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# **Book belly band as a visual cue: assessing its impact on consumers' in-store responses**

## **Abstract**

This research investigates the role of a widely used, yet under-investigated packaging cue: the paper strip that wraps around books, known as the belly band. Drawing on cue utilization theory, we conducted a pilot study, a laboratory experiment and a field study in two real-life bookshops to analyze the effects of belly bands on consumers' responses, as well as on actual browsing and purchasing behavior. The results suggest that the belly band acts primarily as a visual cue; has a significant effect on actual browsing and purchasing behavior; and stimulates unplanned behaviors, producing a carryover effect on the assortment even if it does not alter the customer's budget.

**Keyword:** visual cue; book belly band; field experiment

## 1. Introduction

Like in most retailing contexts, a brick-and-mortar bookshop typically features marketing stimuli that may potentially act on consumers' browsing and purchasing behaviors (Carpenter et al., 1994; Gilbride et al., 2015; Leitão et al., 2018; Miller, 2006; Zhu et al., 2011; Reinares-lara and Martín-santana, 2019). Consequently, consumers come to rely on product packaging that combines aesthetic and sensory characteristics, which helps to differentiate products visually and focus one's attention (Ampuero and Vila, 2008; Mai et al., 2016; Pieters and Wedel, 2007).

In a bookstore, the cover of the book is the most apparent packaging cue: It features a multitude of visual and textual elements (e.g., colors and images, the author, the title) that consumers may use to cope with information overload (Kardes et al., 2004; Zhu et al., 2011). In this narrow space for consumers' attention, marketers have adopted a supplementary packaging cue called the *belly band*: a colored paper strip that wraps around the book. Widely used as advertising tools, belly bands include two major sensory elements—the background color and the printed text. The background is typically a bright monochrome color, while the text usually takes the form of a *blurb*: an (often exaggerated) expression of praise for the author or the book itself (Gagliano, 2014; Hollick, 2018).

In other real-world retailing contexts, and particularly in food retailing, scholars have analyzed the varying influence of different packaging cues on consumers' responses, whether those cues involve shape, color, pictures, brand names or eco-labels (Esch et al., 2019; Garretson and Burton, 2005; Labrecque et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2020; Mai et al., 2016; Minton et al., 2018; Pancer, McShane, and Noseworthy, 2017; Zhu et al., 2011). To the best of our knowledge, the scientific literature features no attempts at analyzing the belly band as a visual cue and assessing its impact on consumers' in-store responses. Against this background, specific features of belly bands make them worthy of investigation. First, publishers must spend money to print belly bands, while retailers must commit time and effort to add them to books after some special event (e.g., a TV series following the book), as in this case, publishers do not typically send the books with the belly bands already in place (Hollick, 2018). Second, the belly band is not simply a logo or a promotional sticker; rather, it is a

combination of visual and textual elements. Third, because it can be added or removed, the belly band can complete the packaging in different moments and contexts, but its lack of solidity can also provoke irritation (“Belly bands on books are actually rather a pain in the neck”; Hollick, 2018). Fourth, it is primarily a marketing tool in brick-and-mortar retailing since online retailers prefer other promotional tools. Therefore, what makes the belly band interesting as a packaging cue is the presence of a double paradox. The first paradox is theoretical: On the one hand, the belly band is a simple visual packaging cue aimed at attracting consumers’ attention; on the other hand, the blurbs printed on it provide complex verbal information aimed at stimulating consumers’ cognitive elaboration. The second paradox is practical: The belly band is a costly packaging element that is used extensively, and at the same time, it is seen as annoying, useless and disposable by booksellers and librarians.

In this study, we shed light on the belly band’s influence as a packaging cue on consumers’ in-store responses. In line with cue utilization theory (Richardson et al., 1994), we empirically support the idea that consumers’ attention is primarily captured by the color of the belly band, which then translates into cue elaboration (e.g., Clore et al., 2001; Esch et al., 2019; Miceli et al., 2014; Townsend and Kahn, 2014; Velasco Vizcaíno, 2018). Our study also suggests that the emotional reaction to the visual cue (the belly band) has behavioral repercussions regardless of whether consumers cognitively elaborate on the verbal elements (Elliot and Maier, 2014; Kareklas et al., 2019; Labrecque et al., 2013). Further, our field data show that the belly band modifies basket composition without affecting the mental budget that consumers establish before entering the store (Stilley et al., 2010). Finally, our field experiment relies on actual behavioral data, offering maximum realism by observing real customers in bookstores (Moorman et al., 2019; Morales et al., 2017).

