Ehrenberg-Bass Institute **Working Paper**:

Out with the... new and in with the old? Investigating the relationship between visually cohesive portfolios and consumer liking

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Authors:

Dr Ella Ward - Ehrenberg-Bass Institute

University of South Australia | Ehrenberg-Bass Institute for Marketing Science

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Abstract

To communicate a strong identity, a branded portfolio should appear visually cohesive, such that all products are connected through consistent use of logos, colours and design. Yet it is commonplace for marketers to design line extension packaging that intentionally juxtapose the Masterbrand in attempts to disrupt consumers and gain favour on-shelf.

This research investigates the relationship between visual cohesion and consumer liking of a portfolio's appearance. It applies a new measure, the Portfolio Branding Cohesion Metric, to explore effects of design typicality and novelty, as well as brand usage on liking. Results suggest no overarching relationship between visual cohesion and liking of a portfolio's appearance, while preference for cohesion is seen in three of five categories examined. Findings also suggest that cohesion is preferred by brand users and does little to reduce the liking of a portfolio among non-users.

Therefore, marketers should not be driven to create novel and disruptive packaging in hopes of gaining consumer preference. Instead, line extensions should be designed to protect the Masterbrand and build a strong brand identity.

Key words: Portfolio branding, pack design, line extension

Track: Product and Brand Management

1. Brand Identity and Visual Cohesion

Visual brand identity, which comprises branding elements such as logos, colours and packaging style, is a crucial means to differentiate from competitors and stand out in today's cluttered marketing environment (Buil et al., 2016; Jain, 2017; Vinitha et al., 2021). The purpose of a visual brand identity is to unify disparate brand elements in a manner that feels seamless to consumers (Perry & Wisnom, 2003; Sample et al., 2020; Wheeler, 2013). Therefore, to communicate a strong identity, a branded portfolio should appear cohesive, such that all products within the portfolio are connected to one another in terms of design (Nguyen et al., 2018). As such, line extensions that expand a portfolio and require a new pack design have a critical role the maintenance of portfolio cohesion in the long term.

The majority of everyday household purchases reflect habitual, repeat-buying from a repertoire of brands (Banelis et al., 2013; East et al., 2008; Ehrenberg, 1972). In a retail context, a cohesive visual identity facilitates this behaviour by guiding consumers to the brand on-shelf and making it easy to find (e.g. the colour blocking of Cadbury purple in the chocolate category) (Pieters & Warlop, 1999; Romaniuk & Caruso, 2018). By comparison, if a brand lacks cohesion, the inconsistency of branding elements across the portfolio can mean consumers fail to form visual heuristics and take longer to find the brand. This inconsistency also reduces communication efficiencies, as the varying brand assets used by different products compete for a finite level of marketing support, both on-pack, and in advertising (Koschmann & Sheth, 2018). Thus visual branding cohesion is critical to effectively maintain and build the Masterbrand (Farquhar et al., 1992).

2. Visual Cohesion and Consumer Liking of Portfolio Appearance

To facilitate a cohesive identity, brands must, in essence, create a Masterbrand archetype that is reflected across all products within the portfolio. This archetype would comprise the branding elements typical of the portfolio. Returning to the Cadbury Dairy Milk example, a typical product would be primarily purple in colour, with the gold Cadbury logo at the top of the pack, followed by the 'glass and a half' image, larger Dairy Milk logo in white, and finally the variant detail at the bottom (see Figure 1).

Despite the known benefits of a cohesive identity, it is commonplace for marketers to launch line extensions, such as Cadbury Energy, that intentionally reject the Masterbrand archetype in an attempt to differentiate the new product and disrupt consumers at the shelf

(Romaniuk & Caruso, 2018). Indeed, this contradiction also appears in literature, where the effects of typicality versus novelty (the antithesis to typicality) on visual preference for consumer products has been widely debated (e.g., Crilly et al., 2004; Hekkert et al., 2003).

Figure 1: Cadbury Dairy Milk brand archetype

What remains undisputed, however, is the importance of a consumer liking as an important antecedent to purchase (e.g., Bower & Turner, 2001; Gunaratne et al., 2019). This research builds an important bridge between cohesion, a characteristic crucial to strong brand identity systems, and consumer liking, a construct critical to preference and therefore purchase.

2.1 The effects of typicality on visual preference for products

Preference-for-prototypes theory suggests that preference for an object (or product) is directly influenced by how representative that product is of the rest of the category (Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998; Whitfield & Slatter, 1979). Put simply, products that appear the most typical are more preferred (Hekkert et al., 2003). Empirical support for this theory comes from a study by Mugge and Dahl that found that typicality (framed as low levels of design newness) lead to more positive evaluations of innovative products (2013). Applying this theory to visually cohesive portfolios leads to the following hypothesis:

H1a: Consumers will like the appearance of high cohesion (typical) portfolios more than low cohesion portfolios.

