



PACKAGING STRATEGIES AND CONSUMER PATRONAGE OF E-TAILERS IN RIVERS STATE

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between packaging strategies and consumer patronage of e-tailers in Rivers State, focusing on packaging colour and packaging material, with referral as the measure of consumer patronage. A descriptive survey research design was adopted, targeting consumers who have purchased products from e-tailers within the past 12 months. A total of 384 questionnaires were distributed, of which 250 were retrieved and found usable. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics and Spearman rank-order correlation. The findings revealed that respondents' perceptions of packaging colour and packaging material were generally neutral, though packaging material had a slightly stronger influence on referral behavior. Correlation analysis indicated a moderate positive and significant relationship between packaging colour and referral ($r = 0.574$, $p < 0.05$) and a stronger positive and significant relationship between packaging material and referral ($r = 0.625$, $p < 0.05$). The study concludes that while attractive packaging colour captures attention, durable and high-quality packaging materials play a more important role in building consumer trust and encouraging recommendations. Based on these findings, it is recommended that e-tailers in Rivers State invest in visually appealing and durable packaging to enhance consumer satisfaction, loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth marketing.

Keywords:

Packaging strategies, packaging colour, packaging material, consumer patronage, referral, e-tailers, Rivers State.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of electronic commerce has significantly transformed the retail environment worldwide by enabling consumers to purchase goods and services through online platforms known as e-tailers. Unlike traditional retailing, e-tailing relies heavily on virtual interactions between businesses and consumers, making marketing strategies that influence consumer perception particularly important. One of the key strategies used by firms to enhance consumer experience and brand perception is packaging. Packaging serves not only as a protective covering for products but also as an important marketing tool that communicates product quality, brand identity, and value to consumers (Silayoi & Speece, 2007). In the context of online retailing,

packaging becomes even more significant because it represents one of the few physical interactions customers have with the retailer during product delivery.

Packaging strategies refer to the deliberate use of packaging elements to influence consumers' attitudes and purchasing behavior toward a product or brand. These strategies involve various components such as packaging design, color, material, labeling, and structure. Among these elements, packaging colour plays a vital role in shaping consumer perception and emotional responses. Colour is one of the first visual elements consumers notice, and it often influences their evaluation of products and brands. According to Grossman and Wisenblit (1999), colours can create strong psychological associations that affect consumers' perceptions of quality, trust, and attractiveness. Similarly, Underwood et al. (2001) noted that visual packaging elements, including colour, can attract attention, enhance brand recognition, and influence consumers' purchasing decisions. As competition among e-tailers continues to increase, the strategic use of packaging colour can help firms differentiate their products and create memorable experiences for customers.

Another important dimension of packaging strategy is packaging material. Packaging material refers to the physical substance used in wrapping or containing products, such as plastic, paper, cardboard, glass, or biodegradable materials. The choice of packaging material plays a crucial role in ensuring product protection, maintaining product quality, and shaping consumers' perceptions of value and reliability. According to Becker et al. (2011), consumers often associate strong and high-quality packaging materials with superior product quality and safety. In addition, modern consumers are becoming increasingly concerned about environmental sustainability, leading many firms to adopt eco-friendly packaging materials. Research by Agariya et al. (2012) suggests that packaging material can significantly influence consumer attitudes toward a product and may affect their willingness to purchase or recommend the product to others.

Consumer patronage refers to the extent to which customers support a particular brand or business through repeated interactions and positive behavioral intentions. One of the important indicators of consumer patronage in the context of e-commerce is referral. Referral occurs when satisfied customers recommend a product, brand, or retailer to others based on their experiences. Word-of-mouth referrals are particularly important in online retail environments where consumers often rely on recommendations from friends, family, and social networks before making purchase decisions. According to Kotler and Keller (2016), satisfied customers who experience value and quality from a product or service are more likely to engage in positive word-of-mouth communication and refer others to the brand. Therefore, the way products are packaged and presented during delivery can influence consumers' satisfaction and their likelihood of recommending the retailer.

In Rivers State, the growth of internet usage and mobile technology has contributed to the increasing popularity of e-commerce and online retail platforms. As more consumers engage in online shopping, e-tailers face intense competition in attracting and retaining customers. Beyond product quality and pricing, packaging strategies have become an important factor influencing the overall consumer experience. Attractive packaging colours can capture consumers' attention and

strengthen brand identity, while durable and appealing packaging materials can enhance the perceived value and safety of delivered products. When consumers receive products that are well packaged and visually appealing, they are more likely to develop positive perceptions of the retailer and recommend the business to others. Consequently, examining the relationship between packaging strategies, particularly packaging colour and packaging material, and consumer patronage measured through referral is important for understanding how e-tailers in Rivers State can improve customer satisfaction and encourage positive word-of-mouth behavior.