## **2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development**

According to cue utilization theory, consumers have limited processing capabilities and likely rely on cues that support memory retrieval and information processing (Loy et al., 2020; Richardson et al., 1994; Wedel and Pieters, 2014). Consumers develop various impressions of products by assessing

their array of intrinsic cues (e.g., taste, texture, aroma) and extrinsic cues (e.g., price, brand name, packaging, color) (Esch et al., 2019; Jacoby et al., 1971; Olson and Jacoby, 1972; Richardson et al., 1994). Consumers may infer a product's benefits from the configuration of the available cues; however, many cues cannot be assessed before making a purchase (Burnkrant, 1978; Kardes et al., 2004).

As might be expected, marketing research has devoted substantial attention to how packaging cues capture customers' attention (e.g., Orth et al., 2008; Lacoste-Badie et al., 2020; Loy et al., 2020; van Rompay and Veltkamp, 2014), signal the effectiveness of their products (Minton et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2011), influence post-purchase consumption (Deng and Srinivasan, 2013), and convey environmental consciousness (Pancer et al., 2017; Steenis et al., 2017), among other reasons. Overall, the literature has demonstrated that the way consumers process a given cue affects their access to other cues. According to the encoding specificity principle (Thomson and Tulving, 1970), this process may enhance encoding or memory retrieval (Garretson and Burton, 2005).

Packaging cues include both visual and verbal elements. Visual elements direct consumers' attention, thanks to the color or logo serving as a cue for comparing products, as well as evoke expectations of the product's sensory aspects (Esch et al., 2019; Underwood et al., 2001). Verbal elements can more directly communicate the product's benefits by using words that might generate interest. In analyzing the interaction between a visual cue (i.e., the color green) and a verbal one (i.e., the information on an eco-label), Pancer and colleagues (2017) found that explicit utility of the cue is not readily accessible to the consumer. In the same vein, when analyzing the visual and conceptual dimensions of logos, Miceli and colleagues (2014) found that consumers' affective and cognitive response may be triggered by a specific characteristic of the cue. Relatedly, recent research in framing and linguistics states how the numerical and verbal information on product packaging may influence behavior in unique ways (Holleman and Maat, 2009; Loy et al., 2020; Sher and McKenzie, 2006).

Extending this background to our context, we argue that the presentation of a widely used visual element, like a belly band, stimulates emotional states that ultimately engender behavioral responses.

*Belly bands on different levels of consumers' responses:* The impact of the belly band derives from its combination of colors, images, cartoons, logos, and printed text. Across all the possible designs, a belly band usually combines at least the background color with some text printed on it. The literature suggests that the background color (as a visual cue) may demand less cognitive effort than the text (as a verbal cue) (Esch et al., 2019; Huddleston et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2009; Loy et al., 2020; Mueller et al., 2010; Townsend and Kahn, 2014; Underwood and Klein, 2002). Mai et al. (2016) stated that package color primes perceptions, even from a distance; in fact, color is the first packaging cue that shoppers note. Furthermore, Van Rompay and Veltkamp (2014) emphasized that visual packaging cues are more effective for increasing brand excitement. Consistently, the belly band is more likely to galvanize an emotional reaction than prompt cognitive elaboration of the stimulus (Esch et al., 2019; Mueller et al., 2010; Underwood and Klein, 2002). This visual focus undergirds consumers' first impression of a product, which may then positively affect purchase intention (Clement, 2008; Pieters and Wedel, 2004). In line with the above, we expect that:

***H1:*** *The presence of the belly band has a positive effect (a) on consumers' affective response and (b) on the intention to purchase compared to books without belly bands.*

*Style of processing as a moderator:* Previous research uncovered two major individual styles of processing, depending on whether they utilize the emotional style of processing information (Preference For Affect, hereafter PFA; Sojka and Giese, 1997) or the cognitive style (Need For Cognition, hereafter NFC; Cacioppo and Petty, 1982). In a bookstore, a PFA example could be a young customer who selects a book based on her favorite cartoon characters without analyzing the price, the title or the content of the book. A NFC example, by contrast, could be a customer who carefully reviews the plot of the book, reads the author's short bio, and evaluates the price and editorial format before making the purchase decision. Thus, one could argue that more affective

individuals respond more positively to visual information than do individuals with a high need for cognition (e.g., Kim, 2019; Martin et al., 2005; Sojka and Giese, 2001), which would suggest that the style of processing exerts a moderation effect. In line with a visual preference heuristic that reduces the distraction generated by other packaging cues (Townsend and Kahn, 2013), the presence (vs. absence) of a visual cue may interact with individuals' prevailing style of processing to determine their response. These speculations translate into the following moderation hypotheses:

***H2:** The higher the Preference For Affect, the higher (a) the affective response toward a book with a belly band and (b) the intention to purchase a book with a belly band compared to a book with no belly band.*

