist with the word ‘car’. The product descriptor ‘ecological smoothie’ is written in a small font below the logo. The typeface is also childish, with uneven strokes, appearing hand-drawn.



**Figure 5.4** Ella’s Kitchen and the smoothies ‘the red one’ and ‘the yellow one’ (Photographs by author)



Specific to this product is the use of a thin plastic packaging which is accommodating. We can compare this to the majority of baby food which is packaged in see-through glass containers which are hard and unyielding and not for children to touch. Here the child can hold and feel the package. And the package, with its rough and unregulated contours, also comes out as less regulated. It adjusts to the touch of the hand, rather than being a food stuff that we take out of the pot with a spoon. This physical closeness in itself can communicate a kind of intimacy as opposed to the remoteness of artificial processes. We also find a stark contrast between the thin and square body of the package and the big, round and solid lid or head, which once again evokes a sense of the playful, of the package being almost a toy. It is also interesting that the colour nuances slightly change and underpin this contrast. The lids are bright red and yellow, of the kind we also meet in children's toys, but the body has more muted nuances. The yellow is darker, almost mustard-like, and comes out as more 'adult' or measured, as directed to parents.

What we begin to see here is the way that colours, fonts and iconography can communicate ideas and values, but so too can materials, sizes and textures. Of course, we experience these as a single material object. But we start to see the value in looking more closely at these semiotic choices.

### Discount brands: communicating value for money

Figure 5.5 shows a form of packaging used to communicate 'value for money'. We see the red and white packaging of the Swedish brand ICA Basic, part of a Dutch-based European food retailer which runs a set of products called Euro Shopper. This is the local ICA version.

What is immediately striking is that the products are given a coordinated colour and design scheme to be easily identifiable on the shelves. But when we



**Figure 5.5** The Swedish discount brand ICA Basic

look closer we also find something very specific as regards the shape and textures of the packages that unite them. And all of these semiotic materials are deployed to communicate ‘basic’, ‘no fuss’ and ‘value’, without suggesting that quality is lower. Of course, what stands out from other packaging is the use of two colours only which together create a quite stark effect and suggests simplicity, something direct, unadorned. The UK food retailer Sainsbury has a similar design of their basic line where orange and white are used. It is no surprise that ICA’s logo is red and Sainsbury’s orange, fusing the products with the brand. Also important is that neither of the colours has contours. They are flat, unmodulated, regular, without relief. Such flat colours tend to be used to communicate constancy and truth. There are no subtle shades or nuances here.

The red and white are used to create rhyming across the designs. The red ‘speech bubble’ stating the nature of the product, rhymes with the ‘table’ surface upon which the products sits. The font colour rhymes with the white. The surface too communicates something basic, uncomplicated and functional. The choice of the glossy is slightly garish. Upmarket versions of frozen vegetables, for example, will contain more iconography of serving equipment and the textures of the plastic packaging may be slightly rough. Such textures feel like they invite touch more than the glossy. We can see in Figure 5.5 that the glossy plastic appears to catch the light in a way that is less flattering. Again this can help give a sense of lack of artifice.

If we look at the baby-food packaging in Figure 5.4 we also find a glossy surface. But here the effect changes with the soft textures created by the colour effect, the typeface and the stylized drawings. And in the case of the whole it is a playful design compared with the starkness and emptiness of the basics design, where also traditional photographs are used to display the product on the front of the package. ICA uses a modern typeface with curvature and a horizontal orientation. It is un-aspirational yet modern and suggests softness and nurturing. A more angular or traditional font would have been too harsh and logical for the rest of the composition. In sum we see that while packaging may to some extent be required to protect, store or transport a product it can also be used to carry very specific discourses and ideas to sell the product.

## Analysing packaging

In this section we begin with materials, and then look at the shape and form of the packaging. We then turn to colour, typeface and writing, and finally iconography. We refer back to some of the examples above and also introduce some new ones, especially those that allow us to carry out the kinds of comparison that tends to be useful for drawing out affordances.