Problem Statement

In a competitive retail environment, packaging is expected to function not only as a protective covering but also as a strategic marketing tool that enhances customer experience and strengthens brand perception. Effective packaging strategies, particularly the use of attractive packaging colour and durable packaging material, are supposed to create positive product impressions, communicate quality, and reinforce brand identity. For e-tailers, whose interaction with customers is largely virtual, packaging becomes one of the few physical touchpoints through which customers evaluate the retailer. Ideally, well-designed packaging should stimulate positive consumer reactions and encourage favourable behavioural outcomes such as recommendations and referrals to others. When packaging strategies are effectively implemented, consumers are more likely to perceive higher value in the product and share their positive experiences with friends, family, and social networks, thereby increasing consumer patronage (Silayoi & Speece, 2007; Underwood et al., 2001).

However, in reality, many e-tailers struggle to utilize packaging effectively as a marketing and relationship-building tool. In many cases, products delivered through online platforms are packaged with little attention to visual appeal or material quality. Poor packaging colour combinations, weak packaging materials, and inadequate presentation during delivery may negatively influence consumers' perception of the retailer and reduce their willingness to recommend the brand to others. This situation is particularly relevant in developing economies such as Nigeria, where the rapid growth of e-commerce has led to increased competition among e-tailers but has not always been accompanied by improvements in packaging practices. As a result, some consumers receive products in packaging that does not reflect professionalism or brand value, thereby weakening the potential for positive referral behaviour. Since referral is an important form of consumer patronage that helps businesses attract new customers through word-of-mouth, inadequate packaging strategies may limit the ability of e-tailers to build strong customer relationships and expand their market base (Agariya et al., 2012).

Although previous studies have examined the influence of packaging on consumer behaviour, most of the existing literature has focused on traditional retail environments, product purchase decisions, or general packaging design elements. For instance, Silayoi and Speece (2007) investigated packaging attributes and consumer purchase decisions, while Becker et al. (2011) examined the effect of packaging design on product evaluation. However, limited empirical attention has been given to how specific packaging strategy dimensions such as packaging colour and packaging material influence consumer patronage outcomes like referral within the context of e-tailers. Furthermore, few studies have explored this relationship within the Nigerian e-

commerce environment, particularly in Rivers State where online retail activities are increasingly expanding. This creates a contextual and empirical gap in the literature regarding how packaging strategies affect consumer referral behaviour among e-tailers.

In view of this gap, this study seeks to examine the relationship between packaging strategies and consumer patronage of e-tailers in Rivers State, with specific emphasis on packaging colour and packaging material as dimensions of packaging strategies and referral as a measure of consumer patronage. By investigating these relationships, the study aims to provide empirical evidence that will help e-tailers understand how strategic packaging can improve customer experiences and encourage positive referral behaviour.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between packaging strategies and consumer patronage of e-tailers in Rivers State. Specifically, objectives of the study are to:

- i. Examine the relationship between packaging colour and referral of e-tailers in Rivers State.
- ii. Determine the relationship between packaging material and referral of e-tailers in Rivers State.

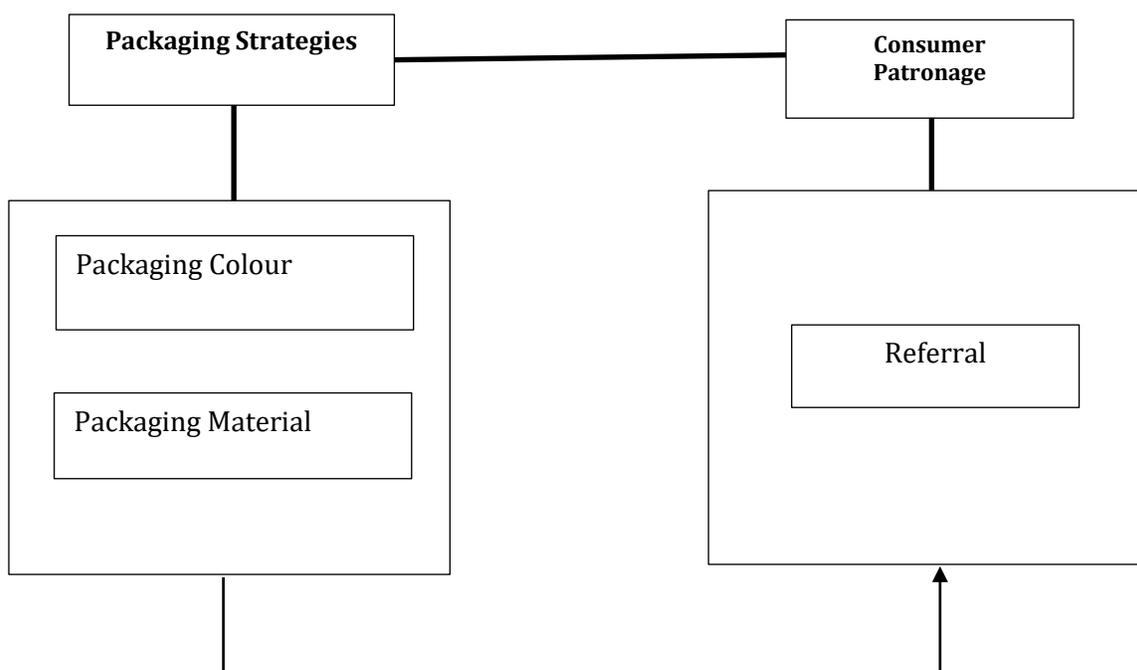
Research Questions

- i. What is the relationship between packaging colour and referral of e-tailers in Rivers State?
- ii. What is the relationship between packaging material and referral of e-tailers in Rivers State?

