

VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF INDUSTRIAL BRANDS: LANDSCAPE, IDENTITY, AND INDUSTRIAL MEMORY IN COMMERCIAL IMAGERY

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Abstract: Recent interdisciplinary research on cultural heritage has highlighted the growing role of corporate actors in the valorisation of industrial heritage, conceptualized as a resource for identity, legitimacy, and market positioning. This paper explores how commercial visual culture contributes to the symbolic construction of selected Romanian food industry brands through the articulation of landscape, identity, and industrial memory. Methodologically, the research combines literature review, case studies, content analysis, and social semiotic analysis. The study draws on selected case studies from the Romanian food industry, including such as Mangalitsa Ham, Grivița beer, Bod and Mărgaritar sugar. The findings highlight how packaging mediates the relationship between product, identity, and place, while also revealing tension between authenticity and commercialisation on heritage-based branding. This study contributes to the literature by bridging critical heritage studies and marketing perspectives, proposing an integrated framework for understanding corporate heritage as both a cultural and strategic resource. It demonstrates how packaging functions as a visual medium through which heritage is constructed, aestheticized, and communicated to build brand identity.

Keywords: corporate heritage, industrial past, industrial memory, social semiotic analysis, critical approach

1. Introduction

Interdisciplinary studies on cultural heritage have increasingly adopted a critical perspective over the last two decades, emphasizing the valorization of industrial heritage managed by corporate enterprises [1]. This type of heritage includes sites, buildings, corporate museums, archives, but also functions as a strategic resource through which companies build economic power and social influence [1].

From a marketing and management perspective, heritage is defined as a process of communication and meaning-making, shaped by social, cultural and political factors [2]. This strategy is applied by companies whose brands could be characterized as corporate heritage brands through external

communication tools related to the origin or organizational history [3].

The concept of „corporate heritage” is relatively recent in literature, situated at the intersection of studies on brand marketing, heritage branding, corporate identity [4,5] and organizational longevity [1,3,4].

In long-standing companies, industrial heritage extends beyond economic continuity to encompass ties to historically significant production spaces. By managing industrial monuments, companies actively participate in the preservation, reinterpretation, and material valorization of industrial memory [1], reinforcing a corporate identity grounded in continuity and territorial belonging [1,2]. In this context, the past becomes a strategic

resource [4], valorized also through communication and promotion [4,6].

Place branding further emphasizes the role of the place in transforming the past into meaningful heritage integrated into promotional discourses [7], where images of place are shaped through communication strategies and public perceptions [6].

Corporate heritage is thus mobilized through visual and discursive resources, such as logos, slogans and packaging, that evoked history and identity, contributing to authenticity, trust, and symbolic value [3,4,6,8,9]. By incorporating images associated with tradition, place, landscape, or industrial memory, packaging participates in heritagization processes, where the past is selectively aestheticized, and re-signified in contemporary commercial discourse [9].

While management and marketing studies and critical heritage approaches have largely developed separately, this paper addresses this gap, by proposing an integrated perspective.

The paper aims to explore how commercial visual culture contributes to the symbolic construction of several Romanian food industry brands through the articulation of landscape, identity, and industrial memory. The study was based on two research questions: (1) How do companies in the food industry use elements of corporate heritage in visual commercial culture – particularly packaging – to build brand identity and perceptions of authenticity? (2) To what extent do visual representations of heritage contribute to articulating the relationship between product, identity, and place in contemporary commercial discourse?

2. Methodology

For the purpose of the study, several methods were employed: documentation, case study analysis, content analysis, and social semiotic analysis. The case study represents an appropriate methodology for examining brand heritage [4,8] and corporate identity [5], as it enables the collection of contextualized and in-depth

data that support the empirical grounding of these concepts [4] and facilitate a deeper understanding of how they are constructed and communicated [6].

The authors selected representative case studies from the food industry, chosen for brand longevity (e.g., Grivița beer, Bod sugar), diversity of heritage types: rural (vernacular architecture: Mangalitsa Ham), industrial (factories, workers, as in Grivița beer), and national (folk costume, symbols, as in Mărgăritar sugar), as well as the degree of geographic and temporal anchoring (i.e., the explicit presence of references to the past). Additional criteria included the complexity of the semiotic resources (image, color, text, symbol), the availability of visual materials, and as well as the relevance of the brands on the Romanian market.

Furthermore, particular attention was given to tensions between authenticity and commercialization, as well as the way heritage is re-signified within corporate strategies.

