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DOCTORAL THESIS

*Visual communication and sustainability in the decision-making process.
Analysing perception of packaging design as a strategic communication
element*

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Abstract

The present study aims to explore how consumers and experts perceive packaging design. Simultaneously, the study highlights how packaging becomes an unequivocal element of strategic communication, serving as the ultimate and most influential participant in the decision-making process of a purchase. Essentially, packaging represents the final form of informative content through which a brand communicates with the consumer before the purchase decision is made. In simpler terms, the information encountered on the packaging, including its form, colour, dimensions, weight, material composition, intricate product details, consideration of trends, and how it addresses the consumer, can seize the consumer's attention and influence them to pay less attention, or none at all, to a positive experience with a different brand, their genuine need to acquire the product or other details that might deter them from preferring the promoted product.

The primary objective of this thesis is to investigate the fundamental aspects and role of visual communication and packaging in the decision-making process, examining the perspectives of consumers and practitioners alike. Specifically, the study seeks to explore the significance of visual elements and the role of sustainable components in shaping consumers' decision-making processes. By unravelling the complexities of these factors, the present research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these participants impact consumer behaviour. To achieve this objective, the Research addresses four key research questions that will guide the investigation, as follows:

IC1: What are the most significant elements of packaging from the consumer's viewpoint, and what is the role of visual elements and the sustainability of the materials used in the purchase decision?

IC2: To what extent do female consumers' perceptions differ from those of male consumers?

IC3: What is the opinion of specialists regarding the importance of visual elements and the sustainability of packaging?

IC4: What are the differences in approach between the opinions of academic representatives and communication practitioners?

The theoretical conclusions of the initial chapter emphasize a comprehensive perspective on the importance of visual communication, advertising, and design in the context of various product packaging solutions. Insights garnered from the review of specialized literature demonstrate that packaging plays a crucial role in consumers' decision-making

processes and their influence on the perception of product quality, purchase intent, and attitudes. Visual elements such as colour, typography, or material are analysed here through the lens of their significance and impact on the development of a distinctive and memorable experience for consumers.

The holistic perspective on packaging and brand identity underscores their interconnectedness and how packaging can serve as a competitive advantage in an already oversaturated market. Furthermore, the significance of sustainable packaging is integrated, with a focus on its impact on the environment. These theoretical conclusions form a solid foundation for the practical segment of this work.

Therefore, the ensuing practical part applies the synthesized knowledge from the literature review and validates the analysed theories. Simultaneously, the research aims to identify insights into market trends and consumer community needs. These insights can subsequently be employed to develop more durable and sustainable packaging if the market demands, satisfying both consumer needs and contributing positively to the surrounding environment. Additionally, a deeper understanding can be gained of consumer attitudes toward specific materials, their level of education, and their social involvement concerning the connection between sustainability and the information consumers possess and process. This extends to the relationship they establish between packaging and the perceived quality of the enclosed product. Following this profile, it becomes important to develop sustainable packaging solutions that consider consumer requirements and actively contribute to mitigating negative environmental impacts. Within this perspective, research in the field of packaging is particularly valuable.

Hence, through the application of appropriate research methods and tools, specialized literature encourages researchers to approach both consumers and experts in the field, fostering a holistic understanding of this subject. Simultaneously, this research methodology can yield unique insights into consumer preferences and behaviours regarding packaging, alongside an understanding of market trends and needs. Subsequently, these insights can be utilized to create and develop more durable packaging that satisfies both consumer needs and environmental considerations, thus achieving a state of equilibrium.

Using qualitative research methods, including consumer focus groups and interviews with representatives from academia and industry practitioners, the study unveils the intricacies of packaging and consumer decision-making. By comparing and contrasting perspectives, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of how packaging elements and

sustainability considerations impact diverse consumer segments. Furthermore, the research explores gender differences in consumer perceptions.

The practical part of the research applies the synthesized knowledge from the literature review and validates the proposed theories. The results of this research take the form of thematic content analysis for both focus groups and interviews. Employing qualitative methods, this methodological framework successfully gathers relevant information from both consumer and industry practitioner perspectives. As such, the research brings forth candid and novel responses in its engagement with the researched subject. Moreover, through meticulous analytical processes, relevant aspects and connections that unite the two major respondent groups addressed in this study are highlighted. The analysis underscores a deep understanding of packaging-related matters and its impact, both on consumers and industry practitioners alike.

Thus, the core themes through which this analysis was conducted revolve around visual elements and sustainability considerations. The findings illustrate the importance of aligning and interweaving these two major themes for a more direct reach to consumers, to continue the series of innovations in this field, and to positively impact the environment. The target audience is increasingly inclined to engage in environmental conservation through their consumption decisions, as long as options are available on the shelves and products remain within the proposed budget range. The maturity with which individuals approach consumption decisions is more clearly defined, and their actions are often more rational, at least from a sustainability perspective.

