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Yang et al.

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(54) **THERMOFORMABLE OVERCOAT IN ROLL-TO-ROLL FORMAT PRINTERS FOR THERMOFORMING APPLICATIONS**

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B41J 3/407 (2006.01)
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B41J 15/04 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**
CPC **B41J 11/002** (2013.01); **B41J 3/407** (2013.01); **B41J 11/0015** (2013.01); **B41J 15/04** (2013.01); **C09D 11/101** (2013.01)

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CPC B41J 11/002; B41J 11/0015; B41J 15/04; B41J 3/407; B41J 2/2107; C09D 11/101
See application file for complete search history.

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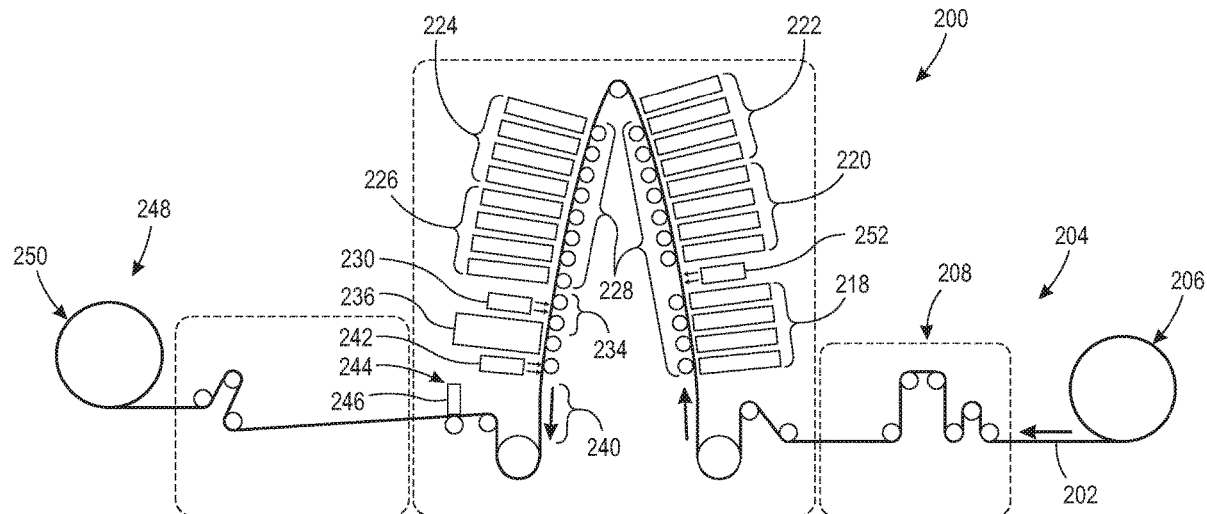
* cited by examiner

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A system for printing at least one stretchable ink on a thermoformable substrate including a first surface and a second surface opposite the first surface. The system includes an unwinder, a printing module and a rewinder. The unwinder is arranged to feed the thermoformable substrate from a first roll into a printing module. The printing module includes a flood coater arranged to deposit a coating layer on the first surface of the thermoformable substrate. The rewinder is arranged to receive the thermoformable substrate and to form the thermoformable substrate into a second roll.

