Is retro packaging making a comeback? Is old the new “new”?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate consumer perceptions of retro packaging vs. modern packaging. A survey was administered to different groups of people around Cal Poly asking participants which packages they preferred in terms of design and perceived quality. The participants indicated their preferences and then expressed their views freely with an open-ended question.

The results of this study indicated that consumers had a strikingly high favor to modern packaging design over retro in terms of design and perceived quality. There was no difference across generations.

Although retro packaging may look appealing, customers are not likely to purchase it. According to this study, consumers associated retro packaging with being “tacky, outdated, and old”. Packaging companies considering changing their current package and bringing back one of the past need to consider other implications that their designs may bring.
Chapter 1

Purpose of the Study

Old has become the new “new”. A new retro movement has taken over much of the packaging world to spark new interest and give consumers a sense of nostalgia. Retro Packaging, culturally outdated at least 15 to 20 years ago, has become apart of the norm once again. Large companies such as Pepsi Co, Procter & Gamble Co., and General Mills Inc. have all caught on to the trend by bringing back packaging designs from the 1970’s or 1980’s. Small companies have also followed the trend by using elements that are meant to remind consumers of past times. This study focused on taking a deeper look into the past, present, and potential future success of retro design in packaging.

With today’s market continually coming out with new and improved packaging, there has been a turning point where creating the most advanced packaging simply does not cut it anymore. “We got to the point where you couldn’t add one more bling thing to a package,” stated Christine Mau, director of design at Kimberly-Clark Corp (Nassauer, 2011).

To better stand out on shelves against complex designs made by their competitors, companies realized that they could bring back their old designs that they had previous deemed antiquated. Particularly, companies that have been around a long time and have seen their business decline (from other competitors entering the market) wanted to remind customers that their brand came first.

Lastly, companies realized that they could use the nostalgia factor to their advantage. Consumers generally have a “sunny impression” of the past and retro packages definitely stand out in “a sea of modern, glossy packages” (Nassauer, 2011).
Retro packaging generally goes back to the 1970s and 1980s; which caters to parents whom remember it and share that memory with their own kids. Hostess used this method by bringing back Twinkie the Kid and King Ding Dong for a limited amount of time. ‘Today’s moms are in their 20s, 30s, 40s, and ‘70s packaging is what they remember,” stated Amy Clark, director of snack marketing for Hostess.

Yet, this form of emotional marketing does not always succeed. Tropicana experienced this after changing their famous packaging design from the orange with the straw to a more generic look that was previously used in the 1970s. Tropicana marketing team had presumed that a retro package that appeared generic would do well during the global financial crisis of 2008, yet they found the opposite to be true. A large outcry occurred from customers claiming that the retro package reminded them of “the generic products of the 1970s, but in a fake way, drained of all meaning, like a ghost package”. Tropicana quickly went back to their previous design as customers had known and loved (Lippert, 2009).

**Significance of the Study**

It is essential for companies to maintain their company’s image and potentially improve it when bringing back retro designs. Packaging design has a major impact on purchasing decisions. In today’s market, consumers have many choices and the way a package is designed has a big influence. Companies must consider all of the implications and associations that may come along with retro packaging. A company can potentially risk a lot by giving up a previously complex package design (such as a pour spout or using a different material to give it a retro look). Yet, they can also gain a whole new
market of customers by sparking a sense of nostalgia to older generations and even to younger generations whom have never seen the particular retro package design before.

This study sought to find out if there is a connection between perceived quality of retro packaging versus modern packaging. Furthermore, it seeks to identify if there is correlation between age group and preference of retro packaging.

