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A Design-Led Approach to Evaluating Condom Packaging

Gianni Renda¹, Bridgette Engeler Newbury¹, Robert Gorkin III²

¹Centre for Design Innovation, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, AU

²Intelligent Polymer Research Institute (IPRI), ARC Centre of Excellence for Electromaterials Science (ACES), University of Wollongong, Wollongong, AU

Abstract

Design-led Innovation is a collaborative approach that focuses on understanding the needs and desires of all stakeholders from the beginning of a project, and uses deep human insights to create new meaning in processes and outcomes. This study aims to identify commonalities and differences in condom branding and packaging in a worldwide context to inform the subsequent design and development of a hydrogel-based condom for a pilot study in the developing world. While many safe-sex initiatives have been trialed around the world, a design-led approach to education and communication, as well as brand and packaging development, was utilized to inform the direction and localization of the product subsequently developed for the pilot study. The design-led approach comprised a review and analysis of brand and packaging of numerous condom brands including: visual and verbal identity; aesthetics, form and function; textual and visual commonalities; marketing contexts; cultural context; industry standards; and legal considerations. The research findings will be used to inform the design and innovation stages of Project Geldom – a project funded under a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation grant focused on developing a next generation condom.

Keywords: design, condom, branding, AIDS, Geldom, Photoshop

Introduction

Condoms represent the only major sexual health device capable of both preventing contraception and prevention of STIs. However, while they are also one of the most well known and easily understood prophylactic devices available, there remains a major lack of condom use which is contributing to higher rates of STIs and undermining the preventable spread of HIV. These diseases cause dramatic effects to the health and wellbeing of those they affect and have extended negative impact on their communities. This can be particularly damaging to those in developing countries.

A major reason for the lack of condoms use is a perception that they reduce the sensation of sexual intercourse. Other barriers to use include allergies, social and cultural issues. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa among 15- to 19-year-old adolescents, boys were almost twice as likely to die of AIDS complications compared to their female counterparts. In South Africa, adolescent boys in this age group were around three times more likely to die of AIDS than girls of the same age in 2012 (Porth, 2014).

As such there are active calls, like a recent grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, to develop a condom that enhances sexual pleasure and/or integrate features to overcome the barriers described.

Design is critical to realize the advantages of new condom technologies. We have proposed collaboration with experts in materials science from the University of Wollongong, and leaders in design driven innovation from Swinburne University of Technology in order to tackle these challenges.

Methodology

Introduction

The project's overarching aim is to assist in the prevention of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in Sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia, however the incidences of AIDS and other STDs are on the rise in developed nations (Porth, 2014, WHO, 2015), therefore a twofold approach is required. A design competition with the aim of gaining better understanding of sexual health practices and sexual health communication in the above listed regions is being run concurrently with this study; this work is being informed by research into the brand, communication and product design strategies of condoms already available to consumers.

Some programs to promote abstinence and faithfulness in sub-Saharan Africa have had no significant impact on sexual behaviour in 14 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, therefore further analysis of sexual behaviour is required (Lo, 2015). Studying the needs, desires and wants of consumers in both the developed and developing worlds will provide valuable insights into how sexual behavior, with a particular emphasis on sexual health and condom use by culture, market availability and aesthetics, as well as other factors, such as socioeconomics, traditional practices, religion and ethnicity.

Condoms were collected from the following nations: Australia, Japan, Hong Kong, Vietnam, United Kingdom, Spain, Serbia, Thailand and Germany. To analyse the branding, two methods were utilized — firstly, a novel visual approach utilizing the ‘statistics’ mode within Adobe Photoshop to understand underlying color and shape usage; and secondly a language analysis to determine common phrases and attributes on the products and packages themselves.

Visual Identity

Visual identity comprises the graphic components that together provide a system for identifying and representing a brand. To understand the underlying visual identity of the packaging, a novel method was trialed utilizing ‘statistics’ inside Adobe Photoshop. One function that is used frequently in image correction is the ‘median’ filter. This function is commonly utilized by photographers who wish to remove people from a scene (Incorporated, 2015) due to it taking an average of the surrounding pixels and omitting non-recurring data. This is useful from a design and branding sense, as a more scientific approach to designing a product or piece of communication can be undertaken by identifying recurring themes or colours. Similar studies have used human faces to create localized averages for judging attractiveness (Langlois & Roggman, 1990).

