

Received: December 2022

Accepted: June 2023

DOI: 10.7862/rz.2023.mmr.13

Konrad SMOLEŃ<sup>1</sup>

## ROLE OF UNIT PACKAGING VISUAL LAYER IN MARKETING ACTIVITIES

Packaging and its visual layer form a unique value for a product and have an impact on its image. The component elements of a visual layer are signs whose precise division is shown in a classification based on the structure and functions of signs. Every single sign of packaging has huge importance in the context of providing specific information designed to induce a potential buyer to make a purchase. The aim of this paper is to analyse and synthesise information pertaining to the signs of a unit packaging visual layer in relation to marketing activities – effective consumer communication and attractive product presentation. Considerations and findings presented herein may prove to be useful in the designing of packaging<sup>2</sup>.

**Keywords:** packaging, packaging visual layer, brand, marketing communication.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

A visual layer of unit packaging is a term which can be found in the packaging literature quite often and is usually associated with the marketing function of unit packaging. Sellers strive to induce consumers to purchase a product by using an innovative design of a visual layer. Packaging is often referred to as a “silent salesman” (Cichoń 1998), however, this term should relate, as a matter of fact, to a visual layer of packaging, which may, by means of a variety of signs such a layer contains, have a considerable impact on consumers’ decisions. Every element of a visual layer of packaging should be carefully selected in the visual layer design process because the combination of components enables a consumer to receive specific information from a seller. In addition, a visual layer of packaging allows for the identification of a given product with a brand.

The aim of the paper is to analyze the available literature sources regarding the visual layer of the packaging. It will allow to verify the hypothesis that publications referring to the visual layer of unit packaging clearly indicate the relationship between the visual layer and the marketing function of the packaging, because the visual layer allows the seller to communicate with the consumer, is a guarantee of an attractive product presentation and identifies the brand.

---

<sup>1</sup> Konrad Smoleń, Cracow University of Economics, Poland; e-mail: smolenk@uek.krakow.pl. ORCID: 0000-0003-2692-4546.

<sup>2</sup> The publication was financed from the subsidy granted to the Cracow University of Economics – Project nr 033/ZJO/2022/PRO.

## 2. DEFINITION OF UNIT PACKAGING VISUAL LAYER

The definition of a visual layer has received wide coverage in the literature on the subject. Nevertheless, the extent to which that definition is interpreted is closely related to authors' understanding of the role and importance of a visual layer. According to J. Szymczak (2003), a visual layer of packaging is "a set of signs which are inseparably connected with packaging, and which form and are perceived as a whole". M. Pyszczyk (2011) considers the definitions of packaging and a visual layer of packaging synonymous. Broader meaning is presented by M. Lisińska-Kuśnierz (2009), who submitted that a visual layer is formed by many signs which are manifested mainly through such elements as: material type, shape, colour, all sorts of texts and varieties of lettering, font size, graphic design, ergonomic solutions, etc., and these components serve mainly as informational and promotional means. A similar view on a visual layer was taken by K. Kołomańska (2014; 2016), who described it along with its elements which, according to the author, include: packaging shape, colour, information on a product showed on packaging, symbolism, marking, closure, ornaments, as well as the material which is used for packaging. On the other hand, Cholewa-Wójcik (2016) portrays a visual layer as a unique instrument designed to create positive emotions and product experiences. The perception of both packaging and a visual layer depends also on a profession practised by an individual. Striving to find the limits, experts in the field can tend to narrow the very definition down. Whereas representatives of art schools will endeavour to place packaging and its visual layer in space.

Making an attempt to define, as precisely as possible, the term in question, it is expedient to refer to dictionary definitions of "layer" and "visual". *Słownik języka polskiego PWN* (PWN Dictionary of Polish Language) says that a "layer" can be understood as "a certain amount of something which forms a uniform plane on the surface or between something and something" or as "components of an object or a phenomenon, which form a certain whole" (layer, [an entry in:] *Słownik języka polskiego PWN*). Given the first of these two definitions, a "layer" bears identical meaning as a "plane", hence its perception could be limited. Whereas the word "layer" construed as *components of an object or a phenomenon* gives opportunities to interpret the term in question as something complex. It appears that the very term "layer" is used slightly more often in relation to a "plane", however, in the context of a visual layer of packaging, researchers – when speaking of a "layer" – more frequently opt for the definition which says that it means *components of an object*.

