Received: 19 September 2023 | Revised: 1 July 2024 | Accepted: 3 July 2024

DOI: 10.1002/smj.3649

RESEARCH ARTICLE

SMS | Strategic Management Journal

WILEY

Disentangling audiences' reactions to creative content and creative packaging

Davide C. Orazi[1] | **Pier Vittorio Mannucci**[2]

[1]Department of Marketing, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

[2]Department of Management and Technology & ICRIOS, Bocconi University, Milan, Italy

Correspondence
Pier Vittorio Mannucci, Department of Management and Technology & ICRIOS, Bocconi University, Via Rontgen, 1—20136 Milan, Italy.
Email: piervittorio.mannucci@unibocconi.it

Abstract

Research Summary: This research addresses the tension of audiences often rejecting creative products despite creativity being foundational to organizational success. To better understand this issue, we take an abductive approach to disentangle the effects of *creative content* (how creative the core concept is) and *creative packaging* (how creatively the core concept is presented and visualized) while accounting for audiences' different expertise levels. Across two archival studies and a pre-registered experiment, we find that both experts and general audiences react positively to creative content. However, reactions to creative packaging display greater variability: on average, experts react positively whereas general audiences react negatively. We find no interaction between the two variables. We discuss the theoretical implications of these findings for the literature.

Managerial Summary: While creativity is foundational to organizational success, audiences often reject creative products. Across two archival studies and an experiment, we show how the effect of creativity on different audience's reception can be better understood when disentangling *creative content* (how creative the

core concept is) from *creative packaging* (how creatively the core concept is presented and visualized). Our results suggest that companies should (a) invest more resources in developing products high in creative content—products that break current norms and are different from others—and (b) acknowledge that heavy investments into novel and visually groundbreaking packaging lend diminishing returns, particularly for general audiences: for the same level of quality a traditional (vs. creative) packaging yields more advantages.

KEYWORDS

audiences, creative content, creative packaging, idea evaluation, novices/experts

1 | INTRODUCTION

Coming up with creative products is foundational to organizational success, as it represents a source of competitive advantage that translates in increased market share and sales (Ahuja & Morris Lampert, 2001; Amabile & Pratt, 2016). Creative products are in fact characterized by novelty (i.e., different from what already exists on the market) and usefulness (i.e., capable of satisfying customer needs and thus producing sales for the company—Amabile, 1983; Kaplan & Vakili, 2015). At the same time, organizational survival and success also depends on how audiences react and judge creative products (Fini et al., 2018; Rindova & Fombrun, 1999). This tension between product creativity and audience reception presents organizations with a conundrum: in many cases target audiences underappreciate or even reject highly creative products. Examples abound: from *Harry Potter* being rejected 12 times by editors before finding a publisher, to Stanley Kubrick's movies never being consecrated by an Academy Award; from John Harrison's 50 years struggle to get his idea of the maritime chronometer accepted by the field (Cattani et al., 2017) to Nikola Tesla's inventions being continuously ignored and rejected in favor of sub-optimal solutions throughout his lifetime.

In an attempt to understand audiences' heterogeneous reactions to product creativity, strategy scholars have focused on how different ways of *presenting* the creative product can change how audiences react to it (e.g., Falchetti et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2019; Mount et al., 2021). However, while this line of research has distinguished between the product and its presentation, it is still premised on the assumption that the creativity that matters for audiences' reaction is just the one of the "core concept" of the product. However, products can be creative not just in their content, but also in the way they are presented (Hargadon & Douglas, 2001; Rindova & Petkova, 2007). The creativity of this presentation, which we label "creative packaging," is likely to matter as much for audiences' reactions as the creativity of the content. Audiences react to how the product looks in addition to reacting to its content (Rafaeli & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2004). For example, customers see and judge books and album covers before actually consuming their content (Sgourev et al., 2023); the success of crowdfunding pitches is as much a function of the way it is presented as of the actual proposed product (Falchetti et al., 2022; Mollick & Nanda, 2016);

and live-action role-players care about the creativity of both the packaging (e.g., props, costumes) and content (e.g., plot and characters) of the events they participate in (Mannucci et al., 2021; Orazi & Van Laer, 2023).

In this paper we propose that, to better understand when and how audiences appreciate and consecrate creative products, we need to unpack products into *creative content* (i.e., how creative the core concept is) and *creative packaging* (i.e., how creatively the product is presented and visualized). Accounting for the dual nature of creative products opens up the possibility that audiences do not necessarily react negatively to both creative content and creative packaging. One possibility is that the negative effect of creativity on evaluations observed in extant literature is driven by creative content. From this perspective, audiences might instead appreciate a highly creative packaging (Cancellieri et al., 2022)—an assumption that many companies in the creative industries seem to espouse, as they invest most of their efforts (and budgets) on creating novel, groundbreaking visual effects (Giardina, 2016; Kelly, 2022). Another possibility is that the overall negative effect of creativity observed in the literature could be driven by the way the product is packaged, with audiences actually favoring new creative content. Audiences can react negatively to product esthetics that depart too much from what they already know, while they seem to be more accepting of creative content (Hargadon & Douglas, 2001). Finally, a third possibility suggested by extant theory is that the effect could be interactive, with audiences reacting more positively to creative content when its packaging is less creative and more standardized, and vice versa (Rindova & Petkova, 2007).

The picture gets further complicated when considering the factor that extant literature sees as the most relevant boundary condition to explain differences in reactions to creative products: the heterogeneous expertise of the audiences evaluating them. Research has shown that, compared to general audiences, experts are more likely (e.g., Wood & Williams, 2014), less likely (e.g., Baron & Ensley, 2006) or equally likely (Mollick & Nanda, 2016) to appreciate novel, creative products. Could these mixed findings be reconciled by simultaneously accounting for creative content and creative packaging, while considering audiences' heterogeneous expertise?

Adopting an abductive, question-driven approach (Behfar & Okhuysen, 2018; Graebner et al., 2023; Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021), this research aims at answering these questions. Our primary objective is to provide a robust analysis of whether content, packaging, or both are responsible for the "creativity liability" observed in extant research. Our secondary objective is to understand whether these effects are bound to the nature of the evaluating audience, specifically experts versus general audiences. We empirically assess how different audiences react to creative content and creative packaging through a multi-method approach that includes a pilot study of movies nominated to the Academy Awards for best movie between 1976 and 2020, a main study of all boardgames produced between 2015 and 2022, and a pre-registered experiment.

Our findings show converging evidence that both experts and general audiences react positively to creative content. The effect is robust across different operationalizations of independent variables and settings. However, reactions of experts and general audiences to creative packaging are more heterogeneous. Experts react positively to creative packaging, but consistently less so than to creative content. Conversely, general audiences seem to react negatively to creative packaging, even if the strength of this effect varies across industries.

Taken together, our findings offer two key contributions to research on audiences' reactions to products, and on product and idea evaluation in particular. First, we disentangle creative content and creative packaging and show that all audiences react positively to creative content. This robust finding suggests that the "creativity liability" observed in previous studies is likely

not due to the creativity of the content, but could be due to creative packaging—at least for general audiences. Second, we show how judges' reactions to creative packaging vary based on level of expertise, contributing to scholarship on the evaluation of products and ideas (e.g., Falchetti et al., 2022; Mueller et al., 2018) as well as to research on expert vs. crowd ratings (LaTour & Deighton, 2019; Mollick & Nanda, 2016). Managerially, our findings have direct implications for companies' investments decisions when designing new products.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | Conceptualizing creativity in terms of content and packaging

Products are defined as "creative" when they are judged to be novel and useful by appropriate observers (Amabile, 1983; Kaplan & Vakili, 2015). Novelty refers to the product being different from what the market already offers, while usefulness refers to the product's ability to appeal to customers and thus generate sales and profits (Ahuja & Morris Lampert, 2001; Harvey & Berry, 2023; Kaplan & Vakili, 2015). Scholars have long noted how important it is for organizational success and survival to come up with creative products (Ahuja & Morris Lampert, 2001; Cutolo & Ferriani, 2024; Soda et al., 2021). Yet, highly creative products are often rejected by audiences (e.g., Boudreau et al., 2016; Criscuolo et al., 2017; Mueller et al., 2018). This "creativity liability" seems due to the fact that creative products cause uncertainty, confusion, and even feelings of threat in the audience. Research in social psychology has shown that highly novel products are perceived as inherently more uncertain and difficult to judge (Mueller et al., 2012). Similarly, research in sociology has consistently shown that creative products, by departing from established categories in the market, end up being perceived as poor fits and less appealing (e.g., Hsu, 2006; Hsu et al., 2009; Leung & Sharkey, 2014; Negro & Leung, 2013). Moreover, in settings where audiences also act as gatekeepers, such as science, these audiences discount creativity because it threatens established social boundaries that they seek to preserve (Fini et al., 2023).

