How Consumers Read the Visual Presentation of Food Packaging Design in a Cross-cultural Context: a conceptual framework and case study

Linna Hu  
*College of Design and Innovation, Tongji University, China*

Hua Dong  
*College of Design and Innovation, Tongji University, China*

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HU Linna and DONG Hua*
Tongji University
* Corresponding author e-mail: donghua@tongji.edu.cn

How consumers understand products is based largely on their communication with the products, which is significantly influenced not only by the consumers’ cultural background but also by the cultural context where the communication happens. This paper viewed consumers as readers who play active roles in the dynamic structure of communication and discussed how cultural factors affect consumers in reading design. Companies are now striving to create visually desirable products that can be universally recognized in the increasingly global marketplace. ‘Lao Gan Ma’, the most popular chilli sauce brand in China, was introduced as a case study in this paper. In spite of being well-known as a cultural icon in China, ‘Lao Gan Ma’ is little known to most non-Chinese consumers abroad. This paper presented a conceptual framework to culturally analyse the visual presentation of Lao Gan Ma’s packaging design. In conclusion, it illustrated that consumers’ reading is culture specific, and it provided detailed findings of how consumers read the visual aspects of food packaging design in a cross-cultural context.

communication; visual presentation; food packaging; cross-cultural context

1 Introduction
How consumers understand design of products is based primarily on their interaction with the products (Norman, 1990), as they cannot interact directly with designers of the products. The interaction process is also a communication process by which consumers are encouraged to understand designers’ intention (Crilly, Good, Matravers & Clarkson, 2008). The consumers have been closely examined in this paper, and the term ‘consumer’ used here include not only those involved in the purchase process but also those involved in the process of visual consumption (Schroeder, 2002; Crilly, Moultrie & Clarkson, 2004). How consumers respond to design is affected by various factors (Bloch, 1995), and cultural factors play a crucial role in determining consumer purchase decision in the increasingly globalized marketplace. Companies are now striving to create
products that can be recognized as visually desirable across different cultural contexts. Packaging, as a powerful communication vehicle, contributes to the improvement of visual appeal of products in a cross-cultural context. However, because of the differences in cultural preferences and values, the visual presentation of packaging design created in a particular cultural context should be modified in order to fit in another. In this paper, a popular Chinese food product was used as an example to explore how consumers with different cultural background and experience interpret the same visual presentation of packaging.

2 Background Literature

2.1 Two Views of Communication

There are two main views in the study of communication: process and semiotics (Fiske, 2011; Shannon & Weaver, 1949; Gerbner, 1956; Jakobson & Halle, 1956; Newcomb, 1953). According to Fiske (2011), the process view regards communication as a process by which senders send messages to affect the behaviour or state of mind of the receivers through encoding and decoding. In short, it focuses on ‘the transmission of messages’. The semiotic view cares about how meanings are generated through the interaction of messages, or texts, and people. In other words, it focuses on the role of texts in culture and how they are ‘read’.

The two views in communication studies place the message receivers in different positions. From the process viewpoint, the communication fails if the message is misunderstood by the receivers, as a message is defined here as something transmitted from senders to receivers and accuracy is therefore important (Shannon & Weaver, 1949; Gerbner, 1956). Hence, receivers play a relatively passive role in the communication process. In semiotics, however, the receiver is identified as playing a more active role, for communication is no longer a linear process but a dynamic structure in which readers are used as a term to replace receivers. Messages serve as an element in this structure, and misunderstandings are not necessarily an evidence of communication failure as they may come from cultural differences between senders and receivers (Saussure, 1974; Peirce, 1958). The semiotics has paid much attention to the impacts of cultural factors on how people read messages in different ways. This paper is based on the semiotic view that gives the readers, namely consumers, more attention than other parts of communication. The reading process could produce different meanings in the end as the readers interpret messages with their own cultural background and experience.

