An Exploratory Study into the Impact of Colour and Packaging as Stimuli in the Decision Making Process for a Low Involvement Non-Durable Product

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Abstract

There has been little research conducted to determine the impact that colour and packaging have as stimuli on the purchasing process for a low involvement non-durable product. Garber, Burke and Jones (2000) showed that the colour of the product's package is an overlooked tool that marketers can use to gain the consumers' attention. The research approach for this study comprised in-depth interviews with a supermarket manager and a design director, and a survey of potato crisp consumers. Potato crisps were chosen, as they are a low involvement non-durable product in a competitive market. This research showed that while consumers did not consciously believe that the colour of the packaging affected their purchasing decision, it was an important subconscious stimulus through the relationship that colour had with the most important stimulus of flavour.showing a differing perspective, the supermarket manager believed that the quality, brand and price were all important stimuli for potato crisp purchasing, while the director acknowledged the increasing importance that is placed on colour and packaging today. It seems that the importance of colour and packaging as stimuli may be often overlooked and more research is needed into this area.

Key words: Colour, packaging, purchase decision, stimuli

Introduction

The consumer decision-making process is 'the analysis of how people choose between two or more alternative acquisitions and of the processes that take place before and after the choice' (Mowen, 1990, p. 283). There are many models describing different aspects of the process, and of relevance to this study were the models that focussed on the importance of stimuli when making a purchase choice (see for example Howard and Sheth (1969), and Bettman (1979)). Howard and Sheth (1969) linked the processes of association with the decision-making process and the actual purchase, and they identified quality, price and distinctiveness as important stimuli that consumers use/associate when making a purchase decision. However, their model was not necessarily relevant to low involvement non-durable products, and therefore a search of the literature was conducted to identify other relevant stimuli for purchasing these kinds of products.

The definition of a product or good includes attributes such as packaging, colour, price, quality, brand, the services and reputation of the seller (Stanton, Miller and Layton, 1994), as well as the level of involvement in the purchase decision (Laurent and Kapferer, 1985). Many studies have been conducted on the ways to influence a consumer to make purchase decisions, including the effectiveness of music; the physical setting of the environment; as well as on the attributes of the product/good itself. Packaging has been shown to be a critical stimulus to the creation and communication of brand identity and in communicating brand meaning and strengthening the consumer-brand relationship, especially for low involvement
consumer non-durable products (Underwood, 2003). There has always been importance placed on packaging (Danger, 1987), most recently in its ability to inform and persuade consumers (Gautier, 1996). This purpose has been largely attributed to the development of supermarkets with many manufacturers now relying on packaging to increase sales in the crowded, cluttered and competitive retail environment (Thompson, 1996). Though the package design is an integrated element of the promotional mix, it is also an important carrier of brand equity in the store (Garber, Burke and Jones, 2000). Brand equity refers to the customer’s subjective assessment of the worth of a brand above and beyond its perceived value, and brand equity has been shown to be a dominant driver in the sales of low involvement grocery products in general (Harvard Business Review, 2004). A reduction in spending on traditional brand-building mass-media advertising (Underwood, 2003) has also lead management to recognise the capacity of packaging to create differentiation and identity for relatively homogenous consumer non-durables (Spethmann, 1994; Doyle, 1999). However, according to Underwood (1996) there has been ‘little theoretical development in the area of packaging and its communicative effects’ (p. 209). Packaging communicates brand personality through many elements, including a combination of brand logo, colours, fonts, package materials, pictorials, product descriptions, shapes and other elements that provide rich brand associations (Underwood, 2003). During each visit to a supermarket, today’s consumers are exposed to thousands of messages (Nancarrow, Wright and Brace, 1998), and often the package may be the only source of information about the product (Garber, Burke and Jones, 2000). There has also been an increase in non-durable product buying decisions at the store shelf (Prone, 1993) and a growing recognition by management of the need to use packaging to create differentiation and identity for relatively homogenous consumer non-durables (Spethmann, 1994). A study performed by CM Research (cited in Gautier, 1996, p.37) demonstrated that consumers ‘did not consciously believe they were purchasing products because of the packaging alone... There are strong indicators, however, of the subconscious influence of the packaging on the purchasing process’.

