

# Personalised, But Untouched: How Photos On Products Can Impact Consumption

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## Problem of practice

Have you ever received cookies or candies that have personalized images on them? How did you feel about eating them? The integration of photographs with such consumer products, such as cookies, candies, coffee mugs, pillows and other personalised items, has become a widespread trend, fuelled by advances in digital printing and consumer demands for customised experiences. However, this growth masks a problem: many photo-integrated products, especially those meant for consumption (consumables) or to be used and disposed of (disposables), are admired but not used. Consumers often hesitate to eat, dispose of or interact with a product that features realistic images due to subconscious discomfort. A recent [study](#) by Freeman Wu, Adriana Samper, Andrea C. Morales, Gavan J. Fitzsimons shows that consuming certain photo-integrated products is perceived as disrespectful or morally wrong, triggering emotional resistance.<sup>1</sup> Hence, product managers, brand managers and product designers need to carefully consider the type of image and the nature of the product on which it is placed. When applied thoughtfully, these insights can help managers optimise product appeal, reduce waste and increase conversion

<sup>1</sup>The article 'When do photos on products hurt or help consumption? How magical thinking shapes consumer reactions to photo-integrated products' by Freeman Wu, Adriana Samper, Andrea C. Morales & Gavan J. Fitzsimons featured in Volume 35, Issue 2 of *Journal of Consumer Psychology* talks about how to evaluate the emotional appropriateness of images across personalised and mass-customised offerings

## The consumption experience

Photo-integrated products offer a deeply personal and emotionally resonant touch by embedding lifelike images of people, pets or meaningful events on everyday items. The global personalised gifts market reflects this momentum, projected to grow from USD 29.08 billion in 2024 to USD 54.14 billion by 2033: an annualized growth of 6.7%.<sup>2</sup> From cookies printed with a child's favourite cartoon character to an M&M candy featuring a couple's engagement picture, these items are designed to celebrate special moments and evoke joy. In many cases, they succeed: consumers report feelings of happiness, surprise and connection when receiving personalised gifts that reflect meaningful images.<sup>3</sup> For example, a customised coffee mug featuring a family photo can brighten a daily routine, while a pillow customized with a pet's face may provide comfort (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Photo-integrated products (a) coffee mug with family photos and (b) pillow with a pet image**



Source: Screenshot taken from amazon.com and samandjack.com<sup>4</sup>

However, while visually appealing and sentimentally meaningful, some photo-integrated products, especially consumables or disposables, can create conflicting consumption experiences.<sup>5</sup> Consumers may hesitate to eat or use these products, not due to dislike, but because consuming them may feel disrespectful or emotionally challenging. Real-life instances include guests avoiding a personalized cake with a baby's face at birthdays (see Figure 2) or napkins with a couple's photos at receptions.

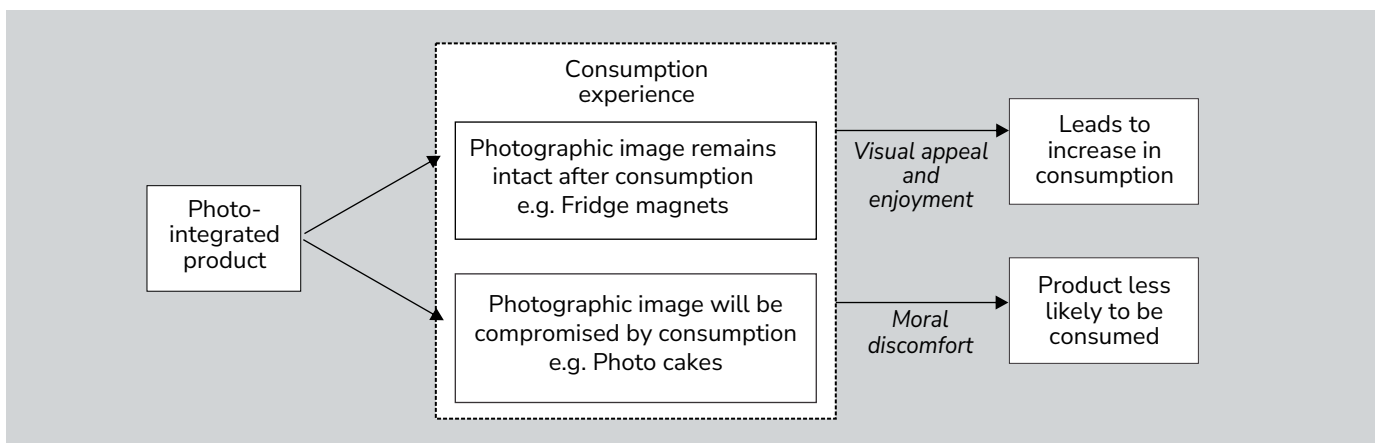
**Figure 2: Photo-integrated product: Birthday cake with baby face**