The empirical corpus comprises four visual materials, consisting of one current packaging version for each selected brand. The materials were collected by the authors through direct photography of products available on the Romanian market during the period 2022-2026, primarily from retail environments. The study focuses exclusively on primary packaging as a form of commercial visual communication, excluding other advertising materials (e.g., print ads, digital campaigns, or promotional visuals). The images were used as support for content analysis and semiotic interpretation [6,8,9] from the perspective of place, material heritage, and local and national traditions. A key limitation of the research is the exclusive focus on the current versions of the packaging, without a diachronic perspective, an aspect that will constitute a direction for future research.

The research combines quantitative content analysis of selected food industry brand packaging with a qualitative approach to identify heritage branding elements. These

are coded as expressions of corporate heritage branding in a historically grounded manner, through which the past rendered meaningful for current and future market positioning. From a critical perspective on industrial heritage and visual culture, the authors examine how heritage brand elements are represented and communicated in relation to the specific characteristics of the places where they are produced.

Social semiotic analysis provides an appropriate methodological framework for examining how meanings are constructed through the visual articulation of individuals, places, and objects within specific social contexts. In this perspectives, logos and packaging designs function as semiotic resources capable of generating multiple and layered meanings [9], shaped by broader socio-historical contexts. The analysis is conducted in two stages. First, a formal analysis of design elements is carried out, focusing on shape, layout, color, image, and photography [8,9]. Second, a social semiotic approach is applied to identify potential meanings, highlighting the relationship between culture, packaging design, and brand identity.

3. Results

The case studies were selected for their relevance in illustrating distinct ways of representing the relationship between product, identity, landscape, and industrial heritage.

The Mangalitsa Ham packaging features a vertical rectangular structure, symmetrical composition with a clear visual hierarchy: brand identity at the top, the main illustration and product information at the center, and secondary graphic elements at the bottom. The warm color palette (beige, dark red, brown), supports a retro aesthetic and evokes authenticity. The central illustration depicts vernacular architecture alongside a character associated with rural domestic activities (Figure 1).

This packaging acts as a form of visual mediation, constructing a narrative of origin,

continuity, and value. Through the stylized representation of rural space, it symbolically anchors the product in a landscape associated with tradition, localness, rural longevity, and perceived quality (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The Mangalitsa Ham packaging: vernacular symbols suggesting local identity and traditional continuity

Source: Authors' own photograph

From a critical perspective, this strategy reflects a territorialized heritage discourse aligning product with place-based identity and memory. In this context, local cultural symbols, such as Székely gates, acts as markers of shared identity [10], enhancing brand differentiation by transforming local identity and traditional food culture into both symbolic and market value.

The Grivița beer label features an axial composition centered on an industrial worker, accompanied by symbolic graphic elements, with the brand name and product type placed at the bottom. The contrasting palette of a light background and brick-red tones evokes traditional industrial graphics, while the simplified, vintage style suggests an idealized representation of industrial labour.

The brand is closely linked to the Bucharest's oldest beer production unit (est. 1869) [11,12]. Following post-1990 privatization and the closure of large-scale production, the brand has been repositioned within a smaller, craft-oriented model [12,13]. This trajectory allows the industrial past to function as a resource for cultural

legitimization, granting the product identity and commemorative value (Figure 2).

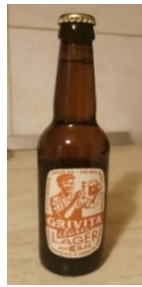


Figure 2: The Grivița beer brand: industrial production and urban industrial memory

Source: Authors' own photograph

The worker figure humanizes industrial production, presenting it as a space of skill and authenticity. In this way, industrial heritage is presented in a positive light, no longer associated with industrial decline, but with tradition, quality, and continuity.

Simultaneously, the brand name acts as a territorial and memorial marker, connecting the product to local industrial history. From the perspective of heritage studies, the Grivița beer brand can be understood as a form of commercial reactivation of industrial memory, while from the perspective of visual culture, it represents a tool that mediates the relationship between product, place, and productive past.

The Bod sugar packaging features a vertical organized, axial composition, with a circular medallion depicting a stylized industrial building and the founding year (1889), and central area dominated by the product's name. The background incorporates vertical lines, while the warm color palette (red, beige) ensures visual coherence.

The design symbolically links the product to place and industrial memory, through the logo with the historic building and the mention of the year of establishment, which suggests continuity (Figure 3).

