

Bombay tonic, please

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In the drink industry, bottles have long been used to contain, ship, and store liquids. Today, they have evolved from a necessary means of transporting fluids into a carefully designed packaging endeavor and marketing device. While bottles still serve as drink vestibules, they have increasingly become intricately designed vehicles for the sale of commodities. As more detailed focus is placed on the design of these bottles, they have become desirable commodities in themselves, a tactic which, according to Willis (1991), “designate[s] the commodity as a discrete unit” (p.2). A closer look at the bottling efforts of the Bombay Sapphire brand of gin reveals this commoditizing of the packaging itself and its ability to successfully entice me to spend more money on it because of its outward appearance. Philosophical interpretation aside, I cannot deny my visceral attraction to this brand. Undoubtedly, I am more attracted to the aesthetic qualities of the packaging than its actual contents; hardly am I such a gin connoisseur that I could tell the difference between Bombay and Tanqueray. However, the inherent qualities of this brand captured my attention once, and continue to convince me that it is the only option when shopping for gin. The entire purchasing and consumption experience is mediated through the outward appearance of the bottle, and effectively entices me into the lure of its brand appeal. So what is it exactly about the bottle’s design that is so alluring and enticing to me? What keeps me continually purchasing this brand, despite the array of other cheaper options? The deliberate design decisions made in the creation of this pseudo-art piece can be explained in both physical form as well as their psychological manifestations within myself.

For years, I shuddered at the thought of consuming a gin-and-tonic. Unaccustomed to the ‘pine-needle’ taste of gin, I preferred liquor without such an identifiable flavor. However, some convincing from a friend encouraged me to try a ‘Bombay tonic’ as she fondly referred to it. With some hesitation, I agreed. As I watched her pour the drink from its unique bottle, I was oddly comforted by its appearance – every detail contradicted the cheap, plastic bottles I was used to purchasing, and I equated its expensive looks to high quality. As I cautiously imbibed, I was pleasantly surprised; this was not at all what I expected, in fact, I was enjoying it! Instead of a drink that was pungent and repulsive, I was met with a drink that was pleasantly smooth and refreshing. I decided that either my tastes had matured, or I had finally found a suitable liquor for a “grown-up” drink. Either way, my next trip to the liquor store found me seeking out this brand.

With a quick, cursory glance down the gin aisle, the bottles of Bombay Sapphire demand my attention. In a sea of clear colorless glass bottles, these translucent blue bottles are significantly different than the

competitors. The bottle's pleasant blue hue drastically contradicts the pine-needle taste that is inherent to most, usually cheaper, gins and has long kept me from purchasing any alcohol in the gin family. Immediately, I am comforted and attracted by the blue bottle, convinced (as I was when I first saw the bottle) that this gin will taste different than those in which I have previously indulged. Heading towards the blue bottle that has piqued my interest, I notice its elegant, yet solid, square shape. As a designer, I am attracted to this design decision, knowing (and being able to see from the other bottles on the shelf) that it was consciously implemented by the makers of Bombay to position the brand as unique. This shape also puts it a couple inches above the other bottles – a seemingly insignificant measure, yet a grand gesture in this regulated commercial setting. Assuming that in a bar, this brand would qualify as “top-shelf” liquor, residing alongside bottles of Grey Goose vodka and Crown Royal whiskey, this gesture creates an appearance of quality. Although no literal top-shelf exists in the consumer store, this careful design decision manages to put Bombay on a figuratively higher level than other gins. Besides establishing visual emphasis and implying quality, this subtle height differential also creates the illusion of increased volume, and therefore implies a better monetary value. In actuality, the bottles of Bombay are the same volume as the neighboring bottles and the cost difference is not due to a larger amount of content. However, these immediate and subconsciously interpreted visions of color, shape, and height are already ingrained in my mind, and they signal to me that this particular brand of gin is a step above the other choices. These visual qualities intrigue me and demand me to take a second, much closer look.

Only after the immediate long-distance attraction causes me to approach the Bombay bottle face-to-face do the intricate detailing and particularities of the bottle's design become apparent. Delicate details of gold foil on the identifying label and protective seal indicate a sense of royalty, which is further enhanced by the image of Queen Victoria surrounded by dazzling sapphire gems and a gold crown. The actual name of the bottle's contents (“Dry Gin”) are much less important than the words “Bombay Sapphire,” which are enhanced through the use of a bold, regal typeface. The bottle's blue glass is even more dazzling up-close, as the beveled corners create a sense of depth and the illusion of complexity, emulating the characteristics of sapphires gems. Standing in front of dozens of these Bombay bottles, yet focusing only on one, I can “imagine the experience of its use” (Willis, 1991, p.5) even if I cannot actually taste the liquor before purchasing it. This experience of anticipating and waiting to use the product is actually a more important

