

Review of Literature

Visual Grammar of Intimacy in Condom Packaging in India

Introduction

Pick up a condom pack from any pharmacy in India and look at it carefully. The colours, the typeface, the couple on the front, the tagline in the corner. None of that is accidental. Each choice is a design decision, and each decision draws on a set of cultural codes that the audience is expected to read in a particular way. What makes this worth studying is that in India, those codes operate within a social environment that is, in several ways, actively resistant to what the packaging is trying to do. People find condoms embarrassing to purchase. Partners hesitate to suggest their use. The product has been quietly associated, over decades of public health communication, with disease and infidelity rather than care or pleasure. That is the tension this dissertation is interested in. How does packaging try to overcome it? And does it succeed, even partially?

To answer that, three separate bodies of scholarship need to be brought into conversation. Semiotic theory offers a framework for reading packaging as a system of signs rather than as decoration. Public health and gender research documents what condoms already mean to Indian consumers, before any designer touches them. Consumer behaviour work tells us what packaging can and apparently cannot do to shift perception at the point of sale. Each of these fields has developed useful tools, but they have rarely spoken to each other, and none has applied its methods to Indian condom packaging specifically. Bringing them together is the task of this review.

The argument that emerges is this: Indian condom packaging sits at a fault-line between visual persuasion and social constraint. Semiotic frameworks show that packaging is capable of encoding complex cultural meanings. Gender research shows that those meanings collide, sometimes head-on, with norms of modesty and shame that have long shaped how condoms are perceived in this country. And consumer behaviour work, for all its evidence that design matters, has mostly studied categories where stigma is not a variable. The gap at the centre of all three fields is the one this dissertation addresses.

1. Packaging as a Semiotic System: Theoretical Foundations

A semiotic approach to packaging is, at its simplest, a refusal to treat any visual choice as neutral. Colour is not just aesthetic. Typeface is not just practical. The image of a couple on a pack is not just illustration. Each of these functions as a sign, and signs derive their meanings from cultural systems that audiences have learned to navigate, often without being consciously aware of it. The theoretical tradition that makes this claim rigorously demonstrable runs from Saussure in the early twentieth century through to the visual social semiotic frameworks developed by Kress and van Leeuwen at the end of it.

1.1 The Foundations: Saussure, Barthes and Peirce

Saussure's (1983/1916) contribution, the one that everything else in this tradition builds on, is the distinction between the *signifier* and the *signified*. The signifier is the perceivable form. The signified is the concept that form calls up. Crucially, the relationship between them is arbitrary. A red rose does not carry romance in its petals. A clinical white background does not inherently suggest sterility. These meanings exist because cultural communities have, over time, agreed on them, and that agreement has been reinforced through advertising, film, packaging and everyday use until it feels natural. For a designer working on a condom pack, this is both an opportunity and a problem. The codes already exist. The question is whether the designer understands what they are actually activating.

Barthes took Saussure's framework and gave it ideological teeth. In *Mythologies* (1972/1957), he showed how signs operate at two levels simultaneously. At the first level, denotation, a pack shows a young couple in soft focus against a warm background. At the second level, connotation, that same image tells a cultural story about who intimacy belongs to, what it looks like, and whether a condom can plausibly be part of it. Barthes called these second-order meanings *myths*. Not myths in the sense of being untrue, but in the sense of being cultural narratives that have been naturalised to the point where they appear simply obvious (Jadou & Ghabra, 2021; Yilmaz & Kir, 2025). The soft-focus couple is a myth. The clinical blue-and-white palette found on many health products is also a myth, one that codes sex as a medical problem rather than a human experience. Neither appears ideological at first glance. That invisibility is precisely how myth works. Separately, in *Image, Music, Text* (1977), Barthes introduced the concept of *anchorage*, the way verbal text on an image narrows the viewer's reading toward one

preferred meaning. A tagline on a condom pack is not filler copy. It is doing ideological work, steering interpretation away from meanings the image might otherwise invite.

Peirce (1931-1958) offers a different but complementary set of tools. His classification of signs into icons, indices and symbols maps the range of ways that visual elements on packaging can function. An icon resembles its object, as a photograph resembles a person. An index has a physical or causal connection to what it signifies, as gold foil connotes luxury through material association rather than resemblance. A symbol's meaning is purely conventional, held in place by shared cultural agreement alone, which is why a heart motif reads as romantic even though there is nothing romantic about its geometric form (Adlina & Amalia, 2025; Erlyana, 2020; De Mendonca et al., 2021). Peirce also proposed finer distinctions between qualisigns, sinsigns and legisigns that allow an analyst to treat the weight of a typeface, the warmth of a colour palette, or the smoothness of a surface finish as signs in themselves, carrying meaning independently of whatever object they appear on. This granularity turns out to be genuinely useful when the aim is to account for why two condom packs with similar imagery can feel radically different from each other.

