

‘It’s all about the packaging’: Investigation of the motivations, intentions and marketing implications of sharing photographs of secondary packaging on Instagram

Katie Louise Ilich^a and Dr Mariann Hardey^b

^a *Durham University Business School, Durham University, Durham, UK;*
katie.l.ilich@durham.ac.uk, katie.ilich@live.com.au, +44 07564274277.

Corresponding author.

Katie is an MSc Marketing graduate and speech pathologist. Her primary area of interest is communications, especially regarding digital, emerging, alternative discourse. Katie has experience in the clinical setting, as well as academic and commercial publishing.

^b *Advanced Research Compute ARC, Durham University, Durham, UK; Lecturer, Digital Communications, Durham University Business School, Durham, UK;*
mariann.hardey@durham.ac.uk; +44 (0) 191 33 40120.

Mariann is a social scientist and digital humanities scholar. Her research interests have been long concerned with mediated relationships and digital communications, while bringing a richer comprehension of opportunities around working in technology into the process of leadership with a focus on supporting gender equality in tech in particular. Mariann is the Institute Lead and Durham PI for the Creative Fuse North East project 2016 - 2018. [weblink: <http://www.creativefusene.org.uk/>] The project is one of the first trans-disciplinary projects to bring together support from the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC), Arts Council England (ACE), and European Research Development Fund (ERDF).

‘It’s all about the packaging’: Investigation of the motivations, intentions and marketing implications of sharing photographs of secondary packaging on Instagram

The phenomenon of ‘unboxing’ purchases has confidently and prolifically emerged into popular culture, with consumer-generated images of the branded and stylised shopping bags, boxes, and parcels from new acquisitions now ubiquitous in the social media world. Bringing this relatively unexplored phenomenon from popular culture into the academic literature, this netnographic investigation coupled with in-depth semi-structured interviews aims to understand the motivations, intentions, and marketing implications of such image sharing. Four distinct but interwoven uses and gratifications emerged, driven by identity presentation, documentation, socialisation, and aesthetics. Actions appeared to be rooted in hedonic and symbolic play for both the self and others, but also had significant ability to actively and incidentally influence brand communities, brand perceptions, and consumption intentions. Findings confirmed and extended current uses-and-gratifications theories surrounding both conspicuous brand association and Instagram involvement, and suggested the multi-directional impact of secondary image sharing for individuals, peers, and brands.

Keywords: secondary packaging; carrier bags; Instagram; motivation; identity

Funding details. None to declare.

Words: 7993

Introduction

The evolving digital landscape has revolutionised the way in which individuals learn, consume, present, and interact with the world around them. Increasingly, the distinction between online and offline worlds is dissolving, and the nature of consumption-based social discourse has similarly evolved (Schiele & Hughes, 2013; Siddiqui & Turley, 2006). Traditionally, individuals demonstrate ‘ownership of goods by removing tags, packaging, placing, customising, and using the items’ (Schiele & Hughes, 2013, p. 47),

but in the age of social media these private possession rituals are shifting into conspicuous visibility (McCracken, 1986; Thourungrroje, 2014).

The phenomenon of ‘unboxing’ purchases has confidently and inclusively emerged into popular culture, with consumer-generated images and videos of the shopping bags, boxes, and shipping parcels from new acquisitions now ubiquitous in the social media realm (Lieber, 2017). Design-focused secondary packaging that once differentiated brands is now prevalent, and such stylised boxes and carrier bags are broadcast on image- and video-sharing platforms (Fuomo, 2016). Coloured and patterned boxes, prominent brand logos or whimsical words, luxuriously textured carrier bags, and internal and external interactive adornments help create memorable experiences for consumers (Fuomo, 2016), which may prolong and intensify the acquisition and ownership process. However, the reason for presenting this personal and often tactile experience online is not yet understood; nor is whether such online imagery holds any persuasive power.

In today’s digital age, consumers shape and drive the marketplace, and promotional and branding activities must adapt to recognise current and potentially unexpected communication trends. More time is spent by individuals on Instagram than any other social networking platform, and it is becoming a space for businesses to shape, grow, and adapt their brands and for friends, strangers, and companies to interact as equals (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011). The prevalence of secondary packaging imagery on Instagram is growing, making it arguably the most prominent home of secondary packaging image sharing. An understanding of the motivations and intentions driving the sharing of such photographs can assist organisations in knowing how best to respond to consumer desires, resulting in a better

chance of differentiation and competitive advantage. This study investigates: is it *really* all about the packaging?

Literature Review

Self-Identity through Consumption

Consistent with consumer culture theory, brands are instrumental in differentiating between owned goods, facilitating identity, achievement, and identification for consumers, as the brand community members and cultural perceptions provide a vehicle for individual self-expression and collectivist association (O’Cass & McEwen, 2004). Belk (1988, p. 141) suggests ‘we may impose our identities on possessions and possessions may impose their identities on us’, with values and attitudes formed out of sources including brand advertising, product distribution, primary and secondary packaging, and visible members of the brand community (de Chernatony, 1999). However, these attributes cannot become part of the consumer’s accepted identity without visibility to others, requiring projection and reception of the signals associated with the consumption (Veblen, 2009 [1899]). Brand ties through social media are often more explicit than those offline, and their user-controlled visibility allows instantaneous and enduring associations among the extended social network (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012).

Digital Possessions

Belk’s (1988) conceptualisation of the extended self has now transcended its original context and moved into the digital age. Digital possessions are now widely regarded as an extension of self to the same extent as material goods (Belk, 2013). Digital possessions and creations visible among peers establish and construct a consumer

identity to be validated or challenged with each virtual interaction, such as a comment, like, or repost (Odom, Zimmerman, & Forlizzi, 2011). Immortalisation of goods through photographic representation and sharing allows items intended for short-term use to remain a part of the consumer's complex and multi-faceted construction of identity far beyond the physical product's lifespan (Odom et al., 2011). Through consumer-generated photographic representations of branded paraphernalia, items are arguably removed from the marketing context and become a subjective art-form (Schroeder, 2005). This allows interpretation, extension, and self-divestment, with members of brand communities arguably appearing as advocates through their self-expression in a more explicit manner than could reasonably be achieved offline (Belk, 2013, 2014).