part of the experience than the actual act of using the product (Haug, in Willis, 1991); in Willis's own words, "the fetishization of the commodity is for the consumer the fetishization of use" (1991, p. 7). As a direct result of the deliberately designed packaging, I believe I have already experienced something special, and I anxiously anticipate my next gin-and-tonic. Eventually, the anticipation grows; as I stare, the bottle demands to be touched, as it seems sort of ethereal in the midst of clear, cylindrical, stubby bottles. When venturing a grip around this solid yet delicate form, I find the glass to be surprisingly smooth and incredibly soothing; this highly tactile quality encourages me to remain in contact and sensually run my grip up and down the tall bottle, similar to the familiar gesture of caressing my martini or wine glass stem. Following this intimate and sexualized interaction, my mouth begins to water as it anticipates the flavor of the gin. However, the packaging, which has so highly enticed me, "prolongs the process of coming into the possession" of this tantalizing bottle (Willis, 1991, p. 4); it keeps me in anticipation, and the contents just barely out of reach. A quick glance around at the other available brands renders Bombay the only satisfying option. The bottle has successfully enticed and engaged me; because no other bottles have managed to evoke such a personal response, they will remain lifeless on the shelf, while I take the Bombay to the counter for purchase.

Walking to the counter, I begin to question my purchase—after all, this is more money than I should be spending on such an unnecessary item. However, a quick glance at the bottle in my hand is all I need to quench these doubts, and I become excited to proudly display my bottle to the worker at the counter. I think to myself, 'Yeah, that's right, I drink Bombay,' and feel that the ownership of this product will somehow allow me membership into an exclusive (albeit unspoken) club of mature drinkers who refer to liquors by brand name and are 'in the know' about quality and taste. These thoughts encouraging my purchase are telling of the fact that "brands replace use-value with image value, [and] reduce goods to stand-ins for the real thing." (Oswald, 1996, p. 4 in reprint). Evidently, I feel that this brand will enhance my image and advance me from the association with ill-informed, college-age, binge drinkers to that of mature, sophisticated, alcohol connoisseurs.

Comforted and excited by these thoughts, I make the final transaction and purchase my coveted bottle of Bombay. Rationalizing its price with the quality that I will soon be able to taste, I pay little attention to the final amount I owe and proudly carry the bottle out of the store. As soon as I get home, the ritual of

consumption begins. I gather my roommates to the kitchen by announcing, “Who wants a ‘ginny?’” and without instruction, we gather around the blue bottle and mindlessly collect the other items necessary for making gin and tonics. Finally able to taste the drink for myself, I feel momentarily fulfilled; perhaps even more satisfying is the ability to regularly share this experience with my closest friends. This ritual is important not only in the fact that it somewhat completes the consumption cycle, but also in the sense that it perpetuates the brand image within a more personally identifiable realm. Oswald is keen to note that part of the brand “narrative evolves out of our own experiences with products, as [they] enter into social rituals” (1996, p. 8). While the brand value has projected a certain image onto me, my repeated consumption habits centering around friends, home, and evening relaxation have transcended any advertising that Bombay has done, and let me create my own, much more meaningful, narrative surrounding the brand. My personalization of the brand value makes it more likely that I will continue this cycle of purchasing and remain loyal to the brand; in reality, this consumption process has become an apartment tradition, one that began shortly after college graduation, and still continues nearly three years (and many liters of Bombay) later, despite a change in roommates.

The attraction of the Bombay bottle does not end after purchase; in fact, it remains worthy of top-shelf status long after its contents have been consumed. Even when empty, the bottle retains its elegant appearance and looks no different than it had unopened, except for the cracked paper seal near the cap. It is difficult to determine if there is liquid in the empty bottles, as the translucent quality and color of the glass is deceiving to the eye. The appealing qualities of the bottle still remain, including the delicate etchings of the ingredients along the left and right sides of the bottle. All these factors contribute to the bottle’s appearance as a unique and rare piece, both before and after purchase; although, as Willis (1991) is quick to mention, there are arguably millions of these bottles sold worldwide, its packaging convinces me that it is extraordinary and “worthy of display” (p. 1). In my apartment pantry, nearly a dozen of these bottles line the top shelf as a sort of tribute to my (and my roommates’) alcohol consumption. Numerous times visitors have commented on this collection, inferring that we must like quality drinks. In this sense, the consumption process has come full circle, and the image that I hoped to convey when purchasing this brand has been recognized. However, the process is far from complete, because as Oswald (1996) notes, the “built in depletion of brand value motivates consumers to repeat the consumption ritual over and over

again, since the endless quest for an identity is tied to the insatiable thirst for ‘image’” (p. 4 in reprint).

With a literal and figurative ‘insatiable thirst’, my attraction to Bombay is cyclical and arguably never-ending; I continue to purchase this brand without thought, despite the vast availability of other options.