1.2 Visual Social Semiotics: Kress and van Leeuwen

Saussure and Barthes developed their frameworks mostly in relation to language and text. Extending semiotic analysis to visual design required a different vocabulary, and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) provided one. Their central argument is that images have their own grammar. Visual choices are not arbitrary any more than grammatical choices in a sentence are arbitrary. They are selections from a system of possible resources, and those selections produce meaning in ways that can be described and analysed.

Their metafunctional framework identifies what any image is doing along three dimensions at once. The representational dimension asks how people and events are depicted: as agents doing something, as experiencers undergoing something, or simply as objects available for visual consumption. The interactive dimension concerns the relationship the image constructs between its depicted figures and the viewer. The compositional dimension asks how the frame is organised: what is placed where, what is made salient through contrast or size, what occupies the centre versus the margins. This framework has been applied to advertising imagery (Wang, 2024; Stoian, 2020),

health warning labels on cigarette packs (Sadallah & Halawachy, 2025) and food packaging (Hu et al., 2019), with consistent results. Visual grammar is systematic. It can be read.

Of the three dimensions, the interactive function deserves particular attention for this study. When a depicted figure meets the viewer's gaze directly, Kress and van Leeuwen call this a demand: the figure is reaching across the image boundary and proposing some kind of social relationship with whoever is looking. When the figure looks away, absorbed in their own world or in another character, the image becomes an offer, something to observe from a comfortable distance. On condom packaging, who gazes and who is gazed at is not a minor aesthetic decision. Consider, for example, a pack showing a woman leaning toward her partner, eyes closed, angled slightly away from the camera. She is an offer. The pack is not speaking to her. Now consider a pack where both figures face the viewer with equal directness. The implied viewer is a couple, not a single male consumer. These two packs are making different ideological proposals about whose sexuality is being addressed. The concept of the implied viewer, the ideal subject position from which the pack's full meanings become legible, may be the most analytically productive idea that Kress and van Leeuwen contribute to this project.

1.3 From Theory to Applied Packaging Research

These theoretical frameworks have practical traction. Applied packaging research has accumulated considerable evidence that semiotic cues produce measurable effects on brand perception and purchase behaviour, particularly in Indian and Asian FMCG contexts. Studies using the stimulus-organism-response model find that colour, typography and imagery work together to shape how brands are evaluated and whether products are purchased (Rehman & Elahi, 2024; Shukla et al., 2022). Work specifically on the Indian market suggests that semiotic packaging can influence perceptions of authenticity, helping a product appear culturally appropriate and trustworthy within its specific social environment (Amani, 2025; Kherde & Jani, 2025).

Research on food and beverage packaging has gone some distance toward mapping specific visual features to specific perceived qualities. Round, flowing typefaces tend to connote softness; heavier, angular forms lean toward strength or reliability. Cool blue tones signal clinical precision; warm reds and deep golds are associated with celebration, passion or luxury, depending on context (Spence & Van Doorn, 2022; Oraiby & Kiygi-Calli, 2023). These are tendencies, not rules, and

they vary across cultural contexts in ways that matter enormously for this study. Research on coffee packaging (De Mendonca et al., 2021), children's food products (Erlyana, 2020), and traditional Chinese tea packaging (Hu et al., 2019) has each contributed to an understanding of packaging as a multimodal text, one where visual elements produce meanings through combination rather than in isolation.

Where this literature appears to fall short is in its assumption that the product categories being studied are socially uncomplicated. Buying coffee, or even cigarettes, does not typically require navigating feelings of shame, relational risk or gendered power imbalance. Condom packaging does. Cigarette health warnings have received some semiotic attention as a case of multimodal health communication (Sadallah & Halawachy, 2025), but the branded design of the pack itself, the visual argument the manufacturer is making, has received far less scrutiny. A product category where design must simultaneously signal desirability and negotiate social stigma represents, as far as the present researcher can tell, territory the packaging-semiotics literature has not seriously entered. That absence is the first dimension of what this dissertation sets out to address.

2. Intimacy, Gender, Trust and Stigma: The Social Meanings of Condoms in India

Semiotic theory tells us that signs carry culturally learned meanings. But for condom packaging in India, those meanings were not written by designers. They were written, over decades, by social norms, public health campaigns and relational scripts that positioned condoms as objects belonging to a specific, generally unwelcome, set of social situations. Any packaging analysis that ignores this inherited meaning is, at best, incomplete. At worst, it mistakes surface communication for the whole story.