**Interest in the Study**

I am a Graphic Communication major with a concentration in Design Reproduction Technology and a minor in Packaging. As a designer, it is very important to consider the impacts that a design of a package can have on consumers in today’s competitive market. I chose to research retro packaging since it has made a comeback and it is beneficial to consider how different groups of consumers may view a product based on its design elements. A design not only has aesthetic importance, it can have several other underlying implications that can influence purchasing decisions.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Since the start of commerce, packaging has been used to transport, store, and sell goods. It wasn’t until the end of the 19th century that packaging design became crucial as branding became popular with Western manufacturers. At that time, packaging became more sophisticated as consumers became more aware of their purchasing options. With the variety of products available to consumers today, shelf impact is key to a product’s success. Packaging design has become one of the most powerful aspects of graphic design as it is so frequently encountered by customers. (Dermody, 2010). A trend that has arose to attract customers and potentially gain shelf impact is “retro packaging”.

History

“Retro” is a term that was first used in the 1970’s to describe a “tendency in popular design to embrace previous historical styles” (Feill, 2006). Most of these packages have had a successful past and today have been “filed away in the history books and consumers’ memories” (DDB Worldwide, 2009). Companies use this concept to their advantage as they believe older generations tend to hold onto past brand associations while newer generations have a newly formed interest in packages that appear to be a “blast from the past”.

Interestingly, companies have turned to design retro packages because they have been
on the market far longer than their competitors and they want to remind consumers of that fact. “The retro movement is driven…by consumer-goods companies feeling pressure from retailers’ private-label products…brands are saying, wait a minute, we invented that category,” declared McGowan, who worked on the Tide and Downy retro designs to remind customers of the history that comes along with these products (Nassauer, 2011). Retro design has the power to spark interest in consumers that remember a company’s previous identity from decades earlier yet also create something with a diverse appeal for a consumer of a younger generation.

There are a few companies that have never changed their labels and they consider it a “badge of honor”. Companies such as McCann’s Steel Cut Irish Oatmeal or Kiehl’s cosmetics (Figure 1) are two examples of packaging that have not changed. Both of these companies use nostalgic packaging to their advantage. Kiehl’s label of authenticity, as well as a list of all of their ingredients, has been positioned front and center on their package since 1851 when they were a small apothecary corner store in New York’s Greenwich village. “Over time, these brands learned that consumers associated the products’ quality with the old-fashion design of the package” (Barrack, 2011). Companies like Kiehl’s and McCann’s use retro style packages as a means of celebrating and publicizing “milestone

“Some of these programs were successful and others spectacular failures…losers simply reminded anyone paying attention they were old…winners made a good case that over the years they had been innovators,
continuously raising the bar” stated Amy Graver, Owner and creative director of Elements, New Haven, CT. ("Do nostalgia campaigns," 2012)

This demonstrates that companies cannot simply come out with a retro package and hope for successfulness. Looking back to a past design is fine, but it must be complimentary to the perception of that brand in a way that is sure to create a nostalgic perception.

Success Today?

Most companies that come out with a retro style package today have been around for a while and have already acquired enough customer approval over the years. Thus, their package tugs at the heartstrings. Years ago, consumers had relationships with the clerk at the corner store or the pharmacist at the drug store. Today, consumers are hard pressed to find relationships like these, as there is no longer a face behind the stores we go to or the products we buy. This gives consumers an emotional gap with the products they buy. Creating nostalgia through packaging helps a brand build credibility and establish trust. “We cannot deny the value of a personal history link that leads the emotion- driven consumption…history may be a powerful tool to use, but remember that history must be made first,” stated Hernan Braberman, partner and design director of Tridimage in Buenos Aires, Argentina. ("Do nostalgia campaigns," 2012)

Companies such as Hostess and Pepsi are prime retro packaging examples. Hostess used the retro effect to get mothers to buy more pastry snacks for their kids. They gained customers by bringing back some of their past logos and animated characters from the ‘70s and ‘80s, such as “Twinkie the Kid” (Figure 2) and “King Ding Dong”. This type of retro packaging appeals to

![Figure 2: Hostess "Twinkie the Kid"](image)
customers since it reminds them of their childhood, and they want to share that memory with their own kids, whom most likely have never heard of “King Ding Dong”. When Pepsi came out with their retro designed cans (Figure 3), they surveyed the public to find out that more than 50% of the people who purchased the product had bought more than they normally would have. Many of those customers didn’t usually buy Pepsi products; thus Pepsi had gained new customers (Nassauer, 2011).

