

Condom usage in men – direction for marketing strategy

Alexandra Hutanu

Universitatea Alexandru Ioan Cuza Iasi, Romania

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Abstract: This paper studies male condoms usage in Romanian men and aims to give marketing directions for the brand Masculan. Two qualitative methods were used. First, in-depth interviews were conducted on a sample of 8 males. Second, a netnographic study was conducted on reviews and comments regarding Masculan and other brands. The study shows that the main advantage sought when using condoms is protection against pregnancies. Preventing STDs is not a real concern. In fact, men exclude the possibility of contracting an STD only on the premise of knowing their partner and their personal hygiene. Masculan is perceived as a low quality brand, because of its packaging and price. Also, when compared to Durex, any other brand seems to be an unworthy competitor. According to these findings, Masculan should change all of the for Ps of the marketing mix. However, this study is relevant to other stakeholders from the condoms industry.

Keywords: condoms, condoms usage, sexual health

Track: Consumer behavior

1. Introduction

Condoms have two main functions: protection against STDs and against pregnancy. 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.

Compared with other contraceptive methods, condoms have the advantage of preventing STDs. If used correctly, condoms' success rate against pregnancies is 98%. However, the percentage, achieved through common use, is 85% (WHO, Family planning/Contraception, updated in July 2017, February 8, 2018). Regarding the prevention of STDs, condoms' efficiency is over 80% (WHO, Condoms for HIV prevention, 2009). 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). 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, it has a positive valence, the thought of sexual intercourse stimulating pleasurable stimuli; on the other side, it reminds of the double dangers brought by sexual intercourse, having a negative valence – possible pregnancy and STD. Braun calls the reluctance towards condoms an “anti-discourse” which has 3 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 (Braun, 2013).

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 Thailand, for example, kids learn about condoms in school (Viravaidya, 2010). In 2007, Japan had the highest condoms usage rate, the products being sold even in special vending machines (Castro-Vázquez, 2007). 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). 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). Another factor 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). In addition, when it comes to using condoms, men have leverage in decision-making and it is 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 study shows that 1 out of 5 women take the decision to use condoms by themselves, with no intervention from their partner (Kinsey Institute, 2018). Age is another relevant factor: higher age associates with lower condoms usage. The 40+ segment has to be addressed by the industry. This is because the number of divorces has grown. Consequently, people are prone to sexual experiences with new partners. 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).

In 2017, globally, there were 30.7 million people with HIV, from which 30% were aware of it (Avert). In 2013, in Romania, there were 16,200 people infected with HIV. To add to this, Romania is on the second place in EU for teen pregnancies (ChartsBin) and the abortion rate is two times higher than the European average (Johnston, 2017). In Romania, contraception is relatively new, having a legacy of 30 years, since the communist regime has fallen. To prove this point, a national statistics from 2010 has shown that 60% of women (age 15-18) have never used a contraceptive method (Romainan Ministry of Health, 2015). Another research from 2004 stated that only 12.1% of married women and 12% of single women used condoms. However, this percentage was higher for single men – 41.9% (Romanian Ministry of Health; World Bank; UNFPA; USAID; UNICEF).

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 not well known. The present research was developed to understand condom usage for Romanian men and to develop a marketing strategy for Masculan on the Romanian market.

2. Methodology

Two qualitative methods were used for this research: in-depth semi-structured interviews and netnography. The interviews focused on the male segment, consumer behavior for condoms being gender specific. The sample consisted of 8 male responders, Romanians, between ages of 23 and 29 years old, living in urban areas. During the selection, the recruited males were asked two filter questions: if they are sexually active and if they have ever used condoms. The responders were assured that their answers are confidential and they will only be used for academic research. The researcher asked for permission to audio record the interview. This way, content analysis was used to examine the transcripts. Taking into consideration the sensible 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”. The interviews took place between the end of April 2018 to beginning of May 2018 and the transcripts were coded manually. At the end, 19 themes with specific sub-themes were identified, along with 380 codes.

The netnographic study was conducted after the interviews. 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 8 themes and 145 codes.

