



Behavioral Branding in Emerging Markets: A Consumer Psychology Analysis of Coca-Cola's Slim Can Strategy in India

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ABSTRACT

Taking up the case of Coca-Cola, this paper discusses the strategy of reducing the package size of the Coca-Cola can in India, which is a typical example of behavioral branding, which is the systematic design of brand touching elements to exploit cognitive biases and influence consumer decision making. Based on frameworks from consumer psychology, such as the cognitive dissonance theory, the unit bias, hedonic versus utilitarian consumption, the price-quality inference and the social identity theory, we examine the measurable effects of such a physical packaging change on consumer perception, willingness to pay, and brand identity. The Indian market presents a unique opportunity as it is witnessing a rise in health awareness among urban Gen Z consumers, combined with the booming growth of quick-commerce companies. Our analysis show that the narrow can approach encompasses all five aspects of behavior: guilt reduction, premium signaling, occasion-fit matching, channel-native design, and identity expression. In CPG markets where mature products and near saturation exist, form factor becomes one of the most fundamental elements of the architecture of the behavior as opposed to an aesthetic or logistics factor. The results of this study bring a behavioral branding framework that can be used by FMCG companies in fast growing emerging markets, where digital integration is taking place. These terms are the key words that demonstrate the value and

1. INTRODUCTION

This connection between packaging design and consumer behaviour has been studied for more than 50 years (Kotler, 1973; Underwood, 2003; Silayoi & Speece, 2007). Behavioural economics, however, has substantially enriched this conversation as a mainstream analytical lens and has contributed to the field in a significant way. Recent studies have recognized that packaging is not just a functional and/or aesthetic component of a product, but it is also a tool for influencing consumer choice systemically that does not involve changing the actual product formulation and/or price (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008; Wansink, 1996). This analysis is rich in the context of the Indian fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) market. India is one of the most competitive beverage markets globally with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of around 14.9% expected till 2027 (IBEF, 2024). Urban Indian consumers, particularly the 18-28-year-old Gen-Z, are also becoming more health conscious, aesthetically aware and digitally-native (Deloitte, 2024). The result is a paradox for the legacy carbonated soft drinks (CSD) brands: consumers continue to demand the product; but their social license to indulge without remorse is shrinking. The slim can format – tall and narrow cans (150ml to 250ml) made of aluminum – is an appropriate solution to this paradox for Coca-Cola, since it is the evening consumption occasion where the company has seen a sharp drop in sales in India. The paper suggests that the slim can is not a packaging innovation per se but a behavioral branding intervention; a conscious change of the psychological experience that lies within the mind of the consumer of the same product. The strategy simultaneously triggers multiple cognitive processes (cognitive dissonance reduction, unit bias exploitation, hedonic occasion alignment, premium signaling and identity expression) and it is channel-native for the fast-commerce market. The paper goes on as follows. The literature review is presented in section 2. The analytical framework is presented in Section 3. The framework is applied to Coca-Cola's slim can strategy in 5 behavioral dimensions in Section 4. The implications for FMCG practitioners and researchers are discussed in Section 5. Section 6 provides some restrictions and future directions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Human Harvesting: Behavioral branding takes the traditional understanding of brand and moves it beyond symbolic identity to the design of cues that impact decisions. Thaler and Sunstein (2008) describe a nudge as something that is a part of the choice architecture that is likely to influence behaviour without removing options or dramatically altering economic incentives. Applied to packaging, this means that



nudge mechanisms are in the nature of form factor, color, size and material which are integrated into the purchase environment (Chandon & Wansink, 2011).

Packaging architecture in this context is the intervention of behavior, taking place to a great degree outside the realm of conscious deliberation. This has been detailed in recent articles, as part of the broader concept of sensory marketing (Krishna, 2012) and pack design research (Clement, 2007; Rettie & Brewer, 2000). In all of these studies, a quick, emotional decision was made by consumers on packaging prior to any conscious consideration. This pre-attentive processing opens a window of behavioural influence that brand managers can tap into with a judicious design approach.

