

Summary

This literature review examines Indian condom packaging through three connected bodies of scholarship, building toward a research gap that no existing study has addressed.

It opens with a simple observational challenge: pick up a condom pack and look at it carefully. Nothing on that surface is accidental. But in India, the visual codes those design decisions activate operate within a social environment that is, in several ways, working against what the packaging is trying to communicate. That tension is the dissertation's central problem.

The first strand establishes the theoretical framework. Starting with Saussure's foundational insight that the relationship between a sign and its meaning is culturally learned rather than natural, the review moves through Barthes's concepts of myth and anchorage, which show how packaging encodes ideology while appearing simply obvious, and Peirce's classification of signs into icons, indices and symbols, which provides a precise vocabulary for analysing individual visual elements. Kress and van Leeuwen's visual social semiotics then supplies the operational grammar: the concepts of gaze, salience, information value and the implied viewer allow systematic analysis of how a pack positions its audience. Applied packaging research confirms that these semiotic cues produce measurable effects on brand perception and purchase intention in Indian and Asian FMCG markets, but this literature has a significant blind spot — it has never seriously engaged with a product category where social stigma is a primary variable.

The second strand establishes the social context. Condoms in India are not neutral health products. They have been mythologised, in the Barthesian sense, as objects associated with infidelity, disease and distrust rather than with care or intimacy. This mythology operates most acutely within marriage, where suggesting condom use can function as an accusation. Gender compounds the problem: most Indian condom packs appear to construct an implied male viewer, failing to address women, who arguably have the most to gain from consistent use. Popular culture, particularly recent Bollywood films, is beginning to contest these stigmas through humour and domestic narrative, but whether packaging has followed is an open question.

The third strand reviews consumer behaviour research, which confirms that visual packaging design influences brand evaluation and purchase behaviour in Indian markets. The critical limitation is methodological: these studies measure purchase intention, not use. For condoms in India, the gap between buying and using is where most of the social action happens, and it is a gap that packaging research has not examined.

The gap at the convergence of all three strands is the one this dissertation fills. No published study has applied a systematic semiotic framework to Indian condom packaging, examining how colour, typography, imagery and composition together construct an implied viewer and negotiate the contradiction between intimacy and stigma.

Important Points

- 1. The opening argument is concrete, not abstract.** The review does not begin with a theoretical claim. It begins with an act of observation — looking at a pack — and builds the academic argument from there. That is a deliberate rhetorical choice, and it works.
- 2. Saussure's arbitrariness principle is the load-bearing idea.** If the connection between a visual sign and its meaning were natural, packaging design would be purely practical. Because it is cultural and learned, every design choice is an ideological act. This is what justifies the entire semiotic approach.
- 3. Barthes's myth concept does the heaviest analytical work.** The insight that condoms in India have been mythologised as objects of distrust rather than care is the most powerful analytical move in the review. It explains why good design alone may not be sufficient to shift behaviour.
- 4. Anchorage is underappreciated.** Barthes's concept that verbal text narrows visual meaning is directly applicable to condom packs, where taglines are doing ideological work that is rarely examined. This is a genuinely productive analytical tool for the methodology chapter.
- 5. The implied viewer is the key analytical category.** Kress and van Leeuwen's concept of the subject position from which a pack's meanings become fully legible allows the review to connect semiotic theory directly to gender politics. Who the pack speaks to, and how, is both a design question and a public health question.
- 6. The on-shelf versus use-behaviour gap is the most original contribution.** No existing consumer behaviour study has examined packaging effectiveness in this dual register. This is the most practically consequential gap the dissertation addresses, and it is clearly stated.
- 7. Indian colour semiotics are analytically decisive, not decorative context.** Red meaning wedding celebration rather than danger. White connoting mourning rather than clinical purity. Saffron carrying nationalist associations. These are not interesting footnotes — they determine whether a semiotic reading of Indian condom packs is accurate or misleading.
- 8. The Bollywood connection is an underexplored resource.** Films like *Janhit Mein Jaari* have found ways to normalise condom use through culturally familiar registers — comedy, domesticity, female agency. Packaging designers have access to the same repertoire, but whether they are using it remains undocumented.
- 9. The localisation risk is real and specific.** Borrowing cultural motifs without understanding their layered historical meaning produces hollow or offensive design. For a product already navigating charged social associations, this risk is heightened.
- 10. The gap statement is precise and defensible.** It names specific theorists, specific visual dimensions and a specific cultural context. A reader finishing this review knows exactly what the dissertation will do and why no one else has done it yet.

Let me give you everything you need — understanding, process and demonstration — all in one place. Think of this as your preparation guide for the supervision meeting.