Research Hypotheses

- H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between packaging colour and referral of e-tailers in Rivers State.
- H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between packaging material and referral of e-tailers in Rivers State.

Conceptual Framework



Source: Silayoi and Speece, 2007; Underwood, Klein and Burke, 2001; Kotler and Keller, 2016; Agariya et al., 2012.

Significance of the Study

This study will be significant to several stakeholders including e-tailers, consumers, researchers, and policy makers. For e-tailers, the study will provide insights into how packaging strategies such as packaging colour and packaging material can influence consumer patronage, particularly in terms of referral behaviour. The findings will help online retailers understand how effective packaging can enhance customer satisfaction and encourage customers to recommend their products and services to others. This will enable e-tailers to develop better packaging practices that improve their brand image and competitiveness in the growing e-commerce market.

The study will also be beneficial to consumers as it will highlight the importance of packaging in shaping their perception of products purchased online. Understanding how packaging colour and packaging material influence their experiences can help consumers make better judgments about product quality and retailer reliability. In addition, the study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence on the relationship between packaging strategies and consumer patronage within the context of e-tailers. Researchers and academics will find the study useful as a reference material for further studies related to packaging strategies, consumer behaviour, and e-commerce marketing.

Furthermore, the study will be valuable to policy makers and business development agencies concerned with promoting the growth of e-commerce and retail activities in Nigeria. The findings may provide useful information for developing guidelines and strategies that encourage improved

packaging practices among online retailers in order to enhance customer satisfaction and business growth.

Scope of the Study

The content scope of the study focuses on packaging strategies and consumer patronage of e-tailers. Specifically, the study examines packaging colour and packaging material as the dimensions of packaging strategies, while referral is used as the measure of consumer patronage. Geographically, the study is limited to Rivers State, Nigeria. The study focuses on e-tailers operating within the state and the consumers who patronize their products and services. The unit of analysis for this study consists of consumers who purchase products from e-tailers in Rivers State. These consumers are considered appropriate respondents because they experience the packaging used by e-tailers and can evaluate how such packaging influences their willingness to refer the retailers to others.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation of this study is anchored on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) theory and the Signaling theory. These theories provide an understanding of how packaging strategies such as packaging colour and packaging material influence consumer behavioural outcomes such as referral.

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) theory was originally proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) to explain how environmental stimuli influence individuals' emotional and behavioural responses. The theory suggests that external environmental factors (stimuli) affect an individual's internal evaluation or perception (organism), which then leads to a behavioural response. In a marketing context, stimuli may include product features, packaging design, store environment, or promotional messages, while the organism represents the consumer's cognitive and emotional reactions. The response refers to the consumer's behavioural outcome such as purchase, satisfaction, loyalty, or recommendation. Within the context of this study, packaging colour and packaging material represent the stimuli that influence consumers' perceptions and emotions toward a product or retailer. These perceptions shape the consumer's internal evaluation, which may ultimately lead to behavioural responses such as referring the e-tailer to others. The S–O–R theory therefore explains how packaging elements can influence consumers' behavioural intentions through their psychological and emotional responses.

Another relevant theory for this study is the Signaling theory. Signaling theory was developed by Spence (1973) to explain how one party conveys information to another in situations where there is information asymmetry. In marketing and consumer behaviour research, signaling theory explains how product attributes communicate information about product quality and reliability to consumers. Since consumers may not always have complete information about a product before purchasing it, they rely on observable cues or signals such as packaging design, colour, and

material to make judgments about the product's value and quality. Packaging colour and packaging material therefore act as signals that communicate the quality, professionalism, and reliability of a product or brand. According to Kirmani and Rao (2000), consumers often interpret marketing cues such as packaging as indicators of product credibility and brand reputation. When consumers perceive these signals positively, they are more likely to develop trust in the brand and recommend it to others.

The relevance of these theories to this study lies in their explanation of how packaging strategies influence consumer behavioural outcomes. The Stimulus–Organism–Response theory explains how packaging colour and packaging material stimulate consumers' perceptions and emotional reactions, which may lead to behavioural responses such as referral. Similarly, Signaling theory explains how packaging elements serve as quality signals that shape consumers' evaluation of products and brands. Together, these theories provide a strong theoretical basis for understanding how packaging strategies can influence consumer patronage of e-tailers in Rivers State.

