

**PACKAGING AND THE INCIDENCE OF INFORMATION
 OVERLOAD IN A LOW-RISK MARKET:
 A STUDY OF GROCERY PRODUCTS.**

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates packaging and the incidence of information overload in a low-risk market, with special reference to grocery products. A descriptive research design based on cross-sectional approach was employed. Simple random sampling technique was used to select three retail stores within Lagos metropolis, while 300 consumers were surveyed, using convenience sampling technique.

The approaches to data analyses were descriptive (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics, using Pearson moment correlation analysis. Data obtained were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS-17). The findings of the study support the following propositions: (1) packaging is significantly recognized as a source of product information, (2) consumers are aware that packaging carries product information, (3) consumers employ packaging information to make purchase decision, and (4) consumers considers (7 items of product information) adequate in making purchase decisions.

The paper concludes that consumers utilized very few items of product information on packaging and the need for companies to take into consideration only items of product information that are relevant to consumer purchase decision. This will minimize information overload and simplify consumer buying decision. Finally, focusing on these key items of product information will also reduce cost of production, which leads to price reduction, increased patronage and by extension profitability.

Keywords: Packaging, low risk market, information sources, consumer behavior, credibility, purchase decision.

1. Introduction

Packaging and its role in economic/business activities has rarely been out of discussions and headlines. It is often praised, criticized, or redesigned – it is always there to trigger a debate and divide opinions among scholars and practitioners. Most marketers consider packaging as a key element of product strategy and the fifth P, along with price, product, place, and promotion. Packaging is a core marketing tool for products and it performs the role of communication (Butkeviciene et al., 2008). Thus, companies must monitor and change product packaging on a regular basis to ensure its continuous and increasing appeal to target audiences. This is because, packaging is the critical link between the product and all forms of promotion. Packaging is defined as the element of marketing mix whose functions fundamentally hinges on serving the interest of the entire marketing forces through the media of the “manufacturer”, “intermediaries” and the “consumer” (Kotler & Keller, 2006).

Packaging is the first point of contact of consumer with the brand or product (Rundh, 2005). Packaging may include up to three levels of material: the primary package, the secondary package, and the shipping package. Packaging is therefore, an important issue in marketing and the growing use of packaging as a marketing tool for self-service is increasing, since approximately 73% of products are sold on a self-service bases at the point of sale (Silayoi & Speece, 2004).

Packaging seeks to serve the interests of the manufacturers in the areas of product differentiation, market segmentation, and branding. As for the intermediaries, packaging tends to serve her interests in the areas of optimal utilization of space, prevention of loss of inventory, and as a silent salesman. It seeks to serve the interest of the consumers in the areas of information, convenience and protective needs Packaging therefore, becomes more important when other promotional avenues are restricted or eliminated by law. Furthermore, the importance of packaging has grown due to the increase and upsurge of supermarkets and the self-service stores. Thus, packaging seems to substitute lack of physical communication between seller and buyer and becomes a medium of communication by itself

The increasing number of new products and proliferation of brand has forced producers to adjust to increasing competition in the market. Nowadays, they have to differentiate their products and brands not only by means of taste and terms but also by means of packaging. The outcome of this development is that customers have access to large amount of new information. This may lead to an information overload which makes consumers’ decision-making more complicated. To avoid this situation, consumers seem to look for quality signals which may guide them in making the right purchase decision.

The modern information environment, however, presents us with information in forms and modes with which our senses, and past experiences, are ill-equipped or inadequate to assimilate and handle effectively. The causes of overload, in this sense, are complex and multiple; hence the difficulty in providing any single quick and reliable solution. It is also unusual, to assume that a major contributory factor, if not the only relevant factor in information overload is the “too much information” (TMI) effect (Bawden, 2001). Increasing diversity of information can also lead to overload, partly by virtue of a consequent increase in the quantum of information on a given issue, which may come from diverse perspectives, but also at times because of an intellectual deficiency or difficulty in fitting it within a cognitive framework appropriate for the use and the user.