20 Claims, 8 Drawing Sheets



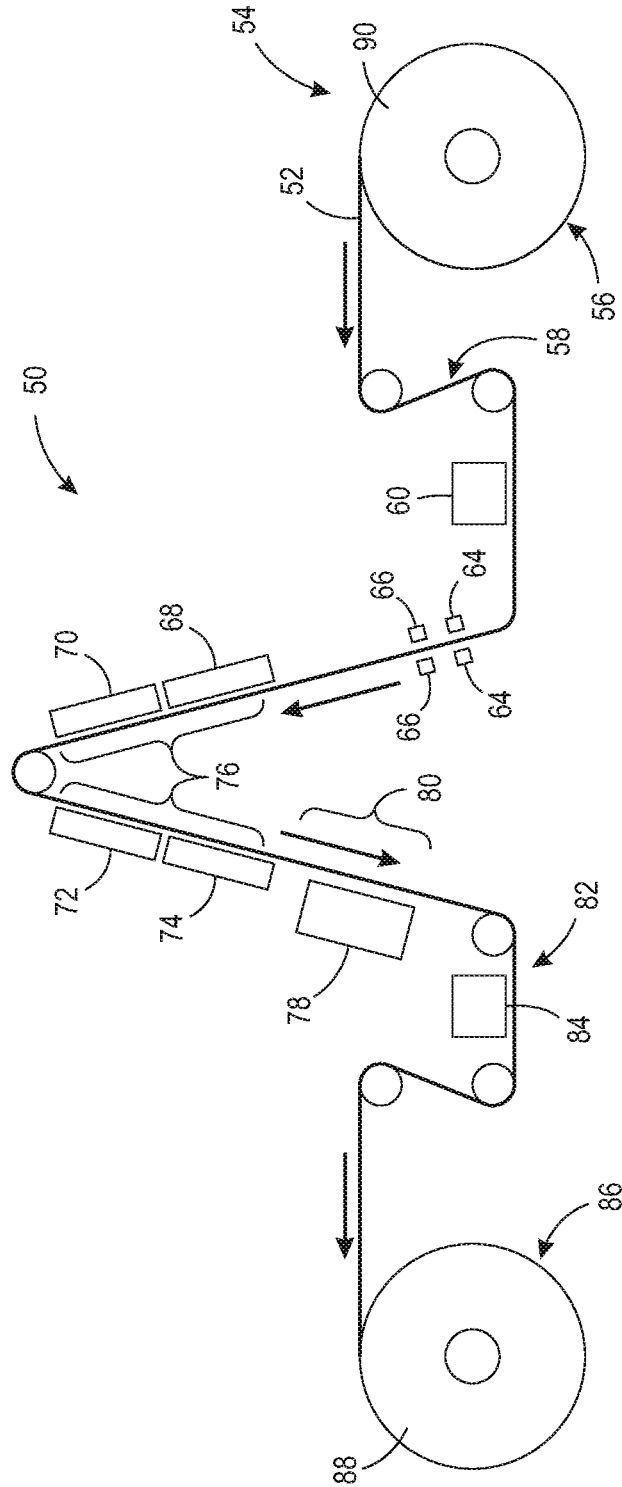


FIG. 1
PRIOR ART

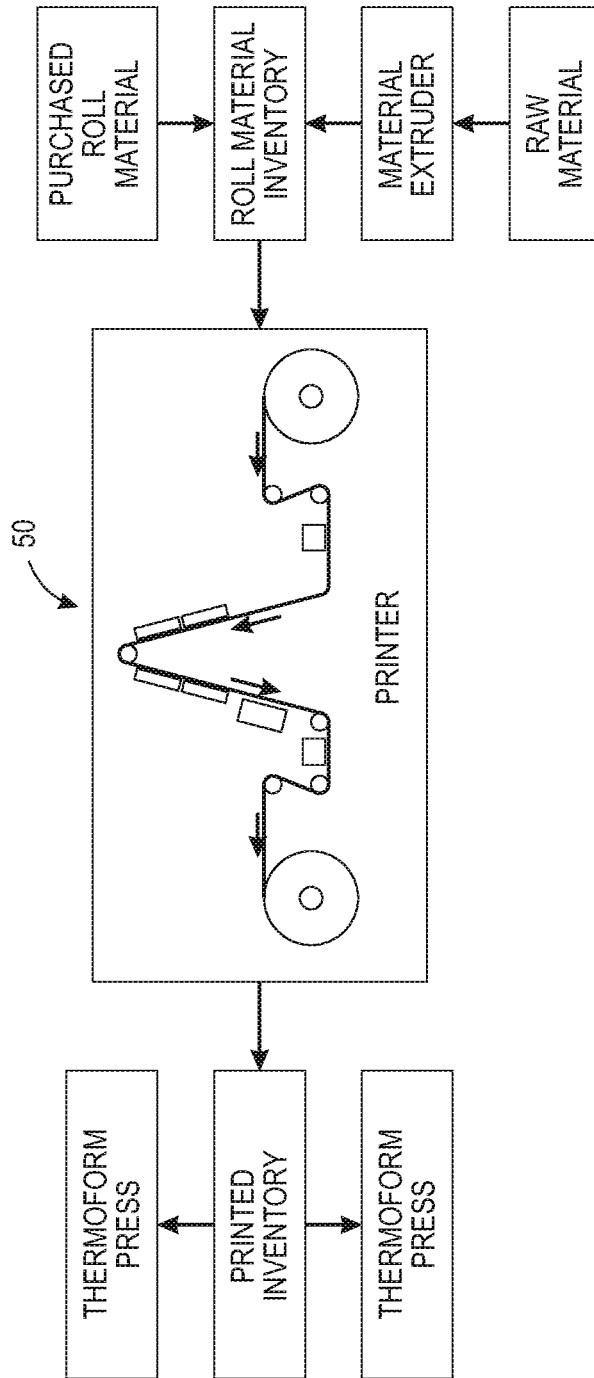


FIG. 2
PRIOR ART

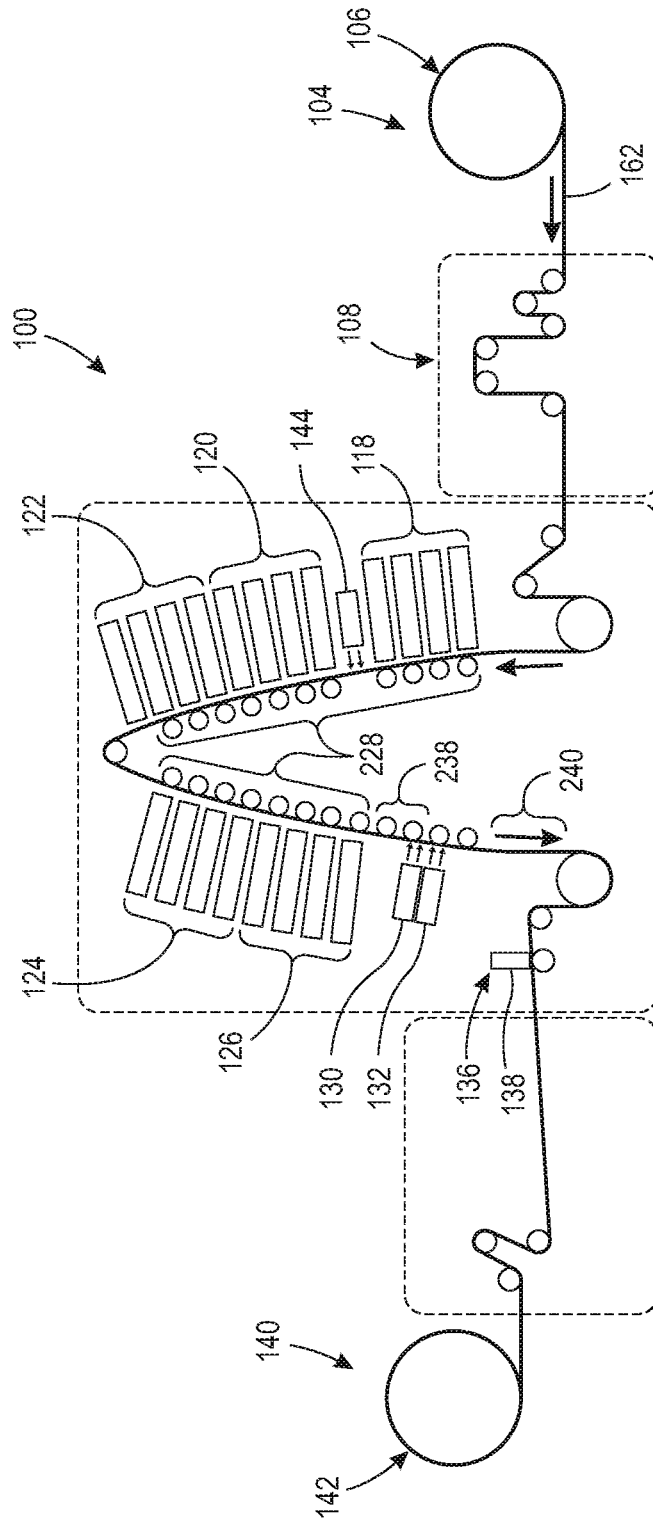


FIG. 3
PRIOR ART

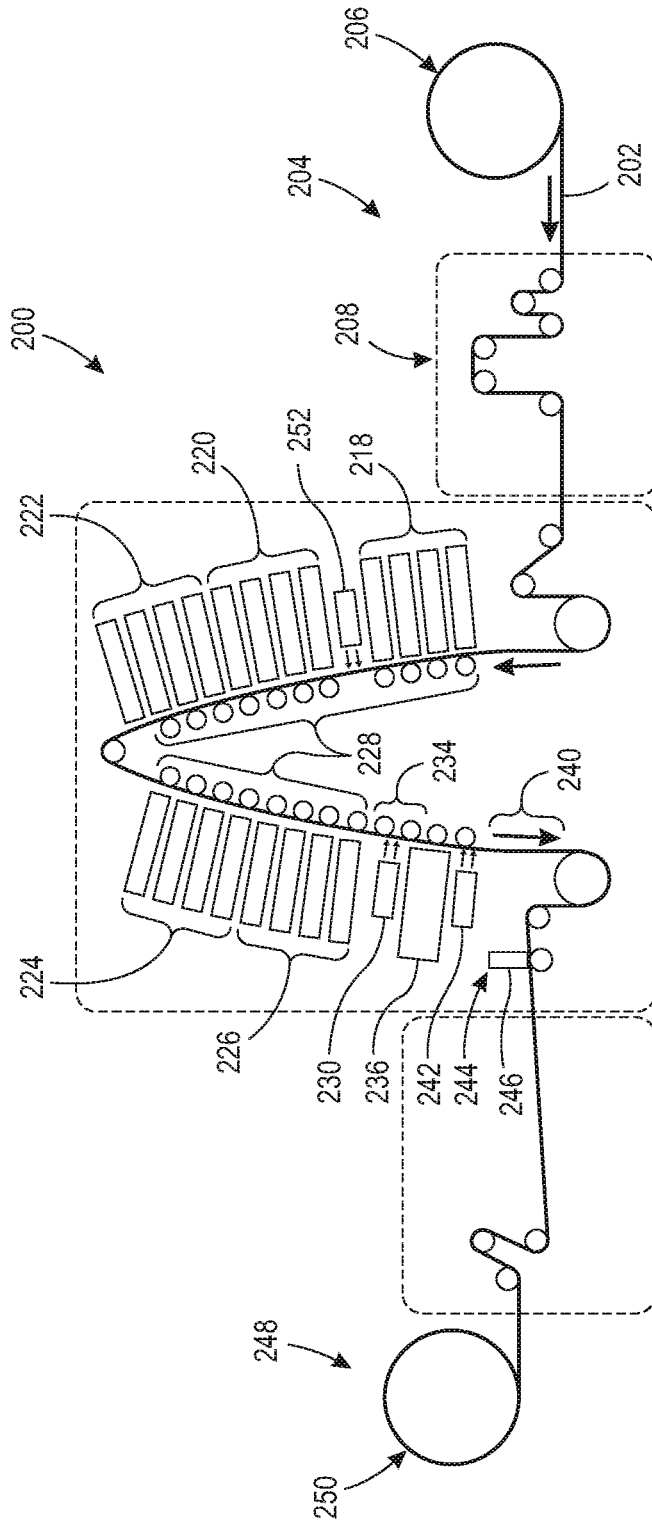


FIG. 4

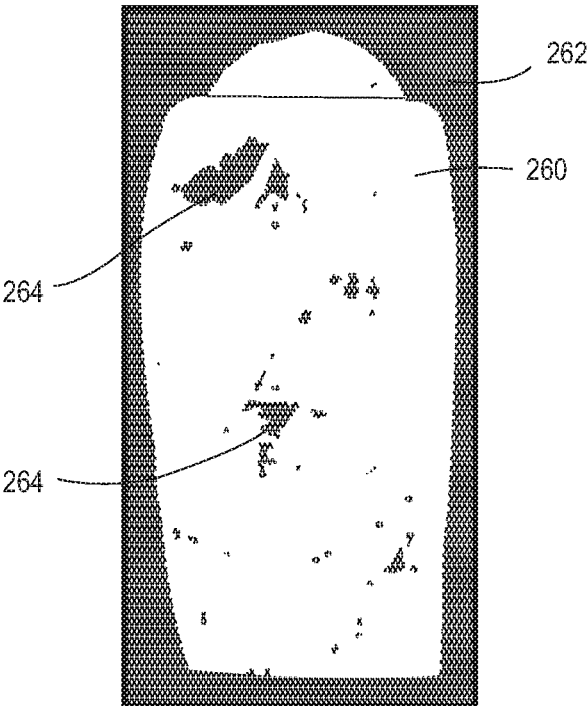


FIG. 5

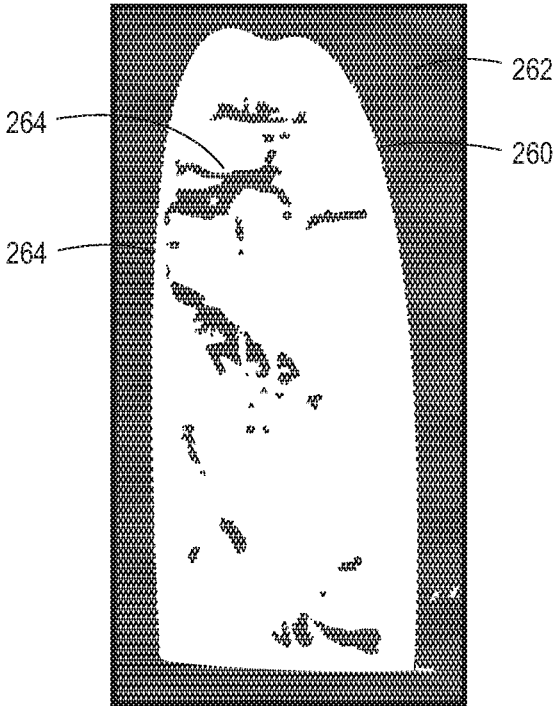


FIG. 6

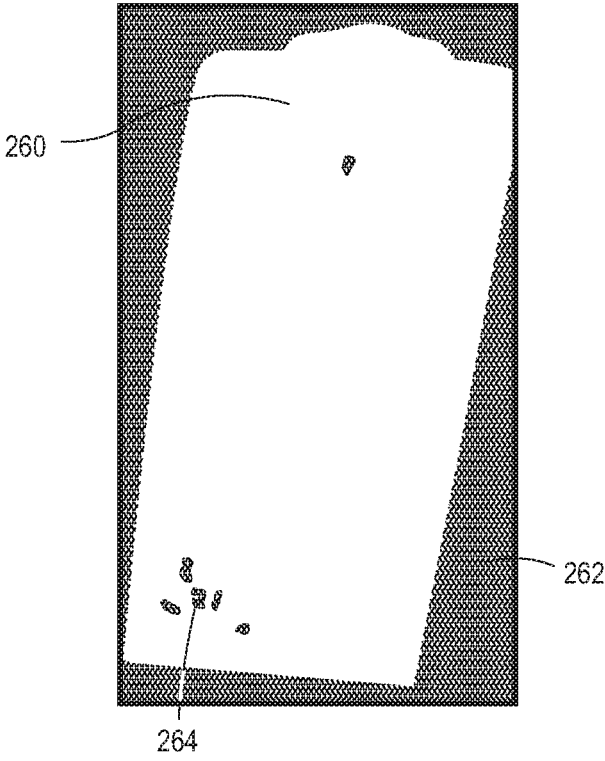


FIG. 7

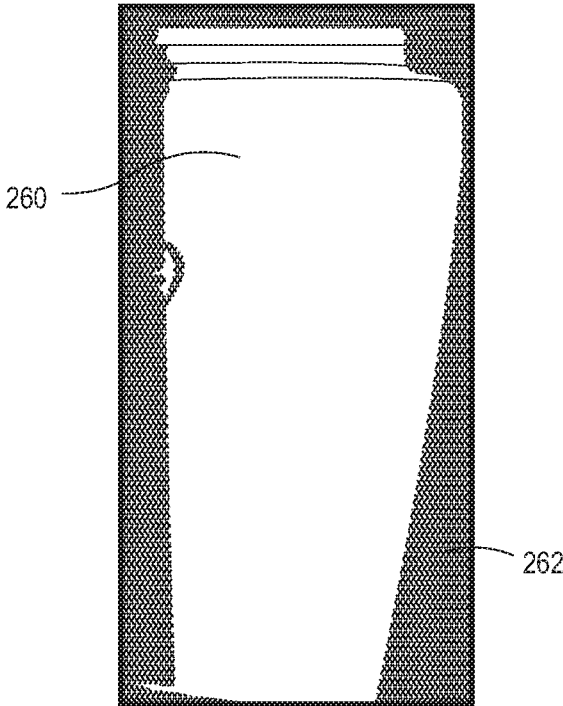


FIG. 8

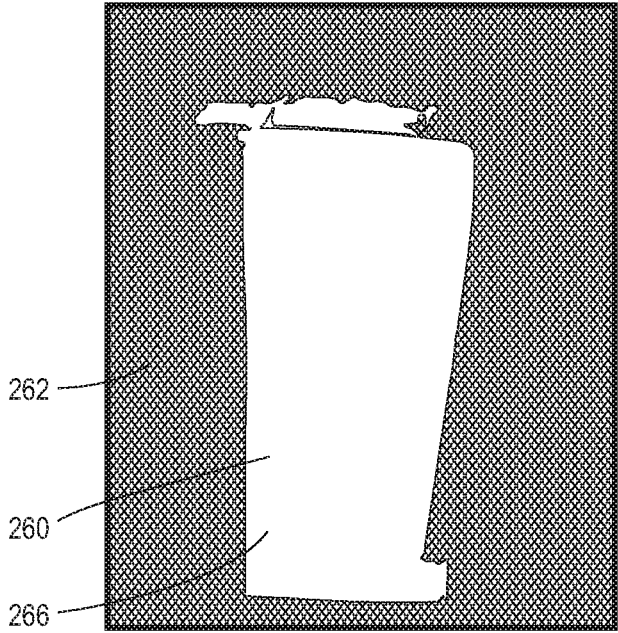


FIG. 9

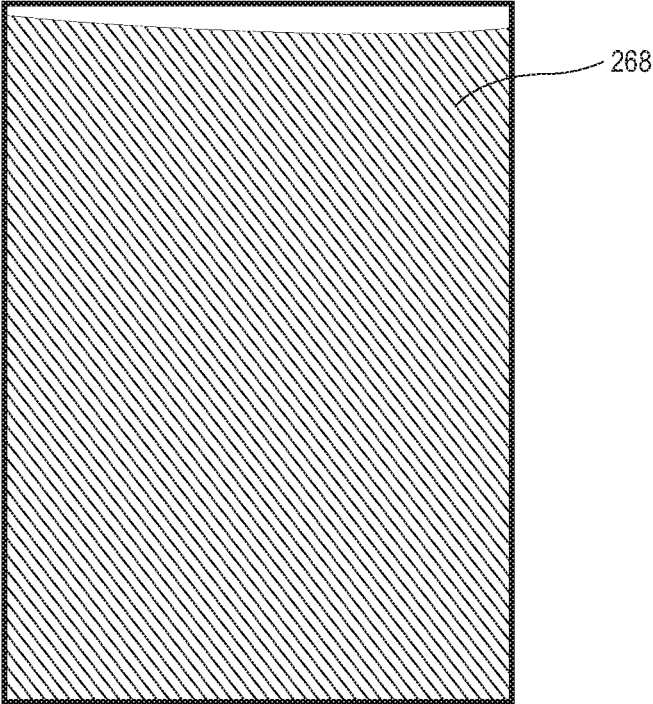


FIG. 10

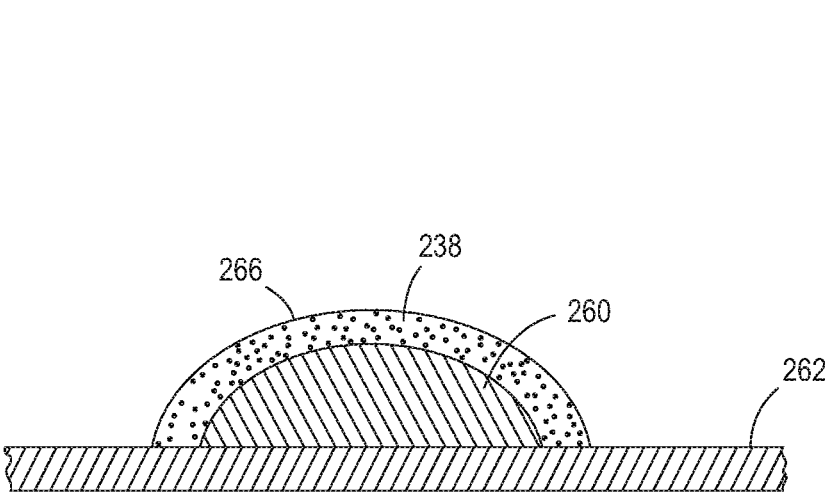


FIG. 11

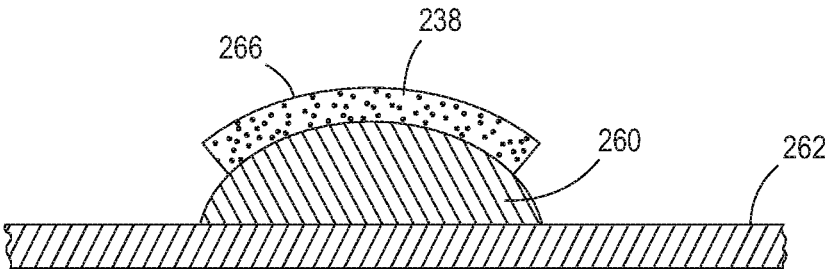


FIG. 12

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THERMOFORMABLE OVERCOAT IN ROLL-TO-ROLL FORMAT PRINTERS FOR THERMOFORMING APPLICATIONS

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This is a Divisional of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 15/711,621, filed Sep. 21, 2017, which application is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

TECHNICAL FIELD

The presently disclosed embodiments are directed to providing a printing system for use with depositing or printing stretchable and/or radiation curable inks on thermoformable substrates and methods of using the same.

BACKGROUND

Print processes compatible with thermoforming processes are known in the art. Conventional digital printers operate by scanning an array of printheads repeatedly across the media web while indexing the travel of the web, i.e., similar to the raster like functioning of traditional ink jet printers. This conventional print process is extremely time consuming in a manufacturing environment in which printed rolls must be delivered to one or more thermoforming presses. Often, the time required to print greatly exceeds the time necessary for thermoforming.

