

Open Inquiry Archive

ISSN 2167-8812
<http://openinquiryarchive.net>

Volume 2, No. 2 (2013)

Culture and Design Education: Pedagogical Discourse for a Globalized World

Brooke N. Scherer

Abstract. In an age of rapidly expanding connectivity, multi-cultural relationships, and innovative technologies, principles that once shaped essential components of graphic design have drastically shifted focus from more locally defined audiences to ones centralized around a global spectrum. These advancements have resulted in a need for specialized knowledge—in both design education and industry practice—that requires not only an understanding of why, but also *how* we visually communicate to societies different than our own. Modernizing the field of graphic design to fit these global needs has become necessity—a change that must begin within the classroom. On that account, this paper will introduce primary foundations and cultural characteristics that help define the belief and behavior systems of individual societies, provide supporting industry examples and assessments of culturally specific design communication, and propose detailed methodological approaches aimed at updating and advancing design education to match the needs of a rapidly advancing globalized world.

The late twentieth century was a time of great change. The advent of Internet connectivity and the World Wide Web drastically redefined the way humans live and communicate. Where cross-cultural interactions, relationships, and business practices once existed primarily for the wealthy and powerful, we now find these options readily available to all. One major area affected by this transformation is the field of Graphic Design. For the first time, industry professionals are afforded opportunities to work and design for international audiences, all of whom define key components of visual messaging in much different ways. As a direct result, an immediate need to

reassess and reformat the contemporary practice of graphic design has emerged—one that ensures practitioners are adequately prepared to meet the growing demands of a globally expanding industry.

Recent examples support this evolving demand for culture awareness. American-based company Hertz Rent–A–Car made a detrimental advertising mistake in the late 1990s due to a misunderstanding regarding color association within their Asian market. When introducing the launch of their #1 Gold Club Membership, Hertz—the corporate colors of which are black and gold—mailed information to their global customers enclosed in a black envelope. Before sending, Hertz excluded their logo from the envelope, leaving only the addressee information printed on the front. While this campaign was successful in the United States and Europe, where receiving a black envelope in the mail has no immediate symbolic undertones, the outcomes were disastrous when presented to Japanese customers. This is because in Japan the reception of a such a piece signifies a family member’s death announcement (McCarron 2003, 21). As quoted by Ashmita Goswami, Senior Strategist for Razorfish, “Japanese citizens were extremely upset thinking they were receiving horrible news and instead they found a membership for Hertz’s Gold Club” (McCarron 2003, 21).

Other global chains to come under fire in recent years include McDonald’s and Burger King. In 2005, McDonald’s ran a television campaign within the Chinese market where they presented a man kneeling before a retail vendor, pleading that his expired coupon for services still be honored. McDonald’s follows this message by reassuring the audience they will never have to beg for discounts at the restaurant because coupons remain valid for an entire year. Although meant only in humor, the Chinese public found the advertisement highly offensive, forcing McDonald’s to pull the commercial from the air (*China Daily* 2005). As quoted by an angry Chinese consumer, “What a shame that the commercial portrayed Chinese consumers as willing to bend to such a petty interest” (*China Daily* 2005, para. 5).

With intentions of creating a more tongue-in-cheek advertisement, Burger King’s 2009 European print campaign for their new “Tex Mex” burger also sent heads spinning. In order to highlight the sandwich’s “South of the Border” taste, the advertisement depicts a brute, Westernized cowboy perched against a fence alongside a midget Mexican wrestler draped in his country’s flag (Reuters, 2009) (See Image A at website.) [Note: All images for this article are available at: http://brooke.utarts.com/?page_id=117] After discovering the advertisement in

Spain, Mexican Ambassador Jorge Zermono requested the spot be immediately pulled. As quoted by Zermono, “This advertisement denigrates the image of our country and uses improperly Mexico’s national flag. . . . Mexico has strict laws prohibiting the defamation of the flag” (Reuters 2009, para. 3–5).

