

EMOTIONAL DESIGN IN PACKAGING: ENHANCING THE UNBOXING EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: The unboxing experience has become a vital touchpoint for consumer engagement with the rise of e-commerce and digital platforms like YouTube and TikTok. Originally meant to protect products, packaging now functions as a multi-sensory brand interaction shaping first impressions and loyalty. However, limited research explores how emotional design principles enhance unboxing experiences, particularly for technology and limited-edition products. This study applies Donald Norman's emotional design framework visceral, behavioural, and reflective levels to examine how packaging creates meaningful and memorable interactions. A qualitative thematic case study analyses nine high-engagement YouTube unboxing videos of premium technology products to capture authentic consumer perceptions. Findings show that packaging integrating sensory appeal, usability, and brand storytelling increases perceived value and encourages user-generated content. Such integration turns unboxing into an emotionally resonant experience that strengthens brand relationships. The study emphasizes packaging as a strategic tool for improving satisfaction, loyalty, and organic brand promotion.

Keywords: Packaging Design, Unboxing Experience, Emotional Design, Consumer Behavior, Levels of Design

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the unboxing experience has become an influential part of consumer engagement, driven by the rapid growth of e-commerce and digital platforms such as YouTube and TikTok. Unboxing videos, which capture the anticipation and process of opening new products, have evolved into a global marketing phenomenon that shapes consumer perceptions and purchasing behaviour (Bhattacharya & Dhingra, 2023). Packaging now goes beyond protection; it functions as an emotional medium that communicates brand identity and enhances user satisfaction (Liu et al., 2024).

Emotional design, as introduced by Donald Norman, emphasizes how products evoke emotional responses at three levels: visceral, behavioural, and reflective. While these principles are widely applied in product and interface design, their systematic integration into packaging remains limited. This gap is particularly evident in the context of technology products, where packaging often serves as the first tactile and visual interaction between consumer and brand. Understanding how emotional design can enhance this interaction is therefore essential for creating memorable unboxing experiences.

This study aims to explore how emotional design principles specifically visceral, behavioural, and reflective elements, enhance consumer engagement through the unboxing experience of technology product packaging. It addresses the following research question: How do emotional design elements within packaging influence the unboxing experience and perceived product value?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section examines emotional design in relation to packaging and the unboxing experience. It is structured according to Donald Norman's (2004) emotional design framework; visceral, behavioural, and reflective levels and explores how each level contributes to consumers' emotional responses when engaging with packaging. This framework serves as the foundation for understanding how design elements can transform unboxing from a functional process into an emotional experience.

2.1 *Emotional Design Framework*

Emotional design theory explains how users form affective connections with products through three hierarchical levels: visceral, behavioural, and reflective (Norman, 2004). The visceral level focuses on instinctive reactions driven by sensory qualities such as colour, form, and texture, which create immediate aesthetic appeal. The behavioural

level concerns the product's usability and interaction, where satisfaction arises from ease of use and the sense of control. Finally, the reflective level involves personal meaning, memory, and symbolic associations that contribute to brand attachment and long-term value.

Emotional responses at these three levels influence how consumers perceive, evaluate, and remember products. Recent studies have extended Norman's model to product packaging, suggesting that visual and tactile stimuli trigger sensory pleasure, while usability and storytelling strengthen engagement (Liu et al., 2024; Álvarez-González et al., 2023). This study adopts Norman's framework as a conceptual guide for analysing packaging elements that evoke emotional responses during unboxing.

2.2 Emotional Design and Packaging

Packaging has evolved from a protective layer to an essential medium of brand communication and emotional expression. Researchers note that visual aesthetics, structural design, and tactile quality all play a role in influencing consumer perceptions and expectations (Kwok & Lin, 2023; Ferreira, 2019). The unboxing moment, in particular, provides an opportunity for brands to establish an emotional connection before the product itself is experienced.

At the visceral level, high-quality materials, contrast of colours, and surface finishes can generate excitement and anticipation (Su & Wang, 2024). Behavioural design is reflected in how intuitive and organized the unboxing process feels, features like layered compartments or smooth opening mechanisms enhance usability and satisfaction (Gibai & Banele, 2023). At the reflective level, storytelling, personalization, and limited-edition details reinforce brand identity and consumer pride (Norris et al., 2024).