The condom boxes and individually wrapped condoms were photographed and scaled to ensure continuity and accuracy. White balance was also adjusted in Photoshop. The sample of condom boxes is demonstrated below:

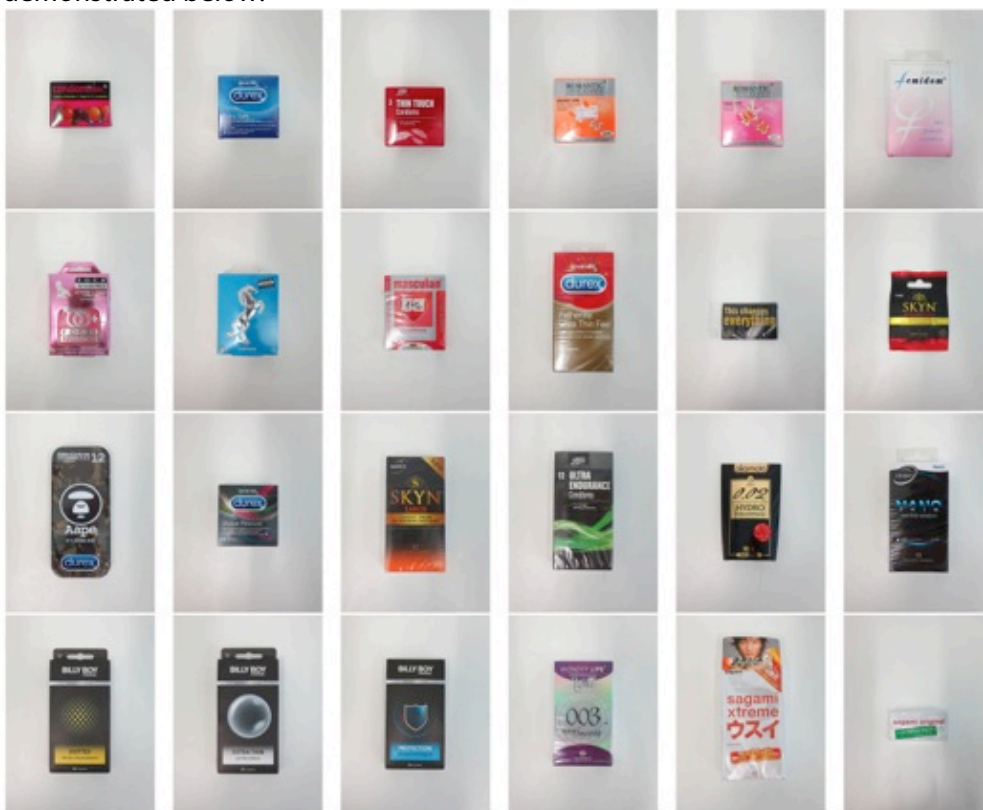


Figure 1: Assortment of surveyed condom boxes.

The first test included all of the condoms and provided the following result:



Figure 2: Condom boxes, image stack mode median

The resultant image provides a visual cue of the colour pink and a recurring circular pattern in the centre of the box. A decision was made to remove the black boxes and process these separately, with the following result below:



Figure 3: Black condom boxes, image stack mode median

When the black packages are processed as a whole, certain patterns emerge. Branding on the upper quarter is apparent, with a central focus point and an explanation of the product attributes within the lower quarter. As the black-coloured packets predominantly focus on a particular product attribute—specifically thinness and increased sensation—this becomes apparent that the brands are exploring a ‘me-too’ approach to attempt to increase their product’s appeal (Carpenter & Nakamoto, 1989). Gold is also used heavily within these packages.

The remaining condom packets were divided into size (large packets & small packets) processed with the following results:



Figure 4: Condom boxes, minus black

Interestingly enough, red and pink again begin to occur and a general layout of brand/logo/attribute also is demonstrated. When analysing the smaller packages, the colour pink becomes even more apparent:



Figure 5: Small condom boxes

Further to this, the individual wrappers are surveyed. These are displayed below:



Figure 6: Small condom boxes

The individual condoms wrappers were processed and the results displayed below:



Figure 7: Condom wrappers, stack mode median

The black 'Billy Boy' condoms caused issues in the survey by virtue of the shape and absence of colour and were excluded from further processing. The wrappers were also processed with the 'front' of the package only. The resultant image from this is displayed below:



Figure 8: Condom wrappers minus black, stack mode median

Much like the outside packaging, the individual wrappers when averaged demonstrate a large saturation of the colour pink.