Identity through Social Media

Social media have provided a global channel for consumption-related communications, allowing individuals to portray their endlessly constructed self, and with it, manage their social ties, social monitoring, and projected social capital (Tufekci, 2008). Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) suggest that the primary motivation for social media use is to distribute and consume content relating to the self. However, it is also an efficient, global mode for networking and socialisation, with functional and emotional information-sharing motives (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Wojnicki & Godes, 2008).

Social media enable users to communicate product and brand attitudes and experiences, generating interest, desire, learning, and, crucially, new beliefs and intentions (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2012). The most prolific users are part of an emerging group of influential consumers – 'influencers' – facilitating value-adding connection and co-creation (Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009). Influencers act as opinion leaders, who connect with opinion seekers and forwarders, and form part of a broad geographic

audience (Chu & Kim, 2011). Participation may be driven by consumption-related learning and teaching; defining and displaying personal preferences, skills, and values; social interaction; and peer recognition and validation – as well as fun and enjoyment (Madupu & Cooley, 2010). Such participation in virtual brand communities is enabled by sharing images and the ensuing discussions, resulting in the individual's sense of brand and community-member connection, increased brand story sharing, and enduring brand loyalty (Madupu & Cooley, 2010). McCracken (1986, p. 79) suggests that 'discussing, comparing, reflecting, showing off and even photographing' possessions is instrumental in the acquisition of symbolic meaning and value and its incorporation into the publicly acknowledged self, especially through image-based social media platforms (Schiele & Hughes, 2013).

Social Media Uses and Gratifications

Uses and gratification theory suggests a complex, dynamic, and multi-directional process affecting motivation, activity, and involvement, suggesting that Instagram users are not only creators and advocates for brands, but also active and engaged audience members. Sheldon and Bryant (2016) report that surveillance and documentation are the two greatest uses-and-gratifications catalysts for Instagram engagement, followed by the newly emerging motives of coolness and creativity. Digital consumption through viewing images of goods on social media is akin to window-shopping, stimulating awareness and desire through innovative, varied, and unique representations that are personalised and injected with symbolic meaning (Schiele & Hughes, 2013; Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010).

The business profitability and growth resulting from customer-to-customer interactions has long been acknowledged, and the rise in social networking has provided more direct and further-reaching channels for such interactions (Libai et al., 2010). Mull

and Lee (2014, p. 193) suggest that ‘trusted individuals in a consumer’s social network have a greater influence on purchasing decisions, attitude constructs, and product assessment than traditional marketing methods’, likely due to the perceived authenticity of such sources, which may be imperative in the formation of positive consumer interactions (Holt, 2004).

Secondary Packaging

Increasingly, secondary packaging is emerging as a feature of high-status and novel content across digital channels, especially through photography and studio style portraits shared on Instagram (Chen, 2016; Lieber, 2017). In this way, the physical and tangible promotional and branding tools, which were once considered only for their offline benefits, are evolving to translate into the digital-inclusive omnichannel environment.

Traditionally, functional requirements, predominately transporting and protecting purchased goods, were the most relevant factors in carrier bag design (Prendergast, Ng, & Leung, 2001). However, the visibility of secondary packaging, identified here as carrier bags, shipping boxes, and delivery parcels (Packaging Innovation, 2014), provides additional branding and promotional functions through peer-to-peer influencing, to the extent that it may be considered advertising (Prendergast et al., 2001). It may also be considered a status symbol, a souvenir or collector’s item, and an art-form, with branded packaging acting as a two-way communication tool, projecting brand meanings, and promoting the user’s identity (Prendergast et al., 2001).

Especially in e-commerce, secondary packaging may be a customer’s first physical brand interaction, making the unboxing experience instrumental in the formation of favourable attitudes and resulting behaviours (Fuomo, 2016). Transitioning

from a functional advertisement to an experience, packaging is increasingly interactive, with tactile and sensory cues integral facets of memorable packaging (Design Packaging, 2016). This experiential packaging has catalysed the phenomenon of user-generated ‘unboxing’ content on social media (Chen, 2016; Lieber, 2017). When kept, even only in photographic representation, packaging can represent mediated and lived experience between brands and consumers, and between consumers and peers (Underwood, 2003). Photographs of secondary packaging on social media may be interpreted as visual representations of the psychological and psychosocial benefits of brand and self-association (McCracken, 1986), but a specific understanding of the consumer behaviour involved and resulting implications of the popular phenomenon is notably absent from the literature.

Research Aims

For consumer-generated activities to effectively achieve organisational objectives, there must be an understanding of factors driving target consumer behaviour, and, within this, the meanings that consumers place on and interpret from material goods (Belk, 1988). Ashley and Tuten (2015) suggest that an engagement-based marketing perspective encourages a focus on consumer interactions, heightening the consumer’s tendency to adopt the brand as part of their self-identity.

Despite its popularity, research into the motivations surrounding Instagram use is limited, especially regarding secondary packaging. Through understanding the motivations and influencing factors surrounding the sharing and viewing of images of secondary product packaging on Instagram, more desirable packaging, presentations, and interactions can be facilitated, manifesting in the greater likelihood of image sharing, peer-to-peer advocacy, and instigation of purchase intention.

Methodology

This research adopted an adapted grounded theory approach, underpinned by a positivist epistemology, to understand and develop predictions, interpretations, explanations, and applications surrounding the topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 2009). Investigation employed netnography, supported by semi-structured interviews.