From a corporate heritage perspective, these elements operate as combined visual and temporal markers of productive continuity. The industrial building signifies material heritage and place-based memory, evoking the productive infrastructure and the

concrete place of an industrial history, while the founding year conveys longevity and stability.



Figure 3: The Bod Sugar packaging

Source: Authors' own photograph

Together, they construct a coherent brand narrative in which the industrial past is reinterpreted as a strategic resource, reinforcing perceptions of authenticity, longevity, and belonging to a sustainable productive tradition.

The Mărgăritar sugar packaging features a vertically structured axial composition, with the brand name emphasized at the top and a stylized central illustration of a female figure in traditional costume (Figure 4).



Figure 4: The Mărgăritar sugar packaging: personified national identity and the commercial use of heritage as a resource for symbolic legitimation

Source: Authors' own photograph

The combination of neutral tones and vivid accents support a recognizable visual identity. While mobilizing national symbols, the design reveals a tension between the rhetoric of authenticity and the transnational corporate context, suggesting its constructed nature.

From a semiotic perspective, the brand is particularly relevant, as its heritage-based

visual language gains additional significance when considered in relation to the transnational structure that manages it.

Although the packaging incorporates recognizable markers of Romanian identity, such as the stylized female figure in traditional costume, the tricolor, and references to "traditional recipes" and "100% sugar from Romanian beet," the brand is produced by Agrana, an Austrian company [14,15]. This tension shows that the visual rhetoric of national authenticity does not simply reflect the origin, but constructs it discursively.

From a critical heritage perspective, the packaging selectively aestheticizes elements of Romanian cultural to anchor the brand in the local cultural imagination and integrate it into contemporary commercial discourse. At the intersection of corporate and brand heritage, this strategy shifts the focus from the mere presence of traditional elements to the way in which national identity is visually articulated within the logics of transnational capital and with the commercial use of heritage as a resource for symbolic legitimation. The new packaging designed by Mădălina Andronic, an artist known for folklore-inspired illustrations [14,15], further emphasizes that the reference to Romanian cultural heritage is part of an explicit heritage branding strategy. In this

context, illustration functions as a tool of visual mediation through which the brand's story, Romanian origin, at least for some products, and tradition are transformed into resources for identity and differentiation in the market.

The quantitative analysis highlighted that the majority of the packaging (75%) utilizes either rural or industrial heritage (Table 1).

The coding scheme used in Table 1 is based on predefined variables derived from the literature on heritage branding and visual analysis [2,6,8,9]. Binary values (0 = absence, 1 = presence) indicate whether a specific feature (e.g., reference to the past, presence of place elements, recognizable cultural codes) is visually identifiable on the packaging [6]. The variable degree of idealization refers to the extent to which the past is visually stylized or aesthetized, rather than realistically represented. It is coded on a three-point scale: (1) low - minimal or no stylization, closer to a functional or realistic depiction; (2) moderate - selective stylization, combining realistic and symbolic elements; (3) high – strong idealized, nostalgic, or symbolic representations that emphasize aestheticization and emotional appeal over realism.

Table 1 Comparative analysis of heritage and design elements in the selective packaging

Variable	Mangalitsa Ham	Grivița	Bod	Mărgăritar
Dominant heritage type	Rural	Industrial	Industrial	National
Explicit reference to the past	1	1	1	0
Presence of place elements	1	1	1	0
Image type	Illustration	Illustration	Stylized graphic	Illustration
Character presence	1	1	0	1
Narrative type	Traditional	Industrial	Industrial continuity	Identitarian

Authenticity based on place	1	1	1	0
Degree of idealization	3	2	2	3
Dominant colors	Warm colors	Warm contrast	Warm-neutral	Bright contrast
Heritage role in design	central	central	central	central
Recognizable cultural codes	1	1	1	1
Local-global tension	0	0	0	1

Source: Authors' own elaboration

In all case studies, heritage plays a central role in the visual construction. At the same time, 75% of the packaging includes characters, contributing to the humanization of the narrative, while a high level of idealization is observed in 50% of cases. The presence of recognizable cultural codes, such vernacular architecture, folk costume, the tricolor, or symbols associated with industrial heritage, enhances the cultural legibility of the packaging. These elements facilitate the rapid identification of references to tradition and place, making the the visual message easily interpretable and accessible.