As regards the word "visual", when one consults the aforesaid dictionary, *Słownik języka polskiego PWN*, it is defined as "linked to sight and an image as a means of conveying information" (visual, [an entry in:] *Słownik języka polskiego PWN*). Therefore, a visual layer of packaging can be understood as the signs which are inseparable elements of packaging, perceived as a whole.

A visual layer of unit packaging is particularly relevant to marketing, as it is seen as a marketing communication instrument (Ankiel-Homa, 2012).

## 3. DESCRIPTION OF SIGNS OF UNIT PACKAGING VISUAL LAYER AS A MEANS OF MARKETING COMMUNICATION

A visual layer of unit packaging is a vehicle for signs including anything that constitutes the components of packaging and, at the same time, sends a message to a recipient. According to the semiotic concept, a visual layer of packaging is construed as "an

intentional code – coordinated in a precisely defined manner – that is to say, a system of signs” (Ankiel-Homa, Szymczak, 2008). As argued by M. Ankiel-Homa (2012), the signs of a packaging visual layer are categorised exclusively as iconic and symbolic signs. Iconic signs include photographs; drawings, ornaments or decorations, while symbolic signs encompass: colours, as well as separable and inseparable signs. Separable signs are ideographic and word signs, e.g. words, expressions, sentences, whereas inseparable signs comprise the size of packaging, closure, shape and design form.

However, the signs of a visual layer do not include so-called transcendental signs, which are additional elements, attached (as part of sales promotion activities) to packaging – such as free samples, competition coupons etc. As a matter of fact, these are not inextricable components of packaging.

The signs of a visual layer encompass obligatory signs (whose form and content is prescribed by applicable legislation under which manufacturers are required to use specific signs) and optional signs (which can have any appearance, content and form).

The elements of a visual layer can be classified using many criteria (Żmijewska, 2016), however, the most transparent classifications were proposed by M. Ankiel-Homa (2012). These are classifications based on the function and structure of signs and the relationship between a sign and its object and interpretant. The most comprehensive division is based on the function and structure of signs. Figure 1 shows the classification of the symbolic signs of a packaging visual layer based on the function and structure of signs.

Inseparable signs are conceived of as the signs which do not have their opposite elements within particular packaging (Szymczak, 2013) and are placed on it, taking one form (Ankiel-Homa, 2012). They are associated directly with an object. The first inseparable sign is a design form which is one and only for particular packaging and cannot take any other additional form at the same time. The most popular design forms of unit packaging include bottles, jars, boxes, cans, bags, ampoules, aerosol containers, trays or sachets. Another inseparable sign is shape, defined as *external appearance of an object or a design of something* (shape [an entry in:] *Słownik języka polskiego PWN*). In the case of packaging, they most often are figures or solid bodies. Next identified inseparable sign is the size of unit packaging, characterised by its dimensions – and both the size and volume are parameters which do not change for particular packaging. The last inseparable sign of a visual layer is the type of packaging closure/the manner it is closed, which depends on the type of packaging and material it is made of. Glass packaging usually comes with metal or plastic caps or stoppers, metal packaging – with lids made of galvanised or aluminium sheet, each of which has varnish coating, whereas plastic packaging uses such techniques like welding or closures made of polymers – e.g. polypropylene (Gajlewicz, 2021). Each of the inseparable signs of a visual layer conveys specific information and affects a consumer in a given way. Combinations of design forms having a certain size and volume, their specific shapes and methods of closure build a unique product picture, as well as affect the way how both a product itself and a brand are seen.

A symbolic sign of a visual layer is colour, which attracts a consumer’s particular attention because it is the colour that is capable of triggering his or her emotions. Respective colours are associated with particular emotions, but their perception is culture-bound. Differences can be noticed not only for cultures on various continents, but also within one continent. Table 1 demonstrates how colours are perceived in Europe.

