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## The allure of the hidden: How product unveiling confers value<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

Different package designs call for different ways of revealing the product. In this research, we demonstrate that packaging that calls for *unveiling*—the removal of the cover of a concealed, stationary object—enhances the perceived value of the product compared to other forms of product revelation. Drawing on theories of grounded associations, shared meaning, and contagion, we theorize that the act of unveiling is associated with revealing a protected and thus pristine object, which is consequently perceived to be valuable. We begin the empirical investigation by exploring consumer associations with product unveiling across American and South Korean consumers (pilot study 1). We then demonstrate that the unveiling effect arises with both imagined (pilot study 2) and real objects and is mediated by beliefs about the pristine condition of the object (studies 1–3). We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical contributions, implications for managers, and directions for future research.

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## 1. Introduction

*“It is natural for us to enjoy and derive an aesthetic pleasure out of pursuing something that is hidden or obscured”*

[—Yuriko Saito (1999, p. 259).]

Which product is more highly valued: a dress on a store hanger for all to see or one revealed from behind a curtain? A blanket visible in its box or one that is revealed when the box is opened? A gift revealed by lifting it out of its packaging or by removing the cover of the box that contains it? The average person opens the packaging of numerous products every day, but what is the impact of the *manner* in which the product inside is revealed?

Prior research has documented how subtleties in package design can influence the way consumers choose and evaluate products (Hagtvædt & Patrick, 2008; Huyghe & Van Kerckhove, 2013; Madzharov & Block, 2010; Raghuram & Krishna, 1999; Warlop, Ratneshwar, & Van Osselaer, 2005). In the current research, we focus on a yet uninvestigated aspect of product packaging: the manner in which the product is revealed. We hypothesize and empirically demonstrate that packaging designed to *unveil* the product signals the product's pristine nature and enhances its perceived value, compared to other forms of product revelation.

Much anthropological and cultural evidence shows that people often protectively cover valuable objects to keep them in pristine condition and retain their essence (Alvi, 2013; Rozin & Nemeroff, 1990), to unveil them only when needed. This has led to

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shared metaphors and mental associations with the notion of unveiling. According to Saito (1999, 259), the concealed object when unveiled is “believed to be something positive and worth having access to.”

In the current research, we define unveiling as an act by which a protective cover is removed from a concealed, stationary product, thereby revealing this product. We theorize that because only valuable items tend to be unveiled, consumers also make the reverse inference: that unveiled items are valuable. In other words, because individuals associate the act of unveiling with valuable objects, they infer that products that are unveiled from their packaging are more valuable than identical products removed from other forms of packaging. We also propose a mechanism to explain why the unveiling effect occurs: a product revealed via unveiling is perceived to be pristine. In investigating these notions, this research provides three key insights about package design that contribute to both marketing theory and practice: (1) A package designed to unveil an object must meet two key criteria: (a) the product must be concealed within a protective package, connoting its pristine nature, and (b) should remain stationary within the packaging when the cover is removed to reveal the product. (2) By contrasting unveiling with other forms of product revelation, we empirically demonstrate that unveiling has a favorable influence on a product’s perceived value and that beliefs about the pristine nature of the product mediate the unveiling effect. (3) We provide theoretical and practical insights into the notion of visual contamination and its implications for packaging design by expanding the notion of contagion to the visual domain. This subtle influence of package design contributes to the bigger landscape of everyday consumer aesthetics (Patrick, 2016) and impresses upon us the significant role of design in everyday life.

## 2. Theoretical development

### 2.1. Grounded associations and shared meanings

The present research is informed by the notion that people have grounded associations and shared meanings about the world. For example, females are associated with light colors and males with darker ones (Semin & Palma, 2014), whereas social comfort is associated with feeling warm and social discomfort with feeling cold (Huang, Zhang, Hui, & Wyer, 2014; Zhong & Leonardelli, 2008). There might be ritualistic instances of figuratively applying some of these associations (e.g., brides wearing white to signal virginity), but there need not be any direct experiential account for their existence.

Historical, cultural, and religious instances of veiling and unveiling behaviors provide many indications that the act and rituals of veiling are associated with protecting the pristine nature of valuable objects while unveiling is associated with the revelation of those valuable objects. Head coverings and veils for women date back to the 13th century BC (Murphy, 1964). In traditional cultures that practiced polygamy, men secluded their wives from the eyes of society, preserving their sanctity in special resorts away from the eyes of other males (Woldesemait, 2013). A resort of this kind was known as a “harem,” meaning sacred and protected (Graham-Brown, 1988). For the 19th century bride, veils became signals of virginity, and the tradition of unveiling the bride is still practiced in many wedding ceremonies (Ingrassia, 2007). In Christianity, sacred objects (holy vessels, chalices, etc.) are veiled presumably to protect them from sinful eyes. Anthropological evidence points to the rituals associated with concealing objects for safety, luck, and protection (Merrifield, 1987) and connects veiling with “concealment, as counterpoised to the relative value of revelation” (Alvi, 2013, 192). Examples from diverse cultures and religions appear to be based on a relatively uniform and consistent rationale: valuable objects are veiled to keep them pristine, hence unveiling entails revealing a pristine object. Pilot study 1 empirically supports this assertion using Korean and American consumers.

