Exploring the role of packaging in the formation of brand images: a mixed methods investigation of consumer perspectives

Abstract

Purpose: This study explores consumers' perspectives on how packaging plays a role in their consumption experience and how it contributes to the formation of brand images. By adopting a consumer's perspective, we identify the criteria that consumers apply to evaluate packaging and reveal how packaging relates to consumers' overall brand associations.

Design/methodology/approach: Through a sequential exploratory mixed methods design, we explore brand packaging of chocolate bars as emotionally laden, well-known fast-moving consumer goods. First, we conduct a qualitative focus group study to explore how consumers perceive package design, and how it relates to their brand impressions. Second, we test the constructs and attributes with an independent sample through a quantitative survey.

Findings: Our qualitative findings reveal the different roles of packaging and highlight how packaging provides value for consumer experiences not only at the point-of-sale but also during later consumption. More specifically, we identify twelve main criteria that consumers use to evaluate packaging. We unwrap how packaging is embedded in consumers' brand image networks by mapping out its connections to other brand associations pertaining to product attributes, the brand itself, and personality impressions. Our quantitative findings confirm the importance of practical and symbolic packaging criteria and the brand image comparisons.

Originality: Taking a consumer's perspective, our study contributes to a more holistic understanding of how packaging supports brand building as we reveal the various ways in which packaging relates to consumers' overall brand image associations. Our study further directs attention to the roles that consumers themselves assign to packaging and how they evaluate packaging based on its practical, symbolic, and social value.

1   Introduction

The importance of package design has evolved from a protective container to an informational and persuasive medium and, finally, an important design element contributing to consumers' brand impressions (Orth and Malkewitz, 2008; Underwood, 2003; Underwood *et al.*, 2001). Brands use their packaging to gain consumers' attention and convey product attributes and symbolic brand benefits (Rundh, 2016). Especially in the sector of fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG hereafter), marked by highly competitive industries and spontaneous purchase behavior, packaging is a critical brand medium that acts as a communication instrument and a differentiation factor that can impact consumers' purchase decision at the point-of-sale (Silayoi and Speece, 2004, 2007; Favier *et al.*, 2019; Rettie and Brewer, 2000). Beyond the point-of-sale, packaging is a recurring brand touchpoint that can create customer satisfaction and increase loyalty throughout the entire customer journey (Löfgren *et al.*, 2008).

However, there is a significant lack of research exploring the role of packaging not from a brand's but a consumer's perspective (Nguyen *et al.*, 2020), regarding not only the value that packaging holds for them but also how it contributes to their brand images. Research on packaging and brand image has focused on testing how specific package design elements, such as color or shape, affect consumers' product and brand impressions in an experimental manner (Spence and Velasco, 2018; Velasco *et al.*, 2014). Hence, there is room for qualitative explorations to illuminate consumers' thoughts and experiences when interacting with brand packaging in three main ways.

First, although research has extensively argued for the importance of packaging as a purchase criterion and a recurring brand touchpoint, it remains uncertain how consumers deliberately perceive packaging as important and which roles they recognize and value. This gap suggests that, while the functional and symbolic aspects of packaging have been explored from a brand's perspective, the subjective consumer perspective on packaging's role in their decision-making, consumption processes, and brand interactions remains under-theorized.

Second, research has paid less attention to how consumers themselves assess brand packaging and its value in their purchasing and consuming experiences. Yet, such a perspective is invaluable for a holistic understanding of the values that consumers naturally attribute to packaging and the different nuances and rankings they ascribe to the resulting evaluative criteria. This calls for a deeper examination of consumers' value assessment processes in relation to packaging.

Third, while previous research has also highlighted the importance of packaging in building brand images (Keller, 1993; Orth and Malkewitz, 2008), there is no holistic understanding of how packaging is embedded in consumers' overall brand image associations. Hence, a framework that conceptualizes the role of packaging in brand image formation from the consumer's viewpoint is needed to address this gap.

To fill these research gaps, our mixed methods study aims to explore consumers' perspectives on how packaging plays a role in their consumption experience and how it contributes to the formation of brand images. Special attention is directed towards nuances of valuation that are naturally expressed by consumers. Our research is guided by the following questions:

1. What roles do consumers ascribe to packaging design during their purchasing and consumption experience?
2. What criteria do consumers naturally apply to evaluate brand packaging and what are underlying motives with regard to their importance?
3. How does packaging relate to brand image associations from the consumer's viewpoint?

Through a sequential exploratory mixed methods study, we investigate consumers' perspectives on packaging and branding, taking chocolate bars as an example of an emotionally laden, widely popular FMCG. First, through a qualitative focus group study with German consumers, we reveal the different roles of packaging throughout the consumer journey and the most important criteria that consumers use for evaluating brand packaging. Moreover, we map out the brand associations evoked through consumers' direct confrontation with brand packaging using a point-of-sale simulation. Second, we test the constructs uncovered in the qualitative study using an online survey with an independent sample. Thus, our study contributes to research on package design by, first, demonstrating how consumers use nuanced criteria to evaluate packaging based on different value propositions, and second, by offering a holistic understanding of how packaging is embedded in consumers' overall brand image associations. By bridging the gap between theoretical constructs of packaging design and consumer-driven insights, our findings have practical implications for brands that face the challenge to design packages that enhance consumers' experiences and build long-term brand images. This study not only enriches the theoretical landscape of packaging design by re-integrating consumer perspectives, but also provides actionable guidelines for practitioners in the FMCG sector.

2   Theoretical background

2.1   The importance of packaging for brands

Marketing theory and practice have long recognized the importance of packaging in product design, logistics, and brand communication (Rettie and Brewer, 2000; Rundh, 2016). In general, a 'package' is a container, shell, cover, or wrapper that encloses an object; thus, it may be understood as both an extrinsic and intrinsic factor of the product (Underwood, 2003). The packaging of a product serves as a primary physical interface for consumers; it determines how they can interact with the product throughout all phases of purchasing, storing, consuming, and disposing of it (Rundh, 2013). A package that is easy to handle and dispose of can provide benefit for consumers (Rundh, 2013, 2016). Therefore,

companies have to make numerous decisions regarding the design of a package and its functions along a product's entire value chain, including logistical requirements, costs, convenience, as well as communicative functions (Orth and Malkewitz, 2008).

In today's fast-moving consumption culture, brands face the challenge of attracting consumers' attention, communicating their product benefits, and building sustainable brand images, i.e., building strong brand associations in consumers' memories (Keller, 1993; Orth and Malkewitz, 2008). Numerous studies have shown that package design elements influence consumers' perceptions of products and brands and their purchase decisions, with special attention directed towards the impact of packaging on consumers at the point-of-sale (Silayoi and Speece, 2004, 2007; Rettie and Brewer, 2000). To illustrate, package design colors raise attention and elicit unconscious expectations regarding product qualities or brand characteristics based on learned associations (Spence and Velasco, 2019, 2018). Similarly, other package design features such as typeface, shapes, tactile elements, and other sensory attributes have been shown to prime consumers' expectations and brand evaluations (Velasco and Spence, 2019; Velasco *et al.*, 2018). Thus, package design is an important marketing instrument that contributes not only to brand communication but also to consumers' multisensory brand experiences (Littel and Orth, 2013).

Accordingly, package design has been established as an important component of a brand's (visual) identity (Orth and Malkewitz, 2008). The textual, visual, and material elements of package design can transport both tangible and intangible brand messages (Rundh, 2016). In a study by Solja *et al.* (2018), it was demonstrated that short brand stories on FMCG packages have a positive impact on consumers' value perception of the brand and their attitude towards it. Packaging does not only display brand symbols and imagery but also serves as a crucial brand symbol, that sets it apart from competitors (van Rompay and Fennis, 2019). Thus, packaging is important to convey product and brand attributes. Yet, creating the right design for the intended purpose is a challenge for brands, given the numerous elements and variables of package design.