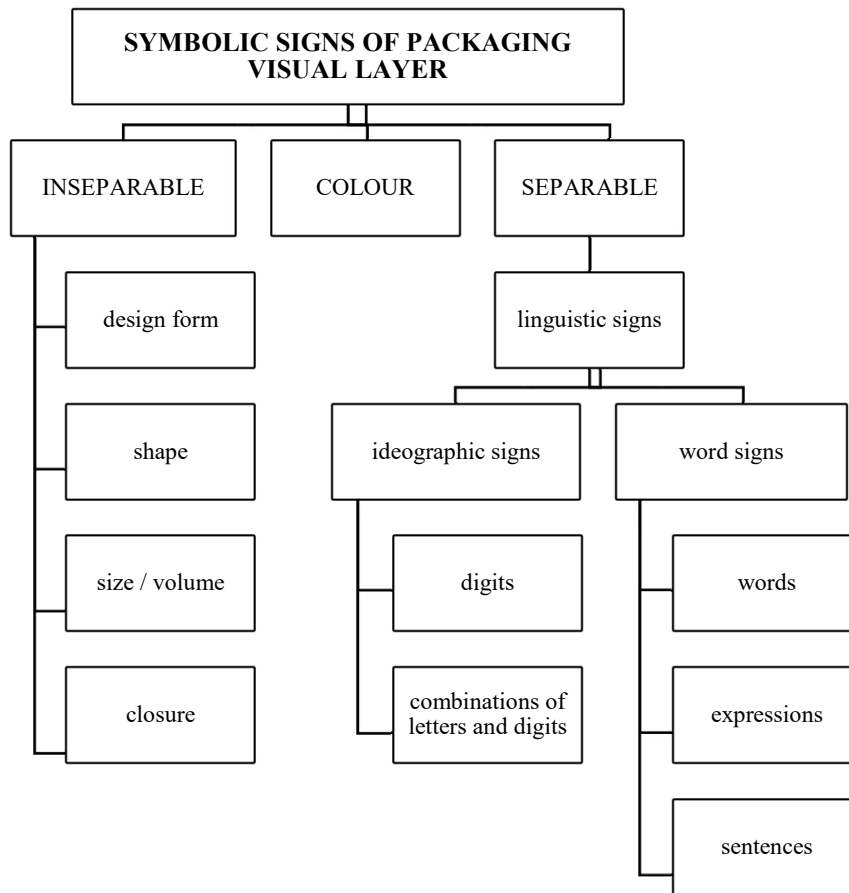


Figure 1. Classification of Symbolic Signs of Packaging Visual Layer Based on Function and Structure of Signs

Source: (Ankiel-Homa, 2012).

Colour, apart from arousing certain consumer's emotions, is also used for brand identification. "Milka" chocolate evokes associations with purple, "Lipton" tea with yellow, while "Coca-Cola" with red colour. Consumers are not keen on rapid changes, hence sudden modifications to packaging colour are also undesirable (Pyszczek, 2011).

The third type of symbolic signs of a visual layer includes separable signs, which are identical to linguistic signs. Word signs and ideographic signs placed on packaging are used to convey specific information. Word signs encompass both single words (e.g. "ecological"), expressions (e.g. "power derived from the nature") and whole sentences, giving, to a large extent, a product description. They have a specified font, which affects the way how a visual layer is perceived by a consumer. Ideographic signs are digits or combinations of digits and letters conveying a given message. Manufacturers usually use them to emphasise or highlight special information pertaining to a product, while ideographic signs are designed to attract consumers' attention. In some cultures, certain digits may be deliberately avoided, also in a visual layer of packaging, due to symbolism.

For instance, in Japan and China, the digit 4 means a failure, and even death (Rudnicki 2000).

Table 1. Differences in Symbolic Perception of Colours in Selected European Countries

COUNTRY	COLOUR		
	green	blue	yellow
Austria	hope	fidelity	jealousy
Denmark	hope, boredom, health	tranquillity, cold, indifference	danger, insincerity, modesty
Finland	hope, modesty	good quality	-
France	youthfulness, concern	anger, concern	disease
Portugal	hope	jealousy, difficulties	despair
Switzerland	something unwanted or immature	rage, anger, love affair	-
Sweden	inexperience	recklessness	lack of money
Italy	youthfulness, lack of money, anger	concern	anger

Source: own elaboration based on M. Pyszczek (2011).