Sample

Initial sampling for the collection of key concepts occurred with a random selection of Instagram users who had posted at least one secondary product packaging image. Theoretical sampling was then used for recruitment to the second phase, allowing the confirmation, evolution, or disconfirmation of the emerging themes through one-to-one interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). No geographical or gender exclusion criteria were imposed, but participants were required to be over 18 years of age and competent English speakers.

Netnography

A 200-data-point netnography was carried out to gain an understanding of the nature and extent of practices in the online communities of interest, that is, Instagram users interacting with images of secondary product packaging. The content was searched using hashtags and brand-run Instagram pages, as well as following interactions through likes and comments on relevant posts. Data collection included field notes and transcriptions of interactions, while the researcher balanced subjective and reflexive observations with an objective and open-minded perspective to understand the meanings and patterns underlying the choices of the virtual community members

(Kozinets, 2010). Netnographic investigation remained observational, with contact only made for participant recruitment for simultaneous rich data collection through in-depth semi-structured interviews (Belk, Fischer, & Kozinets, 2013).

Semi-Structured Interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews were coupled with netnographic investigations to gain a greater depth of understanding of affect and behaviour (Kozinets, 2010). Open-ended questions were employed to scaffold discourse, with informants directed to their product packaging interactions on Instagram as a stimulus for discussion. Verbatim transcription upheld integrity, and researcher familiarisation with the data provided a foundation for interpretation (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). Biographical information regarding interview participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Biographical information of interview participants

[Table 1 near here]

Ethical Considerations

Public Instagram accounts with content visible without a social media account can be considered in the public domain, and therefore permissible to investigate without informed consent (AoIR, 2012). The investigator's personal Instagram account was used to privately contact potential interview participants. Only after informed consent had been obtained, involving the understanding of the data collection, de-identification, storage, and data-use procedures, did interview data collection commence.

Data Analysis

Concurrent data collection and analysis facilitated the researcher's theoretical sensitivity, allowing understanding of the most poignant themes underpinning participants' beliefs and behaviours. Concurrent analysis and collection facilitated the direction and guidance of future interviews, with the explicit aim of theory development. Triangulation between datasets was employed to ensure corroboration and converging evidence, indicating validity and reliability of conclusions (Golafshani, 2003; Mathison, 1988).

Results

Through analysis of 200 Instagram posts and 12 semi-structured interviews, four overarching themes emerged: identity, documentation, socialisation, and aesthetics. As depicted in Figure 1, a further 10 sub-themes were extracted from the data, suggesting varied and complex motivations and intentions surrounding the posting of images of secondary packaging on Instagram.

[Figure 1 near here]

Figure 1. Themes surrounding images of secondary packaging on Instagram

Identity

Status

I spent a lot of money ... It has to be worth it! Not just my friends know that I bought this stuff, I have to make the whole world know that I bought this stuff!
(Rupert)

Instagram users evidently employ secondary packaging to signal positive differentiation from others through their consumption habits. Edith explained that sharing such images ‘tells people what you purchased without them actually seeing it. It also gives an indication of the price and the quality of the product you purchased. And it’s a status symbol, I guess. You purchased in a certain store.’

Through tying the self to aspirational goods and brands, there is potential for enhancement in the consumer’s sense of identity and self-presentation to others. This brand status from secondary packaging is particularly relevant when the purchased product is not visibly branded or immediately recognisable.

Individuals may also employ secondary packaging to associate themselves with high-status and often high-cost labels in a more affordable way.

I didn’t post what I actually got, I just posted the bag, and yet lots people would [know I] have something. It could be small, but no one would know. People would just know that I bought something ... because of the bag. And they’d be, like ‘Oh, it’s really pretty’. (Moir)

Congruence with the actual self is not always a requirement for individuals’ online self-presentation, as evidenced by Eliza’s comment that ‘if there was, like, a Céline bag on the side of the road, I would totally pick that up and just use it for pictures.’ While brand identity appears the most prominent marker of status, location evidently also plays a role in constructing and conveying status:

It really depends on where I am, which signifier, the price or the location, becomes more important ... They’re both exclusive things. You either spend a lot of money on a single product, or spend money on needing to go somewhere, and they only become exclusive to me based on who I am, and what my social circle is. (Rachel)

Secondary packing appears particularly valued in brand-related interactions due to its

recognisability, allowing direct and unambiguous brand association.

Self-Presentation

they changed their packaging ... and they'd put in place quotes about books ... It kind of sparked the importance of reading to me, and it was such a lovely idea that I really wanted to put it on my Instagram ... It was the way it made me feel, in terms of personal interest ... The quote is something that, when I read it, I related to ... it was more of that personal interest I wanted other people to see. (Harriet)

Secondary packaging may facilitate the conveyance of deeper personality and values, with individuals using their consumption to project the many facets of their identity. The sharing process evidently allowed divestment of the self into purchased products, inclusive of the secondary packaging.

there's a sense of ownership when you're taking pictures of something ... You become part of that story. And then when you share it on social media you say very obviously 'Look at this. I own it. This is mine. Let me show you.' (Rachel)

Mere imagery of the packaging may be perceived as insufficient for acceptance of the projected self, with appearance of effort and consideration an important aspect of sharing the self.