Information overload is usually considered to represent a state of affairs where an individual capability and efficiency in using information available at his/her disposal is influenced by the amount of relevant, and potentially useful, information available to him/her. In order word information overload arises when information received becomes a hindrance rather than a help, even though the information is potentially useful.

According to Silayoi & Speece (2004) fast moving good (FMCG) are low involvement products, and consumers do not need to search extensively for information about the brands, evaluate their characteristics, or make a weighty decision on which brand to purchase. This study considers the functional essence of packaging in the light of information conveyed by packaging and which seeks to assist the consumers in arriving at informed choice decision. Product information commonly found on packaging in low-risk market include: price, product weight, manufacturing/expiring date, side effects, dosage and administration, nutritional information, brand-name, copy-claims, place of manufacturer/country of origin, National Food and drug administration agency number (NAFDAC) etc.

Almost 8 to 10 items of information can be identified on product packaging in low risk market and some of these items of information may be irrelevant to purchase decision. The task before the consumer is to really identify the level of awareness of each item of information, their relevance to their choice decision, the number of these items of information put to use in making purchase decision and their belief/credibility of each item of information as a guide to purchase decision. Some product information are obvious and observable for the consumer, but latent information and its influence stay hidden during the decision-making process. Information like country-of-origin, variety, brand name or vintage is regarded as evident information, whereas product design belongs to the latent factors.

Consumers are typically unaware of the physiological and psychological impacts of visualized communication. Therefore, it is tasking to find the appropriate approach to analyze the influence of packaging on their buying decision. Furthermore, the influence of the packaging differs by consumer types. On the basis of market segmentation, it can be concluded that customer groups significantly differ in their evaluation of packaging and identification of product. Undoubtedly, experienced consumers try to minimize the impact of appearance when selecting a product. These customers have gained experience concerning important product attributes to look for and evaluate when making a purchase decision. An uninformed consumer's need information on quality indicators instead of key product attributes in order to judge the quality of product in a subjective way. The product price and also the elements of packaging are essential choice criteria for these segments.

Although, packaging as a concept has been widely researched (see for example, Ragaert et al., 2002; Bland, 2004; Ampuero & Villa, 2006; Gonzalex et al., 2007; Siegrist et al., 2007; Siloyoi & Speece, 2007; Well et al., 2007; Butkeviciene et al., 2008; Ladipo et al., 2012 to mention a few). Most of these studies dwelt much on information source on service goods and sellers looking at consumers' attitude and behavior in relation to information credibility and not specifically in low risk market. A number of previous studies has also provided tactics of what is consider "enough information", and the approaches consumer employ in seeking information prior to making purchase decision has been investigated by a number of researchers (see, for example, Agosto, 2002; Zach, 2005; Parker & Berryman, 2007; Prabha et al., 2007; Mansourian & Ford, 2007). It is clear from the findings of these researches that this is a common, if not ubiquitous, way of dealing with a complex information environment, which is not always applicable in low risk market.

In a mature markets, it has been proven that product packaging and brand experience influence customer purchase behavior. However, the influence of product packaging and customers' brand experience in low-income markets has not been extensively research. The challenge before this present study therefore is to explore packaging as a possible source of information overload in low- risk market, with specific focus on grocery products.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

- i. Packaging is not recognized as a source of product information.
- ii. Buyers may not be aware that packaging carries product information.
- iii. Consumers may not employ packaging information in making purchase decision.
- iv. The number of items of information used by consumers in making product decision is unclear.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

- i. To determine whether packaging is recognized as a source of product information.
- ii. To identify whether consumers are aware that packaging carries product information.
- iii. To investigate whether consumers employ packaging information in making purchase decision.
- iv. To verify the number of items information consumers considered adequate in making purchase decision.

1.4 Research Questions

- i. Do buyers/consumers recognize packaging as a source of product information?
- ii. Are consumers really aware that packaging carries product information?
- iii. Will buyers employ packaging information to make purchase decision?
- iv. What could be the number of items of packaging information considered adequate in making purchase decision?