*Popularity as a moderator:* Popularity drives buying behaviors by providing information about the general preferences of the market (Wu and Lee, 2016). Many individuals respond to claims of popularity—to the point that the naïve theory of popularity asserts that products simply become more desirable as their popularity increases (Berns and Moore, 2012; Steinhart et al., 2014). However, the literature on how popularity affects individuals' responses only includes a generally accepted notion that popularity has a positive effect on sales (e.g., Berns and Moore, 2012; Dean, 1999; Steinhart et al., 2014). The literature also points to a mere exposure effect, suggesting that popularity drives emotional responses by creating more exposure to a thing (Montoya et al., 2017; Witvliet and Vrana, 2007). Notably, Koopman (2015) treated popularity as a measure of exposure and found that it affects emotional responses. Because the exposure-affect relationship does not require metacognitive activities (as would be needed for evaluations, ratings and the formation of explicit preferences, e.g., Berns and Moore, 2012), we do not expect the belly band to influence people's cognitive response relative to popular or unpopular books. Given that we expect the belly band to multiply, rather than simply add to, the effect of popularity, placing the belly band on popular books likely influences consumers' affective response and purchase intention compared to books without the belly band.



Finally, since consumers' reaction to popular products interacts with other contextual cues (e.g., Steinhart et al., 2014), we do not expect any interaction effect for unpopular books. Formally expressed:

***H3:** The higher the popularity of books, the higher (a) the affective response toward a book with a belly band and (b) the intention to purchase a book with a belly band compared to a book with no belly band.*

*Assortment size as a moderator:* Extant research has yet to agree on how assortment size affects the levels of consumers' response (see, e.g., Spassova and Isen, 2013 for a review). We know from the retailing literature that customers who visit grocery stores, bookshops or hardware stores often encounter a layout that is overburdened with information and difficult to decipher (Garaus and Wagner, 2019; Gilbride et al., 2015; Ma, 2016). Larger assortment depth is preferable, rather it may have a detrimental effect on customers' responses because they feel overwhelmed and dissatisfied due to information overload (Lee and Labroo, 2004; Wang and Shukla, 2013). Alternatively, a smaller assortment can improve the perception of search efficiency and reduce consumers' search time, since too much variety in the choice stage can increase complexity and cause consumers to delay or opt out of choice (Townsend and Kahn, 2014). Following this line of reasoning, we posit that the assortment size may have an effect on the way individuals react to the presence of a visual cue. In particular, when the cue is associated with a small assortment, individuals may experience a neutral reaction given the already facilitated decision-making process. Conversely, the impact of a visual cue might be amplified in the case of a large assortment insofar as it reduces the difficulty in experiencing the choice task (Ampuero and Villa, 2008; Mai et al., 2016; Pieters and Wedel, 2007; Spassova and Isen, 2013). Formally:

***H4: The larger the assortment, the higher (a) the affective response toward a book with the belly band and (b) the intention to purchase a book with the belly band compared to a book with no belly band.***

*Actual browsing and purchasing behaviors:* As a matter of fact, “Consumers do move, explore, touch and purchase products in retail stores” (Helmeftalk, 2019, p. 253). The browsing activity is defined as an ongoing search activity independent of specific purchase needs or decisions (Bloch et al., 1989). The browsing activity is a mix between standing still, looking at, touching a small selection of objects in front of the customer and walking around the store (Baltas et al., 2017). In particular, Moe (2003) stressed the hedonic content of browsing a store rather than the accompanying search activity. Consequently, the predominance of the in-store experience and the stimuli-driven nature of browsing behaviors occasionally result in impulse buying. Overall, since visual cues help customers focus their attention (Ampuero and Vila, 2008; Mai et al., 2016; Pieters and Wedel, 2007), one can argue that the presence of the cue may decrease the chances that customers stop in front of a particular shelf or a display. As consumers walk through the store, they gather information in a sequence that stimulates browsing behavior. This suggests that a visual cue, namely the belly band, may encourage consumers to browse more. Formally:

***H5: The presence of the belly band on books is likely to increase browsing inside the store.***

Past research suggests that browsing inside a store may influence purchasing (Ballantine et al., 2015; Helmeftalk, 2019), but it has yet to explore the interaction between in-store cues, browsing and purchasing. Most evidence suggests that offline book purchases are largely unplanned (Nielsen, 2014) and influenced by local stimuli (Dhar et al., 2007; Deng and Srinivasan, 2013; Hui et al., 2013; Ma, 2016; Pancer et al., 2017; Townsend and Kahn, 2014; Zhu et al., 2012). Cueing theory suggests that when consumers are receptive to in-store cues, their browsing is more likely to spur unplanned

behaviors (Gilbride et al., 2015; Thomson and Tulvin, 1970). As the customer walks through the store, being exposed to more items and cues may increase the probability that other cues will trigger the recall of her forgotten wants and needs (Gilbride et al., 2015; Stilley et al., 2010). As suggested by the literature, this revision of previous plans may be reflected in changes to the basket composition and the amount spent (Hahsler and Chelluboina, 2011; Mild and Reutterer, 2003). That said, self-regulation theory suggests that shoppers may deviate from their planned purchases by altering their responses, even if the mental budget does not change (Baumeister and Heatheron, 1996; Stilley et al., 2010). These speculations offer a picture of a shopper who, upon perceiving the presence of the belly band, is likely to browse more and update her mental budget and basket composition accordingly. Formally:

***H6:** The presence of the belly band on books is likely to (a) increase the amount spent and (b) modify the basket composition.*

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Pilot Study**

Due to the lack of theoretical and empirical research on the belly band, we first conducted a pilot study to assess whether the belly band is primarily a visual or verbal cue. We selected three stores located in a medium-sized city center and three located in a commercial center in Italy. As customers approached the exit, an interviewer asked them to indicate whether they had purchased a book. When a customer purchased multiple books, the customer was asked to indicate the first that came to mind. Next, the interviewer asked participants to recall the information about the book: namely the title, the author, the publisher, the presence/absence of the belly band, the color of the belly band and the book's text blurb, while keeping the book covered in the bag. Then, the customer completed the NFC scale (8 items, Cacioppo and Petty, 1982) and the PFA scale (13 items, Sojka and Giese, 1997), which respectively measure the cognitive and affective processing styles (Kim, 2019; Ruiz and Sicilia,

2004). Each item was measured with a 7-point Likert scale (1 = “Totally disagree” to 7 = “Totally agree”). Finally, the interviewer asked customers to retrieve the book from their bag and ascertain its true characteristics.

We defined the accuracy measurement for recalled information as follows: The actual versus recalled presence of the belly band and its color led to a simple comparison, coded as 1 if the actual color corresponded to the recalled information and 0 otherwise. Regarding the recall of the book’s text blurb, author, title and publisher, three researchers independently coded the information provided by each participant (Humphreys and Wang, 2018) on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = “completely inaccurate” to 5 = “completely accurate”. We used the three researchers’ average score for each piece of information recalled.

*Results and Discussion:* We collected a total of 207 usable interviews, which included 49 books with the belly band. The Cronbach’s alphas of the scales were high:  $\alpha(\text{NFC})=.81$ ;  $\alpha(\text{PFA})=.88$ . Meanwhile, the three coders achieved a high level of agreement (average Krippendorff’s (2010)  $\alpha=0.96$ ). Of the 49 customers whose book(s) included a belly band, only four did not recall the presence of the band; of the remaining 158 customers, 10 incorrectly remembered seeing a nonexistent belly band. Overall, customers correctly remembered the presence vs. absence of the belly band (no systematic association:  $p(\chi^2=1.5e-2, df=1)=.9$ ). When restricting the analysis to books with the belly band, we found that 30 out of 45 customers correctly recalled the visual element, namely the color, irrespective of their NFC and PFA (logit analysis,  $\text{AIC}=70.169$ ). Conversely, the recall of the verbal element, namely the text, was small (median=1; mean=1.58; 3<sup>rd</sup> quartile=2.00; just 1 correct recall) and weakly affected by the individual NFC (linear regression,  $b_{\text{NFC}}=.29$ ,  $p=.03$ ;  $R^2=9.8e-02$ ). Notably, there was a significant association between people’s recall of the band’s color and their accurate recall of the book’s title ( $p(F(1, 47)=11.26)=1.6e-03$ ). This evidence indicate that people correctly recalled the visual element (i.e., the color) of the band more than the verbal element (i.e., the text in the blurb). In turn, people’s correct recall of the band’s visual element correlated with

more accurate recall of other packaging elements (i.e., the book title). Thus, the belly band is primarily a visual cue, due to its color.

### **3.2. Study 1: Effect of Belly Bands on Affective, Cognitive and Behavioral Responses**

We then ran a laboratory study to test hypotheses H1-H4, following the pilot study's suggestion that the belly band is primarily a visual cue. The lab included a 2 (presence vs. absence of the band) x 2 (popular vs. unpopular books) x 2 (small assortment vs. large assortment) experimental design. The first condition simply involved the presence or absence of the belly band over the book covers. For the second condition, we defined popular books based on book retailers' weekly ranking lists and unpopular books based on bookseller-provided lists. We adopted booksellers' definitions of book popularity in order to maintain the most practical realism. We defined a first list of popular books by merging the weekly lists of three Italian book retailers (collected over five weeks before the experiment). We also defined a list of unpopular books based on personal interviews with booksellers. The two lists included more than 120 titles each. We randomly extracted a sample of ten popular books from the first list and a sample of ten unpopular books from the second list, taking care that five books were originally marketed with the belly band. For the third condition, we used 10 books for the large assortment size and 5 books for the small assortment size, consistent with the common practice of in-store displays. In order to preserve realism, we left the band on five out of ten books in the large assortment size condition and on two out of five books in the small assortment size condition.