Conceptual Review

Packaging Strategies

Packaging strategies refer to the deliberate planning and use of packaging elements by organizations to influence consumer perception, enhance product value, and promote market competitiveness. Packaging serves both functional and marketing purposes. Functionally, it protects products during storage, handling, and transportation, while from a marketing perspective it communicates product information, brand identity, and quality to consumers. According to Silayoi and Speece (2007), packaging has become an important marketing tool that helps attract consumers' attention and influences their purchasing behaviour. Similarly, Underwood, Klein and Burke (2001) argue that packaging functions as a communication medium that conveys symbolic and visual messages about a product and brand, thereby shaping consumer attitudes and expectations. In modern marketing environments, especially in e-commerce, packaging plays a vital role in creating the customer's first physical interaction with the product, which can significantly influence overall consumer experience and post-purchase behaviour.

In addition, packaging strategies involve decisions relating to colour, design, labeling, size, and packaging material, all of which can influence how consumers perceive a product or brand. Kotler and Keller (2016) note that effective packaging strategies help organizations differentiate their products from competitors while reinforcing brand positioning in the minds of consumers. For e-tailers, packaging strategies are particularly important because customers cannot physically examine products before purchase. Therefore, the packaging that accompanies product delivery becomes an important factor that shapes customer satisfaction and behavioural responses such as recommendation and referral.

Dimensions of Packaging Strategies

Packaging Colour

Packaging colour refers to the specific colours used in the design and appearance of product packaging to attract attention and influence consumer perception. Colour is one of the most noticeable visual elements of packaging and plays a critical role in communicating brand identity and product characteristics. According to Grossman and Wisenblit (1999), colour has strong psychological and emotional effects on consumers and can influence their evaluation of products and brands. Different colours can evoke different meanings and associations, such as trust, excitement, luxury, or reliability, which can affect consumers' attitudes toward a product.

Furthermore, packaging colour contributes significantly to brand recognition and differentiation in competitive markets. Consumers often rely on visual cues such as colour to quickly identify products and evaluate their quality. Underwood et al. (2001) emphasize that attractive and well-coordinated packaging colours can capture consumers' attention and create favourable impressions about the product. In the context of online retailing, the use of appealing packaging colours can enhance the unboxing experience and influence how customers perceive the retailer after receiving the product. When packaging colour creates a positive emotional response, consumers may be more willing to recommend the product or retailer to others.

Packaging Material

Packaging material refers to the physical substances used in the production of packaging containers or coverings for products. These materials may include paper, cardboard, plastic, glass, metal, or other biodegradable materials designed to protect and present products. The choice of packaging material is important because it determines the durability, safety, and visual appeal of the product packaging. According to Agariya et al. (2012), packaging material not only ensures product protection but also contributes to consumers' perceptions of product quality and value. Consumers often associate strong and well-designed packaging materials with reliable and high-quality products.

In addition, packaging material plays an important role in shaping consumers' attitudes toward environmental sustainability. Modern consumers are becoming increasingly concerned about the environmental impact of packaging, leading many companies to adopt eco-friendly or recyclable materials. Becker et al. (2011) observed that packaging materials that appear strong and well designed can positively influence product evaluation and overall consumer perception. In the context of e-commerce, where products are transported over long distances before reaching customers, the use of durable packaging materials is particularly important in ensuring that products arrive in good condition. When customers receive products that are well protected and professionally packaged, they are more likely to develop positive impressions about the retailer and recommend the business to others.

Consumer Patronage

Consumer patronage refers to the extent to which consumers consistently support a particular product, brand, or business through their purchasing behaviour and post-purchase actions. It reflects customers' willingness to maintain a relationship with a firm and continue engaging with its products or services over time. According to Kotler and Keller (2016), consumer patronage is influenced by several factors including product quality, customer satisfaction, brand image, and service experience. Businesses that successfully meet or exceed customer expectations are more likely to gain loyal customers who repeatedly purchase their products and promote them to others.

In the context of e-commerce, consumer patronage extends beyond repeat purchases to include behaviours such as positive reviews, online recommendations, and referrals. Because online shopping involves limited physical interaction between customers and retailers, consumers often rely on their experiences and perceptions to decide whether to continue patronizing a business. Positive experiences with aspects such as product quality, delivery service, and packaging can encourage customers to maintain a favourable relationship with the retailer.

Measure of Consumer Patronage

Referral

Referral refers to the act of recommending a product, service, or business to other potential customers based on personal experience. It is a form of positive word-of-mouth communication that occurs when satisfied consumers share their experiences with friends, family, colleagues, or social networks. According to Keller (2008), referrals are powerful marketing tools because they are perceived as more credible and trustworthy than traditional advertising. Consumers often rely on recommendations from people they trust when making purchasing decisions, particularly in online environments where direct product evaluation may be limited.