Source: Screenshot taken from yummycake.in<sup>6</sup>

In such cases, the photo's lifelike quality can make the image's destruction feel morally uncomfortable. These mixed reactions occur because people tend to apply the law of similarity, which leads them to perceive a photo as sharing essential qualities of the person/object to which it is linked.<sup>7</sup> See Figure 3 for a visual representation of the psychological mechanism involved.

**Figure 3: Visual representation of the psychological mechanism leading to conflicting consumption experience of photo-integrated products**



Source: Created by the author

## Designing photo-integrated products

The challenge of enhancing the emotional engagement of photo-personalized products while reducing the risk of evoking unpleasant emotions is more important than ever, as such products have been expanded beyond the category of gifts. According to a 2024 Deloitte [survey](#), over 50% of surveyed consumers said they would be willing to buy customised products from mass retailers and 20% said they were willing to pay a high premium for such offerings.<sup>8</sup> Even major brands, from Coca-Cola's 'Share a Coke' campaign to Nike's custom sneaker platform, demonstrate that scalable personalisation is now a mainstream expectation rather than a niche novelty.<sup>9,10</sup>

To help product managers navigate the factors of product type, emotional content and consumption context, we offer a Design Choice matrix (see Table 1) based on the research by Wu and team.

The most impactful photo-integrated products are not just visually appealing, but can connect deeply with how people feel, behave and remember

### Over-personalisation leading to awkwardness:

Another common mismatch is the overuse or inappropriate application of personal images, particularly on durable goods. Products that are too intimate or overly tailored to a specific person or context can feel uncomfortable for a broader audience to use. While recipients may not suffer emotional discomfort, a common reaction is "I don't know what to do with this". Many [personalised gifts](#) go unused or are quietly discarded because they feel more like novelty items than functional ones.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, personalisation must be balanced with usability and aesthetic appeal.

**Table 1: Consumable\* products design choices for photo-integrated products**

Emotional resonance of images	Examples	Risks of default placement on consumables	Alternate/ recommended placement
Low-medium	Landscapes, cartoon icons, symbolic objects, celebrity likeness	Moderate risk of moral discomfort	Avoid human likeness: replace with non-human or abstract images
High	Faces of loved ones, pets, religious symbols	Risk of moral discomfort, rejection	Avoid or relocate photo to packaging

Source: Created by the author based on the research by Wu and team

\*Durable products are usually positive, with the exception of religious or sacred symbols (see section below)

The above matrix can also be used to tailor products or service strategies in mass-market contexts, where symbolic or emotionally resonant imagery is increasingly used to enhance brand connection.

## What it takes to implement

Businesses must weigh the operational and technological costs of implementing such strategies. Identifying meaningful personalization opportunities often demands investment in customer data analytics, cultural research and creative development. Moreover, collecting and using personal images introduces privacy concerns and regulatory obligations, particularly in mass-market campaigns. Brands risk consumers' mistrust and potential legal exposure without clear safeguards and consent mechanisms. In addition to the above investments, product managers would do well to avoid the following pitfalls when incorporating images.

