

ANALYSING CONDOM USAGE IN MEN – DIRECTIONS FOR DEVELOPING A MARKETING STRATEGY

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Abstract:

This paper studies male condoms usage: how do men perceive condoms and what are the perceived motivations for or against using them. Two qualitative methods were used: in-depth interviews and a netnographic study conducted on reviews and comments regarding condom brands. The results show that the main benefit sought when using condoms is protection against pregnancies, while preventing STDs is not a real concern. Also, there are many barriers against condoms usage, the strongest being trust in the partner and pleasure diminishment. In the end, we will provide some directions for developing marketing strategies for condom brands.

Keywords: *Condom Usage, Condom Usage Behavior, Qualitative Study*

JEL classification: *M39*

1. Introduction

Condoms are a taboo product, and taboos are deeply rooted in each culture. Condoms intrinsically refer to sex, and consumers reactions to advertisements for taboo products differ not only between cultures, but also between individuals.

Condoms have two main functions: protection against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) (sometimes called sexually transmitted infections – STIs; note that we will use these two terms interchangeably in this research) and against pregnancies. The shift from relative non-consumer to consumer is difficult to achieve, because it implies behavior and perception changes among people who don't perceive themselves at risk. In this case, the role of marketers is to create demand for a market segment difficult to work with.

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And marketers' job is of utmost importance here, because, compared with other contraceptive methods, condoms have the important advantage of preventing STDs. If used correctly, condoms' success rate against pregnancies is 98%. However, the percentage achieved through common use is 85% (WHO, 2018). Regarding the prevention of HIV and other STIs, condoms' efficiency is 98% as well (UNAIDS, 2016). In 2004, WHO officially declared that the latex male condoms are the only and most efficient method of preventing HIV, if used correctly (UNAIDS, 2004). This statement still holds true until today. A document released in 2010 and revised in 2013 by WHO, UNAIDS, UNFPA and FHI still mentions that the condom is the most effective technology in preventing HIV and other STIs. However, they could be less effective in protecting against STIs transmitted by skin-to-skin contact, considering that the condom cannot cover all the infected skin areas (WHO, UNAIDS, UNFPA, FHI, 2010, revised in 2013). Since the spread of HIV/AIDS and STDs, condoms went from being a birth control device to one that signifies sexual responsibility (Bryant, 2004).

Condoms have a double valence, which raises contradictory feelings in consumers' minds: on one side, they have a positive valence, the thought of sexual intercourse stimulating pleasurable stimuli; on the other side, they remind of the double dangers brought by sexual intercourse, having a negative valence – possible pregnancy and STDs. Braun (2013) calls the reluctance towards condoms an “anti-discourse” which has three factors: related to pleasure, to intimacy and connection, and to spontaneity or interruption. She also claims that relationships are incompatible with condoms usage and that the idea of protected sex is opposed with the pleasure felt during intercourse.

Different studies talk about factors that affect condoms usage. Culture is one of the most important factors that affects one's perception about sexuality (Boddewyn & Kunz, 1991). What is considered norm in a culture can be forbidden in another. In 2007, Japan had the highest condoms usage rate, the products being sold even in special vending machines (Castro-Vázquez, 2007). In Thailand, kids learn about condoms in school (Viravaidya, 2010). In contrast, even in 2020, sex education is poor in Romania, the church, who has a great influence upon the nation, even standing against it and considering it a “danger to children's innocence” (Digi24, 2020). Romania, as a collectivist culture (with a score of 30/100 on the Hofstede's individualism cultural dimension) (Hofstede), has a rich cultural context of communication. This translates in a tendency to prefer implicit, not explicit sexual stimuli, the explicit ones being considered aggressive (Biswas, Olsen, & Carlet, 1992).

Also, individuals have different levels of erotophobia (general negative reaction toward sexual stimuli) and erotophilia (general positive reaction toward sexual stimuli) (Fisher, Byrne, & White, 1983), and this level reflects on their behavior towards sexual planning and, consequently, towards condoms. Erotophobes tend to avoid sexual stimuli (Becker & Byrne, 1985), being uncomfortable with them and are less likely to plan ahead for sexual activity. Consequently, they tend to avoid buying contraceptive products (Fisher et al., 1979) and rely more on spontaneous contraceptive methods, exactly because they fail to plan for them (Gerrard, Gibbons, & McCoy, 1993).