1.5 Research Hypotheses

H₀₁: Packaging may not be significantly recognized as a source of product information.

H₀₂: Consumers may not be significantly aware that packaging carries product information.

H₀₃: Consumers may not significantly employ packaging information to make purchase decision.

H₀₄: Consumers may not significantly consider a given number of items of information adequate in making purchase decision.

2.0 Review of Relevant Literature

2.1 Packaging construct

Packaging has become a potent marketing tool and its role has evolved from the traditional function of protecting the products through distribution channels against damage, dirt, theft, mishandling and deterioration. This functional role is a basic requirement of all packaging. In the modern era, packaging is also utilized as a marketing tool to arouse and stimulate consumer's attention, and to promote and convey relevant messages about the product's features to consumers whilst still on the shelf or at the point of sale. Some of the factors that have contributed to the growth of packaging as a marketing tool includes: self-service, consumer affluence, innovation opportunity, and company and brand image.

2.1.1 Dimensions of packaging

From the previous literature, four main packaging elements that affect consumer's purchase decision can be categorized into: (1) Visual elements consisting of colours, graphics, design, size, shape and packaging. These attributes relate to the affective side of consumer decision-making. 2) The information elements which relate to the contents and technologies used in the packaging, and design to address the cognitive side of decision-making, to create customer awareness and the overall image of the brand (Silayo & Speece, 2004).

2.1.2 Visual Elements of Packaging

Most consumer products use a number of indirect communications to convey packaging attributes, such as combining colours. In packaging, colour is regarded as the major aspect involved in subtle consumer communication. Colour is often the most effective element in creating strong brand recognition and associations.

Companies also use packaging attributes such as graphics that include layout and the use of powerful photography, to create an image to help in attracting and sustaining consumer attention. The package design (i.e. size and shape) involves more than the surface look or aesthetics aspect of the packaging. It is influenced by the entire marketing program, which include the package-product combination, the corporate logo or symbol, the distribution and pricing policy, and the promotional effort.

2.1.3 Information elements of Packaging

All necessary items of information that the packaging carries must be clearly visible or implied though the product design. This communication may either be direct or subtle. Direct communication describes the product, its benefits and how to use it (Butkeviciene et al., 2008). High involvement purchases are less influenced by image and visual response.

2.2 Packaging as a Communication Tool

The role of packaging as a communication tool is becoming more and more important due to factors such as increase in self-service at the point-of-sale and the related associated service to the product (Kotler, 2004; Kotler et al., 2005). At the point-of-sale in supermarkets and hypermarkets where people buy large quantities of groceries, as well as in specialized chains with more assortments, the uninformed consumer chooses basically on the basis of packaging (Popai, 1998).

The role of packaging as a communication tool can be analyzed from different perspectives. Marketing based on the idea that packaging is the “clothing” of the product highlights its logistic benefit (containment, protection, fragmentation, transportation) and communicative functions (Well et al., 2007). The fundamental communicative function of packaging is evident in its very existence for instance on the pages of newspapers/magazines, on television, in shop windows, at points-of-sale, even at home, etc., where it communicates by merely being on display. Packaging may also incorporate elements of essential informative and communicative power as well: (e.g. words, images, colors, shape, etc, which communicate to the consumer in various ways and places, both before and after the shopping experience).

2.3 Product as an arrays of Cues

According to Cox’s (1967) consumers seek only a few information cues. He argued that consumers interpret products as arrays of cues (e.g. price, brand name, colour, design, etc). Within this model consumers assign information values to the available cues, using those with the highest values. A cue’s information value is a function of its predictive power (the accuracy with which it predicts the attributes under consideration) and its confidence value (the consumer’s confidence in the predictive value ascribed to the cue).

According to Hansen (1972), consumers evaluate products on the basis of surrogate cues with which they have confidence in the predictive value (e.g. the freshness of cake based on the aesthetic look of the packaging material). This perspective of a product offers a conceptual framework for understanding consumers’ limited information search by indicating that if a few cues offer high predictive and high confidence values to the consumer these will be selected. The appeal of this model is its explanation of information search behavior which still considers the purchaser as a rational decision maker.

