

# Distinctive Design: Embodiment of Culture and Consumer Response

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Consumers' judgment about products is based largely on visual information. Thus, the physical form of a product is a critical determinant of consumer response and marketplace success. Appealing designs can attract consumers by differentiating a product from competing offerings and distinctive designs can help products to stand out in a crowded marketplace. Moreover, visual appearance is a valuable source of information about different attributes of a product. As consumers and designers have no direct means of communication with each other, designers try to communicate invisible product attributes such as functionality and social significance through the medium of the product itself. Product design can therefore be perceived as a language that designers use to talk to consumers about the product. Successful designers are recognized for developing market offerings with a consistent and clear design philosophy. Typically, a design team is motivated by symbolic meanings they intend to communicate in their designs and which form part of the design identity of the organization. Nevertheless, in many instances it is unclear whether the product embodies the intended message, whether the user interprets the design message correctly, and the extent to which the design message has an impact on consumer behaviour.

In this study we first review existing studies and a variety of media sources to pinpoint indexical and symbolic signs of two cultures (i.e., Korea and USA) that can be incorporated in automobile designs. Next, a transport designer is given a brief with the objective of transferring these signs onto digital renderings of two new concept cars. One concept embodies elements of Korean culture and another

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concept embodies elements of American culture. Finally, we conduct an empirical study with US car owners to assess their explicit and implicit attitudes toward these new designs. Results show that respondents were not able to access cultural signs to report explicit attitudes and preferences. The analysis of implicit preferences reveals a different story: consumers favour the design that is in line with their own cultural background.

### **Semantics in Product Design**

The judgment about products is based largely on visual information (Coates, 2003). Thus, the physical form or design of a product is a critical determinant of consumer response and marketplace success (Bloch, 1995). Appealing design can attract customers by differentiating a product from competing offerings (Berkowitz, 1987) and help a product to stand out in a competitive market (Sherman, 2002). Moreover, the appearance of a product is also a valuable source of information about different attributes of the product. Crilly et al. (2004) point out that, as consumers and designers have no direct means of communication with each other, designers communicate product attributes such as elegance, functionality, mode-of-use and social significance through the medium of the product itself. Thus, product design can be perceived as a language that designers use to talk to consumers about the product. For example, Leigh et al. (2006) noted that the design of MG automobiles communicates authenticity through its historical British image. Moreover, product design is important from a socio-cultural perspective, as it can reflect dominant values of society. For example, Hjelm (2002) noted that chairs produced during different time periods in Sweden reflected the dominant ideologies of their respective times.

Product design has been researched under the range of many disciplines, including aesthetics (Pye, 1978), psychology (Cohen, 1990), consumer research (Yalch and Brunel, 1996) and industrial design (Viemeister, 2001). Several studies have drawn ideas from these fields and presented integrated conceptual frameworks for studying different aspects of product design (Crozier, 1994; Bloch, 1995; Crilly et al., 2004). These studies reveal that one of the important aspects of product design involves the investigation of symbolic and social meanings that the design of a

product may communicate to consumers. Such investigation – labelled as product semantics (Krippendorf, 1989) – places an emphasis on the opportunity for consumers to interpret product's qualities (Crilly, 1994), and involves a semiotic framing of product design (Hjelm, 2002). Although product semantics has been extensively discussed in the design literature, there has been very little empirical research that investigated how product semantics is used in the product design process by designers or how product semantic meanings are interpreted by consumers.

Product semantics is a theory developed by Reinhardt Butter and Klaus Krippendorf that focuses on the meanings communicated through the visual domain of product design (Hjelm, 2002). The theory and practice of product semantics caught the attention of the designer community in the 1980s as an attempt to find a new theoretical foundation for design in the light of fading away functionalism (Michl, 1992). As consumers' product preferences were becoming more sophisticated, designers realise that design is not simply concerned with the product's functionality; it is also about aesthetics and consumer preferences. According to Krippendorf (1995), the true purpose of product design is to communicate the information about the product to consumers, who after being exposed to this information, construct the product's meaning by means of semantic interpretation. Thus, Krippendorf (1995) emphasises that, as it is the user who constructs the meaning and not the designer, the primary role of product design is to communicate the information about the product that would allow users to construct positive meanings. Mono (1997, as cited in Crilly, 2004) elaborates on the communicative functions of product design and suggests that product's visual form may communicate the qualities of a product through four semantic functions: description, expression, exhortation and identification.