Different solutions have been suggested to foster the acceptance of creative products, such as using specific linguistic framing (Falchetti et al., 2022; Moreau et al., 2001; Mount et al., 2021; Seong & Godart, 2018), changing the evaluation process (Criscuolo et al., 2017; Harvey & Mueller, 2021), and using prototyping and idea enactment (Lu et al., 2019). At the core of these solutions is the attempt to reduce perceptions of uncertainty and increase familiarity with the novel idea.

When it comes to understanding when and why creative products, ideas, and solutions get rejected, what muddles the picture is that extant literature seems to equate the creativity of the product with the creativity of its content—the extent that the core concept at the heart of the creative product is novel and distinct from alternatives. However, products can be creative in both their content and appearance (Althuizen & Chen, 2022; Hargadon & Douglas, 2001; Rindova & Petkova, 2007). We argue that a full appreciation of how audiences react to the creativity of a product[1] requires considering the distinction between the creative content of a product and its creative packaging. In this article, we limit our focus to visuals as the core modality

[1]We note that we focus on creativity, not on overall quality. As previous literature has shown, these two dimensions are often orthogonal (e.g., Uzzi et al., 2013): a product can be of high quality and uncreative, or very creative but low in quality.

of creative packaging. While often ignored by creativity research, packaging such as album covers (Sgourev et al., 2023) and boardgame boxes (Schell, 2008) represents the first customer touchpoint, which engenders esthetic and emotional reactions even before the content is processed (Rafaeli & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2004). Disentangling creative content from creative packaging is thus a necessary step to understand which creative features, if any, lead to negative audience reactions.

While not directly and explicitly addressed in management research, differences in audiences' reactions to creative content or what we call creative packaging have surfaced implicitly, either in management research itself or in other research traditions, albeit with mixed results. Some studies document a positive effect of creative packaging on audiences' evaluations of a product. For example, marketing literature acknowledges that creative packaging elements such as logo placement can influence consumer liking (Sundar & Noseworthy, 2014). Similarly, advertising scholars investigating the effects of static vs. animated ads, which could correspond to low vs. high in creative packaging, found a positive effect of more creative formats on ad engagement, holding constant creative content (Bruce et al., 2017). Similarly, research on traditional products (i.e., products whose content is highly codified) shows that opera audiences react positively to creative staging—the "packaging" of the operatic product (Cancellieri et al., 2022). Other studies, however, have shown that audiences can react negatively to highly creative packaging because its dissimilarity to existing products engenders confusion (Hargadon & Douglas, 2001).

One way to solve this conundrum is to consider that creative packaging and creative content could have an interactive effect: audiences may react more positively to creative content when its packaging is more standardized, and vice versa (Rindova & Petkova, 2007). When evaluating creative products, customers make sense of them by using pre-existing schemas—for example, by creating analogies or similarity judgments with other products. If the core of the "creativity liability" bias lies in a divergence from existing schemas, then packaging that is more similar to what customers are accustomed to should help making sense of a creative solution (Moreau et al., 2001). Supporting this notion, Rindova and Petkova (2007) suggest that products whose value proposition is radically novel (i.e., with high creative content) may benefit from less creative visuals (i.e., a low creative packaging): Edison's light bulb design resembled a kerosene lamp to provide familiar schemas to prospective customers and increase their acceptance of an innovation perceived as potentially dangerous (Hargadon & Douglas, 2001). On the other hand, new products whose core value proposition is only incrementally novel (i.e., with low creative content) can increase perceived value when they diverge from familiar visual schemas (i.e., when they possess a high creative packaging): such was the case of the first, colorful Mac computers (Kwak & Yoffie, 1999).

In summary, most research on creativity equates the creative product to its content, overlooking creative packaging as another core dimension of a product's creativity. Even the few existing studies that consider content and packaging separately lend conflicting results.

2.2 | The role of audiences' level of expertise

Different audiences have heterogeneous tastes and thus can react differently to the same product (e.g., Cattani et al., 2008; Falchetti et al., 2022; Hsu, 2006; Paolella & Durand, 2016). In particular, audiences' expertise plays a key role when evaluating a creative product, since expertise level informs preferences in general, and for creativity in particular (Berg, 2016; Hahl

et al., 2017). However, both theoretical predictions and findings on the topic are mixed. On the one side, experts are characterized by more complex mental structures (Dane, 2010), which provide them with a richer set of reference points to evaluate a product. Moreover, many expert audiences—such as movie critics, literary scouts, and angel investors—have an incentive to identify and value creative products, as their reputation depends on their ability to do so (Cattani et al., 2014). Consistent with this reasoning, some scholars have argued and shown that expert peers tend to be better able to see promise in creative ideas (Berg, 2016) and are thus more receptive toward them (e.g., Peracchio & Tybout, 1996; Wood & Williams, 2014).

On the other side, with increased complexity of mental structures comes also increased entrenchment (Dane, 2010), which exacerbates, rather than reducing, the feelings of uncertainty and confusion induced by creative products (Boudreau et al., 2016). Accordingly, scholars have shown that experts are less likely to evaluate creative ideas positively (e.g., Baron & Ensley, 2006; Moreau et al., 2001). This finding is also consistent with qualitative evidence on the acceptance of creative products and innovations (Cattani et al., 2017; Hargadon & Douglas, 2001). For example, when John Harrison came up with the marine chronometer—a highly creative solution to solve the "longitude problem[2]"—the Board of Longitude, which included experts such as members of the astronomy community and Navy officers, initially rejected his proposal (Cattani et al., 2017). Findings are made even more inconsistent by a set of studies that have shown no effect of audiences' expertise on the appreciation of creative products. For example, while showing that novel scientific proposals are penalized in evaluations, Boudreau et al. (2016) find that the effect is not shaped by the evaluators' expertise in the proposal's field. Similarly, Mollick and Nanda (2016) found no difference in creativity reception between experts and non-experts: they were equally likely to evaluate positively novel products.

2.3 | Research questions

Ultimately, we are left with different views and conflicting theories of how audiences react to creative content and creative packaging. Even considering audiences' expertise—the most studied boundary condition for understanding how audiences react to creative products—does not provide clearer insights; instead, it increases the sparseness of perspectives and findings. Given how mixed prior theory and findings are (see Table 1 for an overview), articulating specific hypotheses under a traditional theory-testing paradigm seems unwarranted in this case. Instead, we follow an abductive, question-driven approach (Behfar & Okhuysen, 2018; Graebner et al., 2023; Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021), which represents a significant departure from extant creativity research that typically adopted a deductive approach grounded in formal hypothesis testing. While highly reproducible, this deductive approach has generated conflicting findings that we deem reconcilable through an abductive theorizing where we study the phenomenon exploratively, searching for plausible explanations from multiple angles. The following research questions guide this endeavor:

[2]The longitude problem refers to the fact that, until the invention of the marine chronometer, methods for computing longitude were largely inaccurate. This issue became particularly salient in 1707, when an inaccurate longitude calculation caused the wreckage of a British squadron off the Isles of Scilly with the loss of 2000 lives. As a reaction, the British Parliament announced three very large rewards to stimulate scientific and technological advances in this matter, and appointed a committee to evaluate the solutions submitted to solve the longitude problem. For more details, see Cattani et al. (2017).