Despite the growing literature on packaging aesthetics and usability, few studies systematically integrate all three emotional levels to explain the holistic experience of unboxing. This study addresses that gap by examining how visceral, behavioural, and reflective design elements jointly shape consumer emotions in packaging contexts.

2.3 Reflective Design and Emerging Trends

The reflective level of design concerns meaning-making and self-identity (Norman, 2004). In packaging, this manifests through narrative cues, brand symbolism, and design coherence that resonate with personal or cultural values (Marozzo et al., 2019). Consumers increasingly associate packaging with social and ethical values, turning sustainable and eco-conscious design into a form of emotional reflection. Eco-friendly

materials, minimalist aesthetics, and recyclable structures communicate care and responsibility, enhancing emotional attachment and brand trust (Oyeyemi et al., 2024).

These trends show that reflective design is expanding beyond personal emotion to include collective values, such as environmental awareness and authenticity. As a result, packaging serves not only as a carrier of products but also as a medium for expressing shared identity and meaning between consumers and brands.

2.4 Linking Emotional Design and Unboxing Experience

The literature reveals that emotional design enhances consumer satisfaction, brand perception, and purchase intent. Packaging operates as a sensory and emotional interface, where visceral aesthetics, behavioural usability, and reflective meaning converge to shape holistic experiences. However, limited research examines this convergence specifically during the unboxing process, a context rich with anticipation and emotional resonance.

This study bridges that gap by applying Norman's (2004) framework to explore how emotional design principles manifest within technology product packaging. Through a qualitative thematic analysis of YouTube unboxing videos, it investigates how visceral, behavioural, and reflective elements influence emotional engagement, perceived value, and consumer–brand connection. By synthesizing previous literature and addressing its limitations, this study contributes a more integrated understanding of emotional design's role in shaping memorable unboxing experiences.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine how emotional design elements influence the unboxing experience. Unboxing videos were selected as the primary data source because they capture authentic, real-time reactions and provide visual and narrative insight into how consumers interact with packaging. This approach allows the study to analyse emotional and experiential elements that may not be easily captured through written reviews or surveys.

3.1 Case Study Focus Area

Nine unboxing videos of premium and limited-edition technology products were selected from YouTube. The videos were chosen based on two criteria:

- i. High viewership: indicating strong consumer interest and engagement; and

- ii. Content relevance: focusing on creators known for detailed product presentation and commentary, such as Unbox Therapy and Marques Brownlee.

Technology products were selected because they often employ refined and distinctive packaging strategies designed to enhance perceived product value and anticipation during the unboxing moment.

3.2 Data Recording and Analysis

Each video was reviewed multiple times to observe packaging interactions, presentation flow, and emotional responses expressed verbally or visually. Notes were taken systematically to document key design elements, user reactions, and descriptive impressions. A structured observation table was used to maintain consistency when recording material quality, opening mechanisms, internal arrangement, and branding elements.

3.3 Data Analysis

A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted manually. The analysis was guided by Norman's emotional design framework, using the visceral, behavioural, and reflective levels as predefined coding categories. Observations from the videos were grouped based on similarities in visual appeal, usability during unboxing, and conveyed meaning or brand narrative. This approach allowed patterns to emerge regarding how packaging design influences the emotional and experiential dimensions of unboxing.





3.4 Ethical Consideration



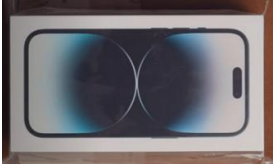
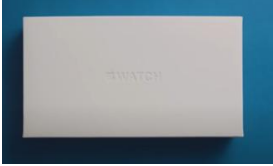

All videos analysed were publicly available on YouTube and did not involve direct interaction with human subjects. No personal identifying data was collected, and content was used solely for academic analysis.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the results of the qualitative analysis of nine unboxing videos, organised according to Norman's three levels of emotional design: visceral, behavioural, and reflective. The analysis identifies how these design elements influence emotional engagement and shape consumer perceptions of value during the unboxing experience. *Table 1* summarises the visual and functional attributes observed in each product case.