### 2.2. Inferences, contamination, and pristine beliefs

In a product packaging context, these notions of value and pristine beliefs are related to the concept of consumer contamination, whereby consumers tend to evaluate products less favorably if they have previously been touched by other consumers (Argo, Dahl, & Morales, 2006). This concept of contamination builds on the theory of contagion, which holds that when two persons or objects come into direct or indirect contact, essential properties from one is transferred to the other (Morales & Fitzsimons, 2007; Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994). This effect remains even after contact between the two parties is broken (Rozin & Nemeroff, 1990). Further, consumers do not necessarily need to personally observe the contaminating contact taking place; they may infer it if the location or presentation of an object appears to expose it to potential contamination (Di Muro & Noseworthy, 2013).

The current research extends these notions by investigating contamination—or the lack thereof—that occurs not only via the sense of touch, but also via the sense of vision. Since merely looking at an object can contaminate it, we posit that contamination need not be a physical reality. The aforementioned practices of veiling or concealing valuable objects “from prying eyes and grubby fingers” (Dickson, 2015, p. 122) suggest that people aim to avoid both physical and visual contamination. In the current context of product packaging, we propose that concealment encourages the perception that the product is protected and pristine. The inference may then be made that the product is more valuable than it otherwise would be.

According to the framework proposed by Kardes, Posavac, and Cronley (2004), such a product evaluation would involve an inductive, memory-based inference, which may be either singular or comparative, depending on the presence of other comparable products. In other words, the inference could pertain to a single product judged in isolation or to multiple products considered in comparison to one another. Inferences are broadly defined as “the construction of meaning beyond what is explicitly given” (Dick, Chakravarti, & Biehal, 1990; Harris, 1981). These inferences are often rooted in learned associations or memory networks that are elicited by situational cues in the consumption environment (Krishnan, 1996).

In the context of the current research, we expect that when consumers unveil a product from its packaging, they draw on previously formed beliefs about the pristine nature of veiled objects to form a general inference of value. To summarize, we hypothesize that (1) packaging that entails (vs. does not entail) unveiling a product encourages beliefs about the pristine nature of that product, and (2) these pristine beliefs cause consumers to ascribe value to the product. We test these hypotheses with a set of two pilot studies and three main experiments.

### 3. Empirical overview

In our empirical investigation, we contrast unveiling of a product (e.g., from a closed, opaque box in which the product remains stationary while the cover is removed) with other forms of product revelation that do not involve unveiling (e.g., a bag, a transparent box, or an open box). We present two pilot studies and three main experiments to test our hypotheses. We begin the empirical investigation by exploring consumers' associations with product unveiling. We find similar associations across American and South Korean consumers, the dominant association being that of keeping the product protected and pristine (pilot study 1). In the next pilot study, we provide evidence that unveiling enhances the perceived value of an imaginary object. Having set the stage for the unveiling effect, study 1 tests the effect of unveiling on the perceived value of a towel presented in a box versus a bag, and we demonstrate the mediating role of pristine beliefs. In this study, we also demonstrate the moderating role of perceived contamination and measure actual choice behavior. In study 2, we replicate the main pattern of results by comparing the influence of a transparent versus opaque box, thereby also implicating the role of visual contamination in the unveiling effect. Prior research involving contagion via physical touch indicates that transparent packages facilitate contamination effects and opaque packages prevent them (Morales & Fitzsimons, 2007). We hypothesize and demonstrate that visual contamination may occur even in the absence of physical touch, whereas concealing the product in an opaque package prevents this form of contamination as well. In study 3, we investigate a managerially relevant empirical question: how the person performing the unveiling might influence pristine beliefs and perceptions of a product's value.

### 4. Pilot study 1: Grounded associations of product unveiling

Aesthetics is a human universal (Dutton, 2009). However, specific aesthetic features might vary in their appeal and interpretation (Han & Shavitt, 1994; Madden, Hewett, & Roth, 2000). Keeping this in mind, especially given the various rituals of unveiling from different cultures and religions, this study was designed to uncover grounded associations with product unveiling and to examine cultural commonalities or differences in this regard. The US and South Korea were chosen as examples of Western and Eastern cultures, respectively (Hofstede, 2001).

One hundred forty-five participants, 72 from the US (61% male,  $M_{\text{age}} = 33$ ) and 73 from South Korea (49% male,  $M_{\text{age}} = 22$ ) completed an online survey in which they provided open-ended responses. Participants were first given a short description of unveiling as “the removal of the cover of a stationary object.” To ensure that they understood the concept, participants were then asked to briefly describe an example of product unveiling. To probe for their grounded associations, we next asked them to spend a minute writing about, “Why do you think packaging is designed that way?” Two US participants and two Korean participants were removed for failing to follow instructions (writing only one or two words), so 141 participants were retained for analysis.

We analyzed the open-ended responses using a constant comparative technique (Dahl & Moreau, 2007; Patrick & Hagtvedt, 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For each of the conditions, we noted specific lay beliefs in the data that helped uncover associations with product unveiling. We found that participants made two predominant associations, regardless of culture. The first association pertained to keeping the product pristine, and the second association pertained to the creation of positive anticipation. Table 1 provides frequencies and examples of these associations across both cultures.

