

When The Packaging Tells More About The Unfamiliar Brands: A Cross-Cultural Research With American and French Consumers

Eliane Karsaklian, Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle

Abstract

Based on previous research (Karsaklian, 2009), it became apparent that packaging plays a predominant role on consumers' attitudes towards familiar and unfamiliar brands. A review of literature finds few researches conducted in this area with limited coverage on the influence of packaging on attitudes towards brands. However, the results presented in this article, as well as those obtained by the previous research, demonstrate that the packaging is of considerable help when unfamiliar brands seek acceptance from consumers. Moreover, this cross-cultural study conducted with American and French consumers highlights the impact of cultural differences on their attitudes towards known and unknown brands, based on the fact that Americans might be less reluctant to try new brands thanks to their low uncertainty avoidance index (Hofstede = 46) than the French, whose index is 86. Thus, the aim of this study was to analyze the impact of packaging on attitudes towards unfamiliar brands in a cross-cultural environment.

Keywords: brand familiarity, uncertainty avoidance, cross-cultural comparison

When The Packaging Tells More About The Unfamiliar Brands: A Cross-Cultural Research With American and French Consumers

Introduction

While previous research demonstrated that when comparing American and French consumers' attitudes towards familiar and unfamiliar brands, particular attention should be drawn to consumer's culture (Karsaklian, 2009), an unexpected theme emerged from the data highlighting the importance of product imagery and the use of color in product packaging. It came out that participants used the packaging as a signal of quality when the brand was unknown. Existing literature about the influence of packaging on decision making concerning unfamiliar brands is limited, and no research analyzing its impact in a cross-cultural situation has been conducted.

In order to fulfill this gap, the present research aimed at analyzing the influence of packaging on consumers' attitudes towards familiar and unfamiliar brands, in a cross-cultural environment. Although extant research has demonstrated that package design has a powerful impact on consumer response, it has provided little guidance to researchers and managers in helping unknown brands to be accepted. Early packaging research has focused on packaging as a means of communication (Lincoln, 1965; Gardner, 1967: in Underwood and Ozanne, 1998) and as a variable influencing product evaluation (Banks, 1950; Brown 1958; McDaniel and Baker, 1977; Miaoulis and d'Amato, 1978: in Underwood and Ozanne, 1998). Since then, researchers and practitioners have studied the communicative role of packaging, (Underwood and Ozanne, 1998), and posited that "at the point of purchase, the product package is the communication life-blood of the firm". Garber (1995), proposed that the ability of brands to gain attention and consideration based on their appearance forms the basis for design strategy, which is particularly important for new brands. In the case of the present research, we aim to highlight the design of the packaging instead of its other functions, as a means of stimulating positive attitudes towards brands. As far as the packaging is one important vector of a brands' image, and in line with the results obtained by Orth and Malkewitz (2008), who following the Gestalt psychologists, stated that the holistic design of a packaging has an overall effect, instead of any individual element of it, we assumed that attitudes towards unfamiliar brands are strongly influenced by the packaging.

Literature Review

Brand Familiarity

Johansson and Ronkainen (2005), state that esteem for a brand is correlated with its familiarity level, which can be explained by the comfort and positive feelings that come with familiarity. Like the package, the brand is an extrinsic cue that consumers may use as input to the product evaluation. Recognition reflects familiarity gained from past exposure and can result in more positive feelings toward nearly anything. When consumers recognize a brand they find it a signal that the brand is good (Aaker, 2002). Brand familiarity reflects the extent of a consumer's direct and indirect experience with a brand and captures the consumers' brand knowledge structures (Campbell and Keller, 2003). Underwood, Klein, and Burke (2001) provide empirical evidence that the effect of package pictures is stronger for unfamiliar brands demonstrating that brand familiarity moderates the positive effects of package design on attitude toward the package, brand attribute beliefs, and brand evaluation.