2.2 *The influence of package design elements on product and brand impressions*

There is a large field of research investigating the relationship between package design elements and consumers' product and brand impressions (Favier *et al.*, 2019). Numerous studies have tested the impact of different package design variables on consumers' perceptions and behaviors, both individually and holistically (Spence and Velasco, 2018; Orth and Malkewitz, 2008). On the one hand, the majority of studies has taken an atomistic approach to examine the individual influence of single-modal cues (Chrysochou and Festila, 2019). To illustrate, visual stimuli like color (Spence and Velasco, 2019; Mai *et al.*, 2016; Gatti *et al.*, 2014), typography (Velasco and Spence, 2019), and imagery or graphic design (van Rompay and Fennis, 2019) have been shown to trigger specific expectations regarding product

quality or other characteristics like healthiness. In a similar vein, researchers have considered the influence of tactile and haptic package design elements, such as shape, texture, size, and weight (Spence, 2016, 2019; van Rompay *et al.*, 2018; Spence and Gallace, 2011; van Rompay *et al.*, 2017). Recently, research has turned to examine cross-modal correspondences. These refer to universally shared associational transfers between sensory and experiential modalities (Spence, 2016; Spence *et al.*, 2013). In the food context, for example, researchers have explored how visual cues like color or shape affect consumers' expectations of flavor (Piqueras-Fiszman *et al.*, 2012; Velasco *et al.*, 2014). On the other hand, some researchers have adopted a more holistic approach and identified higher-order package design variables based on the combination of design elements (Orth and Malkewitz, 2008), including, for example, composition and lateral positioning of design elements (van Rompay *et al.*, 2012), degree of elaborateness (Favier *et al.*, 2019), or prototypicality (Reimann *et al.*, 2010). To conclude, extant studies revealed specific connotations and multimodal correspondences for different package design elements and higher-order variables (an overview of seminal works is provided in Appendix 1). However, this clearly demonstrates how previous research has favored partial over holistic perspectives and has further neglected to lead with the consumer's point of view.

Regardless of whether research has taken an atomistic or holistic approach, most studies have adopted a sender-perspective since they tested how brands can manipulate package designs to convey their intended values propositions better (Orth and Malkewitz, 2008). This is further evidenced by the large number of experimental studies that investigated how different package design stimuli affect consumers' responses (Gatti *et al.*, 2014; Parise and Spence, 2012; Spence *et al.*, 2013). By contrast, only a few studies have explicitly considered that consumers approach packaging with their own personal needs and expectations (Silayoi and Speece, 2007; Nguyen *et al.*, 2020; Holmes and Paswan, 2012). For example, Holmes and Paswan (2012) had consumers try a new tomato product package to determine what dimensions made up their attitude towards it. However, there is a lack of research that uses an inductive approach to uncover criteria consumers choose to evaluate packaging in their brand interactions and consumer experiences. Löfgren *et al.* (2008) emphasized how packaging does not only act as a 'silent salesman' at the point-of-sale but it plays a critical role in consumers' product and consumption experiences. Beyond its immediate impact on purchase decisions, there is room to explore the roles of packaging and the value that a packaging may hold for consumers throughout their interactions across the entire consumer journey. More specifically, this raises questions of how consumers rate the functional and symbolic significance of packaging design as enhancing their overall brand experiences.

Previous literature has also asserted that packaging is an important brand attribute and a part of a consumer's associate network of brand images (Keller, 1993). More recently, researchers have demonstrated how visual and bimodal package design archetypes can convey specific brand personality factors and traits (Orth and Malkewitz, 2008; Littel and Orth, 2013). However, research is needed that begins with the consumer's perspective to explore how packaging relates to different types of brand

image associations to arrive at a more holistic understanding of the role of packaging in brand image networks. To understand the mechanisms of how packaging contributes to the formation of brand images better, it may be worthwhile to explore how consumers themselves either draw on different package design elements or rely on their holistic impressions to make inferences about the brand.

3   Overview of mixed methods research design

This methods section provides an overview of the mixed methods approach and explains why the two study designs were chosen and how they were integrated to explore how consumers view packaging's role in brand experiences and images (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Existing research has been dominated by experimental studies to assess consumer responses to packaging stimuli (e.g., Parise and Spence, 2012), rather than attempting to understand the consumers, their motivations, experiences, and their intrinsic beliefs about brands. In contrast, we chose an exploratory sequential mixed methods research design with an emphasis on qualitative methods (QUAL→quan) to prioritize consumer perspectives. Mixed methods research allowed us to integrate qualitative and quantitative data for a more holistic approach towards packaging and its role in brand image formation (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). First, we used focus groups to explore how consumers perceive brand packaging in terms of elements, benefits, and values, and what role packaging plays in their overall brand image associations. Second, we conducted a survey with an independent sample to test the constructs and insights revealed in the focus groups. We chose the German market of chocolate bars as a research context because chocolate brands are a mass-market FMCG, which also addresses emotional needs. In addition, chocolate bars are among the most favored confectionary of German consumers across gender, milieu, and income class, with sales of chocolate products amounting to 5.84 per capita in 2022 (Statista Market Insights, 2023).

4   Study 1: Focus group procedure

The first exploratory, qualitative phase of the study comprised three focus group discussions, where we explored consumers' impressions of package design and their brand images using a semi-structured interview guideline and projective techniques (Belk *et al.*, 2013; Bell *et al.*, 2019). Focus group discussions enable conversations between participants to help the moderator uncover a broader range of opinions, associations, beliefs, and motives, thus adding an enriched qualitative perspective that mirrors as closely as possible consumers' every-day experience of packaging in a research setting.

We purposefully recruited 18 German participants based on their affinity for and experiences with chocolate brands. To achieve homogeneity within and heterogeneity between groups, we divided

participants into three groups based on gender and age. One group had only young female participants (aged 20-29; n = 5), one young male participants (n = 6), and the third group included male and female participants of different ages from similar social backgrounds (n = 7).

We designed a protocol for the focus group discussions based on the insights of the literature review and the research questions, again emphasizing the exploration of consumer perspectives. The discussion was divided into two parts. First, participants were encouraged to share their opinions, beliefs, and experiences pertaining to their general chocolate consumption, brand preferences, and impressions of package design elements. Second, we conducted a point-of-sale simulation. We uncovered a separate table with 40+ chocolate bars from 16 brands and asked participants to choose one for the rest of the discussion. This led to eight brands being discussed in the focus groups. Participants were then urged to actively explore and share their impressions of the brand packaging chosen either by themselves or by others in the group.

The focus groups were conducted in a laboratory-style situation using conference rooms at a local University and a marketing agency, respectively. The primary researcher took on the role of a moderator. Participants were seated at round tables facing each other and the moderator, thus facilitating more direct interactions and address between the participants. The atmosphere was amicable, and the participants clearly enjoyed examining different chocolate packages and showed a genuine interest in the opinions of others. The discussions took place over a period of three weeks during spring 2019. All discussions were conducted in German and lasted between 60 and 80 minutes.

All focus groups were tape-recorded, transcribed, and subjected to inductive thematic analysis (Bell *et al.*, 2019) in the following way: First, the primary researcher coded the transcripts inductively using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. Second, the emerging codes, categories, and themes were repeatedly discussed in joint research meetings to ensure their appropriateness for answering the research questions. Across the three focus groups, 260 citations were coded. The final code list consisted of 3 major themes, 9 categories, and 31 lower-order codes corresponding to consumers' perceptions and evaluations of packaging elements, value dimensions, and functionalities as well as different brand image associations.

Throughout the planning, execution, and analysis of the study, we adopted several verification strategies to ensure validity and reliability of the qualitative findings (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). First, a small-scale pilot test was conducted with two participants to test the suitability of the protocol and the interview procedures. Second, the analysis process was augmented by continuous peer examination and scrutiny to ensure rigor and trustworthiness of the coding. Third, the mixed methods approach allowed for triangulation of data from different sources to increase the generalizability and applicability of the findings (to be detailed with Study 2).

5 Study 1: Focus group results

5.1 *Purchase criteria and roles of packaging from a consumer's perspective*

Our first research question explored how important packaging is for a consumer's decision compared to other purchase criteria and what roles it plays in their overall consumption experiences. Two main scenarios were discussed in which participants usually bought and ate chocolate. First, consumers ate chocolate for their personal enjoyment and comfort, sometimes to improve their moods. Second, chocolate was frequently purchased by participants as a gift for others. In these instances, participants highlighted the significance of visually appealing chocolate packaging and its growing importance as a purchase criterion. Sometimes, the chocolate was even selected primarily based on the appearance and messages conveyed by its package.