The following are two examples of printing systems used with thermoformable materials. Electronics For Imaging's VUTEk GS Pro-TF Series digital inkjet printer can allegedly produce custom formed signs, packaging, POP displays, vending panels and other thermoforming applications. Similarly, FUJIFILM's Acuity Advance Select is a flatbed inkjet printer used to produce printed thermoforms. Unfortunately, both systems suffer from the drawback of utilizing a scanning printhead which severely limits system throughput, e.g., FUJIFILM's system advertises throughput up to only 32 m²/hr.

Further complicating the process of printing on thermoformable material is the optical characteristics of that material. Many thermoformable materials are transparent, which is a desirable characteristic when being used to hold product that consumers wish to see prior to purchase, e.g., strawberries in a clear plastic container. Clear materials pose a challenge for printing conventional CMYK images (cyan, magenta, yellow and key (black)) since incident light will transmit through the ink. To improve visibility, it is common to print a CMYK image onto a white background having high reflectance. In order to maximize the usefulness of a printing system and minimize costs, preferably the white background is created using the same printing process used for CMYK printing.

Subsequent to printing on the thermoformable material, the material is rewound into a roll. Due to the thermoformability which requires low cross-linking in the cured inks, e.g., ultraviolet (UV) cured inks, it has been found that these inks are prone to "roll offset" failure, also known as "set-off" in the industry. The white ink and/or the CMYK images may transfer from the top surface of the thermoformable material to the bottom surface of the portion of the roll positioned directly adjacent to images in a process commonly known as setting off. In other terms, the printed images, while held in rolled form, migrate from intended locations to unintended locations, thereby resulting in unacceptable print quality.

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Because of the offset, commercial thermoforming printers typically adopt a wide-format, where the UV cured ink is kept exposed to air before thermoforming. The foregoing greatly limits the productivity for a thermoforming product.

The present disclosure addresses a system and method for high throughput printing on thermoformable substrates without unacceptable setting off of printed images. In other terms, a high-volume roll-to-roll format system for thermoforming applications is needed.

SUMMARY

It has been found that coating a thermoformable clear ink on top of, or over, a printed image minimizes or prevents roll offset, and does not affect the capability of subsequently thermoforming the printed images. In an example embodiment, it has been found that a flexographic ink may be used as an overcoat, and therefore the present systems and methods propose flood coating an ink of this type, or similar type, after printing the inks to form a background layer and/or image, e.g., CMYK inks.