When correctly presented, however, cross-cultural design not only has the potential to be extremely successful, but also exemplary. In 2008, PepsiCo Inc. drastically refashioned its iconic Pepsi can from blue to red within their Chinese market to celebrate the country’s team in the Olympic games (see Image B at website). Although appearing to some as mimicking their Coca-Cola counterpart, the new Pepsi can was not only a huge success, but was never confused for their competition (Chao and McKay 2007). In this specific case, PepsiCo Inc. clearly understood that to the Chinese, the color red strongly symbolizes luck, good fortune, and celebration (Peterson and Cullen 2000, 148). As supported by BevMark’s Mr. Pirko, “If you’re going to a party you wear the right clothes, and the right clothes in China are red” (Chao and McKay 2007, para. 23).

Altering the can’s standard blue exterior in support of China’s Olympic Team was not the first time Pepsi had transformed its appearance. In 2006, they ran a similar campaign in Brazil by which the can’s color was changed to yellow and blue in support of the country’s World Cup participation (Chao and McKay 2007).

Successful global campaigns like that of PepsiCo.—where the individuals responsible for cross-cultural design fully understand visual messaging appropriate to their audience—seem a rarity. More commonly, a lack of proper background knowledge—or even an awareness that differences exist—often lead to what is known as “cultural imperialism,” where groups of people attempt to force their own cultural practices and beliefs onto societies unlike their own (Snow 2002, 29). In fact, according to Marieke de Mooij (2004):

Many international marketing managers are convinced that their own ideas or practices represent universal wisdom and try to impose them on everybody. Most global advertising agencies and many multinational companies have Anglo-American management. Their universalism makes them focus on the similarities and ignore the differences (12).

As a direct result of these issues, graphic designers face a new and very important challenge—one that acts to replace these preconceived notions and imperialistic practices with appropriate cultural knowledge in order to create visually communicative messaging in relevant and non-offensive ways. For students working toward entering the field, a shift in educational pedagogy and preparation is key. Tenured designers, however, must also attend to such issues. While providing a full understanding of each demographics' fundamental characteristics would be impossible, putting forth an immediate awareness of such applicable cultural design components is the underlying goal.

Cultural Framework

Although there are many cultural components that define the beliefs and behavior systems of a social group, the following have been found to play specific roles in design communication: cultural dimensions, as explored and defined by psychologist Geert Hofstede; environmental factors, as explored and defined by Richard Nisbett; image construction, based on theories related to cultural dimension and environmental factors; consumer behavior, as prescribed by cultural dimension; and the unique symbolic associations and relationships assigned to areas such as color, imagery, and iconography.

As defined by Hofstede (2004), culture is “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (4). According to Hofstede (2004), the following five “cultural dimensions” form a network of characteristics that help lay the foundational groundwork for each individual society:

1. Power distance -- the way in which a society deals with equality versus inequality, where the primary focus rests on social hierarchies and the prominence (or absence) of class separation;
2. Individualistic versus collectivistic — the role an individual plays in society versus that of the group, where individualistic cultures place value in the interests of an individual, and collectivistic cultures focus on the interests of social groups;

3. Femininity versus masculinity—whether males within a specific culture are expected to display masculine traits only, or if society allows them to display both feminine *and* masculine traits. Additionally, masculine cultures emphasize importance in success and achievement, while feminine cultures pay more attention to the quality of life and care of others;
4. Uncertainty avoidance—the way a society adapts and behaves to uncertainties of the future. The higher the uncertainty avoidance, the more a culture’s need for rules and structure, a harder work ethic, and a consistent mode of security within their lives; and
5. Long-term versus short-term orientation—the importance of an individual’s or group’s actions based on immediate versus future gain and/or results (Hofstede 2004, 46–214).