This pilot study helped provide some preliminary evidence that aligns with our conceptual model and supports the general notion that unveiling elicits similar grounded associations across at least two different cultures. While we focus mainly on the pristine associations—the most frequently identified factor—in our empirical investigation, we also examine positive anticipation as an alternative mediator in study 3.

**Table 1**  
Grounded associations with product unveiling.

Association	US sample		South Korean sample	
	Frequency of mention (%)	Example	Frequency of mention (%)	Example
Pristine	34	Items are kept in containers to keep them from being damaged, contaminated, or stolen.	41	[...]snacks are one kind of the food that people eat so they should be clean and fresh.
Anticipation	27	I think it is designed to heighten the buyer's anticipation and excitement, and to forge a bond between them and the product.	32	By keeping objects within cover, the act of unveiling becomes the act of building suspense and anticipation, until in a climax the object itself is unveiled.

## 5. Pilot study 2: Unveiling enhances perceived value

The second pilot study was designed to demonstrate the unveiling effect with an imagined product. In this study, we aimed to simulate the act of unveiling the product versus lifting it out of the packaging. Our expectation was that the mere gesture of unveiling (vs. lifting) would suffice to trigger the aforementioned inferences of value.

### 5.1. Participants and procedure

Ninety-three undergraduates (40% male) at a large US business school participated in this online study for extra credit and were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: unveiling, lifting, and a no-instructions control. In the first two conditions, participants were first told, “The actions we perform with our body hold some meaning for us. We are interested in the personal meaning of different actions using your hands. Please actually perform the actions to be able to answer the questions.” They were also asked to watch a short video of a woman’s hands performing an action corresponding to the specific condition. Participants in the control condition were not given any information or visual instructions.

The unveiling video operationalized unveiling as a hand gesture that involved the movement of one hand upward and then outward to resemble removing a cover from a package to reveal an object. Lifting was demonstrated as the upward movement of the hand to carry the focal object out of the package. In both cases, the eyes of the actor were focused on the target object. In the unveiling condition, the eyes were focused on the object being revealed whereas in the lifting condition, the eyes moved upwards with the object.

All participants were then asked to imagine that they were opening a box with a watch in it. Those in the two main experimental conditions (unveiling or lifting) were asked to imagine using the gesture demonstrated in the video. Using 7-point scale items (1 = not at all, 7 = very much), all participants reported how valuable, attractive, prestigious, and special (later averaged into a value scale,  $\alpha = .97$ ) the watch they imagined was.

### 5.2. Results

A one-way ANOVA with the value scale as the dependent variable revealed a significant main effect ( $F(2, 91) = 4.13$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Planned comparisons revealed that participants in the unveiling condition imagined a watch of significantly higher value ( $M = 4.89$ ) than those in the lifting ( $M = 3.38$ ,  $t(91) = 2.40$ ,  $p < .05$ ) or control conditions ( $M = 3.32$ ,  $t(91) = 2.57$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The lifting and control conditions did not differ significantly in the perceived value of the watch ( $t(91) = .11$ ,  $p = .92$ ).

### 5.3. Discussion

These results support our basic hypothesis that the act of unveiling enhances perceived value, even for an imagined object. In the study that follows, we utilize product packaging (a box) that naturally calls for unveiling and contrast it with packaging (a bag) that requires lifting out the product. Further, we demonstrate the mediating role of pristine beliefs as well as a moderating condition of perceived contamination: If the product is already shown to be contaminated, the effect of unveiling does not hold. In addition, this study captures a behavioral consequence of perceived value: the motivation to take the product home.

## 6. Study 1: The mediating role of pristine beliefs

### 6.1. Participants and procedure

#### 6.1.1. Choice and pretest of stimuli

Two different types of packaging that naturally afford (Gibson, 1977) unveiling versus lifting were chosen to demonstrate the practical implications of unveiling for marketers. A box was used to elicit the act of unveiling while a bag prompted lifting the object out of the packaging; see Appendix A for the stimuli. Notably, the stimuli were otherwise similar: the price of both the bag and the box was the same (\$1), they were both made of silver paper, they were both of a similar size, and they both contained the same product. The product was a white hand towel chosen as a gender-neutral and valence-neutral object.

To ensure that the bag and box were similar along relevant dimensions, a pretest was conducted with forty-one undergraduates from the same population used in the main study. Participants were shown either the bag or the box and reported, on 7-point scale items, the extent to which the containers were aesthetically appealing, elegant, attractive (later averaged in an aesthetic appeal scale;  $\alpha = .91$ ), luxurious, high class, expensive (luxury scale;  $\alpha = .94$ ), plain, common, ordinary (commonness scale;  $\alpha = .77$ ), and high quality. Results revealed that the silver bag was as aesthetically pleasing ( $M = 4.38$ ) as the box ( $M = 4.39$ ,  $F(1, 40) = .00$ , *ns*), as luxurious ( $M = 3.30$ ) as the box ( $M = 2.92$ ,  $F(1, 40) = .52$ , *ns*), as common ( $M = 3.87$ ) as the box ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $F(1, 40) = .11$ , *ns*) and as high quality ( $M = 3.43$ ) as the box ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $F(1, 40) = .19$ , *ns*). We thus concluded that the stimuli were suitable for use in the study.