According to aspects illustrated herein, there is provided a system for printing at least one stretchable ink on a thermoformable substrate including a first surface and a second surface opposite the first surface. The system includes an unwinder, a printing module and a rewinder. The unwinder is arranged to feed the thermoformable substrate from a first roll into a printing module. The printing module includes a flood coater arranged to deposit a coating layer on the first surface of the thermoformable substrate. The rewinder is arranged to receive the thermoformable substrate and to form the thermoformable substrate into a second roll.

According to other aspects illustrated herein, there is provided a method for applying an image on a thermoformable substrate having a first surface and a second surface opposite the first surface. The method includes: depositing a coating layer on a portion of the first surface of the substrate with a flood coater, the first portion comprises the image, the coating layer comprising at least one stretchable ink; and, curing the coating layer with at least one radiation curing device.

According to other aspects illustrated herein, there is provided a method for applying an image on a thermoformable substrate having a first surface and a second surface opposite the first surface. The method includes: unwinding the thermoformable substrate from a first roll into a printing module having the coating layer; depositing a background layer on a portion of the first surface of the substrate with at least one first full width printhead array, the background layer including at least one stretchable ink; pinning the background layer with at least one radiation pinning device, the at least one first radiation pinning device positioned proximate the first surface of the thermoformable substrate; depositing a foreground layer on the background layer with at least one second full width printhead array, the foreground layer including at least one stretchable ink; curing the background and foreground layers with at least one radiation curing device; depositing a coating layer on a portion of the first surface of the substrate with a flood coater, the first portion includes the image, the coating layer including at least one stretchable ink; curing the coating layer with at least one radiation curing device; and, rewinding the thermoformable substrate into a second roll.

Other objects, features and advantages of one or more embodiments will be readily appreciable from the following detailed description and from the accompanying drawings and claims.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Various embodiments are disclosed, by way of example only, with reference to the accompanying drawings in which corresponding reference symbols indicate corresponding parts, in which:

FIG. 1 is a schematic diagram of an embodiment of a known system for printing stretchable ink on a thermoformable substrate;

FIG. 2 is a schematic process flow diagram including an embodiment of a known system for printing stretchable ink on a thermoformable substrate;

FIG. 3 is a schematic diagram of an embodiment of a known system for printing stretchable ink on a thermoformable substrate;

FIG. 4 is a schematic diagram of an embodiment of a present system for printing stretchable ink on a thermoformable substrate comprising a flood coater;

FIG. 5 is an example of a printed substrate produced using a known system for printing stretchable ink on a thermoformable substrate after a single pass under a radiation curing device;

FIG. 6 is an example of a printed substrate produced using a known system for printing stretchable ink on a thermoformable substrate after two passes under a radiation curing device;

FIG. 7 is an example of a printed substrate produced using a known system for printing stretchable ink on a thermoformable substrate after three passes under a radiation curing device;

FIG. 8 is an example of a printed substrate produced using a known system for printing stretchable ink on a thermoformable substrate after four passes under a radiation curing device;

FIG. 9 is an example of a printed substrate produced using a present system for printing stretchable ink on a thermoformable substrate including a flood coating prior to passing under a final radiation curing device;

FIG. 10 is an example of a thermoformable substrate after contacting the printed substrate of FIG. 9;

FIG. 11 is a cross sectional view depicting a stretchable ink on a thermoformable substrate comprising a flood coated layer over the stretchable ink; and,

FIG. 12 is a cross sectional view depicting a stretchable ink on a thermoformable substrate comprising a flood coated layer partially over the stretchable ink.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

At the outset, it should be appreciated that like drawing numbers on different drawing views identify identical, or functionally similar, structural elements of the embodiments set forth herein. Furthermore, it is understood that these embodiments are not limited to the particular methodologies, materials and modifications described and as such may, of course, vary. It is also understood that the terminology used herein is for the purpose of describing particular aspects only, and is not intended to limit the scope of the disclosed embodiments, which are limited only by the appended claims.

Unless defined otherwise, all technical and scientific terms used herein have the same meaning as commonly understood to one of ordinary skill in the art to which these embodiments belong. As used herein, “full width”, e.g., “full width array sensor” and “full width printhead array”, is intended to be broadly construed as any structure that covers a significant width of the substrate. For example, in some

embodiments, the length of a full width array sensor is approximately half of the width of the substrate which it inspects.

Furthermore, the words “printer,” “printer system”, “printing system”, “printer device” and “printing device” as used herein encompass any apparatus, such as a digital copier, bookmaking machine, facsimile machine, multi-function machine, etc. which performs a print outputting function for any purpose. Additionally, as used herein, “web”, “substrate”, “printable substrate” refer to, for example, paper, transparencies, parchment, film, fabric, plastic, photo-finishing papers or other coated or non-coated substrate media in the form of a web upon which information or markings can be visualized and/or reproduced, while a “thermoformable substrate” is intended to mean any substrate capable of being thermoformed after printing, i.e., capable of being shaped by the use of heat and pressure. As used herein, the term ‘average’ shall be construed broadly to include any calculation in which a result datum or decision is obtained based on a plurality of input data, which can include but is not limited to, weighted averages, yes or no decisions based on rolling inputs, etc.

Moreover, as used herein, the phrases “comprises at least one of” and “comprising at least one of” in combination with a system or element is intended to mean that the system or element includes one or more of the elements listed after the phrase. For example, a device comprising at least one of: a first element; a second element; and, a third element, is intended to be construed as any one of the following structural arrangements: a device comprising a first element; a device comprising a second element; a device comprising a third element; a device comprising a first element and a second element; a device comprising a first element and a third element; a device comprising a first element, a second element and a third element; or, a device comprising a second element and a third element. A similar interpretation is intended when the phrase “used in at least one of:” is used herein. Furthermore, as used herein, “and/or” is intended to mean a grammatical conjunction used to indicate that one or more of the elements or conditions recited may be included or occur. For example, a device comprising a first element, a second element and/or a third element, is intended to be construed as any one of the following structural arrangements: a device comprising a first element; a device comprising a second element; a device comprising a third element; a device comprising a first element and a second element; a device comprising a first element and a third element; a device comprising a first element, a second element and a third element; or, a device comprising a second element and a third element.

Moreover, although any methods, devices or materials similar or equivalent to those described herein can be used in the practice or testing of these embodiments, some embodiments of methods, devices, and materials are now described.

FIG. 1 depicts a schematic view of an embodiment of a known printing system, i.e., printing system 50. Thermoforming grade substrate 52, e.g., polyethylene terephthalate (PET) or polyvinyl chloride (PVC), is unwound at first end 54 of system 50 in unwinder 56. Web 52 then passes through a conventional web drive and steering subsystem, i.e., subsystem 58. Web 52 is exposed to surface energy modification device 60, e.g., corona discharge, atmospheric plasma, or flame treatment. Surface energy modification device 60 enhances both the wetting and adhesion of ink 62 to web 52. An example of a suitable surface energy modi-

fication device is a corona treatment device from Enercon of Milwaukee, Wis. with a typical output power of

$$0 - 100 \frac{W \cdot \text{min}}{\text{m}^2}.$$

In some embodiments, printing system **50** may also include web cleaning stations **64** and static neutralization devices **66** to remove excess particles and static charge from the substrate. In some embodiments, stations **64** and devices **66** are located on both sides of web **52** between surface energy modification device **60** and printhead array **68**. Web **52** then passes by one or more printhead arrays, e.g., printhead arrays **68**, **70**, **72** and **74**. In some embodiments, each printhead array is composed of multiple piezo printheads arranged so that the full width of web **52**, other than inboard and outboard margins, can be addressed by at least one printhead without the need to move or scan the printhead. The foregoing arrangement of printheads allows for a 'single pass' print mode in which web **52** moves continuously through print zone **76**, i.e., the area where web **52** passes adjacent to printhead arrays **68**, **70**, **72** and **74**. It has been found that the foregoing embodiments can print over a speed range of 30-120 feet per minute. The full width printhead arrays of system **50** are stationary, i.e., not scanning transversely across web **52**, which enables much higher printing throughput than conventional printers.

