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From Studio to Shelf: Integrating Retail Contexts into Packaging Design Education

ABSTRACT

Packaging design projects in the classroom are usually judged in the studio, up close, with full control over lighting, scale, and context. But a real shelf does not offer any of that. This paper looks at three student designed brand systems, Lapinette, Crema Bianca, and PECK, developed in a Fall 2025 undergraduate Package Design course at the American University in Dubai (AUD), and asks a simple question: does packaging that succeeds in a studio critique also succeed on a shelf? Each brand was built from concept to final production and evaluated through instructor and peer critique once completed. What came out of this critique is what this paper calls a translation problem: even the strongest, most carefully researched projects showed gaps once shelf conditions were considered, mainly around legibility at a distance and how clearly color communicated flavor or category. The critique also surfaced a second finding worth separating out, that being noticed on a shelf and being wanted enough to buy are not the same thing. Rather than treating these gaps as mistakes, this paper argues they point to something useful for design education: that the studio and the shelf are simply testing different skills, and that packaging design courses would benefit from treating the shelf itself.

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KEY WORDS
Packaging design education, shelf visibility, practice-based research, retail context, design pedagogy

1. Introduction

Packaging is one of the only design objects that most people physically pick up, compare, and choose between on a near-daily basis, often without ever recognizing it as a design decision at all. A shopper reaching for cereal, ice cream, or crackers is making dozens of small visual judgments in a matter of seconds, usually without pausing to think about typography, color, or hierarchy in any conscious way. This everyday familiarity can make packaging feel like a simple design task, but it is precisely this speed that makes it one of the more demanding ones. A shopper typically has only a few seconds to notice a product, understand what it is, and decide whether it is worth a second look, all while competing against dozens of other products vying for the same sliver of attention (Klimchuk & Krasovec, 2013). Packaging, in this sense, has been described as functioning like a silent salesman, communicating a brand's identity and value without a person there to explain it (Klimchuk & Krasovec, 2013), and doing so almost entirely within the narrow window of a shopper's glance.

Despite this, packaging design education is often developed and evaluated within the studio, a space that removes many of the pressures of the real shelf. Visual attributes such as color contrast, typography, imagery, and structural form are known to play a critical role in attracting attention and differentiating products under real, crowded retail conditions (Underwood, Klein & Burke, 2001), yet studio-based packaging projects frequently prioritize conceptual development, branding narrative, and aesthetic polish over how a design will actually perform once removed from that controlled setting (Underwood, 2003). Industry-focused literature has similarly emphasized that packaging should be evaluated in relation to its surrounding competitors rather than as an isolated object (Pentawards, 2023), a retail-centered

lens that is often missing from academic critique, where a project is more commonly judged on its own terms, at close range, and without competition. This gap connects to a broader question in design pedagogy about

how students learn to apply their skills under real-world conditions. Experiential learning theory holds that learning is strengthened through direct experience, reflection, and application, rather than through instruction alone (Kolb, 1984), and design disciplines in particular tend to generate knowledge through cycles of making, testing, and reflecting on real practice (Biggs & Büchler, 2008). Assessing design work adds a further layer of difficulty here, since design outcomes are still frequently judged through subjective critique rather than more measurable performance indicators (Davis, 2017), a challenge that becomes especially visible in packaging, where success depends heavily on how quickly and clearly a design communicates to a viewer who was never going to look closely in the first place (Clement, Kristensen & Grønhaug, 2013).

This paper examines that gap through three student-designed brand systems, Lapinette, Crema Bianca, and PECK, developed as part of an undergraduate Package Design course. Each brand was evaluated through instructor and peer critique following completion, with a specific focus on how the packaging was likely to perform under real shelf conditions rather than in studio presentation alone. Rather than treating any shortcomings surfaced through this process as failures, this paper argues that they point to a translation problem: a distinction between the skills that make packaging succeed in a studio setting and the skills that make it succeed on an actual shelf. The following sections outline the methodology used to gather and evaluate this material, present the three case studies in detail, and discuss what their shared patterns suggest about packaging design education more broadly.

2. Methodology

This study follows a practice-based, qualitative case study methodology. The material analyzed is not survey or experimental data, but the actual design work produced by students, alongside the discussion and critique that surrounded it. This approach fits the nature of design research, where knowledge is generated through making, testing, and reflecting on real practice rather than through detached measurement (Biggs & Büchler, 2008).

The data for this paper comes from a Package Design course (VCGD362) taught in Fall 2025, in which twelve students worked individually to build a complete brand identity, from concept to shelf-ready packaging, with a minimum of six products or SKUs per brand. From this cohort of twelve, three projects were purposively selected as case studies for this paper: Lapinette, Crema Bianca, and PECK. These three were not chosen because the entire class performed at the same level, but because these particular students executed the process correctly at every stage, from the initial market research to the final choice of SKUs, typography, and color. This is a deliberate methodological choice: if weaker projects showed gaps between studio design and shelf performance, the finding would be unremarkable. The fact that even carefully executed, well-researched projects still showed these gaps is precisely what makes the case studies useful evidence for this paper's argument, that strong work on a laptop or in a studio presentation does not automatically translate into strong performance on an actual shelf.