TABLE 1 Summary of studies on audiences' reaction to product creativity.

Study	Study type	Constructs considered	Audience considered	Relationship with audiences' reception
Creative idea evaluation research				
Boudreau et al. (2016)	Field experiment	CC	Experts	Negative
Bruce et al. (2017)	Field study	CP, with CC constant	GA	Positive
Cancellieri et al. (2022)	Field study	CP, with CC constant	Experts GA	Positive Positive
Criscuolo et al. (2017)	Field study	CC	Experts	Inverted U
Hargadon and Douglas (2001)	Qualitative	CC CP	GA	CC positive when CP is low
Mollick and Nanda (2016)	Field Study	CC	Experts GA	Positive Positive
Moreau et al. (2001)	Experiments		Experts GA	Positive for experts, negative for GA
Mueller et al. (2012)	Experiments	CC	GA	Negative
Mueller et al. (2018)	Experiment (Study 1) and Field study (Study 2)	CC	GA (Study 1) Experts (Study 2)	Negative
Rindova and Petkova (2007)	Theory	CC CP	NA	Positive when one is high and the other is low
Social evaluation research				
Fini et al. (2023)	Field study	CC	Experts	Negative
Hsu (2006)	Field study	CC	Experts GA	Negative Negative
Hsu et al. (2009)	Field study	CC	Experts GA	Negative Negative
Negro and Leung (2013)	Field study	CC	Experts	Negative

Note: For simplicity of exposition, we did not include studies that explored other moderating factors (e.g., Falchetti et al., 2022).
Abbreviations: CC, creative content; CP, creative packaging; GA, general audiences.

RQ1. How do audiences react to creative packaging and creative content?

RQ2. Does audiences' expertise shape the degree to which they react to creative content and/or creative packaging?

3 | RESEARCH STRATEGY AND DESIGN

Given our research questions, we sought research contexts where creative products could be effectively disentangled in creative content and creative packaging. We also required contexts where general audiences are accompanied by a set of externally validated experts who judge creative products (see Mollick & Nanda, 2016). To this end, we focused on two creative industries—movies and boardgames—as our research contexts. Creative industries represent a setting where our focal phenomenon is relevant and directly observable, as success and competitive advantage almost entirely depend on creating and sustaining new products and trends (Harrison et al., 2023; Hsu, 2006). Moreover, expert recognition takes the form of what sociologists call "tournaments of value" aimed at singling out the best between contenders. Industry award ceremonies such as the *Academy Awards* for movies, the *Emmys* for music, and the *Spiel des Jahre* for boardgames establish that peers consider one product superior to others (e.g., Aadland et al., 2019).

We chose to first conduct a pilot study in the movie industry. Motion pictures are creative products with clearly identifiable creative content and creative packaging (Simonton, 2004, 2011). They are evaluated both by general audiences on aggregators such as IMDB and RottenTomatoes, and by peers operating in professional organizations such as the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences (AMPAS).

We then conducted our main study, with a larger sample size, in the boardgame industry. Boardgames can also be disentangled in their creative content and creative packaging. Content—the combination of game mechanics and themes—is a key value driver in the gaming industry (Schell, 2008). Moreover, boardgames are packaged in colorful and evocative boxes, which represent the first visual touchpoint with customers in both online stores and physical shelves. Since the esthetic presentation of games is a key value driver of games too (Schell, 2008), game developers can add value to their packaging by making it creative through the combination of different colors and themes. Similar to movies, boardgames are evaluated by consumers on the website Boardgamegeek.com, and consecrated yearly with the Spiel des Jahres (Game of the Year) award, the most prestigious award for board and card games (Board Game Geek, 2022).

Finally, we followed-up this main study with an experimental replication, with the purpose of triangulating across multiple methods and providing stronger evidence for causality and for the difference in effect sizes between content and packaging. We report our findings for each context in the next sections.

4 | PILOT: MOTION PICTURES

4.1 | Data

The dataset consists of 268 movies nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture from 1975 through 2019. The cut-off year for inclusion was 1975, the year when *Jaws* was released, as it changed the way Hollywood created their big budget movies (Rosenstone, 1988). We stopped with 2019 to avoid confounds induced by the COVID-19 pandemic.[3] We decided to

[3]The number of nominees was equal to five from 1975 to 2008, and moved to a maximum of 10 from 2009 onwards. We conducted two analyses to check whether this change in the number of nominations affected our estimates: (a) we included a binary to control for it (1 = after 2008, 0 = 2008 or earlier); and (b) we conducted our analyses just on movies released before the change took place. In both cases results were identical to those reported below, suggesting that the change did not affect our focal relationships.

focus on nominated movies, rather than all the movies produced in a given year, because it allowed us to control for a potential confound: movie quality. While quality naturally has the potential of influencing audiences' appreciation, it is very difficult to distinguish it from creativity in archival studies (Cattani & Ferriani, 2008; Mannucci & Yong, 2018). Focusing on the subset of movies nominated for an Academy Award allowed us to match and compare movies of arguably similar quality.

We obtained the full list of movies from the website of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), and cross-checked it with the Internet Movie Database (IMDB), a well-validated data source on the movie industry (e.g., Cattani & Ferriani, 2008; Mannucci, 2017). Each member of the Academy belongs to a branch representing a specific profession. Members may not belong to more than one branch. Only branch members vote to determine the nominations for their branch: directors vote for directors, editors vote for editors, etc. All members vote for the nominees of the Best Picture award.

4.2 | Variables

4.2.1 | Dependent variables

We operationalized *experts' appreciation* as a binary variable indicating whether a movie won the Academy Award for Best Picture (1 = won; 0 = not won). The Academy Award for Best Picture, more commonly known as the Oscar, is bestowed by AMPAS, a professional honorary organization with the stated goal of advancing the arts and sciences of motion pictures. The Academy Awards are the most prestigious award in the industry (Cattani & Ferriani, 2008; Mannucci & Yong, 2018). The Academy Award for Best Movie is bestowed on the movie as a whole, and as such it represents the best measure of peers' appreciation of the movie's qualities (Simonton, 2004). Academy members select the winner of the Best Movie award following preferential-ballot system.[4] The system is designed to avoid that larger branches can "push" a specific movie just because of their size. As such, the voting for the Best Movie is unaffected by branches' relative size and, thus, does not reflect any specific branch's taste function. This feature is important because it ensures the necessary degree of independence between the voting for the other Academy Awards (which we use to construct our independent variable) and the Best Movie award.

We operationalized *general audiences' appreciation* through the audience score on the popular website RottenTomatoes (www.rottentomatoes.com), a well-established online resource that allows audiences to provide their appreciation of each movie through comments and a numerical score ranging from 1 to 5. The audience score for each movie is the average of a high number of reviews (in the order of thousands), thus providing an accurate measure of overall audience appreciation.

[4]Voters are asked to rank the nominees from most to least favorite. If a movie gets more than 50% of number one votes, it automatically wins best picture. From there, the film that receives the least number one votes has its ballots redistributed to the number two votes of the members who had placed it at number one. This process continues, eliminating the lowest vote earners and redistributing as needed to third and fourth favorites, until one film breaks the 50% threshold.