2.2. The effects of novelty on visual preference for products

Directly opposing H1a, design novelty is defined as the degree of deviation between a new product and existing products (Liu et al., 2020; Talke et al., 2009). Design novelty includes changes in the product's colours, materials, shape and dimensions (Liu et al., 2020; Ranscombe et al., 2012).

Seminal studies in the field of visual attentional and psychology have established that novel stimuli receive increased attention (Fantz, 1964) and increase perceptions of pleasingness and interestingness (Berlyne, 1970). In similar light, novel products have been found to attract more attention from consumers (Garber, 1995), and derive greater emotional responses, such as interest (Crilly et al., 2004). Given the known, positive link between attention and preference (Shen & Sengupta, 2014), it is suggested that design novelty may increase consumer preference (Liu et al., 2020). This leads to the competing hypothesis:

H1b: Consumers will like the appearance of low cohesion (novel) portfolios more than high cohesion portfolios.

2.3. Brand usage effects on product liking

Much like typicality and novelty, the relationship between familiarity and liking has been well documented (e.g. Montoya et al., 2017). Originating in psychology theory, the mere exposure effect suggests that a person will demonstrate increasingly high preference for something they are repeatedly exposed to (Stang, 1975). This theory has been found to hold in a marketing context, such that brand users have more positive, and unique brand associations than non-users (Romaniuk & Gaillard, 2007). Indeed, familiarity is known to have several positive neurological effects, for example users of a brand are also more likely to notice advertising, and correctly recall the brand name (e.g. Simmonds et al., 2020). Given brand users have more frequent exposure to a brand than non-users, and therefore greater familiarity, we can predict that:

H2: The appearance of a portfolio will be liked more by brand-buyers than non-buyers.

While the comparison of portfolio liking amongst buyers and non-buyers may be hypothesised based on existing research, there is insufficient evidence to anticipate whether brand usage influences preference for visually cohesive portfolios. In particular, the preference of non-buyers is of managerial value given the well documented link between penetration and brand growth (e.g. Ehrenberg et al., 1990). Therefore, this research asks:

RQ1: How does liking of the visual appearance of high and low cohesion portfolios differ between brand buyers and non-buyers

The following section details the method employed to address H1, H2 and RQ1.

3. Method

3.1 The Portfolio Branding Cohesion Metric

Within this research cohesion is measured with the Portfolio Branding Cohesion Metric (PBCM). PBCM delivers a single metric for a brand portfolio that captures the consistent use of branding elements across all variants. Originally spanning logo, colour and pack shape (Ward et al., 2019), the PBCM has evolved to capture a wider range of branding elements including logo (graphic and font), color, pack style (and material), character, slogan and image on pack.

$$PBC = \frac{\sum_{\mathrm{i}=1}^{n} BIE1}{n}$$

PBCM reflects the percentage of variants within a portfolio that use a particular brand element (BE), divided by the number of unique brand elements present in a portfolio (n).

3.2 Sample frame and measuring liking

Using pack images sourced from online retailers, we calculated PBCM for 81 brand portfolios in the United Kingdom. The brands covered 5 categories, including dry dog food, instant coffee, toothpaste, shower gel and chewing gum. The sample in this study includes the most and least cohesive portfolio from each category. Table 1 details the sample frame and high/low cohesion classification.

Table 1: PBCM and Cohesion classification of the sample frame

	High Cohesion		Low Cohesion	
Category	**Brand**	**PBCM**	**Brand**	**PBCM**
Dry Dog Food	Pedigree	100	ASDA Hero	35
Instant Coffee	L'Or	100	Nescafe	29
Toothpaste	Corsodyl	100	Colgate	30
Shower Gel	Aveeno	87	Radox	19
Chewing Gum	Starburst	64	Extra	28
Average		90		28

A total of 626 respondents were recruited from a professional online panel in the United Kingdom and screened to be partially or totally responsible for grocery shopping for the household. To capture a nationally representative sample, we employed quotas for gender, age and location. The sample split was as follows: 46% male, 56% female; 8% 18-24 years, 21% 25-34 years, 24% 35-44 years, 26% 45-54 years and 21% 55-65 years.

To explore the relationship between portfolio cohesion and the likability of its appearance, respondents were presented with a coloured image of each portfolio and asked *"How much do you like the appearance of this product range?"* Portfolio likability was measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 'dislike the appearance very much' to 'like the appearance very much'.