> *Sometimes the text said "Happy Birthday" or something like that. (Tom24) So, the focus is definitely on the packaging and the message behind it. (Albert24) I think that when you buy for others (…) I pay more attention to quality and also that the packaging looks good, especially if it's an alibi gift, right? (Steven30)*

In either case, the participants gave criteria that usually influence their purchase decision, namely price, brand, variety, taste, packaging, ingredients, country of production, and ecological production. The package design of chocolate bars was repeatedly mentioned as an important source of information regarding other purchase criteria. Notably, female participants deliberated their purchase decisions more thoroughly and also expressed a greater need for product information, such as sustainability aspects, than male participants did. Contrary to recent research highlighting the increasing importance of sustainability and food waste (Chrysochou and Festila, 2019), however, we found that these aspects only played a subordinate role in consumers' purchase decisions.

Building on previous literature that has explored the diverse functions that packaging serves (Rundh, 2016), our thematic analysis identified five key roles that consumers naturally ascribe to packaging and that they value the most: information, attention, protection, convenience, and experience. This further corroborated prior research highlighting how packaging is important to consumers beyond the purchase decision and throughout the entire customer journey (Löfgren *et al.*, 2008). First, package design elements were important carriers of brand- and product-related *information* and, for example, helped consumers with identifying their favored variety. Second, packaging acts as an eye-catcher and has been shown to raise consumers' *attention* at the point-of-sale. To illustrate, during the point-of-sale simulation, several participants made their choice based on the impressions of colors and the visual prominence of certain packages. Third, the participants acknowledged the importance of the package as a vessel for *protection* of the chocolate goods. Fourth, the focus group confirmed the importance of packaging as a source of *convenience,* as highlighted in previous research (Holmes and Paswan, 2012), since consumers were attuned to practical functions like ease of opening, disposal, and resealability.

What is more, our findings extended previous studies who emphasized the importance of packaging in enhancing product experiences from a more practical perspective (Holmes and Paswan, 2012; Löfgren *et al.*, 2008), as we revealed several ways in which packaging directly contributes to consumers' multisensory and affective *experiences* and how it has a direct impact on their consumption activities. To illustrate, participants described and demonstrated the multisensory experience—the sounds, the smells, the haptic feeling—of opening a bar of chocolate, and the feelings of joy and anticipation that come with it.

> *You buy it, then you break it, then you open it—for me, that is also part of eating chocolate.*
> *(Paige27)*

Furthermore, the participants also explained how the sound of opening a package sensitized them to their own consumption, and discussed how resealable packages helped them to ration their intake of chocolate.

> *And with those [merci] you always have this alarm sound, this crackling of the paper: Oh, I'm*
> *eating another one. (Robert40) Then you can ration it well and don't have to eat it all at once.*
> *You don't get a stomachache and yes; I pay attention to that. (Albert24)*

Besides affecting the overall intake, the number of layers or individual wrappings of pieces were also shown to affect the pace at which chocolate was consumed. Some participants required one-layered packaging that offered them immediate access to the chocolate and thus sped up the consumption process, while others enjoyed the prolonged consumption process offered by multi-layered packaging as it increased their anticipation and sense of excitement. Thus, our findings confirmed that packaging can actively increase cognitive and affective product involvement and enhance multisensory brand experiences, and further demonstrated how packaging can have a direct influence on behavioral consumption patterns.

The five roles outlined may appear to be well understood by current literature from a brand's perspective (Underwood *et al.*, 2001; Rundh, 2016), however, our findings have further shed light on the nuances in importance that consumers attribute to them, as well as the diverse ways in which they influence the consumption experience. While others (Löfgren *et al.*, 2008) have raised doubts about the impact of a package's communicative qualities, our findings have indeed confirmed their importance from a consumer's point of view and further illustrated how these are manifested in real-life.

5.2   *Consumers' perceptions and evaluations of packaging*

Our second research question sought to investigate the different criteria that consumers themselves apply to evaluate brand packaging. To this end, we first explored in more detail how consumers respond to

different package design elements and what kind of value packaging can provide for them to better understand their underlying needs and motives.

Package design elements

Initially, participants were provided with visual prompts displaying basic colors, shapes, and materials to consider what sort of inferences they would draw from them. The conversations revealed rich associations and established brand images (e.g., Ritter Sport's signature square shape). Our findings also highlighted the essential role of color in signaling product category standards (e.g., green for nuts as ingredients, black for dark/bittersweet chocolate). Apart from the basic connotations of color hues, we also found that the uniformity (vs. diversity) of colors used throughout a brand's packages could affect consumers' expectations regarding the flavor of the chocolate. For example, participants had more uniform, homogeneous flavor expectations because of Milka's consistent use of purple packaging with only minor variations. This phenomenon occurred within a product portfolio, such as Milka chocolate bars, or within a brand family, such as Ferrero kinder products. By contrast, a brand that uses a more diversified, highly saturated color palette—like Ritter Sport, where every flavor has its own color—was attributed a higher intensity of flavor.

> *I think the colors [of Ritter Sport] also somehow suggest diversity. When you have a Milka chocolate, you always assume it must taste the same, because it's always the same shape, the same packaging. (…) And accordingly, I would say that I would expect a more intense taste from Ritter Sport. So, a change in flavor. (Linda24)*

While previous literature has extensively researched impressions evoked by a singular package's color in terms of tone, hue, and lightness (Spence and Velasco, 2019), our findings drew attention to the fact that consumers often not only regard a single brand package in terms of its color or other design elements but are aware of multiple design variations by the same brand.

Package design value dimensions

When asked about what they value in and like about packaging, the participants brought up numerous aspects relating to basic design features, purchase motives, and previous experiences. Building upon the different roles ascribed to packaging design by consumers, our thematic analysis further mapped the diverse attributes and benefits onto five main value dimensions, namely practical, symbolic-aesthetic, emotional, social-relational, and experiential (cf. Table I). This further enhanced the understanding of the different constellations of value propositions offered by packaging design and the different roles mentioned. Notably, our analysis revealed that participants were less concerned with the ethical value that a package could provide, for example, by sustainable materials and symbols signaling Fair Trade production conditions. The participants even noticed this lack of ethical concerns themselves.

We are all not that environmentally conscious, right? (ironically) Plastic is, of course, a very, very big problem. [laughter] (Linda24)

Instead, the participants primarily discussed the importance of practical and symbolic benefits of a package pertaining to functionalities in terms of opening, protection, and resealability as well as the visual appearance and the different symbols that communicate product and brand information. These benefits were often related to the practical or symbolic-aesthetic values of package design elements, which were commonly studied in the literature (Spence and Velasco, 2019; Holmes and Paswan, 2012). What is more, our thematic analysis extended these value dimensions by highlighting the emotional, social, and experiential values that a package can provide for consumers. To illustrate, packaging is a source of social-relational value, not only in terms of gift-giving and status symbols, but also as an opportunity for joint consumption. Our analysis found that participants associated chocolate with positive emotions such as nostalgia, comfort, motivation, and joy. The packaging of the chocolate also held emotional value for various participants. Finally, as noted above, packaging was an important source of experiential value by providing a multisensory experience as well as determining the intake and pace of chocolate consumption. Thus, it can be concluded that our findings enrich existing literature (Spence and Velasco, 2019; Holmes and Paswan, 2012) by accentuating the importance of additional value dimensions from a consumer's point of view. In particular, our findings highlighted social and relational aspects associated with packaging that have mostly been overlooked in previous studies.

Insert Table I here

Consumers' practical and symbolic criteria to evaluate packaging

From the various package design elements, benefits, and corresponding values discussed, our thematic analysis extracted the most important factors, namely twelve main criteria, which were commonly used by the participants to evaluate the packaging of chocolate bars. At this exploratory stage, the criteria were broadly divided into practical and symbolic aspects. These twelve criteria were later used as items in the quantitative study.

Regarding the functionalities of packaging, the participants expressed appreciation for solid packages that protected the product (*product protection*). In particular, the use of plastic materials was seen as better suited to prevent the chocolate from melting. The participants also valued convenience, for instance, by requesting *resealability*. Participants emphasized that a resealable package is more pleasant and more secure in storing and transporting chocolate products. Likewise, the *handling* and ease of opening the package was important for hygiene and spontaneous consumption. Yet, there were mixed opinions about *individual packaging*—some thought it was convenient for portioning and sharing, whereas others were concerned about losing pieces or creating extra waste.