Semiotics is a discipline that involves the studying of various verbal and non-verbal 'texts' as 'sign systems' (Chandler, 2006). Chandler (2006) defines a 'text' being a complex sign that contains a system of other signs within its coherent body. A concept of text can be referred to "everything which belongs to (may be accounted for by) a particular system of interpretation" (Sonesson, 1998, p.23), and signs are referred to the individual elements of these larger systems that convey

meanings (Zakia and Nadin, 1987). According to Lotman (1977), a text has a beginning, end, and a definite internal organisation (Lotman, 1977). Thus, texts represent separate entities of meanings that can be distinguished from other texts by the means of their composition (Lotman et al, 1994).

The semiotic notion of texts has been widely used in the marketing communications and consumer research literature. Following the organising principles outlined by Hirschman and Holbrook (1992) for delineating the underlying epistemologies existing in consumer research, a number of scholars have investigated consumers' consumption behaviour as text (e.g. Thompson, 1997; Stern, 1995). Moreover, the concept of text was also used in the advertising literature to analyse different types of advertising messages and their interpretation by consumers (e.g. Mick, 1987; Ritson and Elliott, 1995). Finally, the view of a text being the system of signs that represent an integrated coherent body of meaning has been used in media studies to analyse different aspects of media texts (Selby and Cowdery, 1995).

### **Building a Product Concept Using Semiotic Analysis**

Semiotic analysis used in this research involved the deconstruction of text into smaller signs and the identification of meaning in those signs with the reference to existing conventions to communication. In the dyadic model of signs (Saussure, 1974), a sign always consists of two parts – a signifier and the signified. A signifier is referred to the physical form which a sign takes and the signified is referred to the concept that the sign represents (Eco, 1976). In the context of design studies, the deconstruction of sign into signifier and the signified is a useful technique that can be used to identify the meanings that a particular design of a product may communicate to consumers. For instance, Hjelm (2002) noted that chairs produced during different time periods in Sweden reflected the dominant ideologies of their respective times. In this example, the physical shape of a chair is a signifier – a form that a sign takes -, and the idea that the chair reflects a dominant ideology of Sweden is the signified – the concept that the sign represents. In the design domain, therefore, although a signifier may be reflected as a material object, the signified is a mental construct that consumers visualise when they see a signifier. Thus, semiotic

analysis for design purposes involves the identification of attractive 'signifieds' ideas among consumers – that semioticians call codes (Jakobson 1971) - and the analysis of how these ideas are communicated in the physical signifiers of the product.

### **A Korean Concept**

The trade literature claims that the design of recent Hyundai automobiles tend to reflect a K-factor in design (Van Hout, 2006; Cleaver, 2007). A K-factor in design can be best described as a pursuit to create a distinct Korean design not only in the automobile industry but also in other products. For instance, several authors have pointed out that Samsung has managed to reflect a K-factor in the design of mobile phones. Hyundai seems to achieve the reflection of Korean themes in the automobile design through the metaphorical reflection of Korean national themes in the design of car's features. In particular, it has been mentioned that Hyundai models reflect Korean natural elements such as mountain lines, forests, trees (Van Hout, 2006) and Korean architecture styles (Cleaver, 2007) in their design. Others have suggested that Korean architecture reflects 'Korean nature' (Yoon, 2007).