Another factor influencing condom behavior is gender. Processing sexual information is dramatically influenced by gender, because men and women have different opinions on what being attractive means. Advertisements that are considered acceptable by one gender can be dismissed by the other (Grazer & Keesling, 1995). Helweg-Larsen and Collins (1994) even proposed that gender has a primary role in condoms negotiation and their use. When it comes to using condoms, men have leverage in decision-making and it considered their responsibility to buy them. In contrast, women are responsible for hormonal contraception (Fennell, 2011). This way, condoms are perceived as a product addressed to men. A Kinsey Institute study shows that only 1 out of 5 women take the decision to use condoms by themselves, with no intervention from their partner (Kinsey Institute, 2018). Sheeran et al. (1990) found that women consider condoms more offensive than men do. The motivations behind rejecting condoms may differ across genders. For some women, condom negotiation initiated by them can be interpreted by the partner as a sign of infidelity. Regardless of gender, condoms are associated with sexual promiscuity (Kulcrycki, 2004). For some men, the refusal of condoms during the sexual act can signify masculinity (Khan, 2004). Moreover, it was demonstrated that the rate of condoms usage for men is influenced by the social-economic context of each country (Meekers & Rahaim, 2005).

Age is another relevant factor: higher age associates with lower condoms usage. Because the number of divorces has increased in the 40+ segment, situation in which people are prone to sexual experiences with new partners, this segment should be also addressed by the industry.

People in steady, long-term relationships can negatively view condom usage (Misovich et al., 1997), trust being an important barrier against contraception (Bauman, & Berman, 2005; Michael, 2003). Not only that trust

determines individuals to neglect potential threats, but condoms are also a barrier towards achieving pleasure (Rosengard, Anderson, Stein, 2006; Manuel, 2005; Michael, 2003).

Opinions differ regarding the price. Some researchers say that there is a negative relationship between demand elasticity and the price for condoms. The demand for condoms is more price sensitive than the one for oral contraceptives (Boone, Farley, & Samuel, 1985). In 2016, the combined efforts of advertising and a decreased price led to an increase in male condoms demand (Terris-Prestholt & Windmeijer, 2016). However, there are researchers that claim that a high price comes as a confirmation of quality for condoms (Potts, 1984).

One of the most comprehensive studies about attitude towards condoms was conducted by Darrow in 1974. Darrow studied the attitude towards condoms of 2325 patients from an STD Clinic from California and found the following objections: condoms interfered with sex (25.9%), felt unnatural (17.9%), were unsatisfying (16.3%), were messy and felt uncomfortable (15.7%), were irritating (8.2%), were unreliable (7.2%), the respondents forgot about condoms (5.2%), were unsafe (3.1%), were hard to buy (1.6%), they did not work (1.3%), reduced pleasure (1.2%), were against the religion (1.2%).

A study done by Durex in 2019 during a festival from Romania on a sample of 230 people has found that the main reason against condoms usage is the negative impact upon romance for generation Z and the diminishment of couple intimacy for Young Millennials. The main reason for using condoms is avoiding pregnancies (75% for Gen Z and 85% for Young Millennials), while preventing STDs is the number one reason for only 13% of Gen Z representatives and 11% Young Millennials (SMARK, 2019)

In 2018, globally, there were 30.9 million people with HIV, from which 21% were not aware of it (Avert, 2018). According to WHO, in July 2018, in Romania there were 16,000 people infected with HIV (National Public Health Institute, 2018). In Romania, contraception is relatively new, having a legacy of 30 years, since the communist regime has fallen. To prove this point, national statistics from 2010 has shown that 60% of women (age 15-18) have never used a contraceptive method (Romanian Ministry of Health, 2015). More recent data from 2019 shows us that while the total percentage of Romanians using any modern method of contraception is 50.5%, the percentage of male condoms usage is 22.6%, still better than the European average of only 21% (Population Reference Bureau, 2019).