Regarding the symbolics of packaging, the participants requested that packaging clearly signals the flavor variety (*variety recognition*). Similarly, the participants expressed the need for having a clearly recognizable and familiar brand (*brand recognition*). Another important symbolic aspect of packaging was the use of *colors,* as some participants preferred packages with their favorite colors. In some instances, this was further related to the packaging and branding being recognized from afar (*eye-catcher*) and internalized brand-variety-color associations. With respect to the *depth of information* provided about the ingredients, only a few participants mentioned that they pay attention to the ingredients and nutritional value. This was mostly motivated by checking for intolerances, but the participants held no illusions about the healthiness of chocolate. The price was also an important information for some participants who were seeking good deals on their favorite brands.

> *The only information you look at on the packaging is the brand and the variety. (Ryan26) At most the expiration date, but nothing more. (John21) That there is a brand on it that you know. So, I think I would rather go for that than one that I might not necessarily know. (Sarah36) I took this one because it caught my eye. (Albert24)*

The aesthetic appeal (*attractive design*) of a package was also important to the participants, who wanted their packages to be aesthetically pleasing and looking appetizing, which related to associations of quality. Likewise, the design of the package was important to determine its *suitability as a gift*. The participants highlighted that both packaging and chocolate should match the respective atmosphere and that the package should signal higher quality, for example, through personalized messages or unusual shapes. Finally, the participants also appreciated the *haptic impression*, for example, of a plastic package, during opening a package as it increases anticipation and excitement.

> *Just that it looks cool, and especially so, so appetizing. (Kayla24) When you want to give your loved ones a little present like this, you somehow make sure that it fits in with the atmosphere or, I don't know, sweetens the day a bit. (Albert24) [About plastic packaging] But actually this awesome feeling that you're about to eat chocolate, right? (…) It's just this anticipation, that you just know (…) I don't think any other material could give me that feeling. (Linda24)*

To conclude, our findings were consistent with previous literature as so far as they demonstrated the importance of practical aspects like ease of handling, especially during consumption stages (Holmes and Paswan, 2012; Löfgren *et al.*, 2008). Other than these studies, however, our findings suggested the continuous importance of qualitative or symbolic qualities of a packaging beyond the purchase, as the visual and haptic attractiveness of a packaging was shown to enhance both personal and social consumption experiences. This also reinforced the social value provided by brand packaging and its importance in the eyes of consumers.

5.3   Brand image and personality impressions evoked by packaging

Our third research question explored how packaging relates to consumers' overall brand images. Drawing on associative network theory in branding theory and research (Keller, 1993), our analysis mapped out the relationships between packaging as a mental node in memory that activated other brand image and personality impressions. Packaging was often at the heart of consumers' images and recognized as an essential brand element by participants. More specifically, we discovered three major clusters of brand associations pertaining to packaging itself, relating packaging to product attributes, and the brand itself. In addition, we found strong relationships between packaging and consumers' brand personality perceptions. Figure 1 illustrates the breadth and depth of the brand associations discussed in the focus groups.

Insert Figure 1 here

Brand associations related to packaging itself

The participants noticed the criteria identified above to compare the brand packages at hand, but our analysis also identified additional attributes pertaining to their perceptions of packaging as a brand element, including aesthetic appeal, design, uniqueness, haptics, surface materials, variety, quality of the package itself, practicability, text elements and imagery, and the idea of prototypicality. Apart from variety and brand recognition, the participants directed their attention to the specific visual appearances of the packages, repeatedly talking about them being pretty, classy, elegant, looking premium, as well as stupid, old-fashioned, and cheap. Yet, the participants also criticized packages for not being clearly recognizable or they noted discrepancies between their existing brand images and the packages presented.

> *[About Lindt] Well, I think the name is indeed quality, but I think the packaging doesn't show that. (...)... it doesn't show what you actually think of the brand in general. Of course, it's quality, but I don't think it looks aesthetically pleasing or of high quality. (Paige27)*

Moreover, the participants drew comparisons between brands based on the perceived uniqueness or prototypicality of their packaging. In particular, colors and shapes were the main package design elements used to assess how unique or usual a brand is. Some participants pointed to Ritter Sport's signature square shape as standing out among the typically rectangular packages of the other brands. The simplicity of the design was described as a more modern approach, also leading to more "thick" chocolate bars. Yet, it is also noteworthy that this once unusual shape has evolved to a signal of a new sort of prototypical standard in consumers' minds because the brand's recognition value has been familiar for a long time.

I would say Ritter Sport is the most unusual. (Lucy21) Yes, and Ritter Sport, I think it's a bit more dynamic, because it's just so small and handy in contrast to the others. (Frank25) I think the two [Milka and Ritter Sport] are standard for me. (Harry24)

Brand associations related to packaging and product attributes

Our findings highlighted the role of packaging as a carrier of product-related information (Spence, 2016). With chocolate bars, the perceptions of packaging and product were closely intertwined, with quality, price, and variety (i.e., taste) being the most important attributes. The packages at hand conveyed information that primed consumers' expectations regarding the product's taste, texture or thickness, quality, and price. For instance, package design elements like color and imagery were used to make inferences about the ingredients and corresponding flavors.

Particularly high milk proportion. Yes, because of the cow and that's the slogan, I'll say, that I now associate with Milka. Lots of milk. (Josephine26)

Building on previous studies that emphasized the importance of haptic cues (Littel and Orth, 2013), we found that participants drew strong connections between the materials and texture of a package and their estimation of the price for a bar of chocolate. For instance, a brand like Milka with a glossy plastic wrap was consistently rated as very low-priced. By contrast, a cardboard packaging from Lindt with high gloss and embossing was used to confirm prior images of the brand being upper-class and expensive. Interestingly, the participants were surprised by the actual price (i.e., lower than expected) as printed on the package. However, this discovery did not divert them from their overall brand images. This showed how consumers rely on brand-congruent packaging as signals of consistency. Yet, it also demonstrated how consumers might choose to focus selectively on certain elements of package design to construct their brand image or to confirm their previous attitudes. This observation was of particular interest as it showed how packaging could outweigh other brand image associations.

[About Milka] It's so soft, it's so slippery. (Robert40) [About Milka] I don't know, but I would say from the feel of it, this is the cheapest chocolate of all. (Bernd50) With Lindt chocolate, you would always say that it's something of higher quality. Regardless of the fact that you can see the price [here], but in my mind, I would always say that it's somehow more of a luxury chocolate. (Bernd50)

Brand associations related to packaging and the brand

Our findings further demonstrated how packaging evokes a number of associations pertaining to the overall brand images of consumers, as they recollected previous brand experiences and communications. Moreover, the participants expressed strong feelings of brand attachment and even brand love, driven

by the direct confrontation with the packages. In some instances, their brand relationships were founded in early childhood experiences and their socialization, for example, as they adopted brand preferences from their parents.

Another important set of brand associations that surfaced throughout the discussions refers to consumers' recollections of brand advertising and other brand communications. The participants actively pointed to imagery and symbols displayed on the packages, such as claims, brand mascots, testimonials, or colors, to recall various brand communications and advertising, including commercials, jingles, out-of-home advertising, sponsorships, and flagship stores. This showed how consumers use packaging in combination with advertising to substantiate their personal brand attachment and their impressions of brand values.

> *With Lindt, I don't know, I always have to think of that old commercial where they show how the chocolate is made, with that old guy... (Frank25) Soooo, I decided on Yogurette, (...) because it looks ultra-cool. Yes, and it already looks delicious with the strawberries and the most important thing is: there is great advertising, and it is colorful. (Kayla24)*

Brand personality impressions

By utilizing projective techniques in focus groups, we gained insights into how participants perceive the personality of a brand. Our findings supported previous studies that have shown how consumers draw inferences about a brand's personality from its packaging (Orth and Malkewitz, 2008; Aaker, 1997). Similar to qualitative research using the brand-as-a-person metaphor, our analysis identified several human characteristics attributed to brands, going beyond personality traits (Arora and Stoner, 2009). Extending previous research connecting package design types to personality traits (Orth and Malkewitz, 2008), we found packages can prompt consumers to visualize the brand as a person in terms of age, gender, and social roles. To illustrate, participants described merci as a brand personifying a loving mother ("Who cares, who gives gifts."), while Ritter Sport was seen as a younger, dynamic friend and Lindt was stereotyped as an elderly professional. The importance of relational imagery was further evident in how participants sometimes deviated from the prompt to imagine the brand as a human. Instead, they used relational metaphors of their own accord to visualize their brand impressions. For example, Milka's brand personality was likened to the relationship between a grandfather and a grandchild. In some instances, participants expressed intense feelings of nostalgia, warmth, familiarity, and emotionality in relation to their favorite brand; even identifying themselves with the brand and seeing their lives reflected in the brand's packaging. Hence, findings revealed how brand packaging can even strengthen self-brand connections.