Apart from symbolic signs of a visual layer, M. Ankiel-Homa (2012) distinguished iconic signs. Figure 2 shows the classification of iconic signs based on the function and structure of signs.

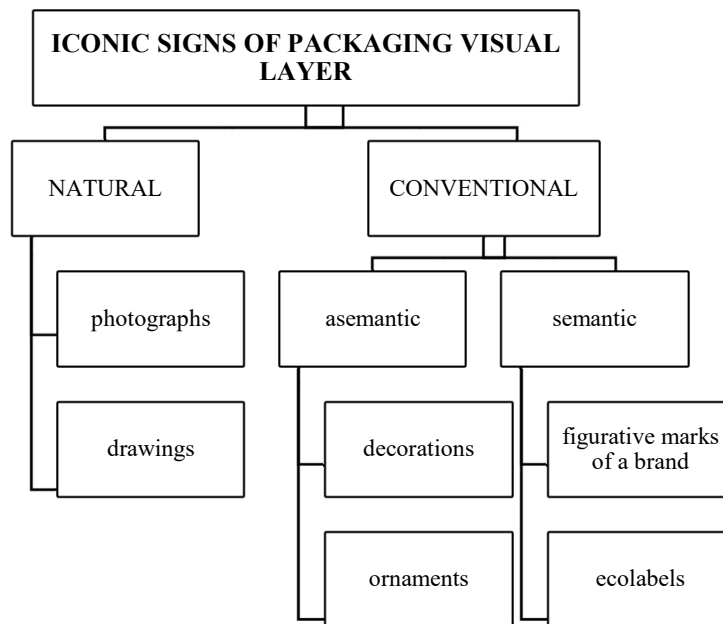


Figure 2. Classification of Iconic Signs of Packaging Visual Layer Based on Function and Structure of Signs

Source: (Ankiel-Homa, 2012).

Iconic signs of a visual layer are classified as natural and conventional signs. Natural signs are those signs which are based on natural, instinctive human knowledge. According to M. Ankiel-Homa (2012), natural signs comprise photographs and drawings, which can also – as is the case with colours – constitute an element of brand identification. Picture 1 depicts packaging of the product “Kinder Cioccolato” with a photograph showing a boy who is smiling. That image sparks off clear associations with the product of the Kinder brand.



Figure 3. Packaging of “Kinder Cioccolato” Product

Source: (<https://spozywczzo.pl/1054-kinder-czekoladki--4szt---opak-20>).

Apart from natural iconic signs of a packaging visual layer, there are also conventional, that is to say, normative signs. Additionally, they are divided into semantic and asemantic signs. Semantic signs include: figurative marks of a brand (logos, logotypes) and ecolabels, which can be placed in a visual layer of packaging only when a manufacturer obtains relevant certificates demonstrating that its product is eco-friendly. Decorations and ornaments are categorised under asemantic signs. Decorations can be made, e.g. by screen printing, hot stamping or flocking, whereas ornaments are decorative motifs. Both forms of asemantic signs constitute a unique added value to a design of packaging visual layer (Ankiel-Homa, 2012). Figure 4 shows ornaments on packaging.



Figure 4. Visual Layer of Packaging with Visible Ornaments

Source: (<https://www.opakowaniacukiernicze.pl/produkt/kartony-na-ciasto-18x18x9-cm>).

The basic division of signs of a unit packaging visual layer proposed by M. Ankiel-Homa (2012) with reference to J. Szymczak (2003) shows that a visual layer of packaging is a broad concept, and all its signs are significant in the context of their perception by consumers.

#### 4. DESIGNING SIGNS OF PACKAGING VISUAL LAYER

The designing of packaging is a complicated process, which must be subject to essential requirements (Ankiel-Homa, Czaja-Gagielska, Assman, 2011). Creating signs and codes (a set of signs), which may be used in a visual layer of packaging and which are a vehicle for encoded market information, is extremely difficult. The way signs are perceived and interpreted by consumers varies, which is often completely different from assumptions made by an entity putting a packaged product on the market (Ankiel-Homa, 2012). Apart from the knowledge of properties and characteristics of individual visual elements, importance is attached to specific recipient's impression and association regarding quality, value and effectiveness, as well as factors that have a bearing on the perception and interpretation of signs of a visual layer. They include biophysical, ethnic, tradition-related factors and stereotypes rooted in awareness (Kołomańska, 2016).