When 'Korean nature' has been mentioned in the context of design, the reference is made to the perception of nature that exist in the culture, rather than to the nature itself. The lines of Korean nature, such as relief of mountains, rivers and forests, are described as smooth and proportional. This cultural myth is a belief that exists within the Korean culture and has its reflection in popular consumption texts such as arts and architecture. Cleaver (2007) suggests that "The flowing curved lines that highlight the side profile of the Elantra are a reflection of the flowing lines found in Korean architecture. It is a softer approach to the harder lines favoured by other Asian manufacturers". Yoon (2007) also notes that Korean architecture reflects the natural landscape of Korea. From this, we can highlight representative signifiers and signifieds of Korean culture:

- Design features (signifier): smooth curves, symmetry, the absence of sharp angles
- Symbolic meaning that design communicates (signified): harmony with nature, peace, tranquillity, Confucianism

## **An American Concept**

Although with both customers and firms becoming more 'globalised' it may appear to be meaningless to talk about "American cars", "European cars", or "Japanese cars" (Valdes-Depena, 2006), there are several distinct features that appear to be associated with American cars. The underlying theme behind 'American' features in the automobile design can be described with such adjectives as "muscular" (Valdes-Depana, 2006), "athletic" (Creed, 2001), "bold moves", "outgoing" and "optimistic" (Horbury, 2006). Below are the features of American design (i.e., indexical signs) and the meanings that these features represent (i.e. symbolic meanings), communicated by the designers of the American cars.

"America's cultural character is outgoing and frank, an attribute that can be reflected in cars. Concept cars like the Ford 427 - aspects of which are found in the Ford Fusion sedan - show off the brash style that marks uniquely American auto design. The outgoing character of Americans is what can be seen in their cars," (Horbury, 2006, Ford designer).

"A frank, muscular character of American culture reflects in the specific features of automobile design. For Dodge that means a big grill, a way to advertise the big engine behind it. For Dodge's sister-brand, Chrysler, it means lots of chrome, something that points to a resurgent interest in what is now called "bling." [American car companies] certainly have a history of vehicles that were very chrome-oriented. In creating a new look for Ford's Lincoln brand, designers have strived for a more subtle expression of that outgoing style" (Sam Locricchio, Chrysler Group design).

Finally, at the presentation of the new Chrysler Crossfire, the senior Vice President of Product Design in DaimlerChrysler Corporation pointed out that the design of this model reflects athletic characteristics of America culture. "A classic, clean design with a decidedly youthful flavor is reflected in the concept's sleek, athletic lines. The sculptured hood focuses attention on the Chrysler winged badge and new grille. Built as a one-piece carbon fiber body on an all-aluminum frame, the Crossfire's design seems to be more architectural than traditionally automotive".

Thus, from this discussion it is evident that the dominant theme that distinguishes "American" car design is its strife to represent such ideologies as power,

freedom, strength and, perhaps, masculinity. We highlight the following representative signifiers and signifieds of American culture:

- Design features (signifier): brash style of design, a big grill, lots of chrome, sharp edges, sleek lines, winged badge.
- Symbolic meaning that design communicates (signified): outgoing style, muscular character of American culture, Athletic characteristics of America culture, youth.

Armed with this information we proceeded to generate new car concepts for each culture. A transport designer was given a brief with the objective of transferring these signs onto digital renderings of two original car concepts. In order to ensure prototypicality and unity in both designs, the designer used an existing vehicle as template and manipulated its exterior appearance to ensure that one concept would embody signifiers and signifieds of Korean culture and the other would embody signifiers and signifieds of American culture. Extensive pretesting indicated that most consumers did not associate either concept with existing brands in the US market.

### **Measuring Consumer Response**

One method of studying implicit attitudes that is popular in psychology is the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz, 1998). The method involves a computerized task in which participants sort stimuli (words or pictures) into four different categories: two target concept categories correspond to the objects being evaluated and two contrasted attribute categories (e.g., pleasant and unpleasant words) that are paired throughout the test. On each side of the computer screen the names of one of the target categories and one of the attribute categories are presented. Stimuli appear in the middle of the screen, one at a time. These stimuli are exemplars of the four categories. Participants are instructed to respond to exemplars of each category by pressing a key on the same side in which the label appears. The analysis uses the reaction times from the tasks for which all four categories are presented on the screen. The participant is asked to do this task in two different forms on different blocks of trials, switching the pairings of attribute and concept categories.