2.2 Consumer Response

Veryzer (1999) developed a nonconscious processing explanation of consumer response, describing how response to product design was formed. According to Veryzer (1993, 1999), the nonconscious processing of consumer response involves perceiving the products and later evaluating its design’s consistency with internalized rules that have been non-consciously acquired and developed over time, and consumer response is the result of consistency or inconsistency. Products possessing high consistency with a consumer’s internalized rules facilitate more positive response than those with lower consistency. Moreover, there exists evidence that these rules may be modified or influenced by cultural forces (Segall, 1976). New elements and associations can be incorporated into the existing rules. Veryzer (1999) also pointed out that the acquisition of these rules started from the moment that individuals began to perceive the world, and different or similar perceptions may result from differences and similarities in the cultural environment in which people reside. For instance, Pittard, Ewing and Jevons (2007) have confirmed the universal preference for the divine proportion (i.e. the ratio of 1:1.618) across different cultures, for the divine proportion has been commonly found in nature and built environment, which makes it a shared experience for individuals with diverse cultural background. Research concerning design and consumer has also discussed various factors such as gender, age, attitude, personality, fashion trends, and innate preferences in affecting
peoples’ reactions to design (Holbrook & Schindler, 1994; Bloch, 1995). These factors can influence how design is perceived, and thus shaping consumers’ response to it.

2.3 Cultural Influences
Companies now are striving to build a successful brand that can be recognized across international borders. The likeability and visual transferability of their product within various cultural contexts are significant for this purpose (Pittard et al., 2007). Culture at the national level contributes to the success of design innovation (Griffith & Rubera, 2014). Thus, designers and companies should respond better to cultural differences in visual preferences. The degree to which a culture or subculture accept a particular design is influenced by the culture’s values and preferences (McCracken, 1986; Bloch, 1995). Designers deliver messages to consumers by the use of desirable elements extracted from a specific culture, and in doing so they expect the messages to provide consumers with preferable meanings within the culture. However, something, be it colour, texture or material, desirable in one culture may be not in another (Armstrong, 1991).

Culture can be classified into three layers (Lin, 2007): physical or material, social or behavioural, spiritual or ideal, which was developed on the basis of Leong’s three cultural levels, that is, the outer, the middle and the inner (Leong & Clark, 2003). Culture influences design preferences and tastes in a variety of ways. One way is through fashion trends, and another is on the basis of semiotic considerations (Jones, 1991). McCracken (1986) explored how culture meaning moves ceaselessly between its several locations in the world, claiming that culture constitutes the world by offering it meaning in that culture determines how individuals see the world and how they change the world by human effort.

2.4 Packaging Design
The recent study provided two major models that discussed the relationship between visual appeal of products and consumer response. Bloch (1995) identified cognitive and affective responses. The cognitive responses include ‘beliefs about the product’ and categorization. Garber’s (1995) model illustrated in detail how visual aspects of products affect consumer attention and product categorization. It is effective to increase the visual appeal of products by improving its packaging design.

2.4.1 Food Packaging Design
Packaging is generally defined as a container that is in direct contact with the product itself, and is consisted of two major components, the graphical and structural (Ampuero & Vila, 2006). The significance of packaging design lies in that packaging of products helps attract consumers’ attention (Schoormans & Robben, 1997; Clement, Kristensen & Grønhaug, 2013), position a product within a category (Ampuero & Vila, 2006), communicate product information, and build brand (Bloch, 1995; Underwood, 2003). Moreover, it continues to influence consumer experiences with long-lasting effect after purchase (Deng, 2009). It has been found that packaging dominates marketing effort (Dickson, 1994). Packaging has been used as a powerful communication vehicle to affect product choice, especially the choice of low-involvement products (Edward, 2013). Low-involvement products refer to those not requiring much thought and time when consumers are buying them (Silayoi & Speece, 2004). Food and drinks are typical examples of this category. Previous studies have indicated the importance of packaging design in food market (Wells, Farley & Armstrong, 2007; Vazquez, Bruce & Studd, 2003; Venter, Merwe, Beer, Kempen & Bosman, 2011).

2.4.2 Visual Presentation of Packaging Design
Consumer purchase decision is based on product attributes and brand values, which requires all of senses to be used, including touch, taste, smell, sight and sound (Lindstrom, 2005). Nevertheless, visual input overwhelms other modalities in the processing of packaging information (Posner, Nissen & Klein, 1976), thus making visual presentation more important than other aspects. The rapid growth of Internet shopping also encourages companies to spend more in the improvement of visual presentation of their product packaging. Research concerning visual aspects of packaging design
includes how various design features of package affect consumers’ perception and evaluation of the product, such as the location of the product image (Deng, 2009). The visual presentation of packaging should perform a wide range of communicative functions, such as price information and brand identity (Schoormans & Robben, 1997).