When assessing cultures and their specific dimensions, interesting cross-links emerge, which allow us to group individual societies together into larger categories. For example, “Many countries that score high on the power distance index score low on the individualism index and vice versa” (Hofstede 2004, 82). A Cultural Dimension Comparison Chart (see Image C on website) shows how fifty-nine international countries rank based on Hofstede’s five dimensions. (Note: when interpreting the chart, the smaller the number, the higher the country’s rank on the spectrum.) After studying this chart, the following connections can be made: Countries that rank high on the power distance index also rank low on the individualistic index, signifying the relationship between collectivistic in-groups and the separation of class in high power distance societies. Additionally, most countries that score high on the masculinity index also score low on the power distance index. However, where masculinity and femininity directly relate to power distance (which has a direct correlation to the individualistic/collectivistic designation), it has little to no association with the rank in individualism versus collectivism. According to Hofstede (2004), while masculine cultures are focused around individual ego, feminine cultures are more focused on feelings and relationships, which carry no predetermined associations defined by an in-group (123). Relationships also commonly exist between uncertainty avoidance cultures and

masculine/feminine cultures. As shown, the more feminine a culture, the stronger the uncertainty avoidance, and vice versa. Finally, although few countries rank on the long-term orientation scale, most have a correlation with collectivism. The more long-term oriented a country ranks, the higher it ranks on a collectivistic scale, and vice versa.

Closely related to these dimensions—specifically to that of the individualist versus collectivistic dichotomy—is the work of Richard Nisbett, who found that environmental factors greatly affect how one perceives their social context. For example, Eastern (collectivistic) cultures believe a person (or individual object) is defined by the immediate surroundings (or the group); without it, that particular object could not exist. Comparitively, Western (individualistic) cultures believe that an object’s meaning is completely detached from its surrounding environment; the focus is the object, not the context in which it is placed. This phenomenon is referred to as “field dependence,” or “a relative difficulty in separating objects from the context in which they are located” (Norenzayan and Nisbett 2000, 134).

To test this theory, Nisbett conducted a study (with a sample of Japanese students from Kyoto University and American students from the University of Michigan) by which he showed selected participants eight animated underwater scenes (see Image D at website), each displaying a diverse group of fish characterized by elements such as color, size, and speed. Supporting content was representative of a realistic underwater scene and included plants, fish, rocks, and bubbles. Students were shown the underwater animation twice, each in twenty second durations. End results of testing concluded that a relatively similar amount of American and Japanese students referenced some aspect of the centralized fish, however the Japanese students made 60% more reference to background objects found in the animation. Additionally, the Japanese students were more apt to refer to the animation and its elements as “in the pond” (full context), where the American students specifically referenced centralized fish and its characteristics (Nisbett 2003, 90). Through this research, Nisbett confirmed the hypothesis that Westerners are more likely to recognize characteristics of individual elements within an environment, while Easterners surmise object definition and meaning through surrounding contextual components (Nisbett 2003, 89).

An additional study by Masuda, Mequita, Tanida, Ellsworth, Len, and Van de Veerdonk, published in the article, “Placing the Face in Context: Cultural Differences in the Perception of Facial Emotion,” explores differences in the interpreted meaning of an individual’s facial

expression in relationship to the subject's given social context (see Image E at website). Here, American students from the University of Michigan and Japanese students from Kyoto University were shown two cartoon videos, each illustrating a centralized individual standing in front of a group of supporting characters, all of whom express distinct, constantly changing emotions. Results revealed that 72% of the Japanese participants felt emotions of the centralized person were influenced by those of the supporting background characters, while 72% of the American students reported the emotions of the centralized figure were *not* indicative of the emotions expressed by the background figures (Masuda et al. 2008, 368–70). In other words, “Westerners see emotions as individual feelings, whereas Japanese see them as inseparable from the feelings of the group” (Masuda et al. 2008, 365).

The connection between cultural dimensions and environmental context also bear direct relationship to the image construction of a visually communicative message. For example, in masculine cultures, men are primarily the main focus of an image. They are often shown in formal attire, participating in authoritative roles, and are associated with objects that represent status and wealth. In feminine cultures, however, females and family relationships—rather than distinctive rank between genders—are portrayed. For individualistic cultures, usually one person is present. When a group is illustrated, the focus lies on one individual only; and when supporting characters are present, they often look at or away from the centralized individual. In collectivistic cultures, however, only groups of interacting individuals are shown. In high power distance cultures, a distinct leader appears and is often situated in a formal, serious pose. In low power distance cultures, however, no obvious hierarchy exists within an image. Individuals are often shown in a casual nature with no specific control over another (Bansal and Zahedi 2006, 1287–91).

