Proceedings of ICADSS 2026 Symposium: Interpreting Culture: Context in Art, Literature, and Mass Media
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.HT35107

From Vanity to Quality: A Study on the Value Regression of Packaging Design from the Perspective of Authentic Consumption

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Abstract. Consumerism has long prevailed in China's gift market, leading to severe excessive packaging of festival food products. This phenomenon not only causes massive resource waste but also aggravates environmental pressure. In recent years, consumers have formed increasingly rational consumption concepts and paid greater attention to the intrinsic value and practical functions of products, making authentic consumption a mainstream trend that points out a new direction for the transformation and development of packaging design. Taking Mid-Autumn Festival food packaging as the research object, this paper adopts literature research and market case analysis to explore the alienating effect of vanity-oriented consumption on packaging design and clarify the core connotation of authentic consumption. It further proposes optimization strategies for packaging design from the perspectives of streamlined structure and innovative materials. The research concludes that the return of packaging design to value is not merely extreme simplification. On the premise of guaranteeing basic functions such as product protection and transportation, it realizes the return of packaging to its functional essence under the concepts of low carbon and minimalism. This transformation not only caters to the core demands of contemporary consumers, but also provides essential impetus for the sustainable development of the packaging industry.

Keywords: Packaging Design, Value Regression, Vanity-oriented Consumption, Authentic Consumption, Mid-Autumn Festival Food Packaging

1. Introduction

China's shifting consumption patterns, from symbolic to quality- and values-driven, have transformed packaging expectations. Traditionally, festival gifts like mooncakes emphasized luxury and social display, leading to excessive packaging: multiple layers, high material waste, and inflated aesthetic focus [1]. Since 2010, regulators have tightened controls. The 2021 Amendment to *Requirements for Restricting Excessive Commodity Packaging — Food and Cosmetics* capped mooncake packaging at three layers, void ratio at 25%, and packaging cost at 20% of product value. In 2023's Iron Fist Campaign, over 1,200 violations were penalized—fines and confiscations exceeded 20 million RMB. In 2024, four ministries jointly strengthened full-chain oversight across

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production, sales, and circulation. Yet regulation alone addresses symptoms, not root causes. Lasting change hinges on evolving consumer values.

Green, rational, and authentic consumption is now mainstream. Consumers prioritize quality, practical value and consumption experience. This trend is reshaping gift-market logic and packaging design is following: simpler, more sustainable, and user-centered [2]. Statistics show that Shanghai's mooncake packaging compliance rate rose from over 80% in 2024 to approximately 97% in 2025, evidence that policy and mindset change reinforce each other [3].

From the perspective of authentic consumption, this paper takes Mid-Autumn Festival food packaging as the research subject, analyzes the influence of changing consumer values on packaging design concepts, and explores the practical paths for packaging design to return from vanity-oriented consumption to quality-oriented consumption. It aims to provide reference for the practice of green packaging and the optimization of the consumer market.

2. The form of packaging design under the influence of face culture

2.1. Social foundation of face consumption

Face consumption is not merely a psychological tendency but a culturally embedded practice rooted in traditional Chinese social logic—especially the "renqing" (interpersonal sentiment)–based acquaintance society. Here, gifts serve key social functions: expressing respect, maintaining relationships, and confirming identity. Crucially, packaging—its specification, material, and visual design—is directly regarded as a measure of the giver's relational commitment and closeness

In marketized environment, capital logic has amplified this tradition: commodities acquire symbolic meanings tied to identity and class, shifting consumption towards display, where purchases signal social status and help individuals position themselves within the social hierarchy.

Fei Xiaotong's "differential mode of association" from *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society* profoundly reveals this structure: relationships radiate outward from the self, with distinct circles demanding distinct gifting norms. In this social structure, the value of a gift depends not only on its own use value but also on its symbolic value. As the "coat" of gifts, packaging has naturally become the most intuitive carrier of this symbolic value.

Consequently, packaging's core function distort: it ceases to be primarily protective or functional and instead serves face-saving, where lavishness, not practicality, determines effectiveness. Firms respond by escalating packaging costs and complexity to meet the demand for face consumption, fueling a vicious cycle: "the more luxurious the packaging → the more popular in the market → the higher the cost" [4].

2.2. Excessive packaging of Mid-Autumn Festival food

As China's core traditional festival, the Mid-Autumn Festival, centered on mooncakes, has become the epicenter of excessive packaging in the gift market. Commercial mooncake gift boxes rountinely exhibit four major flaws: inflated cost, redundant structure, luxurious materials, and mixed content, each violating the basic logic of packaging design [5].