> *[Speaking to Robert] In one bar of chocolate, there are childhood memories, current holiday destinations, taste variance - actually, you could have become a brand ambassador for Milka.*

> *(Bernd50) - Exactly. Milka is childhood memory for me. I see myself in Milka. [laughter] I see myself in Milka, as I was as a child... (Robert40) And I just think that when you have moments where you said: Okay, I have to, somehow, I have to "feel young" again...then you would reach for kinder Schokolade. (Frank25)*

Our analysis further illuminated different mechanisms of how packaging influences consumers' perceptions of a brand's personality and other human-like qualities. On the one hand, consumers directly inferred brand personality impressions from specific package design elements, such as type font, colors, price, and especially brand imagery and symbols. On the other hand, packaging as a whole indirectly contributed to brand personality, as it activated memories of other sources of brand personality, such as advertising motifs or typical user imagery. Table II demonstrates the package design elements employed by participants to support their brand personality perceptions.

Insert Table II here

To summarize our qualitative analysis of consumers' brand image associations, we identified a set of nine competitive aspects that were most important to the consumers throughout their interactions with the brands. These included product-related aspects like price, quality, and taste, brand-related aspects such as recognition value, and aspects related to the package itself as a brand medium, such as aesthetic appeal, handling, information, sustainability, and convenience.

6   Study 2: Survey procedure

The second explanatory, quantitative phase used an online survey to extend the insights of the qualitative study. Based on the main themes uncovered in the focus group discussions, we designed a self-administered questionnaire to test whether the most important attributes regarding both packaging and brand images would be confirmed with a larger independent sample.

Through a snowball sampling approach, we collected data from an independent sample of German consumers of chocolate bars. The questionnaire was set up with an online survey tool and distributed via social and business networks for a three-week period during the summer of 2019. In total, we obtained 411 questionnaires as a response with 360 completed, whereby most of the respondents were female (65%) and aged between 20 and 29 years (54.5%). This rather young population may have resulted from the snowball sampling approach, yet it fit with the fact that young consumers are frequent buyers of chocolate bars in Germany.

The structured, closed questionnaire was designed using the main constructs discovered in the focus groups and questions were made up of items derived from the literature review and the focus group

discussions (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The questionnaire first posed questions relating to participants' purchase and consumption behavior and asked them to rate the importance of the twelve packaging criteria that were highlighted in the qualitative study. Items were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale. The point-of-sale simulation was modified to accommodate the format of the online survey as participants were exposed to photographs displaying the packages of five brands, Milka, Ritter Sport, Lindt, merci, and kinder Schokolade, as they were discussed in two out of three focus groups. In the following, the participants were asked to rate them by comparison using brand image dimensions, again reflecting the major themes and categories uncovered by the focus groups (e.g., "Which of the five packages suggests the highest quality?"). Finally, participants were asked to select one of the five brands and rate it on selected brand-as-a-person items using a bipolar five-point scale.

Our statistical analysis relied on univariate and multivariate analysis techniques, using contingency analysis to make comparisons between male and female participants, and exploratory factor analysis to identify underlying higher-order factors. To ensure internal reliability of the measures that were constructed based on the qualitative findings, we used Cronbach's alpha as a widely accepted test (Bell *et al.*, 2019). In advance of the study, a pilot test was conducted with ten participants to account for the time frame, clarity, and comprehensibility of the questionnaire.

7   Study 2: Survey results

7.1   *Rating packaging together with other purchase criteria*

To answer our first research question, the quantitative study followed up the qualitative findings by testing how important packaging was for consumers compared to the other seven purchase criteria mentioned in the focus groups using a five-point Likert scale (cf. section 5.1). The average scores of the purchase criteria revealed that taste (M = 4.8; SD = 0.44; scale ranged from 1 = "completely irrelevant" to 5 = "very important"), variety (M = 4.46; SD = 0.77), and brand (M = 3.31; SD = 1.2) were the most highly rated and accordingly most important factors in the purchase decision from a consumer's perspective. By contrast, ingredients (M = 3.04; SD = 1.29) and price (M = 2.93; SD = 1.06) were deemed less important and packaging (M = 2.53; SD = 1.03) was rated among the least important criteria together with ecological production (M = 2.63; SD = 1.27) and country of production (M = 2.41; SD = 1.24). Contingency analyses using chi-square independence tests (significance level α = 0.05; using contingency coefficient and Cramér's V) revealed that similar ratings between male and female participants, apart from the fact that female participants attached higher importance of both product origin and ecological production, thus placing at least relatively greater importance on sustainability, what is in line with the findings of the focus groups. Taken together, while our quantitative findings showed that consumers mostly do not deem packaging itself as decisive in their purchase decisions, the

qualitative findings have revealed how consumers typically rely on packaging to infer the information regarding their most influential factors.

7.2   Testing the importance of consumers' practical and symbolic packaging criteria

To answer our second research question, we similarly asked respondents to rate the importance of the twelve criteria that were identified as most essential to consumers' evaluation of packaging in the qualitative study, again using a five-point Likert scale. Notably, the 12-item scale was confirmed as a reliable measurement instrument with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.77. The resulting rating (cf. Table III) confirmed the immense importance of variety recognition as the most important symbolic aspect and key information carried by packaging, similar to the requests of the focus group participants (cf. section 5.2). Our quantitative findings further supported the importance of practical aspects, especially product protection and handling, which reflected the protective and convenient functions that packaging serves for consumers (Löfgren *et al.*, 2008). Finally, our contingency analyses also confirmed that these results were largely the same across male and female participants, with the exception that female participants valued information depth higher than males, again affirming the observations of the focus groups.

Insert Table III here

Besides the rating scale, participants could add attributes they considered important in an open-ended question. The survey received open-ended responses that showed a desire for eco-friendly packaging with less waste. Examples included a general demand for ecological packaging ("Environmentally friendly packaging!"; "Sustainability") or specific requests for more eco-friendly materials ("Biodegradable packaging"; "Paper packaging"; "Please do not use aluminum foil"). These answers were in stark contrast to the focus group discussions, where environmental friendliness only played a subordinate role or was even mocked.

Extending the findings of the qualitative study, our aim was to test if there were any underlying motivational factors that affected how consumers evaluate brand packaging. We conducted an exploratory factor analysis using principal component analysis with Varimax rotation (Holmes and Paswan, 2012). The results revealed a four-factor solution, which accounted for an accumulated explained variance of 63.5% (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin criterion value 0.777, significance of $p = 0.0001$). The first factor was named "symbolics/aesthetics" because visual and haptic aspects loaded highly onto it (eigenvalue: 3.6; explained variance: 29.9%). The second factor was labelled "practicability" (eigenvalue: 1.8; explained variance: 14.9%) because it comprised attributes relating to the functional and practical aspects of a package. The remaining two factors were named "shareability" (eigenvalue:

1.2; explained variance: 10%) and "informative value" (eigenvalue: 1.1; explained variance: 8.9%). Figure 2 shows the four factors and the respective items loading onto them.

Insert Figure 2 here

Therefore, our quantitative findings corroborated the qualitative results as so far as the two major factors corresponded to the distinction between practical and symbolic aspects of packaging that were of most value to consumers. Yet, the results of the factor analysis further extended this typology as they highlighted two additional, albeit minor, factors that play a role in consumers' evaluation of packaging. The general "informative value" was mostly characterized by a high information depth and a negative relation with eye-catching qualities, hence, it connects more strongly to the practical and cognitive value provided by packaging. Interestingly, our findings revealed how aesthetics of packaging were not only contingent upon visual attributes like colors or brand symbols but also encompassed non-visual attributes like the haptic impression. Notably, the "shareability" factor provided additional evidence for how packaging can provide social or relational value to consumers (cf. Table I), either by serving as a representative gift or by inspiring joint consumption. To conclude, the integration of qualitative and quantitative findings answered the second research question by highlighting how packaging provides practical, symbolic, and social value to consumers, which form the basis for their evaluation criteria.