#### 6.1.2. Main study procedure

Participants in the main study were 214 undergraduate students (43% male) randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (packaging: unveiling vs. lifting)  $\times$  2 (contamination: used vs. new) between-subjects design. All participants were given a cover

story that asked them to evaluate a hand towel as part of a market research study that would help clients design give-away products for future marathons. Participants were instructed to open the container and inspect the towel. In the unveiling condition, the towel remained stationary when the cover was removed, so participants could easily view the towel before handling it. In the lifting condition, participants needed to lift the towel out of the bag before viewing it. In other words, participants were free to handle the towel in both conditions, but the packaging afforded unveiling only in the former condition. We manipulated perceived contamination in a manner similar to Argo et al. (2006). All participants saw the identical stimulus: a clean, folded, white hand towel presented in a bed of white tissue in either the box or the bag. Participants in the new condition were told that the hand towel was intended for use at an upcoming 5 K marathon (to indicate that it was unused and pristine). Participants in the used condition read that similar towel boxes/bags had been given to marathon runners at a 5 K the previous weekend and that “some of these towels were returned by the runners. So keep in mind that you might be given a towel that has been used by one of the runners during the marathon.” In reality, every participant—regardless of condition—was given a clean, unused, white hand towel; only the possibility of contamination was introduced.

The rationale for this manipulation was that whereas unveiling a product highlights its pristine nature, we would not expect this effect to hold when it has already been suggested that the product being unveiled is contaminated. Indeed, we expected that the possibility of prior use by a sweaty marathon runner would constitute a particularly strong manipulation of perceived contamination. Participants completed measures of pristine beliefs and perceived value. They were asked to report how uncontaminated, pristine, and pure the towel appeared (measured on 7-point scale items where 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; later averaged into a pristine beliefs scale:  $\alpha = .79$ ). Perceived value was measured on the same scale as in pilot study 2 ( $\alpha = .92$ ). To test for possible differences stemming from cultural background, participants also reported their ethnicity (38% Asian, 25% Hispanic, 22% Caucasian, 10% African American, 1% Pacific Islander, and 4% other). This measure was not a significant covariate and did not change the pattern of effects, so it is not discussed further. At the end of the experiment, participants were told that they could take the towel with them as a token of appreciation. We recorded this measure of actual behavior.

## 6.2. Results

### 6.2.1. Perceived value

A 2 (packaging: unveiling vs. lifting)  $\times$  2 (perceived contamination: new vs. used) between-subjects ANOVA on the perceived value scale revealed a main effect of packaging ( $F(1, 210) = 7.27, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .03$ ), a main effect of perceived contamination ( $F(1, 210) = 37.24, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .15$ ), and the predicted interaction between packaging and perceived contamination ( $F(1, 210) = 3.73, p = .05, \eta_p^2 = .02$ ).

Planned comparisons showed that within the new condition, participants perceived the towels in the unveiling condition ( $M = 3.26, SD = 1.57$ ) to be of significantly higher value than those in the lifting condition ( $M = 2.49, SD = 1.33, t(210) = 3.36, p < .001$ ). In turn, towels in the latter condition were perceived to be of significantly higher value than those in the unveiling–used condition ( $M = 1.92, SD = .92$ ) and in the lifting–used condition ( $M = 1.79, SD = .87, t(210) = 3.17, p < .01$ ). The two used conditions did not differ significantly ( $t(210) = .53, p = .60$ ); see Fig. 1.

### 6.2.2. Pristine beliefs

A similar ANOVA on the pristine beliefs scale revealed a main effect of packaging ( $F(1, 210) = 22.13, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .09$ ), a main effect of perceived contamination ( $F(1, 210) = 169.71, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .45$ ), and a packaging  $\times$  perceived contamination interaction ( $F(1, 210) = 8.5, p < .01$ ). Planned comparisons showed that within the new condition, participants perceived the towels in the unveiling condition ( $M = 5.81, SD = 1.20$ ) to be significantly more pristine than those in the lifting condition ( $M = 4.15, SD = 1.87, t(210) = 5.53, p < .001$ ). In turn, towels in the latter condition were perceived to be significantly more pristine

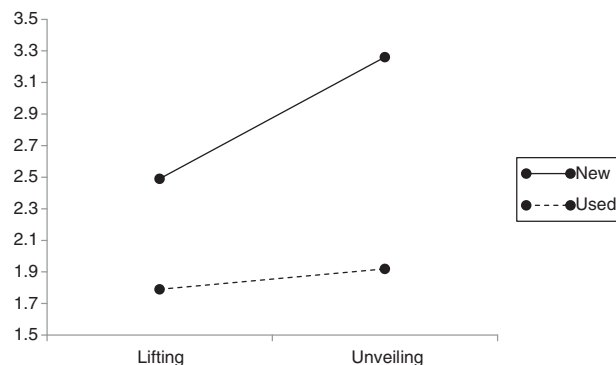


Fig. 1. Perceived value of towel.

than those in the unveiling–used condition ( $M = 2.34$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ) and in the lifting–used condition ( $M = 1.96$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ,  $t(210) = 7.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The two used conditions did not differ significantly ( $t(210) = 1.23$ ,  $p = .22$ ); see Fig. 2.