In terms of cost, the packaging cost ratio of many commercially available mooncake gift boxes far exceeds the national standard: a 160-yuan mooncake gift box has a packaging cost of 50 yuan, accounting for 31.3%, far exceeding the national cap of 20%; another 398-yuan gift box has a packaging cost of 126 yuan, accounting for 31.7%. Such cases indicate that nearly one-third of the

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price paid by consumers are actually used for non-functional packaging, significantly diluting the intrinsic value of the product.

Structurally, boxes adopt unnecessary nesting— large over medium over small, leaving minimal space for actual mooncakes. Some reach 37% void ratio, prioritizing visual "heaviness" over utility. In terms of materials, high-priced materials such as solid wood, leather, and embroidery are widely used, and some gift boxes are equipped with non-food accessories such as precious metals and jewelry, spawning the chaos of sky-high-priced mooncakes. Before the Mid-Autumn Festival in 2022, a "golden mooncake" gift box priced at 4,999 yuan appeared on the market, which contained 8 mooncakes and a 20-gram golden mooncake pendant. Some gift boxes are made of mahogany, and the value of the box itself even exceeds that of the mooncakes.

In terms of content, some gift boxes illegally mix irrelevant products such as red wine, tea, and handicrafts, further amplifying the problem of packaging redundancy. Such excessive packaging makes consumers pay a high premium for ineffective packaging, greatly reducing product cost performance, and has become a long-standing chronic problem in the festival food market [6].

2.3. Practical problems caused by excessive packaging

The negative impacts of excessive packaging cover three dimensions: resources and environment, consumer rights and interests, and social conduct, forming systematic industrial drawbacks.

At the resource and environmental level, excessive packaging causes ineffective consumption of a large number of disposable materials such as paper, plastic, and wood. Data shows that packaging waste accounts for more than 30% of urban domestic garbage, especially after festivals, when this volume surges. Packaging waste such as non-degradable plastics and composite materials remains in the environment for a long time, exerting continuous ecological pressure on soil and water sources [7]. Calculations show that producing 100 million mooncake gift boxes consumes about 4,000 tons of paper, equivalent to cutting down more than 70,000 adult trees.

At the consumer rights level, excessive packaging leads to a serious discrepancy between product price and product value. Consumers essentially pay a high premium for non-functional packaging, constituting a hidden transfer of costs to consumers. According to the *Mid-Autumn Mooncake Consumption Survey Report* released by the China Consumers Association in 2024, 68% of consumers think the current price of mooncake gift boxes is too high, and 72% attribute this to excessively luxurious packaging. Some consumers reported that a 300-yuan mooncake gift box they bought contained only 8 small mooncakes with a total weight of less than 500 grams, while the packaging weighed 2.5 kilograms.

In terms of social conduct, excessive packaging intensifies comparison in gift consumption, turning festival gifting from emotional communication into material competition, distorting the cultural connotation of traditional festivals and the essential meaning of social interaction [8]. The Mid-Autumn Festival is originally a festival for family reunion and sharing happiness, and mooncakes are a symbol of reunion. However, fueled by excessive packaging, mooncakes have gradually become a carrier of "face projects", gift-giving has become "giving packaging", and gift-receiving has become "receiving face". This trend not only increases people's economic burden but also deprives traditional festivals of their original warmth and meaning.

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3. Emergence of authentic consumption and the shift in packaging design

3.1. Basic connotation of authentic consumption

As the problem of excessive packaging becomes increasingly prominent, the market has spontaneously formed a regulatory mechanism. Consumers have gradually abandoned the form-oriented consumption logic and shifted toward the authentic consumption model centered on their real needs. Authentic consumption means returning consumption to its essence of meeting living needs, weakening symbolic values such as brand, appearance, and ostentation, and strengthening intrinsic values such as practical functions, quality, safety, and product related environmental protection [9].

The essence of authentic consumption lies in "authenticity" and "value". It emphasizes that consumers should remain rational and think independently in the consumption process, not be influenced by advertising and social trends, and make consumption choices according to their actual needs and economic capabilities. Authentic consumption opposes mindblind comparison and conspicuous consumption, advocating that consumption should serve people's real living needs rather than become a symbol of status.

Most contemporary consumers, especially young people, can rationally judge what they need, avoid impulsive purchases, and do not follow trends to buy internet-famous products. They have clear judgment in consumption and reject impulsive and herd consumption. They are more willing to pay a reasonable price for practical, healthy, and environmentally friendly products. According to the *China Consumer Consumption Trend Report* released by iResearch in 2025, 76% of post-90s and post-00s consumers said they would prioritize the practicality and cost performance of products when purchasing goods, rather than brands and appearance. 62% of consumers said they would take the initiative to choose products with environmentally friendly packaging.