Part 1: Understanding This Literature Review

What a Literature Review Actually Is

Most students think a literature review means summarising what other people have written. That is the most common misunderstanding. A literature review is an **argument** — one that uses existing research as its evidence.

The argument your review makes is this:

Packaging communicates meaning through visual signs. In India, condoms carry deep social stigma that packaging must navigate. Nobody has ever studied how Indian condom packaging does this visually. My dissertation fills that gap.

Every section exists to build one piece of that argument. Nothing is there just to show you have read things.

How the Review is Structured — and Why

Think of it as three rooms leading to one door.

Room 1 — Semiotic Theory establishes your method. It answers: *why is a semiotic approach the right one for this problem?*

Room 2 — Stigma and Gender Research establishes your context. It answers: *what social meanings does the product already carry, before any designer touches it?*

Room 3 — Consumer Behaviour Research establishes your problem. It answers: *what can packaging actually do, and where does it fall short?*

The Door — The Gap Statement is where all three rooms lead. It says: *no existing study has brought these three bodies of knowledge together around this specific product in this specific context. This dissertation does.*

The Key Ideas You Must Be Able to Explain

Saussure — Signs are culturally learned, not natural. A red rose does not inherently mean romance. That connection was built up over time through cultural repetition. This matters because it means every visual choice on a pack is drawing on a cultural code — and designers need to understand what code they are actually activating.

Barthes — Images carry hidden ideological stories. He called these stories *myths*. A soft-focus couple on a condom pack looks like a simple illustration. It is actually a myth — a cultural story about who intimacy belongs to, what it looks like, and whether a condom can plausibly be part of it. His second idea, *anchorage*, shows how the text on a pack steers the viewer toward one particular reading of the image.

Peirce — Signs function in three different ways. An *icon* resembles what it represents — a photograph of a couple. An *index* has a physical connection to its meaning — gold foil connoting luxury. A *symbol* is purely conventional — a heart meaning romance even though there is nothing heart-shaped about love. This taxonomy lets you analyse any visual element on a pack precisely.

Kress and van Leeuwen — Images have grammar. Their most useful concept for your study is the *implied viewer* — the ideal person the pack is speaking to. Most Indian condom packs, it appears, construct an implied viewer who is male. That is not a minor design detail. It reflects and reproduces the gendered assumptions that public health research identifies as barriers to consistent use.

The On-Shelf vs Use-Behaviour Gap — your most original contribution. Consumer behaviour research measures purchase intention. But for condoms in India, buying and using are separated by a social environment that packaging alone cannot resolve. No existing study has examined packaging effectiveness in this dual register. That is the gap.

Part 2: How This Review Was Built — Step by Step

Step 1: Starting With a Problem, Not a Topic

The starting point was not *condom packaging* as a topic. It was a genuine tension: packaging is supposed to communicate meaning, but what happens when the product itself carries social meanings that resist that communication? That tension is what gave the review its direction.

Step 2: Identifying What Three Fields Each Contribute

Rather than reading everything and then deciding how to organise it, the approach was to ask: what does each body of knowledge contribute to the central argument?

Semiotics contributes the method. Stigma research contributes the context. Consumer behaviour contributes the evidence of packaging's limits. Each field was read with that specific question in mind, which is why the review synthesises rather than summarises.

Step 3: Building Theory Before Application

Section 1 establishes theory before discussing any applied research. This is deliberate. If you introduce the SOR model from consumer behaviour before explaining Saussure, the reader has no way of evaluating what that model is actually measuring semiotically. Theory first means the rest of the review has a foundation to stand on.

Step 4: Making Each Section End With a Forward Connection

Notice how each section closes by pointing toward the next problem. Section 1 ends by noting that packaging-semiotics research has never engaged with stigmatised product categories. That is not a conclusion — it is a handover to Section 2, which explains what stigma looks like for this product. Section 2 ends by noting that popular culture is changing the conversation, but packaging may not have followed. That is a handover to the analytical questions in Section 4.

Step 5: Writing the Gap Statement Last

The gap statement was written after everything else was in place. It could not have been written first, because its precision depends on having established exactly what three fields contribute and exactly where they fail to speak to each other. The gap statement names specific theorists, specific visual dimensions and a specific cultural context. That specificity is what makes it defensible.

Part 3: What to Say and Show Your Supervisor

Here is a complete verbal walkthrough you can deliver in a supervision meeting. Practice it until it feels natural, not memorised.

Opening — Frame the Review in One Minute

"My literature review makes a single argument across five sections. The argument is that Indian condom packaging sits at a fault-line between visual persuasion and social constraint. Semiotic theory tells me packaging can encode complex cultural meanings. Gender and public health research tells me condoms in India already carry social meanings that work against what packaging is trying to do. Consumer behaviour research tells me packaging influences purchase but has never been tested where stigma is the main variable. No existing study brings these three things together around this product in this context. That is the gap my dissertation addresses."