2.3.1 Brand Name as an Informational Cue

A review of the literature shows that presence or absence of brand name may serve as a very important informational cue to consumers. According to Allison & Uhl, (1964) consumers' perceptions of product attributes are markedly affected by the presence or absence of brand names. The brand name, or retailer name on pack, evokes certain impressions and connotations which consumers place reliance upon when evaluating competing brands within a product class. Also, from the evidence of studies of (Render & O'Connor 1976; Jacoby et al., 1978; Kendall & Fenwick, 1979), there is evidence of the importance of brand names as informational cues.

2.4 Information Overload and the Paradox of Choice

The idea that there is too much information at hand, often exacerbated by the multiple formats and channels available for its communication, has led to the concept of information overload, perhaps the most familiar of the "information pathologies". Other consequences include conditions referred to as infobesity, information avoidance, information library anxiety and anxiety. They may be understood in terms of a general framework of "paradox of choice".

There is no single generally accepted definition of information overload. The term is usually regarded as a state of affairs where an individual's efficiency in utilizing information at their disposal is influenced and hampered by the amount of relevant, and potentially useful, information available to them (David & Lyn, 2008).

In a nutshell, information overload occurs when information received becomes a hindrance rather than a help, even though the information is potentially useful. By the 1990s, information overload began to be referred to as a major problem, in the business world as much as in academia and the professions, and even more so with the influence of new technologies, particularly electronic mail and the internet.

3.0 Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

For the purpose of this study, a descriptive research design based on cross-sectional approach was employed. This is because most of the variables under investigation are non-metric but purely qualitative in nature. Cross sectional survey method was used because panel data will not be required in this study.

3.2 Population of the Study and Unit of Analysis

The population of the study consists of all the retail outlets that deals in grocery products (i.e. breads and cereals, dairy products, frozen foods, produce, bath and kitchen items, meat and alternatives, canned and dry goods etc) and operate within Lagos metropolis and all the consumers who patronize the outlets to purchase grocery products.

3.3 Sample Size/Selection

Three retail outlets were selected (Park & Shop, Goodies Store, and Cash & Carry store). They were obtained through simple random sampling via balloting). This is apparent considering the nature of population which seems quite complex and might not well be represented by straight forward sampling (Babbie, 1990).

Three hundred (300) customers of the selected retail outlets were selected using convenient sampling technique. This sampling technique is the most feasible tool in terms of time and money (Zikmund, 2003).

3.4 Instrumentation

Data were collected from the respondents through the aid of structured multiple choice questionnaire which was originally developed and administered for the purpose of the study. The questionnaire was designed/structured using 5-points Likert rating scale of strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree and strongly disagree for the first construct (packaging), while Likert rating scales for the second construct (items of product information), ranges from extremely important, important, undecided, unimportant and totally unimportant.

The choice of the closed-end instrument in preference to its counterpart, the open-ended questionnaire was influenced by the former's capability to generate higher response rate, and particularly more acceptable to respondents.

3.5 Pilot Study of the Instrument

The instrument was initially subjected to reliability and validity test through the process of pilot study in order to ascertain the suitability of the instrument for primary data collection. The reliability of the instrument was ascertained through Cronbach's alpha. The reliability test seeks to measure the consistency of the instrument in measuring variables of interest to the study. The cut-off point is generally 0.6 (Hair et al., 1992). It is evident from Table 1 that Cronbach's alpha values were .846 and .759, suggesting that our scale had adequate measurement properties.

Validity test, which indeed is a test of the capability of the instrument to measure accurately the variables of interest, was kick-started by giving the copies of the questionnaire to four academic professionals. Based on the obtained feedback, the instrument was modified to enhance clarity and appropriateness of the measures purporting to tap the constructs. Based on the reliability and validity results the instrument was considered suitable for data collection.