FIG. **1** shows one printhead array for each of the four conventional colors, i.e., cyan, magenta, yellow and black, also commonly referred to as CMYK. The four printhead arrays are represented by arrays **68**, **70**, **72** and **74** for the CMYK colors, respectively. An additional array or a plurality of additional arrays can be included for a fifth color, e.g., white, or for a plurality of additional colors. The printhead arrays are responsible for adding digitally defined image content to substrate **52**, such as package graphics, instructions, and the like. The printhead arrays may also print non-image marks such as registration marks for subsequent thermoform processing, cutting operations, or other post printing processes that require alignment to the printed image.

It should be appreciated that corresponding ink delivery subsystems for each printhead array are not shown in the figures or discussed in detail herein as such subsystems are generally known in the art of liquid and solid ink printing. Each ink delivery subsystem supplies its corresponding printhead array with a radiation-curable thermoforming ink. It has been found that suitable inks should be formulated to allow for stretching of at least 400% elongation without cracking or losing adhesion to the substrate. However, the extent of necessary stretching is dependent on the thermoforming process and inks providing less than 400% elongation without cracking or loss of adhesion to the substrate may also be suitable for some applications.

After all ink has been deposited onto the substrate, the web then passes through a radiation curing zone, where such radiation source is selected based on the requirements for fully curing the ink. In some embodiments, multiple wide spectrum UV lamps provide curing of the inks, although other devices such as UV spectrum LED arrays may also be used, i.e., the necessary radiation output is dependent on the curing requirements of the ink. Thus, radiation curing device **78** may be selected from the group consisting of: an ultraviolet radiation source; an infrared radiation source; a visible light radiation source; and, combinations thereof, depending

on the requirements of the stretchable ink. After web **52** passes through curing zone **80** it passes through sensing subsystem **82** which can be used to detect color-to-color registration, missing jets, and other print quality metrics. In some embodiments, sensing subsystem **82** comprises full width array sensor **84**. Web **52** then passes into rewinder **86** where printed web **52** is returned to a roll form, e.g., roll **88**. Printed roll **88** can be used in a thermoforming press and thereby converted into thermoformed objects, e.g., food packaging containers.

In some embodiments, web substrate **52** is 0.014 inch thick thermoforming grade PET, although other thermoformable plastics may also be used. In some embodiments, print resolution of 600 dots per inch (dpi)×600 dpi is acceptable, although other print modes may be used, e.g., 300 dpi×300 dpi.

In view of the foregoing, it should be appreciated that system **50** is capable of printing at least one stretchable ink on a thermoformable substrate, e.g., substrate **52**. In some embodiments, system **50** comprises unwinder **56**, surface energy modification device **60**, at least one full width printhead array, e.g., printhead arrays **68**, **70**, **72** and **74**, at least one radiation curing device, e.g., curing device **78**, full width array sensor **84** and rewinder **86**. Unwinder **56** is arranged to feed thermoformable substrate **52** from first roll **90** into web drive subsystem **58**. Surface energy modification device **60** is arranged to alter a substrate surface energy to enhance wetting and adhesion of the at least one stretchable ink to thermoformable substrate **52**. The full width printhead arrays are arranged to deposit the at least one stretchable ink on thermoformable substrate **52**. Radiation curing device **78** is arranged to cure the at least one stretchable ink on thermoformable substrate **52**. Full width array sensor **84** is arranged to monitor the at least one stretchable ink on thermoformable substrate **52**, and rewinder **86** is arranged to receive thermoformable substrate **52** and to form thermoformable substrate **52** into second roll **88**.

In some embodiments, each of the at least one stretchable ink is an ultraviolet radiation curable ink; however, other types of inks may also be used. Moreover, in some embodiments, thermoformable substrate **52** is selected from the group consisting of: polyethylene terephthalate; polyethylene terephthalate glycol-modified; polycarbonate; acrylic; polyvinyl chloride; acrylonitrile butadiene styrene; polypropylene; and, combinations thereof.

As described above, surface energy modification may be provided by a variety of devices. In some embodiments, surface energy modification device **60** is selected from the group consisting of: a corona treatment station; an atmospheric plasma treatment station; a flame treatment station; and, combinations thereof. In some embodiments, thermoformable substrate **52** comprises a first width and surface energy modification device **60** comprises a second width/length greater than the first width. Depending on system and printing requirements, it is also within the scope of the claims to have a surface energy modification device that is smaller/shorter than the width of thermoformable or printable substrate **52**.

Similarly, in some embodiments, each full width printhead array dispenses a unique stretchable ink. In other terms, each full width printhead array dispenses a particular color unique to that printhead array. Thus, a first full width printhead array **68** may dispense cyan ink, while a second printhead array **70** dispenses magenta ink, a third printhead array **72** dispenses yellow ink, and a fourth printhead array **74** dispenses black ink. In some embodiments, thermoform-

able substrate **52** comprises a first width and the at least one full width printhead array, e.g., arrays **68**, **70**, **72** and/or **74**, comprises a second width/length less than the first width. Depending on system and printing requirements, some embodiments have printhead arrays that are equal to or greater than the width of the thermoformable or printable substrate. However, in embodiments having printhead arrays with widths/lengths greater than that of the thermoformable substrate, some piezo printheads must be turned off, i.e., the printheads falling outside of the substrate, to avoid waste of ink or damage to the overall system.

FIG. 2 depicts a schematic view of a known embodiment of printer **50** within an example of a full thermoforming manufacturing process. The benefits of printing in a roll-to-roll mode are evident versus a fully integrated in-line system. For example, depending on throughput rates of extruders, printers, and thermoform presses, it is possible for a highly flexible and reconfigurable manufacturing process with high uptime if any one component is down for servicing or otherwise unavailable for its contribution to the overall process.

FIG. 3 depicts a schematic view of another known embodiment of a printing system, i.e., printing system **100**. Thermoforming grade substrate **102**, e.g., polyethylene terephthalate (PET) or polyvinyl chloride (PVC), is unwound at first end **104** of system **100** in unwinder **106**. Web **102** then passes through a conventional web drive and steering subsystem, i.e., subsystem **108**. Although not depicted, it should be appreciated that all embodiments described herein may include surface energy modification devices, cleaning stations and/or neutralization devices. Web **102** then passes by one or more printhead arrays, e.g., printhead arrays **118**, **120**, **122**, **124** and **126**. In some embodiments, each printhead array is composed of multiple piezo printheads arranged so that the full width of web **102**, other than inboard and outboard margins, can be addressed by at least one printhead without the need to move or scan the printhead. The foregoing arrangement of printheads allows for a 'single pass' print mode in which web **102** moves continuously through print zone **128**, i.e., the area where web **102** passes adjacent to printhead arrays **118**, **120**, **122**, **124** and **126**. It has been found that the foregoing embodiments can print over a speed range of 30-120 feet per minute. The full width printhead arrays of system **100** are stationary, i.e., not scanning transversely across web **102**, which enables much higher printing throughput than conventional printers.