Demonstrate the Theoretical Progression

Draw this on a piece of paper and walk through it:

SAUSSURE

Signs are arbitrary — meaning is culturally learned

A red rose means romance because we agreed it does, not because it is natural

leads to

BARTHES

Signs carry ideology — images tell hidden cultural stories (myths)

The soft-focus couple on a pack is a myth about whose intimacy counts

Text anchors visual meaning toward one preferred reading (anchorage)

leads to

PEIRCE

Signs function differently — icon / index / symbol

Photograph = icon. Gold foil = index. Heart motif = symbol.

Lets us analyse any element on a pack precisely

leads to

KRESS AND VAN LEEUWEN

Images have grammar — gaze, salience, implied viewer

The implied viewer of most Indian condom packs is male

That is a design decision with public health consequences

Then say: *"Each theorist adds something the previous one cannot do alone. Together they give me a systematic method for reading a condom pack as a text, not just looking at it as a picture."*

Demonstrate the Central Tension

Hold up two fingers and say:

On one side: Consumer behaviour research shows packaging measurably influences brand perception and purchase intention in Indian FMCG markets. Design can shift how a product is evaluated.

On the other side: Public health research shows that social norms around gender, shame and relational trust prevent consistent condom use even among people who have already purchased. The gap between buying and using is where stigma lives.

"The gap I am filling is right there — between these two bodies of knowledge. Packaging research has never studied a product this stigmatised. Public health research has never examined how the visual design of packs participates in or resists the stigma. My dissertation sits at that intersection."

Demonstrate the Implied Viewer Concept

This is your most concrete demonstration. Describe these two imaginary packs:

Pack A: A woman leaning toward her partner, eyes closed, angled slightly away from the camera. She is not looking at the viewer. She is being looked at.

Pack B: Both figures facing the viewer directly, with equal eye contact and equal presence in the frame.

Then say: *"Pack A and Pack B are making different ideological proposals. Pack A constructs an implied viewer who is male. The woman is an object of contemplation, not a subject with her own desires. Pack B speaks to a couple. Kress and van Leeuwen call this the difference between a demand, where the figure reaches out to the viewer, and an offer, where the figure is available for the viewer's gaze. Most Indian condom packs appear to make the offer rather*

than the demand, and they direct that offer toward a male viewer. That is not a neutral design choice. It reflects and reproduces the gendered assumptions that public health research identifies as central barriers to use."

Demonstrate the Barthesian Myth Applied to Condoms

Say: "Barthes showed that objects can be mythologised — that they accumulate second-order meanings through cultural repetition until those meanings feel natural and inevitable. In India, condoms have been mythologised as objects of distrust. Suggesting condom use within a marriage can function as an accusation of infidelity. Qualitative research with people living with HIV shows this operating in the most acute form. The condom is being read as a message, not used as a tool. My dissertation asks: does packaging participate in this mythology, or does it try to overwrite it? And if it tries to overwrite it, what visual strategies does it use?"

Read the Gap Statement Directly

"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."

Then stop. Let it land. Do not explain it further unless your supervisor asks.

Questions Your Supervisor May Ask — With Suggested Answers

Q: Why semiotics specifically, and not discourse analysis or content analysis?

"Semiotics gives me a framework for reading visual meaning systematically, not just describing what I see. Content analysis would tell me how often a couple appears on a pack. Discourse analysis would focus on language. Semiotics lets me ask what the image is doing ideologically, which is the question that matters for this topic."

Q: How will you select your sample of packs?

"The literature review establishes the theoretical and contextual basis. The methodology chapter will detail the sampling criteria, but the review points toward the key variables: colour palette, use of human figures, script choice, and whether the pack addresses an implied male or couple viewer."

Q: Is this not too speculative? You have not analysed any packs yet.

"The review is not speculative. It establishes that the tools exist, that the social context is well-documented, and that the gap is real. The preliminary observations about implied

viewers and colour choices are offered as analytical hypotheses, not findings. The analysis will either confirm, complicate or challenge them."

Q: What is the practical value of this research?

"If the visual grammar of Indian condom packs is reinforcing the same stigmas that public health research identifies as barriers to use, that is a finding with real implications for designers, public health communicators and brand managers. Design is not politically neutral, especially in a product category where consistent use has genuine health consequences."

The One Thing to Remember Above Everything Else

When your supervisor asks you about your literature review, they are not testing whether you have read the papers. They are testing whether you understand **why those papers are there** and **what argument they collectively make**.

Your answer to every question should connect back to this: *"This source is here because it builds one piece of the argument that my study is necessary and my method is appropriate."*

That is the difference between a student who has done a literature review and a researcher who owns one.