While some research was conducted by Grossman and Wisenblit (1999) on colour choices with packaging in fast moving consumer goods, they also highlighted the need for more research into colour as a stimulus when they stated that ‘colour research in the field of marketing still appears to be in its infancy’ (p. 86). Underwood, Klein and Burke (2001) highlighted the importance of both colour and packaging as a brand communication vehicle. The colour of the packaging for a low involvement product can affect a consumer’s purchasing behaviour because ‘people first notice the colour of the package; impressions of shape and form come much later, but before the product in the package is noted or the print on it’ (Danger, 1987, p.25). Garber, Burke and Jones (2000) showed that the colour of the product’s package is an overlooked tool that marketers can use to gain the consumers’ attention. The focus of colour as a stimulus is related to its ability to aid companies who are looking for ways to improve their sales and obtain a dominant market share (Kotler, et al. 1998). While some colours have the ability to make goods stand out from their competitors among the clutter of the goods and promotional material at the point of purchase (Heath, 1997, and Key, 2000) other colours do not have this effect (Key, 2000). Grossman and Wisenblit (1999) suggested that although there is no underlying theory of colour in marketing, the concept of associative learning could help to explain consumers’ behaviour. Consumers may develop preferred colours for particular goods due to learning through association (Grossman and Wisenblit, 1999), for example, green is associated with Harrods, red with Virgin airlines, and red and white with Coca-Cola (Key, 2000). Marketers can use the theory of associations to create meaning for particular colours or to develop a brand image based on a colour (Grossman and Wisenblit, 1999). Therefore, research was needed to gain an insight
into the effects of colour and packaging as stimuli in the decision making process at the point of purchase for a low involvement non-durable product.

In deciding on the product to be researched, several factors were considered and it was decided that potato crisps were suitable. This was because there were several different brands competing in the Australian market, the main ones being Lays, Smiths, Kettle and Samboy; potato crisps are non-durable fast moving consumer goods; the manufacturers use different colours to distinguish the different flavours, eg. Pink/purple for salt and vinegar and blue/white for plain crisps; and, potato crisps are part of the highly competitive Australian snack food industry which has an annual turnover of $AUD4,128 million with potato crisps making up 19% of the value of the industry (IBIS World Report, 2003). The research questions that were measured in the research were: to understand the important factors/stimuli to the consumer when purchasing potato crisps; to understand if there was an association between the colour and the packaging of the product; and to understand if the brand quality was communicated through the colour of the packaging.

In deciding on the research design, the researchers believed that they needed to gain an insight into the research questions from different perspectives. First, an exploratory approach using two case studies was utilised which supported the authors' aim 'to find out what is happening and seek new insights' into the research questions (Robson, 1993, p. 42). This involved conducting two depth interviews – one with a design agency director who had much experience in designing packaging for consumer goods including snack foods and had personally won many prestigious awards in Australia and overseas for his creative designs. He was chosen to give an insight into what factors were considered in the design of potato crisp packaging. The other depth interview was with a supermarket store manager who could give an insight into what actually happened at the point of purchase for potato crisps. In deciding on the appropriate methodology to give an insight into the consumer purchasing process, it was decided to utilise a self-completion survey of potato crisp consumers, as it was believed that a case study approach would not reflect the diversity in the population. Students were an appropriate sample as potato crisps were available in many places around the university campus, and all students in the sample had bought crisps in the last month. Stecher and Borko (2002) argued that 'multiple research methods are beneficial when studying complex processes' though the 'successful integration of case study and survey methods must be cultivated at the design stage' (p. 567). The discussions from the depth interviews were transcribed and a summary of the main themes was prepared. SPSS v11.5 was used to analyse the data from the quantitative research. For the quantitative survey, 151 tertiary students aged between 18 and 41 years were in the sample, of which 90 were male and 61 were female. For the purposes of the analysis the supermarket store manager will be called the 'manager', the director of the design agency will be called the 'director', and the respondents in the self completion survey will be called the 'consumers'.

Findings

The consumers and the manager agreed that important factors when deciding which packet of potato crisps to purchase were the quality, the brand and the price of the product, with flavour also being an important factor for the consumers. The consumers used a constant sum scale (out of 100) to rate the six attributes of flavour, quality, brand, price, size and shape, and the colour of the packaging. Overall, the consumers indicated that the flavour of the product was easily the most important stimulus when selecting potato crisps with an average rating of 38
points. This was about twice as important as the quality (21 points), which was more important than the brand (14 points) and the price (13 points). While brand and price were of about equal importance, they were about twice as important as the size and shape of the crisps (8 points) and the colour of the packaging (7 points), which the consumers rated of very low importance. The flavour of the crisps was less obvious to the manager who believed that when purchasing potato crisps, the brand (in particular), quality, and price were all important. ‘I think brand name is very important in my current business. I think we have proved that big brands sell the product. You only have to look at Coca-Cola, Kellogg’s, Kraft and Smiths’. He also believed that the quality of the product influenced the consumers’ choice, more so than price. ‘Quality goes without saying... if you haven’t got quality don’t even consider putting a product on the shelf. The other thing is price’. These findings were in accordance with Howard and Sheth (1969) who included quality and price in their model as purchasing stimuli, and authors such as Heath (1997) and Key (2000) who believed that the brand and price were important stimuli. It was interesting that while authors such as Danger (1987), Trent (1993), Grossman and Wisenblit (1999) and Garber, Burke and Jones (2000) believed that the colour of product’s packaging was an important stimulus to the consumer when purchasing a low involvement product such as potato crisps, the consumers had a different view as they did not consciously consider the colour of the product’s packaging to a stimulus while making a purchase decision.