## Materials

Packages are manufactured from physical materials, and we will here make comments on some affordances of such materials. In an actual package such materials will of course be manufactured and shaped into a whole. Furthermore, after the packaging and product have been used, materials become part of processes of not only recycling but also ‘upcycling’ (Björkvall and Archer, 2017). So discarded materials are reused and their semiotic values and affordances are transformed. A metal food container can be made into a lamp, a torn ladder into a bookshelf, a PET bottle into a broom.

There are clearly a number of key materials used in packaging: paper, card, plastic, glass, metals and wood, as well as a new range of bio-materials made from plants. And these materials can, as we have seen above, communicate ideas and values. A plastic bag can be thin and mainly transparent to hold budget apples. It can be glossy and white for a basics line, or it can be given a texture and pastel colour scheme to hold a product like an organic chicken. Below we present an inventory of some basic affordances of typical packaging materials (cf. Klimchuk and Krasovec, 2006: Chapter 8).

## Wood

We begin with a much less used material, which is useful for drawing out the affordances of other materials. We only tend to find wood used for packaging of products such as cigars or a bottle of expensive whisky. Clearly there is a sense of something special here, that such products are associated with craft, with being handmade, with something artisan. The artisanal connotations suggest slower, careful processes, which translate onto a product that must be appreciated and savoured at the same slow pace. Increasingly we can find things like cosmetics packaged in ways to connote naturalness. Although in such cases we do not find the rougher wood-casing look of the whisky, but wood that is more fashioned and shaped; for example a blusher is placed in a round wooden pot where the grain of the wood can be seen through a metallic coloured finish.

## Glass

This is a more traditional form of pre-plastic and pre-mass production packaging and much of its meaning can relate to these associations. Glass can suggest something older or traditional. It gives a sense of something created to endure longer and can communicate substantiality through weight. Beers sold in bottles feel different than those sold in cans which appear more practical, and attempts to use plastic bottles have not been successful (Wagner, 2015). Shops now stock

ranges of newer specialist beers where much thought has gone into the design of the glass, as regards form and colour, often to bring connotations of tradition in brewing. The weight of the bottle here can be important to carry associations of provenance and substantiality and again of artisan honesty. It feels more ceremonious if you eat in your local Indian restaurant and two specialist beer bottles are placed on the table rather than two cans of beer. And of course glass can be used to allow us to see the contents, which can be another way to communicate honesty. We often find cosmetics in coated glass can suggest quality and expense.

### Carton

Boxes can give an extra layer of protection. But they can also suggest higher quality. Some deep-freeze foods, such as pizzas, come in clear plastic sealed covers, whereas others are also placed within a box. A basics range breakfast cereal will tend to come in a plastic packet whereas a branded cereal will be in a box, although of course boxes can then carry colour and compositions that tell us that it is nevertheless a more economy brand. Cartons can also have different thicknesses, which can also signal quality through weight, durability and solidity. A box of special occasion biscuits, made for taking to an event, will likely use thicker card than cheaper biscuits or say for a pizza packaging. Cartons can also be used to communicate 'no frills' in a specific way when they are used in a form that looks bare, as is the case of the brown, rough, packaging in IKEA stores (cf. Ventura, 2015).

### Paper

Paper gives an impression of more fragility and tends to be associated with something more handmade or traditional, where formerly goods were hand-wrapped in paper. So we may find bread in paper and find it more traditional than the loaves packaged entirely in a plastic bag. A bar of soap in an organic shop may be wrapped in a stiffer form of paper. When we buy fresh fish at a counter some supermarkets may use a plastic bag, or seal the fish into a polystyrene tray. But others may wrap the fish in paper which is sealed on one side, which appears more hand-served. We may also find an addition paper layer of wrapping inside a tin of biscuits.

### Plastics

Here we find a wide variety of forms and their meaning will depend upon textures and shapes as we saw above as regards the washing products and the baby food.

Plastic can communicate modernity and processing, in the way that a manufacturer may feel the need to add elements of card, texture or colour to help add a sense of quality or honesty. For example, an organic, free-range chicken may be sealed in a plastic bag, but if there is a thin card band fastened around it and if the plastic is textured this will give it a different meaning than the glossy polished plastic of the basics range. A bottle of face cream may have a basic plastic container but has a fused outer card surface, again for texture. But even very cheap clear plastic can be used to communicate expense and quality. For example, you buy some Apple hardware, such as an iPhone. Each individual item, the cable, a connector, the device, its container, are all wrapped in their own tiny plastic bag or sleeve. And this early interaction with the product can be part of the message about it being an event.

