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When Prices Stay the Same, but Contents Shrink: Shrinkflation and Consumer Behavior

Lemiyana Leman*, Rina Maradona#

∗ Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah
Faculty of Economics and Islamic Business
Jl. Jl. Pangeran Ratu Kelurahan 5 Ulu, Kota Palembang 30126, Indonesia
E-mail: lemiyana_uin@radenfatah.ac.id

Universitas Putra Batam
Master of Management Program
Jl. Raden Patah No.12A, Kec. Lubuk Baja, Kota Batam 29444, Indonesia
E-mail: rina_curidy@gmail.com

Abstract

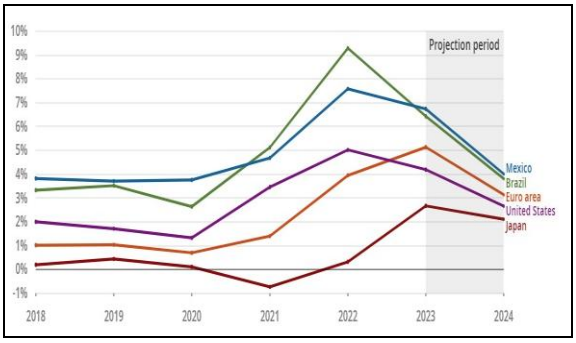
Shrinkflation is the practice of reducing the quantity of a product while maintaining its price, has become a prevalent strategy for manufacturers to deal with escalating production expenses. This research explores consumer perceptions and behavior toward shrinkflation through a qualitative approach. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with consumers of fast-moving consumer goods, aiming to understand their awareness, emotional responses, and decision-making processes regarding shrinkflation. The results reveal that many consumers initially overlook reductions in product size, but once they realize the change, they experience feelings of distrust and dissatisfaction. Additionally, shrinkflation impacts brand loyalty, with several consumers showing a tendency to switch to alternative products or brands. This study highlights the importance of transparency and clear communication in maintaining consumer trust. It provides valuable insights for manufacturers and policymakers in developing strategies that address consumer concerns while promoting fair market practices.

Keywords: Shrinkflation, Consumer Behavior, Brand Loyalty

1. Introduction

The functioning of a nation's economy is fraught with difficulties. Price volatility, ongoing price increases, or circumstances like inflation itself are some of the obstacles that impede economic activity. Inflation results from mismatches between the supply and demand for goods and services. Because of this, supply outpaces demand, which has a greater effect on the state of the economy. The impact of inflation on a nation's economy is significant. A nation's ability to prevent inflation is not based on its level of development because inflation can happen with any currency at any moment. Depending on its level, the inflation rate can have either a good or negative impact on a nation's economy (Salim, Fadilla, & Purnamasari, 2021). If the economy is unstable, domestic market prices will either increase or decrease (Rasyidin, Saleh, Muttaqim, Nova, & Khairani, 2022).

Inflation is considered an important issue and must be addressed by considering the severe effects of economic instability, rising commodity prices, and increasing unemployment. Economic growth, low unemployment, and minimal changes in the prices of goods and services are all indicators of economic stability, which is measured through the inflation rate. Inflation, on the other hand, can never be completely eliminated. Reducing it is the only option. Inflation is an issue faced by every country around the world, and governments and policymakers often prioritize this issue as their main concern (Mishkin, 2008). Below is the inflation data of major countries from 2018 to 2024.



Sources: OECD Economic Outlook, Interim Report September 2023.

Figure 1. High Inflation in Most Countries

In Figure 1, it is explained that due to tighter financial conditions, demand pressures will decrease, and U.S. annual GDP growth is expected to slow from 2.2% this year to 1.3% in 2024. In the Euro area, where demand is already weak, GDP growth is projected to drop to 0.6% in 2023 and rise to 1.1% in 2024, as the negative effects of high inflation on real income diminish. Structural pressures in the real estate market and weak domestic demand in China are expected to halt growth, decreasing to 5.1% in 2023 and 4.6% in 2024.

Essentially, shrinkflation is a form of hidden inflation. Producers reduce the size of a product while maintaining the same price, rather than directly raising the price, which would be immediately noticeable to customers. It is not the overall price of the product that increases, but the price per unit, weight, or volume. Consumers typically do not notice the small reduction in quantity. Experts say that shrinkflation is not a new phenomenon, but it has become more prevalent during inflationary periods as businesses face rising costs for materials, packaging, transportation, and labor. Efforts to cope with the price increases caused by persistent inflation, such as we are experiencing now, are known as shrinkflation strategies. While the selling price may sometimes remain unchanged, customers perceive this change as a loss.