The assumption underlying the IAT is that it is easier to give the same response to items in two categories when those categories are associated than when they are not. This is described as an implicit measure because it does not depend on participants' awareness of the existence or strength of the associations being assessed. The IAT effect is computed as the difference in average response latency between the two combined tasks divided by the standard deviation of subject response latencies in the two combined tasks, after deleting trials with unusually large response latencies and deleting subjects with excessive error rates or for whom more than 10% of trials have latency less than 300 msec (Greenwald, Nosek, and Banaji, 2003).

Our study investigated implicit preferences for two car designs and their relation to explicit preferences in order to assess the extent to which consumers would be able to discern cultural elements in distinctive designs. We told participants that they were about to evaluate the two finalists in a worldwide design competition organized by an unnamed car manufacturer. The cars were described as being designed by Jae Lee and John Smith (to correspond to the Korean and the American car, respectively). We use these common names to provide labels to the cars in the IAT but participants were not told about the countries. Pretesting did not show evidence of these names being used to correctly guess country of design for the cars.

Participants in the full study were recruited from GMI-MR US online panel. They were selected based on two criteria: age over 18 years old and own at least one vehicle. Panelists were invited to participate in our study by GMI-MR and they used their own computers and Internet connection. The study was closed after 215 submissions were collected. Incomplete and duplicate submissions were discarded and we retained 175 unique complete responses for the analysis (92 female and 83 male<sup>2</sup>). Participants first responded to a brief questionnaire that showed in the same page two views of each car and included the following items: a) liking – separate questions for liking of each car (9-point scale: 1=not at all; 9=very much); and b)

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<sup>2</sup> Full demographic profile available from the first author.

preference – 9-point scale with preference for one of the two cars (1=definitely prefer the car designed by Smith; 9= definitely prefer the car designed by Lee).

The IAT measure of implicit preference for two cars included the following words related to the self and others: (self) I, me, my, and mine; (others) they, them, their, and other. Stimuli representing the two target categories were three images for each car: front, rear, and side view<sup>3</sup>. The IAT was completed on PC-type computers using Inquisit web software (Inquisit, 2007). Stimuli were presented in the center of the computer screen. Participants were instructed to assign each stimulus to one of two categories (in single categorization practice tasks) or one of four categories (in combined categorization tasks) and to sort them quickly by using either the “E” key with the left index finger or the “I” key with the right index finger to correspond to the labels on the same side on top of the screen.

The IAT involved five classification tasks: Task 1 – single categorization for the attributes (self-others; 20 trials); Task 2 – single categorization for the two target concepts (picture of ‘Lee’ and ‘Smith’ designs; 20 trials) ; Task 3 – combined categorization task, practice and data collection trials (Smith, self, vs. Lee, others; 20 trials practice and 30 trials data collection); Task 4 – single categorization for the target concept (as in task 2) but with reversal of the side of the screen in which the labels appear (20 trials) ; and Task 5 - combined categorization task, practice and data collection trials with reversed target categories (Lee, self, vs. Smith, others; 20 trials practice and 30 trials data collection);. Participants were randomly assigned to either this order or another order in which Tasks 2 and 3 were interchanged with Tasks 4 and 5. Only the data from tasks 3 and 5 are used for the analysis. After the IAT we collected demographic information (i.e., age, gender, education, ethnicity, and income) and debriefed participants.

## Results

35 participants were excluded from the analyses because of an error rate higher than 30%. All analyses reported here involve the remaining 140 participants and we use the labels Lee and Smith to refer to the two car designs. In response to

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<sup>3</sup> These images are available electronically from the first author.

how much they like each car individually, we found that participants have positive attitudes for both cars (Mean score Lee = 5.36, Mean score Smith = 5.77) and the difference in scores was not statistically significant. When asked explicitly which of the two cars they prefer, approximately equal numbers of participants preferred each car: 58 preferred Smith and 60 preferred Lee. 22 participants did not show explicit preference for either car. Averaged over all participants, explicit evaluations indicate that participants liked both cars and they are split when it comes to determine their relative preference for either design. Evaluation of explicit measures along demographic variables did not show significant differences for any of these variables.