2.1. Data Collection: The Course Process (Fall 2025)

The first stage of data collection took place during the course itself. Before any design work began, students were required to visit a supermarket they shop at regularly and identify a product category they wanted to work with. Each student photographed an average of four to six competitor products, a mix of examples they felt worked well and examples they felt did not, whether in terms of visual appeal, clarity, or shelf presence. These photographs were then discussed as a class, allowing students to identify what to aim for and what mistakes to avoid before starting their own designs.

The project brief, communicated to students through the course syllabus and weekly reminders on Blackboard, required a fixed structure for the final submission: an introduction and project brief, brand development (logo, color, typography, brand story), market research and competitor analysis, concept development (mood boards and sketches), structural design, graphic design and flavor differentiation, prototyping, physical documentation of final prototypes, digital mockups and shelf display renders, and a

final reflection. Digital mockups were mandatory specifically as a contingency, so that a project would still be fully presentable even if the physical print quality fell short.

Beyond in-class discussion, students were also instructed to test their work informally with classmates, friends, and family before bringing it to the instructor, treating these informal viewers as stand-in customers whose honest reactions mattered as much as academic feedback. Once packaging was printed, mocked up, and photographed, all twelve projects were presented and critiqued as a group, with the instructor and all students present. Each project received approximately ten minutes, a short presentation followed by open critique. Critique was semi-structured around a consistent set of questions: does this stand out on a shelf, do you like it

and why or why not, what would you normally buy in this category, and would you be interested in buying this new product instead. Several students were notably candid in this stage, stating plainly that they would not personally buy a given product and explaining why, which added a layer of honest, consumer-style feedback beyond academic critique. Feedback during these sessions was captured through instructor field notes; the sessions themselves were not audio or video recorded. Final photographed work and digital mockups were separately documented by students and submitted through Blackboard as part of the final presentation.

2.2. Data Analysis: The Research Process (Summer 2026)

The second stage of this study is distinct from the course itself. Following the completion of the Fall 2025 course, the three selected case studies were revisited as a formal research process during Summer I 2026, structured around a seven-week plan: a literature review situating the project within existing packaging and pedagogy research, a review of the shelf-related critique data already gathered during the course, synthesis of the instructor field notes against the final submitted documentation, comparative analysis between studio-stage design decisions and shelf-related critique findings, and preparation of the findings into this paper. Framing the course and the research as two separate stages, rather than treating the course itself as the study, allows this paper to move beyond a simple project report and to instead analyze the course outcomes with a research lens applied after the fact.

2.3. Limitations

Two limitations of this methodology are acknowledged directly. First, the shelf evaluation conducted in this study did not involve a true side-by-side comparison with physical competitor products on an actual shelf; competitor comparisons instead relied on students recalling and referencing the market research they had conducted earlier in the project. Second, the critique panel was limited to the instructor and peer students within a single class, rather than including other design instructors, external evaluators, or actual consumers. Both limitations are addressed further in the concluding sections of this paper as directions for future coursework and research.

3. Case studies: Three Student Brand Systems

The case studies presented in this paper come from a Package Design course (VCGD362), where senior students were asked to build a complete brand identity from concept to shelf-ready packaging, with a minimum of six products or SKUs. The project ran over roughly 40 days and moved through several stages: market research, concept development, structural and graphic design, prototyping, and final production. What makes this project useful for the present study is not only the final output, but the way shelf awareness was built into the process from the very beginning, and then tested again at the end through public critique.

Before any design work began, students were asked to visit a supermarket they shop at regularly, walk through the aisles, and identify a product category they wanted to work with. They were then asked to photograph examples they liked and examples they felt were not working, whether in terms of visual appeal, clarity, or shelf presence. These photographs became the basis for an in-class discussion comparing strong and weak packaging examples, so that students could identify what to aim for and what mistakes to

avoid before starting their own designs. This early exposure to real shelf conditions, rather than a purely conceptual studio brief, set the tone for the rest of the project.

Once the final packaging was printed, mocked up, and photographed, the projects were exhibited on campus for one week. During this time, students presented their work to the class and to the instructor, discussing their design decisions, the challenges they faced, and how their earlier market research shaped their final outcome. It is important to note that this evaluation was conducted through critique and discussion rather than a controlled side-by-side shelf test with competing commercial products; comparisons to well-known brands were raised by students from memory, drawing on the research they had done at the start of the project. Three brands from this cohort were selected as case studies for this paper: Lapinette, a storybook-inspired baking brand; Crema Bianca, a premium Italian gelato line; and PECK, a food and connection-focused brand built around crackers, spreads, nuts, and cheese.

