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Thinking inside the box: How seeing products on, or through, the packaging influences consumer perceptions and purchase behaviour

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ABSTRACT

Images of food constitute salient visual stimuli in the mind of the consumer. They are capable of promoting both feelings of hunger and the desire for food. It should not, then, come as any surprise that many product packages present the food contained within as a salient aspect of their visual design. Conventionally, this has been achieved primarily by the use of attractive visual imagery showing the product on the outside of the packaging. Nowadays, however, developments in packaging are increasingly enabling designers to add transparent elements, thus allowing consumers to directly see the product before purchase. Yet relatively little is known about the effectiveness of product imagery as compared with transparent packaging. In this review, we address the various ways in which seeing (images of) food influences the consumer. The implications for packaging designs which include: (a) images of food, and (b) transparent elements, are investigated. Guidelines are also provided for designers and brands on the ways in which to take advantage of these effects of being able to see the food.

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1. Introduction

Packaging is far more than merely a convenient means of getting a product to the store/consumer without damage (see Hine, 1995; Spence, 2016, for reviews). Over the past couple of decades, it has increasingly been realised that product packaging constitutes a powerful marketing tool in its own right (e.g., Rundh, 2005), and as such requires the same attention and techniques used in other areas of marketing to maximise commercial success (see Ahmed, Ahmed, & Salman, 2005). As such, the effects of packaging should be of great importance for designers, marketers, and brand managers alike. It has been estimated that: over three-quarters of food/drink purchase decisions are made at the point of sale (Connolly & Davison, 1996; POPAI, 2014; see also WPP, n.d.); 90% of consumers make a purchase after only examining the front of pack; and 85% of consumers make a purchase without having picked up an alternative product (Urbany, Dickson, & Kalapurakal, 1996). Making purchase decisions is no simple matter either – the average consumer will typically buy only 0.7% of the

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available products in-store over the course of a year (Catalina, 2014), despite having a range of over 30,000 products from which to choose (e.g., Sainsbury, n.d.). As a result, consumers must find, evaluate, and compare the products that they want from the vast range of products available in-store. There is rarely the opportunity to sample products in-store, and so consumers must make these judgments concerning the likely taste of the food based on the packaging and branding. According to Glanz, Basil, Maibach, Goldberg, and Snyder (1998), consumers primarily buy foods and drinks based on their expected taste and flavour (see also Food Processing, 2013), thus it is important for designers and marketers to: (1) grab the consumer's attention; and (2) create positive associations and expectations in their minds (such as the expectation of a great taste/flavour experience) in order to ensure the long-term commercial success of a product.

Packaging can help achieve these goals both at the point of sale and the point of consumption (see Hawkes, 2010; Hine, 1995; Spence, 2016, for reviews). However, there are many options and parameters of packaging design to consider when it comes to ensuring that the packaging transmits the most effective messaging, captures the attention of the consumer in-store, and achieves its full potential as a tool with which to enhance product experience. A number of studies have been conducted over the last few decades in order to identify how the various elements of product packaging contribute to these effects. Such studies have investigated elements of packaging including the main colour of the packaging (e.g., Danger, 1987; Gimba, 1998; Piqueras-Fiszman & Spence, 2011), packaging shape (Lindstrom, 2005; Meyers, 1981; Velasco, Salgado-Montejo, Marmolejo-Ramos, & Spence, 2014), weight (Kampfer et al., submitted for publication; Piqueras-Fiszman & Spence, 2012), shape curvature (Becker, Van Rompay, Schifferstein, & Galetzka, 2011; Salgado-Montejo, Leon, Elliot, Salgado, & Spence, 2015), and typeface (Velasco, Woods, Hyndman, & Spence, 2015), to name but a few (see Spence, 2016, for a review). Furthermore, a growing body of research suggests that the sight of food is capable of triggering a diverse range of neurological and physiological responses, which include increased hunger, more favourable taste evaluations, and the priming of reward networks (see Spence, Okajima, Cheok, Petit, & Michel, 2016, for a review). However, to date, comparatively little research has been conducted to investigate the confluence of these two streams of research. That is, the effect of seeing a product on subsequent product evaluations.

Packaging can enable the consumer to see the product contained within in one of two ways. Either through images of the product printed on the packaging, or through transparency as an element of the packaging. The prevalence of the latter approach would appear to be on the rise, and a trend that is set to continue (Mintel, 2014). Estimates from the US suggest that transparency is present in between 20% to 77% of all packaging, depending on product category (20% of chips, 20% of cookies, 23% of crackers, 77% of nuts; Deng & Srinivasan, 2013). See Fig. 1 for examples of packaging that feature product imagery or transparency.

This review investigates the evidence concerning how food imagery, either delivered through food images on pack, or else via the use of transparent windows, can influence the consumer. This review also provides guidelines as to how this effect can be levied to the benefit of packaging designers and brand managers.

2. The effects of seeing food

According to the extant literature, images of food tend to constitute salient visual stimuli (see Spence et al., 2016, for a review). As such, it would seem natural that this could offer food companies a relatively cheap and easy means of attracting the attention of the customer in-store.

Fig. 1. (a): Examples of front-facing product imagery as part of packaging design in four Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) food categories; (b): Examples of transparency as part of packaging design in four FMCG food categories.

Testing this hypothesis, Nijs, Muris, Euser, and Franken (2010) combined eye-tracking with a visual probe task in order to identify whether images of food (e.g., of chocolate, a donut) would capture attention more effectively than neutral images (e.g., a stapler, or paperclips). These images were matched in terms of their shape, colour, background colour, and position. Attention was robustly captured by food images in all participants[1]. These results were supported by a P300 peak after the presentation of food stimuli. This particular Event-Related Potential (ERP) is thought to be related to the orienting of selective attention (Cuthbert, Schupp, Bradley, Birbaumer, & Lang, 2000). Thus, as these images were task-irrelevant to the visual probe task, it would seem that images of food do indeed involuntarily capture people's attention. di Pellegrino, Magarelli, and Mengarelli (2011) used a similar paradigm (again

[1] Note that these results were found regardless of whether the participant was overweight/obese, or normal-weight; and whether they were hungry (following a 17-h fast), or satiated.

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