Pursuing “Culture Authenticity” in the Design of Products for Communicating Cultural Messages

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ABSTRACT:

The current paper discusses how products can represent culture and develops categories by which “cultural authenticity” in the development of products can be classified. Moreover, the present work explores how cultural products create an impression of authenticity on customers and explains which level of authenticity attracts buyers. Results of the current study may be used in efforts to produce items with cultural identities.

Key words: cultural product, cultural authenticity, cultural identities

1. INTRODUCTION

Promoting tourism by attracting the interest of customers to the local culture of Taiwan, particularly through the production of cultural products, is a current trend. Cultural products are popular instruments presenting local culture. Local products can serve as an instrument that translates messages, narrates memories and historical events, and establishes an emotional connection with customers. However, the expression of cultural authenticity has changed to reflect the popular view and to cater to the needs of the market. When authentic artifacts are altered by market preferences, they can be transformed into new products that may be branded as “fake.” Therefore, the current study is posited from the perspective of design practice and investigates cultural elements in product design by determining which factors reflect cultural
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authenticity. A classification of the stages of cultural authenticity in product design is performed through semantic differential analysis. Finally, a table of cultural authenticity is used to catalog design factors to create a diverse array of cultural products.

2. CULTURE-DRIVEN PRODUCT: THE QUESTION OF CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY

Culture is defined in numerous ways. Broadly, culture is the way people express themselves, not only verbally, but also in their manner of clothing, lifestyle, beliefs, and practices (Crocombe, 1983). Culture is an anthropological term referring to the fundamental values, beliefs, and codes of practice that make a community what it is. The customs of a society, the self image of its members, and the things that distinguish it from other societies constitute its culture (Fincham and Rhodes, 1994). Thus, the value of culture lies not only on the fact that it allows the members of a society to recognize themselves. Non-members of a society can use culture to differentiate one group from others.

All aspects of human life are affected by culture (Hofstede, 2001), and the work of designers can be affected by their own culture (Press and Cooper, 2003). A number of arguments showed that all products are cultural, but a cultural product is a piece of merchandise that presents a cultural identity. Brett el al. (1997) propose that products can be considered a medium through which culture can be manifested and embodied. Thus, artifacts, along with values and norms, provide a way to understand a culture (Ramireatez & Zehner, 2009). Cultural differences are here to stay, and they will force designers to adapt and to differentiate their products for different cultures (Van Raaij, 2005). Cultural values can be incorporated in products by designing appropriate signs or features that represent these values (Moalosi et al., 2008). Cultural products are recognizably local and original. Using local features in design as a strategy to create product identity in the global market, designers have noted the importance of associating products with cultural features. This association enhances product value (Rung-Tai Lin, 2007). That is, cultural products are designed consciously with the function of cultural identity. A cultural product is actually a modern-day interpretation of a souvenir. On one hand, cultural products include souvenirs and products employing local cultural elements to create an identity in the global market. On the other hand, for a product to create identity in the global market, it must be embedded with a local culture.

Therefore, designers have to understand how culture is driven and how authenticity exists in cultural products because such products have to satisfy the market. In the Australian cultural product research, Cohen (1992) observes that cultural products, including mass-produced handicrafts such as Javanese batik shirts or the Maori carvings of Rotorua, that might initially appear contrived or unauthentic might eventually be recognized as authentic. He refers to this process as "emergent authenticity" and notes that such products may eventually be accepted as authentic even by experts (Asplet & Cooper, 2000). Hence, authenticity is actually an impression of customers. Moreover, authenticity can be established by people and society through time. Although "resemblance" need not include total accuracy in production, it
has often been observed that a belief in authenticity lends tremendous weight and value to cultural objects (Healy, 1994). Conversely, to understand what factors affect customers and to determine whether a cultural product is authentic or not, the method by which designers and industries convince customers must be understood. One may understand the belief of customers by asking them to define a cultural product.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. RESEARCH STRUCTURE

The current research used the grounded theory to discover the core value of cultural products and how governments constructed the concept and image of cultural products on general customers by analyzing art- and design-related magazines published by the government. Using the keywords generalized by the grounded theory, the present research constructed an analyzable scale based on a semantic differential method to test if the core value can be identified by general customers. This scale also produced four different quadrants, and these quadrants were used to construct the level of cultural authenticity as a first outcome. As the final stage of experiment, card sorting was implemented to determine what factors affect respondents’ perception of cultural authenticity. The keywords associated with cultural products were compared with the different perspectives given by the government to general customers to draw a comprehensive conclusion and to formulate suggestions. Table 1 presents the research structure.
I. Grounded theory

The present study uses the grounded theory in analyzing texts and pictures and proceeds with the three stages of coding, namely, open, axial, and selective coding. This stage generalizes the keywords associated with cultural products.

II. Semantic differential method

Using the keywords facilitates the construction of four quadrants. These quadrants are the following: high cultural content with high emotional response, high cultural content with low emotional response, low cultural content with high emotional response, and low cultural content with low emotional response. General customers are made to classify 20 cultural products based on the four different quadrants.

III. Card Sorting

The final section presents the two stages of card sorting. In the first stage, respondents were asked to write down the descriptions of cultural products that they thought had high cultural content and elicited high emotional response. In the second stage, respondents were asked to categorize the descriptions they wrote by creating short and simple keywords. In the final stage, the researcher performed a selective coding.

To sum up, the current study produced a level of cultural authenticity as outcome. The keywords associated with cultural products were compared with the different perspectives given by government to general customers to generalize how cultural authenticity could affect cognition and recognition of cultural products by general customers and even society itself. As a final outcome, the present work proposed suggestions for designers to enhance the authenticity of the cultural products they design.