3.1. Lapinette (designed by Emmanuelle Nafaa)

Lapinette is built around a fictional baker character, Delphine, and applies a soft, pastel, storybook aesthetic across a full line of cake mixes, chocolate bars, sprinkles, candles, and whipping cream. During critique, students responded strongly to how distinct the brand felt on the shelf: the vintage, fairytale mood was something they said they rarely, if ever, see in a real bakery aisle, where most competing products lean on bold colors and straightforward product photography rather than narrative illustration.



» **Figure 1:** *Lapinette, final printed brand system as exhibited on campus. Student work by Emmanuelle Nafaa.*

At the same time, the critique surfaced several concerns that are directly tied to shelf performance rather than studio presentation. On the cake mix boxes, the brand name, flavor name, and the words “Cake Mix” all sit at a similar visual weight, which slows down how quickly a shopper could scan the package and understand what it is. The QR code element, styled as a flat, modern graphic, was also flagged as inconsistent with the painted, illustrated style used everywhere else on the packaging. Finally, because every flavor in the line shares the same frame, ribbon, and bunny motif, differentiating between flavors from shelf distance would be difficult without a stronger color or icon system per variant.



» **Figure 2:** *Lapinette Red Velvet Delight cake mix box, showing the shared frame, ribbon, and bunny motif, and the flat QR code element discussed in critique. Student work by Emmanuelle Nafaa.*

3.2. Crema Bianca (designed by Asma Nowbandi)

Crema Bianca takes a more restrained, minimalist approach, built around a premium Italian gelato concept with a clean color palette and simple line art across tubs, stick boxes, waffle cones, toppings, and whipped cream cans. In critique, students consistently described the line as looking more expensive and higher-end than typical supermarket ice cream, crediting this to its simplicity, in contrast to the more saturated, pattern-heavy packaging common in the freezer aisle.



» **Figure 3:** *Crema Bianca, final printed brand system, including tubs, stick boxes, waffle cones, toppings, and whipped cream cans. Student work by Asma Nowbandi.*

However, that same simplicity introduced some shelf-related risks. The flavor names on the tub lids, set in a script or serif typeface, were noted as elegant but low in contrast against the busy floral or marbled patterns behind them, which would likely be hard to read quickly at freezer-case distance. The color-to flavor logic was also inconsistent: purple for lavender or green for olive oil reads intuitively, but pink for “Rosa Rosa” or tan for vanilla would be harder for a shopper to decode at a glance, without relying on the text. Additionally, the seamless illustrated pattern that worked cleanly on the flat tub label became visibly distorted when wrapped around the curved paper cups, a challenge the student had already identified in her own reflection on the project.



» **Figure 4:** *Close-up of Crema Bianca cup lids, showing the illustrated pattern distorting around the curved seam and low-contrast flavor names discussed in critique. Student work by Asma Nowbandi.*

3.3. PECK (designed by Maria Semaan)

PECK is built around the idea of shared eating and connection, inspired by the Lebanese mezza tradition, and includes crackers, spreads, nuts, dried fruits, and cheese. During critique, the hand-drawn illustration style used across the packaging was singled out as a strong point of differentiation, standing out clearly against the more conventional, polished look of typical supermarket packaging in the same categories.



» **Figure 5:** *PECK cracker boxes, final printed packaging, showing the hand-drawn wordmark and background line-art pattern discussed in critique. Student work by Maria Semaan.*

Even so, several issues emerged that would affect how well PECK performs on an actual shelf. On smaller formats, such as jar lids and box ends, the hand-drawn "PECK" wordmark began to compete with the busy line-art pattern used as a background texture, making the logo harder to read at a glance. The brand's category color-coding, while generally effective for shelf differentiation, was not fully consistent: it was unclear in places whether a given color represented a product category or a specific flavor variant. Finally, the cheese products, wrapped in wax and cloth with only a small circular sticker for branding, were flagged as losing brand presence almost entirely against their white wrap and dark staging, despite being some of the most premium items in the line.



» **Figure 6:** *PECK Brie, wax and cloth wrap with a small circular branding sticker, illustrating the reduced brand presence noted in critique. Student work by Maria Semaan.*

3.4. Summary of Findings

Across all three brands, the critique process revealed a consistent gap between what works in a controlled studio presentation and what would likely hold up under real shelf conditions. None of the concerns raised in critique were addressed afterward, as the projects were finalized and exhibited as submitted, without a revision stage. Rather than treating this as a shortcoming, this paper treats it as evidence: the students had internalized shelf-awareness early, through their initial market research, but the 40-day project timeline did not allow space to test and revise their designs against that same shelf-thinking once the work was finished. This gap between early awareness and final execution is discussed further in Section 4.