The link between cultural dimension and consumer behavior also plays a large part in the construction of visually communicative messaging. For example, where individualistic cultures are more focused on purchasing items which highlight one's status, wealth, image, or success, collectivistic cultures are prone to make purchases that focus on the quality of life and for the overall group (remember, the individual cannot exist without the whole). Another interesting correlation between cultural dimension and consumer behavior centralizes around uncertainty avoidance. Where high uncertainty avoidance cultures desire more whole foods, products that provide cleanliness, and safety (all fear of the unknown), low uncertainty avoidance cultures are

more attracted to the idea of convenience, self-image, and innovation, finding attraction to commodities such as fast food, beauty products, and technology (de Mooij 2004, 110–171).

Lastly, understanding the various definitions derived from color and symbolic associations are also important in design communication. For example, where the color red signifies warning, death, and passion in the United States, it represents fertility in India and good luck and celebration in most Asian cultures (as seen in the PepsiCo. example). In Turkey and Africa, blue means fertility and healing, where it signifies truth and justice in Egypt (Peterson & Cullen 2000, 10–176). Symbolically speaking, where most Americans perceive such a creature as an anaconda to be terrifying, Africans worship the reptile, for it signifies the Earth and rain. For the Chinese, anacondas symbolize wealth (Miller, Brown, and Cullen 2000, 58–136). Lastly, being equally mindful of more iconic symbolism (such as a country's flag, as in the Burger King example) is also essential to culture and design communication.

As communicators responsible for delivering appropriate visual messaging to various demographics across the globe, it is essential that we fully understand the fundamental role the aforementioned components play within design. To aid in this task, a Cultural Design Components Matrix (Scherer 2010) has been created to allow a more in-depth assessment of how factors such as cultural dimensions, environmental context, image construction, consumer behavior, color, and symbolism interact to communicate proper content to an intended audience. Additionally, this matrix was designed to be used as a tool in helping designers not only break apart, but also create appropriate cultural messaging within any form of visual communication.

The Cultural Design Components Matrix (see Image F at website) works by grouping Hofstede's five dimensions (DIM) with ideas of environmental context (EC), image construction (IC), consumer behavior (CB), and color (CLR)/symbolic (SYM) use. Because Hofstede's dimensions are meant to act as the primary foundation of these studies, they are placed along the X-Axis and grouped together in accordance to the larger relationships previously defined by Hofstede (as listed in the Cultural Dimension Comparison Chart). Therefore, Individualism (IND), Masculine (MAS), Low Power Distance (LPD), Weak Uncertainty Avoidance (WUA), and Short-Term Orientation (STO) are located to the left of the Y-Axis, and Collectivism (COL), Feminine (FEM), High Power Distance (HPD), Strong Uncertainty Avoidance (SUA), and Long-Term Orientation (LTO) are all listed to the right of the Y-Axis. Additionally, the overall symbolism designation is located on the X-Axis, where xSYM (to the left of the Y-Axis)

represents the absence of color or symbolic meaning within a message versus SYM (to the right of the Y-Axis), which represent the presence of symbolism (color or image) within the design. When using the Matrix, points should be placed at cross-sections of corresponding components where applicable.

A series of multi-cultural advertisements created by AdAsia for Verizon Wireless (complemented with corresponding matrices) provides a prime example of a successfully designed cross-culture visual communication campaign (see Images G – I at website). The first advertisement (see Image G on website)—designed for the U.S. audience—shows a single, confident, centralized businessman announcing his achieved success through the use of Verizon Wireless’s Iobi products. Placing focus on the “I” (I), Verizon primarily supports Hofstede’s individualistic, masculine, weak uncertainty avoidance, and short-term orientation dimensions by suggesting trust in technology to achieve personal profit and gain. The absence of specific background information also supports Nisbett’s research regarding environmental context and its relationship to image construction. No direct image or color symbolism exists.

The next example (see Image H on website) shows two educators (one male and one female) energetically engaging with a group of adult students. Here, Verizon speaks to their Korean-American audience by encouraging the public to volunteer in ways that can best contribute to society and the “whole.” By this, the advertisement specifically highlights the culture’s collectivistic, feminine, low power distance, and long-term orientation attributes. Additionally, whereas the Western advertisement used no contextual imagery within their design, this message could not be successfully achieved without emphasizing the interaction between teachers and students.