After all ink has been deposited onto the substrate, the web then passes through a radiation curing zone, where such radiation source is selected based on the requirements for fully curing the ink. In some embodiments, multiple wide spectrum UV lamps provide curing of the inks, e.g., Type D UV Bulb Lamps, although other devices such as UV spectrum LED arrays may also be used, i.e., the necessary radiation output is dependent on the curing requirements of the ink. Thus, radiation curing devices **130** and **132** may be selected from the group consisting of: an ultraviolet radiation source; an infrared radiation source; a visible light radiation source; and, combinations thereof, depending on the requirements of the stretchable ink. After web **102** passes through curing zone **134** it passes through sensing subsystem **136** which can be used to detect color-to-color registration, missing jets, and other print quality metrics. In some embodiments, sensing subsystem **136** comprises full width array sensor **138**. Web **102** then passes into rewinder **140** where printed web **102** is returned to a roll form, e.g., roll

142. Printed roll **142** can be used in a thermoforming press and thereby converted into thermoformed objects, e.g., food packaging containers.

It should be appreciated that as depicted, system **100** includes printhead array **118** arranged to deposit an initial background layer/image, e.g., a white background, which is then pinned with UV LED lamp from **144** the topside of substrate **102**. Then, remaining inks, e.g., the CMYK inks, are consecutively printed using printhead arrays **120**, **122**, **124** and **126** and then cured with UV lamps **130** and **132** to polymerize the printed image and or background. Due to the fact that the inks have a lesser degree of crosslinking, serious offset can be observed in the printed rolls (See, e.g., FIGS. **5** through **8**), which not only damages the printed image, but also may damage adjacent images by adhering to the bottom surface of substrate **102**, and may lead to safety concerns.

FIG. 4 depicts a schematic view of an embodiment of a present printing system, i.e., printing system **200**. Thermoforming grade substrate **202**, e.g., polyethylene terephthalate (PET) or polyvinyl chloride (PVC), is unwound at first end **204** of system **200** in unwinder **206**. Web **202** then passes through a conventional web drive and steering subsystem, i.e., subsystem **208**. Although not depicted, it should be appreciated that all embodiments described herein may include surface energy modification devices, cleaning stations and/or neutralization devices. Web **202** then passes by one or more printhead arrays, e.g., printhead arrays **218**, **220**, **222**, **224** and **226**. In some embodiments, each printhead array is composed of multiple piezo printheads arranged so that the full width of web **202**, other than inboard and outboard margins, can be addressed by at least one printhead without the need to move or scan the printhead. The foregoing arrangement of printheads allows for a 'single pass' print mode in which web **202** moves continuously through print zone **228**, i.e., the area where web **202** passes adjacent to printhead arrays **218**, **220**, **222**, **224** and **226**. It has been found that the foregoing embodiments can print over a speed range of 30-120 feet per minute. The full width printhead arrays of system **200** are stationary, i.e., not scanning transversely across web **202**, which enables much higher printing throughput than conventional printers.

After all ink has been deposited onto the substrate, the web then passes through a first radiation curing zone, where such radiation source is selected based on the requirements for fully curing the ink. In some embodiments, multiple wide spectrum UV lamps provide curing of the inks, e.g., Type D UV Bulb Lamps, although other devices such as UV spectrum LED arrays may also be used, i.e., the necessary radiation output is dependent on the curing requirements of the ink. Thus, radiation curing device **230** may be selected from the group consisting of: an ultraviolet radiation source; an infrared radiation source; a visible light radiation source; and, combinations thereof, depending on the requirements of the stretchable ink. After web **202** passes through first radiation curing zone **234** it passes under flood coater **236**. Flood coater **236** is arranged to apply a coating of a curable ink, e.g., flexographic ink, over the printed image and/or background previously deposited on substrate **202**. Flood coat **238** may cover all or a portion of the printed image (See, e.g., FIGS. **11** and **12**). It should be appreciated that flood coat **238** may comprise a clear ink or alternatively may comprise an ink including a color pigment. A non-limiting example of an acceptable clear coat material is Thermoform TF produced and sold by Inktech International Corporation of Toronto, Ontario. Subsequently, substrate **202** passes through second radiation curing zone **240** wherein second radiation curing device **242** cures flood coat **238** and

depending on the printed image and other system arrangements, may also cure the printed image/background. Then, substrate 202 passes through sensing subsystem 244 which can be used to detect color-to-color registration, missing jets, and other print quality metrics. In some embodiments, sensing subsystem 244 comprises full width array sensor 246. Web 202 then passes into rewinder 248 where printed web 202 is returned to a roll form, e.g., roll 250. Printed roll 250 can be used in a thermoforming press and thereby converted into thermoformed objects, e.g., food packaging containers.

It should be appreciated that as depicted, system 200 includes printhead array 218 arranged to deposit an initial background layer/image, e.g., a white background, which is then pinned with UV LED lamp from 252 the topside of substrate 202. Then, remaining inks, e.g., the CMYK inks, are consecutively printed using printhead arrays 220, 222, 224 and 226 and then cured with UV lamp 130 to polymerize the printed image and or background. By including flood coater 236 and subsequently curing flood coat 238 over the printed image and/or background, the offset described above is eliminated (See, e.g., FIGS. 9 and 10).

The benefit of including a thermoformable overcoat layer, e.g., flood coat 238, is readily apparent in view of FIGS. 5 through 10. Without an overcoat or flood coat, seven (7) passes under Type D Bulb UV lamps are required to prevent offset of a white ink layer printed on a thermoformable substrate. FIGS. 5 through 8 show results from passing a printed image under Type D Bulb UV lamps one, two, three and four times respectively. As can be seen in the figures, some portion of white ink 260 remained on substrate 262, and some regions of separation also occurred, e.g., regions 264. However, it is impractical to include seven curing lamps within the substrate path as it would greatly increase the cost of the system, as well as the heat from the lamps will distort the substrate. With clear overcoat 266 included over ink 260, there was no offset observed. There was no trace of clear ink 266 offset to cover PET 268 which is shown in FIG. 10. The results of some testing of printed substrates including and not including a final flood coat are summarized herebelow in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Offset Passes in D Bulb UV	White TF ink		White TF ink & clear overcoat	
	Sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 1	Sample 2
1	Fail	Fail	Pass	Pass
2	Fail	Fail	Pass	Pass
3	Fail	Fail	Pass	Pass
4	Fail	Fail		
5	Fail	Pass		
7	Pass	Pass		
10	Pass	Pass		

The foregoing results may result from at least the following two reasons. First, the thermoformable clear UV ink may be a flexo ink that has much higher viscosity, i.e., higher molecular weight, than ink-jettable inks, e.g., ink dispensed from printhead arrays 218, 220, 222, 224 and 226. After UV curing, monomers in this type of ink are much less migratable to form an offset. Second, the clear ink has no pigment obscuring the UV light used to cure the ink, enabling light to go through the entire layer to cure the surface and the bulk of the ink. The foregoing method may also be used in other UV jetting applications.

The present systems and methods bring a variety of simultaneous benefits, some of which are follow. A clear thermoformable overcoat prevents offset in wounded rolls in roll-to-roll printing systems. Flexographic inks have greater durability compared to thermoformable inkjet inks, which can substantially increase durability performance of printed inks. A clear overcoat can prevent gloss differences on CMYK prints, resulting from image height variation because of halftone printing techniques. A highly cured and cross-linked clear layer can serve as a barrier to prevent potential safety issues.