4.2.2 | Independent variables

To operationalize creative content and packaging, we followed the procedure used by Simonton (2004, 2011). First, for each movie we collected the wins in different Academy Awards categories, which can be seen as an authoritative assessment of the creativity of each movie element (Cattani & Ferriani, 2008; Mannucci & Yong, 2018; Simonton, 2004). Second, we used Simonton's (2004) empirically validated taxonomy to group the different award categories into creative clusters, each representing a different facet of the creativity of a movie. The original clusters identified by Simonton and their use in our study are summarized in the Online Appendix. We used the sum of Academy Awards won by the movie in what Simonton calls "dramatic cluster" as the measure of *creative content*. The dramatic cluster includes the professional categories that make up the story and narrative of the movie: directing, acting, writing, and editing. Directing and editing can be bestowed with only one award each, similarly to writing, as the two awards for writing are mutually exclusive (either Best Original, not based on previously published materials, or Best Adapted Screenplay, adapted from another source); acting can instead bestow four (Best Supporting Actor, Best Supporting Actress, Best Lead Actor, Best Lead Actress). This variable took form of a count with a range from 0 to 7. We used the Academy Awards in what Simonton (2004, 2011) calls the "visual cluster" as a measure of *creative packaging*. The visual cluster includes all categories related to the looks of the movie: cinematography, production design, costume design, and makeup. The variable ranged from 0 to 4.

4.2.3 | Control variables

We controlled for different variables that could affect both our independent and dependent variables. First, we controlled for the other two clusters identified by Simonton (2004): the technical cluster and the sound cluster. Second, we controlled for the movie's budget, as it can affect both audiences' reception and creative content and packaging (Amabile et al., 1996; Simonton, 2005). We included in the model the logarithmic transformation of the movie budget obtained from IMDB, and cross-checked it with other sources (e.g., boxofficemojo.com). Fourth, audiences' appreciation (both experts and non-experts) can be affected by critics' ratings (Mannucci & Yong, 2018). Thus, we controlled for critical reception, measured as the average of the critics' ratings for the movie(s) the creator worked on in the focal year. Moreover, controlling for critics' ratings could be seen as another way of controlling for the quality of the movie. Data on critical reception was obtained from RottenTomatoes. Finally, we included dummies for the observation year and the main genre of the movie[5] in order to control for the existence of unobserved time-varying factors and genre-specific characteristics.

4.3 | Results

We used a logit model to predict the likelihood of winning the Best Picture award (peers' appreciation), and an OLS model to predict audience ratings revenues (audience's appreciation).

[5]To avoid an excessively large number of control variables, we created seven 6-years intervals binaries, and used the interval 1975–1980 as the reference category. Similarly, for genre we created four binaries: three for the most frequent genres—namely drama (52.99% of the sample), comedy-drama/dramedy (17.16%), and biopic (12.69%)—and the fourth (the reference category) for all other genres (e.g., adventure, fantasy—17.16%).

Correlations and descriptive statistics are reported in Table 2. We used STATA 17.0 to estimate all models.

Table 3 presents the results of the logistic models for peers' appreciation (Models 1–3), and of the OLS models for audiences' appreciation (Models 4–6). We run three regression models: (1) controls only, (2) predictors only, (3) control variables and predictors. Results for the predictors are virtually identical across the models with and without controls: we will thus comment on the model with control variables (Model 3 and Model 6, respectively). Model 3 shows the effect of our core predictors on experts' appreciation. Experts react positively both to creative content (OR = 8.795; SE = 2.765; $p = .000$) and creative packaging (OR = 2.862; SE = 0.950; $p = .002$), with the effect size (odds-ratio) of creative content being higher than the one of creative packaging (Wald $\chi 2 = 7.47$, $p = .006$). Specifically, the likelihood of winning the Best Picture award is about 9 times higher for each one-unit increase in creative content score. Conversely, the likelihood of winning the Best Picture award becomes only about 3 times higher for each increase in creative packaging score. Model 6 displays the effect of our core predictors on general audiences' appreciation. General audiences react positively to creative content ($\beta = .232$; SE = 0.013; $p = .003$). However, they react negatively to creative packaging, even if the effect size is weak ($\beta = -.073$; SE = 0.023; $p = .195$).

4.3.1 | Moderation analysis and robustness checks

We report full results for the following analyses in the Online Appendix. We first tested the possibility that creative content and creative packaging have an interactive effect on audiences' appreciation, as predicted by theoretical work on new product design (Rindova & Petkova, 2007). We found the interaction to be not precisely estimated for both experts' appreciation ($p = .593$) and general audiences' ($p = .239$).

We also conducted a series analyses to ensure that our results were robust to different specifications of creative content and creative packaging—that is, what constitutes "content" and "packaging," as this distinction can be complex for certain movies. All the analyses yielded results highly consistent with those reported above, suggesting that our effects are not dependent on the specific operationalization of our core predictors.

TABLE 2 Pilot study—Correlations and descriptive statistics.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Experts' appreciation	0.170	0.374							
2. Audiences' appreciation	4.067	0.262	0.116						
3. Creative content	1.078	1.111	0.617	0.235					
4. Creative packaging	0.399	0.789	0.241	−0.018	0.101				
5. Technical cluster	0.254	0.626	0.137	0.365	0.047	0.347			
6. Musical cluster	0.172	0.424	0.171	−0.005	0.051	0.354	0.244		
7. Budget	7.476	0.425	−0.006	0.010	−0.064	0.338	0.378	0.145	
8. Critics	7.931	0.714	0.174	0.318	0.197	0.058	0.171	0.151	−0.195

Note: $N = 268$.

TABLE 3 Pilot study—Regressions predicting experts' and general audiences' appreciation.

	Model 1 Experts	Model 2 Experts	Model 3 Experts	Model 4 General audiences	Model 5 General audiences	Model 6 General audiences
Controls						
Technical	1.498 (0.437)		1.657 (0.714)	−0.052 (0.036)		−0.043 (0.036)
Musical	2.120 (0.784)		1.685 (1.144)	−0.071 (0.044)		−0.052 (0.045)
Budget	0.782 (0.340)		0.388 (0.237)	0.099 (0.039)		0.126 (0.039)
Critics	2.176 (0.669)		1.208 (0.433)	0.365 (0.026)		0.329 (0.026)
Predictors						
Creative content		6.468 (1.617)	8.795 (2.765)		0.240 (0.013)	0.168 (0.013)
Creative packaging		2.350 (0.577)	2.862 (0.950)		−0.042 (0.022)	−0.087 (0.022)
Genre dummies	*yes*	*no*	*yes*	*yes*	*no*	*yes*
Year dummies	*yes*	*no*	*yes*	*yes*	*no*	*yes*
Wald χ^2 (df)	25.10 (14)	63.70 (2)	70.53 (16)			
R^2	0.090	0.467	0.511	0.140	0.084	0.168

Note: $N = 268$. Table reports Odds Ratios for logistic regression, and standardized coefficients for OLS regression. Robust standard errors in parenthesis. Nagelkerke pseudo R^2 is reported for Models 1–3.

4.4 | Discussion of pilot study

The results of the pilot study suggest that experts react positively to both creative content and creative packaging (although the weight of creative content looms larger). General audiences, on the other hand, react positively to creative content, while creative packaging has a negative, albeit weak, effect on their appreciation.

While this first study provides initial insights on how different audiences react to the two creative facets of a product, it suffers from a few limitations. First, the number of observations is relatively limited. Second, despite the clear separation granted by the Academy Awards voting system, the voters of each award used to construct the independent variables still represent a subset of the expert audience voting for the Best Picture award. Third, while awards bestowed on specific creative activities have been thoroughly validated as measures of creativity, it is still possible that they capture other dimensions as well. Finally, the sample is representative only of the upper-end of the distribution—very high-quality products that have been nominated for Best Picture—and is thus potentially affected by selection issues (Certo et al., 2016). While we deliberately focused on nominated movies to ensure they were of comparable quality, results might play out differently when considering the whole population of products.