Packaging

According to Rundh (2005), package attracts consumer attention to particular brand, enhances its image and influences consumer perceptions about the product. Packaging acts not only as a communication vehicle for transmitting symbolism, but is important for its own symbolic contribution to the total understanding of the corporation or brand (Underwood, 2003). Kuvyikaite and al. (2009), established a research model in which the elements of packaging are divided into two different categories: visual (graphic, color, size, form, material) and verbal (product information, producer, country of origin, brand). It came out of their research that verbal information such as country of origin is one of the main verbal elements, while size and material are the most influential visual elements in consumer's purchase decision. The model defined by Bloch (1995) provides a systematic approach to the relationship between the product form and the consumer responses of either approach or avoidance, issued from two types of psychological responses that are cognitive (product beliefs and categorization) and affective (positive and negative responses). Among the moderating influences, the author includes the personal preferences which are influenced by the consumer's culture.

Objectives, Method and Research Design

Previous research (Karsaklian, 2009) demonstrated that when the brand is unfamiliar, the packaging plays an important role in guiding consumer's attitudes towards the brand. Therefore, the main objective of the research here presented was to understand the influence packaging can have on consumers' attitudes towards unfamiliar brands in a cross-cultural environment. The United States and France differ in terms of uncertainty avoidance index, defined by Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) as *the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations*. France scores 86 whereas the American index is 46, which allows us to assume that French consumers are more risk averse than Americans, what can have an impact on their attitudes towards unfamiliar brands. A qualitative study of packaging was conducted with an experimental design which was considered appropriate vehicle to tap consumer perceptions of product packages, since the impact of package design is inherently subjective (Underwood and Ozanne, 1998); therefore, in-depth interviews were conducted with participants. Fifty participants (25 Americans and 25 French) analyzed eight products although redundancy was reached after the 17th respondent. The experiment took place in each country separately. A survey of 200 TV commercials covering 10 mass market product categories indicated that packaging is often prominently featured in advertising spots; on average, approximately 12 seconds of a 30 second advertisement is devoted to featuring the package. For new products and/or products that have received package updates, the advertisements tended to feature the product even longer (Keller 1998). Thereby, in the research here presented, participants were exposed to the packaging projection on a screen for 15 seconds, after which they should express their feelings about the brand. The following step was letting respondents manipulate the actual packaging and asking them again to tell what they thought about the brand. The eight presented brands were both known and unknown to the participants and from different countries of origin.

Results

Evidence from this research demonstrates that packaging plays a strong influential role on consumers' attitudes towards unknown brands, and as it had been stated by Bloch (1995), culture has a moderating role in consumer acceptance of unfamiliar brands. Acceptance and rejection were identified by the respondents' answers to the question: *Would you buy this*

brand? and the corresponding verbatims. Eight brands were analyzed during the study, but only four of them will be here presented, because of the limited length constraints for the paper. Results are presented hereafter (words written in red indicate the majority of responses):

Table 1. Results for Nudie Crushie (unknown brand to both samples)

Image on the screen	
Americans: acceptance	Americans: rejection
Looks tasty	The name has nothing to do with the product
Looks healthy	I don't know what it is
	I don't like the name Nudie
	The picture on the bottle is holding itself as it has to go to the bathroom
	Cartoon makes it for children
French: acceptance	French: rejection
I like smoothies	I don't know the brand
It seems good quality	I don't know what it is
It seems natural and healthy	I guess it is for kids
It is similar to familiar brands	The logo is ugly
Packaging manipulation	
Americans: acceptance	Americans: rejection
The character is cute	Small quantity
It has humor	It should be overpriced
Raw flavor with no additives	I don't like the name
	The character is odd
	Why is there a nude person?
	Looks expensive and unfamiliar
French: acceptance	French: rejection
Nice packaging	It's still an unfamiliar brand
I like the cap's material	The label is unclear
It's beautiful and clean	Not attractive
Small and practical	No information about the product
Fine and prestigious	What is "more"...?