### Metal

Metal, like plastic, can be used to make lightweight and thin yet highly resistant containers. For preserved food they have the disadvantage or advantage of concealing the product. In this case a picture can be used, either printed onto the can or by using paper. The look of the contents is then not that important as the cultural meanings which the packaging can load upon it. But metal can also bring a sense of quality, given it is durable. A metal lid on a bottle appears more high status than a plastic one. And the metal can be covered with lacquers or paint. Some coffees such as Lavazza produce options in metal cans with a re-sealable lid. We also find this with some branded cooking ingredients such as gravy powders. Often food for Christmas such as biscuits or chocolates come in tins bringing a sense of tradition and luxury. Here, neither wood nor plastic would do the same job.

### Textures

It is clear from the above account of materials that the kinds of textures that they are capable of, or which can be designed onto them, is important as regards how packaging communicates. Like materials themselves textures are infused with social meanings and values and are experienced in all human activities. Here we look at textures using several categories of analysis, drawing on Abousnnouga and Machin (2013), van Leeuwen (2016) and Ledin and Machin (2017b). As with materials, the meaning of these will depend upon how they are used in other design combinations. But here there is value in exploring these in this atomized manner. In practical analysis we would tend to use them together with the other tool kits to look at a single package.

## Rigidity

Surfaces may be resistant or they can give more or less to the touch. A resistant surface is a hard surface, and as surfaces get softer their resistance to pressure decreases. The floor of an entrance hall may be a marble floor which is unyielding to the touch. Another may have a cork or rubber floor which gives very slightly. In theory we could make a highly resistant sponge floor that had the texture of a mattress. This may be okay for a children's play centre but not for a corporate building. If we look at the two washing products at the start of the chapter we find that the Axe container is more rigid to the touch than the Fructis shampoo in Figure 5.1. Simply the surface is stronger and less yielding. The whole package feels more stable. We can say that this works alongside the angularity and colours as part of communicating toughness. The more giving container of Fructis, in contrast, could suggest something more accommodating, or comfortable. The baby food in Figure 5.4 suggests softness, yielding to the touch, which contrasts with the more usual use of transparent glass jars. The Innocent bottle in Figure 5.2 is made of very thin plastic that yields slightly. In both cases this yielding could be better than glass for communicating accommodating to the environment. In the case of the baby food the softness can also go along with nurturing.

## Relief

Parts of surfaces can extend below or above a horizontal plane. This can suggest the difference between something that is natural and uneven, with imperfections, or something that is artificially flat. Relief can signal 'authenticity', 'simplicity', something worn, used over time, a lived surface. Relief can also hinder movement and touch, as the bumps on a road. The flat and smooth surface might, on the one hand, be considered un-authentic, dull and pre-fabricated, but could, on the other hand, come out as pure, practical, efficient and easy to use. We can see in the two washing containers in Figure 5.1 that Fructis has a flat unimpeded surface. Here we might say there is a sense of something pure and efficient. In contrast the Axe container uses relief on the sides with the grip look and for the lid with the angular shapes. Here there is a sense of something more authentic, less easy. The Innocent bottle in Figure 5.2 is very flat. The smaller version of the bottle has no relief at all, emphasizing simplicity and ease. The larger version has a very gentle ridge which sits around the label area. But for the most part we still find lack of relief. We can contrast this with contemporary traditional ale bottles which often have ridges, lettering which is raised, other emblems and icons which raise the relief of the bottle. And other products, like chocolates or perfumes, may have raised letters and designs on boxes. Here too there is a sense of a personal touch, of something hand-embossed.