Research conducted by P. Silayoi and M. Speece (2007) proved that the effectiveness of packaging in attracting the attention of a prospective consumer results from a graphic background and a verbal message placed on it. L. Garber, E. Hyatt and U. Boyna (2009) observed that out of all signs of a packaging visual layer, word signs and characteristics understood as the manner in which packaging is perceived play a key role from the marketing perspective. The perception of packaging may be conditional, among other things, on gender, e.g. in the context of colours. In her research, A.I. Baruk (2009) demonstrated that taking into consideration a recipient's gender in designing a visual layer of packaging proved to be of key importance. Men in general do not understand colour nuances (e.g. they do not differentiate between canary yellow and peach). Using the pallet of colours must be therefore simplified, if the target group of designing are males (Steward, 2009).

It is not uncommon that a figurative mark of a brand is altered to adapt it to dynamically changing consumer expectations and requirements. Attempts are made to design a logo (logotype) from scratch, retaining an element recognised by purchasers, which is a demanding and risky task. Another difficult challenge for designers is the selection of a proper font or its size. Apart from a requirement for clarity, a sign being created must reflect the nature of a brand, identify and embellish. What is useful for designing signs of a visual layer is the knowledge of how a human eye perceives, moving always from left to right, from a big to small element, from black to white, from colourful to colourless. Additionally, a characteristic human feature of people's sight is a preference for order and harmony (Pyszczek, 2011).

A visual layer should be designed, while taking into account emerging trends, which nowadays could include personalisation or adapting recyclable materials (Smoleń, Cholewa-Wójcik, 2021). It is also vital to ensure that a visual layer of packaging is designed carefully, with attention being given to every detail and taking into consideration the fact that consumers' perception of every sign should be concurrent with a designer's intention. The application of an eye-tracking method is inestimable added value (Cholewa-Wójcik, Kawecka, 2015).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The concept of a “visual layer” of packaging has a broad scope and refers not only to what can be seen on a shop shelf, but it is definitely wider. Elements (signs) of a visual layer are also a design form, shape or a type of product packaging closure. The components of a visual layer of packaging are the signs whose visual layer serves as a vehicle. These signs, which constitute a visual layer of packaging, are at the same time a manifestation of a product which is contained in packaging and send specific messages to consumers, persuading them to make a purchase. Nowadays, the field which is occupying a greater and greater role in designing a visual layer and its signs is neuromarketing (Pradeep, 2011). In times when people are overloaded with information and, to a certain extent, as a consequence of that, need to make quick decisions, messages represented by signs of a packaging visual layer are received and processed by consumers immediately. Similarly, purchasing decisions are made quickly. Hence the role of signs of a packaging visual layer is sometimes dominant. Bloch (2011) demonstrated in his paper that packaging provides a consumer with useful, hedonistic and semiotic benefits. However, this may be achieved by an appropriate design of a packaging visual layer.

After reviewing the publication of this topic, it can be concluded that the concept of the visual layer of the packaging and a number of signs that this layer contains have been thoroughly and in great depth analyzed by researchers. They agree that each of the signs of the visual layer of the packaging should be carefully selected in the visual layer design. The signs of the visual layer of the packaging can be analyzed both separately and as a whole. In addition, researchers in their publications repeatedly draw attention to the connection between the visual layer of the packaging and the marketing function of unit packaging. The consumer, through the interpretation of the signs of the visual layer, receives a number of specific information from the seller, who communicates with the consumer just through these signs. For the seller, careful selection of signs in the process of visual layer design of the unit packaging may contribute to the attractive presentation of the product, as well as build the value and importance of the brand that the product represents. Thus, the term “silent salesman” should be used in relation to the visual layer of the packaging, created by a series of signs.