7.3   Comparing brand image and brand personality profiles

The final part of our questionnaire reflected our third research question and used photographs of five brand packages (front, back) as visual prompts to mirror the point-of-sale simulation of the focus groups. The following brand image comparison was based on the nine image dimensions identified in the focus group, whereby we asked participants to select one of the five brands as strongest for each dimension (e.g., "Which of the five packages suggests the highest quality?"). Compared to the assessments of the focus group participants, our quantitative findings confirmed strong relationships between packaging and brand images regarding brand recognition value (highest for Milka), quality (highest for Lindt), price (highest for Lindt), handling (highest for kinder Schokolade), and ease of opening (highest for Ritter Sport) (a full rating is provided in Appendix 2). However, our analysis revealed slight differences between the two studies as the impressions of varieties, eco-friendliness, and information depth were more balanced than in the focus groups (cf. section 5.3). Another notable difference was found for the notion of attractiveness (visual appeal), as the survey participants demonstrated much more favorable evaluations of the packages of Lindt, Milka, and Ritter Sport if compared to the focus group participants.

In addition, we asked survey participants to select one of the five brands and rate it on selected brand-as-a-person items using a bipolar scale five-point scale (cf. Figure 3). Our quantitative findings confirmed that brand packaging elicited strong impressions regarding brand gender and age (cf. section 5.3). To illustrate, the brand merci was deemed more female than all the other brands who were attributed a male brand gender. Likewise, the quantitative findings replicated the focus group results as they demonstrated how a brand like kinder Schokolade was perceived as young, personal, and highly emotional, whereas a brand like Lindt was seen as old, distant, and more rational. Therefore, our study confirmed that packaging conveys recognizable brand images and personality attributes, as the quantitative findings regarding brand age, gender, and traits were in accordance with the focus group discussions. Drawing on associative network theory, our study highlighted the special role of packaging for the formation of brand personality association from a consumer's viewpoint.

Insert Figure 3 here

8　General discussion and conclusion

This exploratory sequential mixed methods study has illuminated consumers' perspectives on how packaging plays a role in their consumption experience and how it contributes to the formation of brand images using the example of chocolate bars. Through an in-depth exploration using focus group discussions, we first unpacked consumers' perceptions and evaluations of brand packaging, with special attention being given to how consumers themselves interpret and rank these roles, values, and criteria. Furthermore, we have shed light on diverse ways of how packaging is embedded in consumers' brand image networks and how it relates to other brand associations like product attributes, the brand itself, and brand personality impressions. To account for the natural limitations of a qualitative inquiry, we used the themes and categories to develop a quantitative research instrument, a self-administered questionnaire, testing whether the qualitative themes would be generalizable to a larger sample. The subsequent independent survey, first, confirmed the importance and ranking of twelve packaging criteria derived from the focus groups and further identified four motivational factors underpinning them. Hence, the quantitative study underscored themes of the qualitative study emphasizing the functional, symbolical, and also social value that brand packaging holds for consumers. Second, the quantitative results further strengthened the qualitative insights as the survey results demonstrated how packaging both elicits and grounds various brand image and brand personality associations. To conclude, our research has provided a more holistic understanding of the multifaceted role of packaging in shaping consumer experiences at and beyond the point-of-sale. By adopting a consumer-centric perspective through a mixed methods approach, we were able to further show how packaging supports brand

building processes as it conveys values desired by consumers (e.g., quality, attractiveness, shareability) and influences various brand image and personality dimensions.

8.1 *Theoretical implications*

The preceding studies have explored the role of packaging in consumption experiences and brand images from a consumer's point of view. Through a mixed methods design, we have provided an in-depth analysis of how consumers perceive and evaluate packaging, and how packaging relates to their overall brand image formation. Our research contributes to literature on packaging and branding in three main ways.

First, we have elucidated a comprehensive set of roles (information, attention, protection, convenience, experience) that packaging plays for consumers throughout their entire customer journey. Moving beyond existing literature that identified comparable roles from a brand perspective (Underwood *et al.*, 2001; Rundh, 2016), our research contributes to the field by revealing the varying levels of significance consumers themselves assign to these roles. Our research offers a deeper understanding, particularly of the experiential and social dimensions of packaging, which have been underexplored. Regarding consumers' purchase decisions, both of our studies affirm the essential function of packaging as a carrier of product- and brand-related information and symbols (Silayoi and Speece, 2004). Moreover, our findings extend the focus of previous research, which has emphasized the convenience of packaging for storage and consumption (Holmes and Paswan, 2012), by delineating how packaging also enhances consumers' affective experiences and shapes their consumption patterns more directly.

Second, our study makes a significant theoretical contribution to the growing body of research on packaging's influence on product and brand impressions by adopting an inductive, consumer-centered approach–a perspective rarely employed in existing literature (Nguyen *et al.*, 2020). Unlike previous research that investigated the impact of packaging from a sender-perspective (Spence and Velasco, 2018), we shifted the focus to the consumer's viewpoint, uncovering a set of practical and symbolic criteria that consumers themselves prioritize when evaluating packaging. This shift marks an important first step towards understanding the values consumers actively assign to packaging. More specifically, our qualitative study has developed a typology of five value dimensions–practical, symbolic, social, emotional, and experiential–that a package can provide for consumers. The subsequent quantitative study further underscored the importance of the practical, symbolic, and social values as the primary factors driving consumers' packaging evaluations. This expanded, more nuanced framework challenges and extends existing models that prioritized technical attributes over communicative qualities in packaging (Löfgren *et al.*, 2008), by introducing value dimensions that go beyond practical usage to highlight the perpetual significance of symbolic meaning, as well as the often-overlooked social and relational aspects of packaging.

Third, our study offers a holistic exploration of how packaging is embedded in consumers' brand images. By leveraging associative network theory (Keller, 1993), we extent knowledge pertaining to the role of packaging in building brand images, specifically by identifying how various package elements influence a wide array of brand associations, ranging from packaging benefits and product attributes to more elaborate brand images. In addition, we demonstrate how specific package design elements lead consumers to personify a brand along dimensions such as age, gender, and traits, building upon prior research that suggested consumers infer brand personality from package design (Orth and Malkewitz, 2008; Littel and Orth, 2013). In doing so, our findings highlight the theoretical significance of packaging not just as a functional or aesthetic element, but as an essential part of the broader framework of brand identity formation.

In conclusion, these theoretical contributions of our study, namely the nuanced view of consumer perspectives, the inductive approach's novelty in prioritizing the consumer's viewpoint, and the integration of associative network theory to understand brand image associations through packaging have substantial implications for future research and practice. Our research suggests new directions for examining the consumer-centric value of packaging and provides a framework for exploring the interplay between packaging design and brand image formation. Future studies could build on our typology of packaging values to investigate how these dimensions interact with other aspects of consumer behavior and brand relationships. Additionally, our findings advocate for a more integrated approach to packaging design, considering its functional, symbolic, and social roles in consumer experience. By advancing the theoretical discourse on packaging's multifaceted role in consumer-brand interactions, our research provides a foundation for further exploration of packaging as a critical element in consumption and brand experiences.

8.2   *Managerial implications*

Our findings also have significant managerial implications. Using our insights on the different roles that packaging has for consumers and our typology of values, brand managers and package designers can, first, predict how consumers may interact with their packaging beyond the point-of-sale and how it could shape their consumption activities as well. By understanding and applying the functional and symbolic criteria identified in our study, together with their underlying motives, brand managers can determine the most demanding requirements of consumers as well as how packaging design may best address them. This enables opportunities for brand managers to enhance consumption experiences, brand interactions, and brand image formation. For instance, by focusing on practicability of packaging, incorporating features like resealable closures, protective layers of material, and cues for easy handling, brands can meet consumers' practical needs and preferences, thereby increasing the likelihood of repeat purchases. Furthermore, the symbolic value of packaging should not be underestimated. Notably, our integrated findings reinforced how aesthetics of packaging are determined not only by visual attributes but also by

non-visual attributes like haptic impression. We suggest that brand managers leverage this advantage by using packaging to communicate brand personality meanings as well as further image attributions through a multi-sensorial approach. One novel finding of this study is the attention drawn to the social value that packaging design holds for consumers, which is best captured through shareability features. This finding encourages brand managers to consider how their packaging design may impact individual and communal consumption activities and to utilize design features like resealable closures and individual wrappings not just for matters of convenience but also to prompt shared brand experiences. Finally, by mapping out the overarching brand image associations and different brand-as-a-person attributes that are evoked by packaging, we encourage brand managers to monitor how packaging becomes established as a brand medium and what attributes of a packaging consumers use most commonly to make inferences about the brand's image and personality.