## Regularity

Regular textures are predictable and can mean homogeneous, lack of surprise and consistency. Or they can be irregular and mean different, playful, creative, or inconsistent. Irregularity can also suggest something handmade as opposed to being manufactured and standardized. The Ella's Kitchen baby food in Figure 5.4 uses irregularity, also to point away from the idea of processing and regularity. We can see how this rhymes with the irregular appearance of the fonts and colour scheme. And many organic products might seek to use less regular surfaces, such as through paper or card packaging which is slightly uneven. Other products that may use irregular packaging are breads. We could imagine buying a bread in a sharp-edged regular surfaced box. This would not tend to work as breads should bring some sense of being handmade, or as having provenance or a link with nature, as we see in the commercials that market them. Where we would be less likely to find irregularity would be on medical products where regular surfaces communicate predictability, standardization and science.

## Naturalness

Textures can also communicate naturalness or artificiality. This is partly because materials may have their origin in nature or be manufactured and artificial. Natural materials include wood, bark from trees. But naturalness partly involves cultural experiences and knowledge in determining the origins of different materials. So a rough paper might appear more natural than a shiny plastic. A glass bottle, such as used for a traditional ale, might appear more natural, due to the association with traditional and natural methods of production. This is one reason a beer bottle appears less intrusive than a can of beer when placed on a table in a restaurant. Naturalness can be associated with what is authentic and organic. Textures that are less naturalistic can suggest technological progress, high competence, the predictable, and also the impersonal and artificial. In the case of the ICA Basic, we find mainly plastics with glossy surfaces, which points to the predictable and the impersonal. The packaging communicates little of personal touch as regards texture. On beauty products we may find wood used for make-up containers or plastics that are moulded in the form of wood grain, bark or leaves. Other products might use tin to deliberately communicate older industrial processes.

## Viscosity

Viscosity is about how sticky different surfaces are. Of course, this can have positive and negative meanings, depending on context. Sticky can mean dirty and unwashed, which is not very useful for food packaging. But more sticky can also

be achieved through rubber-like or foam textures, which can add comfort and grip. More often in packaging this is accomplished by shape, which we deal with in the next section. But, nevertheless, viscosity may be used on lids to help them be gripped and unscrewed. Men's washing products may use viscosity as part of a handle-type grip design. A type of canned energy drink may use viscosity, in the form of a polystyrene layer, to communicate its practical use during fitness. A branded detergent may have a small viscous section to help grip, or a trigger section where spray action is involved. Such additions may be practical, but they also help to communicate functionality as a kind of affect as would a male deodorant that was slightly viscous. For a branded product such extras can be important as part of communicating its robustness in doing its job.

### Liquidity

Surfaces may be more or less wet or dry, which can relate to life and vitality or to rot and decay. Liquid is a prerequisite for humans and living organisms. Surfaces that are wet can mean vitality and purity. This is one reason a corporate entrance hall may install a wall fountain. Sexuality is tied to what is humid, which often makes a 'wet look' stand out as sexy and also young. Dryness consequently can connote ageing, a lack of vitality. But dryness can also signal comfort, cleanliness and order, as when we do the laundry or wash the car and then dry it to get a smooth and perfect surface. We may find a wet look surface less often in food packaging, although this may be of value in drinks and ice cream sold in summer. But dryness seems of high importance. Dryness can be used as part of communicating oldness and tradition as in the dry and crispy-type paper found to wrap some brands of crackers. While the inside of a cheese packaging may be glossy and liquid to suggest moisture, the outside may be dry and slightly lacking in vitality to suggest aging. The dryness of breakfast cereal packaging can also be important to communicate crispness and freshness. The packaging for washing products such as Garnier Fructis may have a surface that appears to have liquidity connecting it to the shampoo within.

### Shape

Since packages are three-dimensional manufacturers naturally take a lot of interest in shape. Again, to some extent, there are practicalities as regards storage and transportation. But important too is how the product looks on the shelves, the physical appearance and feel when we pick it up and its possibilities for use in domestic space. In the inventory below we list three-dimensional features of packaging.



## Front and back

Important for packaging is that there is a front and a back. Packaging designers call the front the ‘primary display panel’, or PDP, and here colour, symbols and typography come together, not least to emphasize the brand name, as we see in the examples above (Klimchuk and Krasovec, 2006: Chapter 4). There is a clear parallel with humans. We also have a clear front and back and interact with others this way. The front is our face, our eyes and sensory organs, and displays who we are, and we look into the eyes of friends to see how they are or feel. This is an important explanation as to why packages are designed as they are and as to why the communication comes out as direct.

