PERCEIVED TRANSPARENCY AND SUSTAINABLE UNBOXING EXPERIENCES AS DRIVERS OF BRAND AUTHENTICITY IN EMERGING MARKETS

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Abstract

Sustainable packaging has become a key factor in consumer decision-making in the emerging markets, but how packing design can be involved in buying premium is less researched. The research question is how Perceived Packaging Transparency (PPT) and the Unboxing Sustainability Experience (USE) affect Willingness to Pay a Premium (WTPP) of consumers and Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA) performs as a mediating variable. The parameters were gathered using a structured questionnaire of 150 Pakistani consumer who represent an environment where the level of sustainability is increasing but consumers are very price sensitive. With the help of the mediation analysis results, it is shown that PPT and USE positively contribute to PBA, and this variable positively predicts WTPP. The findings are that clear communication of eco-attributes and immersive sustainable unboxing experiences reinforce perceptions of authenticity, which justifies greater acceptance of higher prices. This research is relevant to the literature because it combines the concepts of consumer psychology and sustainable marketing and emphasizes authenticity as the key mechanism connecting the cue of packaging and high premium prices. Practical implications include the fact that the firms in developing economies should leverage the minimization of environmental impact by designing packaging that conveys the impression of credibility and memorable consumer experiences. In such a way, brands would be able to build trust, differentiate themselves in competitive markets, and get value by enabling premium pricing strategies.

Keywords: Sustainable Packaging, Perceived Packaging Transparency (PPT), Unboxing Sustainability Experience (USE), Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA), Willingness to Pay a Premium (WTPP)

Introduction

Sustainability is one of the most captivating trends of the modern consumer markets and one of the most obvious manifestations of brand-environmental concern is packaging. Packaging has ceased to be considered as a practical need but rather as a communication tool that helps build consumer credibility, trust and authenticity (Magnier & Crié, 2015). Specifically, the issue of sustainable packaging has become more prominent in developing economies where the increased awareness of the environment collides with a high price sensitivity, providing a complicated decision-making environment (Prakash & Pathak, 2017). In the case of companies that are involved in such markets, it is difficult to design packaging that has less detrimental effects on the ecology, but at the same time achieves authenticity and warrants higher prices.

The clarity of the eco-friendly features conveyed by the brand through packaging has been found to contribute to consumer trust and buying intentions: Perceived Packaging Transparency (PPT). Open communication can decrease cynicism and improve views of integrity, which are essential in the markets with greenwashing issue at the forefront (Testa et al., 2021). On the same note, the Unboxing Sustainability Experience (USE), i.e. sensorial and symbolic elements that consumers experience when dealing with sustainable packaging, is gaining an increasing influence on brand judgments. The studies reveal immersive and memorable unboxing experience to be able to reinforce emotional ties to brands and sustainability perceptions (Shin et al., 2018)

One of the important processes that connect these packaging messages to consumer action is Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA). Authenticity indicates how much consumers perceive that the sustainability messages used by a brand are real and go together with its values (Morhart et al., 2015). The existing literature emphasizes that authenticity is one of the strongest motivation factors of consumer loyalty and readiness to pay more, especially in the products where the ethical and environmental factors are considered (Napoli et al., 2014). Nevertheless, research has not been conducted on the combined effects of PPT and USE on PBA and subsequently on Willingness to Pay a Premium (WTPP) which is one of the key outcomes of firms that aim at balancing between sustainability and profitability.

This is an especially topical gap in Pakistan, in which the sustainability awareness is rising, yet the consumer markets are quite price-sensitive (Khan & Sheeraz., 2024). Although international companies are starting to experiment with environmentally friendly packaging, the supporting facts on the impact of this practice on consumer attitude and the willingness to buy premium product in new markets are not that abundant. Even though there is a high level of awareness that sustainable packaging can be considered a differentiator, the psychological processes that help translation of transparency in packaging and unboxing into premium willingness is poorly understood. Lack of knowledge of these mechanisms exposes firms to the danger of making investment in packaging innovations that can never produce consumer value or can not warrant increased prices.

Objectives

This study seeks to:

1. Test the impacts of Perceived Packaging Transparency (PPT) and Unboxing Sustainability Experience (USE) on Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA).
2. Explore the mediating position of PBA between packaging cues and Willingness to Pay a Premium (WTPP).