Referral behaviour is usually influenced by the level of satisfaction and perceived value consumers derive from a product or service. When customers have positive experiences with a brand, they are more likely to encourage others to try the product or patronize the business. In the context of e-tailers, factors such as product quality, delivery reliability, and packaging presentation can influence whether customers recommend the retailer to others. Therefore, effective packaging strategies that enhance consumer satisfaction may increase the likelihood of positive referrals and strengthen overall consumer patronage.

Empirical Review

Oaya, Newman and Ezie (2017) examined the impact of packaging on consumer buying behavior in Nasarawa State, Nigeria. The study focused on packaging attributes such as labeling, product differentiation and packaging design as the dimensions, while consumer buying behavior served as the measure of consumer response. The study adopted a survey research design and collected

data from consumers using structured questionnaires. The data were analyzed using ordinary least squares regression analysis. The findings revealed that packaging attributes significantly influence consumer evaluation and buying behavior. The study concluded that attractive and well-designed packaging can enhance consumer interest in products and encourage consumers to patronize and recommend the products to others.

Su and Wang (2024) investigated the influence of packaging colour on consumer purchase intention in the food industry. The study focused on packaging colour and food type as the independent variables, while purchase intention served as the dependent variable. The researchers adopted an experimental research design involving consumer participants who evaluated different product packages with varying colour schemes. The results showed that packaging colour significantly affects consumer perception and purchase intention, as colours influence consumers' expectations and emotional reactions toward products. The study concluded that marketers can strategically use packaging colour to shape consumer perceptions and influence consumer behaviour.

Cui (2025) conducted a study on the effect of product colour and packaging on purchase intention with perceived usability serving as a mediating variable. The study used product colour and packaging design as the dimensions, while purchase intention was used as the behavioural outcome. A survey research design was adopted and data were collected from 287 respondents using structured questionnaires. The data were analyzed using regression and chi-square analysis. The findings indicated that both product colour and packaging significantly influence consumer purchase intention. The study further revealed that visually appealing packaging enhances perceived usability and positively influences consumers' willingness to buy and recommend products.

A study published in the *British Journal of Marketing Studies* (2021) examined the relationship between packaging attributes and consumer buying behaviour among small-scale entrepreneurs in Arusha City. The study considered packaging colour, packaging material and labeling as the dimensions of packaging attributes, while consumer buying behaviour served as the dependent variable. The study adopted a survey research design and collected data from consumers through questionnaires. The findings revealed that packaging colour and packaging material significantly influence consumers' buying decisions and attitudes toward products. The study concluded that packaging attributes are important marketing tools that can enhance product attractiveness and influence consumer behavioural responses.

Eze, Okoro, and Nwankwo (2018) conducted a study on the effect of packaging strategies on consumer buying behavior in Lagos State, Nigeria. The study focused on packaging colour and packaging material as the independent variables, while consumer patronage—measured by repeat purchase and referral—served as the dependent variable. A survey research design was adopted, and data were collected from 250 consumers using structured questionnaires. The data were analyzed using multiple regression analysis. The findings revealed that both packaging colour and packaging material significantly influenced consumer patronage. The study concluded that e-

retailers can enhance customer satisfaction and encourage referrals by implementing attractive and durable packaging strategies.

A study by Adeoye and Akinola (2019) examined the influence of product packaging on consumer preference in the fast-moving consumer goods sector in Nigeria. The study considered packaging design, colour, and material as dimensions of packaging strategies, while consumer patronage was measured using referral and repeat purchase. The research adopted a descriptive survey design and collected data from 300 consumers using questionnaires. Analysis was carried out using correlation and regression techniques. The study found that packaging colour had a stronger effect on consumer preference and referral than packaging material, suggesting that visual appeal is critical for influencing consumer behavior in competitive markets.

Khan, Waheed, and Ahmed (2020) investigated the role of packaging attributes in shaping consumer purchase intentions in the e-commerce industry in Pakistan. The study focused on packaging colour and packaging material as independent variables and purchase intention as the dependent variable. Using an experimental design, 200 participants evaluated products with different packaging combinations. The results indicated that products with attractive colours and high-quality packaging materials significantly increased consumers' willingness to purchase and recommend the product. The study concluded that packaging serves as a critical signal of product quality and can drive positive word-of-mouth behavior among consumers.

Nwafor, Obi, and Chukwuma (2021) studied the impact of packaging strategies on consumer loyalty in Nigerian online retail stores. The study considered packaging colour, packaging material, and labeling as dimensions, while consumer loyalty was measured by repeat purchases and referral behavior. A survey design was used, collecting data from 280 online shoppers. Using regression analysis, the study revealed that packaging material had a significant influence on both repeat purchase and referral, while packaging colour primarily affected referral. The conclusion emphasized that online retailers who invest in high-quality and visually appealing packaging can significantly increase customer referrals and retention.

