

Cultural Differences in Design-based Product Evaluation: The Role of Holistic and Analytic Thinking

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Consumers base initial impressions on the visual design of products and packages; initial impressions, in turn, then guide behavior. While a growing body of research attests to the ability of specific design factors and elements to influence consumer evaluation of salient product characteristics, little is known on what drives these inferences, specifically how individuals learn to link visual elements with evaluative outcomes.

This dissertation makes at least two important contributions to better understanding how individuals form evaluative judgments based on visual design characteristics. First, it distinguishes between implicit and explicit learning. Second, it offers a novel perspective on how a cultural variable, namely a person's analytic versus holistic processing style, influences the relationship between design and product evaluation. Analytic thinking, the tendency to focus on single objects detached from their context, is more common with people from Western countries, whereas holistic thinking, the 'big picture' approach, occurs mainly with people from Eastern countries.

Two empirical studies, both of them involving extensive pre-tests and two culturally diverse subsamples, examine design-based evaluative processes and outcomes with respondents in China and Germany. The results indicate that Easterners perceive package design more favorable than Westerners, and that these differences trace back to different thinking styles. Additional findings point at how package design (a visual stimulus) influences consumers' product evaluation. More detailed findings include that, from the whole package perspective, Eastern consumers evaluate quality more favorably than Western consumers. From the specific design elements perspective, Eastern consumers perceive higher degrees of elemental changes than Western consumers. This ability is also evident with Easterners' ability to detect subtle changes in the design of entire packages.

Implications center around advancing research on consumer learning of design – product links and on aiding managers in better matching product package design to culturally diverse target groups.