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The allure of the hidden: How product unveiling confers value[☆]

Vanessa M. Patrick^{a,*}, Yashar Atefi^b, Henrik Hagtvedt^c

^a University of Houston, Bauer College of Business, 334 Melcher Hall, Houston, TX 77204, USA

^b E. J. Ourso College of Business, Louisiana State University, USA

^c Carroll School of Management, Boston College, Fulton Hall 450D, 140 Commonwealth Ave, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, USA

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ABSTRACT

Different package designs call for different ways of revealing the product. In this research, we demonstrate that packaging that calls for *unveiling*—the removal of the cover of a concealed, stationary object—enhances the perceived value of the product compared to other forms of product revelation. Drawing on theories of grounded associations, shared meaning, and contagion, we theorize that the act of unveiling is associated with revealing a protected and thus pristine object, which is consequently perceived to be valuable. We begin the empirical investigation by exploring consumer associations with product unveiling across American and South Korean consumers (pilot study 1). We then demonstrate that the unveiling effect arises with both imagined (pilot study 2) and real objects and is mediated by beliefs about the pristine condition of the object (studies 1–3). We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical contributions, implications for managers, and directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

"It is natural for us to enjoy and derive an aesthetic pleasure out of pursuing something that is hidden or obscured"

[—Yuriko Saito (1999, p. 259).]

Which product is more highly valued: a dress on a store hanger for all to see or one revealed from behind a curtain? A blanket visible in its box or one that is revealed when the box is opened? A gift revealed by lifting it out of its packaging or by removing the cover of the box that contains it? The average person opens the packaging of numerous products every day, but what is the impact of the *manner* in which the product inside is revealed?

Prior research has documented how subtleties in package design can influence the way consumers choose and evaluate products (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2008; Huyghe & Van Kerckhove, 2013; Madzharov & Block, 2010; Raghuram & Krishna, 1999; Warlop, Ratneshwar, & Van Osselaer, 2005). In the current research, we focus on a yet uninvestigated aspect of product packaging: the manner in which the product is revealed. We hypothesize and empirically demonstrate that packaging designed to *unveil* the product signals the product's pristine nature and enhances its perceived value, compared to other forms of product revelation.

Much anthropological and cultural evidence shows that people often protectively cover valuable objects to keep them in pristine condition and retain their essence (Alvi, 2013; Rozin & Nemeroff, 1990), to unveil them only when needed. This has led to

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: vpatrick@bauer.uh.edu (V.M. Patrick), yatefi@lsu.edu (Y. Atefi), hagtvedt@bc.edu (H. Hagtvedt).

shared metaphors and mental associations with the notion of unveiling. According to Saito (1999, 259), the concealed object when unveiled is “believed to be something positive and worth having access to.”

In the current research, we define unveiling as an act by which a protective cover is removed from a concealed, stationary product, thereby revealing this product. We theorize that because only valuable items tend to be unveiled, consumers also make the reverse inference: that unveiled items are valuable. In other words, because individuals associate the act of unveiling with valuable objects, they infer that products that are unveiled from their packaging are more valuable than identical products removed from other forms of packaging. We also propose a mechanism to explain why the unveiling effect occurs: a product revealed via unveiling is perceived to be pristine. In investigating these notions, this research provides three key insights about package design that contribute to both marketing theory and practice: (1) A package designed to unveil an object must meet two key criteria: (a) the product must be concealed within a protective package, connoting its pristine nature, and (b) should remain stationary within the packaging when the cover is removed to reveal the product. (2) By contrasting unveiling with other forms of product revelation, we empirically demonstrate that unveiling has a favorable influence on a product's perceived value and that beliefs about the pristine nature of the product mediate the unveiling effect. (3) We provide theoretical and practical insights into the notion of visual contamination and its implications for packaging design by expanding the notion of contagion to the visual domain. This subtle influence of package design contributes to the bigger landscape of everyday consumer aesthetics (Patrick, 2016) and impresses upon us the significant role of design in everyday life.

2. Theoretical development

2.1. Grounded associations and shared meanings

The present research is informed by the notion that people have grounded associations and shared meanings about the world. For example, females are associated with light colors and males with darker ones (Semin & Palma, 2014), whereas social comfort is associated with feeling warm and social discomfort with feeling cold (Huang, Zhang, Hui, & Wyer, 2014; Zhong & Leonardelli, 2008). There might be ritualistic instances of figuratively applying some of these associations (e.g., brides wearing white to signal virginity), but there need not be any direct experiential account for their existence.

Historical, cultural, and religious instances of veiling and unveiling behaviors provide many indications that the act and rituals of veiling are associated with protecting the pristine nature of valuable objects while unveiling is associated with the revelation of those valuable objects. Head coverings and veils for women date back to the 13th century BC (Murphy, 1964). In traditional cultures that practiced polygamy, men secluded their wives from the eyes of society, preserving their sanctity in special resorts away from the eyes of other males (Woldesemait, 2013). A resort of this kind was known as a “harem,” meaning sacred and protected (Graham-Brown, 1988). For the 19th century bride, veils became signals of virginity, and the tradition of unveiling the bride is still practiced in many wedding ceremonies (Ingrassia, 2007). In Christianity, sacred objects (holy vessels, chalices, etc.) are veiled presumably to protect them from sinful eyes. Anthropological evidence points to the rituals associated with concealing objects for safety, luck, and protection (Merrifield, 1987) and connects veiling with “concealment, as counterpoised to the relative value of revelation” (Alvi, 2013, 192). Examples from diverse cultures and religions appear to be based on a relatively uniform and consistent rationale: valuable objects are veiled to keep them pristine, hence unveiling entails revealing a pristine object. Pilot study 1 empirically supports this assertion using Korean and American consumers.

2.2. Inferences, contamination, and pristine beliefs

In a product packaging context, these notions of value and pristine beliefs are related to the concept of consumer contamination, whereby consumers tend to evaluate products less favorably if they have previously been touched by other consumers (Argo, Dahl, & Morales, 2006). This concept of contamination builds on the theory of contagion, which holds that when two persons or objects come into direct or indirect contact, essential properties from one is transferred to the other (Morales & Fitzsimons, 2007; Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994). This effect remains even after contact between the two parties is broken (Rozin & Nemeroff, 1990). Further, consumers do not necessarily need to personally observe the contaminating contact taking place; they may infer it if the location or presentation of an object appears to expose it to potential contamination (Di Muro & Noseworthy, 2013).

The current research extends these notions by investigating contamination—or the lack thereof—that occurs not only via the sense of touch, but also via the sense of vision. Since merely looking at an object can contaminate it, we posit that contamination need not be a physical reality. The aforementioned practices of veiling or concealing valuable objects “from prying eyes and grubby fingers” (Dickson, 2015, p. 122) suggest that people aim to avoid both physical and visual contamination. In the current context of product packaging, we propose that concealment encourages the perception that the product is protected and pristine. The inference may then be made that the product is more valuable than it otherwise would be.

According to the framework proposed by Kardes, Posavac, and Cronley (2004), such a product evaluation would involve an inductive, memory-based inference, which may be either singular or comparative, depending on the presence of other comparable products. In other words, the inference could pertain to a single product judged in isolation or to multiple products considered in comparison to one another. Inferences are broadly defined as “the construction of meaning beyond what is explicitly given” (Dick, Chakravarti, & Biehal, 1990; Harris, 1981). These inferences are often rooted in learned associations or memory networks that are elicited by situational cues in the consumption environment (Krishnan, 1996).

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