3. Results

3.1 In-depth interviews’ results

The main perceived function of condoms is avoiding a pregnancy. With a frequency of 24, condoms are used to avoid an “accident”: “condoms are used to not get a girl pregnant and that’s all”. On the other side, protection against STDs is overlooked: the respondents mentioned it only after the interviewer asked. STDs are not seen as a real problem: “it is not even there to begin with”, “you just don’t think about it”. Even if the respondents think about it, they ignore it like white noise: “it is a question that stays in the background, we don’t even thought about it”. Having an STD is considered to be shameful, almost impossible, even though this is not verified through a medical check-up: “we should be more civilized [than that]”.

This impossibility of contracting an STD comes from the trust in the partner (frequency of 25). Knowing the partner, her sexual history and seeing that she takes care of her personal hygiene eliminates the idea of STDs: “I just trusted her”, “I am quite well informed about her and I don’t do it with whomever”, “I see she’s clean [...], my trust in her strengthens”.

Therefore, studies that show that relationships are a barrier in condoms' usage are confirmed (frequency 5). Moreover, STDs are associated with promiscuous women: "I don't interact with promiscuous women", "I don't spend time in promiscuous groups". Respondents think that condoms should be used in one night stands, with a woman that they don't know very well and don't trust (frequency of 7): "you can use the condom only when you have sex with people that you don't know". Other reasons for using condoms are the desire to prologue intercourse (frequency 6) and a feeling of security (frequency 2), this last reason being valid only in the beginning of sex life.

In some cases, the request to use a condom comes as an insult and it implies doubting your partner: "if I was using it, she didn't trust me, [...] <<Who am I, a hooker? What can you take from me?>>". This confirms the previous studies.

Some respondents showed distrust in condoms (frequency 6): "even if we use it, the accident [pregnancy] can still happen". In contrast, another reason against condoms usage is trust in oneself and in controlling the ejaculation (frequency 4). Reasons like: "I know myself very well", "I think I have enough experience in this, I can really control myself" are the perfect excuses. Pleasure diminishment is another barrier in condoms usage (frequency of 13). There are even complaints about losing the erection (frequency of 3). Some respondents said that condoms ruin the magic and set a bad mood (frequency of 3): "sometimes it upsets you and you are not in the mood anymore". In other situations, the excitement is so strong, it affects their judgment (frequency of 3: "you lose your head, you don't think normally", "you don't think clear anymore").

When it comes to the image of people that don't use condoms, the opinions differ. It is generally accepted that it is ok for men not to use it, but it is unacceptable for women to do so. Women that use condoms are seen as "smart", "intelligent" and "know what they want from their lives". However, there is a twist in the story – if a woman asks the man to use condoms or if she is the one to bring them, she is perceived as promiscuous: "I would wonder why does she have condoms and how often does she do it". This result confirms previous studies. On the other side, the situation is different for men. On one hand, some respondents think that "it is cooler not to use it". Condoms are seen as an object that emasculate, and men that use them are considered weak: "they worry and are introverts... too careful, they don't trust themselves". Men that don't use condoms are seen as risk takers, courageous (frequency of 5). On the other hand, they are considered irresponsible (frequency of 7).

Men perceive themselves as 100% responsible for condoms. With a frequency of 11, respondents insisted it is normal for men to be in charge of buying and paying for condoms:

“it would be nice for him to pay because a condom is symbol for masculinity”, “I am the man, I bring the condoms”. Also, asking the woman to contribute in any way feels like an insult: “it’s insulting. You don’t even think about asking her [to pay for it].”

Regarding the price, there were 10 mentions about the fact that condoms are not very expensive. On the other side, there were 5 mentions of condoms being expensive. However, when the responders 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: “what is more expensive is better”. The researches saying, that a higher price for condoms means better quality, are confirmed.

Interviewees consider Durex the best brand (frequency of 28). The respondents could not give clear, objective reasons for choosing Durex, the choice being a habit: “I’m used to it. I don’t even look for other options”, “I trust them, they have the best advertisements”. Also, Durex seems the best in comparison with other brands: “once I bought Love Plus and she asked me: <<Didn’t you have enough money for Durex?>>”, “With Love Plus, it’s like you own a Logan and with Durex – a BMW”. Masculan has 20 negative mentions. The most common complaint is the packaging. On one side, “it looks like medicine”. On the other side, the heart from the packaging should be replaced: “I wouldn’t even think about this being a condom, what’s that heart?”, “it looks mediocre. Why does it have a heart? What does it represent?”. However, the mention “German quality” from the package was appreciated: “it looks classical, low cost, but the simple fact that it says German quality makes me change my perception”. Regarding the quality of Masculan, there were also good comments: “Masculan is better”.