3. Offer information on how sustainable packaging policy can cultivate authenticity and warrant the high prices in new markets like Pakistan.

The research will help fill the gap in the sustainable marketing and consumer psychology literature by providing theoretical and practical information on the ways in which packaging can be used as a stimulus to brand differentiation and value creation.

Hypothesis Development

Perceived Packaging Transparency (PPT)

Openness and display of green features via packaging eliminates consumer doubt and builds more trust. According to the previous research, consumers will tend to view the brand as a credible and genuine one when the environmental benefits are well communicated by the packaging (Magnier and Crié, 2015; Testa et al., 2021). The recent studies also focus on the idea that the markers of sustainable packaging (clear labeling of recyclability, carbon footprint, or material origin) have a positive impact on consumer attitudes to brand responsibility and authenticity (Bai, 2023; Branca, Resciniti, and Babin, 2024). Such results indicate that packaging transparency functions as a trust-building tool, which contributes to preserving the compatibility between the consumer values and brand communication.

H1: Perceived Packaging Transparency (PPT) has a positive effect on Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA).

Unboxing Sustainability Experience (USE)

Unboxing has been made a symbolic and experience touch point to customers. Unboxing experiences can be sustainable (e.g., recyclable, minimalistic, biodegradable) to add emotional interest and support the attitude towards brand responsibility (Shin et al., 2018; Sastre et al., 2022). Recent research indicates that consumers are becoming more likely to associate green unboxing experiences with authenticity because they believe that the brand can be reliable in its sustainability promises through the length of the consumption experience (Branca et al., 2024; ResearchGate, 2023). This experience aspect of sustainability does not only enhance emotional attachment but also leads to brand loyalty.

H2: Unboxing Sustainability Experience (USE) has a positive effect on Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA).

Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA)

The realness in the consumer is a decisive factor in consumer trust and loyalty. Consumers derive greater value in this scenario as they tend to reward a brand by being creative in their loyalty and premium purchase decision (Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014) when they trust the sustainability initiatives of the brand.

Recent reports affirm that brand authenticity has a high impact on willingness of consumers to pay a premium especially where authenticity is associated with transparent sustainability practices. Fatma and Khan (2024) show that brand authenticity contributes to increasing willingness to pay a premium price with the mediation of brand identification. This is an indication that authenticity does not only lead to transactional results, but it also contributes to the establishment of relationship between consumers and brands. On the same note, Schallehn, Burmann, and Riley (2014) behave that authenticity creates emotional attachment, which is converted to increased perceived value, and willingness to spend more on authentic brands.

In addition, the growing body of empirical evidence points to the fact that the concept of authenticity is becoming a multidimensional notion, that includes heritage, sincerity, and credibility (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). These dimensions strengthen the

consumer perception of brand integrity and this increases the willingness to contribute a higher price. This is also supported by a study conducted by Fritz, Schoenmueller, and Bruhn (2017), which reveals a positive effect of authenticity on brand trust and consumer advocacy, both of which are antecedents of premium purchase behavior. Therefore, perceived brand authenticity serves as a strategic resource of the company that aims to establish itself in the market as a competitive edge based on sustainability-based stories.

H3: *Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA) has a positive effect on Willingness to Pay a Premium (WTPP).*

Mediation Effects of PBA

Authenticity is a psychological mediator that may exist between sustainability cues and consumer behavior. The experiences of packaging and unboxing might not have a direct impact on the premium willingness unless perceived to be authentic (Safeer, 2023). According to research, authenticity can be used to convert sustainability messages into valuable consumer experiences by enhancing credibility and enhancing skepticism (Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014). By so doing, authenticity averts the connection between the eco-friendly packaging cues and the desire to pay a higher price, such that the sustainability initiatives are not disregarded as shallow or greenwashing.

Additional empirical data point to the fact that authenticity is a vital mediator in consumer behavior that is driven by sustainability. Fritz, Schoenmueller, and Bruhn (2017) established that brand authenticity boosts the level of trust and emotional bonding, consequently raising the purchasing propensity of the consumers. In the same manner, Schallehn, Burmann, and Riley (2014) also found that authenticity mediates consumer loyalty and premium purchase intentions influenced by brand communication strategies. This implies that transparency in packaging, as well as sustainable experiences during unboxing processes, should be seen as genuine to convert into increased readiness to pay a higher price. Therefore, authenticity can be seen as the process by which the sustainability cues become persuasive in the consumer decision making process.