2.1 What Condoms Mean: Stigma, Suspicion and the Problem of Negotiation

The barriers to condom use in India are extensively documented, and they run deeper than awareness or access. A national review of Indian perceptions found partner non-acceptance and the association of condoms with infidelity or disease to be persistently cited obstacles, surfacing across different populations and research methods (Wankhede & Wanjari, 2021). Earlier acceptability studies add texture: men describe condoms as interrupting the emotional rhythm of sex; women describe shame, a reluctance to be seen as forward, and a fear that suggesting use

implies distrust of the partner (Donta et al., 2014; Chakrapani et al., 2010). These are not marginal attitudes held by a minority. They appear, with striking consistency, across urban and rural settings, across age groups, and across different relationship types.

What is perhaps most analytically interesting here is not the stigma itself but how it operates semiotically. The condom, in the Indian context, has become a sign in its own right. And what it appears to signify, to a significant portion of the population, is not protection or care but suspicion. Qualitative research with people living with HIV captures this with particular clarity: suggesting condom use within a marriage can function as an implicit accusation of infidelity, or as an involuntary disclosure of illness (Chakrapani et al., 2010). The condom is being read as a message, not used as a tool. Barthes's concept of myth is clarifying here. The condom has been mythologised through the accumulated weight of HIV campaigns that linked it to risk populations rather than ordinary intimacy, through social scripts that associated contraception with transgression, and through the conspicuous absence of any cultural narrative in which condoms appear as a normal and caring part of a committed relationship. The second-order meaning that has settled around the product is one of distrust. Packaging that wants to communicate intimacy is, in effect, trying to overwrite a myth that has had several decades of uncontested cultural airtime.

2.2 The Gender Dimension: Who Is the Implied User?

The gendered character of condom stigma in India is worth examining separately, partly because it is more complex than a simple observation about cultural conservatism, and partly because it connects directly to the representational choices that appear on packs. Research on female condom acceptability in urban settings found that women who found the device genuinely useful were simultaneously aware that adopting it could mark them as sexually 'forward', particularly in more conservative contexts (Weerasinghe et al., 2021). A pleasure-centred study in an urban context found something perhaps more revealing: what most drove acceptability among female participants was not risk reduction at all, but feelings of consent, shared control and emotional privacy (Bowling et al., 2017). Intimacy, for these women, was understood as something relational and mutual, not as a clinical transaction.

This finding has direct implications for packaging. If a substantial portion of female consumers understand sexual intimacy primarily through the lens of mutuality and shared agency,

but condom packs consistently depict women as soft, decorative and oriented toward a male partner's pleasure, then the packaging is failing to address the consumer who may have the most to gain from using the product. Kress and van Leeuwen's concept of the implied viewer makes this failure legible. The question is not simply whether a woman appears on the pack, but how she is positioned. Is she an agent in the image, someone with desires and a gaze of her own? Or is she an ornament, there to signal that the product is associated with attractive heterosexual sex? Most Indian condom packs, from what casual observation suggests before formal analysis, appear to construct an implied viewer who is male. That construction may not be deliberate, but it is not without consequence.

2.3 Bollywood, Popular Culture and Signs of Change

The picture is not entirely static. Popular culture in India has, in recent years, begun engaging with condom stigma in ways that are at least partially changing the conversational landscape. Films like *Janhit Mein Jaari*, *Chhatriwali* and *Helmet* have been read as deliberate exercises in destigmatisation, deploying humour, family values and female protagonists to reframe condoms as products that belong in healthy, loving relationships (Behera et al., 2025). What is worth noting, from a design perspective, is the semiotic strategy these films share. They do not argue against stigma by confronting it directly. They find culturally familiar registers, comedy, domesticity, the language of everyday Indian life, and redirect them toward a product that had previously been excluded from those registers. A packaging designer has, in principle, access to the same repertoire. Whether contemporary Indian condom packs are actually drawing on it, or whether they have remained anchored to older, more ambiguous codes, is one of the specific questions this study will attempt to answer.

3. Consumer Perception and Behaviour: The Limits of Visual Persuasion

Given everything the previous section establishes about the social meanings condoms carry in India, one might reasonably question whether packaging can do much at all. The consumer behaviour literature, read charitably, suggests it can, but within constraints that are worth being precise about.