In the lab, we randomly assigned respondents to each experimental cell. Participants completed a three-stage experiment. In the first stage of the experiment, we asked them to complete a questionnaire that measured their PFA (Sojka and Giese, 1997) and their NFC (Cacioppo and Petty, 1982), as well as requested some sociodemographic details. In the second stage, after returning the completed questionnaire, participants moved to a table on which they found real books. They were free to handle the books and leaf through them for a maximum of 10 minutes. In the third stage of the

experiment, participants left the room and received a second questionnaire that asked them to rank the first three books they remembered according to their preference. For each book, the survey asked respondents to indicate the title, author, whether a band was present, and if so, its color and text. The questionnaire also measured participants' purchase intention for the preferred book (intention and likelihood, both on a 7-point Likert scale), their cognitive response (8 adjectives on 7-point semantic differentials, adapted from Coulter and Punj, 1999), and their affective response (10 items on a 7-point, Likert-type scale, adapted from Chowdhury et al., 2011).

*Results and Discussion:* The laboratory study resulted in 123 usable questionnaires (69 females, average age 20.93 years). There was no statistically significant association between age and sex, nor between age, sex and popularity/assortment (all  $p(\chi^2) > 0.05$ ). Of the 123 questionnaires out, 52 were related to books with the belly band, and 45 participants out of 52 correctly reported the color of said belly band. We achieved high reliability for all measurements, according to the Cronbach's alpha test for PFA ( $\alpha = .85$ ), NFC ( $\alpha = .8$ ), intention to purchase ( $\alpha = .91$ ), affective response ( $\alpha = .91$ ) and cognitive response ( $\alpha = .72$ ).

*Hypotheses H1a,b:* The presence of the belly band had a positive effect on both the affective response (linear regression:  $b_{\text{band}} = .72$ , std. err = .25,  $p = 5.5e-03$ ; ANOVA:  $p(F(1, 121) = 8.00) = 5.5e-03$ ) and the intention to purchase a book (linear regression:  $b_{\text{band}} = .61$ , std. err = .29,  $p = .04$ ; ANOVA:  $p(F(1, 121) = 4.31) = .04$ ), thus supporting H1a and H1b. As expected, the band exerted no effect on the cognitive response.

*Hypotheses H2a,b:* We conducted ANOVAs on the affective response and purchase intention, finding no significant interaction effects between the PFA, the NFC, and the presence of the belly band. Linear models likewise reported no interaction effects ( $R^2 = .12$  for the intention to purchase,  $R^2 = .18$  for the affective response). Overall, the data do not support hypotheses H2a,b. However, we did find a direct effect of the PFA on the affective response ( $b_{\text{PFA}} = .37$ , std. err = .15,  $p = .02$ ), while the ANOVA indicated a significant direct effect of PFA on purchase intention.

*Hypothesis H3a,b:* The average affective response to a popular book with the belly band was significantly higher than the average affective response to a popular book without the belly band ( $m_{\text{band}}=4.96$ ,  $m_{\text{no band}}=3.73$ ;  $p(t=-3.69, df=45.05)=6.1e-4$ ), supporting H3a. The average intention to purchase a popular book with the belly band was significantly higher than the average intention to purchase a popular book without the belly band ( $m_{\text{band}}=4.81$ ,  $m_{\text{no band}}=3.80$ ;  $p(t=-2.39, df=37.18)=0.02$ ), supporting H3b. As expected, the belly band had no significant effect on unpopular books (affective response:  $m_{\text{band}}=3.68$ ,  $m_{\text{no band}}=3.41$ ;  $p(t=-0.76, df=58.84)=.45$ ; intention to purchase:  $m_{\text{band}}=3.38$ ,  $m_{\text{no band}}=3.13$ ;  $p(t=-0.62, df=51.62)=.54$ ). Furthermore, the ANOVAs we ran on consumer responses failed to support any interaction effects (all  $p(\text{belly band} \times \text{popularity}) > .05$ ).

*Hypothesis H4a,b:* Finally, we analyzed the effect of assortment size. The ANOVAs we ran on the affective response and purchase intention empirically support an interaction effect between the assortment size and the presence of the belly band, as reported in Table 1 below.