Verbal Identity

Visual identity is a component in branding – the parts you see and experience – and verbal identity encompasses the written, spoken and other language-based attributes and characteristics of a brand that you hear, speak and read (Olins, 1989, Crosby 1986). Verbal identity and visual identity work together to make a brand distinctive (Olins, 1989). An analysis of a brand's verbal identity takes into consideration name, any supporting elements such as tagline or slogan, pack, brand or sub-brand descriptors, and the particular brand language or lexicon used by a specific brand (Simmons, 2003). The same kind of analysis can be done for the defining language or lexicon of a specific product category, taking into account generic or common usage words that are part of the overall category and/or brand/product communication (e.g. butter, smartphones, law firms or personal products such as in this particular case, condoms).

Condom is an English word and it has been used in various forms in multiple languages for hundreds of years although its precise etymology is argued (Collier, 2007). It is recognized and understood in its English form, and often preferenced in verbal and written usage over possible native language forms (Figures 1 and 6). Arguably, the word condom is familiar and its meaning understood in potentially hundreds of countries around the world today. Pack shape, format and

¹ The front of the wrapper is defined within this study as the one having the most branding found. The 'rear' of the wrapper is usually silver and lacks significant branded detail.

other elements of visual identity help foster product identification and support ongoing recognition and recall of specific product types and brands.

Brands—whether by name alone or in conjunction with other features and attributes—influence people’s purchases and consumption choices (Blackett, 2003). Brand names in particular help a brand command presence and even a price or positioning premium in the marketplace (Ranchhod, 2011). A brand name is a foundation element of a brand strategy from visual identity and perceived image, to differentiation against competitors, building and maintaining reputation, and particularly in an age of social media significance, word of mouth (or even ‘word of mouse’ clicks and social media likes) and referrals (Blackett, 2003). While the numerous associations and meanings people construct and perceive attached to a brand name can be built over time, brand owners – the buyer and user of a brand as much as the manufacturer or parent brand organisation – realise that the name brings inherent and immediate value to the brand, and this can be grown or diminished over time as part of a strategically designed visual and verbal identity that works across global markets and different cultures (Cowley, 1996).

Brand names are critical to the success of a new product, whether consumer –facing or business-to-business (Ranchhod, 2011). The brand naming process is as significant for large and established organisations as it is for start-ups, and for brands entering cluttered sectors and industries whether disruptive or not. Desirable attributes and characteristics to be conveyed in verbal identity are based on a series of factors determined by the overriding marketing and brand strategy of a product including the brand platform, brand positioning and brand architecture in conjunction with a name’s distinctiveness, uniqueness, memorability and pronunciation, meaning and symbolism, simplicity and need for translation (Cowley, 1996). Names themselves can be classified broadly into three main types: functional and descriptive; symbolic or associative; abstract or conceptual (Cowley, 1996).

The measures for distinctive and successful brand names are derived from these factors and range from pictorial representation (for increased memorability), word length (memorability and easier use), spelling, customer motivation, accepted naming conventions and strategies (typical vs atypical names can be said to pit acceptance vs distinctiveness in a product category), trade mark opportunities (IP protection). In the case of condoms, these measures of success could include: strength; durability; safety/surety; convenience; sensitivity/feel; pleasure/enjoyment.

Initial analysis of verbal cues – language, style/tone, features and attributes

Everything a brand does is communication. The way packs are designed, the words used on and inside packaging, the way the phones are answered (or not), product and service names, the shops in which things are sold: all these say powerful things about a brand.

Adding to the visual analysis to date, two distinct themes are emerging in communication as part of verbal identity: thickness/sensitivity (relating to pleasure and enjoyment) and thickness/safety (relating to safety/surety). With both brand messages, there is a link to ‘peace of mind’ knowing that the condom provides reliable and trusted protection from pregnancy and STDs. Of course underpinning all brand communication is a message about performance i.e. the product is reliable.