Dworsky (2023) states that the motivation behind implementing "shrinkflation" is that customers will not notice the price increase but will notice changes in packaging weight or small details, such as a decrease in the number of tissue sheets. Companies have also found that they can use this strategy to draw public attention to the downsized packaging, such as by attaching brighter labels on smaller packages to still attract buyers.

Shrinkflation often occurs during challenging economic periods, such as recessions or inflation, where producers try to protect their profit margins without losing customers. This practice can influence consumer perceptions of product value and brand loyalty. Some studies suggest that consumers tend to feel dissatisfied and may switch to other brands when they become aware of product size reductions without a corresponding price decrease (Janssen & Kasinger, 2024).

Recent technological advancements, such as social media and e-commerce platforms, have amplified consumer awareness of shrinkflation. Platforms like Twitter and Instagram are increasingly used by consumers to share grievances, often leading to public debates about corporate accountability. This digital shift has made it even more challenging for companies to adopt shrinkflation without scrutiny. Addressing shrinkflation requires a multi-faceted approach involving regulatory frameworks, corporate ethics, and consumer education. Governments can play a pivotal role by enforcing stricter labeling requirements and ensuring that product changes are clearly communicated to consumers. Similarly, companies can invest in consumer education initiatives to foster transparency and build trust.

Shrinkflation, a strategy where manufacturers reduce product size or quantity to offset rising production costs without increasing prices, is common in fast-moving consumer goods like food and household items (Wilkins & Ireland, 2022). Studies by Tian & Keep (2001) identify it as a covert method to maintain profitability without alarming consumers, while the OECD (2021) notes its growing prevalence during inflationary periods, sparking concerns about transparency and fairness.

One of the famous pizza franchises in the United States, Domino's Pizza, decided to reduce the number of chicken wings from 10 pieces to 8 pieces. However, this did not negatively affect customers. Since the price of chicken meat increased, the selling price remained around US$ 7.99 (Hakim, 2023). According to Pahwa (2023), shrinkflation can also be implemented by changing the packaging shape of products, including adding holes at the bottom, curved sides, and altered shapes. The result of these changes is that fewer products are packaged in the new packaging compared to the previous one.

The phenomenon of shrinkflation has become a common practice in the food and beverage industry. In addition to this term, there are deflation, downsizing (package reduction), and store shrink rays. If we talk about well-known brands that were popular among Indonesian children in the past, such as Momogi, Astor, Better, and Beng-Beng, which have also seen a decline in popularity. In fact, they have shrunk to half of their original size. According to Sewraz (2023), the size reduction is small enough that it is not immediately noticeable by consumers. This is usually caused by high inflation, which forces many businesses to continuously raise prices to survive.

Several studies indicate that consumers often fail to notice shrinkflation unless it is explicitly highlighted. Vigh et al., (2024) found that consumers are more likely to detect shrinkflation in frequently purchased products or those where quantity changes are more apparent, such as chocolate bars. Similarly, Grewal et al. (1998) noted that brands adopting transparent communication about shrinkflation are less likely to lose consumer trust compared to those employing deceptive practices.

This study aims to explore consumer perceptions and responses to shrinkflation, with a focus on in-depth consumer experiences. The research seeks to provide deeper insights into how shrinkflation impacts purchasing decisions and brand loyalty. It also examines the effectiveness of transparency in reducing negative perceptions, contributing to the broader discourse on ethical marketing practices in the era of inflationary pressures.

2. Theoretical Framework

Consumer Value Theory

Consumer Value Theory (Zeithaml, 1988) provides the foundation for understanding how consumers evaluate the perceived value of products and how shrinkflation affects their purchasing decisions. According to this theory, perceived value is a trade-off between what consumers give (e.g., money, effort) and what they receive (e.g., product quantity, quality, satisfaction). Shrinkflation disrupts this balance by reducing the quantity or size of products while maintaining the same price, potentially leading to dissatisfaction and perceptions of unfairness.

Shrinkflation

With various definitions, the term shrinkflation refers to actions taken by producers to reduce or limit the quantity of products they manufacture or produce to alleviate the financial burden on the company during periods of high economic inflation. Additionally, rising production costs, wages, and transportation also influence producers to adopt this policy (Wood, 2022).