- insert Table 1 -

The average affective response to a book with the belly band was significantly higher than the average affective response to a book without the belly band in both a large assortment ( $m_{\text{band}}=4.59$ ,  $m_{\text{no band}}=3.27$ ;  $p(t=-3.09, df=49.97)=3.24e-03$ ) and a small assortment ( $m_{\text{band}}=4.27$ ,  $m_{\text{no band}}=3.55$ ;  $p(t=-2.77, df=100.55)=6.72e-03$ ). Furthermore, the average intention to purchase a book with the belly band within a large assortment was significantly higher than the average intention to purchase a book without the belly band ( $m_{\text{band}}=4.83$ ,  $m_{\text{no band}}=3.58$ ;  $p(t=-2.85, df=49.99)=6.3e-03$ ). A marginally significant effect occurred in the case of a small assortment ( $m_{\text{band}}=4.04$ ,  $m_{\text{no band}}=3.43$ ;  $p(t=-1.98, df=87.815)=0.05$ ). Overall, the data support hypotheses H4a,b.

Figure 1 reports the patterns of the two-way interactions between popularity and the presence of the belly band for small and large assortments.

- insert Figure 1 -

As Figure 1 shows, for small assortment there was no difference between the presence vs. absence of the band in the case of popular ( $m_{\text{no band}}=3.591$ ,  $m_{\text{band}}=3.687$ ) and unpopular ( $m_{\text{no band}}=3.125$ ,  $m_{\text{band}}=2.941$ ) books. Popularity makes no difference ( $m_{\text{popular}}=3.617$ ,  $m_{\text{unpopular}}=3.049$ ), and the same is true for the presence of the band ( $m_{\text{no band}}=3.347$ ,  $m_{\text{band}}=3.180$ ). However, significant differences did emerge in the case of the large assortment: The band significantly increased the intention to purchase popular books ( $m_{\text{no band}}=4.250$ ,  $m_{\text{band}}=5.375$ ;  $p=.036$ ), but not unpopular books ( $m_{\text{no band}}=3.133$ ,  $m_{\text{band}}=4.045$ ). Overall, popularity positively affected the intention to purchase ( $m_{\text{popular}}=4.942$ ,  $m_{\text{unpopular}}=3.519$ ;  $p=1.8\text{e-}03$ ) and the belly band significantly increased the intention to purchase ( $m_{\text{no band}}=3.580$ ,  $m_{\text{band}}=4.83$ ;  $p=.6.3\text{e-}03$ ).

Overall, the results of Study 1 support that the belly band works as a visual cue to drive affective responses—and in turn, shape purchase intention—through its main characteristics (i.e., the band's background color).

### **3.3. Study 2: Effect of the Belly Band on Browsing and Purchasing Behavior**

To test hypotheses H5-H6, we conducted a field experiment where we unobtrusively observed and measured the shopping behaviors of people patronizing actual bookstores (Charness et al., 2013; Morales et al., 2017). Unlike in lab experiments where people often base the informativeness of a stimulus on their shopping goals (Pieters and Wedel, 2007), consumers in a real store may eventually purchase something without worrying about artificial constraints (e.g., time pressure, completing a task, etc.). Rather, we maintain that “experimental realism is at its maximum when the research can be conducted outside of the lab, in the field [...] in the same setting as the actual consumption experience” (Morales et al., 2017, p. 469). Then, we used consumer transaction data provided by the retailer to confirm our observations with regard to purchasing.



A national book retailer in Italy provided access to two stores in two different northeast Italian cities. The two bookshops are homogeneous in terms of revenue, assortment, physical features and commercial area. There were no promotions or special events taking place during the two weeks of the experiment. The list of books that served as stimuli for the experiment, as well as the proper layout of the manipulated display, were decided in collaboration with the marketing director of the retail chain. We selected a total of 40 books: 20 popular and 20 unpopular books drawn from the same lists used in Study 1. Ten books within each group originally had the belly band on their cover. All selected books were displayed as a stack of books on a low display at each store's entrance (see Figure 2). All elements of this setup were identical between the two bookshops. The number of books in each stack ranged from 10 to 30 pieces and the stacks were continually refilled during the two weeks.

- Insert Figure 2 here -

In week 1, bookshop 1 displayed 10 popular and 10 unpopular books with their original belly band, and another 10 popular and 10 unpopular books without the band (treatment condition). In the same week, bookshop 2 displayed all books with no belly bands (control condition). During the second week, the experimental conditions were reversed (see Figure 3 below).

- Insert Figure 3 -

During the experiment, three researchers observed 2,575 consumers enter the bookshops. The researchers were dressed like attendants and did not interact with customers in order to avoid biases (Morales et al., 2017). We coded consumers' different in-store browsing behaviors in the following way: 1) consumers who only spoke with the attendant as *no browser*; 2) consumers who browsed only the manipulated display as *limited browser*; 3) and consumers who walked around the store as

*extensive browser*. The observations covered all week days and the relevant time slots (early morning, noon, early afternoon, evening).