## Vertical and horizontal

This is simply whether a package is tall and more vertically oriented or squat and more horizontally oriented. Here taller slimmer packages can appear more elegant, aspirational or even delicate. A shorter fatter package can be more stable, durable or practical. Also the reverse meanings can be realized, where taller can appear pompous, insubstantial, fragile or delicate and where shorter packages can appear clumsy and immobile. We see this difference in the two washing products in Figure 5.1 where Fructis uses a more vertical orientation to suggest something more elegant and perhaps delicate, as compared to the squatter, more stable-looking Axe. So a bottle for a white wine may be tall and thin, to suggest elegance while such a form would not be so appropriate for a beer, a whisky or even for a fruit juice.

## Curvature and angularity

Angular packaging can suggest something practical, technical, harsh, efficient, even masculine. In contrast curved packaging can suggest emotions, the organic, expression, luxury and feminine. We see curvature in the shape of both the washing products in Figure 5.1. Of course in the case of Garnier Fructis we find a gentle curvature of the container combined with vertical orientation and slimness. In the case of the Axe container we also find curvature. But this is used to create the shape of the grip handle. And we also have other aspects of angularity in the surface relief. And we have much less horizontal orientation. We can see that the orange-juice package in the ICA Basic range in Figure 5.5 is a square box in contrast with the curves of the Innocent bottle in Figure 5.2. In the case of the basics range the use of the box can communicate practicality and efficiency, whereas the curves of Innocent can here, combined with other aspects of the packaging

design, communicate something more natural and organic. A perfume bottle may use curvature in more complex ways to communicate emotional expression and femininity. In the case of Ella's Kitchen in Figure 5.4 we find the use of roundness as part of communicating something natural and emotional. The oversized lid is highly rounded. The 'shoulders' of the packet have been rounded and the base given a rounded form.

### Opacity

Packaging can be opaque, as in the case of the Axe container, or transparent, as with the Innocent container. Other products might have a small plastic window so that the product can be glimpsed. Where we can see inside there is a sense of revealing the inner workings, or a sense of lack of concealment, of openness. In many contemporary public and corporate buildings glass walls can be used to suggest such transparency, communication and open interaction. A jar of asparagus where the product can be seen may suggest something more honest, a more open and simple relationship between production and consumption than a can of asparagus that carries a photograph with a serving suggestion. In the ICA Basic range there is no transparency or intimacy, but a consequent use of photographs that appear bright and optimistic. We can also get degrees of transparency and opaqueness created by coloured glass. The greens and browns used in traditional ale bottles, as well as signifying older, artisanal types of glass, help to bring a more rustic hue to the beer.

### Size

Size is of course related to practicality, to how large a package must be to contain the product, but we can think about size where it has been used deliberately to communicate something about the product. Larger size can then be used to communicate value. The package may still contain a lot of air, as we find in breakfast cereals or potato crisps, but this may still be a good way to communicate 'more'. When we buy electronic products, for example a new electric toothbrush, we might find padding used in a larger-than-necessary box. This may be moulded plastic or polystyrene. Here the size of the packaging and the sublayers of wrapping help to give value to the product. Other packages may seek to be smaller and discreet, as opposed to taking up space. A luxury product or particularly something wholefood may work better in a smaller container. This may be related to preciousness, about quality versus quantity and also about communicating less packaging and environmental friendliness, even if this product's processing and the creation of the packaging in fact was highly costly to the environment.

## Colour

In this section we make an inventory of colour as used for packaging (Klimchuk and Krasovec, 2006: Chapter 6). We also deal with colour in Chapter 3 (p. 49), and in Chapter 4 (p. 80) we look specifically at colour in composition. Here we start with experiential metaphors involving colour.

A colour has a range of associations that arise from experiential metaphors, our experiences of life and culture (Gage, 1994). We know, for example, that the sky is blue, as is the sea when the sun shines. And blue has come to be used to communicate reflection, science and objectivity. This may be related to the way that the blue sky is not confined and allows us to see and think clearly. Blue has also come to be used to communicate purity since water is viewed as soft, pure and cleansing. A toothpaste might use such associations to create a 'burst of freshness' type design, which we see in Figure 5.6.