Table 1: Summary of Observed Emotional Design Elements in Unboxing Experiences

No	Product	Visceral Design	Behavioral Design	Reflective Design
1	 <p>Figure 1. ROG Phone 6 Pro</p>	Hexagonal-shaped pearl white box, futuristic aesthetic	Pull-tab opening, structured layout with layered compartments	Gaming-themed packaging reinforces ROG's brand identity
2	 <p>Figure 2. Oppo Reno7 Pro (League of Legends Limited Edition)</p>	Rocket-shaped box, inspired by the in-game weapon	Bottom cap opening, multi-compartment storage for accessories	Game-themed collectibles and branding enhances emotional connection
3	 <p>Figure 3. OnePlus 9RT (Genshin Impact Limited Edition)</p>	Rectangular green box, visually striking graphics	Sliding compartment design, structured placement of items	Includes game code, badge, and poster, enhancing player engagement
4	 <p>Figure 4. OnePlus Pac-Man Edition</p>	A white and orange box with PacMan-themed graphics	Flap opening, hidden compartments	Nostalgic theme tied to classic gaming, interactive packaging elements

No	Product	Visceral Design	Behavioral Design	Reflective Design
5	 <p>Figure 5. Red Magic (Transformers Decepticon Edition)</p>	Steel grey and purple box, Decepticon-inspired design	Flap and sliding compartments, hidden storage sections	Collectible case, stickers, and accessories aligned with Transformers fandom
6	 <p>Figure 6. Samsung Galaxy Fold</p>	Black, white, and blue minimalist box, premium look	Flap and sliding compartments, box-within-a-box experience	Layered unboxing enhances exclusivity, reinforcing high-end branding
7	 <p>Figure 7. iPhone 14 Pro</p>	Sleek minimalist white box with Apple logo	Tear strip opening, simple yet elegant organisation	Apple's signature unboxing experience, consistent brand identity
8	 <p>Figure 8. Apple Watch Ultra</p>	Clean white & grey packaging with embossed Apple Watch logo	Flap and tear strip opening, a structured component organization	Premium unboxing aligned with Apple's minimalist branding
9	 <p>Figure 9. Samsung Galaxy S23 Ultra BMW M Edition</p>	Replica BMW car front model, red and black theme	A hood-like opening mechanism, segmented storage	Collectible BMW-themed accessories, reinforcing luxury branding

The emotional impact of packaging extends beyond its basic function of protecting the product. Packaging design shapes consumer perceptions and experiences, making it a critical element in branding and marketing strategies. The analysis and findings highlight how different design aspects; visceral, behavioural, and reflective interact to enhance the unboxing experience and foster long-term consumer engagement.

4.1 Visceral Design Level

At the visceral level, packaging design triggers immediate sensory and emotional responses through visual appeal, colour contrast, form, and material quality. The analysis reveals that first impressions during unboxing are often shaped by aesthetic cues that convey a sense of exclusivity and anticipation. Products such as the ROG Phone 6 Pro and Oppo Reno7 Pro (League of Legends Edition) employed bold geometric forms and themed colour palettes to evoke excitement even before opening. Similarly, minimalist packaging designs such as the iPhone 14 Pro and Apple Watch Ultra projected refinement through clean lines, precise proportions, and subtle embossing, eliciting feelings of trust and admiration. These visceral qualities establish the emotional foundation for the subsequent unboxing stages by visually communicating quality, identity, and brand prestige.

4.2 Behavioural Design Level

The behavioural level concerns usability, interaction flow, and the physical process of unboxing. Findings indicate that ease of opening, logical arrangement, and tactile satisfaction play a vital role in shaping user perception of quality and care. Many products adopted layered structures, magnetic flaps, or sliding compartments that guided the user through an organised sequence of discovery. For instance, Samsung Galaxy Fold employed a box-within-a-box system that invited curiosity, while Oppo Reno7 Pro featured an intuitive multi-compartment design that balanced protection and accessibility. In contrast, Apple's tear-strip mechanism provided a sense of precision and control, enhancing the perception of technical excellence. When functionality aligns with user expectation, the unboxing experience produces feelings of satisfaction and control, reinforcing positive behavioural engagement.