The evidence for packaging's influence on brand evaluation and purchase behaviour in Indian FMCG markets is, on its own terms, reasonably persuasive. Colour, figurative imagery,

logo design and overall layout have been shown to shape brand experience, and brand experience in turn influences what consumers are willing to pay and how loyally they return (Liu et al., 2025; Kherde & Jani, 2025; Kapoor & Kumar, 2019). The stimulus-organism-response model, applied consistently across studies from India, Singapore and other Asian markets, maps a plausible pathway from visual packaging cues through internal consumer evaluations to purchase outcomes (Rehman & Elahi, 2024; Shukla et al., 2022). More recently, Amani (2025) has argued that semiotic packaging can shape something called cognitive legitimacy, the degree to which a product appears culturally appropriate and trustworthy within its market. For condom packaging in India, where appearing non-threatening and socially acceptable may matter as much as appearing desirable, this concept seems particularly applicable.

There is a theoretical caveat worth sitting with, however. Visual communication does not function independently of the social context in which it is received. The meanings that signs carry depend on how audiences are positioned by their identities, their relationships and the power structures they move within (Mikhaeil & Baskerville, 2019; Yilmaz & Kir, 2025). Packaging and advertising visuals, as Liu (2025) notes, routinely reproduce ideologies of gender and aspiration by linking products to idealised bodies and lifestyles. For condom packaging, which already navigates contested gendered meanings, this is not an abstract theoretical concern. The ideologies encoded in pack design may reinforce the very stigmas they are ostensibly trying to overcome.

The limitation of the consumer behaviour literature that matters most here, though, is methodological. Purchase intention is what most studies measure. For many product categories, that is a reasonable proxy for what actually matters. For condoms in India, it is arguably only half the story. A consumer might be persuaded by well-designed packaging to make a purchase in the relative anonymity of a pharmacy or a supermarket. The same packaging cannot, by itself, alter the social dynamics of the private moment when the condom needs to be used. Public health research shows, repeatedly and across populations, that social norms around gender and relational trust prevent consistent use even among people who have already bought the product (Wankhede & Wanjari, 2021; Donta et al., 2014). Packaging, then, must somehow work at two registers simultaneously. It must persuade in a public retail context where embarrassment is already a factor. And it must encode meanings of normalcy and intimacy strong enough to survive into a private context where other forces are actively working against it. No existing consumer behaviour study

appears to have examined packaging effectiveness in this dual register, which is perhaps the most practically consequential gap this dissertation is positioned to address.

4. Cultural Symbols, Localisation and the Indian Visual Field

Applying a semiotic framework to packaging in India requires more than carrying European or American analytical tools into a new geography. India's visual culture is layered in ways that make certain signs genuinely untranslatable across contexts, and a reading that misses this will produce conclusions that are, at best, superficially accurate.

4.1 India as a Semiotic Environment

Jha (2025) offers what may be the most useful recent overview of how visual semiotics operates in the Indian socio-cultural context. Her analysis of Indian communication design shows how multiple visual traditions coexist and constantly inform each other: Hindu iconographic conventions, folk art traditions such as Madhubani painting and Warli art, the Mughal aesthetic legacy that persists in ornamentation and textile patterns, and the contemporary visual grammar of Bollywood cinema and digital advertising. These are not separate archives that designers consciously choose between. They are woven together in a visual culture where a lotus motif carries both religious and national meaning, where certain colour combinations signal wedding celebrations before they signal anything else, and where the spectacles associated with Gandhi can function as a shorthand for ethical legitimacy in a brand campaign. The density of this semiotic environment means that designed objects in India are always potentially saying more than their creators intended.

Colour is where this density appears most consequential for condom packaging. Red in India is primarily the colour of the wedding ceremony, of sindoor, of the bridal sari, of the auspicious transition into married life. It carries a different primary register than it does in, say, Western health communication, where red tends toward danger or urgency. For a condom pack, deploying red could position the product within the cultural vocabulary of sanctioned intimacy, marital sexuality and celebration. Alternatively, depending on what surrounds it, it could read as an invocation of risk. The ambiguity is irreducible, and that ambiguity itself is analytically meaningful. Saffron is perhaps an even clearer case: its association with religious identity and, in the current political environment, with Hindu nationalism, makes it a near-impossible choice for a

product already navigating sensitive social territory. White, associated in Western clinical packaging with sterility and medical authority, is in many Indian contexts the colour of mourning. A condom pack designed with a white-dominant palette may be communicating something quite different to an Indian consumer than its designers assumed.

4.2 Localisation: Opportunity and Risk

Research comparing global and Indian cosmetic brands offers a useful illustration of what culturally informed design can achieve. Forest Essentials, positioned as an Indian luxury brand rooted in Ayurveda, deploys calligraphic typography, deep jewel tones drawn from Mughal decorative tradition, and imagery evoking herbs, rituals and the sensory language of classical Indian medicine (Jaiswal, 2025; Huo et al., 2025). The result is a packaging system that makes a coherent cultural argument: this product belongs to a tradition of care, refinement and indigenous knowledge. Global brands entering the same category typically rely on generic nature signifiers, green palettes and leaf imagery, that signal sustainability without any cultural specificity. The difference is not primarily aesthetic. The local brand is making a claim about identity that the global brand, for structural reasons, cannot match.