You can't just let the bag do all the work, because it's much more than that. It's not just 'I have a carrier bag. I'll show you all my carrier bags.' ... I have a real fine line between just showing the bag and 'Look what I bought', and a more ceremonial 'I really like this object. Look, how amazing it is. It came with beautiful packaging and I really enjoyed the experience', and it's sharing that experience. (Sarah)

Some individuals shared concerns that they appear 'kind of shallow, that I'm only there for brands, and I'm showing off brands that I'm lucky enough to buy' (Harriet), manifesting as hesitation in sharing secondary packaging online. However, when tied to

more altruistic causes, conveyance of a deeper ideal or actualised self may be achieved through packaging.

by putting that on my social media, I am saying ‘This is relevant to me. I believe in this’, and that, hopefully, would make people see me, again, not just for my consumption, but that I was an active follower in this social campaign. So, it’s also the way this would reflect on me. (Harriet)

Instagram users employed secondary packaging for self-presentation, conveying their interests, hobbies, social and philanthropic alignments, brand preferences, and other facets of true or idealised self. It is apparent that individuals make careful and judicious selections to convey their diverse values and sense of self, with varying congruency to actual identity.

Documentation

News

within social media you want to be fresh. It’s also an element of being on-trend ... It’s how people get their news, and part of that journalism process is to be on the ball with the next new product, the next big thing. (Sarah)

The element of news-telling as an instigator and motivator for secondary packaging posts is prevalent, with individuals’ postings as visual descriptors of new products, packaging, events, and brand-rated information. Margot suggested that by using secondary packaging in social media posts, ‘it’s a little bit of news, it’s a little bit of interest’, and that the visual element makes the conveyance of new information more engaging and aesthetically pleasing. Through the sharing of news, individuals may project current information for the benefit of themselves and others, in captivating and visual modalities.

Storytelling

Secondary packaging has strong abilities to aid in the memory and emotive recall of consumption-based and non-consumption-based events. Images may be used as a reminder of experiences, and also to share stories of these experiences. It is apparent that secondary packaging conveys a narrative of acquisition, not merely a presentation of personal possessions. Additionally, it plays an evidentiary role in proving acquisition and newness.

It shows it more as a shopping experience rather than a fashion thing. Rather than me just holding a handbag, it's 'I bought a handbag'. (Edith)

If you post the package or the bag, it means you just bought it. It doesn't mean that you borrow[ed] from someone, it means that you just bought it yourself, and freshly [came] out from the store. (Rupert)

While aesthetically pleasing packaging is a desirable feature for most consumers, as discussed later, many Instagram users employ secondary packaging as a signifier of location and differentiation from their norm. Rachel summarised the appeal and meaning of secondary packaging in storytelling with the comment:

they're commercial products but the thing with each individual person is that why you buy it, the situation in which you got it, really changes a commercial product into something more personal ... It's all these mass-produced products, and mass-produced pieces of paper, and bags or boxes, and stuff that, through individual experience, become more than that.

Preservation

when you come to see the picture [of the secondary packaging], you receive the memory, flashback to that moment you just bought it from the store. (Rupert)

Instagram posts appear instrumental in immortalising product packaging and preserving

the experience surrounding its acquisition. This was particularly important for unique or personally resonant shopping experiences. The preservation of packaging in its original and new state was widely discussed.

I wanted to keep a memento of my first buying experience of a particularly expensive handbag. I like the idea of being able to keep all the packaging but it will probably never look the same, so I took a photo of it. (Edith)

It was suggested that posting packaging is a type of ‘photography journaling’, with the aim of ‘freezing that moment for the future’ (Rachel). Secondary packaging may be used in the recall of experiences and intangible interactions, and Instagram provides a readily accessible vehicle for viewing these visual memories.

Strong emotional attachments to packaging itself may not be a defining motivator, but packaging may, nevertheless, facilitate profound emotive and experiential properties conveying meaning and memories.

It’s not very important now, but maybe one day they will become a signifier of time and place. You don’t notice it now, because you’re living in this time and place and it’s just something you see every day. But, maybe that brand won’t exist anymore, and suddenly what you have left of it is that old carrier bag that you saved. (Rachel)

Socialisation

Peer Interactions

Individuals may post secondary packaging to align themselves to peers and peer groups, both online and offline, presenting facets of themselves and their social ties, while remaining ‘a little bit private’ (Caroline). Secondary packaging posts provide a channel for individuals to convey their social capital, especially through the display and

exchange of gifts, as well as a stimulus and medium for two-way peer interactions,

for me to show everyone ‘Look what I got’, to show off, in a sense. It genuinely is at the end of the day. It’s the only reason I’d tell people, and because it was my birthday. So, people usually say ‘What have you got?’, so I thought I’d post it and be like ‘I got an Apple – joined the club’. People liked it, people commented on it, saying like ‘Oh, you finally got one’ and ‘Which model did you get?’, ’cause they didn’t know the size, ’cause obviously it’s in a carrier bag. And just like ‘Oh, I’ve got that one’, and interacting telling us what they’ve got, me telling them what I’ve got, as well. (Moira)

Frequently, secondary packaging posts appear to be a self-promotional tool directing followers to other social media for more information, or to build anticipation and curiosity for following Instagram posts. Interview participants emphasised the perceived genuineness and believability of advocacy through secondary packaging images when posted by peers, and the resulting intrigue and interest. Packaging posts provided a channel for peer teaching and learning, as well as connecting through shared brand and consumption appreciation and comparison.

Brand Interactions

Secondary packaging posts on social media are used ‘to make as many connections as you can, and putting in packaging with the name, the logo, is one way of doing that’ (Sarah). Evidently, they are important in gaining positive consumer and brand relationships, with Instagram users obtaining a sense of recognition and value from positive brand interaction.

Everyone likes to be noticed, especially by a company. I tagged each of the companies in it and I, kind of, like the ones a bit better that actually liked it back ... You’re actually interacting with people a bit more. It’s just a like. It’s not like it takes very much for them to do, but it’s a nice thing. (Rachel)

The likelihood of brand interactions was a motivator for secondary packaging posting, and a preference was expressed for genuine and selective brand acknowledgment, with user-instigated posting resonating more than that encouraged by brands. The resulting meaningful interactions may lead to enhanced brand attitudes, brand favour, and ongoing brand engagement.