Packaging design is generally referred to as having two aspects, that is, the graphical and the structural (Underwood, 2003). The structural characteristics mainly involve shape features, and the graphical has much to do with the label (Schoormans, Berge, Laar & Bergweitzel, 2010). Both characteristics affect consumer response. Moreover, Clement et al. (2013) revealed that in the in-store environment packaging design features are able to stimulate a bottom-up process by which consumers decide what to purchase. The design features like shape, ratio and contrast are easier to get consumers’ eye contact than texts. This finding helps prevent products from being overlooked in the store.

3 Case Study

Lao Gan Ma Special Flavour Foodstuff Company, the biggest capsicum products in China with more than 20 kinds of products, has dominated the Chinese sauce market since 1990s. Lao Gan Ma, which means ‘old godmother’ in Chinese, is a household name in China. The product portfolio of Lao Gan Ma includes a wide variety of flavoured sauce, such as hot and spicy, beef soybean and chilli chicken, oil chilli and more. Soybean oil chilli sauce, as the pearl of the crown, is the most popular product among other products of Lao Gan Ma and is used as an example in this case study.

3.1 Introduction to Lao Gan Ma

Lao Gan Ma’s product is known for a Chinese woman portrayed on bottles. That woman is Tao Huabi, the creator of Lao Gan Ma chilli sauce and also the founder of the privately-owned Lao Gan Ma Foodstuff Company, who started her business from nothing and eventually became one of the most successful women in China. The life story behind Tao Huabi and her chilli sauce is fascinating (Koetse, 2017). Tao was born and raised in a poor family. At the age of 42, Tao opened a small noodle bar near a local school, selling noodle with her own homemade chilli sauce after her husband died. She often gave discount and some extra food to poor students, which made her beloved in the neighbourhood and therefore she was called ‘godmother’ there. Tao’s noodle business flourished, surprisingly not because of the noodle but that homemade chilli sauce which is so popular that sometimes customers came to purchase the sauce without the noodle. That was when Tao realized the great potential of her sauce and later turned her noodle bar into a sauce shop. In 1997, when Tao was 50 years old, Lao Gan Ma Flavour Foodstuff Company was founded. Lao Gan Ma is by now the largest and most famous chilli brand of China. Its products are also exported to more than 30 countries and regions worldwide.

3.2 Visual Presentation of Lao Gan Ma’s Packaging Design

The visual presentation of packaging design is generally considered as having two components, i.e. the graphical features and structural features (Underwood, 2003). The packaging design of Lao Gan Ma, whether in terms of the graphical features or structural features, has been barely changed since 1997. It is visually presented as a rounded glass bottle with a red label, using a small portrait of Tao Huabi and three Chinese characters of Lao Gan Ma as the logo (as shown in Figure 1).
3.2.1 Graphical Features
The graphical features usually concern colour, logo, typography, images and so on. In 1990s it was quite common that Chinese companies placed in their packaging design a real portrait of the product’s creator to indicate its authenticity, even though that looks rustic and out of date. Lao Gan Ma is a classical example of this trend. Red is used as the main colour of Lao Gan Ma’s visual identity, which is easy to explain as red is probably the most representative colour of China, and moreover, it is associated with hot and spicy taste. The application of traditional Chinese font in the brand name Lao Gan Ma as the trademark is another graphical feature of its packaging design. Those yellow circles with black and bold Chinese characters provide information about the product’s flavour and raw material, with special emphasis on its originality. Other text information on the backside of the packaged bottle includes ingredients, nutrition, expire date, storage condition, place of origin, manufacturer, contact address and phone number. All texts are in Chinese.

3.2.2 Structural Features
The structural features mainly deal with size, shape, materials and other characteristics used for manufacture. The volume of a typical soybean oil chilli sauce of Lao Gan Ma is 280g, and the version of a larger volume is also available. The rounded bottle is made of transparent glass, which allows the sauce inside to be seen to consumers. Those small pits around the bottle body shown on both upper and lower parts distinct Lao Gan Ma from others. The cylinder-shaped bottle, together with the concave middle part of the bottle body, is ergonomically designed. Overall, the structural features of Lao Gan Ma’s packaging design indicate in what way it can be used, and the bottle design helps visually communicate product attributes and brand identity.