Lastly, Verizon Wireless uses color and symbology to advertise their service in a Chinese New Year advertisement (see Image I on website). By combining the colors red and gold (a representation of success and status) (Peterson and Cullen 2000, 148–49) with the image of a fish (which are thought to bring luck and wealth, specifically when eaten at a New Year’s feast) (Baker 1993, 277), Verizon strongly speaks to their collectivistic, masculine, long-term oriented audience. Through the corresponding matrix, we see China’s underlying cultural dimensions—as well as the integration of color and image symbology—all helping to construct a successful message intended for a specific audience.

A comparison of these matrices (see Image J on website) shows a considerable shift in the cultural components used to create each design. Where the compositional elements identified in the American advertisement solely exist left of the Y-Axis, those primary elements identified in the Korean-American advertisement—as well as the Chinese New Year Verizon advertisement—cross over to the right side of the matrix, proving the same ideas used to create the American advertisement could *not* be transferred to an Asian market.

Changing the Future of Design

The area of Graphic Design is a continually evolving discipline that both adapts to and advances through modern-day visually communicative needs. The rapid increase of globalization, as well as ongoing availability of day-to-day cross-cultural interaction, has thrust our field forward thereby creating an immediacy to understand demographics unlike our own—not only for the purpose of personal relationships, but in order to deliver intended messages in the correct manner. This demand to adjust our visually communicative standards from the immediate locale into a worldwide spectrum is the future of design; a change that must begin in the classroom.

Ideally, this change would involve a complete redesign of graphic design curriculum in order to fit the needs of global communication. Realistically, however, time and resources needed to complete such a task would negate the immediacy of the matter. So for now, the primary objective is to integrate individual or semester-long projects that help create foundations of cultural awareness so that students leave academic properly prepared for futures as visual communicators. Main goals of these projects are that students ask, and ultimately be able to successfully answer, the following questions:

1. *“What is your real message?”* What is the exact message the client is trying to communicate?
2. *“Who are you talking to?”* Who is your audience? What is their demographic? What are their beliefs, traditions, and social attitudes? What specific audience characteristics are important?

3. *“What will make them look?”* What design components are most important within the given visual communication? Are there certain colors or symbolic elements that are important to the audience? Does imagery place a specific role?
4. *“Have I used their prejudices?”* Properly understanding the audience’s attitudes, needs, and beliefs is essential to proper visual communication.
5. *“Is the balance right between words and images?”* Does a prescribed balance already exist for the audiences which you are communicating the message? Are the images composed correctly?
6. *“Does my presentation mean what I think it does?”* Has the designer properly created a visual message that represents the intended audience? (Morgan and Welton 1992, 138–42)

A set of project examples which can be used to help teach cultural awareness and answer the aforementioned questions include the following:

1. *Poster Design and Full-Class Presentation* (Individual or Group) -- Students are responsible for creating a set of posters that illustrate important traditions and characteristics (including cultural components) of an assigned culture. Students then present their findings to the class. No two students or groups may choose the same demographic—in theory, this should allow students to walk away from presentations with a broader range of cultural knowledge.
2. *Local Company Goes Global* -- Students are placed in groups and required to create global campaigns for American companies who have yet to venture their business overseas. Students are not only required to research the culture in which the company would be advertising, but also companies of similar retail or operations within the foreign market to help assess components used in preexisting design communication. As in the poster project, students present their findings in a formal presentation.
3. *Redesign Preexisting Design Communication* -- Student explore unsuccessful advertising/design campaigns such as that of Burger King or McDonalds, fully evaluate the miscommunication, and recreate a more appropriate visual message.

4. *Incorporating the Cultural Component into the Full-Semester Course* -- If possible, the cultural component will be worked into preexisting design projects. Although research and lectures would be necessary, audience demographics would shift to one or more foreign markets. Presentations of cultural findings and design results will help enhance the overall learning outcomes for all students within the class.
5. *Long-Distance Project* -- A more hands-on approach entails working side-by-side with another university where students are able to research and create design through real-world scenarios.