To address these issues, we required a setting where the independent variables are completely independent from audiences' evaluations and a larger dataset that includes the entire population of products, rather than just those nominated for an award. We found the boardgame industry to satisfy these requirements.

5 | MAIN STUDY: BOARDGAMES

5.1 | Data

We sourced the initial data from Kaggle.com, an open-source dataset repository where we located a boardgame dataset publicly available under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license. This dataset consists of 8031 unique boardgames scraped from BoardGameGeek.com (herein on, BGG). BGG is the largest online aggregator of boardgame data, and the most reliable source of information on board games worldwide. For each game, BGG provides rich information on game characteristics—something we needed to construct our core variables. Our sample includes games published from 2015 to 2021. We complemented this dataset with additional information on awards won and the URLs of boardgame box cover images (discussed below).

5.2 | Variables

5.2.1 | Dependent variables

We are interested in understanding how creative content and creative packaging influence both experts' and general audiences' appreciation. We operationalized experts' appreciation using nominations to the Spiel des Jahre (translated: Game of the Year) game award. This choice is consistent with extant research that has used nominations, rather than mere wins, as a measure of quality and creative consecration. Nominations are more robust than wins because they more clearly signal audiences' real preferences and are less susceptible to external factors such as publicity and politics (Cattani & Ferriani, 2008; Mannucci & Yong, 2018). Spiel des Jahre is the most prestigious recognition in the boardgame industry. First instituted in 1978, the award is bestowed by a jury of boardgame critics from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, who reviews all games released in Germany in the preceding 12 months. It is recognized worldwide as "the" signal for experts' appreciation in the industry: being nominated to the Spiel des Jahre is thought to increase sales by 6 to 10 times (Woods, 2012). Each game is eligible to be voted only in 1 year. Our experts' appreciation variable is thus a binary taking the value of 1 when the game was nominated for the Spiel des Jahre game award, and 0 otherwise. To operationalize general audiences' appreciation, we use the Bayesian average[6] of BGG user ratings. BGG users can rate each game on a scale from 1 to 10. Their ratings are a robust measure of audiences' appreciation, as BGG provides clear guidelines describing the meaning of each scale point (BoardGameGeek, 2022), hence minimizing the risk that users interpret the same scale point differently. On average, a game receives 827 ratings.

[6]More details on the Bayesian average calculation are reported in the Online Appendix.

5.2.2 | Independent variables

We operationalized *creative content* as the originality in the combination of mechanics and genres that characterize each game. Originality is a classic measure of creativity, capturing how often a given outcome appears within a consideration set (Cutolo & Ferriani, 2024; Runco & Jaeger, 2012; Uzzi et al., 2013). Game mechanics include the rules defining the boundaries of spaces, objects, actions, and their consequences, and are contextualized to specific genres to provide context to players (Schell, 2008). Games, much like movies and books, can be classified into one or more genres based on the presence of similar and identifiable patterns in terms of setting, content, mood, style, and structure. Game mechanics and genres thus represent core content dimensions of boardgames. BGG lists 155 distinct gameplay mechanics (e.g., "dice rolling" or "action points") and 73 genres (e.g., "fantasy" and "science fiction"). We assigned each game a value of either 1 or 0 for each mechanic and genre, depending on whether the focal game lists the respective mechanic. We then concatenated these 228 dummy variables to create a binary barcode (see Ploog & Rietveld in press, for a similar approach). Next, we counted the number of times each barcode occurred in our dataset (Wilson et al., 1953): the more frequent a barcode, the less original it is. Three hundred and seventy four barcodes (4.8% of our sample) occurred only one time, whereas the most frequent barcode occurred 999 times (representing 12.8% of our sample). For the sake of interpretation, we transformed this absolute frequency measure into a relative measure of originality, computed as follows:

$$1 - (\text{frequency focal game} / \max \text{frequency}).$$

The variable could range from 0 (extremely low originality) to 1 (extremely high originality).

We followed the same approach for *creative packaging*. First, we used Google Vision API to extract colors and content labels displayed in the box cover. Vision API uses pre-trained machine learning models to classify images into predefined categories by assigning them to a specified label, and extract dominant colors in RGB format (Google Cloud Vision, 2022). To keep the length of the barcodes manageable and comparable to that of creative content, our final dataset included 100 columns for the most frequent labels mined by the API, and 104 columns for unique colors,[7] each taking a value of either 0 (absent) or 1 (present). We then followed the same procedure described for content (concatenation into binary barcode, conversion to relative measure of originality) to compute the variable for creative packaging.[8] Four hundred and seventy nine barcodes (6.2% of our sample) occurred only once, whereas the most frequent barcode occurred 521 times (representing 6.7% of our sample).

5.2.3 | Control variables

Additional game features and market-level variables may simultaneously affect critical acclaim and audience ratings. At the game level, we control for other game features including the minimum and maximum number of players and the minimum and average playing time. We also

[7]The "RGB to Color" classifier is available in Online Appendix.

[8]We also tried a different specification of our two predictors, where we counted the number of times each barcode occurred within the game's focal year, rather than in the whole dataset. Results are identical to those illustrated below and are reported in full in Online Appendix.

included dummies for the observation year in order to control for the existence of unobserved time-varying factors. In the model predicting general audiences' ratings we also included whether the game was nominated to the Spiel des Jahres award, as nominations could shape audiences' evaluations (Kovács & Sharkey, 2014). Results were identical when not including this variable.

5.3 | Results

We dropped 285 games due to missing information on one of our core variables. We thus run our analyses on a dataset that included 7746 unique boardgames. We used a logit model to predict the likelihood of being nominated to the Spiel des Jahres award (peers' appreciation), and an OLS model to predict BGG users' ratings (general audience's appreciation). We used STATA 17.0 to estimate all models.

Correlations and descriptive statistics are reported in Table 4. Table 5 presents the results of the logistic models for peers' appreciation (Models 1–3), and of the OLS models for audiences' appreciation (Models 4–6). We entered variables into the analysis in three steps: (1) control variables only, (2) predictors only, and (3) all variables. As results across the last two steps are virtually identical, we will comment on the third step.

Model 3 shows the effect of our core predictors on experts' appreciation. The overall fit of the model improves as compared to Model 1, indicating that the full model better fits the data ($P_r > \chi^2 = .013$). Experts react positively to creative content (OR = 3.520; SE = 1.490; $p = .010$), with the odds of being nominated to the Spiel des Jahres becoming about 3.5 times higher for each one-unit increase in the creative content score. Experts react positively also to creative packaging (OR = 1.634; SE = 0.922; $p = .384$), but less strongly than to creative content (Wald $\chi^2 = 8.64$, $p = .013$). Results were identical when we added the two predictors separately.

Model 6 shows the effect of our core predictors on general audiences' appreciation. The overall fit of the model improves as compared to Model 4, indicating that the full model better fits the data ($P_r > F = .000$). General audiences react positively to creative content ($\beta = .050$; SE = 0.013; $p = .000$), but negatively to creative packaging ($\beta = -.027$; SE = 0.018; $p = .024$). Results were identical also when we added the two predictors separately.

5.3.1 | Moderation analysis

Similar to the pilot study, we conducted moderation analyses to explore the possibility that creative content and packaging interact in shaping audiences' perceptions. We found the interaction to be not precisely estimated for both experts ($p = .104$) and general audiences ($p = .351$). Results for this analysis are reported in full in the Online Appendix.