3.3 Analysing the Visual Presentation of Lao Gan Ma’s Packaging Design: a Conceptual Framework
3.3.1 Problems of Lao Gan Ma’s Packaging Design in a Cross-cultural Context
Today, Lao Gan Ma is going international; its products are selling in more than 30 countries and regions, from North America to Africa. However, the internationalization brings about a problem of how the local meets the global. Although Lao Gan Ma sells well in overseas market, it is little known to non-Chinese. The business success is actually due to the large population of overseas Chinese, especially Chinese students who study abroad. For non-Chinese who frequently go to Chinese restaurants or supermarket, they are probably familiar with Lao Gan Ma. Nevertheless, it is difficult for them to appreciate Lao Gan Ma as Chinese do. It is even more challenging for non-Chinese consumers who seldom have contact with Chinese food to be aware of Lao Gan Ma chilli sauce as a Chinese famous product.
3.3.2 Cultural Meaning of Visual Presentation of Lao Gan Ma’s Packaging Design

In order for Lao Gan Ma to respond better to globalization, it is important to associate its product packaging with cultural features that can be understood in similar ways by both Chinese and non-Chinese. McCracken (1986) posited that people buy products not only for their utilitarian functions but also for symbolic meanings they have. Douglas Holt (2004) conceptualized cultural branding, a novel methodology of branding, the crux of which is to build a widely admired identity myth of the brand. This identity myth appeals to consumers as it contributes to alleviating the cultural contradiction in society and thus lessening citizens’ own identity burden. Culture is dynamic and changes over time. As a result, the previous identity myth may not fit with the new culture context and thus being unable to fix the contradiction. When we take a closer look at Lao Gan Ma with the cultural branding theory, it is found that the cultural meaning behind Lao Gan Ma plays a principal role in its success. Lao Gan Ma has been an iconic brand in China since 1997. That was when China joined the wave of globalization. With the rapid economic development, the life and culture in China were also changing very fast. New cultures, at that time, were formed with the impact of foreign culture, especially food culture, which leads to the awake of people’s national consciousness. Social factors that affected the myth market of China since that period of time also includes the increasing population mobility, the reform and opening-up policy, social construction transition, a tidal wave of Chinese tourist/students abroad, etc. So since late 1990s, Lao Gan Ma quickly became popular among Chinese, especially overseas Chinese people, as it met their desire to keep authentic Chinese identity. All elements of Lao Gan Ma, including the endearing name, the rustic packaging and the authentic Chinese flavour, remind Chinese of their roots. Lao Gan Ma for Chinese consumers seems to be the symbol of Chinese identity and national consciousness.

Packaging, viewed as a tangible embodiment of a particular culture, is capable of strengthening or weakening the emotional bond between consumers and brand (Underwood, 2003). One way for Lao Gan Ma to achieve international success is to increase its global recognition by the improvement of its packaging design. To do this, there is a need to explore how consumers read the visual presentation of Lao Gan Ma’s packaging design in a cross-cultural context, as consumers living in different cultural context interpret the same message in different ways. The result of interpretation may determine whether consumers will buy the product.

3.3.3 A Conceptual Framework

Based on the previous studies concerning cultural influences (Leong & Clark, 2003; Lin, 2007), a conceptual framework is presented here so as to culturally analyse the visual presentation of Lao Gan Ma’s packaging design (as shown in Figure 2).
First, the outer (tangible) level deals with physical features, such as form, colour, material, etc. In Lao Gan Ma’s case, the graphical and structural features are discussed at this level. For instance, the classical portrait of Tao Huabi, the creator and founder of Lao Gan Ma, can be classified as one part of the outer level of Lao Gan Ma’s culture. All visual features, be it the graphical or the structural, belong to the material layer of culture. Second, the middle (behavioural) level involves human-related behaviour and the scenarios in which people could use the product. For Lao Gan Ma, it is primarily about how this product can be used. For example, the packaging design is expected to indicate the appropriate amount of Lao Gan Ma to be added to different food. Third, the inner (intangible) level contains emotional content, including stories, identity and more. Lao Gan Ma’s emotional bonding with consumers lies in the symbol of Chinese identity and national consciousness. The storytelling of Lao Gan Ma also plays a part at this level. Specifically, it exemplifies the Chinese dream – everyone can achieve success and wealth as long as he or she tries hard. Moreover, it concerns nostalgia, which reminds Chinese consumers of the taste of home. The application of this framework in Lao Gan Ma is as shown in Figure 3.
3.4 Reading the Visual Presentation of Lao Gan Ma’s Packaging Design: an Application of the Conceptual Framework in a Cross-cultural Study

Reading the visual presentation of packaging design in a cross-cultural context is affected by cultural factors in many ways. One way is on the basis of symbolic cultural meanings. The symbolic meaning associated with products is a consequence of collective effort in brand management and society’s interaction with the brand, as well as the interpretation of the products (Underwood, 2003). Macro social trends often facilitate changes to symbolic meanings of products and brands (Holt, 2004; Holt & Cameron, 2010).