The present research was developed for understanding condom usage in Romanian men and their motivations for accepting or refusing to use them. At the end of the study, we will provide directions for developing a marketing strategy for condom brands.

2. Methodology

The scope of this paper is to analyze condom usage in men - their perceptions and attitudes towards condoms. The following objective will be sought out:

- Identifying the perceived benefits of condoms;
- Identifying the main reasons against condom usage;
- Understanding the perception towards people who use condoms and, in contrast, the perception towards people who don't;
- Understanding the reasons behind preferring a specific condoms brand against another.

Two qualitative methods were used for this research: in-depth semi-structured interviews and netnography. The sample for the interviews consisted of 8 males, Romanians, with ages ranging from 23 to 29 years old, living in urban areas. During selection, two filter questions were used: if the candidates are sexually active and if they have ever used condoms. The responders were assured that their answers are confidential and used only in academic research. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Through content analysis, different themes were identified and a code system was developed and revised. Taking into consideration the sensitive nature of the subject, during the interview, the interviewer used many times phrase such as: “studies say that”, “some people believe that”, “there are no correct answers”. At the end, 10 themes with specific sub-themes were identified, along with 304 codes.

The netnographic study was conducted after the interviews and consisted in reviewing comments about the brand Masculan. On the Romanian market, the player with the highest market share is Durex – 63% in 2010 (Toma, 2010), followed by Love Plus. Masculan is a premium German brand, also present in Romania, but with lower brand awareness. Over 115 comments from 12 sources (11 forums and Masculan’s Facebook page) were analyzed through content analysis. The comments were related to Masculan or Masculan in comparison with other brands. The researcher identified 4 themes and 130 codes.

3. Results

3.1. In-depth interviews' results

The main perceived function of condoms is avoiding a pregnancy. The interviewees mentioned that, generally, condoms are used to avoid what is considered to be an “accident”: “condoms are used to not get a girl pregnant and that’s all”. On the contrary, condoms’ function of protecting against STDs is overlooked: all of the respondents mentioned STDs only after being asked about them, initially mentioning only the protection against pregnancies. STDs are not seen as real problems and most of the times are not even being considered: “you just don’t think about it”. Even if they think about the possibility of contracting an STD, the respondents mentioned that they prefer to ignore this thought, to place it the back of their minds. Having an STD (either they or their partner) is seen as out of the question, especially because it is considered “uncivilized” and shameful. However, there are no medical check-ups to prove their own or their partner’s healthy medical state.

This impossibility of contracting an STD comes mostly from trusting partner, trust being the main barrier against condom usage. The simple facts of previously knowing the partner, her sexual history and seeing that she is preoccupied with personal hygiene eliminate the idea of STDs: “I just trusted her”, “I see she’s clean, my trust in her strengthens”. Therefore, studies that show that trust is a barrier in condoms’ usage are confirmed. Also, as previously identified in the literature, condom usage in a relationship is considered unnecessary.

Also related to the negative effect of trust on condom usage, the respondents mentioned that condom negotiation is not well regarded. Condom negotiation implies lack of trust in the partner, the insinuation of having an existing STD and it is even an insult. Moreover, STDs and condom usage are associated with promiscuous women, confirming previous studies. Respondents think that condoms should be used in one-night stands, with women they don’t know and don’t trust. Other two reasons for using condoms are the desire to prolong intercourse and the feeling of security. However, the respondents said that the increased feeling of security is felt only in the beginning of sexual life, when one cannot control his erection and cannot stop when feeling close to climaxing.

Another frequently mentioned barrier against condoms is the decreased penile sensation felt during safe sex. The respondents are not willing to compromise at all their own satisfaction during intercourse. Some of

them even mentioned that condoms can inhibit erections or can “ruin the mood”: “sometimes it upsets you and you are not in the mood anymore”.