5.3.2 | Robustness checks

We describe all these procedures in detail and report the full results in the Online Appendix. First, since boardgames are not randomly assigned to their creative content and packaging, there is the possibility that games with high creative content and creative packaging might differ systematically from those with low creative content and low creative packaging. While it is

TABLE 4 Main study—Correlations and descriptive statistics.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Experts' appreciation	0.008	0.088								
2. Audiences' appreciation	5.750	0.407	0.143							
3. Creative content	0.731	0.268	0.029	0.031						
4. Creative packaging	0.801	0.789	0.014	−0.031	0.048					
5. Sequel	0.121	0.326	−0.020	0.113	−0.072	−0.048				
6. Min players	1.891	0.717	0.018	−0.149	0.093	0.012	−0.050			
7. Max players	5.849	14.953	0.010	−0.029	0.007	0.019	0.013	0.061		
8. Min playing time	39.489	85.461	−0.016	0.062	0.024	−0.014	0.034	−0.055	−0.024	
9. Max playing time	79.541	265.985	−0.016	0.024	0.017	0.009	0.010	−0.074	−0.015	0.530

Note: $N = 7746$.

TABLE 5 Main study—Regressions predicting experts' and general audiences' appreciation.

Variables	Model 1 Experts	Model 2 Experts	Model 3 Experts	Model 4 General audiences	Model 5 General audiences	Model 6 General audiences
Controls						
Sequel	0.463 (0.280)		0.513 (0.309)	0.106 (0.017)		0.108 (0.017)
Minimum players	1.172 (0.178)		1.113 (0.173)	−0.149 (0.006)		−0.154 (0.007)
Maximum players	1.003 (0.004)		1.003 (0.002)	−0.022 (0.000)		−0.022 (0.000)
Minimum playing time	1.003 (0.004)		1.002 (0.004)	0.062 (0.000)		0.060 (0.000)
Maximum playing time	0.978 (.004)		0.978 (.004)	−0.019 (0.000)		−0.019 (0.000)
Spiel nomination				0.150 (0.074)		0.149 (0.074)
Predictors						
Creative content		3.390 (1.667)	3.520 (1.490)		0.033 (0.013)	0.050 (0.013)
Creative packaging		1.902 (1.039)	1.634 (0.922)		−0.032 (0.018)	−0.027 (0.018)
Year dummies	*yes*	*no*	*yes*	*yes*	*no*	*yes*
Wald χ^2 (df)	48.38 (11)	9.13 (2)	63.55 (13)			
R^2	0.05	0.01	0.06	0.06	0.00	0.06

Note: $N = 7746$. Table reports odds ratios for logistic regression (Models 1–3) and standardized coefficients for OLS regression (Models 4–6). Odds ratios lower (higher) than 1 indicate a negative (positive) effect. Robust standard errors in parenthesis. Nagelkerke pseudo R^2 is reported for Models 1–3.

not possible to completely rule out this selection issue, one partial remedy is to adopt a coarsened exact matching (CEM) methodology (Blackwell et al., 2009). This procedure results in a more balanced sample and makes the comparison between the two groups more meaningful and robust. Results from these CEM analyses were highly consistent with those reported above.

Second, given the low frequency of being nominated to an award, we also conducted a rare event logit analysis as a robustness check. Results were identical to those reported above. Finally, while on paper all boardgames have an equal likelihood of being nominated for an award, some critics have argued that two typologies of games—wargames and role-playing games—seem to be less likely to be nominated. We thus run our main models excluding them, obtaining identical results.

5.4 | Discussion of main study

The main study shows that creative content has a strong, positive effect on both experts' and general audience's recognition. Reactions to creative packaging are less positive and

heterogeneous across audiences. Experts reacted positively to creative packaging, but less so than to creative content, whereas general audiences reacted negatively to it. These results converge with the insights gathered through our pilot: the effect of creative content on both experts' and general audiences' reactions is positive and larger than that of creative packaging; and experts react positively to creative packaging, while general audiences react negatively to it. While CEM analyses alleviate some concerns related to selection issues, and the fact that the design of a product naturally precedes audiences' evaluations mitigates concerns of reverse causality, it is still possible for other unobserved factors to bias our estimates. We thus run an experimental replication to dissipate these remaining concerns.

6 | EXPERIMENTAL REPLICATION WITH GENERAL AUDIENCES

We conducted an experimental study aimed at providing stronger evidence of causality and of better comparing the strength of effect sizes of creative content and creative packaging. Due to the difficulty in recruiting a large-enough panel of experts comparable to those of the Main Study, the experimental study only focuses on general audiences.

6.1 | Methods

6.1.1 | Participants and design

The study follows a 2 (creative content: low vs. high) × 2 (creative packaging: low vs. high) full-factorial design. We pre-registered this study (https://aspredicted.org/284_TWV)[9] and recruited 441 Prolific workers (M_{age} = 35.66, SD = 12.32, 49.9% female). They completed a 4-min study in exchange for $0.65.

6.1.2 | Materials and procedure

Participants were introduced to the experiment under the premise of evaluating a game description. Each game description featured a brief synopsis followed by the creative content and creative packaging manipulations. Participants in all conditions were presented with (a) textual descriptions of the creative content and creative packaging; and (b) star ratings for creative content and creative packaging (two stars for low creativity; five stars for high creativity). We complemented verbal descriptions with star ratings to avoid semantic ambiguity, since star ratings are widely used in online reviews to convey dense information more efficiently. We randomized the order of appearance for creative content and packaging avoid order effects. We report the complete manipulations in the Online Appendix. Participants then evaluated the game before completing manipulation checks. Last, participants self-rated their expertise in boardgames, provided socio-demographic information, and completed an attention check.

[9]While we pre-registered exclusion criteria based on an attention check, the analyses reported are conducted on the full sample to provide a more conservative test. Including or excluding participants failing the attention check (N = 21) did not significantly alter results.

6.1.3 | Dependent variables and covariates

Following exposure to the experimental stimulus, participants reported their overall evaluation of the game using a star rating from 1 to 5. This rating was comparable to audience ratings for movies (Pilot) and games (Main study) and represented our key dependent variable. We also measured participants' intentions to play the game (1 = Very unlikely; 7 = Very likely) as an additional behavioral variable. As per preregistration, we also included self-reported expertise in the game domain (1 = Far below the average; 7 = Far above the average) as a covariate.

6.2 | Results

6.2.1 | Manipulation checks

The high creative packaging condition was perceived as more creative than the low creative packaging condition **(**$M_{low} = 3.39$, SD = 1.55, $N = 219$ vs. $M_{high} = 5.71$, SD = 1.16, $N = 222$; $t(439) = 17.73$, $p = .000$, $d = 1.69$**)**, with no differences on perceptions of creative content ($p = .340$). The high creative content condition was perceived as more creative than the low creative content condition ($M_{low} = 3.33$, SD = 1.47, $N = 225$ vs. $M_{high} = 5.77$, SD = 1.06, $N = 216$; $t(439) = 19.94$, $p = .001$, $d = 1.90$), with no differences on perceptions of creative packaging ($p = .208$).

6.2.2 | Star ratings

A 2 × 2 ANOVA revealed that creative content ($F(1, 440) = 209.06$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .324$) and creative packaging ($F(1, 440) = 54.23$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .110$) both separately affected star ratings. The effect size of content was stronger than the one of packaging, with content explaining 32.4% of the variance in star rating, and packaging explaining 11% ($F(1, 437) = 25.33$, $p = .000$). Participants in the high creative content condition rated the game higher than those in the low creative content condition ($M_{low} = 2.96$, SD = .71 vs. $M_{high} = 3.92$, SD = .77; $t(439) = 13.62$, $p = .000$; $d = 1.30$). As expected, the same occurred for participants exposed to high (vs. low) creative packaging, but with a weaker effect size ($M_{low} = 3.19$, SD = .87 vs. $M_{high} = 3.67$, $SD = .83$; $t(439) = 5.98$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.56$). We found no evidence for a two-way interaction ($p = .537$). Figure C1 in the Online Appendix summarizes our results.

Results were robust when including age, gender, and self-reported expertise. We also run our analyses using intentions to play as a dependent variable. Results replicated those reported above, and are available in the Online Appendix.