4. Discussion

Taken together, the three case studies point to a broader issue than any single critique note on its own. Lapinette, Crema Bianca, and PECK were selected precisely because their creators had followed the process correctly, from market research through to final production, and had clearly absorbed the lessons of the early studio brief. Yet all three still ran into shelf-related concerns once evaluated through critique. This is best understood not as a shortcoming in any individual project, but as evidence of what could be called a translation problem: the skills that make a package succeed in a controlled studio presentation are related to, but not identical with, the skills that make it succeed on an actual shelf. A student can follow every step of a brief correctly and still produce work that has not yet been fully translated into shelf-ready communication, because the two contexts are simply not testing the same thing. The studio rewards conceptual strength, narrative, and visual craft at close range; the shelf demands all of that plus near instant legibility from a distance, in competition with dozens of other products for a few seconds of attention.

The most consistent issue across all three brands was legibility and hierarchy at a distance. Elements that read clearly in a close-up studio presentation, such as the flavor names on Lapinette's cake mix boxes, the PECK wordmark against its background pattern, or Crema Bianca's script typography, became harder to parse once shelf distance and competing visual noise were factored in. Closely related to this was the question of color-to-flavor logic. In all three brands, color functioned as a differentiation tool, but its logic was not always intuitive: a shopper scanning quickly relies on color as one of the fastest available cues, often faster than reading text, and when that color mapping is not immediately clear, legibility suffers even if the typography itself is technically readable. This suggests that improving color-to-flavor logic is

not a cosmetic fix but a direct lever for improving shelf recognition (Clement, Kristensen & Grønhaug, 2013).

The critique sessions also surfaced a second, distinct layer of shelf performance that is easy to overlook if visibility is treated as the only goal: purchase intent. Several students were candid during critique in stating that they personally would not buy a given product, even in cases where they liked the design itself. This distinction matters. A package can solve the legibility problem and still not translate into a shopper wanting to buy it, because that reaction was not about whether the design was noticed or understood correctly, but about brand and product fit, personal taste, or simply not being the target customer for that particular

flavor or concept. Visibility and purchase intent are therefore best treated as two separate hurdles rather than one. Being seen and read correctly on a shelf is a necessary first step, but it is not the same as being wanted, and design evaluation that stops at legibility risks mistaking the first hurdle for the finish line.

It is worth being clear about what this paper is, and is not, arguing. The issues identified here are not evidence that the students misunderstood the brief or that the process itself was flawed; if anything, the fact that carefully researched, well-executed projects still surfaced these concerns shows how different the conditions of a real shelf are from those of a studio critique, regardless of how thoroughly a designer has prepared. The market itself is simply a harder, less forgiving test than the studio, and this paper treats that as a market reality worth building into design education, rather than as a gap in any single project or process.

This points naturally to a direction for future work. The present study relied on critique and discussion rather than a direct, side-by-side comparison with real competitor products, a limitation already noted in Section 2. A useful next step would be to test student packaging more directly against actual competitor products, either by physically placing them together on a shelf or by building a virtual shelf simulation, to observe more precisely how these designs perform in direct visual competition rather than in critique discussion alone. Doing so would allow the translation problem identified here to be tested, and potentially addressed, under conditions much closer to the real retail environment these designs are ultimately meant for.

5. Conclusions

This paper set out to examine how three well-executed student packaging projects, Lapinette, Crema Bianca, and PECK, held up once evaluated with shelf conditions in mind, rather than through studio presentation alone. Across all three, the same underlying pattern emerged: work that was conceptually strong, well researched, and carefully produced still surfaced legibility and recognition concerns once shelf distance and competition were taken into account. This paper has argued that this is best understood as a translation problem, a distinction between the skills required to succeed within a studio setting and the additional skills required to succeed on an actual retail shelf, rather than as any failure on the part of the students or the process they followed.

The most consistent finding across the three case studies was that legibility and recognition at a distance, closely tied to how intuitively color communicated flavor or category, remained the clearest gap between studio and shelf performance. A second, related finding was that visibility and purchase intent are not the same thing: a package can be noticed and correctly understood and still fail to be wanted, a distinction that matters for how shelf performance is evaluated going forward. Together, these findings suggest that packaging design education would benefit from treating the shelf, and not only the studio critique, as a genuine site of testing and learning.

This study is limited by its reliance on critique and discussion rather than a direct, side-by-side comparison against real competitor products, and by a critique panel limited to the instructor and peer students. Future work building on this paper could address both, either through a physical shelf test placing student packaging alongside real competitor products, or through a virtual shelf simulation that allows for repeatable, more controlled comparison. Such a step would extend the practice-based approach used here, allowing the translation problem identified in this paper to be tested more directly, and would offer a clearer picture of what packaging design education still needs to teach once a project leaves the studio and enters the market it was always meant for.

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