H4: *Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA) mediates the relationship between Perceived Packaging Transparency (PPT) and Willingness to Pay a Premium (WTPP).*

H5: *Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA) mediates the relationship between Unboxing Sustainability Experience (USE) and Willingness to Pay a Premium (WTPP).*
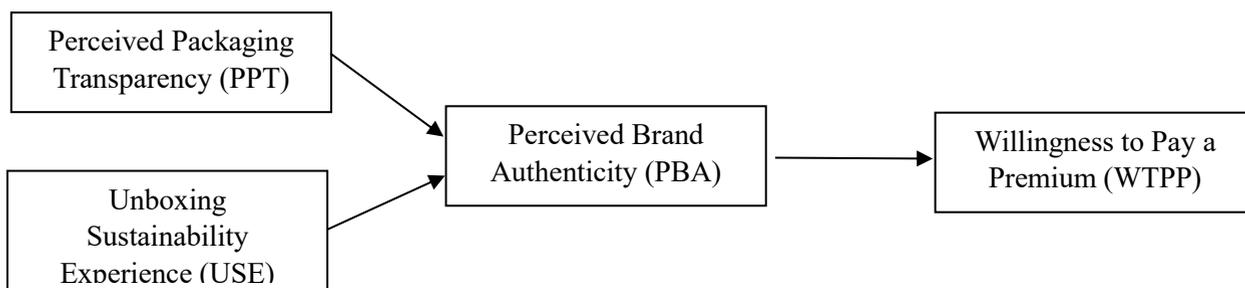
Methodology

Research Design

The paper was a cross-sectional survey design that applied a quantitative methodology to investigate the influence of Perceived Packaging Transparency (PPT), Unboxing Sustainability Experience (USE) on Willingness to Pay a Premium (WTPP) in the consumer population with Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA) as an intermediate variable. The survey method has been viewed as suitable since it can be used to gather standardized data

on a fairly large sample and can be statistically tested to establish hypothesized relationships (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

Population and Sample

The target population called upon consumers in Pakistan with previous experience of buying packaged consumer items, especially in those categories where the sustainability cues can be seen (e.g., food, cosmetics and personal care). The sample size of 150 respondents was chosen as it is a recommended number required in mediation analysis and structural equation modeling, which stipulates 5-10 responses per indicator variable (Hair et al., 2019). The purposive and convenience sampling methods were used to recruit the respondents in the urban cities like Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad where people are relatively aware of sustainable packaging.

Data Collection Procedure

The self-administered questionnaire was a structured questionnaire, but it was administered online (through the Google Forms and social media platforms) and in the physical retail locations. To verify the questionnaire, 20 respondents were used to pre-test the questionnaire to ensure clarity and reliability of items. Participation was voluntary and a promise of confidentiality and anonymity was given to the respondents. Ethical issues were also considered by providing the participants with the aim of the study and getting them to consent to data collection.

Measurement of Variables

The constructs were measured with the help of the established scales that were used in the previous studies.

- Perceived Packaging Transparency (PPT): Scale: Items based on Magnier and Crié (2015) and Testa et al. (2021) and concentrating on the perception of the sustainability message communication transparency and sincerity.
- Unboxing Sustainability Experience (USE): Items were customized based on Sastre et al. (2022), which includes sensory and symbolic attributes of sustainable packaging.
- Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA): Scale created by Morhart et al. (2015), which measures the perceptions about the brand genuineness and the brand credibility of consumers.
- Willingness to Pay a Premium (WTPP): Items were based on Prakash and Pathak (2017) and Nguyen et al. (2020), which are concerned with the willingness of consumers to pay more to have sustainably packaged products.

Everything was rated using a five-point Likert scale (1, strongly disagree); (5, strongly agree).

Data Analysis

The SPSS and PROCESS Macro (Model 4) were used to test the direct and mediating effects. It was initially done with the use of descriptive statistics that help in profiling respondents. Cronbach alpha was used to measure the reliability, and factor analysis was a measure to determine validity. The correlation analysis was used to test the associations between variables. To estimate the PBT indirect effects of PPT and USE on WTPP, the Hayes PROCESS macro with 5,000 bootstrap samples was used to mediate the relationship between PPT and USE and WTPP.