This consumption transformation marks that China's consumption market is maturing, with consumers shifting from "paying for symbols" to "paying for value", which has also become the core driving force for packaging design reform.

3.2. Practical manifestation of the shift in consumption concepts

The rational transformation of consumption concepts is particularly evident in the gift market, especially in Mid-Autumn Festival food consumption. In recent years, the market share of mooncake products with simple packaging, small portions, and greater emphasis on taste has continued to rise, while the market space for large, luxurious gift boxes has been shrinking.

JD Super's 2024 Mid-Autumn Festival consumption data shows that sales of simply packaged mooncakes increased by 85% year-on-year, and sales of small portion mooncakes (2-4 pieces per box) increased by 120% year-on-year; in sharp contrast, sales of luxurious mooncake gift boxes priced above 300 yuan decreased by 45% year-on-year. Tmall Supermarket's data for the same period shows that mid-range mooncakes priced at 50-150 yuan account for 78% of sales, while high-end mooncakes priced above 300 yuan account for only 8%.

This trend is not an isolated phenomenon but extends to traditional gift market sectors such as tea, alcohol, and health products. Consumers' purchasing criteria have shifted from "impressive appearance and well-known brand" to "practical, durable, and cost-effective", making authentic consumption the mainstream of the market. According to data from the China Tea Marketing Association, sales of simply packaged tea accounted for 65% in 2024, an increase of 20 percentage points compared with 2020.

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It should be clear that this transformation is not "consumption downgrading" but a rational manifestation of consumption upgrading. The qualified rate of mooncake packaging in Shanghai has increased by more than ten percentage points in one year, indicating that most enterprises have taken the initiative to simplify packaging. Luxurious packaging is no longer the main selling point to attract consumers,and green, simple and practical designs have become the mainstream trend in packaging design.

3.3. Packaging design returns to core functions

The change in consumption concepts has directly pushed packaging design back to its original state: core functions such as product protection, convenience of use, and information transmission. Meaningless decoration and redundant structures are abandoned, and materials and processes are focused on functional improvement. At the same time, the environmental protection concept has become the core criterion of packaging design. Recyclable, degradable, and reusable packaging forms have been widely recognized by the market, and the application proportion of green materials continues to rise [10]. Packaging has finally become a supporting part of the product again, rather than an independent product for showing off.

Leading industry brands take the lead in practicing function-oriented design: Maxim's Mooncakes launched a minimalist environmentally friendly gift box, removing the multi-layer nested structure, adopting a single-box integrated design, and only retaining the basic elements of product protection and festival visual identity; Guangzhou Restaurant simplified packaging materials, replacing plastic inner trays with virgin pulp to reduce packaging weight and cost; Xinghualou launched small, simply packaged mooncakes in kraft paper packaging of primary color, weakening luxurious decoration and highlighting product taste and traditional craftsmanship. Sales of this series of mooncakes increased by 90% year-on-year after launch, becoming the first choice for young consumers.

The above cases prove that packaging design has returned from an "independent conspicuous product" to a "functional carrier supporting products", realizing therestoration of value standards.

4. Improvement methods of packaging design for authentic consumption

4.1. Rational simplification of packaging structure

The core principle of packaging structure optimization is to reduce the number of layers,minimize void spaces, and reduce material usage on the premise of ensuring product safety and transportation protection, strictly complying with national restrictive standards on the number of mooncake packaging layers and void ratio [11].

In design practice, integrated molding and folding structures have become mainstream, reducing the use of accessories and adhesives and simplifying the production process. For example, a mooncake gift box folded from a single piece of paper without any glue or nails is environmentally friendly and easy to produce. This structure can also be folded into a flat shape during transportation, greatly saving transportation space and logistics costs. According to calculations, mooncake gift boxes with folding structures can reduce shipping volume by more than 70% and logistics costs by more than 50%.

At the same time, reusable design has become an innovative direction: some mooncake gift boxes are designed for secondary use as storage boxes, orsmall bookshelves to improve resource utilization. For example, a brand launched a "bookshelf-style" mooncake gift box that can be

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assembled into a small bookshelf for placing books and decorations after eating mooncakes. Other gift boxes are designed as handbags, stationery boxes, etc., with strong practicality.

Forms such as puzzle packaging and modular packaging turn packaging waste into cultural and creative products, achieving the goal of "zero waste" design [12]. For example, a brand launched a puzzle-style mooncake gift box with a Mid-Autumn Festival-themed puzzle on the lid; after eating the mooncakes, consumers can assemble the puzzle and hang it as a decoration. This design not only improves packaging utilization but also adds fun and cultural connotation to the product.