In understanding if an association existed between the colours and the packaging of potato crisps, the manager said he believed that it would be much more difficult to identify a specific flavour of crisps if all packaging had the same colour. ‘It’s definitely harder to find the flavour if all varieties have the same colour pack’. He believed that companies occasionally make the mistake of changing the packaging of a product when consumers have already become familiar with the packaging. The director believed that the colour of packaging has grown in importance as a stimulus in the decision-making process and that it has become as important as other visual elements of the package, such as the style of the font and the print. This was due to his belief that consumers have the ability to associate a particular colour with a specific brand in accordance with Key’s (2000) work and the director used the Coca-Cola example as did Key (2000) to illustrate his belief. The director raised the point that the brand’s history can influence the effectiveness of the product associations, which he believed were based on factors such as consumer loyalty, name awareness and trademarks. This was in accordance with Grossman and Wisenblit (1999) who believed that consumers have formed colour associations with products through past experience. The consumers had a similar view, as they relied strongly on the colour of the packaging when trying to identify a particular flavour of potato crisps. When asked to rate the importance of the colour of the packaging to identify flavour, about three quarters (72%) of the consumers believed that the colour of the package was very or fairly important to them. The colour was more important for flavour recognition than brand recognition, as when the consumers were asked to rate the importance of the packaging colours when trying to identify a brand of potato crisps about half of the consumers (52%) said that the colour of the packaging was very or fairly important. The consumers clearly associated different colours with different flavours. Approximately two thirds of consumers (63%) associated the colours purple/pink with the flavour salt and vinegar, and about two thirds (60%) associated blue with the plain flavour of potato crisps.

The director and the manager indicated that the colour of the packaging seemed to have the ability to communicate the quality of the product. The supermarket store manager compared the packaging of the branded crisps to the neutral colours used by generic brands and the fact that the colour can affect the price and sales of a product. ‘Colour definitely influences
customer purchases... Over the past five years the cheaper generics with poor quality have been replaced with better coloured packaging, better quality and they are still cheaper. That is why they now have 15% of market share. When there were no upmarket generic brands the sales of cheap and nasty white coloured packaged generics would have had a 7% or 8% market share. The director of the design agency had a similar view about the colour of the packaging being very important in representing the brand’s identity and the consumers’ perceived quality, and described the importance of colour development in a package, saying that ‘70% of the job of developing the packaging involved the colour development, and the other 30% while working on the actual brand identity of the client’. ‘Colour is extremely important in capturing the personality and the attributes of the actual product itself’. These findings indicated that the colour of the package design was an important carrier of brand quality and identity at the point of purchase, in accordance with Garber, Burke and Jones (2000).

Conclusions

Overall, the research indicated that the most important factors when purchasing potato crisps were the quality, brand and price of the product, with flavour also being an important factor for the consumers; in this market consumers associated specific flavours with particular colours of the potato crisp packaging; and the brand quality was communicated through the colour of the packaging. It seems that in a market such as potato crisps with its proliferation of different brands and flavours, the importance of product differentiation based on colour to attract purchase was of vital importance. The importance of the colour of packaging as a stimulus in the consumer decision-making process was recognised by the design professional and the supermarket store manager. As a relationship existed between the colour of the packaging and the flavour and brand, this assists in demonstrating that colour is an important stimulus, albeit a seemingly unconscious one in the consumer decision-making process. This was in accordance with a study by CM Research (cited in Gautier, 1996), which showed that consumers did not consciously believe they were purchasing products because of the packaging, but ‘there are strong indicators, of the subconscious influence of the packaging on the purchasing process’ (p. 37). This finding differed from Danger (1987) who said that ‘people first notice the colour of the package; impressions of shape and form come much later, but before the product in the package is noted or the print on it’ (p.25). Through the colour associations with particular flavours and brands, and the ability of packaging to portray the quality of the product, it is believed that the colour of the packaging can greatly assist the sales of goods in a market such as potato crisps.

This research concluded that while the colour of the packaging did not directly affect their purchasing decision, through the relationship that it had with the top three stimuli, the colour of the packaging was an important stimulus in influencing the consumers’ choice when purchasing potato crisps and that it served the purpose of generating information about the brand, flavour and quality of the product. While the literature did not discuss the stimulus of ‘flavour’ as a stimulus in the consumer decision-making process, this study suggested that ‘flavour’ (or variety) should be included in a model for purchasing low involvement products that have different flavour or variety variants. It seems that the impact of colour and packaging as stimuli may need further research.
References