When a person becomes tired or exerted the face can become reddened as the heart speeds up. When we are wounded, of course, we bleed. Thus, red is a common signifier for energy, for being active and on the move. A red price tag on a package means a special offer, something immediate and on the move. Red can also communicate fire, heat and therefore, passion or aggression. Red can be used on the label of a beer bottle to suggest warmth. Orange can, like red, be associated with warmth, and be the colour of sun. Orange is a popular colour for skin-care products, or, if we associate it with flavours, it can signify fruitiness, as from peach or tangerine. We often find red and orange are colours used by discount brands to suggest simple optimism. Yellow is associated with the brightness of sunshine whereas colours like green and brown are related to the earth and to nature.

Black and white are associated with seeing a vision. Black can mean darker moods, seriousness, secrets, concealment, and it is a typical colour of up-market products, for example champagne. White is associated with purity and with softness. It is also common that the colour of the package simply depicts the product, so that tomato ketchup comes in a red bottle. Lemon juice might be packed in a yellow plastic container with relief having the exact shape of a lemon. Due to the fact that blooming nature is green, there can be a 'green product line', signifying that the products are ecological. When carrying out analysis we must be mindful that colours carry many different meanings and therefore these kind of associations are wide-ranging and ambiguous out of context.

## Dimensions

As for dimensions, colours have qualities that can be placed on scales, such as light and dark, saturated and dilute. They combine cultural and experiential associations.

*Brightness* Colours can be on a scale from brightness to darkness. This has to do with what is light and dark, which obviously is a rich source of meaning-making, including associations with clarity and obscurity, from brighter more optimistic moods to those that are solemn or reserved. In the process of analysis here we can look at the relative levels of brightness found on different packages. For example, in the case of the two washing containers in Figure 5.1, we find that Fructis uses a brighter colour for the plastic material and also brighter colours for some of the design. It is simply more optimistic. In contrast Axe uses a black material, suggesting something more reserved. The fonts use a brighter white and also aqua blue and a neutral grey. This helps to bring some brightness to the overall design. If we look at the ICA Basics design we find a bolder red, but these packages are dominated by white and by brightness. While the white and the form of the composition communicate simplicity and emptiness, they are also therefore optimistic. Such a design would not have worked with an overall darker colour scheme.

*Saturation* Colours can be rich and saturated or more dilute and muted. Saturated colours can be associated with higher emotional temperatures whereas more diluted colours with more muted and reserved moods. We see saturated colours on the packaging of ICA Basic in Figure 5.5. The red here shouts out. As regards the Aquafresh toothpaste in Figure 5.6 we find rich emotional reds and bright whites but also a more muted sea blue-green, suggesting something more soothing.

*Purity* Colours can be pure or they can be blended or contain shades, or elements of other colours. Historically pure colours have been associated with truth, order and simplicity. Impure colours are associated with complexity, ambiguity. Children's toys and products, of course, tend to use pure and highly pure, saturated colours. A toothpaste may use pure blues and whites to communicate simple direct cleaning actions as we see in Figure 5.6. ICA Basic will use pure colours to communicate simplicity and the truth if basic products. But we may find that natural products will tend to use less pure-looking natural types of colours, such as browns with blues in. Combined with a rougher textured card these can suggest something less purified, and therefore natural.

*Modulation* Colours can be flat and featureless or they can carry grades of colour saturation. Or they can have different degrees of graininess, where they carry lighter versions of the same colour or another colour. The meaning of this

can also relate to simplicity. A flat unmodulated colour can appear idealized, simple. The ICA Basic range uses such flat colours in the red. Even where we see the surface areas where the dishes stand, we see only minimal evidence of shadow.

*Colour range* This is to do with how many colours we find on a package. A higher number of colours will tend to be used to communicate fun, liveliness and playfulness. A smaller number of colours, reducing to monochrome, will communicate something more reserved and contained. A high number of colours can also look crude and garish whereas a limited number can appear dull and lifeless. Typically, packaging for children's products will carry a wide colour palette of brighter colours. In Figure 5.6 we see that the Aquafresh toothpaste uses dark blue, blue-green, white and red. This is a relatively small colour range. Here the 'energy' is supplied by the pure, saturated, white explosion.