User-generated and user-instigated content is often created for personal validation and relationship building, but may also be motivated by self-promotion.

I think any time you post secondary packaging or primary packaging you should link the brand because you just never know ... Obviously, you should not embarrass yourself, and you should probably have good images if you tag brands, but, yeah, I tag brands all the time because it doesn't hurt, and on the off chance that they'll see it and repost it, it's really great exposure for you. (Eliza)

Aesthetics

Packaging Design

Count PACKAGING among my obsessions. The luxury of Dior comes through not only in their products, but also in the packaging: precisely pleated tissue, heavy-weight textured paper, and twill tape printed in #DiorGray. (I know this sounds like an ad but it's not.) (Instagram User 1)

The prevalence of secondary packaging on Instagram is overwhelmingly tied to its physical appearance and resulting perceived quality. The motivations present in netnographic investigation are predicated on a number of design features, including but not limited to colour, shape, text, print, materials, recognisability, and availability.

It is apparent that packaging design can significantly influence brand attitudes, consumption habits, and resulting advocacy on social media. Viewing images of secondary packaging on social media is a sufficient instigator for trialling new brands

when deemed particularly aesthetically desirable, provided the financial outlay required is not excessive.

I have had experiences where I specifically went somewhere after I saw someone post it on Instagram, because I really loved the packaging. I was like ‘I really like that’. (Sarah)

Recognisability and visual appeal both impact attitudes and resulting actions, with some individuals stressing the importance of clear brand image accompanied by congruous clarity in secondary packaging. While iconic and recognisable packaging is valued, limited edition and themed secondary packaging can create discussion and desire, often resulting in purchase intention and social media sharing. Such varied and seasonal packaging can create a sense of elusiveness and desirability: ‘it’s almost like that packaging becomes a collectible’ (Sarah). However, ‘brands have to be careful, because sometimes it puts me off, as well, to feel like they don’t have a voice’ (Sarah).

Perhaps the factor most evident from interviews and netnographic investigation is the perception of plastic bags as being of lesser quality and aesthetic appeal, and therefore less likely to be shared on Instagram. Rachel explained that the product or brand is often not a motivator in image sharing, and that ‘it sounds a little bit inauthentic, but sometimes the packaging is really really nice, and it ends up being something that’s a lot nicer than the actual product’. Images of carrier bags, boxes, and shipping parcels on social media are often a tribute to and appreciation of interactive, design-focused, and aesthetically pleasing secondary packaging, which is valued and captured as an accessible and desirable art-form.

Creativity

While consumers appear to value secondary packaging for its creative and artistic

elements, they also employ secondary packaging as a facilitating tool in their own creativity. The visual nature of Instagram lends itself to presenting photographic creations, with both play-based and self-promotional motivations.

I just really love creating images, and I love photography, and I think that brand packaging is really big right now, and it can really add so much to your photo ... I can't work on having a great curated Instagram unless it's at least a little bit about image, but I would say it's mostly, for me, about creating beautiful images. (Eliza)

While brand associations and self-presentation are proven motivators in secondary packaging image sharing, the photographic process may sometimes dominate, suggesting that 'as long as the packaging is pretty, and I know I can get a good photo out of it, it's really not about the brand' (Eliza).

The transparency of staged photographs is sometimes explicit, such as in this post: 'The best kind of retail therapy. I missed you Instagram! (Yes, indeed, I carefully balanced this bag on a shrub purely for this photo, I AM NOT ASHAMED)' (Instagram User 2). This was met with affirming and bonding comments, including 'Haha it turned out adorable' and 'Guilty!!!'. This suggests that packaging may be used for the enjoyment of the photographic process, without the need for congruous and enhanced self-projection.

Individuals reported perusing the secondary packaging images of other Instagram users, seeking creative, photographic, and consumption inspiration.

I like seeing how people take these, maybe, boring bits and pieces and everyday things, and sort of elevate in them into art directions. The way they set them up makes them seem even more than just a plastic bag ... I enjoy seeing how people [use secondary packaging], what they put it with, how they play with the colours of the bags. Do they use fabric? Do they use a table? How does this fit in to the trends I see? Is everyone using the same bag in the same way? Are there certain colours

or products that keep popping up? Is that a colour or product I should look into?
(Rachel)

The interactive artistic process involved in photographing secondary packaging may enhance brand perceptions among peers, and play a strong role in curiosity, learning, and investigation of consumption-based activities.

Value

Evidently, thoughtful packaging positively reinforces purchase decisions, and provides an extra element to the consumption experience, which is extended and appreciated through photographing and image sharing.

It's such an ephemeral thing. It's not meant to be, in the case of carrier bags or the box that something comes in, it's not meant to be saved, really. So, the amount of effort that is sometimes put into this packaging, and the amount people notice it, only to throw it away, is really strange, and really, really interesting ... I guess it sometimes works, because I did buy something. (Rachel)

Individuals extract additional value from their purchases through photographing and appreciating the secondary packaging experience: 'it becomes part of what you purchase. It's part of what you're spending your money on.' (Rachel)

The nature of Instagram facilitates individuals' promotion of themselves and their personal work, with content creation an instigator for image sharing. Secondary packaging adds value through its reflection on the goods it contains, but also through its aesthetic and photographic possibilities. Experiential and ritual-based packaging may also be valued for its functional, less emotional potential.