My interpretations of the Bombay brand’s meaning, quality, and image are not exceptional. The Bombay Sapphire brand was created with deliberate intentions to create a distinct aura surrounding it; just like the classic “martini cocktail has been a symbol of stylish glamour, elegance and sophistication” (Bombay Sapphire, *The Martini Glass*, 2006), Bombay distinctively personifies these qualities in its brand and further applies them to loyal consumers like myself who identify with this brand. Beginning with the brand’s bold but underplayed tagline, “Be brilliant and inspired,” the appeal to creative consumers who want to exude designer status or otherwise set themselves apart from the status quo is evident. Furthermore, Bombay’s advertising tactics and extensions of the brand beyond the logo and the packaging perpetuate this image. Most recently, within the last decade, Bombay has strengthened its appeal to this in-crowd by creating a “Designer Glass Competition,” in which designers worldwide “design a functional martini cocktail glass inspired by the Bombay Sapphire brand” (Bombay Sapphire, *Contest Info*, 2006). This competition has further expanded to include other “functional design disciplines including ceramics, textiles and furniture” in hopes of creating a “Bombay Sapphire-inspired world” (Bombay Sapphire, *Advertising Artists*, n.d.). As is typical in the design community, Bombay is implementing a subtle, but effective, viral marketing campaign. The intrigue of this design competition leads a specific audience to become interested in the Bombay brand; as these designers share their interest with others, a buzz surrounding the brand begins to form among those in this community. Eventually, the inner circle expands to include non-designer consumers. Through these efforts, Bombay magnifies its appeal to those like myself, who already consider themselves members of a design community, and also entices those who want to be a part of this in-crowd. As a result, consumers who identify with this brand also appear stylish, glamorous, and privy to quality consumption.

Another appeal of the Bombay brand is its seemingly timeless quality that it conveys. The Bombay Sapphire website features a “1761 recipe”, which deceptively creates the illusion that this brand’s origins stem from hundreds of years ago (Bombay Sapphire, n.d.); additionally, the corporate website boasts that the brand’s loyalists have found “intrigue in its colonial connotations” (Bacardi-Martini Limited, n.d.). The

truth is that the Bombay Sapphire brand was created in 1987 (Wikipedia, 2007) and has existed fewer years than myself. However, its brand aura exudes a sense of timeless classic, or at least an image reminiscent of historic times, which increases its validity as a quality liquor. While this does not directly reference the designer qualities previously discussed, it is still an important part of the brand's overall appeal. This aspect of the brand balances its currency with a sense of stability and positions it as an item worthy of investment. Rather than feeling as though I am frivolously indulging in a designer brand with mediocre quality, this enduring aspect of the brand reinforces its staying power and calms any doubts or uneasiness regarding its purchase.

So what does all this mean? Does this bottle promise more than it can offer? Does it leave me satisfied or wanting more? This deep exploration of my relationship with Bombay has clearly revealed that I am purchasing this product based on its brand value. Considering that the brand value signifies its image value, it can be concluded that Bombay only fulfills its promise if it is projecting onto me the aforementioned images of sophistication, class, and style. Oswald (1996) explains that, "brand image' is central to the formation of personal and social identity in consumer culture" (p. 5 in reprint). In this respect, the Bombay brand completely fulfills its purpose when this projection occurs for others to see; if others are not seeing, I am not benefiting from the maximum potential of this brand.

This projection successfully occurs at multiple points in my consumption cycle. Although it seems insignificant, the point of purchase is the boldest occurrence of this brand personification. During this transaction, my attraction to the brand becomes actualized. Immediately, I feel that the liquor store cashier will relate my purchase to elite status; upon seeing my careful choice, it is clear to him that I am a Bombay drinker who takes my liquor seriously. My identity with this brand is again reinforced when my display of empty bottles receives recognition from visitors. This is perhaps the most satisfying part of the experience, as people who intimately know me now associate me with this brand's identity. Less distinct instances of a similar nature occur when I am discussing the brand with others or ordering a drink in public, requesting a 'Bombay tonic' rather than a generic 'gin and tonic.' While separately insignificant, the combination of these social interactions contributes to the formation of my branded self that centers around the qualities of the Bombay brand. As long as I am able to derive attention and personal satisfaction

from this identification process, I will continue to purchase this brand. Although other options are available, none has formed such an intimate bond with me, nor infiltrated so many aspects of my life.

Clearly, this bottle is more than a container for gin. It is my inner-self personified, an extension of who I am and who I want to be – and most importantly, how I want others to see me. Although I am ultimately consuming the contents of the Bombay bottle, I am more viscerally attracted to the packaging because it personifies qualities that the alcohol inside cannot possibly convey. My consumption, which is focused primarily on the branded packaging as opposed to the actual gin, occurs consciously, although the immediate attraction occurs at a more subconscious level. In this repetitive battle between emotion and reason, my passion for the brand is able to overcome reason, resulting in a cyclical pattern of attraction to, consumption of, and momentary satisfaction with Bombay Sapphire gin.

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