Results

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The study included 150 respondents from major urban centers in Pakistan. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics.

Table 1:   *Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 150)*

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	82	54.7%
	Female	68	45.3%
Age	18–25 years	64	42.7%
	26–35 years	55	36.7%
	36–45 years	21	14.0%
	Above 45 years	10	6.6%
Education	Undergraduate	72	48.0%
	Postgraduate	58	38.7%
	Other	20	13.3%
Monthly Income	Below PKR 50,000	61	40.7%
	PKR 50,000–100,000	57	38.0%
	Above PKR 100,000	32	21.3%

The sample was quite even in gender and most of the respondents fell between the age group of 18-35 years old reputation of being the younger generation who is most interested in sustainability trends in Pakistan.

Reliability and Descriptive Statistics

All constructs showed a high internal consistency with Cronbach alpha values that were higher than the recommended value of.70. Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations.

Table 2:   *Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities, and Correlations (N = 150)*

Variable	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4
1. Perceived Packaging Transparency (PPT)	3.89	0.72	.83	—			
2. Unboxing Sustainability Experience (USE)	3.76	0.68	.82	.42**	—		
3. Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA)	3.94	0.74	.86	.48**	.44**	—	
4. Willingness to Pay a Premium (WTPP)	3.62	0.79	.85	.39**	.36**	.52**	—

Note. α = Cronbach's alpha. **p < .01.**

The constructs all revealed good reliability. The correlations were positive and significant which implied that the greater perceptions of transparency and sustainable unboxing experiences correlate with more authenticity and premium willingness.

Mediation Analysis (PROCESS Macro, Model 4)

Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA) was tested to mediate the role of Perceived Customer Support (PCS) by using Hayes PROCESS macro (Model 4, 5,000 bootstraps). Results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: *Direct and Indirect Effects Using PROCESS Macro (N = 150)*

Pathway	B	SE	t	p	95% CI (LL, UL)
PPT → PBA	0.41	0.08	5.13	<.001	[0.25, 0.57]
USE → PBA	0.37	0.09	4.11	<.001	[0.19, 0.55]
PBA → WTPP	0.49	0.10	4.90	<.001	[0.29, 0.69]
Indirect Effect (PPT → PBA → WTPP)	0.20	0.06	—	—	[0.10, 0.32]
Indirect Effect (USE → PBA → WTPP)	0.18	0.05	—	—	[0.09, 0.29]

- **H1 supported:** PPT significantly predicted PBA.
- **H2 supported:** USE significantly predicted PBA.
- **H3 supported:** PBA significantly predicted WTPP.
- **H4 and H5 supported:** The indirect effects of PPT and USE on WTPP through PBA were significant, as the 95% confidence intervals did not include zero.

The findings reveal that the transparency of the packaging and the positive unboxing experiences make a substantial contribution to the brand authenticity that, in turn, leads to the readiness to pay a higher price. This emphasizes the authenticity as the key psychological process that connects packaging stimuli to consumer behavior in new markets like Pakistan.

Discussion of Findings

This study aimed at investigating the impact of Perceived Packaging Transparency (PPT) and Unboxing Sustainability Experience (USE) to determine Willingness to Pay a Premium (WTPP), with Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA) as an intervening variable. The results offer some significant input into the contribution of sustainable packaging to consumer behavior evolution in Pakistan which is the market where the environmental consciousness is increasing and where price sensitivity is also still high.

The findings depicted that PPT has significant effects in improving brand authenticity perceptions. This result aligns with previous studies, which claim that open communication of pro-environmental qualities leads to decreased consumer distrust and to trust (Magnier and Crié, 2015; Testa et al., 2021). With the Pakistani setting where the issue of false sustainability claims is the most common, environmentally communicative packaging seems to reinforce consumer trust in the genuineness of the brand. This would imply that transparency is not merely a practical quality but also an iconic message of integrity and trustworthiness.

The research also established that the effect of USE on PBA is positive. This is consistent with previous studies showing that unboxing rituals and product package design provide the experience of value that goes beyond the product (Shin et al., 2018; Sastre et al., 2022). Concepts of sustainability at the point of unboxing, including recyclable materials, minimalistic design, or biodegradable packaging, support the sense of responsibility and authenticity. In less developed markets where buyers are becoming more exposed to trends

toward global sustainability via digital means, these experiences can help distinguish brands and establish more intense emotional relationships.