## REFERENCES

- Ankiel-Homa, M., Czaja-Jagielska, N., Assman, K. (2011). *Projektowanie opakowań jednostkowych – kluczowe aspekty procesu*. „Opakowanie”, 7.
- Ankiel-Homa, M. (2012). *Wartość komunikacyjna opakowań jednostkowych*. Poznań: PWE.
- Baruk, A.I., (2009). *Znaczenie marek produktów spożywczych w opiniach polskich nabywców*. „Marketing i Rynek”, t. 16 (2).
- Bloch, P.H. (2011). *Product design and marketing: reflection after fifteen years*. “Journal of Product Innovation Management”, (28).
- Cholewa-Wójcik, A. (2016). *Weryfikacja możliwości wykorzystania nieparametrycznego testu niezależności do analizy postrzegania wybranych elementów komunikacji wizualnej opakowań*. „Humanities and Social Sciences”, nr 23(3).
- Cholewa-Wójcik, A., Kawecka, A. (2015). *The influence of effectiveness of packaging elements on the consumers' preferences with the use of marketing eye-tracking technique*. “Modern Management Review”, Vol. 20, No. 22(1).
- Cichoń, M. (1998). *Funkcja informacyjna i edukacyjna opakowań*. „Opakowanie”, 2.



- Gajlewicz, I. (2021). *Zamknięcia do opakowań w przemyśle spożywczym*, „Przemysł Spożywczy”, t. 75.
- Garber, L., Hyat, E., Boyna, U. (2009). *The effect of package shape on apparent volume: an exploratory study with implication for package design*. “*Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*”, 17.
- Kołomańska, K. (2014). *Opakowanie jako element sterowania poziomem jakości wizualnej*. „*Opakowanie*”, 12.
- (2016). *Funkcje warstwy wizualnej opakowania – podejście zintegrowane*. „*Opakowanie*”, 4.
- Kształt* [an entry in:] *Słownik języka polskiego* [online] [Access: 2.12.2022]. Access on the internet: <https://sjp.pwn.pl/szukaj/ksztalt.html>.
- Lisińska-Kuśnierz, M. (2009). *Preferencje dotyczące elementów warstwy wizualnej opakowań reklamowych*. „*Opakowanie*”, 2.
- Pradeep, A.K. (2011). *Mózg na zakupach. Neuromarketing w sprzedaży*. Gliwice: Helion.
- Pyszczyk, M. (2011). *Wybrane aspekty projektowania warstwy wizualnej opakowań*. „*Opakowanie*”, 7.
- Ratajczyk, M. (2020) *Metody badania wpływu opakowań na zachowania zakupowe konsumentów* [w:] Mazurek-Łopacińska, K., Sobocińska, M., red., *Badania marketingowe wobec nowych trendów w otoczeniu*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego we Wrocławiu, s. 145–158.
- Rudnicki, I. (2000). *Zachowania konsumentów na rynku*. Warszawa: PWE.
- Silayoi, P., Speece, M. (2007). *Importance of packaging attributes: a conjoint analysis approach*. “*European Journal of Marketing*”.
- Smoleń, K., Cholewa-Wójcik, A. (2021). Consumers’ purchasing decisions as a resultant of the perception of selected elements of the packaging’s visual layer [w:] Kelemen-Erdos, A., Feher-Polgar P., Popovics A., red., *FIKUSZ 2021. XVI. International Conference: Proceedings*. Budapest: Obuda University. Keleti Karoly Faculty of Business and Management, s. 227–240.
- Steward, B. (2008). *Projektowanie opakowań*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PWN.
- Szymczak, J. (2003). *Wpływ warstwy wizualnej opakowań jednostkowych na decyzje nabywcze* [w:] Sojkin, B., red., *Wprowadzanie nowego produktu na rynek* „*Zeszyty Naukowe Akademii Ekonomicznej w Poznaniu*”.
- Szymczak, J., Ankiel-Homa, M. (2008). *Projektowanie opakowania jednostkowego dla wybranych (specyficznych) segmentów rynkowych*. „*Opakowanie*”, 2.
- Warstwa* [an entry in:] *Słownik języka polskiego* [online] [Access: 2.12.2022]. Access on the internet: <https://sjp.pwn.pl/szukaj/warstwa.html>.
- Wizualny* [an entry in:] *Słownik języka polskiego* [online] [Access: 2.12.2022]. Access on the internet: <https://sjp.pwn.pl/szukaj/wizualny.html>.
- Żmijewska, A. (2016). *Warstwa wizualna opakowań jako przedmiot innowacji w przemyśle spożywczym*. „*Opakowanie*”, 9.