3.2. AREA OF STUDY AND SAMPLING

The present study uses “Fountain of Creativity” magazine published by the General Association of Chinese Culture and the “Design” Magazine published by Taiwan Design Center as reference materials. Table 2 presents the area of study and sampling.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Cultural products</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variation of study</td>
<td>Keywords associated with cultural product.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text</td>
<td>Fountain of Creativity magazine, Design magazine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article sampling</td>
<td>Articles on cultural products or brands of cultural products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image sampling</td>
<td>A total of 56 images of cultural products were recognized in “Fountain of Creativity” magazine and “Design” magazine. Products that appeared a large number of times and numerous products made by the same brand were excluded. As a result, 20 images were recognized as image samples.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time area</td>
<td>Based on the government policy “Challenge 2008 National Development plan: Cultural and Creative Industry development plan,” the current selected the years 2009 and 2010 to examine the results of this policy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Area of study and sampling
4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present work generalizes open coding. A total of 13 keywords comprise axial coding, including “the combination of new and old,” “re-interpreting tradition,” “fitting in the modern life,” “originality and uniqueness,” “communication of cultural content,” “employment of local material,” “handmade style,” “cross-cultural collaboration,” “creation of the life value,” “creation of innovation,” “storytelling,” and “cultural heritage.” The keywords obtained from the pictures included “the combination of new and old,” “re-interpreting tradition,” “fitting in modern life,” “employment of local material,” “handmade style,” “cross-cultural collaboration,” “storytelling,” and “culture heritage.” Using the 13 keywords form text and 8 keywords from the picture, axial coding was established as the core value of cultural products, namely, cultural content, emotional response, and value recreation (Table 3).

Table 3: Coding process
In the second part of the experiment employed the semantic differential method. In a cruciform scale, four quadrants were constructed, namely, high cultural content with high emotional response, high cultural content with low emotional response, low cultural content with high emotional response, and low cultural content with low emotional response. These keywords were the result of coding from magazines. However, one of the keywords, “value recreation,” was difficult for the respondents to recognize. Respondents had to observe a product for a significant period before they can acknowledge whether a product can recreate value. Thus, value recreation was excluded in this experiment. As a result, all of the five respondents were able to differentiate the cultural products in terms of scale. This result shows that general customers recognize cultural content and emotionally respond to cultural products. Moreover, two out of the 20 sample products were recognized as having high cultural content and elicited high emotional response from all respondents, indicating that customers, in general, have the same cognition of the cultural content of a product and manifest the same emotional response.

The third and final part of the experiment used card sorting, wherein respondents were asked to describe the cultural products that they thought had high cultural content and elicited high emotional response from them. They were also asked to categorize the description using short and simple keywords. The factors that were found to affect the cognition of cultural content and the manifestation of emotional response were cultural image, personal experience, appearance, tactile impression, and function (Table 4).
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Table 4: Semantic differential scale and card sorting

The manner by which designers and the government build the perception of cultural products by customers should be analyzed if the authenticity of cultural products is to be discussed. Through the analysis of magazines published by the government, the present study finds three core values of cultural products, namely, cultural content, emotional response, and value recreation. Cultural content and emotional response not only reflect the first impression of general customers, but also serve as a medium to communicate cultural messages. Therefore, cultural authenticity is based on the utility of how cultural messages can be communicated. Customers in general are able to recognize cultural content and manifest emotional response to cultural products. If the cognitions were to be placed into different groups, the utility of the communication of a cultural message can be explained. Moreover, grouping can show the different levels of the existence of authenticity in cultural products.
The authenticity of cultural products is classified according to the following: 1. high cultural content with high emotional response; 2. low cultural content with high emotional response; 3. high cultural content with low emotional response; and 4. low cultural content with low emotional response. The utilities of 1 and 4 are obvious. However, the reason why cultural authenticity is stronger in 2 than in 3 is difficult to comprehend because without emotional response from customers, a product, even if it has high cultural content, is hardly able to effectively send a cultural message (To see the presentation on the level of cultural authenticity, please refer to Table 5).

Table 4: Level of cultural authenticity

5. CONCLUSION

By comparing the keywords generalized from the texts in magazines with the keywords obtained from card sorting, two facts were found. First, personal experience is vital. The cognition of cultural content and emotional response relates to personal memories and experiences. Therefore, in designing cultural products, designers should conduct a keen observation to understand a culture. They should also design products that the target market can recognize. Thus, the utility of the communication of a cultural message can increase, and cultural authenticity can be enhanced.

Moreover, although the core value of cultural products lies in their communication of cultural messages and promotion of a culture, for the general customers, a product is still a product that should satisfy their wants and basic needs, such as in terms of appearance, tacit impression, and function. The quality of design can affect cognition of cultural authenticity by customers. Aesthetics and creativity might be a gray area for the cognition of cultural authenticity, but designers should still work on this aspect. Enhancing the perception of cultural authenticity requires not only the interpretation of a culture, but also emphasis on the quality of design. Such an emphasis covers the relevance between the product and the cultural element that it embodies.
In the global market, customers might not be able to distinguish authenticity in cultural products. Nonetheless, as an example, authenticity can mistakenly represented as Chinese characters tattooed on foreigners. When foreigners are unaware of the meaning of the tattoo, they feel fine and are not bothered. However, once they understand the true meaning behind the characters, they might feel ridiculous. Thus, cultural authenticity and the manner by which culture is embedded in a product are important, even in a global market. In addition, culture is owned by the local people. When local people cannot recognize the authenticity of a cultural product, even if the said product can be mistaken as authentic overseas, their perception of culture becomes confused. Designing a cultural product requires the best balance between the needs of the market and cultural authenticity. Designers should consistently espouse cultural creativity, instead of solely focusing on the needs of the market.

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