6.3 | Discussion

This pre-registered experimental replication provides causal evidence for the stronger effect of creative content (vs. creative packaging) on general audiences' appreciation. While they both have a positive effect on audiences' evaluations, the effect of creative content was more than two times higher than the one of creative packaging.

7 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Coming up with creative products is central to organizational competitiveness, success, and survival (Falchetti et al., 2022; Kaplan & Vakili, 2015; Mount et al., 2021). At the same time, audiences often react negatively to highly creative products due to feelings of uncertainty and even threat (e.g., Hsu, 2006; Leung & Sharkey, 2014; Mueller et al., 2012, 2018). Solving the conundrum of how and when audiences react positively or negatively to creative products, and finding a way to balance innovation and audience appeal, is thus very central to strategy research (Ahuja & Morris Lampert, 2001; Fini et al., 2018).

In this paper, we have proposed that the solution might lie in a more precise understanding of *what* audiences react to. Identifying the specific product features whose creativity triggers positive or negative reactions in audiences would provide organizations with a better understanding of creativity-audience dynamics—thus informing where to focus resources and efforts when developing new products. To this end, we disentangled the creative content and creative packaging of a product, and presented externally and internally valid empirical evidence to tease out their effects on expert and general audiences' reception.

7.1 | Theoretical contributions

7.1.1 | Different audiences react positively to creative content

We first contribute to creativity and social valuation research by showing that all audiences react positively to creative content. This finding is robust across two creative industries and a lab experiment, and across different operationalizations of creative content. Our study suggests that organizations should invest resources and effort in creating products whose core content is creative. In so doing, our study challenges research—in both the creativity evaluation and social valuation/strategic differentiation domains— that has shown that audiences react negatively to creative, dissimilar products.

Explaining this difference in findings is important not only to better qualify our contribution, but also to identify boundary conditions that could explain these differences (Makadok et al., 2018). At least for general audiences, one potential explanation could be that their negative reactions to creative products are caused by creative packaging, an important aspect of creativity that previous work does not account for. This explanation would be consistent with the notion of "robust design" (Hargadon & Douglas, 2001)—even if that stream of research has argued for interactive effects that we do not observe. Alternative or complementary explanations lie in the contextual differences between our contexts of investigation and those employed by previous scholarship. We identify three factors that could explain why the "creativity liability" was observed in previous research and not in our study: (1) limited information about the product; (2) the early-stage nature of the product; and (3) judges' adoption of an economic mindset.

First, most prior research was conducted using laboratory samples, who had limited time to thoroughly assess the products. In contrast, the audiences of our secondary datasets had ample time to inspection the creative products prior to expressing their evaluation. However, the results of our experimental study, where participants had limited information about the product and limited time to assess it, replicate the general pattern surfaced in the pilot and main study, thus suggesting this explanation is unlikely.

Second, in both lab experiments and field studies judges typically evaluate early-stage products in the form of ideas, prototypes, sketches, and proposals. The difference in stage of development may thus explain the discrepancy between prior research and our results. Judges might penalize creative products in the early stage of development, when they have to judge them based on proposals or prototypes, but reward them once they have the chance of "seeing them in action." However, the online experiment replicated the field data even without providing participants with a direct, perceptual experience of creative content and packaging. Moreover, research has shown a "differentiation liability" also for audiences assessing complete products (e.g., Hsu, 2006; Hsu et al., 2009; Leung & Sharkey, 2014; Negro & Leung, 2013). Overall, this evidence suggests that product development stage or abstractness versus concreteness should not explain the differences between our findings and existing ones.

Third, another common thread is that judges are typically asked to evaluate products with an economic mindset, either because they are judging products for funding or purchase purposes (e.g., Boudreau et al., 2016) or because their assessment is attached to some type of economic incentive (e.g., Mueller et al., 2012). This saliency of economic considerations might have triggered the decision-making, economic mindset known to exacerbate the tendency to penalize highly creative ideas (Mueller et al., 2018). Our data instead include expert and general audiences that were far removed from economic considerations, as they were either awarding artistic accolades (experts), assessing a product that they had already acquired (general audiences in pilot and main study), or were hypothetically considering whether to acquire (general audiences in the experimental study). Integrating these findings suggests a potentially complementary explanation: an economic mindset will not completely reverse the effect of creative content given the strength of the observed effect sizes across audiences, but it could explain the effects of creative packaging, particularly among general audiences, who pay a price for the product they purchase. Future research could try to disentangle the negative effect of economic considerations and that of creative packaging.

7.1.2 | Creative content and creative packaging across audiences

The second contribution of our study is to disentangle creative content from creative packaging, and to show how the level of expertise of the evaluating audience influences their reactions. On one side, our findings on creative content seem to corroborate studies showing no difference between crowds' and experts' judgments (Mollick & Nanda, 2016): both audiences react positively to creative content. On the other side, we do find variation in how they react to creative packaging: for experts, creative packaging matters less than creative content in informing audiences' evaluations, and sometimes it matters very little; for general audiences, it either matters little or it can even lead to negative evaluations.

Intriguingly, this finding both corroborates and contradicts extant findings in product design. Creative packaging indeed has a negative impact, as these studies have theorized (Rindova & Petkova, 2007) and found (Hargadon & Douglas, 2001), but only, and not always, for general audiences. For experts, creative packaging seems to be a "nice to have" feature that does not shape their evaluation as much as creative content does, but does not hurt it either. One reason for this finding is that experts' knowledge structures and information processing styles are more complex and sophisticated than general audiences' (Dane, 2010; LaTour & Deighton, 2019). Experts are more likely to take a holistic approach in assessing product value (Falchetti et al., 2022; Mount et al., 2021) and should be better able to disentangle creative

packaging from creative content. Conversely, general audiences have a more analytical, focused approach: they might see creative packaging as a distraction, leading them to ignore or even penalize it when they see it as irrelevant for their evaluation.

Another reason for these differences in findings, both within our study and between our study and extant research, could lie in contextual characteristics. Specifically, comparing and contrasting our settings and those of published studies led us to identify two contextual dimensions that could shape the effect of creative packaging on audiences' appreciation: (1) whether creative packaging can be objectively disentangled from creative content[10] and (2) whether creative packaging is a core or peripheral dimension of creativity—in other words, whether audiences are likely to see it as equally important or less important than creative content. Both dimensions pertain to the relationship of creative content and creative packaging and on how they concur to form the creativity of the overall product.

The two settings included in our study differed under both dimensions. For many movies, disentangling content and packaging is conceptually and practically possible, yet for others the storyline and visual elements are so intertwined to the point that is not possible to disentangle them. Conversely, for boardgames the disentanglement is more clear-cut, with esthetics and visuals clearly distinguishable from game mechanics and story elements. This difference could also explain why creative packaging is received less positively by general audiences within boardgames than within movies. When the distinction between content and packaging is less clear-cut, such as in movies, general audiences' lower expertise might lead to a "positive spillover" of their judgment of creative content to creative packaging, leading to a positive reaction. Conversely, when the two elements can be more easily disentangled, like in boardgames, their reaction to packaging is more negative.

The two settings differed also on whether packaging is a core or peripheral dimension of the product. The movie industry, and the Academy Awards in particular, recognize both creative content and creative packaging as core elements of a movie (Cattani & Ferriani, 2008; Mannucci & Yong, 2018; Simonton, 2004), with content being slightly more important (Simonton, 2004). Boardgames, on the other hand, are mainly defined by their creative content, such as game mechanics (Schell, 2008). Creative packaging such as the game box is more of a supportive dimension that should help selling the game (Holcomb, 2017).