8.3   Limitations and future research

The mixed methods approach has contributed to a more holistic understanding and added more depth to the subjective aspects of packaging than would have been possible with a single qualitative or quantitative study, thus it heightened reliability and accuracy of the findings. Yet, since we sought to provide an in-depth exploration of consumers' perspectives on the role of packaging, we limited our study to one product category from the FMCG sector and likewise, a limited number of brands. Thus, some criteria and their assigned importance may have been category specific, such as the importance of variety recognition. Because of our consumer-first approach, the brands chosen by the participants and thus investigated were all well-known brands with strong brand images. We suggest that future research adopts a consumer-first approach to explore how consumers perceive and evaluate packaging in other product categories, potentially comparing established and newer brands. Likewise, future research could include other samples from different age groups. Nevertheless, future research may use the main value dimensions and packaging criteria, and the four factors identified in our study for further testing their generalizability. Given that the focus of our study was on how packaging contributes to building brand images, we limited our quantitative questionnaire to assessing the most relevant constructs and items pertaining to our research questions. However, our focus group study has provided additional insights that may be taken further in future research. For example, it has been shown how color usage across brand packages can homogenize flavor expectations.

8.4   Concluding remarks

In sum, our mixed methods study has provided an initial look at the multifaceted role of packaging in shaping consumer experiences and influencing brand image formation. Through focus groups and a subsequent survey, we highlighted the importance of packaging in conveying functional, symbolic, and

social values, influencing consumer experiences and brand associations. Considering consumer perspectives, our findings suggest that brands should design packaging that corresponds with these value propositions we have described and ensure that brand identity and personality are encoded to strengthen brand images and brand relationships. We hope this study inspires others to continue exploring the dynamics between packaging and branding across different product categories and cultural contexts while still taking a consumer-centric perspective.

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Table I: Roles of packaging, benefits and value dimensions (Source: Authors own work)

Value dimension	Roles of packaging	Packaging benefits	Illustrative quotes
Practical/ functional	• Protection • Convenience • Experience	• Ease of opening, handling • Resistance and robustness • Information depth • Cleanness • Resealability • Multiple layers	"That it is practical (…). There are now packages that have such adhesive strips on them, which you fold up and put the adhesive strip on and then it's closed." (Robert40)
Symbolic/ aesthetic	• Attention • Information	• Visual appearance (appeal) • Symbols of flavor, ingredients • Familiarity and recognition • Brand symbols • (Favorite) colors	"But I think the packaging looks really classy somehow. Even if it only costs 50 cents, I don't know." (Linda24) "Yes, the package looks good, so noble, and also stands for quality." (Felix25) "I'm looking for the purple color, I'm looking for the recognition value, for the packaging of Milka, yes." (Robert40) "Yes, I unconsciously pick my favorite colors, I think, when I choose a bar of chocolate." (Josephine26)
Emotional	• Experience	• Feelings of nostalgia, childhood memories • Rewarding and comforting • Feelings of joy	"(…) exactly kinder Schokolade reminds me of childhood, and I just really like it." (Lucy21)
Social/ relational	• Convenience • Experience • Information	• Possibility to share the chocolate • Suitability for gift-giving and representativity • Self-expression in social groups	"So, the focus is definitely on the packaging and the message behind it. You don't want to gift anything cheap." (Albert24)
Experiential/ sensory	• Experience • Convenience • Protection	• Multisensory experience • Sense of anticipation and excitement • Unboxing and opening, accelerated, or decelerated	"You buy it, then you break it, then you open it – for me, that is also part of eating chocolate." (Paige27)

Table II: Brand personality inferences drawn from package design elements (Source: Authors own work)

Package design elements	Illustrative quotes	Brand-as-a-person attributes
Color(s)	"Everything is so colorful. (…) That's why it's so colorful and crazy." (Kayla24 about Ritter Sport) "I would also associate Milka more with a woman than with a man. I don't know if it's the color or the name, but it's the type somehow." (John21)	**Personality traits** (colorful, open, crazy) **Brand gender** (male, female)
Imagery	"The grandpa with the white hat and the cocoa pot in his hand." (Melanie29 about Lindt) "Yes, but also Alps and cows, you immediately have the Austrian Alpine herdsman in your head. For me, Milka is sitting there with a felt hat, he has a beard, the beard is curly and already grey." (Bernd50) "Yes, it was a giant swing over the whole city. She swung over the whole city and ate yogurt. In the advertisements, but it's really old." (Mary20 about Yogurette)	**Brand age** (old) **Brand gender** (male, female) **Social/family roles** (grandfather, job)
Type font	"I agree, Lindt is a man for me (…), definitely someone who is smartly dressed. (…) so this may be the font up here. Yes. That might be the gold. That is someone who is simply more smartly dressed. Someone who is well-dressed, who doesn't sit there in jeans, but in a suit." (Robert40) "Yes, I see a woman there too, if only because of the font, somehow" (Josephine26 about merci)	**Brand gender** (male, female) **Brand appearance** (stylish, fashionable)
Symbols	"(…) maybe it's because of the name, but... That's why I would rather take the younger, male one who is a friend or a neighbor or a likeable, nice guy." (Bernd50 about Ritter Sport) "Yes, also because of the little heart, of course, a little red heart is feminine, that's just the way it is." (Bernd50 about merci) "Yeah. I definitely see the Aladdin, with his spices and stuff..." (Linda24 about Sarotti)	**Personality traits** (nice, likeable) **Brand gender** (male, female) **Social/family roles** (friend, neighbor)

Table III: Rating of packaging criteria by importance (Scale ranged from 1 = "completely irrelevant" to 5 = "very important") (Source: Authors own work)

| #	Criteria	n	M	SD
1	Variety recognition	368	4.02	1.011
2	Product protection	366	3.51	1.236
3	Handling	369	3.44	1.250
4	Attractive design	369	3.23	1.140
5	Brand recognition value	370	3.14	1.224
6	Resealability	369	3.07	1.347
6	Information depth	368	3.07	1.303
8	Haptic impression	368	2.85	1.098
9	Eye-catcher	369	2.71	1.177
10	Colors	368	2.57	1.117
11	Gift suitability	369	2.41	1.215
12	Individually packaged pieces	369	1.96	1.143
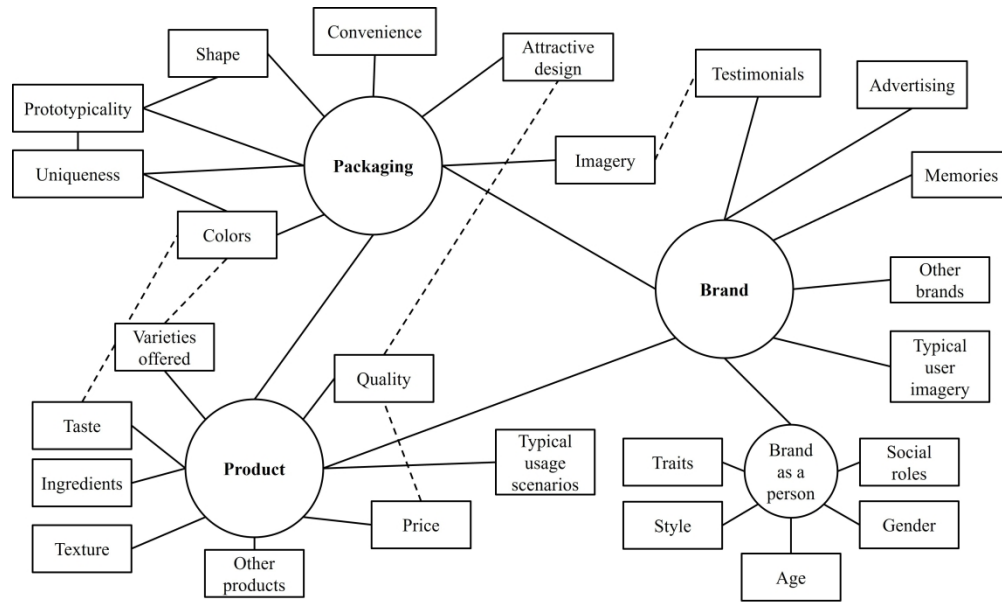
Figure 1: Associative network model of participants' brand associations activated by point-of-sale simulation, adapted from Keller (1993) (Source: Authors own work)