On review of the samples collected so far, two distinct language themes are emerging, each based around a distinct value proposition and separate but overlapping sets of brand attributes/benefits.

First is the suggestion of a softer ‘feminine’ language focus on pleasure in contrast to a stronger ‘masculine’ language focused on strength. This appears to shift the focus on enjoyment for women to enjoyment durability for men. However culturally this may not be so clear-cut: women want peace of mind as much as men. Women appear to choose to use condoms for sexual health as well as contraception, avoiding other choices such as IUDs or oral contraceptives. Pleasure seems to be denoted as a female benefit through tactile enhancements (ribbing, dots etc.) reinforcing assumptions that condoms diminish sensitivity and pleasure but ensure strength and durability.

Table 1. Gender in language samples

Masculine vs feminine language	Masculine	Feminine
Attributes and characteristics: enjoyment	‘just like without’ Endurance Longer lasting pleasure Closest thing to wearing nothing Think for a feeling of sensitivity Tiger type Rocket type Nano thin Next level sensation Natural touch	360 dots of pure pleasure Dotted and ribbed Mutual pleasure Intense feel Intense stimulation for her
Attributes and characteristics: durability	Longer lasting pleasure Your personal bodyguard Super smooth More natural feeling for him	Love rubber Your personal bodyguard

Second is overall tone and personality. Words can echo fun, playfulness, erotic and romantic cues as well as pleasure/enjoyment and strength. In some instances, the word itself conveys a distinct tone or personality in sound and structure, not just meaning and symbolism.

Table 2. Tone and personality samples

Tone/Personality	Fun, playfulness	Erotic, romantic	Strength	Pleasure
Symbolic	Tiger type Rocket type	Love rubber	Protection xtreme	Fetherlite
Descriptive	Condommm...		Ultra safe Extra safe	Ultra thin feel Nano thin Next level sensation

Findings so far suggest other considerations needing further research include:

- Brand architecture models – endorsed as in the BAPE/Durex product
- Brand hierarchy – differing role and purpose of master brand name (e.g. Durex) and the sub-brand variant (e.g. Mutual Pleasure) names Are they valued differently? Do they communicate differently to different users in different markets?
- Do descriptors add value and meaning, explain or support the name, reinforce choice (confidence and surety)? How?
- Language on pack becomes a differentiator – style and tone characteristics cue to pack styling, culture, usage
- Tonality influencing other communication e.g. pack inserts and accompanying instructions

Conclusion

Looking at the packages without the image processing, it is apparent that certain colours used in a Western context convey meaning; black packages mean a more ‘technically advanced’ or ‘sophisticated and stylish’ product, with an emphasis on the thinness and sensitivity of the product – which could be attributed to technology and sophistication; black could also be connoted/denoted as strong, masculine and powerful. Pink packages could be said to focus on the sensory experience – aesthetics are important but the softer and ostensibly more ‘feminine’ cues of this colour could convey softness, romance, even more delicate and enhanced sensation and feel for the female user. Notably most products that appear to be cued to a female buyer and/or user are generally studded, ribbed or otherwise embellished with features that suggest an enhancement of female pleasure and satisfaction. Blue packages focused more upon the safety aspect—these were more about strength and reassurance, confidence and even connoting a medicinal or clinical feel while still conveying sensation and sensitivity by the hue or depth of colour. Gold elements within the packages aimed to provide a level of quality, refinement and superiority—whether the product was thinner, or provided greater sensation, it didn’t matter. Metallic finishes convey prestige and ‘premiumness’, even if it was a manufactured attribute of the brand itself. This metallic finish and emotional associations extended to the individual condom wrappers themselves: gold being the prominent colour used after silver and black. However, when

processed utilizing the algorithm in Photoshop, the colour pink is found to be recurring in both the packages and the individual wrappers themselves, therefore this should be considered as a key choice evaluation as the basis of the new product. This would also fit the existing visual cues of a product being aimed at enhancing female pleasure. The usage of black can convey the technical advancements found in the product, however this should not be as prominent as in existing packages as it is too commonly associated and may get lost in a store display.

While most brands work well verbally, some rely on a specific image and perception being created by words that is both determined by and then determines the attitudes and expectations of its buyers and users. Brands that demonstrate more universal appeal and still offer tangible meaning may transcend cultural, religious and language boundaries.

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