Some participants showed distrust in condoms. They mentioned that there are cases when condoms break and lead to pregnancies, thus there is no point in using them. Another reason against condoms usage is trust in oneself and in controlling the ejaculation. Reasons like: “I know myself very well”, “I think I have enough experience in this, I can really control myself” not only prove once again that the only motivation for using condoms is avoiding a pregnancy, but also that the rejection of condoms is considered a sign of virility. However, the respondents seem to be unaware of the fact that the pre-ejaculatory fluid can lead to pregnancies. There were also participants that admitted that they just forgot about condoms, being extremely excited and losing their clear judgement.

The respondents were asked what their opinion about people who don't use condoms is. The attitude towards men not using condoms greatly differed from the attitude towards women who do the same. While the respondents said that it is “ok” for men not to use condoms, they declared that it is unacceptable in the case of women. If they previously insinuated that women who ask to use condoms are promiscuous and untrustworthy, now they called these women “smart” and “intelligent”. In contrast, men who don't use condoms are seen as risk takers and courageous, while those who do use them are considered weak, too careful and lacking confidence in themselves.

When asked about who is in charge of buying and paying for condoms, the respondents declared that men are 100% responsible. They insisted that it is natural that men are in charge of condom, because “a condom is a symbol for masculinity”. Even though until now the respondents disregarded condoms and considered that not using them is a sign of masculinity, when they talked about buying and paying, they mentioned that condoms acquisition and payment are their duty. Also, asking women to contribute to in any way is considered an insult.

Regarding the price, there were 10 mentions about the fact that condoms are not very expensive, while there were 5 mentions about condoms being expensive. However, when the respondents were asked to choose from two identical condoms packages, one of 9 lei and one of 13 lei, the majority chose the most expensive one, arguing that a more expensive product is one of better quality. Previous findings stating that condoms with higher price are perceived more qualitative are confirmed, suggesting that prices are indicators of quality in the case of condoms.

When asked about condom brands, the interviewees mentioned that Durex is the best brand, even though they could not give clear explanations why. They said that Durex has the best advertisements, are more expensive and, consequently, they trust the brand. At the end of the interview, after talking about condoms brand, the respondents were asked to check a Masculan condoms package and to state their opinions about it. The general opinion towards Masculan was negative and the packaging was considered mediocre. However, the mention “German quality” written on the packaging was appreciated, giving an increased sense of security and trust. There were interesting reactions towards the image displayed on the packaging – a heart. First of all, it made the respondents think about a pharmaceutical product; second of all, they said that the heart does not make them think about sex. It suggests that condoms are not associated with love and relationships.

3.2 Netnography’s results

The goal of the netnographic study was to identify users’ perceptions towards an unpopular condom brand from the Romanian market, in order to understand and provide directions for future marketing directions. The selected brand was Masculan, which was constantly compared to Durex in the comments and reviews identified.

Durex is considered a benchmark for condoms on the Romanian market. It is the condoms brand with the highest market share in Romania - 63% in 2010 (Toma, 2010) and also the one who focused the most on advertisement. In 2019, Durex was present at UNTOLD, the biggest music festival from Romania, with more than 372,000 participants from all over the world (Mediafax, 2019). Durex was present at the festival with a dedicated stand called “The G-Spot”. In the last years, Durex has established numerous partnerships with Romanian influencers whose public consists by teens or young adults. They have a strong offline and online presence (in online, not only that they have a dedicated website, but they have social media accounts where they frequently post and promote different campaigns). In contrast, Masculan does not have a website or an Instagram account, and the last Facebook post was published in October 2016. Engaging with young potential customers in social media can not only increase brand awareness, but also create brand trust and brand loyalty (Laroche et al. 2012). By not being present in the online environment, Masculan misses on an important customer touchpoint of utmost value today.

Consistent with the literature, the higher price of Durex was understood by customers as proof of higher quality. However, Durex had also complaints about quality. Masculan had more negative comments than positive ones. Positive comments referred to: the pleasant smell, feeling of comfort, increased resistance and elasticity. However, most of the reviews had complains about the poor quality.

It is important to note that most of the negative reviews about Masculan were from people who did not even try the brand. These individuals were reviewing a product that they did not experience firsthand and were judging it by other criteria, such as the name or the fact that they have never heard about it. These motivations convinced them to not “risk” using the unknown brand.