Although Nudie Crushie is an unfamiliar brand to all participants, the important aspects for the French were that it is a natural product, the material used for the cap (Kuvyikaite and al., 2009) and the convenient and practical size. Americans accepted it more willingly, but seemed to be more concerned about the price of the product, due to its small dimensions, and did not feel comfortable with the naked character.

Table 2. Results for Hungry Jack's (unknown brand to both samples)

Image on the screen	
Americans: acceptance	Americans: rejection
It reminds me Burger King	Looks like a knock-off of Burger King
Good colors	The flames are weird
Looks like other fast-foods I know	Not attractive
Looks something grilled because of the flames	
French: acceptance	French: rejection
I would try them	It will burn the stomach
The logo is a hamburger	The colors are aggressive
It seems normal fast-food	I'm loyal to McDonald's
	Too spicy, hard for digestion
Packaging manipulation	
Americans: acceptance	Americans: rejection

It is owned by Burger King	Not attractive
I like it very much	The flames are odd
It looks like it has a lot of flavor	It seems greasy
French: acceptance	French: rejection
I would try them	I would never eat this
	Junk food with bad quality
	It seems cheap and poor quality
	It seems old
	I can't trust it
	Too much fat

Despite the fact that Hungry Jack's is an unfamiliar brand, Americans could recognize Burger King's colors and seeing in the packaging that it actually belongs to Burger King is reassuring for them. However, the French are not familiar with Burger King, and thus, the packaging was the only parameter for them to base their judgments on.

Table 3. Results for Lipton (known brand to both samples)

Image on the screen	
Americans: acceptance	Americans: rejection
I love chai tea	I don't like chai tea
Trusted brand	
Lipton is high quality	
French: acceptance	French: rejection
I like vanilla	It seems creamy and fat
I know the brand	I don't know what it is
Packaging manipulation	
Americans: acceptance	Americans: rejection
Lipton is a good and strong brand	I don't like chai tea
It's large size	
French: acceptance	French: rejection
I would try it once	Too many things mixed together
Nice colors on the packaging	Artificial, too much chemistry

Lipton is a very strong brand in both countries, but unlike American consumers, the French are not familiar with the Chai tea concept. Moreover, they tend to reject products presented in powder, because they are not natural and it is almost impossible to know exactly what is in it.

Table 4. Results for Le Président (well-known brand to the French)

Image on the screen	
Americans: acceptance	Americans: rejection
Looks delicious	I don't understand what it is
Fondue is good	I don't know the brand
French: acceptance	French: rejection
Good brand	I like to prepare it myself
Fondue is part of our tradition	It is to share
Packaging manipulation	
Americans: acceptance	Americans: rejection
Quick and easy	Unappealing
For the microwaves	Looks gross
French: acceptance	French: rejection
I live alone	Ready to use

The reputation of the French brand name Le Président was not enough to persuade French participants to buy this product. Their attitude was very negative, because they could not

accept an industrialized version of this traditional meal, while Americans' positive attitude was reinforced by the packaging which announced that it was easy and quick to prepare. The four other brands analyzed in the study and not presented here were McDonald's, Shapes, Up&Go and Naturekind. **McDonald's** was approved by all the participants thanks to the brand reputation; **Shapes**, obtained more approval from Americans because they are more used to crackers as snacks than the French and also because they found the packaging similar to Ritz. Followed **Up&Go**, rejected by all respondents mainly because of its manufacturer's name Sanitarium which along with its packaging colors reminded them cleaning products. Finally **Naturekind** was rejected by most part of Americans, because it seemed confusing and too healthy, whereas the French would be more eager to buy it because it is a European brand.