I want to pump out as many photos as I can from something that I bought ... if the packaging's really pretty you almost feel like you get a second go at a product. You already post it once on Instagram, and then you have the packaging you can

post, which is nice, so it's almost ... I don't want to say getting your money's worth 'cause ... I would buy it regardless. But, with that pretty packaging you feel like it's added value. It adds value to what you purchased. (Eliza)

Sarah summarised the phenomenon of secondary product packaging on social media by highlighting the multi-faceted, evolving, and personal nature of intention and motivations:

It's also really this kind of experience of you going to the store, selecting your product, not I just I bought it and that's the end of the story. It's a whole ritual of packaging ... putting it in the box, tying the ribbon, and then you unpackage it ... it's almost a lot of commercial products are going towards that tradition of packaging as a ritual, because you almost elevate that product through the packaging, making it extraordinary ... within the world of social media, documenting that process. If you have a pretty box you can do an unboxing, product reviews, and, I think it's a whole, it's almost a new phenomenon of how we interact with everyday objects, but it has this lineage to historical packaging as ritual. It's a circular thing that's happening, but it's just presented itself differently on social media. Like before ... you had to package it beautifully for the kings and queens, but now everyone can have it.

Discussion

As suggested by Baudrillard (2016), individuals in the postmodern age increasingly surround themselves with objects rather than people. However, it is also apparent that these objects play an instrumental role in interpersonal interactions, and the offline and online representation, conveyance, and formulation of these (Schembri & Latimer, 2016). Investigation into the relatively unexplored phenomenon of image sharing of secondary packaging on Instagram suggests four diverse but intertwined motivations – identity, documentation, socialisation, and aesthetics – with findings both confirming and extending current literature surrounding social media uses and gratifications.

Identity

In social media environments, socially and contextually distinct audiences are all recipients of the same information, without capacity for individuals to tailor self-presentation to their varied communication partners (Marwick & boyd, 2010). This context collapse can catalyse self-identity incongruence, as individuals engage in impression management, balancing their projection of actual, enhanced, and ideal selves (Marder et al., 2017; Marwick & boyd, 2010). Through posting images of secondary packaging on Instagram, consumers engage in authenticating acts (Arnould & Price, 2000), sharing their self-concept, or multiple and varied selves, drawing symbolic meaning from brands and consumption indicators (Belk, 2013; Schau & Gilly, 2003). Secondary packaging has the dual benefit of overt recognisability through clear brand prominence, as well as non-specificity regarding the nature of purchased goods. This allows consumers to conspicuously align and co-construct their individual and group identities with lesser accompanying risk, as reduced information provides fewer markers for detrimental judgements (Marder et al., 2017; Schau & Gilly, 2003). Additionally, greater liberties in self-identity are afforded to individuals, as lower-cost items from high-status brands can be presented without differentiation from high-cost goods, or through tying the self to social and philanthropic causes without the requirement of any personal divestment beyond purchase from a relevant retailer. Status accrual through brands as a signifier of location is an unexpected addition to the knowledge base, suggesting that many facets of identity may be visually construed through packaging posts, including and beyond direct brand and consumption association.

Documentation

Personal and collective memories are more readily stored through visual means, explaining the high prominence of documentation motives on Instagram (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). Consistent with Belk's (2013) concept of distributed memory through digital possessions, it is evident that individuals post packaging images as markers of time, place, experiences, and social ties, not purely as a means of demonstrating purchasing experiences. Nostalgia and other emotive symbolism are stored through these digital representations, and individuals may view their secondary packaging posts as a digital photo album, and allow it to be viewed by peers in the same manner (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016).

A visual depiction provides trustworthy proof of experience or news, cueing a realism heuristic (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Secondary packaging may be employed as a proof element, as it indicates currency, acquisition, and experience, rather than the mere display of owned or borrowed goods. Preservation of experience and packaging itself evidently plays a strong motivating role and, concurrently, newsfeed-like postings aim to project immediate and sensational brand, personal, and other information transfers, with both hedonic and functional intentions.

Socialisation

There is a founded concern with false and contrived intimacy readily built between individuals, peers, and brands (Baudrillard, 2016). However, play is an instrumental element in the gratification obtained from Instagram-based interactions (Sundar & Limperos, 2013), and superficiality may not be detrimental to interactions between peers, due to a strong focus on enjoyment and escapism (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Whiting & Williams, 2013). Individuals post images of secondary packaging for

information sharing purposes, as well as employing the non-specific nature of packaging as a stimulus for peer curiosity and ensuing virtual discussion. The accrual of social status may be achieved through resulting interactions, or simply presented through displaying the social ties that predicated the acquisition. Collaborative self-presentation is evidently created through the symbolic interactions surrounding secondary packaging images, as well as reciprocal learning and teaching among peers (Marwick & Boyd, 2010).

Validation and recognition from brands is an active sub-motivator in the sharing of secondary packaging. However, consistent with Mull and Lee (2014), a holistic consumer-focused approach to interactions is valued, with stronger positive brand perceptions following genuine, relationship-building engagement. The positive and judicious recognition, engagement, facilitation, monitoring, and shaping of consumer activity result in more genuine brand perceptions, effort in secondary packaging image sharing, and evangelical brand behaviours (Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011).

Aesthetics

Adding to the literature is the novel discovery that Instagram users actively search for and acquire design, brand, and photographic knowledge through surveillance of peers' packaging images. While information-gathering through virtual exploration on social networks is well documented, previous research suggests that this is a more passive act than was evident through this investigation (Mull & Lee, 2014). Sheldon and Bryant (2016) are the only previous authors to cite creative display as a use and gratification of Instagram, reporting the generation and sharing of personal photographic artworks as the weakest of identified motivations. However, findings suggest that the creative process is a prominent and intense motivating factor. Individuals view other images, gathering design and photographic inspiration, which can be used to contribute to the

planning and production of future images, often regardless of brand personality and accompanying associations. Packaging desire generation was readily discussed by Instagram users, with aesthetically pleasing packaging adding value through its reflection on purchased goods, as well as for its photographic ease and possibilities. While such creative processes may, arguably, all relate to favourable and enhanced online self-presentation, it is apparent, even stressed, that art creation through secondary packaging is a distinct and intrinsically rewarding motivator.