Whichever method chosen, it is essential that the Cultural Design Components Matrix is used as a primary teaching tool, for it bears pedagogical promise in helping students bridge defining cultural components with the practice of design communication. Continual instructor direction, feedback, and critique will be key in helping students both understand and utilize the matrix.

The design of visual communication for worldwide audiences is centralized around the concept that culture largely influences the way a message is received and understood. It is not enough to assume that our own societal definitions hold true for everyone. Rather, it is crucial to recognize that components such as cultural dimensions, environmental context, image construction, consumer behavior, and symbolic meanings all represent different things to different people. Shifting one's practical knowledge to include that of global demographics must become a primary focus of graphic design discussion, pedagogy, and practice. The future of design eagerly sits upon our doorstep; it is time we embrace these changes and continue on as successful visual communicators in this ever-evolving globalized world.

Brooke Scherer received her MFA in Graphic Design from Iowa State University. She is Assistant Professor of Graphic Design at the University of Tampa, where she teaches courses in graphic design foundations and application, typography, the history of graphic design, and sustainable design, and where she recently redesigned of the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design program. Her research focuses on culture and visual communication, sustainable design, and technology/social media integration in the design classroom.

Brooke's professional and student work can be found on her website at: www.brookescherer.com. She can be contacted at: bscherer@ut.edu.

References

- AdAsia. 2007. *AdAsia website*. Retrieved from <http://www.adasia-us.com>.
- Baker, K. 2012. "Symbolism in Cross-cultural Trade: Making Chinese Symbols Work for You." In *Societal Culture and Management*, edited by T. D. Weinshall, 271–78. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Bansal, G. and F. Zahedi. 2006. *Proceedings of the Twelfth Americas Conference on Information Systems: Exploring Cultural Contents of Website Images*. Acapulco, Mexico.
- Chao, L. and B. McKay. 2007. "Pepsi Steps into Coke Realm: Red, China." *The Wall Street Journal*, September 2.
- China Daily. 2005. "McDonald's Ad Banned Due to Insulting Plot." *China Daily*, June 23. Retrieved from http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-06/23/content_453733.htm.
- De Mooij, M. 2004. *Consumer Behavior and Culture: Consequences for Global Marketing and Advertising*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hofstede, G. and G. J. Hofstede. 2004. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. Columbus, OH: MacGraw-Hill.
- Masuda, T., P. C. Ellsworth, B. Mesquita, J. Leu, S. Tanida. and E. Van de Veerdonk. 2008. "Placing the Face in Context: Cultural Differences in the Perception of Facial Emotion." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 94(3): 365–81.
- McCarron, C. 2003. Expanding Our Field of Vision: Globalization and the Changing Landscape of Visual Communications. *Communication Arts* 45(1):16–23.
- Miller, A.R., J. M. Brown, and C. D. Cullen. 2000. *Global Graphics: Symbols: Designing with Symbols for an International Market*. Gloucester, MA: Rockport Publishers.
- Morgan, J. and P. Welton. 1992. *See what I Mean: An Introduction to Visual Communication*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Bloomsbury USA.
- Nisbett, R. 2003. *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently. . . and Why*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Norenzayan, A. and R. E. Nisbett. 2000. "Culture and Causal Cognition." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 9(4): 132–35.
- Peterson, L. K., and C. D. Cullen. 2000. *Global Graphics: Color: Designing with Color for an International Market*. Gloucester, MA: Rockport Publishers.

Reuters. 2009. "Burger King Ad Angers Ambassador." *Reuters news service*, April 14. Retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/04/14/us-burgerking-idUSTRE53D48A20090414>.

Scherer, B. 2010. *Globalization, Culture, and Communication: Proposal for Cultural Studies Integration within Higher Education Graphic Design Curriculum*. Graduate Thesis. Iowa State University, Digital Repository, Paper 11914.

Snow, N. 2002. *Propaganda, Inc.: Selling America's Culture to the World*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Seven Stories Press.

Zirin, D. n.d. *China's Olympic Trails*. Retrieved from <http://www.edgeofsports.com/2008-08-04-366/index.html>.