312x186mm (330 x 330 DPI)
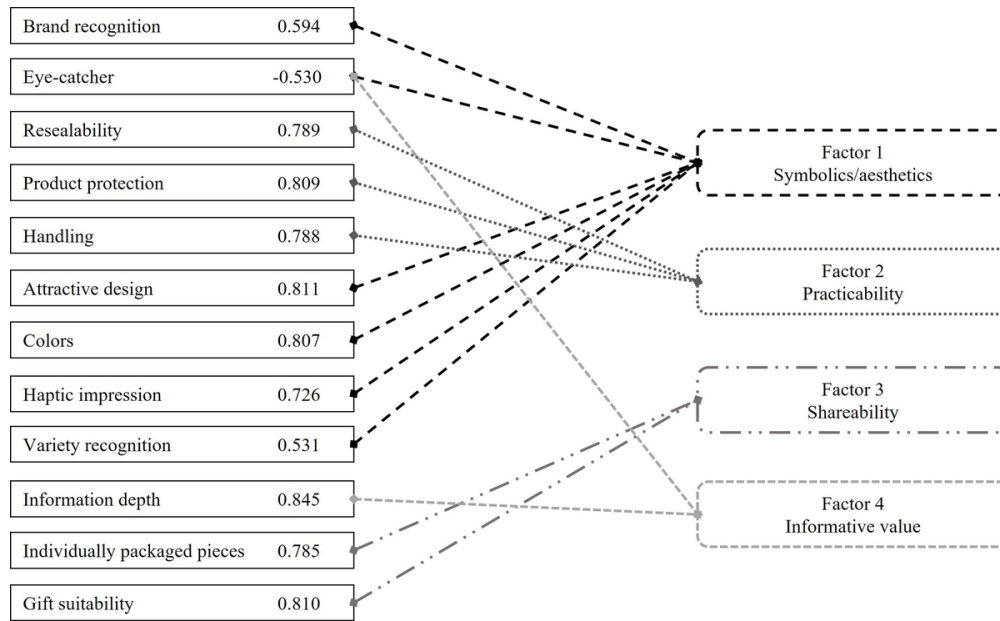
Figure 2: Four factors and loadings (Source: Authors own work)
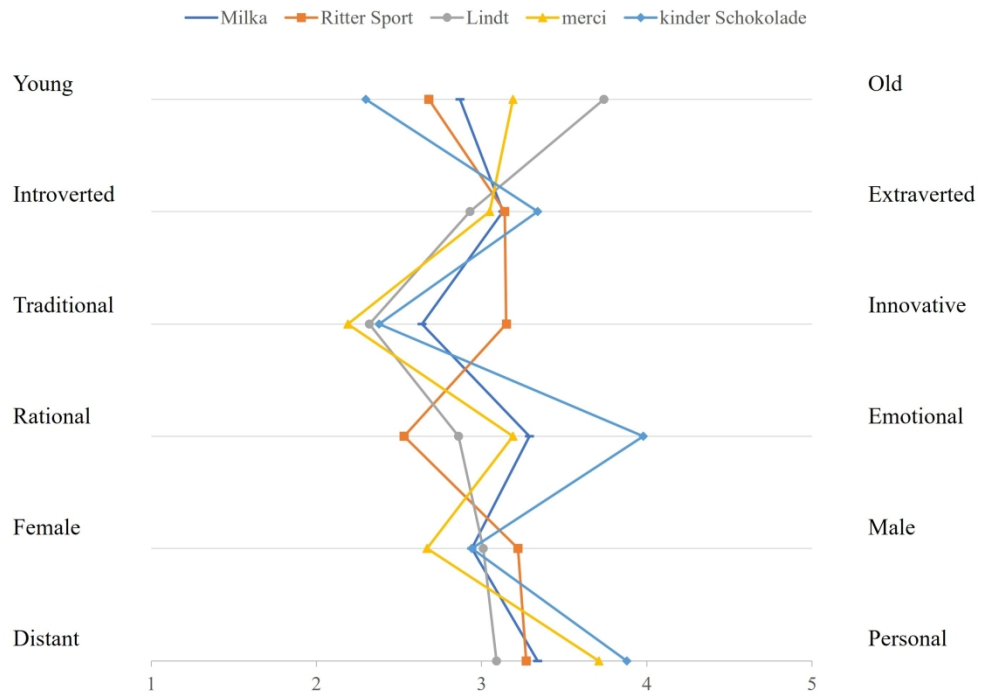
203x125mm (150 x 150 DPI)

Figure 3: Brand personality profiles (Source: Authors own work)

214x151mm (330 x 330 DPI)

Appendix 1: Research on package design elements and higher-order variables (Source: Authors own work)

Element	Stimuli	Connotations	References
Color lightness	Light	Healthiness, bad taste, weak, tender, soft, faithful, calm, slow, deliberate	Mai *et al.*, 2016
	Dark	Lower healthiness, powerful, hard, strong, active, agitated, lively, fast	
Color saturation	High	Vividness, purity, less / low healthiness, higher hedonic expectations, high intensity in flavour or fragrance, excitement, arousal	Tijssen *et al.*, 2017; Becker *et al.*, 2011; Gatti *et al.*, 2014; Mead and Richerson, 2018
	Low	Health effect, less intensity in terms of flavour or fragrance	
Shape / contour	Angular	Powerful, hard, strong, active, agitated, lively, fast, sour, bitter, or salty in taste, potent; associated with high-pitched sounds (sound symbolism)	van Rompay *et al.*, 2017; Spence and Gallace, 2011; Velasco et al., 2014
	Round	Tender, soft, faithful, passive, weak, calm, slow, femininity, sweet in taste; associated with softer sounds (sound symbolism)	
Surface patterns	Smooth	Female, mild, less intense, higher sweetness in taste	van Rompay *et al.*, 2018
	Angular / sharp	More intense, bitterness in taste	
	Glossy	Light, attractive, higher quality	Briand Decré and Cloonan, 2019
	Matte	Rough, thick	
Alignment/ location	Right	Preference for textual elements, heavy	Rettie and Brewer, 2000; Deng and Kahn, 2009
	Left	Preference for graphical elements, light	
	Bottom / top	Heavy / Light	
	Verticality	Luxury, exclusivity, power	van Rompay *et al.*, 2012
Degree of elaborateness	Simplicity	Precision, rigor, sobriety, modernity, universality, mass production, functionalism, competence, honesty, trust, elegance, prestige, quality	Favier *et al.*, 2019
	Complexity	Past, tradition, craftsmanship, seduction, sophistication, manipulation, hedonism, superficiality, imagination, creativity, freedom	

Appendix 2: Brand image comparison (Source: Authors own work)

Images	n	Milka	Ritter Sport	Lindt	merci	kinder
Package-related						
Aesthetics	363	19.6%	17.6%	32.5%	15.2%	12.1%
Ease of opening	363	9.4%	31.4%	2.5%	24.8%	30.9%
Handling	361	4.7%	18.0%	1.4%	16.1%	54.8%
Information	363	1.9%	27.8%	15.7%	31.1%	17.4%
Eco-friendliness	359	9.7%	14.8%	14.5%	13.1%	32.9%
Product-related						
High price	362	0.8%	0.0%	74.6%	23.8%	0.3%
Quality	361	3.6%	2.8%	75.6%	15.0%	1.4%
Variety	363	27.8%	39.4%	11.8%	14.9%	2.8%
Brand-related						
Recognition	362	48.6%	14.4%	2.5%	1.9%	30.1%