4.2. Green upgrade of packaging materials

Greening and degradability are the core trends in packaging material selection. Natural renewable materials such as bamboo pulp and sugarcane pulp have become the preferred materials for festival food packaging due to their natural degradability and low-carbon environmental protection characteristics.

The development of pulp molding technology has expanded the application of green materials in the packaging field. Pulp molding is a technology for making packaging products from plant fiber raw materials. It has the advantages of wide raw material sources, natural degradability, recyclability, and good cushioning performance, making it an ideal material to replace plastic packaging. Currently, pulp molding is widely used in packaging for mooncakes, eggs, fruits, electronic products, and other products.

Pulp inner trays are gradually replacing traditional plastic inner trays, reducing environmental treatment costs while ensuring product protection. Practical examples show that green materials not onlyalign with environmental trends but also reduce packaging weight and logistics costs. At the same time, they can enhance product texture and user experience, which is also beneficial to sales [13].

4.3. Improvement practice of Mid-Autumn Festival food packaging

Mid-Autumn Festival food packaging from the perspective of authentic consumption does not abandon the festival cultural atmosphere; instead, it inherits festival culture through minimalist visual design on the basis of simple structures and green materials. Current Mid-Autumn Festival packaging on the market generally adopts simple structures and environmentally friendly materials while controlling costs and volume, retaining the festival atmosphere with concise visual design

Diversified improvement practiceshave emerged in the current market: Maxim's environmentally friendly gift box outlines Mid-Autumn Festival imagery with simple lines and has been highly recognized by the marketsince its launch [14].

Simply packaged kraft paper mooncakes have become the first choice for young consumers due to their low cost and natural, eco-friendly appeal. This packaging is made of natural-colored kraft paper without excessive decoration, printed only with simple brand logos and product information. It is not only affordable but also environmentally friendly and recyclable, in line with young consumers' pursuit of a simple and natural lifestyle.

Puzzle-style mooncake boxes can be spliced into Mid-Autumn Festival-themed hanging paintings, balancing environmental protection and culture. For example, a brand launched a "Mid-Autumn Moon" puzzle gift box with a lid that is a 1,000-piece puzzle featuring a Mid-Autumn moonlit night.. After eating the mooncakes, consumers can assemble the puzzle and frame it as home decoration. This design not only improves packaging utilization but also allows consumers to experience the fun of hand-making while enjoying delicious food.

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Overall, Mid-Autumn Festival food packaging has completed the transformation from "external ostentation" to "internal quality" and the upgrade from "symbolic display" to "environmental value", fully conforming to the core needs of authentic consumption and achieving the triple unity of culture, function, and environmental protection [15].

5. Conclusion

Taking Mid-Autumn Festival food packaging as the research object, this paper analyzes the alienating effect of face consumption on packaging design from the perspective of authentic consumption, explains the core connotation and market performance of authentic consumption, and proposes optimization paths for packaging design from three dimensions: structural simplification, material upgrading, and cultural inheritance. The study shows that the transformation of consumption concepts from "face-oriented" to "quality-oriented" is the core driving force for the value restoration of packaging design; traditional face culture has pushed packaging towards luxury and redundancy, causing problems such as resource waste, environmental damage, and rampant comparison, while authentic consumption returns packaging to the functional criteria of protection, practicality, and environmental friendliness, achieving a simple and efficient design goal through structural optimization and material innovation. From the market transformation of mooncake packaging, it can be seen that the return to value of packaging design is an inevitable direction that aligns with market principles, meets consumer demand, and promotes the sustainable development of the industry.

This study still has certain limitations: the research sample only focuses on Mid-Autumn Festival food packaging, with a relatively narrow research scope that does not cover gift packaging for other traditional festivals such as the Dragon Boat Festival and the Spring Festival; the research methods are mainly case analysis and literature research, lacking quantitative data support and consumer empirical research, so the universality of the conclusions needs further verification. Future research can be expanded in three aspects: first, expand the research scope to include gift packaging for festivals such as Dragon Boat Festival zongzi and Spring Festival goods, and compare and analyze the transformation laws of different festival packaging; second, combine empirical methods such as questionnaires and user interviews to quantitatively analyze consumers' acceptance of authentic consumption and green packaging, and build a more targeted packaging design optimization model; third, deeply explore the integration path of traditional festival culture and simple packaging to provide more detailed theoretical guidance for the cultural inheritance and innovation of festival food packaging.

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