

Sensory Aspects of Package Design[☆]

Aradhna Krishna^{a,*}, Luca Cian^{b,1}, Nilüfer Z. Aydınoglu^{c,1}

^a Stephen M Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, 701 Tappan St., Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1234, USA

^b Darden School of Business, University of Virginia, 100 Darden Blvd., Charlottesville, VA 22903, USA

^c College of Administrative Sciences and Economics, Koç University, Rumelifeneri Yolu, Sarıyer, İstanbul 34450, Turkey

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Abstract

Packaging is a critical aspect of the marketing offer, with many implications for the multi-sensory customer experience. It can affect attention, comprehension of value, perception of product functionality, and also consumption, with important consequences for consumer experience and response. Thus, while it was once viewed as being useful only for product preservation and logistics, package design has evolved into a key marketing tool. We introduce the layered-packaging taxonomy that highlights new ways to think about product packaging. This taxonomy has two dimensions: the physicality dimension, which is composed of the *outer–intermediate–inner* packaging layers, and the functionality dimension, which is composed of the *purchase–consumption* packaging layers. We then build on this taxonomy to present an integrative conceptualization of the sensory aspects of package design as they affect key stages of customer experience.

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Introduction

In the last decade, there has been a paradigm shift toward developing more sensorially engaging and interactive products and services. New research highlights the importance of “sensory marketing and embodied cognition”—the idea that we perceive the world through our senses and that our bodily sensations affect the decisions we make without our conscious awareness (Krishna and Schwarz 2014). Krishna (2010) defines sensory marketing as “marketing that engages the consumers’ senses and affects their perception, judgment, and behavior” (p. 333). Strategically, sensory marketing provides a multi-sensory experience to consumers with the intention of creating additional value. The sensory aspects of products and their presentation to consumers (smell, sound, touch, taste, or look), individually or through their interplay, shape the holistic customer experience and the interaction between companies and consumers.

“In the past, communications with customers were essentially monologues—companies just talked at consumers. Then, they evolved into dialogues, with customers providing feedback. Now they are becoming multidimensional conversations, with products finding their own voices and consumers responding viscerally and subconsciously to them” (interview with Krishna in *Harvard Business Review*, 2015, p. 29). Such conversations should guide product innovation and marketing. Companies should devise their marketing offers in an all-encompassing manner, using the senses to define product experiences and brand identities that consumers will care about and remember.

This paper aims to heighten awareness of the need for researchers to focus more on the sensory aspects of packaging. Most of the previous sensory research in marketing has focused on the environment (such as store settings or atmospherics; e.g., Mattila and Wirtz 2008; Spence et al. 2014) or the product itself (such as how food tastes, looks, and smells; e.g., Hoegg and Alba 2007; Peck and Childers 2008). Less attention has been paid to packaging, a situation that this paper may help to ameliorate. Packaging is one critical aspect of the marketing offer, with its many implications for the overall customer experience. In this paper, we gather together research related to the sensory aspects of package design as they affect key facets of the customer experience. We also introduce an over-

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* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 734 936 8716.

E-mail addresses: aradhna@umich.edu (A. Krishna), CianL@darden.virginia.edu (L. Cian), naydinoglu@ku.edu.tr (N.Z. Aydınoglu).

¹ Author names are in reverse alphabetic order and authors contributed equally to the research.

all conceptualization of multi-sensory customer experience and discuss its significance. Products are presented to consumers wrapped in their unique packaging: the package becomes the outfit of the product and conveys its look and feel throughout the customer–brand interaction. We identify key stages of the multi-sensory customer–product interaction: attention, expectation formation, engagement, and consumption. While our review incorporates insights from existing research and practice, we also include new theoretical questions to stimulate future research and propose new ways of thinking about product packaging.

As we begin, we want to introduce a new taxonomy aid to describe the multi-sensory customer–product interaction presented above—what we call the *layered-packaging taxonomy*. We propose that packaging has two major dimensions—the physicality dimension and the functionality dimension. The physicality dimension focuses on how the package appears to the consumers and is composed of the *outer–intermediate–inner* packaging layers. The functionality dimension relates to what purpose the packaging serves and is composed of the *purchase–consumption* packaging layers.