2.2 Issues of self-concept and self-presentation The theory of cognitive dissonance was developed by Festinger (1957) and suggests that a person's mind feels uneasy when their beliefs and actions are in conflict with one another or when their beliefs conflict with their self-perception. In the food and beverage domain, this is the health indulgence conflict, where health-conscious consumers feel conflicting emotions when purchasing high calorie/fat or high sugar food and beverages (Raghunathan, Naylor & Hoyer, 2006). Cognitive scaffolding, cues that enable the consumer to recode the consumption experience to fit into his/her self-image, can minimize this dissonance for brands (Hoch & Loewenstein, 1991). This scaffolding comes from the small size of the slim can, which conveys a vocabulary of restraint – a language that is common to the better sparklers and energy drinks. Consumers can rationalise buying it because it is 'healthier' to them in Wansink and Chandon's terms 'health halos' which is the idea of a healthy container surrounding a product.

2.3 Unit Bias and Portion Size Perception Unit bias is the tendency to eat or judge an entire unit as the "correct" quantity (Geier, Rozin, & Doros, 2006). Most importantly, the perceived edge of a unit is dependent on the container.

Researchers have examined how container size influences the amount and perception of the material consumed in these studies, and have consistently found that larger containers lead to increased consumption and perception of consumption of soup, popcorn, and beverages, respectively (Wansink, 2006).

Whether filled with large or small amounts, slim, tall containers clearly express smallness and restraint. This perceptual effect has been cleverly used in premium drinks. The switch to the slim 250ml can in 1987 was an important marketing move not just because it was a cost-cutting measure, but because it



established a perceptual cost anchor in the minds of consumers: precision and sophistication, a distinction between Red Bull and the ubiquitous wide-can format of the mainstream sodas (Gschwandtner, 2004).

The language of 'high-end' energy drinks has, over the past 30 years, been internalised, and has become a 'cultural code' that is slim = 'controlled' = 'premium' = 'intentional'.

2.4 Hedonic vs. Utilitarian Consumption Occasions The concept of differences between hedonic and utilitarian consumption motivations has been well theorized (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Batra & Ahtola, 1990).

Hedonic consumption is influenced by emotional and experiential and sensory rewards and utilitarian consumption is influenced by functional reward of need satisfaction. Importantly, consumers evaluate products according to different evaluative criteria when the consumption occasions are perceived differently (Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999).

The evening consumption occasion is mainly hedonic and related to self-reward, social bonding and moving from work to leisure (Spence et al., 2017). Items that match hedonic occasion signals (based on appearance, dimensions and social display value) have a competitive edge, beyond functional characteristics.

The thin can is highly photogenic and looks good, and is a perfect product-occasion fit for the evening social and self-care environment. The price-quality inferences and the Veblen-adjacent signals are introduced here. Price-quality inferences and Veblen-adjacent signals are introduced here. Consumers are often able to make inferences about product quality based on non-price cues such as in low involvement products where direct assessment of quality is not possible (Zeithaml, 1988; Olson & Jacoby, 1972).

One of the strongest of these cues is packaging. The research of Underwood et al (2001) shows that packaging visual appeal has a direct effect on quality perceptions particularly in FMCG settings. Even if there is no product differentiation this phenomenon makes it possible to charge a premium.

In FMCG markets, this phenomenon is a 'Veblen-adjacent' phenomenon – the product is not truly luxury positioned, but it means 'elevated everyday', which means that there is a premium tier within the mass market that permits modest pricing premiums and high volume. Positioning options like those of brands like Evian and Perrier and premium private brands in established markets are gaining in significance in aspiration-rich emerging markets such as India.



2.5 Social Identity and Gen Z Consumption According to social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), people have a part of their self-concept from belonging to a social group and consumption is used to indicate and reinforce identity. With the Gen Z generation, though, digital visibility of consumption serves as a first mechanism of social communication and self-expression: what one is seen to consume, especially in the shared social media sphere, is a way of expressing oneself and communicating with others (Robehmed, 2020; Francis & Hoefel, 2018). This makes the thin can into a social object. The aesthetic fit of the environment into a café, the imageable proportions for the smart phone capture, and its fit into the cultural codes of health-conscious, experience-oriented urban youth render what we thus call 'performative consumption value' — value not in the experience itself, however, but in the social legibility of the act of consumption.

3. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: FIVE BEHAVIORAL DIMENSIONS OF THE SLIM CAN

Based on the theoretical framework discussed above, we suggest a five dimension behavioral branding framework to analyze the slim can strategy. Every dimension reflects one of the discrete consumer psychology mechanisms and together they are what we call the 'behavioral stack' — the sequence of cognition mechanisms by which the packaging design fulfills its commercial goals.

A summary of the framework is presented in Table 1.

The 3 factors of the psychological mechanism that underlie behavioral change are: Dimension, Psychological Mechanism, and Behavioral Outcome.

1. Guilt Reduction – Consumer rationalizes indulgence as health-consistent (by reducing their actual perception of the indulgence)

2. Portion Distortion Unit Bias Slim container signals reduced quantity, regardless of volume, promotes consumption as moderate

3. Occasion Alignment/Hedonic Consumption Framing/Premium aesthetics match occasion of evening self-reward, enhancing purchase likelihood in cafes, multiplexes and quick-commerce

4. Premium Signaling Price-Quality Inference Product looks good enough to justify a small price increase; positions product as 'elevated everyday' in FMCG tier Instagrammable form factor turns consumer into brand communicator, resonates with Gen Z's norms of self-presentation. Instagrammable form factor is a transformation of the consumer into the brand communicator and aligns with the norms of self-presentation of Gen Z.

The table below illustrates the

5 Dimension Behavioral Branding Framework for slim can strategy analysis.

Dimension	Psychological Mechanism	Behavioral Outcome
1. Guilt Reduction	Cognitive Dissonance Reduction	Consumer rationalizes indulgent purchase as health-consistent through smaller perceived portion
2. Portion Distortion	Unit Bias	Slim container signals reduced quantity regardless of actual volume; endorses consumption as moderate
3. Occasion Alignment	Hedonic Consumption Framing	Premium aesthetics match evening self-reward occasion; increases purchase likelihood in cafes, multiplexes, and via quick-commerce
4. Premium Signaling	Price-Quality Inference	Packaging aesthetics justify modest price premium; positions product as 'elevated everyday' in FMCG tier
5. Identity Expression	Social Identity & Performative Consumption	Instagrammable form factor converts consumer into brand communicator; aligns with Gen Z self-presentation norms

Table 1: Five-Dimension Behavioral Branding Framework for Slim Can Strategy Analysis

4. ANALYSIS

4.1 Dimension One: Cognitive Dissonance Reduction The Indian soft drinks market has a structural contradiction as per capita consumption of CSD has been increasing consistently while surveys conducted as part of the health consciousness survey across the country have also indicated increased awareness amongst the consumers regarding sugar and calories intake in the CSD category (Euromonitor, 2023; Nielsen India, 2024). While this is not something specific to India, it is similar to what is seen in developed markets, but is magnified in the Indian case due to the increasing growth of health and wellness discussions on social media among urban consumers.

The thin can overcomes this paradox by changing the consumer's mind without changing the product. The smaller, taller size invokes the narrative of a 'virtuous consumption' by allowing the consumer to



imagine that the consumption of this item is a moderate, but measured choice. This story is used to reconcile the purchase with the consumer's "health image", lowering the psychological toll of buying it.

Most importantly, this process doesn't need to be an explicit one for the consumer. The dissonance-reducing frame is activated by pre-attentive processing of the can's visual cues, such as the slenderness of the tube, the association with sparkling water packaging. It is the job of the brand to supply the narrative structure, and the cognitive system to take care of the rest.

4.2: Dimension Two: Unit bias and portion distortion : Unit bias is distinct from and complementary to dissonance reduction. Geier, Rozin and Doros (2006) illustrated that a clearly marked unit boundary makes the unit the "normative consumption quantum" and deviating from it in either direction requires explicit justifications.

The large scale of the experimental work carried out by Wansink (2006) confirms that the size of the container is the most important determinant of the perceived amount of consumed food, while information about the amount of food in the container is a secondary one. This is how the slim can makes use of this mechanism by providing a smaller, visually smaller unit. The amount of calories the consumer thinks he is eating is affected even if the calories are the same, by the size of the container.

This effect is well established in alcoholic beverages research (Attwood et al., 2012), as well as snack foods research (Wansink & van Ittersum, 2003) and has been seen in a variety of product categories.