3.2 Netnography’s results

In the netnographic study, the researcher identified more negative comments (frequency 40) related to masculan than positive ones (frequency 23). Most of the negative comments were identified on Masculan’s Facebook page. Positive comments referred to: good smell (“but they smell nice”, “they don’t smell like latex”), comfort (“I was very impressed, they are indeed the best, the most comfortable ones”), resistance (“they are very resistant”) and elasticity (“they’re elastic”). There were comments that praised Masculan: “I think they are the best condoms”, “they are far superior”. However, most of the reviews complained about poor quality (frequency 12): “10 Masculan equals 1 Durex, they break easily, bad quality”, “you should wear 4 condoms like these [Masculan] one on top of the other to have one Durex”. Also, there were three mentions regarding small size: “they squeeze me so badly”.

Durex is considered a benchmark for condoms on the Romanian market, with a frequency of positive mentions of 54: “Durex, without any doubt. They are a bit more expensive, but I think they are safer. You can also feel the difference”, “Durex is the best condoms brand, don’t buy other rubbish”. However, Durex had also complaints about quality (frequency 2).

4. Conclusions and discussions

The main perceived function of condoms is preventing unwanted pregnancies, while STDs do not represent a real concern for the responders of this study. The reasons against condom usage invoked by responders are: the trust in the partner and the idea that the selection of partner is not done randomly. Contracting an STD is perceived as being a thing of the past, which cannot happen to people that carefully select their partners and take care of their hygiene. Besides, some of the motives against condoms were: confidence in controlling ejaculation, decrease in bodily sensation when using condoms and a lack of condoms during necessary times.

On one side, it is interesting to mention that some of the respondents associate the requirement to use a condom with an offense or with a hint that the woman could have an STD. On the other side, not using a condom is perceived as an action to be proud of, because it comes as a confirmation of self control and masculinity. This is why men that do not use condoms are seen as adventurous, courageous, assertive and risk takers.

Durex is seen as the benchmark of quality, even though the responders cannot give clear reasons why. The notoriety of the brand makes Durex not only a trust worthy brand, but the only viable option. This is why other brands are ignored without being tested first. This is why the main objective for Masculan is to increase the awareness of brand in the Romanian market. Also, taking into consideration that majority of the respondents said that there is no real difference between the condoms themselves in terms of touch and feel, the brand should start a campaign that encourages product testing.

Taking into consideration the results, it is recommended that every P of the marketing mix is changed for Masculan. Product quality controls should check the complaints about sudden breaks. Moreover, the packaging needs a dramatic change, because current packaging looks like package for pills and like a cheap product. Also, the heart from the packaging should be removed, because the respondents don’t connect sex with love. The price needs to be increased, because, in the case of high risk products, a high price is the validation of high quality. Moreover, most of the consumers compare a condom’s price with the price for Durex

(4 lei/condom), products cheaper than this being seen as low quality. 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 the price-sensitive customers. Now, the price for a Masculan condom is 2-3 lei/condom. Regarding placement, the focus should be on distribution in supermarkets. The kiosks should be eliminated from the distribution chain. Two things are important: firstly, that Masculan is visible at the shelf; secondly, that it is also present next to the cash register, where customers are used to finding condoms. At present, Durex sells its products also at the cash register and it has the highest shelf share. Regarding promotion, the main objective should be increasing awareness on the Romanian market. Communication messages should not refer to relationships or love, these two, along with trust in the partner, being strong reasons against using condoms. However, messages could be about an adventurous spirit.

However, this research should be considered a preliminary study and needs to be continued with qualitative methods. This qualitative study lead 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 giving up on condom usage

H_{3a}: Trust in the partner negatively affects condom usage

H_{3b}: 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

In addition, there are some limits of this study. Firstly, the small sample size could make the results insignificant and the results hard to be generalized on a bigger sample. Secondly, the subject of the study is very intimate and sensible. Some respondents could have felt uncomfortable saying the 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.

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

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