Importantly, the physicality dimension stresses that packaging does not merely refer to the *outer packaging*—such as the hard paper packaging that envelopes the plastic bottle that the 50 tablets of ibuprofen come in, or the plastic packaging of a bag of KitKats that contain many small KitKats, or the paper packaging that a bar of soap comes in. Packaging also refers to *intermediate packaging*, such as the plastic medicine bottle of ibuprofen that resides within the hard paper outer packaging, and the wrappers for the individual KitKat bars. Furthermore, packaging refers to the *inner packaging* or *product packaging*, such as the shape, color, form, and texture of the ibuprofen tablet,

the KitKat bar, or the bar of soap (see Fig. 1). While all manufactured products have inner packaging or product packaging, only some have intermediate and outer packaging.

We further introduce two other terms: *purchase packaging*, which mostly affects consumers at the time of purchase (typically, the outer packaging), and *consumption packaging*, which mostly affects consumers at the time of consumption (typically, the inner packaging; and also intermediate packaging if it exists for the product). With a bar of soap, the outer and intermediate packaging are not present at the time of consumption; only the inner packaging is—the product form of the soap itself. However, with ibuprofen, both the intermediate and inner packaging are present at the time of consumption (see Fig. 2).

Next, we introduce our overall conceptualization of consumers’ sensory experience with a product, as well as the significance of that experience. The rest of the paper identifies and discusses the facets of the customer experience as affected by sensory aspects of packaging. The discussion also highlights implications for different types and roles of packaging as suggested by our layer-packaging taxonomy. We conclude with implications and possible extensions of our review.

Sensory Experience with a Product

Customer–brand interactions are characterized by a multitude of contact points subject to sensation and perception processes. The field of sensory marketing has evolved in an attempt to better understand how customers’ perceptions, emotions, preferences, and consumption are affected by sensory and unconscious processes, with the intention of appealing to them more effectively (Krishna 2010). Products are “sensual” in nature (that is, they relate to sensation or the senses; Krishna

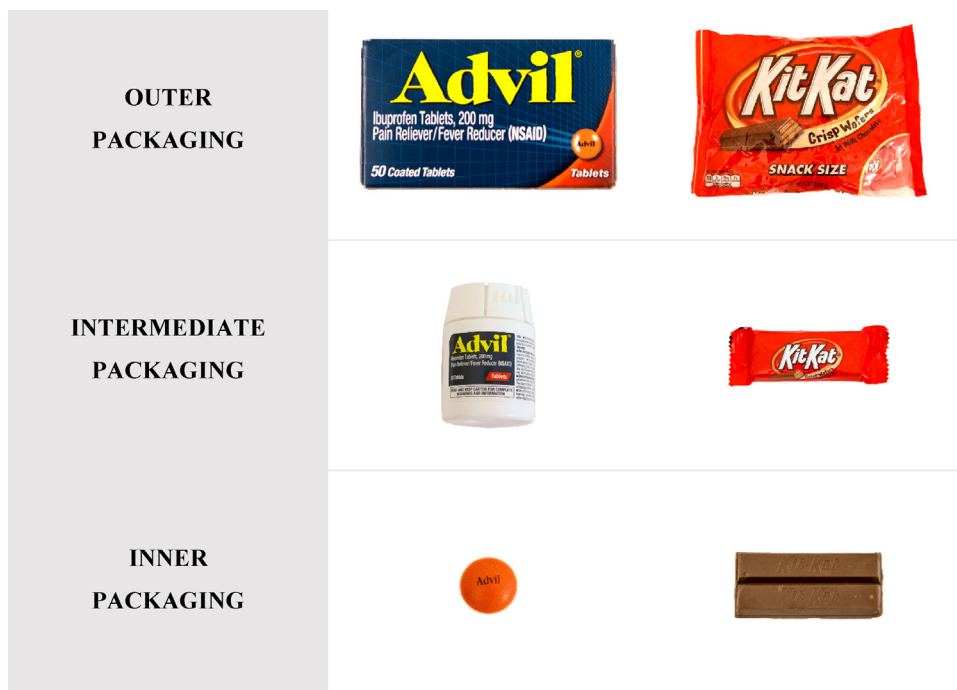


Fig. 1. Examples of the layered-packaging taxonomy: physicality dimension.

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