Discussion

The cultural experience relates to visual conventions that have been established over time in various societies. For example, the red and yellow colors of Hungry Jack's suggested grilled food to Americans while the French found them aggressive and hard to digest. Packaging can be viewed as a window upon the culture and serves as the tangible embodiment of a product symbol, often playing a major role in strengthening or weakening the emotional bond between consumer and brand. The ability of packaging to arouse emotions is often just as important as its functional capability to store and protect its contents (Feig, 1999). This can be illustrated by the Nudie Crushie character that makes Americans feel uncomfortable because it is naked, while this fact has no impact on French respondents' perceptions. Moreover, and as it was highlighted by Kuvyikaite and al. (2009), the material used for the cap attracted the French participants', while the size of the bottle was an important characteristic to Americans, who associated it with the price of the product. From the methodological point of view, the method applied to this research allows to say that seeing the brand and manipulating the product's packaging reveal different levels of attitudes of consumers towards familiar and unfamiliar brands. Finally, the influence of the country of origin should be taken into account, because it can motivate some consumers to buy unfamiliar brands, as it was the case for the French respondents with the German brand Naturekind. Although in no case participants radically changed their opinion about a brand, their contact with the actual packaging allowed to either reinforce or minimize their acceptance or rejection of them.

Managerial Implications, Limitations and Future Research

The current study has several meaningful managerial implications. First, the findings of this research clearly indicate that practitioners and researchers should draw special attention to packaging when launching new products in different countries. The Lipton example can illustrate this, as although the brand has a very good reputation in France, French consumers would reject the new product because of its packaging. This is even more important for unfamiliar brands settling in a new market, as for example Nudie Crushie which activated different responses from the two different cultures. As Orth and Malkewitz (2008) pointed out, the packaging should translate into gains in brand strength and equity, and managers should determine which impressions are desirable for their brands in each targeted country. Although results from this research cannot be explained exclusively by the UAI, they demonstrate that the French have a tendency to reject the unknown brands, whereas Americans would be more eager to try them once. Results here presented have limited reach because of the exploratory approach of the experiment conducted with a limited sample. Thereby, the results can also be influenced by personal values instead of cultural ones. The chosen products were all food and it is impossible to predict any replication of these results

with other product categories and other cultures, which would encapsulate a broader array of values and references. Thus, the research sample should be enlarged, including other cultures and further research should be conducted with other product categories.

APPENDIX



References

- Aaker, D.A. 2002. Building Strong Brands. Free Press.
- Bloch, Peter, 1995. Seeking the Ideal Form: Product Design and Consumer Responses. Journal of Marketing 59.
- Campbell, M. and Keller, K., 2003. Brand Familiarity and Advertising Repetition Effects. Journal of Consumer Research 30.
- Garber, L., 1995. The Package Appearance in Choice. Advances in Consumer Research 22.
- Johansson, J.K. and Ronkainen, I.A., 2005. The Esteem of Global Brands. Brand Management, 12 (5).
- Karsaklian, E., 2009. Americans Prefer Famous and Cheap, But French Would Buy Healthy and Tasty: A Cross-Cultural Study on Brand Preferences. MMA Spring Conference, Chicago.
- Kuvykaite, R. and al. 2009. Impact of Package Elements on Consumer's Purchase Decisions. Economics and Management 14.
- Orth, Ulrich, R. and Malkewitz, Keven, 2008. Holistic Package Design and Consumer Brand Impressions. Journal of Marketing 72 (3).
- Rundh, B., 2005. The Multi-Faceted Dimension of Packaging. British Food Journal 107 (9).
- Underwood, R. and Ozanne, J., 1998. Is Your Package an Effective Communicator? A Normative Framework for Increasing the Communicative Competence of Packaging. Journal of Marketing Communications (4).
- Underwood, Robert L., 2003. The Communicative Power of Product Packaging: Creating Brand Identity via Lived and Mediated Experience. Journal of Marketing Theory & Practice.. 11(1), 62.
- Underwood, Robert L. and Klein, Noreen M., 2003. Packaging as Brand Communication: Effects of Product Pictures on Consumer Responses to the Package and Brand. Journal of Marketing Theory & Practice 11 (1), 62.