![Figure 3: From the left is a can from the 1970’s, a modern can, and Pepsi's retro can design- highlighting that it is made of "real sugar", not corn syrup.](image)

**Styling- What colors and styles are considered “Retro”?**

Retro design usually consists of a limited color palette. Full color printing was very expensive in the past thus two toned color printing was predominately used. Generally, a bright focal color was used with a pale color to compliment it. Another common element was shapes and illustrations. Most of the shapes used were simple. Circles and borders were very popular. They would be used to frame pictures, highlight content, and create focus areas. Sometimes texture would be used in the background,
along with brush or stained images that gave a “vintage look”. Lastly, typography played a vital role. Retro typography would involve the duplication, repositioning, and change in pixel strokes of fonts (Peterson, 2011).

**A reflection of the current economy?**

In many instances, the success of a particular retro package is correlated to the current economy and society.

“Today’s world is complex and uncertain. In the midst of what economists are calling the ‘Great Recession,’ the country is struggling with financial troubles – housing foreclosures, rising food prices, high unemployment – consumer confidence is low and there doesn’t seem to be an end in sight. Because of these factors many marketers are bringing back the brands of yesterday with the hope that they will tap into peoples’ desire for simpler, happier, less stressful times.”

(DDB Worldwide Communications Group, 2009)

General Mills had launched retro packaging of Cheerios and Trix cereal at Target when the recession started back in 2008. General Mills noticed that consumers were “getting back to basics, comfort food, value-based purchases”, stated Ms. Lindsay Backer, associate marketing manager at General Mills. During annual promotion periods, sales of the retro cereals have been up every year since 2008. (Nassauer, 2011)
Yet, this emotional play for shoppers doesn’t always work. Kraft Foods Inc. produced a retro look for the 2009 redesign of its Miracle Whip brand, incorporating elements of the brand's original label from 1933. At the time, with a recession in full swing, there was a longing to "celebrate the past and push toward our future," says Carol-Jacqueline Nardi, director of design and innovations for Kraft (Nassauer, 2011). Interestingly, this Miracle Whip package did not go well with older consumers as they associated it with the Great Depression.

**What about the Future?**

Retro Packaging can potentially appeal to a whole new market. Yet, companies must be cautious moving forward with it in the future. Retro packaging’s success is correlated completely with its connection with the consumers. “It needs to align with timeless values relevant to all generations” claims DDB WorldWide Communications Group (2009). These values include authenticity, identity, membership, and independence. Customers want authenticity as they want a product that is real, true, and
associates with a less complicated time and lifestyle. Customers want a sense of identity to embody their personal style, philosophy, and their desire to feel connected to others with common interests and values. Lastly, the customer wants independence; they desire a freedom of choice and empowerment.

According to DDB Worldwide Communications Group, more retro brands exist today than yesterday, and there will be even more tomorrow (DDB Worldwide, 2009).

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify if there were correlations between consumers and their purchasing preferences when purchasing products with retro
packaging. The goal of this research was to survey for correlation within two main categories:

1. Identify if the age of a consumer correlates with their purchasing preference of modern vs. retro packaging (Understand if the generation/age of the consumer had an effect on their preference).

2. Identify if the consumer believes there is a higher value in a product that is within a retro package vs. modern package (Determine if retro packaging is a successful method to get consumer’s attention and increase sales.)

**Data Collection**

A survey was administered to different groups of participants at Cal Poly. One group comprised of college students within “Generation Y” (1984-2000). The other comprised of teachers and staff that would fall within the “Silent Generation” (1925-1945), “Baby Boom” (1946-1964), or “Generation X” (1965-1983). Fictitious images of retro packaging samples were created and used within the survey. These images allowed for the consumer to visually compare and contrast design aspects of retro packaging and contemporary packaging.