The centrality of content and the peripheral nature of packaging in defining what a "good game" is may explain why experts and general audiences react positively to creative content across our two fields, but either care not or react negatively to creative packaging in the boardgame industry. This reasoning is consistent also with a study whose findings are in apparent contradiction with ours: Cancellieri et al. (2022) find that highly creative opera stagings (i.e., highly creative packaging) are well received by audiences in general, and by general audiences (versus season ticket holders) in particular. We believe this finding can be reconciled with ours by considering that the content of centuries-old operatic pieces (or any other artistic or cultural production for what maters) is a given and, therefore, what matters is the way they are reinterpreted and creatively repackaged. In this context, different audiences are likely to see creative variations in how the opera is packaged as a core element of the product under evaluation, which explains their positive reactions.

Since our settings differ on both dimensions, our study does not allow us to definitively say whether the entanglement or the relative coreness of the two dimensions is driving the observed differences. Future research could further explore this issue by comparing movies

[10]We thank the Editor for this suggestion.

(characterized by low disentanglement and high coreness) and boardgames (high disentanglement, low coreness) with products characterized by high disentanglement and high coreness. One example of this product are videogames. Similar to movies, both creative content and packaging are core dimensions of the videogames. However, and different from movies, the content of the game in terms of storyline and mechanics can neatly be disentangled by the graphics and special effects (De Vaan et al., 2015). This three-way comparison would allow to precisely identify whether the objective disentanglement of creative content and creative packaging and/or their relative coreness play a role in explaining these different results.

Finally, the fact that we consistently find no interaction between creative content and creative packaging also challenges extant research. Scholars have theorized (Rindova & Petkova, 2007) and shown (Hargadon & Douglas, 2001) that audiences react positively when one of the two dimensions is low, and the other is high. The aforementioned reasoning on the objective disentanglement and relative coreness of content and packaging could also explain why we did not find an interactive effect of the two elements on audiences' evaluations. The lack of interaction suggests that content and packaging can have independent, rather than interactive, effects on audiences' evaluations. The presence of interactive effects might depend either on whether they are clearly separable, or on how core or peripheral they are in the conceptualization of the creative product. Consistently, the famous case of the invention of the electric light (Hargadon & Douglas, 2001) seems to present characteristics that are different from the two settings we explored. The illumination system invented by Edison and his scientists was arguably characterized by low objective disentanglement and low coreness of creative packaging. First, given its high technical innovation, general audiences were likely unable to objectively disentangle content from packaging. Second, the appearance of the illumination system was not core to its functioning (Hargadon & Douglas, 2001). Overall, this suggests that the interactive effect might be present only when both boundary conditions we identified are low—an issue that future research could explore more in-depth.

7.2 | Practical implications

Our results have direct implications for companies' investments decisions when designing and implementing creative products. Companies should invest more resources in developing products high in creative content—products that break current norms and are different from others. On the contrary, they should be aware that heavy investments into novel and visually groundbreaking packaging lend diminishing returns. This does not mean that packaging does not matter at all: the quality of the packaging still matters. While the quality of packaging remains relevant, however, a traditional packaging is preferred to a creative one. Consistent with this notion, game designers view the box of a boardgame as a key touchpoint for selling the game that has to be both captivating and familiar (Holcomb, 2017). When searching for a fantasy-themed game, a customer may implicitly look for appropriate visual cues such as steel swords, red dragons, and bright-flame colors.

In many industries, however, companies seem to think that creative packaging matters more than creative content. For example, in creating *The Rings of Power*, the most expensive TV show in history, Amazon Studios spent most of its budget in creating groundbreaking creative visuals, but hired two relatively inexperienced screenwriters. This decision resulted in a show that disappointed fans throughout the globe for its poor, unoriginal writing (Kain, 2023; Kelly, 2022). While audiences agreed that the packaging was highly creative, it was not enough

to overcome the low creativity of the script, and resulted in lot of backlash and abysmal approval ratings. Our findings caution against trying to attract attention by deviating drastically from the esthetic canon one would expect for a particular product, as this is unlikely to impress experts and likely to go unnoticed or even penalized by customers. More broadly, they highlight that understanding the relative effects of both creative content and creative packaging can support the strategic allocation of organizational resources to enhance the overall perceived appreciation of creative products.

Last, our findings imply that contextual differences between industries (in our case, motion pictures and boardgames) may require industry-specific strategies. Whether creative content and packaging can be objectively disentangled, and whether they constitute a core or peripheral dimension of creativity in the industry of reference, may demand tailored approaches for optimal audience reception. Organizations should develop industry-specific metrics to assess the degree of "creative entanglement" and coreness of creative content and packaging, as they hold the potential to answer the question of whether audience expertise dramatically changes the reception of creative products or not.

7.3 | Limitations and directions for future research

Our study has some limitations that can inspire avenues for further research. First, our findings might generalize only to other creative industries where success and competitive advantage almost entirely depend on creating and sustaining new products and trends (Harrison et al., 2023; Hsu, 2006). These include music albums (Sgourev et al., 2023), story-based consumption experiences such as theatrical performances (Mollick & Nanda, 2016), videogames (De Vaan et al., 2015), and role-playing (Orazi & Van Laer, 2023). While these industries substantially contribute to the overall economy, we also believe that our results might apply to non-entertainment focused industries where the tension between creative products development and rejection is present. These industries include venture capital funding (Falchetti et al., 2022), industrial research (Criscuolo et al., 2017; Mount et al., 2021), and science more broadly (Boudreau et al., 2016; Lane et al., 2022). Future research could seek to replicate our findings in these and other settings to pinpoint potential boundary conditions, including, but not limited to, ease of disentanglement and relative coreness.

Another limitation of our findings lies in the specific audiences we focused on. It could be that other audiences we did not consider could react differently to creative content and creative packaging. For example, critics represent another type of expert audience that is significantly different in terms of tastes and preference from peers (Cattani et al., 2014). Moreover, general audiences are differentiated by their level of expertise, with significance variation in taste (Hahl et al., 2017; Peterson & Kern, 1996). Future research could explore if our results are robust to other creativity specifications and different audiences.

Another limitation is that we cannot entirely rule out that the overall quality of the product could confound our results. While we control for it by keeping it constant both in the pilot and in the lab experiment, it is still possible that quality interacts with creative content and creative packaging to shape audiences' reactions. For example, it could be that products perceived to be of higher quality elicit an expectation for highly creative packaging, leading to positive evaluations. Future research could explore this issue in industries where creativity and quality can be meaningfully and clearly separated, overcoming a well-known problem in creativity research (Cattani & Ferriani, 2008; Mannucci & Yong, 2018).

Finally, our datasets were limited in capturing the dynamic and evolving interaction between creative content, creative packaging, and audiences' taste. One possibility is that reactions to the same creative content and/or creative packaging change over time as audiences' tastes change. While some existing evidence points in this direction (e.g., Simonton, 1980; Wijnberg & Gemser, 2000), it either does not distinguish between content and packaging, or looked at limited periods of time. Future research could explore this issue by looking at how the same creative content and/or creative packaging have been received by different audiences over time. Another intriguing possibility is that audiences might react differently to the same content based on its different packaging. This question could be explored by looking at how new audiences react to movie remakes, music covers, or to the retelling of well-known stories within the publishing industry (e.g., Madeleine Miller's best seller *The Song of Achilles*, a retelling of the central plotline of Homer's *Iliad*).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors extend their gratitude to associate editor Gino Cattani and two anonymous reviewers for their invaluable feedback throughout the review process. We are also indebted to the helpful suggestions on earlier drafts provided by Sebastiano Della Lena, Andrea Fosfuri, Davide Ravasi, and the participants of the 2018 Story Consumption Symposium and of the Symposium "Recognizing and Extending Creativity" at the 2022 AOM Conference. Open access publishing facilitated by Universita Bocconi, as part of the Wiley - CRUI-CARE agreement.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data and code are available from the corresponding author upon request.

ORCID

Davide C. Orazi https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4038-9113
Pier Vittorio Mannucci https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9391-6696

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: Orazi, D. C., & Mannucci, P. V. (2024). Disentangling audiences' reactions to creative content and creative packaging. *Strategic Management Journal*, 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.3649