3.6 Administration of Instrument

Having established the suitability of the instrument for data collection, same was administered on the entire three hundred sample respondents. The period of distributing the questionnaire lasted from 2nd of October, 2012 to 24th November, 2012. Six research assistants (2 per retail stores) were employed to administer the instrument. These research assistants were trained by the researchers before the study was commenced.

3.7 Methods of data Analysis

The data collected through the copies of the questionnaire were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS-17). The approaches of data analyses were descriptive (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics, using Pearson moment correlation analysis.

4. Results of the Data Analysis

Table 1. Reliability Test

S/No	Constructs	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
1	Packaging	10	.846
2	Items of product information	14	.759

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

Items of product Information	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Price	286	2	5	4.85	.566	.320
Colour	286	1	5	1.81	.841	.708
Quantity	286	1	5	1.93	.990	.981
Waranty	286	1	5	1.90	.938	.880
Net weight	286	1	5	1.84	.831	.690
Ingredients	286	1	5	3.96	.965	.986
Expiry date	286	2	5	4.82	.523	.273
Brand name	286	2	5	4.40	.943	.889
NAFDAC No	286	2	5	4.73	.660	.436
Nutritional value	286	1	5	4.61	.892	.796
Country of origin	286	3	5	4.87	.379	.144
Ease of application or use	286	1	5	1.87	.837	.700
Customer care line	286	1	5	1.95	.992	.983
Instruction on storage	286	1	5	1.92	.975	.951
Valid N (listwise)	286					

Table 3. Correlation Test

		Packaging Construct	Information Items Construct
Packaging Construct	Pearson Correlation	1	.828**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	286	286
Information Items Construct	Pearson Correlation	.828**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	286	286
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

A total of 300 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to the respondents that were involved in the study, out of which 14 were rejected on the ground that they were not properly completed. This means that a total of 286 copies were eventually used for data analysis, giving response rate of 95.33 per cent.

Table 1 presents the number of items for each constructs. The Cronbach's Alpha value of .846 and .759 recorded for the two constructs were under acceptable range of $\alpha = 0.7$ (Girden, 2001).

The descriptive statistics table shows the mean, standard deviation, variance, minimum and maximum value for each item of product information. From Table II, the following items of product information (price, ingredients, expiry date, brand name, Nafdac number, nutritional value, and country of origin) have a very significant mean and standard deviation, confirming that they are mostly used by consumers when purchasing grocery products.

The other items of product information on packaging (colour, quantity, warranty, net weight, ease of application or use, customer care line, and storage instruction) have low insignificant mean and standard deviation value, implying that, they are less important to consumer choice decision.

Table 3 presents the correlation analysis results (using Pearson Product-moment correlation), which revealed a satisfactory significant relationship between packaging and product items information. Using a scatter plot, the preliminary analysis conducted revealed that the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity were not violated.

The result of the analysis revealed a positive correlation between the two variables, $r = .828$, $n = 286$ and $p < 0.0005$, with high levels of coefficient of determination between the two variables (68.56%). The coefficient of determination is the square of correlation coefficient multiply by 100. The coefficient of determination of 68.56% is quite a significant variance explained between the two variables of the study.

This indicates that the source of information and number of items of product information carries by packaging significantly simplify and influence consumer purchase decision. On the basis of the results of the correlation analysis, the four null hypotheses investigating the relationship between packaging and items of product information carries by packaging were rejected. Thus, there is strong evidence (based on the findings of this study) to support the following propositions: (1) packaging is significantly recognized as a source of product information, (2) consumers are aware that packaging carries product information, (3) consumers employ packaging information to make purchase decision, and (4) consumers considers (7 items of product information) adequate in making purchase decision.

The findings of this study can be said to be in line with the study of (Bone & Corey, 2000, Silayoi & Speece, 2004, 2007; Well et al., 2007; Ladipo et al., 2012 to mention a few). These authors claimed that source of information and number of items of product information available to consumer significantly affects product choice and that consumer attach importance to a given number of items /source of information in making purchase decision.