Huo et al. (2025) provide a useful corrective to any simple enthusiasm for cultural localisation, however. Their analysis of traditional symbols in commercial packaging found that decorative borrowing, using cultural motifs for their visual appeal without understanding their layered historical meaning, reliably produces either communicative failure or, in sensitive categories, genuine offence. Symbols become oversimplified, stripped of the context that gave them meaning, and the resulting design feels hollow or exploitative. Chinese tea packaging research makes a related point from a different angle: the same traditional visual elements, calligraphic scripts, landscape imagery, symbols of auspiciousness, can be read in fundamentally different ways by domestic and overseas audiences, suggesting that cultural resonance cannot simply be assumed from visual similarity (Hu et al., 2019). For condom packaging, where the product already carries charged associations with transgression and disease, the uncritical deployment of religious or auspicious imagery would likely compound the problem rather than resolve it.

4.3 The Questions This Study Will Ask

Drawing these threads together, several specific analytical questions emerge for the examination of Indian condom packs. These are the questions that the literature reviewed here makes it possible to ask, even though it does not answer them.

The first is about colour. Which palettes are actually used on Indian condom packs, and what cultural register do those colours activate? Is the pack positioned within the warm, celebratory vocabulary of weddings and romance, or the cooler register of clinical hygiene and medical safety? The second concerns bodies. Given that overt sexual imagery in Indian public space remains genuinely contested, how do packs communicate desire? Do they use suggestion, abstraction, conventions borrowed from Bollywood romance sequences, or do they sidestep the body altogether and rely on symbolic substitution, a rose, a pair of hands, a stylised silhouette? The third asks about cultural motifs. Do packs draw on recognisable imagery of couplehood, domestic warmth or auspiciousness, and if so, from which visual tradition does that imagery come? The fourth is about typography. The choice between Roman and Devanagari scripts, between formal serif faces and contemporary sans-serifs, between weighty and delicate letterforms, encodes assumptions about class, education and which consumer the pack is primarily addressing. Existing Indian semiotic work provides the analytical precedents for addressing these questions (Jha, 2025; Kherde & Jani, 2025). Applying them to condom packaging has simply not been done.

5. Synthesis: Three Threads and One Gap

Three bodies of knowledge have been drawn on in this review, and each contributes something distinct to the rationale for this dissertation.

Semiotic and visual-grammar theory, running from Saussure's foundational work on the arbitrary nature of the sign through Barthes's analysis of myth and anchorage to Peirce's taxonomy of sign types and Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar, establishes that packaging is a structured, decodable meaning-making system (Jadou & Ghabra, 2021; Stoian, 2020; Wang, 2024; Yilmaz & Kir, 2025). The tools exist to analyse colour, typography, gaze and composition as components of a visual argument, not as aesthetic decoration.

Public health and gender research on condoms in India establishes the social field within which that visual argument must operate. Condoms are not neutral objects. They are semiotically loaded, entangled with norms of gendered trust, marital propriety and shame that appear to

override health knowledge with some regularity (Wankhede & Wanjari, 2021; Donta et al., 2014; Chakrapani et al., 2010; Weerasinghe et al., 2021; Bowling et al., 2017). Any analysis of packaging that treats design as the only variable in play would be, at minimum, analytically naive.

Consumer behaviour research confirms that packaging design influences brand perception and purchase behaviour in Indian FMCG markets (Rehman & Elahi, 2024; Amani, 2025; Shukla et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2025). The limitation of this literature, for present purposes, is its near-exclusive focus on product categories where stigma does not significantly mediate between purchase and use. Condoms in India are different. The gap between buying and using is where most of the social action happens, and it is a gap that packaging research has not seriously examined.

The gap that this dissertation addresses lies at the convergence of all three. To the present researcher's knowledge, no published study has applied a systematic semiotic framework, drawing on Barthes's analysis of myth and anchorage, Peirce's sign taxonomy and Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar, to Indian condom packaging. How colour choices, typographic decisions, imagery and composition work together to construct an implied viewer and negotiate the tension between intimacy and shame has not been mapped. This dissertation sets out to do that, treating each pack not merely as a commercial artefact but as a visual argument made under conditions of social constraint, about what intimacy looks like and whether a condom can credibly belong within it.

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