Shrinkflation, as a business practice that reduces product size or quantity without changing the price, has a direct relationship with Consumer Value Theory proposed by Zeithaml (1988). This theory explains that consumers evaluate a product's value based on the balance between what they sacrifice (e.g., money and time) and what they receive (e.g., product quality, quantity, and benefits).

Shrinkflation, defined as the practice of reducing product size or quantity while maintaining the same price, has gained attention in consumer research and economic literature due to its implications for consumer perceptions, purchasing behavior, and brand trust. This section reviews the existing body of knowledge on shrinkflation and its relationship with consumer behavior, focusing on theoretical underpinnings, empirical findings, and key variables.

Consumer Behavior

Consumer behavior refers to the process and activities undertaken by individuals or groups to search for, purchase, use, evaluate, and dispose of products or services to satisfy their needs and wants. According to Schiffman & Kanuk (2008), consumer behavior is the study of how individuals make decisions to allocate their available resources, such as time, money, and effort, to acquire goods and services. Solomon (2020) further emphasizes that consumer behavior involves not only purchasing actions but also psychological processes, such as motivation, perception, and attitudes, that underlie those decisions. Thus, consumer behavior is a multidisciplinary field encompassing psychology, sociology, economics, and anthropology.

Consumer behavior can be measured through several key indicators. According to Kotler et al., (2016), indicators of consumer behavior include: (1) Purchase patterns, how often and in what quantities consumers buy products, (2) Brand preference, consumer loyalty to certain brands, (3) Perceived value, how consumers evaluate the benefits and costs of a product, and (4) Emotional response, consumer reactions to product attributes, such as packaging or price. Additionally, Peter & Olson (1990) state that consumer behavior is also influenced by external factors, such as cultural, social, and marketing influences, as well as internal factors like motivation and past experiences. Understanding these indicators helps producers and marketers design more effective strategies to attract consumer attention.

3. Research Method

This study uses a qualitative research methodology to explore consumer perceptions and behaviors toward shrinkflation in the context of fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG). Qualitative research is ideal for gaining a deep understanding of consumer experiences, allowing for the identification of underlying motives and emotional responses to shrinkflation (Creswell, 2014). Data collection is conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. These methods are chosen to ensure that both individual insights and collective views on shrinkflation are captured. By using qualitative techniques, the research can explore nuanced attitudes and behavioral changes in response to this phenomenon.

The sample size for this study consists of 15 respondents who were selected using purposive sampling. This sampling technique is appropriate for qualitative research, allowing the researcher to select individuals who have direct experience with the products affected by shrinkflation (Patton, 2014). The participants are drawn from a range of demographic backgrounds, including different age groups (20–50 years), gender (balanced representation), and income levels (low, middle, and upper-income). This diversity ensures a comprehensive understanding of the different ways in which consumers perceive shrinkflation and its impact on their purchasing decisions. In-depth interviews will involve 10 respondents, while 5 additional respondents will participate in a focus group discussion.

Data analysis is conducted through thematic analysis, a widely used approach in qualitative research that involves identifying recurring themes and patterns within the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interview and focus group transcripts will be coded to highlight key themes such as perceived value, emotional reactions, trust, and loyalty. To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, triangulation will be applied, comparing the results from both individual interviews and group discussions. Ethical considerations, such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, are strictly followed to maintain the integrity of the research process (Silverman David, 2017).

4. Result and Discussion

The primary objective of this research was to explore the impact of shrinkflation on consumer perceptions and behavior in the context of fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG). Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 15 respondents, this study identifies key themes related to consumer awareness, emotional responses, and purchasing behavior toward products affected by shrinkflation. The findings reveal that shrinkflation significantly influences consumer perceptions of product value and brand loyalty, with notable differences based on consumer demographics.

a. Consumer Awareness of Shrinkflation

One of the most prominent findings from the interviews is that many consumers were not immediately aware of shrinkflation until it was pointed out to them or they experienced a noticeable reduction in product size or quantity. Respondents reported that while they noticed a decrease in product sizes, they often attributed it to other factors, such as packaging redesigns or smaller packaging for convenience. For instance, one respondent noted, "I didn't realize that the weight had decreased until I compared it with a previous purchase. It seemed the same at first, but it wasn't." This finding suggests that consumer awareness of shrinkflation is still relatively low, even though they perceive differences in the size of products they purchase.