### 6.2.3. Mediation analysis

We tested mediated moderation using PROCESS model 59 (Hayes, 2013) with 10,000 resamples, with the prediction that pristine beliefs would mediate the effect of packaging on perceived value, but only within the new condition. First, the indirect effect of the highest order interaction was significant ( $B = .16$ , 95% CI = [.03, .38]). The indirect effect of packaging on perceived value via pristine beliefs was significant within the new condition ( $B = .20$ , 95% CI = [.05, .42]) but not within the used condition ( $B = .05$ , 95% CI = [−.02, .19]). In other words, our prediction was supported.

### 6.2.4. Taking the towel home

Chi-square analysis on the additional behavioral measure of taking the towel home revealed significant differences stemming from packaging ( $\chi^2(1) = 38.37$ ,  $p < .0005$ ) and perceived contamination ( $\chi^2(1) = 6.56$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Specifically, 58.2% of unveiling–new, 27.1% of lifting–new, 4.3% of unveiling–used, and 3.6% of lifting–used participants took the towel home with them ( $\chi^2(3) = 48.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ); see Fig. 3.

### 6.3. Discussion

Study 1 provides compelling evidence with real stimuli that unveiling confers value on a product and increases the likelihood that it is chosen. Further, mediation analysis confirmed that pristine beliefs underlie the unveiling effect. Unsurprisingly, the effect does not hold when participants were told that the towel may have been used by sweaty marathon runners; the subtle signal provided by unveiling was not strong enough to overcome this explicit information. However, one limitation of the study was that the lifting condition involved more physical contact between the towel and the participant; this could arguably have influenced the results. The following study was therefore designed to require equivalent interaction between conditions.

## 7. Study 2: Seeing versus revealing the product

### 7.1. Participants and procedure

Seventy-seven undergraduates (53% male) participated in a between-subjects experiment in which they were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: transparent versus opaque. All participants viewed a box containing a teal plush blanket; see Appendix A for stimuli. In the transparent packaging condition, the front of the box was transparent, so the blanket was visible even when the box was closed. In the opaque packaging condition, no part of the box was transparent. Both boxes were otherwise identical, and they were both sealed with a tightly wound ribbon. (Although a seal is not necessary for unveiling to occur, it suggests that contamination via touch has not occurred.) The experimenter presented the box, stating that it contained a blanket for sale, then cut the ribbon with scissors and opened the box. In the transparent condition, the blanket was already visible while the box was closed, so although the act of opening the box was identical between conditions, the act fit our definition of unveiling only in the opaque condition. Based on their visual impression, participants reported perceived value ( $\alpha = .86$ ) and pristine beliefs ( $\alpha = .82$ ) regarding the blanket on the same scales as in the previous study. To test for possible differences stemming from cultural background, participants also reported ethnicity. This measure was not a significant covariate and did not change the pattern of effects, so it is not discussed further.

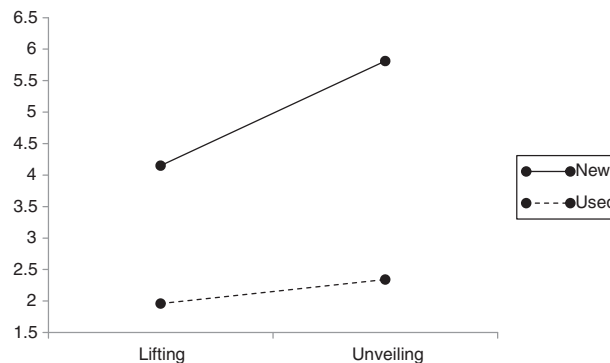


Fig. 2. Pristine beliefs for towel.

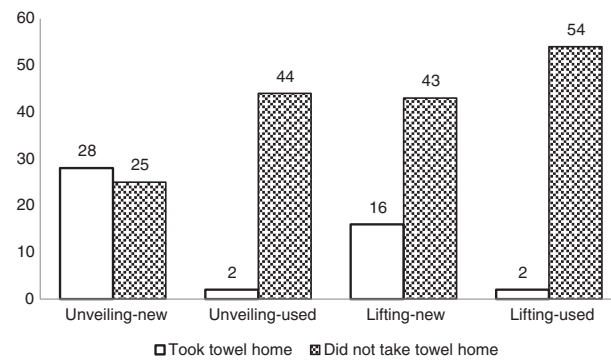


Fig. 3. Number of participants who took the towel home.

## 7.2. Results

### 7.2.1. Perceived value

An ANOVA on the perceived value scale revealed the expected main effect of packaging ( $M_{\text{transparent}} = 3.34$  vs.  $M_{\text{opaque}} = 4.46$ ,  $F(1, 74) = 14.68$ ,  $p < .0005$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .17$ ).