Hence, by comparing and contrasting perspectives, this research offers a comprehensive understanding of how packaging design elements and sustainability considerations differentially affect consumer segments. For the initial analysis, focus groups were employed. The central point was to facilitate extensive and open discussions among participants, enabling the observation of how subjects position themselves in relation to the mentioned situations. A structured framework was established to ensure consistency across groups of respondents. Participants were encouraged to express their opinions, perceptions, and personal experiences related to packaging design and decision-making. These focus groups were conducted entirely online via the Zoom application. Discussions were kept to approximately the same duration, maintaining a framework that wouldn't affect respondents by altering meeting details. Dialogue sessions lasted between 60 and 100 minutes, depending on how respondents conveyed their opinions regarding the discussion topic. Additionally, the series of meetings took place over 35 working days, depending on respondent availability. Consequently, nine discussion groups were formed, each consisting of six participants. Gender

criteria were selected to ensure a balanced representation of masculine, feminine, and mixed perspectives. Ultimately, three exclusively male, three exclusively female, and three mixed groups were formed. The mixed groups aimed to test interaction and contamination dynamics, building on the idea presented in specialized literature that "behaviour or subjects considered taboo in mixed groups can be unproblematic or even welcome in single-gender groups, and vice versa" (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999). Furthermore, the analysis of scientific research suggests that "mixed-gender groups tend to enhance the quality of discussions and their outcomes" (Freitas et al., 1998).

By analysing responses from focus groups comprised of both male and female participants, as well as mixed-gender groups, the study reveals potential variations in how packaging elements and sustainability considerations are perceived based on gender representation. These findings contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of consumer perspectives. Moreover, the results of these respondent groups highlight the significance of product protection, presentation, information, and ease of handling as features that manufacturers must consider when it comes to their packaging. According to perspectives expressed by male respondents, the prioritization order assigned to these characteristics varies depending on the product context. Similarly, brand reputation and packaging sustainability are elements that contribute to the perception of primary objectives and are aspects consumers take into account when making consumption decisions. The discussion as a whole confirmed that gender perspectives converge concerning highlighted objectives, with product protection remaining a priority.

On the other hand, representatives from academia and industry practitioners swiftly grasped the shifts occurring within their target groups and have consistently tailored their products and packaging to align with these characteristics. Individual interviews with representatives from academia and industry practitioners were conducted using a more focused approach, concentrating on their expertise. A set of questions was prepared to delve deeper into their understanding and how this target group relates to the research subject. Additionally, this set of questions covered key aspects related to the role of packaging, the materials it comprises, and market trends, depending on the professional perspective of each interviewee. The aim was to gather comprehensive and detailed information, not only about the implications and influence of packaging but also about how specialists engage with packaging when making communication decisions.

By utilizing this tool, the goal was to identify the specialists' opinions regarding the significance of visual elements and packaging sustainability. Moreover, it aimed to uncover the

differences in approach between the perspectives of representatives from academia and those of communication practitioners.

The interviews were conducted entirely online through the Google Forms platform. Due to time constraints, the interviews were carried out in written format using electronic means. Nevertheless, this online method is deemed valid due to the substantial amount of information collected and the avoidance of respondent availability issues (Hunt & McHale, 2007; Lee & Hollister, 2020). It's important to note that given the research's objective to consult the views of individuals who are either experts in the field or international decision-makers regarding existing packaging in the market, these interviews were conducted in English. Thus, this research accumulated 20 responses through a set of 10 open-ended questions. These questions were structured to familiarize respondents with the theme and allow them to respond smoothly and progressively to questions highlighting the main attributes of effective packaging design and material-related elements, with an emphasis on sustainability.

Consequently, the interviews (N=20) were conducted with both practitioners (n=8) in communication, marketing, and packaging, as well as representatives from academia (n=12) who have engaged with packaging in their work. They contribute to ensuring a holistic perspective, providing a more detailed understanding of their professional ideas and evaluations. The subjects were selected based on their experience in the packaging design field. In general, this type of subject and the qualitative research principles applied are most often developed by specialists in the United States. The outcomes of these endeavours then influence trends in the industry and are addressed in various discussion contexts in different forms. Furthermore, the realm of academic excellence and scientific publications in this subject area is divided between the U.S. and U.K. Thus, this rationale underpinned the focus on identifying subjects from these two countries. Additionally, the sample was constituted either by approaching subjects directly or through intermediaries.

Their responses' analysis demonstrates their readiness to embrace the new generation of technology and the resources they must utilize in the future, and they embrace ecological initiatives with creative and innovative responses. Hence, this thematic analysis of responses obtained from focus groups and interviews attempts to contribute to the field of packaging, regardless of the perspective from which it's studied. It provides relevant information by realistically understanding the complexity of this subject and its impact in various contexts. This work adds to existing perspectives in the scientific realm of communication. It contributes by comprehending the interaction between visual stimuli, sustainability elements, and their translation into consumer behaviour during the purchasing process. Through detailed analysis

of their perspectives and those of academic representatives and practitioners in this field, this study highlights the significance of all factors involved in shaping product and brand quality perceptions. Moreover, it makes a significant contribution by exploring the sustainability subject in relation to packaging and its impact on consumer preferences and purchasing decisions. Another valuable contribution lies in addressing these topics by identifying gender differences in consumer perceptions, highlighting how women and men approach packaging differently and how it can be tailored to better serve the needs of these consumer segments.

Furthermore, from a managerial standpoint, the results obtained from this research offer an in-depth understanding of how brands can build effective and appropriate communication through the packaging they create. They can identify suitable stimuli to evoke different emotions and attract attention on the shelves. The importance of developing sustainable packaging is also emphasized in this study, providing brands with the opportunity to meet market demands for environmentally friendly products. Additionally, the work contributes valuable insights for developing personalized strategies based on identified preferences and priorities. Therefore, professionals in this field can craft more effective and relevant campaigns and messages that resonate with the target audience. Through these contributions, this work aims to create a positive experience for consumers while fostering a strong relationship between brands and their customers.

Keywords: packaging, sustainability, communication, consumer perception, purchasing decision;

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