Figure 4 shows how consumers, both Chinese and non-Chinese, read the visual presentation of Lao Gan Ma’s packaging design in a cross-cultural context. The information presented in the figure is collected from semi-structured interviews with postgraduate students from different countries. A total of twenty interviews were conducted, over five days. Half of the interviewees are Chinese, and the rest are originally from Finland, Germany, and Russia. Each interviewee was shown a bottle of Lao Gan Ma soybean oil chilli sauce and was asked specific questions. Three questions were of interest in this study: first, how consumers think about the graphical and structural features of the packaging of Lao Gan Ma; second, how consumers understand the usage of Lao Gan Ma simply via its packaging; third, how the emotional bonding between Lao Gan Ma and consumers change in a cross-cultural context. Interviews were structured lasting from 15 to 30 minutes, and researchers...
took notes during the interview. Altogether twenty respondents participated in the interview, with twelve females and eight males. The median age was 24, ranging from 22 to 30.

Figure 4 How consumers read the visual presentation of Lao Gan Ma’s packaging design in a cross-cultural context

Without the knowledge of Lao Gan Ma either as a brand or as a product, the visual features familiar to Chinese are contrarily unfamiliar to non-Chinese consumers. The portrait of the creator, for example, is seen by some non-Chinese interviewees as an image of ‘an angry lady’. The overall packaging is evaluated by most non-Chinese interviewees as exotic, and not surprisingly, with no strong aesthetic impression. The Chinese characters and the colour help them identify it as being produced from China. However, some of them found it difficult to categorize the product, as they have not used any Chinese chilli sauce before. A product category has been defined as a group of products that share a number of similarities and attributes (Schoormans & Robben, 1997). The categorization of products depends on their conceptual similarities that vary in different cultures. For instance, at least in China, a rounded glass bottle with large opening mouth is likely to be categorized as a container of flavouri

ing sauce. As for the behavioural level, it is found from the interviews with non-Chinese that pasta sauce products are likely to be considered as visual references in this case, which may cause the misuse of Lao Gan Ma in cooking. In addition, the majority of non-Chinese interviewees said they were curious about the taste of Lao Gan Ma, even though they have little knowledge about how and where it can be used. Last but not least, the intangible level of the visual presentation of Lao Gan Ma’s packaging varies significantly from culture to culture. Unlike most Chinese consumers, non-Chinese consumers did not hear of the story behind Lao Gan Ma and had no idea of what the product or brand is about. Consequently, the emotional bonding between non-Chinese consumers and Lao Gan Ma is missing.
4 Discussion
The visual presentation of packaging design created in a particular cultural context should be modified when encountering a different cultural context. This modification is necessary as cultural factors affect how people living in different context read the same visual message in different ways. There exists research that identified associations between specific visual features and consumer response (Westerman et al., 2013). Consumer experience visual features of packaging at three different levels: the physiological, the cultural and the associational (Hine, 1995). The physiological level involves universal and involuntary response. Take colour as an example, the colour red speed the pulse, while the colour green slows it down. The associational level is related to product categorization. The cultural level is linked to visual conventions that have been established in societies where individuals develop their internalized rule systems based on the visual conventions (Veryzer, 1993, 1999). Consumers in various cultural contexts therefore read the visual message with their own rules. For example, the colour dark red (nearly black) of Lao Gan Ma chilli sauce sometimes discourage the potential consumers, for most chilli sauce known to non-Chinese consumers are bright red which evokes the image of fresh chilli. Those who have little knowledge about Chinese food may take the dark red sauce as expired. The misreading of Lao Gan Ma’s visual presentation, to some extent, provides an explanation of why it is unpopular among non-Chinese abroad.