### Writing and typography

Typography is a crucial part of packaging and we have made many typographical observations of packages in this chapter; for example a bold font with weight giving emphasis, as in the ICA Basic design in Figure 5.5, or a curved font suggesting something gentle and feminine, as was the case for the Garnier Fructis shampoo in Figure 5.1. As for analysing typography, the tool kit presented in Chapter 4 (p. 78), based on dimensions such as 'weight' and 'slope', works also for packaging so we refer to this tool kit.

Here we will concentrate on writing, which clearly is part of the design of packaging and also subject to regulations of law, which Figure 5.6 illustrates. This toothpaste carton comes from the US National Library of Medicine, which points to the regulations for packaging (and in this case medicine). As for the different types of writing we draw on Klimchuk and Krasovec (2006: Chapter 5). It is worth noticing that packaging designers make a general difference according to the three-dimensional shape of packaging and talk about the 'primary display panel', or PDP, as we discussed above, and 'secondary panels'. Here the primary front panel always contains the brand and product name and often call-outs, whereas the mandatory information to a large extent is given in the secondary panels. Below we account for our inventory of different types of writing.

### Brand and product name

This is placed on the PDP and in this case reads 'Aquafresh' and with smaller upper-case letters 'fluoride toothpaste' and 'triple protection' placed above and



**Figure 5.6** The carton package of Aquafresh as stored in and approved by the US National Library of Medicine and with categories of writing added by us

below the logo. In lower-case but larger letters in a dark-blue ribbon we see the text ‘extra fresh’. So the product is, unsurprisingly, given positive qualities in order to sell.

### Callout

A callout is writing inserted in graphics, in an icon or box of some kind. It is printed on the PDP. The Aquafresh carton has two graphically separated callouts with icons, to the upper left about being recommended by dentists, and to the right about improving gums, teeth and breath. As we saw in Figure 5.2, Innocent used the callout ‘Small hats, warm hearts’ to involve customers.

### Sell copy

This is often placed on a secondary panel, in the case of Aquafresh on the side of the carton. To the left we meet bullet points saying, among other things, that it ‘Helps to maintain healthy gums with regular brushing’ and that it has a ‘Clinically proven active ingredient to fight cavities’. The rest of the panel has another layout and displays toothbrush heads but with similar and overlapping messages: ‘Aquafresh Extra Fresh fights cavities with fluoride ...’. Similarly Innocent in Figure 5.2 uses sell copy on the ‘sides’ of the bottle to explain their knitting campaign where money is donated to the elderly.

### Mandatory copy

This is copy enforced by the law, which explains why the net weight must be given on the PDP. Otherwise we find the mandatory copy in small fonts (but it must be legible according to law) on the back of the carton, on the side opposite

the PDP. Here we find ingredients and the obligatory address of the retailer. In practical analysis different categories of mandatory copy can be separated according to their contents and legal constraints.

Overall, the writing of packages is very functional and connected to shape and three-dimensionality. We find strictly informational text but the promotional text is also striking, where graphics and writing come together in selling and branding the product.

## Iconography

Packaging tends to carry a range of drawings, more abstract designs such as wavy lines as well as photographs and icons (Klimchuk and Krasovec, 2006: Chapter 7). Here we look at how we can guide the way we can make observations about these and draw on Barthes (1977) and Panofsky (1970). Both of them were interested in the way that elements in visual representations could be used to communicate wider associations. Panofsky's interest lay in art while Barthes had a wider interest in popular culture. Often such elements become invisible as they become part of more established discourses. The job of the analyst for these writers was to denaturalize them. Drawing on the work of both we have constructed the tool kit below.

## Objects

Here we can ask what kind of objects we find on a design. This can be a kind of animal. Such an animal may be a bird to suggest lightness, or a monkey to suggest fun and playfulness. We may find an item of machinery involved in production. We may, for example, find a farm tractor, or simply icons for technology and power such as a battery or cogs. We may also find a leaf, or an item of fruit. The Fructis shampoo in Figure 5.1 has several scientific diagrams. Here too we find a cutaway of fruit, but here rendered as if seen through a microscope or in a petri dish. Of course, the meaning here is a mixture of natural refreshing cleaning ingredients from fruit along with science. Of interest was that men's cosmetics tended not to carry such scientific diagrams but rather icons representing machines or energy.