### 7.2.2. Pristine beliefs

A similar ANOVA on the pristine beliefs scale revealed the expected main effect of packaging ( $M_{\text{transparent}} = 3.64$  vs.  $M_{\text{opaque}} = 4.49$ ,  $F(1, 75) = 6.62$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .08$ ).

### 7.2.3. Mediation analysis

We tested mediation using PROCESS model 4 (Hayes, 2013) with 10,000 resamples, with the prediction that pristine beliefs would mediate the effect of packaging on perceived value. This prediction was supported by the significant indirect effect of packaging on perceived value via pristine beliefs ( $B = .43$ , 95% CI = [.11, .88]).

## 7.3. Discussion

These results provide evidence that the act of unveiling confers perceived value, even when compared with an otherwise identical act in connection with transparent packaging. In study 1, participants not only had the opportunity to touch the product, but the notion of contamination was tied to physical touch by sweaty marathon runners. In study 2, there was no touch involved, whether by runners or participants. Further, in study 1, there were arguably differences in the physical act between conditions, but in study 2, the act was physically equivalent between conditions. However, this act qualified as unveiling only in the opaque condition, in which the product was revealed through the act of opening the box. In the transparent condition, the product was already visible before opening the box.

Having demonstrated in a pilot study and two main experiments the influence of unveiling on product evaluation, we designed the study that follows to investigate an empirical question: How does the person in charge of unveiling affect pristine beliefs and perceptions of a product's value? We expect that the unveiling effect will be diminished when another person is displaying the product; in this case, it not only seems likely that involvement and sense of discovery may be reduced, but one might also intuit that the person displaying the object has done so to others before, suggesting some level of contamination, regardless of whether the object is unveiled or merely presented in a pre-opened state. Additionally, the following study addresses an alternative explanation for the influence of unveiling on perceived value, namely, positive anticipation.

## 8. Study 3: Unveiling by oneself or by others

### 8.1. Participants and procedure

Sixty-six undergraduates (85% male) at a large business school individually participated in a lab experiment in exchange for extra credit. The study was a 2 (packaging: unveiling vs. open)  $\times$  2 (person: self vs. other) between-subjects design. The stimulus for the experiment was silverware in a velvet box; see Appendix A. Participants were told that they were participating in a product evaluation study. In the unveiling–self condition, participants entered a room where the velvet box containing the silverware was closed and placed on a table. In the open–self condition, the box was already open when the individual entered the room. In the unveiling–other condition, a male experimenter unveiled the silverware for the participants. In the open–other condition, the experimenter showed the silverware in an already open box. The experimenter then left the room and let the participants complete

the computer-based questionnaire. Note that in contrast to study 2, in which the packaging was opened by breaking a seal, the product in study 3 could potentially have been physically contaminated by others. We expect this perception to be more likely in the open (vs. unveiling) condition.

In addition to the scales used in previous studies, we measured positive anticipation by asking participants to respond to two 7-point scale items, “Before viewing the silverware, I was very curious/interested to see what was in the box” (averaged into a positive anticipation scale;  $r = .64$ ). This measure served to test anticipation as a potential alternative mediator; as noted earlier, pilot study participants had mentioned anticipation as another function of veiling and unveiling. To test for possible differences stemming from cultural background, participants also reported ethnicity. This measure was not a significant covariate and did not change the pattern of effects, so it is not discussed further.

## 8.2. Results

### 8.2.1. Perceived value

A packaging (unveiling vs. open)  $\times$  person (self vs. other) between-subjects ANOVA with the perceived value scale as the dependent variable revealed the hypothesized difference between the unveiling ( $M = 3.87$ ) and open ( $M = 3.04$ ,  $F(1, 62) = 5.44$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .08$ ) packaging conditions. We also observed a significant interaction between packaging and person ( $F(1, 62) = 4.44$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .07$ ). Contrast analysis revealed that the source of the interaction was the difference between the self-open ( $M = 2.60$ ) and self-unveiling ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $t(1, 62) = 3.19$ ,  $p < .005$ ) conditions; see Fig. 4.

### 8.2.2. Pristine beliefs versus positive anticipation

A similar ANOVA on the pristine beliefs scale revealed the hypothesized difference between the unveiling ( $M = 5.16$ ) and open ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $F(1, 62) = 5.15$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .08$ ) packaging conditions. We also observed a main effect of person ( $M_{\text{self}} = 4.42$  vs.  $M_{\text{other}} = 5.15$ ,  $F(1, 62) = 4.62$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .07$ ). The ANOVA with the positive anticipation scale also revealed a main effect of packaging ( $M_{\text{unveiling}} = 5.77$  vs.  $M_{\text{open}} = 4.82$ ,  $F(1, 62) = 10.53$ ,  $p < .005$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .15$ ). No other differences were significant. Mediation analysis was consequently conducted to identify whether positive anticipation explains the unveiling effect.

### 8.2.3. Mediation analysis (pristine beliefs versus positive anticipation)

We tested mediated moderation using PROCESS model 5 (Hayes, 2013) with 10,000 resamples. The indirect effect of packaging on perceived value via pristine beliefs was significant ( $B = .34$ , 95% CI = [.07, .83]). However, a similar analysis with the positive anticipation scale entered as the mediator revealed a non-significant indirect effect ( $B = .12$ , 95% CI = [−.14, .51]). In other words, pristine beliefs mediate the unveiling effect, but positive anticipation does not.