Chukwu and Emeka (2022) examined the influence of packaging attributes on consumer buying behavior in the Nigerian food industry. The study focused on packaging colour and material, with consumer patronage measured through repeat purchase and referral. Data were collected using structured questionnaires from 320 respondents, and the analysis employed multiple regression techniques. Findings showed that packaging colour positively influenced consumer referral, while packaging material significantly affected both repeat purchase and recommendation behaviors. The study concluded that packaging strategies are essential tools for enhancing consumer patronage in both traditional and online retail settings.

Gap in the Literature

Although existing studies have extensively examined packaging strategies and consumer behaviour, several gaps remain, particularly in relation to e-tailers in Rivers State and the specific variables of packaging colour, packaging material, and referral behaviour. First, most of the

reviewed studies were conducted outside Rivers State and, in many cases, outside Nigeria (e.g., Su and Wang, 2024; Khan et al., 2020). Even within Nigeria, studies were carried out in different geographical contexts such as Nasarawa State and Lagos State. Therefore, there is a geographical gap, as findings from other locations may not accurately reflect consumer behaviour in Rivers State, where cultural, economic, and online shopping patterns may differ.

Second, many studies focused on general consumer buying behaviour or purchase intention as the dependent variable (e.g., Oaya et al., 2017; Cui, 2025; Su and Wang, 2024). However, fewer studies specifically examined consumer patronage in terms of referral behaviour, especially within the context of e-tailers. Referral is an important post-purchase behavioural outcome in online retail because it influences word-of-mouth marketing and customer acquisition. This creates a conceptual gap. Third, while several studies investigated packaging colour and packaging material, only a few examined them together as predictors of referral behaviour in an online retail environment (e.g., Eze et al., 2018; Nwafor et al., 2021). Most of the existing research concentrated on traditional retail sectors such as fast-moving consumer goods and food industries, with limited attention to e-tailers. Since packaging in e-commerce differs from in-store packaging, this represents a contextual gap.

Fourth, although some studies explored mediating variables such as perceived usability (e.g., Cui, 2025), limited research has directly examined the relationship between packaging colour, packaging material, and referral behaviour without introducing complex mediating structures. This indicates a need for more direct empirical evidence. Finally, while packaging is widely acknowledged as a marketing tool, limited studies have focused specifically on its influence on consumer referral behaviour in the digital marketplace, where recommendations and online reviews play a major role in business success.

Therefore, this study addresses the geographical, contextual, conceptual, and variable integration gaps by examining the relationship between packaging colour, packaging material, and referral of e-tailers in Rivers State.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population of the study comprised all consumers who purchase products from e-tailers operating in Rivers State. This includes individuals who have used online retail platforms to buy goods in the last 12 months. Given the rapid growth of e-commerce in Rivers State, the population is heterogeneous in terms of age, income, education, and frequency of online purchases. A sample size of 384 consumers was considered appropriate for this study. This number was determined using the Creche and Morgan formula which was considered sufficient for statistical analysis for unknown population while being manageable for data collection. The purposive sampling technique was employed to select respondents who have experience purchasing from e-tailers. This ensures that only individuals with relevant knowledge and experience contribute to the study. Data was collected using a structured questionnaire designed based on the objectives of the study. The questionnaire will be divided into sections corresponding to the variables:

- Section A: Demographic information (age, gender, education, frequency of online purchases)
- Section B: Packaging colour (measured using statements such as “I prefer products with attractive packaging colours”)
- Section C: Packaging material (measured using statements like “I am more likely to recommend products with durable and high-quality packaging material”)
- Section D: Consumer referral (measured using items such as “I often recommend e-tailers to friends or family after receiving well-packaged products”)

A five-point Likert scale will be used for all items, ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

Validity and Reliability of Instrument

The questionnaire was subjected to content validity by experts in marketing and consumer behavior to ensure that the items accurately measure the intended constructs. Reliability was tested using a pilot study with 50 respondents outside the main sample. The Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient will be computed to check the internal consistency of the instrument. A reliability value of 0.70 or higher will be considered acceptable (Nunnally, 1978). The researcher administered questionnaires to respondents through both online platforms and face-to-face distribution, depending on accessibility.

Method of Data Analysis

Data collected will be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation will summarize respondents’ demographic characteristics and responses. Inferential statistics, specifically spearman rank order correlation analysis, was used to test the hypotheses and examine the relationship between packaging strategies (packaging colour and packaging material) and consumer patronage (referral). Statistical significance will be determined at 5% ($p < 0.05$).

DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

Questionnaire Distribution and Retrieval

Description	Number of Questionnaires	Percentage (%)
Questionnaires distributed	384	100
Retrieved and usable	250	65.1
Not retrieved / not usable	134	34.9

A total of 384 questionnaires were distributed to respondents for the study, of which 250 were retrieved and found usable, representing 65.1% of the total. The remaining 134 questionnaires, accounting for 34.9%, were either not retrieved or not usable. This indicates a moderate response

rate, which is adequate for analysis and reflects a reasonable level of participation from the target respondents. The high proportion of usable questionnaires suggests that the data collected are reliable and sufficient to support the study's objectives and statistical analyses.