It will be appreciated that various of the above-disclosed and other features and functions, or alternatives thereof, may be desirably combined into many other different systems or applications. Various presently unforeseen or unanticipated alternatives, modifications, variations or improvements therein may be subsequently made by those skilled in the art which are also intended to be encompassed by the following claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A printing system that deposits at least one stretchable ink directly onto a semi-rigid thermoformable substrate to be subject to a subsequent thermoforming process so as to form a printed thermoformed object having a semi-rigid shape, the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate comprising a first surface and a second surface opposite the first surface, the system comprising:

- an unwinder;
- a printing module; and,
- a rewinder,

wherein, the unwinder is adapted to unwind and feed a first roll of the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate into the printing module,

wherein the printing module is adapted to receive the unwound semi-rigid thermoformable substrate therein and deposit the at least one stretchable ink directly onto the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate, the printing module comprising:

at least one printhead adapted to receive the unwound semi-rigid thermoformable substrate and deposit a first portion of the at least one stretchable ink directly on the first surface of the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate;

a flood coater adapted to receive the unwound semi-rigid thermoformable substrate including the first portion of the at least one stretchable ink deposited directly thereon and deposit a coating layer directly on a portion of the first surface of the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate atop the first portion of the at least one stretchable ink deposited on the first surface, and

wherein, the rewinder is adapted to receive the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate including the deposited first portion of the at least one stretchable ink and the coating layer and rewind the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate into a second roll.

2. The system of claim 1, wherein the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate is a thermoformable grade plastic.

3. The system of claim 1, wherein the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate is a thermoformable grade plastic, the first surface comprises an image formed from the at least one stretchable ink, and the coating layer comprises a stretchable ink.

4. The system of claim 3, wherein the thermoformable grade plastic is a thermoformable grade polyethylene terephthalate (PET) having a thickness of about 0.014 inches and the image and the coating layer are applied to the portion of the first surface on the basis that the semi-rigid thermo-

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formable substrate including the image and the coating layer will be subject to a subsequent thermoforming process to form a printed thermoformed object having a semi-rigid shape.

5. The system of claim 4 wherein the coating layer deposited atop the portion of the at least one stretchable ink partially covers the image or the coating layer fully covers the image.

6. The system of claim 1 wherein the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate is a thermoformable grade plastic and the printing module further comprises:

at least one first radiation curing device;
at least one second radiation curing device; and,
the flood coater is positioned between the at least one first radiation curing device and the at least one second radiation curing device.

7. The system of claim 1 wherein the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate is a thermoformable grade plastic and the printing module further comprises:

at least one first full width printhead array arranged to deposit the first portion of a stretchable ink on the first surface of the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate to form an image;

at least one first radiation curing device;
at least one second radiation curing device;
the at least one first radiation curing device is positioned between the at least one first full width printhead array and the flood coater; and,

the flood coater is positioned between the at least one first radiation curing device and the at least one second radiation curing device.

8. The system of claim 7 wherein the coating layer partially covers the image or the coating layer fully covers the image.

9. The system of claim 1 wherein the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate is a thermoformable grade plastic and the printing module further comprises:

at least one first full width printhead array arranged to deposit the first portion of the at least one stretchable ink on the first surface of the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate to form a base layer;

at least one second full width printhead array arranged to deposit a second portion of the at least one stretchable ink on the base layer to form an image;

at least one radiation pinning device positioned between the at least one first full width printhead array and the at least one second full width printhead array, proximate the first surface, and arranged to partially cure the first portion of the at least one stretchable ink on the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate prior to the second portion of the at least one stretchable ink being deposited on the base layer;

at least one first radiation curing device positioned between the at least one second full width printhead array and the flood coater, proximate the first surface, and arranged to partially cure the first portion and/or the second portion of the at least one stretchable ink on the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate prior to the coating layer being deposited on the image layer and/or base layer;

at least one second radiation curing device positioned proximate the first surface and arranged to at least partially cure the first portion of the at least one stretchable ink, the second portion of the at least one stretchable ink and/or the coating layer; and,

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the flood coater is positioned between the at least one first radiation curing device and the at least one second radiation curing device.

10. The system of claim 9 wherein the coating layer partially covers the base layer and the image, or the coating layer fully covers the base layer and the image.

11. The system of claim 9, wherein the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate has a thickness of about 0.014 inches.

12. The system of claim 9, wherein the image and the coating layer are applied on the basis that the image and the coating layer will be affected by the subsequent thermoforming process.

13. The system of claim 1 wherein each of the at least one stretchable ink is an ultraviolet radiation curable ink.

14. The system of claim 1 wherein the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate is a thermoformable grade plastic selected from the group consisting of: polyethylene terephthalate glycol-modified; polycarbonate; acrylic; polyvinyl chloride; acrylonitrile butadiene styrene; and, combinations thereof.

15. The system of claim 1, wherein the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate has a thickness of about 0.014 inches.

16. The system of claim 1, wherein the image comprises a background layer and a foreground layer, and the background layer, foreground layer and the coating layer are applied on the basis that the background layer, the foreground layer and coating layer will be affected by the subsequent thermoforming process.

17. The system of claim 1, wherein the printing module is adapted to receive the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate and comprises at least one first full width printhead array arranged to deposit a first portion of the at least one stretchable ink on the first surface of the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate to form a base layer.

18. A printing system that deposits at least one stretchable ink directly onto a semi-rigid thermoformable substrate without the use of labels or adhesives, the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate to be subject to a subsequent thermoforming process so as to form a printed thermoformed object having a semi-rigid shape, the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate comprising a first surface and a second surface opposite the first surface, the system comprising:

an unwinder;
a printing module; and,
a rewinder;

wherein, the unwinder is arranged to unwind and feed a first roll of the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate into the printing module,

wherein the printing module is adapted to receive the unwound semi-rigid thermoformable substrate therein and deposit the at least one stretchable ink directly onto the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate, the printing module comprising:

at least one first full width printhead array arranged to deposit a background layer directly on a portion of the first surface of the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate with at least one stretchable ink;

at least one radiation pinning device positioned proximate the first surface of the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate and arranged to pin the background layer;

at least one second full width printhead array arranged to deposit a foreground layer on the background layer, the foreground layer comprising at least one stretchable ink;

at least one radiation curing device arranged to cure the background layer and the foreground layer; and,

a flood coater arranged to deposit a coating layer on a portion of the first surface of the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate, and the rewinder is arranged to receive the printed semi-rigid thermoformable substrate and form the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate into a second roll;

wherein, the flood coater deposits the coating layer on the portion of the first surface comprising the image, the coating layer comprising at least one stretchable ink; wherein, at least one curing device is arranged to cure the coating layer; and,

wherein, the rewinder is arranged to receive the printed semi-rigid thermoformable substrate including the background layer, the foreground layer, and the image coating layer and form the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate into the second roll.

19. The system of claim **18**, wherein the background layer, the foreground layer, and the coating layer are applied to the portion of the first surface on the basis that the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate including the background layer, the foreground layer, and the coating layer will be subject to a subsequent thermoforming process to form a thermoformed object having a semi-rigid shape.

20. The system of claim **19**, wherein the semi-rigid thermoformable substrate has a thickness of about 0.014 inches.

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