## 8.3. Discussion

The results from study 3 indicated that the unveiling effect manifested when participants unveiled the product but not when the experimenter did so. We interpret the difference between these results to stem from the extent to which the unveiling was perceived as unique or special. Participants who unveiled the product themselves might be expected to experience a sense of discovery, whereas those who saw the experimenter unveiling the product may have perceived this as a routine procedure, much like one could expect in a retail setting. Participants in the former condition would likely be more involved and therefore more sensitive to differences between the unveiling condition and the open condition.

In a retail setting, a customer might take it upon herself to unveil and inspect a product. Consistent with our previous studies, we would expect a more favorable response to this product than to one that was freely displayed in an open container.

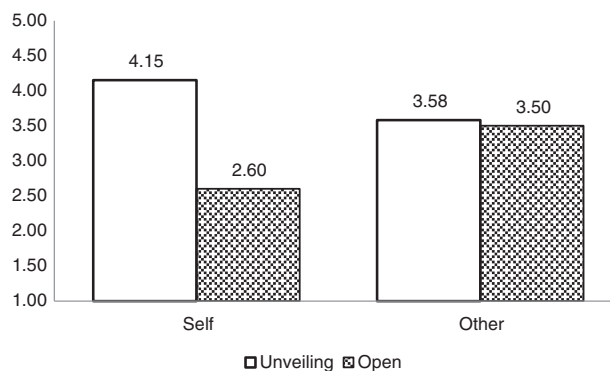


Fig. 4. Perceived value of silverware.

Alternatively, a salesperson may be in charge of showing the product to customers. In this case, we would expect the differences stemming from unveiling versus an open container to be eliminated, because either way the arrangement implies that a number of customers have had access to the product, although access to the product would not be as indiscriminate as it would be with an unsupervised open container. Further, the consumers' response to contamination would presumably be stronger when involvement is higher, which we expect that it would be when the consumer, rather than the salesperson, is in charge of handling the product. If our interpretation is correct, it would fit with the call by [Argo et al. \(2006\)](#) to investigate the role of salespeople in this context. However, more research is needed to determine whether our interpretation of this empirical finding is correct. Further, a limitation should be noted in regard to the finding that positive anticipation failed to explain the unveiling effect, as it not only relied on a two-item measure but also was measured as a remembered feeling after the product interaction.

## 9. General discussion

With a set of two pilot studies and three main studies, we demonstrate that packaging that calls for unveiling enhances the perceived value of the product compared to other forms of product revelation. The perception of value is encouraged by actual unveiling of a product (e.g., from a closed, opaque box as opposed to a bag, a transparent box, or an open box), or even by a mere gesture that simulates unveiling. Drawing on theories of grounded associations, shared meaning, and contagion, we theorize and demonstrate that the unveiling effect arises because the unveiled product is perceived to be pristine. We do not find cultural differences in the associations with product unveiling, although it is still possible that these may exist.

Our findings not only contribute to the literatures on packaging and product evaluation, but they also respond to calls for more research on contagion and contamination. In their suggestions for future research, for example, [Argo et al. \(2006, 92\)](#) note that it “would be interesting to investigate whether product packaging can protect products from consumer contamination.” The current research demonstrates that such protection can be effective and that subsequent unveiling of the protected products provides positive benefits in terms of pristine perceptions and product evaluations. Relatedly, [Morales and Fitzsimons \(2007\)](#) find that clear packages facilitate product contamination effects via contact with other disgusting products whereas opaque packages prevent them. However, as [Argo et al. \(2006\)](#) point out, whether these findings hold true for consumer contamination remains unclear and is left for future research. Our results from study 2 indicate that the effect does indeed hold true for consumer contamination.

### 9.1. Marketing implications and future research directions

Enhancing perceived value is a cornerstone of marketing practice ([Zeithaml, 1988](#)), and our findings can be applied to a host of different marketing activities, from packaging to in-store displays. Our results suggest that marketers should keep in mind the manner of product revelation, specifically aiming to create an unveiling experience. Whereas much prior research has focused on package design, relatively less research has focused specifically on the impression conveyed by the manner in which the product is revealed.

Many packages in the marketplace entail unveiling. For instance, Apple products are often ensconced in their packaging to be unveiled by the user. Fast growing subscription service Birchbox mails subscribers meticulously designed boxes that similarly entail unveiling to reveal the stash of goodies for that month. Notably, while unveiling may not influence pre-purchase evaluation, the current research suggests that it is likely to influence post-purchase consumer satisfaction and enhance customer delight ([Oliver, Rust, & Varki, 1997](#)).