In order for companies to produce internationally successful product, the cultural integration was proposed as an effective approach, concerning the integration of one particular culture and another, and by doing this it is possible to create a universal acculturation (Lin, 2007; Leong & Clark, 2003). The cultural elements of integration should be carefully selected. In the case of Lao Gan Ma, the cultural integration aims to enable its packaging design to visually communicate similar cultural meaning in the cross-cultural context for both Chinese and non-Chinese. This cultural integration intends to develop a new visual presentation of Lao Gan Ma’s packaging design by incorporating design features embodied contemporary western culture into Chinese cuisine culture. Despite the less popularity of spicy food in the western food culture, competitors such as Sriracha and Tabasco are globally welcome. In fact, the cultural integration requires a modern expression of Chinese culture to be created. Chinese people have tight emotional connections to Lao Gan Ma, but the old story is supposed to respond better to the globalization by ‘speaking again’ in new cultural contexts, so as to raise global awareness of Lao Gan Ma as a classical Chinese chilli sauce.

In addition, there is a need to take a larger diversity of cultural scenarios and contexts into consideration, so as to make necessary changes in the packaging design of the same product depending on the area where it is marketed. Each positioning strategy is associated with specific graphical features of the packaging design in some or all of the visual variables (Ampuero & Vila, 2006). Thus, the research on how cultural factors affect consumers’ reading of the visual presentation of the product packaging may contribute to the planning of marketing strategy. For this purpose more issues need to be considered. Creusen and Schoormans (2005) outlined six different roles of product appearance for consumers, i.e. communication of aesthetic, symbolic, functional information, ergonomic information, attention drawing, and categorization. These roles probably make sense to packaging design as well. Take categorization as an example, on one hand, consumers prefer unique packaging which stands out from other competitors. On the other hand, if the package deviations are too strong to be grouped into a specific category as perceived by consumers, the product might be unacceptable. A compromise thus has to be made.

5 Conclusion
Following with the semiotics view of communication, consumers in this paper are seen as readers who play an active role in the dynamic structure of communication. How consumers respond to a product largely determines the consumer purchase decision, and therefore it is useful to understand the factors affecting consumer response formation. Previous studies explored how various factors,
e.g. gender, age, personality, innate preferences, affect consumer response to design (Holbrook & Schindler, 1994; Bloch, 1995). Nevertheless, there is yet inadequate research on the role of cultural factors in shaping consumer preference. Veryzer’s theory suggested that the internalized processing algorithms, or rule systems, that direct consumer response to design are nonconsciously learned very early in life and developed over time (Veryzer, 1993, 1999). The rule systems could be largely influenced by culture and convention ((Pittard et al., 2007)). Similarly, it has been found that consumers in different cultural context see things differently. The design feature preferred in one culture may be not in another.

Due to the increasingly globalized marketplace, companies are now making huge effort to design globally desirable products. To do this, there is a need to create likeability and visual transferability of their products within cross-cultural contexts. Improving packaging design is an effective way to increase the visual appeal of products within various cultural contexts, for packaging is a powerful communication tool in affecting product choice, in particular, the choice of low-involvement products like food and drinks (Edward, 2013). Lao Gan Ma, the most popular Chinese chilli sauce brand since 1990s, is a household name in China. Although Lao Gan Ma has become extremely successful in China, it still struggles for a better international recognition. The case study of Lao Gan Ma introduced in this paper explored how Chinese and non-Chinese consumers read the visual presentation of its packaging design in a cross-cultural context. The conceptual framework contributes to the analysis of the cultural meaning in the visual presentation of Lao Gan Ma’s packaging design. Semi-structured interviews with students from different countries were used as an approach to collect information. It suggested products be packaged with different visual presentation depending on the area where it is marketed. The results will provide companies and designers with a better understanding of how to create globally recognizable products by identifying cultural preferences and values in visual aspects of product packaging.

6 Limitations and Further Research
A couple of limitations of the case study have to be noted here. First of all, only a small number of interviews were conducted in this study, and the interviewees were selected from a specific group (i.e. international students at Tongji University). Secondly, the products were not evaluated in the usual in-store environment where more factors affect consumers’ response and their product choice.

For further research, the sample should be more carefully selected, and a larger number of case studies should be conducted to support and develop the findings. Additionally, further research could be done to make use of other methods, such as observation in in-store environment.

7 References

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About the Authors:

HU Linna, a final-year postgraduate student at College of Design and Innovation, Tongji University, China. Her research interest is in understanding the nature of consumers with different cultural background and how cultural factors can affect design communication in the global context.

DONG Hua, Ph.D., a professor at College of Design and Innovation, Tongji University, China. She has extensive experience of cross-cultural and interdisciplinary design research. Her research interest is in inclusive design, design education, design process, design management, and design research methodology.