Frequency Distribution of Online Purchase Behaviour of Respondents

Frequency of online Purchases

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Rarely	60	24.0	24.0	24.0
Sometimes	68	27.2	27.2	51.2
Often	65	26.0	26.0	77.2
Very Often	57	22.8	22.8	100.0
Total	250	100.0	100.0	

The frequency of online purchases in the table above, showed that 24.0% of respondents rarely shopped online, 27.2% sometimes, 26.0% often, and 22.8% very often. This distribution reflects a balanced mix of occasional and frequent online shoppers, providing insights into how different levels of engagement with e-tailers may influence consumer behavior in relation to packaging colour and material. Overall, the demographic data indicate that the sample is sufficiently diverse to support meaningful analysis and interpretation of how packaging strategies affect consumer patronage of e-tailers in Rivers State.

Reliability Result

Variables	Cronbach Alpha	No. of Item
Packaging Colour	.809	5
Packaging Material	.911	5
Referral	.805	5

Source: Result Output from SPSS (2026).

The reliability results indicate that the measurement instrument used in this study is consistent and dependable for collecting data on packaging strategies and consumer patronage of e-tailers in Rivers State. The Cronbach's Alpha values for all variables exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, demonstrating acceptable internal consistency. Specifically, the Packaging Colour variable has a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.809 for its five items. This suggests that the items measuring respondents' perceptions of packaging colour are closely related and reliably capture the intended construct. The Packaging Material variable shows an even higher reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.911 for its five items. This indicates excellent consistency, suggesting that the items effectively measure respondents' perceptions of packaging material quality and impact. The Referral variable, which measures consumers' willingness to recommend e-tailers based on packaging, has a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.805 for its five items. This demonstrates that the items are reliable and consistently measure the construct of referral behavior.

Overall, the reliability analysis confirms that the questionnaire items are appropriate for statistical analysis, and the data collected are dependable for examining the relationship between packaging strategies and consumer patronage. The high reliability scores strengthen the validity of subsequent analyses and the trustworthiness of the study findings.

Bivariate Analysis

Spearman's Rank Order Correlation Analysis

Packaging Colour and Referral

Correlations

			Packaging Colour	Referral
Spearman's rho	Packaging Colour	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.574
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	250	250
	Referral	Correlation Coefficient	.574	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	250	250

Source: Result Output from SPSS (2026).

The Spearman's rho correlation analysis shows a positive and significant relationship between Packaging Colour and Referral. The correlation coefficient is 0.574, indicating a moderate positive association. This means that as the attractiveness or appeal of packaging colour increases, consumers are more likely to recommend e-tailers to friends, family, or others. The significance value ($p = 0.000$) is less than 0.05, which indicates that the correlation is statistically significant. In other words, the observed relationship is unlikely to have occurred by chance, and Packaging Colour has a meaningful impact on consumers' referral behavior in the context of e-tailers in Rivers State.

Overall, this result suggests that enhancing packaging colour can positively influence consumer patronage through referrals, highlighting the importance of visually appealing product packaging for online retailers.

Packaging Material and Referral

Correlations

			Packaging Material	Referral
Spearman's rho	Packaging Material	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.625
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	250	250
	Referral	Correlation Coefficient	.625	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	250	250

Source: Result Output from SPSS (2026).

The Spearman's rho correlation analysis indicates a positive and significant relationship between Packaging Material and Referral. The correlation coefficient is 0.625, which suggests a moderate to strong positive association. This implies that as the quality, durability, or eco-friendliness of packaging material increases, consumers are more likely to recommend e-tailers to others. The significance value ($p = 0.000$) is below the 0.05 threshold, indicating that the correlation is statistically significant. This means the relationship is unlikely to have occurred by chance and that Packaging Material has a meaningful effect on referral behavior among consumers of e-tailers in Rivers State.

Overall, the result suggests that using high-quality or appealing packaging materials can enhance consumer patronage by encouraging referrals, emphasizing the importance of packaging material in online retail marketing strategies.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study indicate that packaging strategies, specifically packaging colour and packaging material, have a moderate influence on consumer patronage of e-tailers in Rivers State, particularly in terms of referral behavior. The descriptive statistics revealed that respondents' perception of packaging colour was generally neutral, with mean scores ranging from 2.89 to 3.08. While a portion of respondents expressed agreement that attractive and bright packaging colours influence their purchase decisions and referral behavior, a substantial proportion remained neutral or disagreed. This suggests that while packaging colour can capture attention, it is not the sole factor driving online consumer referral. Similar studies have reported that visual appeal, such as colour, can attract consumer attention and influence purchase intentions, but its effect may be limited without complementary product or service quality factors (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Silayoi & Speece, 2007).