In the context of in-store product demonstrations, the unveiling effect may be central to purchase intent and pre-purchase evaluations, but in this case consumer contamination becomes a factor to consider. As illustrated in study 3, the favorable influence of unveiling may be eliminated in connection with product demonstrations, if it becomes salient to the consumer that other consumers have been shown or given access to the product. One simple way to avoid this situation is for the store to set product units aside for demonstration while selling ones that remain pristine within their packaging. Numerous stores do this, and it should allow for the unveiling effect to manifest while sidestepping any negative influence from perceived consumer contamination. It is also possible that allowing the consumer to personally unveil the product might strengthen the experience. For example, Apple employees are instructed to hand over a new iPhone and allow the customer to unveil it in the store before setting it up for use.

An additional retail consideration is the impression of plentitude that may be given when stores offer numerous units of the same product, which might dilute product valuation. Blatant plentitude in retail outlets may possibly undermine perceptions of specialness arising from the unveiling effect in connection with in-store demonstrations. It therefore seems likely that luxury outlets may be especially well suited for in-store unveiling experiences. In this context, there are typically not a multitude of units on display for each product, and it is also less likely that a given unit has been displayed to a crowd of other customers, so the specialness of the experience is more likely to be preserved. This remains an empirical question for future research.

The unveiling effect also constitutes a potential area of research at the intersection of luxury and food consumption. Luxury brands of chocolate, such as Neuhaus or Pierre Marcolini, and luxury champagnes, such as Veuve Clicquot (e.g. the novel Fridge box), use packaging that invites unveiling. Consistent with the notion that unveiling might portray an exclusive image of the

brand, it is possible that these items are consumed more mindfully and in smaller quantities. Future research on food packaging might examine whether package design that enhances perceptions of luxury can potentially reduce gluttonous consumption.

As discussed in connection with study 3, consumer involvement represents another viable avenue for future research. It seems likely that consumer involvement will heighten sensitivity to contamination or pristine perceptions, so contexts or product types that increase involvement may be conducive to strengthening the unveiling effect. Involvement might also affect whether actual, physical contamination must occur to decrease the perceived value of a product. In the current research, as with much related literature, contamination can be of an intangible nature, perhaps even arising when an object is merely exposed to other consumers' vision. Future research could investigate contexts or product types for which physical versus intangible contamination come into play.

With intangible contamination, the notion of product concealment becomes especially relevant. As demonstrated in study 2, for instance, transparent packaging is not compatible with the unveiling effect. However, transparent packaging may have other favorable effects; by allowing consumers to see the product within, such packaging can remove uncertainty. Product visibility might draw a consumer in and help achieve an initial sale, whereas the buyer may be less satisfied with the acquisition after bringing it home and opening it. A great deal of research is needed to map out the favorable and unfavorable effects of product concealment or the lack thereof. For example, future research should identify circumstances under which a concealed product might evoke a positive sense of mystery or surprise rather than pristine perceptions, or when a sense of security from transparency might have a more decisive influence on consumer response. As another example, recent work illustrates the role of transparent packaging in increasing or decreasing food consumption (Deng & Srinivasan, 2013). Such findings could be combined with the concept of unveiling to investigate the influence of opaque versus transparent packaging on variables such as enjoyment or satisfaction with the food.

Whereas the current research suggests that companies may benefit from designing packaging that provides an unveiling experience, future research could do more to investigate nuances of that experience as well as various packaging details that could facilitate it. For instance, an intricate box or a delicate cloth covering that calls for careful unwrapping might enrich an unveiling experience. Relatedly, however, it seems feasible that the need for careful unwrapping could affect the perception of package functionality, with potential negative consequences similar to those stemming from overstyling in product design (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2014). Future research is needed to explore both positive and negative aspects of consumers' experience with opening packages in general, and unveiling products in specific, depending on various package attributes. Perhaps packaging could even be designed to elicit specific hand motions during unveiling (similar to our pilot study 2); future research may uncover specific motions or actions that are especially conducive to an unveiling experience. Other sensory elements such as auditory and tactile cues could also be incorporated. For example, much like manufacturers intentionally engineer car doors to emit a satisfying thud when they close, packages could be engineered to emit certain sounds when they are opened. Such considerations may seem counter to the notion that packaging should be easy to open. However, we are not suggesting something akin to the tamper-proof packaging that consumers often must struggle to open, sometimes even damaging the product in the process. We are suggesting packaging that emphasizes the act of revealing a product, which can be easy and meaningful at the same time. In many cases, this act colors a consumer's first impression of a new acquisition.

Notably, new acquisitions need not necessarily be new products, and the value of collectibles such as old artworks, antiques, classic cars, and vintage comics depends on whether they remain in pristine condition. Such collectibles may represent a special category in the current context, and they are not necessarily considered contaminated if they have been viewed and even touched by numerous people in the past. Future research could map out how the basis for perceived contamination differs between product categories.

Finally, it seems feasible that the meaning extracted from unveiling may vary between cultures. We did not uncover such differences in the current research, perhaps because the practice of protecting pristine and valuable objects is particularly widespread. Nonetheless, there is often culture-specific variability even within the most widespread practices, and future research could do more to uncover nuances in connection with unveiling.

## Appendix A

Stimuli for study 1: Box versus bag and the hand towel.



Stimuli for study 2: Transparent box versus opaque box.



Stimuli for study 3: A typical set of silverware (a set of a spoon, fork, knife, teaspoon, and steak knife) in a black velvet box.



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