*Results and Discussion:* The chi-squared tests indicate that the consumers' visible characteristics were homogenous between the experimental conditions ( $p(\chi^2) > 0.05$ ). An ANOVA showed a significant effect of the manipulation on behaviors ( $p(F=31.60; df=(1, 2573))=2.1e-08$ ). A chi-squared test on the proportions of the three observable behaviors (*no browser*, *limited browser*, *extensive browser*) further supports this significant effect ( $p(\chi^2=68.41; df=2)=1.4e-15$ ). The proportion of consumers stopping at the low display was higher when all belly band were removed from the books (control condition). This result suggests that removing all belly bands provides an unusual configuration of the assortment within a bookshop, perhaps capturing more of consumers' unconscious attention. Meanwhile, the browsing behavior was larger when there were books with and without belly bands (treated condition), supporting H5. Table 2 reports the frequencies of all the observed behaviors.

- Insert Table 2 -

To analyze the conversion of browsing into sales, we used data provided by the two bookshops. The data covered the two weeks of the experiment and included both the sales from the manipulated display and each store's overall sales for that period. Regarding the manipulated display, both stores collectively sold 225 books during the experiment. During the treated condition, i.e., when the belly bands were left on the original books (week 1 in bookstore 1 and week 2 in bookstore 2; see Table 2), the manipulated displays sold 113 items. During the control condition, i.e., when the belly bands were removed (week 2 in bookstore 1 and week 1 in bookstore 2; see Table 2), the manipulated displays sold 112 items. When focusing on each book presented, the proportion of sold copies was significantly affected by the presence of the belly bands ( $p(\chi^2=55.08; df=39)=4.45e-02$ ). Meanwhile,

the overall sales data included details for 10,051 purchased items (58.8% in bookshop 1), corresponding to 5,291 receipts. The transaction data also indicated an ID for each receipt, the type of item purchased (e.g., books, stationary, toys), the book category, and the price. Bookshop 1 printed 2,978 receipts with an average amount of 23.01€ (1,403 receipts during the treatment). Bookshop 2 printed 2,313 receipts with an average amount of 18.99€ (1,227 receipts during the treatment). The difference in the average amount was statistically significant ( $p(t=2.67; df=3248.97)=0.01$ ). Between the two bookstores, the average amount of the receipts was 21.25€ (2,630 receipts during the treatment) with no significant differences between the treatment and control weeks ( $p(t=0.21; df=4973.14)=0.83$ ). Within each bookshop, the belly band exerted no effect on the average amount spent (bookstore 1:  $p(t=0.13; df=2940)=0.90$ ; bookstore 2:  $p(t=-0.31; df=2275.9)=0.76$ ), not supporting H6a.

In order to analyze purchasing behaviors, we ran a basket analysis (Hahsler and Chelluboina, 2011; Mild and Reutterer, 2003). We first aggregated sales data in the 16 categories used by the retailer. Then, we defined association rules as “ $A \Rightarrow B$ ”, where A and B are items purchased. The association “ $A \Rightarrow B$ ” holds when the item in the left hand of the rule is likely to be purchased with the item on the right hand of the rule. Since we are interested in determining any statistical significant differences in the basket composition between the two experimental conditions, we focused on the *confidence* of association rules extracted from receipts (e.g., Hahsler and Chelluboina, 2011). Overall, our data provide 150 association rules when belly bands were on books (treated condition) and 172 association rules when they were removed (control condition). An ANOVA on all the association rules found no significant effect on the *confidence* of the rules across the two experimental conditions ( $p(F(1,320)=0.80)=.37$ ). However, when narrowing to the 20 and to the 10 most confident rules, we found a main effect for the presence vs. absence of the belly band ( $p(F(1, 38)=4.24)=.046$  and  $p(F(1, 26)=10.49)=3.28e-03$ , respectively). This finding suggests that belly bands modify the basket composition, supporting H6b.

As a whole, the field study supports the notion that a belly band significantly modifies consumers' browsing and purchasing behaviors within the bookshop. Likewise, the results suggest that the presence of a packaging visual cue inside the store does not affect planned behaviors, since consumers visiting the bookshop with a more concrete goal (i.e., interacting with the bookseller with no browsing) do not modify their plans (Dhar et al., 2007; Gilbride et al., 2015; Hui et al., 2013). Interestingly, even if the composition of the basket was altered, the average amount spent was not significantly different between the conditions. Overall, the data indicate that unplanned needs do not translate into more money spent, but rather involve a reconfiguration of the basket when the consumer's attention is excited by the presence of the belly bands.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusions**