A comparison of the reaction times in the tasks in which images of one car were paired with words related to the self with those obtained in the task in which images of the other car were paired with words related to the self provide a measure of implicit preferences for the two cars. The implicit preference score (i.e., IAT effect) is computed as the difference in average response latency between the two combined tasks divided by the standard deviation of subject response latencies in the two combined tasks, in line with the procedure described by Greenwald, Nosek, and Banaji (2003). Positive values of the implicit preference score would indicate a strong association between Smith (i.e., American car) and the self.

A correlation analysis of implicit with explicit measures reveals significant effects. We found significant correlations between the implicit score and explicit attitudes for Lee's design (-.262,  $p < .01$ ) and between the implicit score and relative preference<sup>4</sup> (-.441,  $p < .01$ ). There was no significant correlation with explicit attitudes for Smith's design (-.112, n.s.). In sum, participants were unable to discriminate between the two cars on explicit measures. The IAT, however, revealed that over all participants, implicit preferences are slightly in favor of the American concept (Mean=.0076, Min=-1.011, Max=1.156). More importantly, implicit measures are useful to discriminate the effect of cultural elements embodied in the design of two similar products.

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<sup>4</sup> Preference was measured with Smith on the left and Lee on the right.

## General Discussion

Our study is a reflection of cultural analysis, design thinking, embodiment of culture in design and consumer response to distinctive design. In this research we analyze cultural myths and metaphors to generate specific cultural elements for a design brief and assess their impact on consumer attitudes and preferences. The study seeks to gain important insights for researchers and managers. In particular, we address the following questions: How to determine elements of consumer culture to create distinctive designs? How do designers transfer those elements to the product? To what extent are consumers able to recognize the message the designers intend to communicate? To what extent are consumers influenced (perhaps unknowingly) by their own culture? How does this affect their design preferences? Is this reflected in their purchase behaviour?

In the context of consumer culture, the design development and consumption process can be conceived at a basic level under two parallel perspectives. First, from the designer's perspective, we see that cultural environment drives the generation and popularization of myths and metaphors. These are combined with the designer's thinking and embodied in product designs that later are presented to consumers in the marketplace. Second, from the consumer's perspective, we see that cultural context also influences the construction of preferences and implicit attitudes, which in turn have a strong influence on revealed preferences in the marketplace. The argument is supported by the idea that design interpretation is influenced by the cultural environment where interpretation takes place. Therefore, meaning may be embodied in the product not only by the designer's creation but also by the observer's interpretation.

In our study we first review existing studies and a variety of media sources to pinpoint indexical and symbolic signs of two cultures (i.e., Korea and US) that can be incorporated in automobile designs. Next, a transport designer is given a brief with the objective of transferring these signs onto digital renderings of two new concept cars. One concept strongly embodies elements of Korean culture and another concept strongly embodies elements of American culture. Finally, we conducted an empirical study with 175 US car owners to assess their explicit and implicit attitudes toward these new designs. We found that consumers were unable to discern cultural

elements in the two automobile designs explicitly and were unable to show explicit preferences for either. However, cultural preferences appear to be automatic as respondents implicitly favour the design that is in line with their own cultural background and implicit measures are able to discriminate between the initially inconclusive explicit preference measures.

The wide variety of car makes and models reported in our sample did not allow us to find evidence of statistically significant relationships between car ownership and preference measures. We found, however, that owners of traditional American brands (i.e., Buick, Cadillac, Chrysler, Dodge, and Jeep) have strong implicit preferences for American culture. Surprisingly, owners of Honda and Toyota brands also show strong implicit preferences for the American, whereas owners of Ford and Chevrolet brands show weak implicit preferences for the American. Perhaps the design identity of Honda and Toyota is becoming more American, while the design identity of Ford and Chevrolet is becoming less American, and this may help to explain the current state of acceptance for these brands in the US market. Future research could shed more light on this issue. Another important aspect for future research is to determine the extent to which implicit preferences for own culture are reflected in other contexts and product categories.

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