## Settings

We can ask what kind of settings are represented. We might find nature (Hansen, 2002). This could be a farm, one that is idealized with a winding brook and happy animals, or a wild meadow. Or it could be a mountain, where nature becomes a natural wilderness, or ocean. Nature may be in the form of a

deliberately exotic setting for coffee or global foods. Or we might find scenes such as an old-fashioned factory, a distillery. In, for example, the Innocent juice in Figure 5.2 the fruit appears to sit in an empty white space infused with brightness. Some fruit juices choose to show fruit placed in fresh growing grass. But here the light infused space seems to suggest a step further into purity and innocence.

## Persons

We can ask what kind of people we find on packaging. We might find a farmer, often used to represent honest work, even where the producer is a huge corporation. Such pictures can be used on meat and dairy products to point to traditional production processes, free from worry of the use of toxic feeds, and so on. We might find an attractive yet unstriking woman used on a hair-colouring product. We might find a child on the side of a carton of organic milk, to help communicate health benefits. We might find generic ethnic people for coffee from Latin America, or Chinese people for a brand of soy sauce.

## Emblems

Products carry all kinds of emblems, brand marks and crests. Here we can look at things like experiential associations such as angularity and curvature (for the meaning of such associations see sections on borders in Chapter 4), colours and the kinds of objects they carry. The Axe container in Figure 5.1 carries an emblem that resembles a kind of burst of electricity, yet in Aqua blue and grey. The Aquafresh toothpaste carries three circles that are glinting with light. Out of each comes a toothbrush that carries one of the three colours contained in the toothpaste used to visualize the sell copy.

## Stylization

Barthes (1977) called this ‘photogenia’. By this he meant the kind of style that is used. For example, do we see a ‘real’, more naturalistic scene, such as a farmer in front of a farmhouse. Or does it appear more in the form of a children’s drawing, as on the Ella’s Kitchen packaging in Figure 5.4, or a scientific diagram as on the Fructis package in Figure 5.1. Does it suggest a particular style of art? We might find a kind of impressionist art used, for example, on an organic range to connote high culture, yet at the same time something gentle. All such associations will depend on cultural experiences.



## SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Throughout this chapter, through showing how packages communicate, making comparisons within product types and showing what kinds of discourses they communicate, we have given a clear sense of what kinds of research questions can be answered using these tools and how the analysis would take place. But here we can think about some specific research questions and how we might answer them:

- How are ecological/organic toothpastes packaged compared to 'regular' products?
- How are children's versions of dairy products packaged in three different countries?
- What is specific about the packaging of healthy products?

All of these questions imply some kind of comparison. In the first case we would need to collect a range of different toothpastes that were branded as organic and not branded as organic. We could then compare things like shape, materials, iconography, colour, texture, and so on. We would most likely establish that there are a number of basic rules for 'organic-ness' which we find to greater or lesser degrees. There is an organic shop near to where the authors live that sells very small and very expensive tubes of organic toothpaste. At this level great care must be taken to signal the correct meanings to justify the price. As part of this research project we would need to carry out a literature review on media representations of nature and the environment, some of which we referred to early in this chapter.

In the second case we would need to collect children's dairy products from different countries. This would then allow us to compare the uses of materials, colours, iconography, and so on. This may give us insights into the different ideas of things like childhood and health in different countries. Of course, many products may have many similarities across countries where there is only translation of language. In such a case this may indicate a global homogenization of children's foods. But we may find many differences too. Such a project would engage with literature on the representation of childhood in society and in the media.

In the third case we may need to narrow the question down to one specific kind of product. 'Healthy' is a broad and vague notion as regards food products. It can be associated with added ingredients and supplements, or with the 'natural' which is often again very vaguely defined, or with 'wholegrain', with 'goodness', with weight management. In this case a research project may be better aimed to investigate 'healthy products' as regards one type of food stuff, such as drinks, or breakfast cereal with an aim of looking at the different discourses that are communicated and at *how* these are communicated at a semiotic level.