The above-mentioned reason, along with the constant comparison of Masculan with Durex, and the excellent reviews from users who actually tried Masculan condoms, may suggest that one strategy that marketers could apply is free condoms samples, in order to give potential customers the chance to test the product.

4. Conclusions

This study was designed to understand the reasons behind condoms acceptance or refusal in males. It was revealed that the main perceived function of condoms is preventing unwanted pregnancies, while STDs do not represent a real concern for the responders. The two main reasons against condom usage are trust in the partner and the decreased pleasure felt while using condoms, confirming previous studies (Michael, 2003; Manuel, 2005; Rosengard, Anderson, Stein, 2006; Braun, 2013). Having an STD is perceived as being impossible, especially by people who carefully select their partners. The illusion of sexual health is reinforced not only by trust in the partner, but also by proper personal hygiene. This implies, firstly, that STDs can be associated with unclean people who have a precarious intimate and general hygiene; and secondly, that there are individuals who expect visual cues for detecting STDs.

Condoms negotiation is considered offensive, implying a lack of trust in the partner or being aware of having an STD. As in previous studies (Kulcrycki, 2004), women who initiate condoms negotiation are considered promiscuous. However, when asked what is their opinion about women who do not use condoms, the participants mentioned that they would not trust those women. In contrast, women who do use them are considered smart. This lack

of consistency between statements can suggest a gap between thinking and doing. But when it comes to men who do not use condoms, the respondents have a positive perception, calling them courageous, adventurous and risk takers. Men who use condoms are perceived as weak, because it is believed they cannot control their erection. As in previous studies, the refusal to use condoms is seen as a sign of masculinity (Khan, 2004).

In designing marketing strategies for condoms, specialists need to understand first what are the motivation behind the acceptance or the refusal of condoms. If men perceive that the usage of condoms suppresses their virility, advertisement need to tackle this issue. Also, educational campaigns about contracting and transmitting STDs should be developed, in order to increase awareness of the fact that there is no connection between personal hygiene and STDs and that trust alone is no substitute for medical check-ups.

Also, marketers need to be aware of the fact that Durex is perceived of a benchmark for quality. Increased awareness of the brand makes it the number one choice and leads to ignoring other brands. A strategy of free product sampling could be a solution for this in the beginning, only for convincing customers to try other condom brands. As it was discovered in the nethnographic study, there are no real differences in terms of touch and feel across brands. Highly trusting Durex is a consequence of brand awareness compared to other brands.

Regarding the marketing mix, what we can conclude after this study is that the price of condoms is a cue for quality. As in the case of high-risk products, a higher price is a confirmation of high quality. Because customers compare the price of other condoms with the price of Durex, this could be the rule for marketers – establish a price similar to Durex. In this case, a higher price can position the product as a trust worthy brand, even though there is the risk of encountering lower sales from price-sensitive customers. Regarding promotion, one suggestion is to dismiss any love-related cues from the packaging, as love is not associated with condoms.

This is an initial, exploratory qualitative study which attempts to shed light on condoms usage in men. Although the findings from this study are consistent with previous researches, the results are preliminary and should be confirmed by additional research. Also, the subject of the study is very intimate and sensitive. It is possible that, feeling uncomfortable, some respondents could have failed to disclose the whole truth. Other could have intentionally lied in order to give sociable desirable answers or they could

have subconsciously lied because of memory faults. Also, it is recommended that a similar study is replicated for women.

This qualitative study leads to 4 research hypothesis that can be studied through quantitative analysis:

H1: There is a positive correlation between the desire to avoid a pregnancy and the use of condoms

H2: There is a positive correlation between ignoring the existence of STDs and refusing condom usage

H3a: Trust in the partner negatively affects condom usage

H3b: Knowing the sexual history of the partner negatively affects condom usage

H4: There is a positive correlation between the high price of condoms and the perception regarding their quality

It is important to mention that this paper studied the condoms consumption behavior only in heterosexual couples, this behavior being different in the case of LGTBQ community.

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