The survey consisted of different types of questions including multiple choice, likert, and open ended. Multiple choice questions included sex, age, generation, if the consumer was aware of retro packaging, and if their perception of a product’s quality was based on its package. A likert scale (from 1 low-5 high) was used to rate their preference and likelihood of purchase after viewing images of certain packages. Open-ended
questions included “what aspects of retro packaging appeal or do not appeal to you?” and “Does retro packaging give you any sense of nostalgia?”

Data Analysis

Qualitative data was collected from questions that asked the users what package they preferred, the percentages of users who are aware of retro packaging, the age groups of users, and their generations. This information was then analyzed to develop a list of important considerations that companies, as well as designers, need to make before changing their current design to a design that would appear to have sat on shelves years ago.

Chapter 4

Results

Overall, participants that were polled preferred modern packaging to retro packaging. There was no correlation in the age of a consumer with their buying preference of modern vs. retro packaging. Furthermore, consumers believed that there
was a higher value product delivered in modern packaging in comparison to retro packaging.

1. **Please indicate your Gender:**

   The results were derived from 226 participates. 82 of them were male and 144 of them were female.

   ![Participant Gender Chart]

2. **Please indicate what generation you are apart of.**

   Participants were asked to indicate which generation they were apart of. They were asked to choose between Millennial/Generation Y (1984-2000), Generation X (1965-1983), Baby Boom (1946-1964), Silent Generation (1925-1945), and the G.I. Generation (1900-1924).
The majority of my participants (210) were within the millennial/Generation Y category. The 16 other participants fell within older generations.

3. How aware are you of retro packaging?

Scale: 1 Not at all aware, 2 Slightly aware, 3 Moderately aware, 4 Very aware, 5 Extremely aware
These results indicated that there was a fairly normal distribution. Overall, most participants seemed to be moderately aware of retro packaging. Furthermore, there was no difference in retro packaging awareness between younger and older generations.

4. After looking at the images of Pepsi cans, please select:

Which package would you purchase?

Which package’s product do you think is of higher quality?
Participants had a higher preference towards the modern Pepsi can packaging.

5. After looking at the images of Tide detergent packages, please select:

Which package would you purchase?

Which package’s product do you think is of higher quality?
Participants had a very high preference for the modern Tide detergent packaging.

6. After looking at the images of Trix Cereal packages, please select:

Which package would you purchase?

Which package’s product do you think is of higher quality?
Participants had a high preference for the modern Trix cereal package.

7. Please leave some general comments about retro packaging. For example, what aspects of retro packaging appeal/ do not appeal to you? Does retro packaging give you any sense of nostalgia?

This question was left as an open ended short answer response. Thus, users had the option to express their thoughts about retro packaging without being constrained by multiple choice. There were a wide variety of responses.

Participants within Generation Y had mix reactions toward retro packaging. Some participants stated that they appreciate the minimalistic approach and that they prefer retro packaging as modern packages have way too much information on them. A few participants stated that they do get a sense of nostalgia for a happier, “more prosperous” era that their parents and grandparents grew up in. The majority of participants claimed that they see retro packaging as outdated. They explained that retro packaging makes
them feel like the product is expired or stale. Furthermore, a number of participants feel that companies just use retro packaging as an “ethos boost” in the way that they remind consumers that their product is original and has had long term success.

Participants within Generation X explained that retro packaging does bring memories of a time when things were less complicated yet they wouldn’t necessarily buy it for that reason. One participant claimed “retro packaging always gets my attention—ZigZag, licorice gum, cinnamon sticks, etc. Also, my cigarettes come in retro packaging which I also enjoy”.

Participants in the Baby Boom generation associated retro packaging with products that are made with more wholesome ingredients. Yet, the nostalgia packaging doesn’t fool them— they believe that retro packaging is “less environmentally friendly” and find it “visually intruding and tacky”. One participant claimed that they see a quality issue with retro packaging, “I prefer modern packaging because it seems to be of better quality”.