5. Conclusion and Discussions

The use of packaging by fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies and retailers remains strong worldwide and remain a potent marketing strategy for companies to glamorize its product in order to attract consumer's attention. Packaging has become important in consumer need satisfaction and plays a strategic role in seven out of the ten in-store purchase decisions, and is, therefore, a potent marketing tool through which companies can imbibe knowledge and customer preferences to new, innovative product packages (Bone & Corey, 2000). The packaging must, therefore, simplify and perform many of the sales tasks, including making an overall good impression and influence impulsive purchasing. Product information helps to create awareness and knowledge about brand and by extension simplify purchases. Oftentimes the amount and credibility of information available to consumers informs their decision to buy a particular product (Kiel & Layton, 1981). Packaging is, therefore, an important medium through which companies can differentiate products from the plethora of competing brands.

Packaging is the face of a product and often is the only product exposure consumers experience prior to purchase. Therefore, distinctive packaging can boost sales in a competitive environment. The package may be designed to enhance the product image and/or to differentiate the product from the competition. Packaging also provides important information to the consumer. For example, package labeling satisfies legal requirements for product identification, nutritional value, ingredient declaration, net weight, expiry date, warranty, brand name, country of origin, and manufacturer information. Additionally, the packaging conveys relevant information about the product such as instructions on application or use, brand identification, and pricing.

A review of extant literature on consumer behavior shows that consumers undertake little external search when buying packaged groceries, with considerable emphasis and reliance being placed upon memory and available information carried by packaging. Consumers strive to source for relevant information to simplify and make informed choice decision. In doing so, consumers tend to look for information from all several sources such as advertising, word-of-mouth communications, the package, opinion leader (Jacoby et al., 1977; Verbeke et al., 2006). Such sources may be: commercial, personal, experiential etc

The relevance of the number of items of information carries by packaging is of paramount importance; however, the choice of product is contingent upon the available sources of information and its credibility. An increasing amount of information available to consumer may cause information overload. However a

minimum amount of information source helps to arrive at choice of best brand (Scammon, 1977; David & Lyn, 2008). For low involvement products, marketing communications need to have a strong impact, because the images and information carried by packaging affect consumer purchase decisions (Grossman & Wisenblit (1999). For many consumers of low risk market, the packaging becomes the product, because of impressions formed by customer on initial contact on the basis of which consumers evaluate a product before buying.

The findings of this study revealed that consumers utilized very few items of product information on packaging. Therefore, companies should take into consideration only items of product information that is relevant and important to consumer purchase decision. This will minimize information overload and simplify consumer buying decision. Focusing on these key items of product information will also reduce cost of production and by extension lead to price reduction, increased patronage and profitability.

Based on the above findings, it is imperative for FMCG manufacturers to pay attention to the growing societal concerns about packaging and make a decision that is in line with society's interests as well as immediate customer and company objectives. Packaging decision and design must be well articulated. In the design process marketers must take into consideration consumers' past experiences, needs and wants when developing new line extensions or products innovations (Silayoi & Speece, 2007).

The packaging must attract attention to its self and stand out from a plethora of competing product and brands. This can be done by developing sound packaging concept, with the right choice of color, shape, copy, trademark, logo, and other features (Sogn-Grundvag & Ostli 2009)). Finally, the key to maximizing packaging impact is to understand the consumer's response to packaging. Packaging must not only sell the product but also create favorable impression that will propel desire for repeat purchases. Other additional benefits offered by packaging includes: re-use opportunity, ease of application and use , which promote repeat sales and add value.

6. Limitations and Future Research Directions

The research was limited to three retail stores that deal in grocery products within Lagos Metropolis using convenience sampling technique to select the respondents that were surveyed; as such generalization should be done with caution. Also, the present study involved a cross-sectional survey, not longitudinal survey. This means that the data were gathered at one point in time. As such, it only offers a static view without taking into account the dynamic nature of the respondents. Therefore, further studies that will incorporate more samples from the study population in a diverse environment, over time periods are suggested. Also, the study is restricted to only grocery products, future research could be directed at industrial goods.

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