This lack of consumer awareness indicates that FMCG companies might not be sufficiently transparent in communicating such changes, which results in confusion among consumers. Studies by et al., (2023) show that many consumers only realize shrinkflation when it is highlighted by the media or others, a trend also observed in this research. Unclear reduction s in product size can lead to consumer dissatisfaction or uncertainty, which, in turn, affects their purchasing decisions.

Moreover, this lack of awareness could contribute to a sense of frustration or even betrayal when consumers eventually notice the change. Some respondents mentioned that once they realized the reduction in product size, they felt the company was not forthcoming about the reason behind it. This type of emotional response can damage the relationship between consumers and brands. In this regard, companies that engage in shrinkflation must be mindful of the importance of clear, transparent communication with their customers. Failure to disclose such changes in a straightforward manner may not only hurt consumer trust but also lead to a decline in brand loyalty over time. As seen in this research, once consumers perceive a product change as deceptive, their likelihood of returning to that brand diminishes significantly.

Additionally, consumer awareness of shrinkflation may also vary depending on the product category and the frequency with which a consumer purchases it. Products purchased regularly or in larger quantities are more likely to prompt consumers to notice any reduction in size or quantity, as these are items they have a frame of reference for. However, for occasional purchases, consumers may not immediately perceive the change. This difference in consumer attention underscores the role that frequency and familiarity play in detecting shrinkflation. In products with lower engagement, shrinkflation may go unnoticed for a longer period, allowing companies to maintain their pricing strategies without facing immediate backlash. This finding points to the complexity of consumer awareness and the factors that influence whether shrinkflation will be recognized or not.

b. Emotional Reactions to Shrinkflation

Emotional responses to shrinkflation varied widely among respondents, with many expressing feelings of frustration or distrust when they discovered that product sizes had been reduced without a corresponding decrease in price. Several participants mentioned feeling deceived, particularly when the shrinkflation was perceived as hidden or deceptive. For example, one participant noted, “It’s like they’re cheating me. I’m paying the same price, but the product is smaller. It doesn’t feel right.” This emotional response is consistent with the findings of Akinwale & Mbewu (2024), which showed that perceived deception in shrinkflation practices erodes trust in brands and reduces consumer satisfaction. These emotional reactions, particularly feelings of being misled, appear to influence consumers’ attitudes toward brands, leading to a potential decline in brand loyalty.

This shift in consumer behavior highlights the importance of transparency and communication in maintaining customer trust. Emotional reactions to shrinkflation, especially feelings of betrayal and unfairness, can significantly affect purchasing decisions and brand loyalty. The companies that are able to manage consumer emotions effectively through honest communication and clear explanations of their pricing and product size strategies are more likely to retain consumer loyalty even in the face of inflationary pressures.

c. Impact on Purchasing Behavior

The results of the focus group discussions revealed that shrinkflation leads some consumers to reconsider their purchasing decisions, especially when they perceive a significant loss in product value. Some respondents indicated that they began to switch to competitor brands or opt for alternative products when they felt that the reduced product size was not justified by the price. For instance, one participant shared, “I’ve switched to a competitor’s brand because I feel like I get more for the same price, even if it’s not exactly the same product.” This aligns with consumer behavior theories, such as Zeithaml (1988) model of perceived value, which suggests that consumers are less likely to purchase a product when they perceive the value to be lower than expected.

Additionally, there was a noticeable difference in responses based on income level. Consumers in the lower-income bracket tended to be more sensitive to shrinkflation, as they were more price-conscious and perceived the reduced quantity as a loss of value. In contrast, consumers with higher incomes appeared more tolerant, with some expressing the view that shrinkflation was simply a result of inflationary pressures. These findings are in line with research by Grewal et al.,(1998), which showed that price-sensitive consumers are more likely to react negatively to price changes, including shrinkflation.