A crucial secondary effect is the 'completeness norm' for consumption of a defined unit: Consumers tend to finish a defined unit (Geier et al., 2006). Coca-Cola has also managed to shrink the unit size with the slim can to allow for an even more paradoxical reward – that it decreases overall consumption per use, but increases the revenue generated per unit, which is good for the bottom line but also helps with health messaging, the narrative the target consumer values.

4.3 Dimension Three: Hedonic Occasion Alignment. The strategic targeting of 'evenings' consumption moments is significant analytically. Numerous studies have found that decision making is more affect-based and less price-sensitive when it is in the context of a hedonic product as compared to a utilitarian product (Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999; Kivetz & Simonson, 2002).

Hedonic and experiential consumers are also more sensitive to aesthetic and experiential stimuli which increases the importance of packaging quality, aesthetic appeal and occasion fit at the point of purchase.



India's evening occasion presentation has other structural characteristics that are a plus for the slim can format.

The consumer context in which the rapid development of the café sector results in an increasing number of organized café outlets is creating a social show environment for the evaluation of packaging aesthetics. Likewise, the multiplex cinema segment, which has less than 10,000 screens in India, is a high-end occasion context, where consumers are already prepared to spend on experiences. The physical qualities of the slender can - shape, handlebar, distinctiveness from the standard can - make it the perfect prop for the evening social event.

It photographs well. Fits comfortably in the hand with the backdrop of a café or cinema. It signals intentionality.

In hedonic consumption situations, these aesthetic affordances trigger purchases, factoring out taste, cost and nutritional components. In this lesson, students will learn to infer the quality and identify margins based on price. The linkage between price and quality has been well studied for FMCG (Zeithaml, 1988; Rao & Monroe, 1989). In low-involvement product categories, where quality is hard to measure, packaging is a key quality signal. A symbolic capital that is being borrowed, that makes the product in the can more look-alike with the traditional premium beverage brands – Red Bull, Sanpellegrino, Perrier, premium energy drink brands – increases the perceived quality of the product in the can.

For Coca-Cola, this premium inference means adopting a pricing strategy that industry analysts call 'premiumisation in the mass market': maintaining access to the mass market, but still generating additional revenue from a portion of the market willing to pay a small premium for an 'elevated' consumption experience. This premium retail price over the standard PET bottle is usually 15-25% in the Indian market (Kantar Worldpanel, 2024), and the premium signals of the packaging seem to have given the consumers no hesitation and made them pay a premium price.

The business case is quite strong: Premium SKU usage leads to revenue per unit gains without corresponding COGS gains. The costs of producing aluminum cans are more expensive than PET, but the price premiums more than make up for it, and they also help to drive the consumer perception up.

This is the 'behavioral margin premium', which is the extra margin that can be claimed due to the framing of the cognitive process, not the improvement of product alone. The Social Identity and Quick-Commerce Ecosystem.



The next dimension involves relating individual identity mechanisms to the structural aspects of the fast-changing retail environment in India. Consumption will be used as a manifestation of social identity as signals when the consumption act is socially visible (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Escalas & Bettman, 2003).

For Gen Z consumers, the context in which they are seen is extended to digital social spaces – what they view as they are consuming on Instagram Story or YouTube content is a public identity statement. The identity use of the slim can relies on its aesthetic attributes, making it an unusually good identity artifact for this purpose.

Its visual distinctiveness from standard can formats, its ability to conform to the aesthetics of cafes that dominate aspirational Gen Z social media content, and the implied weightings of its health-consciousness and premium taste creates a form of 'consumption capital' - a symbolic value of the visible act of choosing a specific product format.

The Q- Commerce dimension provides an added layer of analysis. Consumer browsing on mobile devices has changed the product discovery and evaluation landscape, with visual differences and relevance to single serve format being key product selection factors today (RedSeer, 2024).

The slim can has a better visual profile than the typical PET bottle or can and it is designed for one-time use, hence fits the impulse occasion dynamics of quick-commerce consumers. In this sense, the slim can represents what we call 'channel-native packaging' - packaging created for the digital shelf, not the retail shelf.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1: Behavioural branding of FMCG products: This section presents an outline of a framework for behavioural branding of FMCG products. The Coca-Cola slim can case is a prime example of a concept we call behavioral branding in FMCG, using insights from behavioural economics to make a systematic approach to brand architecture decisions.