4.3 Reflective Design Level

At the reflective level, emotional meaning and brand storytelling transform the unboxing act into a memorable narrative. This study found that limited-edition and themed packaging, such as the Samsung Galaxy S23 Ultra BMW M Edition and OnePlus 9RT Genshin Impact Edition, extended the experience beyond physical interaction by invoking personal or cultural symbolism. Collectible inserts, artwork sleeves, and thematic accessories created a sense of pride and ownership associated with brand identity. The OnePlus Pac-Man Edition and Red Magic Transformers Edition further demonstrated how nostalgia and cultural references generate emotional depth, encouraging users to share their experiences online. Reflective design thus strengthens the psychological bond between consumer and brand by embedding storytelling and self-expression into the product encounter.

By successfully integrating visceral, behavioural, and reflective design elements, brands can transform unboxing into a memorable and emotionally engaging experience that enhances product desirability and consumer loyalty. Beyond functionality and aesthetics, packaging nurtures emotional connections through brand storytelling, collectible items, and cultural relevance. Limited editions like the OnePlus Genshin Impact Edition include posters, in-game codes, and themed accessories, deepening consumer engagement. The Apple Watch Ultra, though minimalist, aligns its packaging with Apple's brand philosophy, reinforcing its premium identity.

4.4 Interaction Between the Three Levels

The findings suggest that these three emotional design levels are not isolated but interdependent. A visually striking form (visceral) captures attention and draws users into the experience; intuitive interaction (behavioural) sustains engagement; and meaningful narrative (reflective) transforms satisfaction into attachment. Together, they create an emotional continuum in which sensory appeal, usability, and storytelling reinforce one another to enhance perceived product value and brand connection.

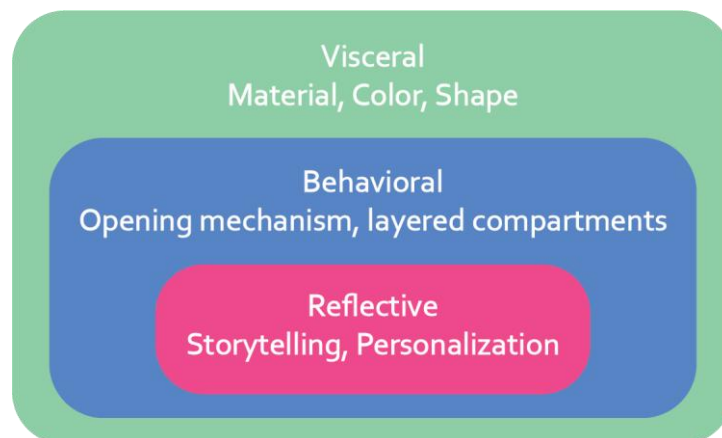


Figure 10. Interaction of visceral, behavioural, and reflective design levels in packaging design

Figure 10 visualises the layered relationship between visceral, behavioural, and reflective design levels in packaging. The outer layer represents visceral design, where materials, colour, and form generate immediate sensory responses that attract attention and trigger anticipation. The behavioural level, situated within, governs the user's interaction with the packaging through mechanisms such as opening sequences, compartment organisation, and tactile flow. At the core lies the reflective level, encompassing storytelling, personalization, and symbolic meaning that extend the experience beyond functionality. Together, these layers form a holistic emotional system in which visual appeal, interaction quality, and narrative meaning combine to produce memorable and emotionally engaging unboxing experiences.

5. DISCUSSION

The study highlights how emotional design elements visceral, behavioural, and reflective work together to create memorable and emotionally engaging unboxing experiences. Packaging that appeals to the senses, supports usability, and communicates brand storytelling enhances perceived product value and strengthens consumer–brand relationships. These findings provide practical implications for designers and brands seeking to transform packaging into a strategic tool for engagement, loyalty, and organic promotion.