Given the limited number of case studies, the study incorporates a basic form of quantitative content analysis, based on the systematic coding of predefined variables (e.g., heritage type, presence of characters, degree of idealisation). This approach does not aim at statistical generalisation but at providing a structured comparison across cases. The qualitative component is therefore exploratory and is used to support and strengthen the qualitative interpretation.

4. Discussion

The discussion addresses the two research questions by interpreting how heritage is mobilized in packaging design and how it contributes to the relationship between product, identity, and place.

The comparative analysis of the four case

studies highlights a common pattern in which heritage is transformed into a strategic resource for communication and commercial differentiation. Heritage is selectively aestheticized and visually integrated into packaging, becoming a tool through which authenticity is discursively constructed rather than directly reflected. This constructed authenticity is anchored in place, tradition, and continuity, and reinforced through recognizable cultural codes and idealized representations of the past. At the same time, industrial memory is reactivated and re-signified as a brand resource, contributing to the legitimization of products through association with longevity, experience, and productive identity. In relation to the first research question, these findings show how companies use corporate heritage as a strategic visual resource to construct brand identity and to generate perceptions of authenticity through references to tradition, place and continuity.

However, the analysis also reveals tensions, particularly when local or national identity is mobilized an extended corporate context, suggesting a gap between the material origin of the product and its symbolic construction. Thus, the relationship between heritage, identity, and commercial capital appears as a negotiated one, in which memory and culture are simultaneously valued and instrumentalized. These tensions reflect a

broader process of reconfiguring the image of places, in which brands play a central role in shaping territorial identity and contributing to competition between geographical spaces [16]. Place branding produces symbolic, often idealized images, that transform space into a place imbued with meaning and capable of generating emotional connections between consumers and places [17], thereby suggesting product authenticity and evoking nostalgia for products of the past [8,17]. In relation to the second research question, the analysis demonstrates that visual representations of heritage play a key role in articulating the relationship between product, identity, and place, transforming products into vehicles of territorial meaning and cultural memory.

Within this paper, it is necessary to distinguish between industrial brands, food brands, and heritage brands. Food brands are understood as brands associated with food products, representing the sectoral level of analysis. In contrast, the notion of industrial brand does not refer solely to the type of product, but to its relationship with historical production infrastructures and industrial memory. Thus, a food brand can simultaneously function as an industrial brand when it builds its identity through references to productive longevity, historic factories, or industrial processes.

The heritage brand, in turn, represents a cross-cutting category that describes how the past is strategically mobilized in brand communication. In this sense, the analyzed brands are not homogeneous: some (such as Grivița or Bod) are more explicitly anchored in industrial heritage, while others (such as Mangalitsa Ham) activate a rural and traditional imaginaries, and the Mărgăritar primarily draws on national identity symbols.

Therefore, rather than adopting a strictly typological perspective on industrial brands, the study examines food industry brands within a broader framework, analyzing how they mobilize and re-signify diverse forms of heritage (industrial, rural, and national) in

constructing their visual and symbolic identity.

Overall, the findings confirm that packaging functions as a mediating device through which heritage is strategically constructed and communicated, linking corporate heritage identity to broader spatial and cultural narratives.

5. Conclusions

The article explores how selected industrial brands visually construct the relationship between product, national identity, industrial heritage, and landscape through symbolic imagery, such as the idealized rural landscape, industrial landmark, and traditional female figure.

The study contributes to expanding the concept of corporate heritage by applying it to food brands, highlighting packaging as an active medium for mediating memory and identity. By integrating heritage studies, marketing, and visual culture, the article shows how local, industrial, and national symbols are transformed into commercial resources and strategically used in the construction of authenticity.

At the same time, the analysis highlights the inherent tensions between cultural authenticity and market logic, proposing an interdisciplinary approach that enhances understanding of the relationship between heritage, identity, marketing, and visual culture. These tensions between authenticity and market strategy becomes evident in the ways heritage is selected and reconfigured within commercial discourse. The Mărgăritar case illustrates how cultural symbols are integrated into a transnational corporate strategy, transforming authenticity into a symbolic construct, removed from its origin.

In line with the specialized literature, the case studies emphasize that commercial representations actively shape heritage, rather than merely reflecting it, by selecting, aestheticization, and recontextualization it within contemporary economic and cultural discourse. In the case of industrial heritage,

production sites and the memory of labour
are extracted from their original economic

and social contexts and reinserted into new
discourses of authenticity and local identity.

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