4. Results

As per Table 2, the mean liking of portfolios with high cohesion and low cohesion is consistent at 4.9. Hence, there is no significant difference in the liking of high and low cohesion portfolios ($p<0.05$ using a paired samples T-test). When split by category, we find that cohesive portfolios are preferred in three of the five categories examined: dry dog food, chewing gum and toothpaste. This provides preliminary support for H1a but requires further investigation of other product categories to build the robustness of the finding.

There is no significant difference in the liking of the high and low cohesion instant coffee portfolios, whereas the low cohesion shower gel portfolio is liked more. Thus, due to a lack of significant difference overall, and variability at the category level, we find insufficient support for H1b.

Table 2: Mean liking of portfolio appearance for high and low cohesion brands

Brand	Cohesion	Mean Liking
Aveeno	H	4.8
Radox	L	5.3
Difference		-0.5*
Pedigree	H	4.8
Hero	L	4.3
Difference		0.5*
Starburst	H	5.0
Extra	L	4.8
Difference		0.2*

L'OR	H	5.2
Nescafe	L	5.1
Difference		0.1
Corsodyl	H	4.5
Colgate	L	4.9
Difference		0.4*
Average	**H**	**4.9**
	L	**4.9**
Difference		**0**
Std Dev	**H**	**0.24**
	L	**0.37**

Statistically significant at p<0.05

Regarding H2, we find that the mean liking of a portfolio's visual appearance is 5.5 for brand users compared to 4.9 for non-users (T-test significant at $p<0.05$). This result is consistent within the high cohesion group and low cohesion group. Hence, we find support for H2, that the appearance of a portfolio will be liked more by brand-users than non-users.

In response to RQ1, we find that brand users like high cohesion portfolios significantly more than they like low cohesion portfolios (5.7 vs 5.4), however non-users like non-cohesive portfolios slightly more (5 vs. 4.8 for high cohesion portfolios) (see Table 3).

Table 3: Differences in portfolio liking amongst brand users and non-users

Cohesion	Brand	Mean Liking (User)	n	Mean Liking (Non-User)	n
H	Pedigree	5.7	107	5.0	101
H	Corsodyl	5.2	104	4.4	461
H	Starburst	5.9	97	5.2	178
H	Lor	6.0	89	5.3	356
H	Aveeno	5.9	85	4.6	430
L	Colgate	5.1	393	4.7	172
L	Nescafe	5.5	256	5.1	189
L	Radox	5.7	235	5.0	101
L	Extra	5.3	173	5.4	102
L	Hero	4.8	28	4.7	180
H	**Average**	**5.7***		**4.8***	
L	**Average**	**5.4**		**5.0**	
All	**Average**	**5.5****		**4.9**	

**Significant against low cohesion portfolios at p<0.05*

***Significant against total non-users at p<0.05*

5. Discussion

This research finds that, overall, PBCM has no significant effect on whether consumers like the appearance of a brand's portfolio. Consumers generally have neutral feelings towards a branded product range such that they neither like, nor dislike the appearance, regardless of how visually cohesive its branding is.

Despite previous research finding novel products attract more attention and thereafter preference (Garber, 1995; Liu et al., 2020; Shen & Sengupta, 2014), we find no consistent evidence to suggest that low cohesion portfolios (i.e. those with high variability/novelty in design) have higher likability than low cohesion portfolios. For three of five categories examined, we find the opposite, that high cohesion portfolios (i.e., those with design typicality) are more preferred than those with low cohesion. This is supported by prior research from Mugge and Dahl (2013) and, more broadly, suggests that preference-for-prototype theory may indeed hold in the context of prototypical products within a branded portfolio (Whitfield & Slatter, 1979).

Further, this research finds that users of a brand demonstrate a significant preference for visually cohesive portfolios, while non-users slightly prefer non-cohesive portfolios. It should be noted, however, that the difference in liking of high and low cohesion portfolios among non-users equals only 0.2 on a 7-point scale. Thus, managerial significance is likely trivial. Instead, the largest effect appears to be brand usage and liking generally. That is, category buyers rate the visual appearance of portfolios they use significantly higher than those they do not use.

It has been established that visual branding cohesion is an important means to protect and build a strong brand identity (Nguyen et al., 2018), and that consumer preference is a crucial precursor to purchase intention (e.g., Bower & Turner, 2001; Gunaratne et al., 2019). The present research suggests that two metrics, cohesion and likability, are not related at an aggregate level. The primary implication of this finding is that marketers should not be driven to create novel and disruptive packaging for line extensions that may jeopardise the Masterbrand identity. Instead, preliminary findings suggest that cohesion may preferred by brand users and does little to reduce the liking of a portfolio among non-users.

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