Conclusion

This research investigated the motivations, intentions, and marketing implications of sharing photographs of secondary packaging on Instagram, and uncovered some distinct but interwoven uses and gratifications. Instagram allows for great control over individuals' projected images, with limited scope for challenging the authenticity of presented facets of self or resulting interpersonal interactions (Ellison et al., 2006). It is apparent that in this environment, self-identity is manipulated and constructed, but not entirely fabricated, with the intention of presenting an enhanced, multi-faceted self to the masses, and users employ carefully selected brands as mediators of personal attributes and values (Ferraro, Kirmani, & Matherly, 2010). Ritualistic consumption practices, such as photographing secondary packaging from acquisitions, are evidently a means of artistic appreciation, self-divestment, and enjoyment, that, when shared on Instagram, facilitate information-sharing, and co-create cultural value in the process (Cova & Dalli, 2009). When authentically, selectively, and non-invasively supported and acknowledged, desirable image enhancement outcomes can be extended to brands, with multi-directional, reciprocal benefits. This research both confirms and extends the literature surrounding motivations and intentions regarding Instagram use and brings the

phenomenon of the posting of secondary packaging images from popular culture discussion into the academic literature. It is apparent that this growing, impactful phenomenon is predominantly rooted in hedonic and symbolic play for both the self and others, but also has significant ability to shape, expand, and consolidate brand communities through artistic and resonating user-created content. Apparent through their consumption and Instagram activities, consumers desire to receive, and evidently to present, the whole package.

Limitations and Future Research

There was a female prevalence in the sample, consistent with the female dominance among Instagram users (Parker, 2016), as well as an 18 to 29-year-old majority (Statista, 2017). A longitudinal, immersive netnographic investigation with a less homogeneous sample may have further facilitated generalisability, corroborated with semi-structured interviews, providing greater insight into both moderated and more extremist views (Kozinets, 2002).

Further understanding of the desirability of secondary packaging regarding the specific aesthetic features that catalyse image sharing may allow organisations to offer more impactful packaging. Additionally, understanding the transferability of desirable attributes for both content creators and content viewers to other social media and formats would allow a greater understanding of consumer perception and resulting behaviour, facilitating a greater chance of positive differentiation and competitive advantage.

References

- AoIR (Association of Internet Researchers) (2012). *Ethical decision-making and internet research: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (Version 2.0)*. Chicago: AoIR Ethics Committee.
- Arnould, E., & Price, L. (2000). Authenticating acts and authoritative performances: Questioning for self and community. In: S. Ratneshwar, D. Mick & C. Huffman (Eds.), *The why of consumption* (pp. 140–163). London: Routledge.
- Ashley, C., & Tuten, T. (2015). Creative Strategies in Social Media Marketing: An Exploratory Study of Branded Social Content and Consumer Engagement. *Psychology & Marketing, 32*(1), 15-27.
- Baudrillard, J. (2016). *The consumer society: Myths and structures*. London: Sage.
- Belk, R. (1988). Possessions and the extended self. *Journal of Consumer Research, 15*(2), 139–138.
- Belk, R. (1990). The role of possessions in constructing and maintaining a sense of past. *Advances in Consumer Research, 17*(1), 669–676.
- Belk, R. (2013). Extended self and the digital world. *Journal of Consumer Research, 40*(3), 477–500.
- Belk, R. (2014). Digital consumption and the extended self. *Journal of Marketing Management, 30*(11–12), 1101–1118.
- Belk, R., Fischer, E., & Kozinets, R. V. (2013). *Qualitative consumer and marketing research*. London: SAGE Publications.
- boyd, d. m., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 13*, 210–230.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.
- Chen, Y. (2016). A YouTube institution, ‘unboxing’ is making its way to Snapchat. Digiday. Retrieved from <https://digiday.com/marketing/youtube-institution-unboxing-making-way-snapchat/> [accessed 1 Aug. 2017].
- Chu, S., & Kim, Y. (2011). Determinants of consumer engagement in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in social networking sites. *International Journal of Advertising, 30*(1), 47–75.

- Cova, B., & Dallı, D. (2009). Working consumers: The next step in marketing theory? *Marketing Theory*, 9(3), 315–339.
- de Chernatony, L. (1999). Brand management through narrowing the gap between brand identity and brand reputation. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 15(1–3), 157–179.
- Denegri-Knott, J., & Molesworth, M. (2010). Concepts and practices of digital virtual consumption. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 13(2), 109–132.
- Design Packaging (2016). Packaging in editorial photos, darling. Retrieved from <https://designpackaginginc.com/tag/absolutely-fabulous/> [accessed 1 Aug. 2017].
- Ellison, N., Heino, R., & Gibbs, J. (2006). Managing impressions online: Self-presentation processes in the online dating environment. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(2), 415–441.
- Ellison, N., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of Facebook ‘friends’: Social capital and college students’ use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12, 1143–1168.
- Ferraro, R., Kirmani, A., & Matherly, T. (2010). Signaling identity through brands: The role of perceived authenticity. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 37, 81–84.
- Fuomo, N. (2016). When did shipping boxes get pretty? Racked. Retrieved from <https://www.racked.com/2016/7/7/12002156/packaging-commerce-shipping-boxes-glossier-warby-parker> [accessed 27 Jun. 2017].
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (2009). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishing.
- Golafshani, N. (2003). Understanding reliability and validity in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 8(4), 597–606.
- Hollenbeck, C., & Kaikati, A. (2012). Consumers’ use of brands to reflect their actual and ideal selves on Facebook. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 29(4), 395–405.
- Holt, D. (2004). *How brands become icons: The principles of cultural branding*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Kozinets, R. (2002). The field behind the screen: Using netnography for marketing research in online communities. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 39(1), 61–72.
- Kozinets, R. (2010). *Netnography. Doing ethnographic research online*. London: SAGE Publications.