Participants in the G.I. generation believe that retro packaging implies a “return to the old formula…but people are not dumb, they know that you are trying to return an old marketing appeal to them. Retro marketing would work better if it actually was combined with a return to an old formula/product”.

Chapter 5

Conclusion
Packaging is a billion dollar industry that will never go away. It is essential—whether it is simply consumer packaging, an industrial package, or protective package. One of the key factors that drives a package’s successfulness is the design of it. With the extensive availability of choices in the marketplace today, having a quality product simply does not cut it. The exterior package is what really is a determining force in a consumers purchasing decision. Companies can potentially gain (or loose) billions of dollars simply by changing their package design. For example, when Tropicana came out with their new design and lost millions of dollars. Hence, I decided to investigate the success of retro packaging, as it is a fairly new trend, and then set out to understand consumer perceptions of retro packaging vs. modern packaging.

Results from the survey showed that consumer preferences showed a strikingly high favor to modern packaging design over retro. There was no difference across generations. A high percentage of participants indicated that they preferred modern packaging in terms of design and perceived quality.

Although one might think retro packaging would bring a sense of interest and nostalgia to a package, this was not the case. According to my study, consumers relate retro packaging with words such as “tacky, outdated, and old”. They liked the idea of it but would not purchase a package with retro designs due to the quality they associated with it. Packaging companies considering changing their current package and bringing back one of the past need to consider other implications that the design may bring. A wrong packaging decision can make a bad turn for a company and cause them to loose millions. Yes, some companies such as Keihl’s and McCann’s steel oatmeal are successful with a packaging that would be considered “retro”. Yet, the difference is that
they have never changed their packaging. Thus, their success is based more on their product.

I personally, as a packaging minor with a design concentration, will take this knowledge with me after I graduate. Design that is displayed within mass media settings to large audiences, such as design on packaging, must be carefully considered. Although it may look appealing, it is important to evaluate the other implications that consumers might have with it.

In conclusion, retro packaging has become increasingly popular in the 21st century. Although it is an interesting throw back to previous designs and seeks to bring nostalgia, consumers across generations are not buying it.

**Limitations and Recommendations for Further Study**

A great number of participants in this study were college students apart of the Millennial/ Generation Y category. To continue this study, a recommendation would be to attain a greater distribution of generation groups to participate in the survey.

**References**


Appendix
A. Demographic Questions

1) Male, Female

2) What generation are you apart of?
   a) 1984-2000 - Millennials or Generation Y
   b) 1965-1983 - Generation X
   c) 1946-1964 - Baby Boom
   d) 1925-1945 - Silent Generation
   e) 1900-1924 - G.I. Generation

3) How aware are you of retro packaging?
   i) Likert Scale:
      (1) Not at all aware
      (2) Slightly aware
      (3) Moderately aware
      (4) Very aware
      (5) Extremely aware

4) After looking at the images of Pepsi cans, please select:
   a) Which package would you purchase?
   b) Which package’s product do you think is of higher quality?

5) After looking at the images of Tide detergent packages, please select:
   a) Which package would you purchase?
   b) Which package’s product do you think is of higher quality?

6) After looking at the images of Trix cereal packages, please select:
   a) Which package would you purchase?
   b) Which package’s product do you think is of higher quality?

7) Please leave some general comments about retro packaging. For example, what aspects of retro packaging appeal/ do not appeal to you? Does retro packaging give you any sense of nostalgia?
B. Email Instructions:

“Hello,

I would really appreciate it if you could take my brief senior project survey. I’m doing research on retro packaging and how desirable it is to consumers. Retro packaging is a packaging trend that major consumer packaged goods companies, including Procter & Gamble, General Mills, and PepsiCo. have followed. It will take less than 1 minute to complete and no personal information will be used, all information will be aggregated into a report.

Here is the link: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/86SXXLL.

Thank you very much!

Andrea Hodgson”