What do YOU think about this car?

Perception and meaning of automotive design in New Zealand and Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

This investigation examines the relationship between perception and meaning on automotive exterior designs in New Zealand and Taiwan. The Visual Product Experience framework [Warell, 2007] categorises perception and meaning Impression, Recognition, Appreciation, Association and Comprehension. This study uses the VPE framework to examine the perception and meaning of the specific car models from BMW and Lexus in two markets. It did so through the collection of qualitative data from questionnaires conducted through a semi-structured interview, with a total of 60 participants in automotive-related events in both New Zealand and Taiwan.

The background of this project was established through the secondary research that explored a wide range of topics including the theoretical knowledge review, characteristics of the markets and design philosophies of the car brands. Through these researches, the differences in the market characteristics and design focuses of the brand BMW and Lexus are verified.

The findings indicate that the BMW 320i has strong visual impression on consumers in both markets with regard to aesthetics and identity. This strong visual impression was attributed by the overall coherent visual composition of the 320i. The design features of the Lexus IS250 were more recognised by Taiwan consumers than New Zealand consumers.

The visual features designed to express and describe on both cars were perceived consistently by consumers in both market. Interestingly, the Lexus Arrowhead motif was not recognised as an overall visual appearance, but as individual details. However, the grille of the Lexus as not consistently indicated as a signifier of the Lexus brand. This was in contrast to the BMW 'Kidney Grille', which was consistently recognised as a BMW signifier.

The results of this study were consistent with the findings of the literature review. This is evident because the participants from Taiwan strongly associate the cars with their values in society. Between the two markets, differences in interpretation of the design features is apparent. Taiwan consumers appreciates smaller details more than New Zealand consumers.

The VPE framework is proven to be a highly comprehensive model in this research project. This is because it allows categorisations and hence an inclusive understanding on the design intents and analysis on the 320i/IS250 both in the secondary and primary research design and analysis.
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Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary global economy, designing for markets with different socio-cultural backgrounds has become a central issue for both product companies and industrial designers. This research seeks to examine the relationship in product perception and meaning between a Western and Eastern market, specifically focusing on automotive design. By further understanding the culturally influenced perception of motorcars, different characteristics on visually perceived meanings and preferences between these markets can be identified.

1.1 Background and significance

A vast amount of marketing-related research commissioned by product companies has been conducted to understand different market characteristics and consumer preference. The scope of such market research is often limited to overall consumer preferences, which require periodical updates to maximise product competitiveness. Moreover, the reasoning and meaning behind aesthetic preferences has not been the focus of most of this marketing research.

The field of research that studies the relationship between human perceptions on products is still in its infancy compared to other related academic fields of arts, marketing and psychology. This topic is, however, gaining increasing interest amongst academics, industries, designers, and design schools around the world. This all-round interest has grown in importance in the light of academic research which offers more authority to designers’ communication and design decision-making: a decision-making process which has up to now relied upon the designer’s subjective reasoning to support her/his own preferences and opinions.

Within newly established theories and research on product meaning and perception, few [e.g. Fjellner, Stridsman-Dahlstrom, 2004] have investigated the relationship between internal and external perceptions and meanings in product design. This comparative research study focuses on car design and markets in New Zealand and Taiwan. It will focus on mapping the visual features of two cars with a different design focus, but from the same market range for compatibility. As a basis for the design and discussion of the primary research, the market profile of the 320i and BMW will be compared against the IS250 and Lexus.

In this study, the word “Consumer” refers to members of the public who might experience the products, either through visual perception or physical interaction, but not necessarily owning the product. This research aims to examine the visual experience of perception and meaning on automotive exteriors. “Experience” is the process through time whereby people encountered the event which resulted a psychological reaction. This
process contributes to people's memories of a particular feeling that occurred through the event, and contributes to their impression of the process.

1.2 Central proposition
The central proposition of this research states that cultural values have a major influence on the process of meaning and perception in cars. This project will cover two aspects of the meaning in design; this includes the intended meaning from the car manufacturers, and the perceived meaning of exterior design on consumers. To understand the various aspects of perception and meaning of automotive designs, a framework is required to allow the analysis and identification of the intended meanings at various levels, including formal aesthetics and design semantics. This research adopts the Visual Product Experience (VPE) framework by Warell (2007) as its base structure.

1.3 Research aim
The aim of this study is to examine and evaluate the relationship between product meaning and visual perception of two automotive designs in two markets. An important aspect of the literature review is to identify theories and other frameworks on the topic of design semantics as the basis for this research.

This research seeks to address the following questions:

- What visual elements are perceived as signifiers (i.e. carry meaning) and what meanings are conveyed by those visual elements?
- How are the two cars perceived and interpreted in the two markets?
- What visual elements are perceived as characteristic for the selected models (i.e. are visually distinctive)?
- Are there any differences in perception and meaning in different markets? What are those differences?
- What are the intended messages and aesthetic qualities from the point of view of the manufacturers (i.e. the internal design intent)?
- Do internal intentions and external perceptions map? What are the differences and coherencies?
- What are the implications for design?
1.4 Scope of research
This research project is limited to assessing the differences in the perceived meanings of two cars for consumers based in different cultures. The selection of cars for this research is based on the differences in their associated brand heritage and design focus. The selected car models are the 320i by German car maker BMW, and the IS250 from Japanese car maker Lexus. The chosen countries for this study are New Zealand and Taiwan. This selection of New Zealand is due to its significance as a Western country, and the ease of access to local literature and participant groups. Similarly, the selection of Taiwan is based on its Confucius-influenced socio-cultural background and the geographical and language differences to New Zealand.

The selected focus participant group is car enthusiasts due to their potential interest and likelihood of having good levels of knowledge in the design and styling of cars. Although it is desirable to study perception from a targeted consumer group, this particular group is not included in this research as the project's aim is to study the relationship between meaning and perception of cars in different markets. This exclusion is also due to potential responses bias if the participant groups are included on the customer database from a premium car brand. Also the accessibility to the database of the targeted consumers raised issues over customer privacy.