**Cultural and religious insensitivity:** Even if you have avoided using a meaningful image in a way that will not be compromised, there remains a particular serious pitfall in using sacred symbols or culturally significant images without proper understanding or respect. Ignoring cultural sensitivities such as the underwear and slippers that were put up for sale in [Walmart](#) featuring Hindu deities like Lord Ganesha can lead to widespread offence, negative media coverage and lasting damage to brand reputation.<sup>12</sup>

Such incidents highlight the need for brands, especially those producing at scale, to proactively assess the cultural and emotional resonance of any imagery used. Examples of design-stage questions are: *Could this image be considered sacred, sensitive or inappropriate in any consumption context? Would the product's usage violate symbolic norms?* When in doubt, consider testing designs in local markets and consulting cultural experts.



## Identifying new opportunities

Despite the implementation challenges mentioned above, there is an immense potential market for photo-integrated products beyond the personalised gifting sector. The following ideas and examples illustrate these novel opportunities for brands.

**Brand collaborations:** Photo-integrated, limited-edition products can be developed for co-branding purposes to create buzz and drive customer engagement. A strong example is Oreo's collaboration with [Pokémon](#), featuring collectable cookies engraved with character designs.<sup>13</sup> Riding on Pokémon global fandom, the cookies became Oreo's [fastest-selling](#)

limited edition, generating \$11.8 million in six weeks and increasing market share by 7%.<sup>14</sup>

**Innovative marketing and social impact campaigns:** Photo-integrated packaging can go beyond aesthetics to serve as a platform for social messaging and awareness. A remarkable example is the 'Missing Portraits' campaign by Brazilian dairy company [Piracanjuba](#), which printed images of missing persons on over 300 million milk cartons (see [Figure 4](#)).<sup>15</sup> Within the first month, eight families were reunited with their loved ones. By combining photo personalisation with mass distribution and AI facial recognition, the campaign turned product packaging into a tool for national impact.

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### Potential opportunities for photo-integrated products:

- Brand collaborations
  - Innovative marketing and social impact campaigns
  - Celebrating major events and cultural milestones
  - Rewarding loyal customers and employees
  - Retail brand strategy
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**Celebrating major events and cultural milestones:** Organizations can also use photo-integrated products to commemorate significant milestones, whether company anniversaries, national holidays or global events. For example, [Panasonic](#) released a line of branded products, such as SD cards and a limited-edition Lumix DMC-G3, featuring the 2012 London Olympic logo and mascot.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, sports franchises often capitalize on victories by launching [photo merchandise](#) featuring star players or iconic match moments to boost fan loyalty, engagement and merchandising revenue globally.<sup>17</sup>

**Figure 4: 'Missing Portraits' campaign by Brazilian diary company Piracanjuba**



Source: Screenshot taken from [campaignsoftheworld.com](http://campaignsoftheworld.com)

**Rewarding loyal customers and employees:** Businesses can leverage photo personalisation to recognize and retain their most dedicated customers and employees.<sup>18</sup> Hotels, airlines, banks and subscription-based businesses can offer customer and employees anniversary gifts, photo-embedded loyalty cards or commemorative products that mark personal milestones.<sup>19</sup>

**Retail brand strategy:** Subtle personalisation in everyday retail can become a memorable brand signature. Amazon India's 'Story Boxes' campaign, featuring real seller photos and personal narratives on delivery packages, turns routine orders into emotionally resonant experiences (see Figure 5).<sup>20</sup> Expanding on this idea, brands can make personalized offerings, integrating customer stories and region-specific cultural designs.

## Beyond the visual appeal

While photo-integrated products are often valued for their aesthetic and sentimental appeal, such novelty is not enough to ensure positive consumer responses. Managers must also consider the psychological and emotional consequences of image placement on products. A misaligned design can lead to consumer

**Figure 5: Amazon India's story boxes featuring real seller photos and personal narratives on their delivery packages**



Source: Screenshot taken from [amazon.in](http://amazon.in)

discomfort, underutilization, wasted inventory and even damage to reputation. Successful photo personalisation needs to find a balance between the product's durability, emotional context and intended consumer interaction. By designing with empathy, preserving images through packaging, using neutral visuals for functional items and tapping into emotionally safe contexts, brands can transform personalization into a powerful driver of trust, engagement and loyalty. In short, the most impactful photo-integrated products are not just visually appealing but can connect deeply with how people feel, behave and remember.

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Successful photo personalisation requires strategic alignment between the product's durability, emotional context, and intended consumer interaction

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