The study also found that respondents' perception of packaging material was neutral, with mean scores between 2.98 and 3.16. Respondents moderately agreed that durable and eco-friendly

packaging materials positively influence their trust in e-tailers, preference, and willingness to recommend products. This finding aligns with previous research showing that packaging materials, particularly those perceived as high quality or environmentally friendly, enhance consumer trust and satisfaction, which in turn promotes referral and repeat patronage (Wang et al., 2017; Ares et al., 2015). The reliability of packaging material as a construct was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.911$), indicating that the items consistently captured respondents' perceptions.

Correlation analysis further confirmed the relationship between packaging strategies and referral behavior. Packaging colour showed a moderate positive correlation with referral ($r = 0.574$, $p < 0.05$), while packaging material exhibited a slightly stronger positive correlation with referral ($r = 0.625$, $p < 0.05$). These results suggest that improvements in packaging colour and material can enhance consumer willingness to recommend e-tailers, supporting the notion that packaging serves as a critical marketing tool that communicates quality and builds consumer trust (Ampofo et al., 2020; Underwood et al., 2001). The stronger association for packaging material indicates that consumers place slightly more importance on the durability and quality of packaging than on its colour when making recommendations.

Overall, the findings highlight the role of packaging strategies in influencing consumer patronage of e-tailers through referral behavior. While packaging colour contributes to initial attraction and interest, the material quality is more strongly associated with trust and willingness to refer. This underscores the importance for e-tailers in Rivers State to invest in both visually appealing and durable packaging to enhance consumer satisfaction and encourage positive word-of-mouth marketing.

Conclusion

The study examined the influence of packaging strategies on consumer patronage of e-tailers in Rivers State, focusing on packaging colour and packaging material, with referral as the measure of patronage. The findings indicate that both packaging colour and packaging material have a moderate impact on consumers' willingness to recommend e-tailers to others. Packaging colour was found to capture attention and generate interest, but its effect on referral behavior was neutral overall. In contrast, packaging material, particularly durable and eco-friendly materials, had a slightly stronger influence, enhancing trust, preference, and the likelihood of referral. Correlation analysis confirmed positive and significant relationships between packaging strategies and referral behavior, with packaging material showing a stronger association. These results highlight that packaging is a critical element of e-commerce marketing, capable of influencing consumer perception and encouraging positive word-of-mouth, although other factors such as product quality and service may also play significant roles.

Recommendations

1. E-tailers should invest in attractive and visually appealing packaging colours to capture consumer attention and stimulate interest in products, especially for first-time buyers.
2. E-tailers should prioritize high-quality, durable, and eco-friendly packaging materials, as these are more strongly associated with consumer trust and willingness to recommend products.

Limitations of the Study

- i. The study adopted a descriptive survey design, which does not establish causality. Therefore, the relationships identified between packaging strategies and referral cannot be interpreted as cause-and-effect relationships.
- ii. The study relied on self-reported data collected through questionnaires. Respondents' answers may be influenced by recall bias, social desirability bias, or personal perception.
- iii. The sample was limited to consumers who purchased from e-tailers within the past 12 months in Rivers State. Therefore, the findings may not be generalized to other states or to consumers outside the specified timeframe.
- iv. The use of Spearman rank-order correlation only identified the strength and direction of relationships but did not control for possible intervening or moderating variables.

Suggestions for Further Studies

- i. Future studies should adopt experimental or longitudinal research designs to better establish causal relationships between packaging strategies and consumer patronage.
- ii. Future research could introduce mediating variables such as customer satisfaction, perceived quality, trust, or perceived value to better explain how packaging influences referral behaviour.
- iii. Comparative studies could be conducted across different states or regions in Nigeria to determine whether the findings are consistent in other geographical contexts.
- iv. Similar studies may also be carried out in other sectors beyond e-tailers, such as food delivery platforms, fashion e-commerce, or electronics retailing, to enhance generalizability.

Contribution to Knowledge

- i. The study contributes to existing literature by providing empirical evidence on the relationship between packaging strategies and referral behaviour specifically within the context of e-tailers in Rivers State, an area that has received limited attention in previous studies.
- ii. It expands knowledge on packaging research by examining packaging colour and packaging material simultaneously as predictors of consumer referral in the online retail environment.

- iii. The study highlights the comparative influence of packaging material over packaging colour in influencing referral behaviour, thereby offering practical insights for e-tailers on prioritizing durable packaging strategies.
- iv. It adds to consumer behaviour literature by focusing on referral as a key measure of consumer patronage in digital marketplaces, emphasizing the importance of word-of-mouth in e-commerce growth.
- v. The findings provide valuable guidance for online retailers and marketing practitioners on how packaging strategies can be used to enhance customer trust, satisfaction, and positive recommendations.

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