This study contributes to the extant literature in three ways. First, this paper contributes to cue utilization theory (Richardson et al., 1994) by emphasizing the importance of visual cues on consumers' responses. In fact, the pilot and lab results suggest that consumers' attention is primarily stimulated by the band's color and not by the text reported on it (i.e., the blurb). In turn, the color facilitates cue elaboration, reinforcing previous scholars' argument that visual cues are superior to verbal ones (e.g., Huddleston et al., 2018; Miceli et al., 2014; Townsend and Kahn, 2014; Velasco Vizcaíno, 2018). This finding also aligns with perceptual fluency theory (Clore et al., 2001; see Miceli et al., 2014 for a review of the theory), which suggests that a visual element of the packaging facilitates its elaboration. Second, we contribute to the research stream about the effects of packaging color on consumers' perceptions (e.g., Labraque et al., 2013) by supporting that the belly band, as a visual cue, activates an emotional reaction that translates into behaviors, overriding/overwriting any cognitive elaboration of the stimulus' verbal elements. Third, we discovered that belly bands stimulate unplanned behaviors by inclining consumers to reconfigure their basket composition, even if their budget stays the same (Stilley et al., 2010). The field study suggests that when entering a bookstore, consumers who extensively browse the store tend to change their shopping behavior in the

presence of the belly bands (Deng and Srinivasan, 2013; Dhar et al., 2007; Gilbride et al., 2015; Hui et al., 2013; Pancer et al., 2017). However, the transactional data revealed that the belly band did not engender a budget modification across the experimental conditions—only a change in the basket composition. In contrast to the idea that unplanned behaviors stimulate other unplanned behaviors (e.g., Gilbride et al., 2015), our data indicate that the belly band produces a carryover effect that encourages customers to inspect the whole assortment (Townsend and Kahn, 2014). Lastly, our field study answered a scholarly call for more realism in consumer research (Moorman et al., 2019; Morales et al., 2018).

*Managerial Implications:* Overall, this study features a major implication for booksellers: namely the recommendation to use belly bands. In fact, while these visual cues may not increase the average amount spent, they can influence the intention to purchase a book, modify the overall composition of the basket and encourage consumers to browse the store. In fact, booksellers might use belly bands to guide shoppers to different parts of the store. Our results also support a carryover effect of the belly band on other books, suggesting that retailers can exploit economies of scope by putting books without belly bands next to books with the belly band. For example, a retailer could pair two books by the same author—one with the belly band and the other one without. Furthermore, since handling belly bands is a costly operation, the bookseller might decide to personalize the assortment of the store based on her knowledge of the local customer base, depending on the contractual agreement with the publisher or the retailer. This could be the case for books associated with some special event (e.g., a literary prize or a TV/movie adaptation). Furthermore, since our results support an interaction effect with the assortment size, we suggest that bookstores combine belly bands with a larger assortment in order to divert consumers' attention to the whole assortment. Finally, given that belly bands do not affect the cognitive response, booksellers may employ other promotional devices, such as shelf talkers or staff recommendation stickers to stimulate consumers' cognitive reactions.

*Limitations and Future Research:* Some limitations of this study represent opportunities for future research. First, we only focused on a specific type of packaging cue—the belly band—but other elements could be investigated, such as the book cover characteristics, or the size and font of the title. Second, scholars could analyze how packaging cues interact with store cues in order to uncover the optimal method of attracting or diverting consumers’ attention. Moreover, given the metacognitive effort needed to complete questionnaires, future research should also try collecting data via eye-tracking or in-store video. For instance, scholars could analyze the effect of packaging cues on the time that consumers spend browsing the store. Third, the results of the field study suggest that the presence of the belly band does not affect planned behaviors, but future research should experimentally investigate this effect. Finally, the pilot study and laboratory experiment suggest that color plays a peculiar role here. Even though we did not present specific hypotheses on the effect of belly bands’ background colors, this issue deserves further empirical research.

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## TABLES

**Table 1: Effect of Assortment Size on Participants' Responses**

	Affective Response			Intention to Purchase		
	Sum Sq	F	P	Sum Sq	F	p
Band	15.41	8.18	5.0e-03**	11.13	4.80	3.0e-02*
Assortment	0.09	0.05	0.82	21.80	9.41	2.7e-03**
Band x Assortment	8.86	4.71	3.2e-03**	14.55	6.28	1.3e-02*
Residuals	119 df; Sum. Sq 224.01; Mean sq 1.88			119 df; Sum. Sq 275.715; Mean sq 2.317		

**Table 2: Frequencies of Customers' Browsing Behavior**

	<b>Bookshop 1</b>		<b>Bookshop 2</b>		<b>Total</b>		
	Treated	Control	Treated	Control	Treated	Control	
<b>No browser</b>	106	94	82	94	<b>188</b>	<b>188</b>	376
<b>Limited browser</b>	246	461	329	354	<b>575</b>	<b>815</b>	1390
<b>Extensive browser</b>	168	104	314	223	<b>482</b>	<b>327</b>	809
Total	520	659	725	671	<b>1245</b>	<b>1330</b>	<b>2575</b>