Shrinkflation has caused them to change their overall shopping habits. Some mentioned that they became more aware of the price-to-product size comparison and began to compare products more carefully before making a purchase. This change in consumer behavior highlights the growing trend among consumers to scrutinize products more closely, especially when they perceive a loss of value due to shrinkflation. It also indicates that while shrinkflation may not immediately drive consumers to abandon brands, it can make them more cautious and careful in their purchasing decisions. Interestingly, some consumers reported that shrinkflation did not necessarily affect their brand loyalty, as long as the company explained the reasons for the product size reduction transparently. Some participants mentioned that they better understood shrinkflation when companies explained it as a result of increased production costs or other economic pressures.

d. Brand Loyalty and Trust

When it comes to brand loyalty, the findings suggest that brands that were transparent about shrinkflation were more likely to retain consumer trust. Some respondents appreciated clear communication from companies regarding why sizes were reduced, such as rising production costs. One participant said, “If they tell me why the price is the same but the product size is smaller, I'll understand better and might continue buying." Transparency, therefore, appears to play a crucial role in maintaining customer loyalty. This finding is consistent with the research by Grewal et al.,(1998) and Akinwale & Mbewu (2024) which highlighted that when brands openly communicate reasons for shrinkflation, they can reduce negative emotional responses and maintain consumer trust.

The importance of transparency in maintaining brand loyalty is also supported by the growing trend of consumer empowerment through digital platforms. In today's age, consumers are more informed and have easy access to information, including reviews and feedback about products. Brands that fail to communicate the reasons behind shrinkflation openly risk losing consumer trust, as customers may feel deceived or misled. On the other hand, brands that are upfront about the reasons behind product size reductions, whether due to inflationary pressures, increased production costs, or supply chain challenges are likely to foster a stronger connection with their customers. This transparency creates a sense of honesty and reliability, which is highly valued by today's consumers.

Furthermore, clear communication not only helps mitigate negative emotional reactions but also establishes a long-term relationship between the brand and its consumers. When consumers understand the rationale behind a company's decisions, they are more likely to sympathize with the brand's situation and feel more tolerant of product adjustments. Brands that show empathy and take a proactive approach in explaining their actions are viewed as more customer-centric, which can lead to greater consumer loyalty over time.

e. Implications for Marketing Strategies

Based on the findings, companies can improve consumer satisfaction and mitigate negative responses to shrinkflation by adopting transparent communication strategies. Informing consumers about the reasons for product size reductions, such as inflationary pressures or rising production costs, could help maintain trust and brand loyalty. Moreover, companies should focus on maintaining product quality to ensure that consumers perceive value even when the size is reduced. A strong emphasis on ethical marketing practices and consumer-centric approaches will be crucial in retaining consumers and avoiding the loss of brand loyalty due to shrinkflation.

To further enhance the effectiveness of marketing strategies in addressing shrinkflation, companies should consider employing targeted messaging that highlights the long-term benefits of the product despite the size reduction. For instance, emphasizing the continued quality and value of the product can help reassure consumers that they are not losing out despite the smaller size. Marketers can also use comparisons with competitors to showcase how their products still offer superior quality or unique features, thus positioning their brands as more value-driven than others. By communicating these elements clearly, brands can minimize the negative impact of shrinkflation and reinforce the perception of product worth, even if the quantity has been reduced.

In addition, companies should leverage digital platforms and social media to engage with consumers directly, ensuring transparency in real-time. By offering explanations through blogs, videos, or social media posts, brands can educate consumers about the reasons behind shrinkflation and the measures they are taking to mitigate its effects, such as optimizing packaging or reducing waste. Consumer feedback should also be encouraged, creating an open dialogue where companies can address concerns and demonstrate their commitment to consumer satisfaction. Social media can be a powerful tool for building brand trust, as consumers increasingly turn to these platforms for brand interactions and updates. Proactive engagement can significantly improve consumer loyalty by showing that the brand values transparency and consumer input.

Moreover, it is essential for companies to align their shrinkflation strategy with broader sustainability efforts. In many cases, the reduction in size or packaging may be linked to initiatives aimed at minimizing environmental impact, such as reducing waste or lowering carbon footprints. By highlighting these eco-friendly benefits, brands can turn a potential negative (shrinkflation) into a positive narrative. Consumers who are increasingly concerned about sustainability may view the size reduction as a necessary step in contributing to environmental preservation, rather than a deceptive business practice. Thus, incorporating sustainability into marketing messages can not only address consumer concerns but also enhance the brand's reputation and foster a deeper emotional connection with its audience.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that shrinkflation significantly affects consumer perceptions, emotional responses, and purchasing behavior. Consumers who feel deceived by shrinkflation are more likely to lose trust in the brand and seek alternatives. Therefore, transparent communication and maintaining product quality are essential for companies to retain consumer trust and reduce negative emotional reactions. This study underscores the importance of understanding consumer sentiment towards shrinkflation and provides insights for companies to design more effective marketing strategies in addressing this phenomenon**.**

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