- Lapadat, J., & Lindsay, A. (1999). Transcription in research and practice: From standardization of technique to interpretive positioning. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 5(1), 64–86.
- Lee, D., Kim, H., & Kim, J. (2012). The role of self-construal in consumers' electronic word of mouth (eWOM) in social networking sites: A social cognitive approach. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28(3), 1054–1062.
- Libai, B., Bolton, R., Bügel, M., de Ruyter, K., Götz, O., Risselada, H., & Stephen, A. (2010). Customer-to-customer interactions: Broadening the scope of word of mouth research. *Journal of Service Research*, 13(3), 267–282.
- Lieber, C. (2017). The ugly problem of pretty packaging: What happens after the Instagram unboxing? Racked. Retrieved from <https://www.racked.com/2017/5/23/15680638/ecommerce-packaging-waste> [accessed 17 Jul. 2017].
- Madupu, V., & Cooley, D. (2010). Antecedents and consequences of online brand community participation: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Internet Commerce*, 9(2), 127–147.
- Marder, B., Shankar, A., Houghton, D., & Joinson, A. (2017). 'What if my mum sees it?': Examination of visible brand interaction in the presence of a wider network. *Information Technology & People*, 30(1), 210–226.
- Marwick, A., & boyd, d. (2010). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society*, 13(1), 114–133.
- Mathison, S. (1988). Why triangulate? *Educational Researcher*, 17(2), pp. 13–17.
- McCracken, G. (1986). Culture and consumption: A theoretical account of the Structure and movement of the cultural meaning of consumer goods. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 13(1), 71–84.
- Mull, I. R., & Lee, S. E. (2014). "PIN" pointing the motivational dimensions behind Pinterest. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 33, 192–200.
- O'Cass, A., & McEwen, H. (2004). Exploring consumer status and conspicuous consumption. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 4(1), 25–39.
- Odom, W., Zimmerman, J., & Forlizzi, J. (2011). Teenagers and their virtual possessions: Design opportunities and issues. *CHI 2011: Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 1491–1500). Vancouver and New York: ACM.

- Packaging Innovation. (2014). The shopping bag: Secondary packaging that is not to be underestimated. Retrieved from <http://www.packaginginnovation.com/packaging-materials/packaging-bags/shopping-bag-secondary-packaging-underestimated/> [accessed 18 Apr. 2017].
- Parker, S. (2016). Top Instagram demographics that matter to social media marketers. Hootsuite Social Media Management. Retrieved from <https://blog.hootsuite.com/instagram-demographics/> [accessed 24 Apr. 2017].
- Prendergast, G., Ng, S., & Leung, L. (2001). Consumer perceptions of shopping bags. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 19(7), 475–482.
- Schau, H., & Gilly, M. (2003). We are what we post? Self-presentation in personal web space. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 30(3), 385–404.
- Schau, H., Muniz, A., & Arnould, E. (2009). How brand community practices create value. *Journal of Marketing*, 73(5), 30–51.
- Schembri, S., & Latimer, L. (2016). Online brand communities: Constructing and co-constructing brand culture. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 32(7–8), 628–651.
- Schiele, K., & Hughes, M. (2013). Possession rituals of the digital consumer: A study of Pinterest. *European Advances in Consumer Research*, 10, 47–50.
- Schroeder, J. (2005). *Visual consumption* (1st ed). New York: Routledge.
- Sheldon, P., & Bryant, K. (2016). Instagram: Motives for its use and relationship to narcissism and contextual age. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 58, 89–97.
- Siddiqui, S., & Turley, D. (2006). Extending the self in a virtual world. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 33, 647–648.
- Statista (2017). Percentage of U.S. internet users who use Instagram in April 2016, by age group. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/246199/share-of-us-internet-users-who-use-instagram-by-age-group/> [accessed 9 Aug. 2017].
- Sundar, S., & Limperos, A. (2013). Uses and grats 2.0: New gratifications for new media. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 57(4), 504–525.
- Thoumrunroje, A. (2014). The influence of social media intensity and EWOM on conspicuous consumption. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 148, 7–15.

- Tufekci, Z. (2008). Grooming, gossip, Facebook and Myspace: What can we learn about these sites from those who won't assimilate? *Information, Communication & Society*, 11(4), 544–564.
- Underwood, R. (2003). The communicative power of product packaging: Creating brand identity via lived and mediated experience. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 11(1), 62–76.
- Veblen, T. (2009 [1899]). *The theory of the leisure class: An economic study in the evolution of institutions*. New York: Macmillan
- Weinberg, B., & Pehlivan, E. (2011). Social spending: Managing the social media mix. *Business Horizons*, 54(3), 275–282.
- Whiting, A., & Williams, D. (2013). Why people use social media: A uses and gratifications approach. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 16(4), 362–369.
- Wojnicki, A., & Godes, D. (2008). Word-of-mouth as self-enhancement. *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 6(1), 1–48.

Table 1. Biographical information of interview participants

Name	Age	Gender	Country of residence	Employment
Anabelle	26	F	Austria	Student (design)
Caroline	25	F	UK, China	Student (marketing)
Edith	26	F	Australia	Assistant sales manager
Eliza	29	F	USA	Advertising and marketing professional; lifestyle blogger
Harriet	25	F	UK	Student (marketing)
Margot	58	F	Australia	Fashion store owner
Moira	24	F	UK	Student (marketing)
Nicole	25	F	Canada	Visual merchandiser
Rachel	25	F	Canada	Retail worker
Rupert	24	M	UK, Thailand	Student (marketing)
Sarah	27	F	New Zealand	Museum curator
Zoe	27	F	Australia	Speech pathologist

Figure 1. Themes surrounding images of secondary packaging on Instagram