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

The findings reveal that the unboxing experience is not merely a functional step in product delivery but a strategic emotional touchpoint that reinforces consumer–brand relationships. By applying Norman’s (2004) emotional design framework, this study demonstrates how visceral, behavioural, and reflective elements work together to create holistic and memorable unboxing interactions. Across all nine cases, the unboxing process engages consumers through sensory appeal, usability, and storytelling, each contributing to heightened emotional responses and perceived product value.

Visceral design elements such as form, material, and colour trigger initial attraction and excitement, setting an anticipatory tone before the product is revealed. Behavioural features, including intuitive opening mechanisms and structured compartment layouts, sustain engagement and reinforce perceptions of product quality and craftsmanship. Reflective elements, represented through brand narratives, limited-edition storytelling, and symbolic associations, create lasting emotional meaning that transcends the physical packaging. Together, these findings confirm that emotional design is essential to transforming packaging from a protective shell into a medium of experience and identity formation (Liu et al., 2024).

5.2 Theoretical Implications

This study extends the theoretical understanding of emotional design by demonstrating its application within packaging and unboxing contexts. Previous studies have primarily discussed Norman’s (2004) framework in relation to product design and usability, but its systematic integration into packaging design remains underexplored (Liu, C., 2024). By interpreting unboxing through the three levels of design, this research highlights that emotional engagement is a dynamic and multi-layered process rather than a singular visual or functional response.

The findings also support prior literature suggesting that packaging contributes to emotional value creation by shaping consumer perceptions and memory recall

(Bhattacharya & Dhingra, 2023). The present study, however, adds depth by revealing how emotional design layers interact sequentially, where visceral appeal initiates engagement, behavioural design sustains satisfaction, and reflective meaning consolidates brand loyalty. This layered interpretation contributes to the growing discourse on experiential consumption, providing a structured framework for understanding the emotional mechanisms underlying unboxing experiences.

5.3 Practical Implications for Designers and Brands

The results provide actionable insights for designers and brand strategists aiming to enhance consumer engagement through packaging. Effective packaging should address the three emotional levels simultaneously to create balance between sensory stimulation, usability, and meaning.

At the visceral level, designers should prioritize sensory cues that immediately attract attention and convey product quality. Choices of texture, colour palette, and structural form can evoke specific emotions such as excitement, curiosity, or luxury perception that define the initial impression.

At the behavioural level, brands should focus on usability and intuitive sequencing. Features like tear strips, magnetic flaps, or multi-layered reveals enhance the sense of guided discovery while maintaining functionality and protection.

At the reflective level, embedding brand storytelling, personalization, and thematic coherence can transform unboxing into a memorable emotional narrative. Strategies such as thank you notes, collectible inserts, or environmentally conscious messaging can deepen brand connection and encourage social sharing (Oyeyemi et al., 2024).

By aligning packaging decisions with emotional design principles, brands can enhance perceived value, reinforce identity, and leverage unboxing as a form of organic marketing in social media environments. These insights are particularly valuable for technology and lifestyle sectors, where anticipation and aesthetic expression play a central role in consumer satisfaction.

5.4 Limitation and Future Research

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary data from publicly available YouTube videos, which may not capture all contextual factors influencing user emotion. Video content can be edited or influenced by brand sponsorship, potentially shaping consumer reactions. Additionally, the focus on technology products, particularly premium and limited-edition models, means the results may not generalize to other industries with simpler or mass-market packaging. Future research could expand this analysis by incorporating consumer interviews or experimental testing to validate emotional responses in real-time settings. Exploring cross-cultural perspectives or the

role of sustainability cues in emotional design would further enhance understanding of evolving consumer values.

Conclusion

This study extends the application of emotional design principles to packaging, demonstrating how visceral, behavioural, and reflective elements collectively enhance consumer engagement and elevate the unboxing experience into a strategic brand interaction. The integration of sensory aesthetics, functional usability, and symbolic meaning enables packaging to act not only as a container but as a narrative medium, transforming product unboxing into a multisensory, emotionally resonant brand experience.

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