The results also indicated that PBA is a strong predictor of WTPP. Such an outcome confirms the thesis that authenticity is the most essential factor of consumer loyalty and high-end buying (Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014). Consumers are only ready to pay higher prices when they believe that the sustainability initiatives by a brand are not fake. It is especially applicable in Pakistan, where pricing is likely to be the most important factor, yet the consumer is gradually ready to compensate the brands that show realistic environmental responsibility (Shabbir et al., 2023).

The mediation analysis proved that PBA provides psychological mediations between the packaging cues (PPT and USE) and WTPP. This observation underscores the role of authenticity as a key process that converts sustainability cues into consumer value. Packaging transparency and unboxing experiences cannot necessarily result in premium willingness without authenticity. This confirms the thesis of Safeer (2023) that consumers in emerging markets focus their sustainability assessment on authenticity.

Theoretical Contributions

This paper can be added to the existing body of literature because it has incorporated consumer psychology and sustainable marketing. It builds on previous studies that have examined the environmentally friendly packaging by proving that the relationship between the packaging cues and premium willingness is mediated by authenticity. The results are also useful in understanding the interaction between experiential factors, including unboxing, and symbolic messages, including transparency, to influence consumer behavior.

Practical Implications

As a practitioner, the findings indicate that companies ought to aim at transparently reporting eco-attributes and create immersive sustainable unboxing to reinforce perceptions on authenticity. In doing this, the brands will be able to charge high prices even in price-sensitive markets. Herein, one can use recyclable packaging with clear eco-labels, minimalist and eco-friendly unboxing designs, to generate the memorable experiences that would encourage credibility. Such a strategy is not only strengthening consumer confidence, but also is making brands competitive in a world where companies are facing off on the basis of sustainability.

In a country such as Pakistan where the consideration of sustainability is growing, and the level of distrust towards corporate statements is still high, the results highlight the valuable character of authenticity. The brands that invest efforts on packaging strategies which are considered to be authentic are more likely to gain consumer confidence and readiness to pay a higher price. It has both local company and global company implications of both local firms that would like to compete with global brands and international companies that would like to localise their sustainability initiatives.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed how Perceived Packaging Transparency (PPT) and Unboxing Sustainability Experience (USE) influence Willingness to Pay a Premium (WTPP) with Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA) as a moderating factor. According to the results of the surveys conducted among 150 Pakistani consumers, the results indicate that both PPT and USE have a substantial impact on improving the perceptions of authenticity, which positively affect the readiness of consumers to pay more money on sustainably packaged products. These findings emphasize authenticity as a critical psychological process linking packaging stimuli with value generation by consumers.

The research paper adds to the existing folio of literature on sustainable marketing by uniting the psychology of consumers and the design of packaging. It demonstrates that packaging is not only an effective necessity, but also a strategic tool of communication that may create trust, brand differentiation, and rationalize high prices in new markets. To practitioners, the report highlights the need to create packaging that is eco-friendly and socially believable thus helping companies to create value and at the same time work towards ensuring sustainability.

Limitations

However, this study is not without limitations in spite of its contributions. First, the study utilized cross-sectional design, which does not allow making causal conclusions. Longitudinal research could give more information concerning the way perceptions of packaging and authenticity change over time. Second, the sample contained 150 respondents that were living in urban centers in Pakistan, which could not provide the accurate reflection of the diversity of consumer attitudes in rural areas and other developing economies. Third, the research was based on self-report tools, which can be prone to social desirability bias, especially when it comes to the questions being sustainability-related. Lastly, in the study, consumer attention was made on general consumer goods; this finding might be varying among product lines such as luxury goods, food or personal care.

Future Research Directions

It is possible to expand this research in several ways in the future. To start with, the scholars can consider making cross-cultural comparisons and investigate whether the relations between packaging transparency, unboxing experiences, authenticity, and willingness to pay a premium exist between various cultural and institutional settings. Second, this can be done by using experimental designs to manipulate cues of packaging and directly test its effect on consumer perceptions and consumer behavior. Third, additional studies can be done on the moderating variables like the environmental concern, income level or the generational difference in order to comprehend the heterogeneity in consumer responses.

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