There are 4 key attributes of this framework.

First, it is not a product but the form “does the work”: the occasion and the channel, not the product.

Second, it triggers more than one cognitive mechanism at a time, which creates a ‘behavioural stack’ that is stronger than any individual mechanism.



Thirdly, it is digitally connected: packaging has to work as well as on the physical shelf as on the digital shelf.

Fourth, it is moment specific: the behavioral nudges are designed to the moment in the target consumer's mind when the target product is consumed.

This framework is not just applicable to the drink market; it is also relevant to the FMCG strategy in general. Any food product where such a tension between health and indulgence exists, such as confectionery, snack foods or dairy, may be treated with an analogous intervention of behavioural branding.

The message is that in a mature FMCG category, the key differentiator is not the product itself, but the consumer's psychological view of the product – the battle for market share is being won or lost on the mental side of the sale.

5.2 India's Quick-commerce Ecosystem Implications. The Q-Commerce market is expected to grow to USD 5.5 billion by 2025 (Redseer, 2024) and is changing the purchasing habits of FMCG products.

The behavioral aspects involved in quick-commerce transactions are significantly different from those of traditional commerce in terms of the purchase occasion, the visual nature of the selection interface, and the fact that single-serve items are purchased more often.

This makes it important that there are specific design requirements for FMCG packaging that are not well captured by current frameworks. The slim can case is a good example of how the packaging designed to influence behaviour in the physical environment can need to be adapted for use on the digital shelf.

On the other hand, a package that is well-optimized for digital thumbnail performance can be used to create a competitive advantage that can further boost in-store sales. Future research would look into how packaging design impacts the buying behaviour of consumers across channels when these channels have concurrent fast growth, such as the markets in the Philippines.

5.3 Ethical Considerations The use of behavioural economics in the marketing of FMCG products is a fair subject of ethical debate. A unit bias cognitive nudge to make high-calorie products look healthier than they are is a perceptual manipulation nudge. However, the health halo effect that can emerge from the smaller portion signal of the slim can can cause consumers to underestimate the calories in their meals, especially for repeated-purchase consumers, who might frame the slim can as a 'daily indulgence'.



These are not exclusive to Coca-Cola's thin can approach but rather are the characteristics of implementing behavioral architecture in a commercial setting. However, regulators have taken steps across a variety of markets by introducing mandatory requirements for front of pack nutrition labelling, including specific aspects, such as serving size and calories, that must be visible to the consumer in order to overcome potential serving size distortion from the container (FSSAI, 2022).

Further studies in the field are required to explore the factors that facilitate a shift from positive persuasion to misleading manipulation of behavior in FMCG products.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has proposed a five-dimensional behavioural branding model based on the cognitive dissonance theory, unit bias theory, hedonic consumption theory, price-quality inference and social identity theory with regard to Coca-Cola's Indian Slim Can strategy. We have suggested that the slim can is a behavioural architecture innovation rather than a traditional packaging innovation; its commercial success lies in the fact that it simultaneously engages a number of psychological mechanisms that combine to decrease the psychological cost of purchase and increase the symbolic and experiential value of consumption. The case study brings three main contributions to the literature.

Firstly, it is a first step in the extension of the behavioral branding paradigm to FMCG packaging in an emerging market context, highlighting the relevance of insights from behavioral economics for product category and format choices beyond pricing and promotion.

Second, it presents the idea of channel-native packaging, which views the digital shelf as a new packaging performance space, with the special space of quick-commerce thumbnail screens being the focus of special analytical study.

Third, it brings forth the behavioral margin premium as a business-relevant idea: increased margin due to cognitive reframing over product improvement. The downside of this study is that it is secondary data and theory-based, so there is no primary consumer research.

Future studies could use experimental techniques, such as eye-tracking, conjoint analysis, and in-situ behavioral observation to measure the impact of each behavioral dimension on purchase likelihood and willingness to pay. A longitudinal analysis would be interesting to see if the behavioral premium of the slim can last over time or reduce over the years as the format is becoming familiar.

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