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An Endeavor towards Developing a Cross-Cultural Product Design Model Utilizing the Unique and Rich Islamic Art Elements

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Abstract:

Culture of a people can be defined as the communication of experiences of these people through their recorded symbols as clothing, tools and artifacts. On the other hand, every man-made object that has ever existed was designed. Therefore, we can say that culture and design are mutually effective and reflective.

Cross-cultural design is how to consider and implement cultural elements into a product design for greater aesthetic, functional and emotional acceptance. And, the Islamic aboriginal culture offers great potential for enhancing design value and make it recognizable worldwide.

The purpose of the current work is to utilize features from the rich Islamic culture to create a cross-cultural product design model and illustrate the steps. This work also aims at showing how to make a design with cultural insights and develop products carrying rich cultural values that address the needs of the global market.

Keywords: *cross cultural design, cross cultural model, Islamic culture*

1. Introduction

1.1. What is Culture?

The word "Culture" was defined by the Oxford Dictionary, as the collective ideas, customs, and social behaviors of a particular people or society, (Oxford Dictionaries, 2010). Edward Tylor first used "culture" within the context of social anthropology in the 1870s. In the 20th century the word culture was used as a unifying concept describing the universal human capacity to classify and encode their experiences symbolically (Street & Tylor, 2012). So, "culture" can be described as the encoding and communication of experiences through symbols; often recorded as the clothing, tools and artifacts of a people (Zachary L. Rubin, 2012).

1.2. What is Design?

Human beings have been designing since the beginning of life, imprinting the values, lifestyles, and environment of their time on their artifacts (Saha, 1998). Where, we can understand ancient cultures by studying their left behind artifacts. We gain insights from these cultures by studying the materials they used, its colors, art and the way they manufactured those materials, how they lived, the conditions of their environment and their ideals. The same goes for recent history where we study the designed artifacts to understand a people and their culture (H.H.C.M. Christiaans, 2007). At some point, someone, somewhere planned how every object would look, function, and be made.

Design has moved from a state of survival and necessity, through a stage of arts and crafts, to the modern business and mass production (McCullagh, K. (2011). Today, "design" is an umbrella term that crosses numerous trades and disciplines including architecture, graphic, fashion and product design (Ann, E., 2003). There are many forms of design and many types of designers, but at the core they are all the same, they all involve the "planned making" of something.

Product design is a multi-disciplinary process that involves several activities including, market and technological research, concept design, prototype development, final product development and testing and finally, post-production refinement (McCullagh, K., 2011).

2. Culture and Design

To a designer: culture involves many faces of the human experience including the unlimited patterns of values and ideals, trends and lifestyles, environments and human relationships (M. Razzaghi, 2008). It could be said that culture forms the foundation of all design. It generates the diversity revealed in all human activities, including the products designed by people (Moalosi & Hickling-Hudson, 2008).

Culture is communicated through all things made, and interpreted by the same set of the five human senses and comprehension. As users of these products we experience a multitude of “design elements,” or product features that are deliberately integrated as part of a design.

Design today is multicultural. Not only are designers from different countries working side-by-side, but also design itself often finds inspiration from other lands (S. D. Eppinger, 2006). However, preliminary research in this subject has revealed a knowledge gap of sorts. Although designers seem to respect and value cultural needs and differences, yet, many products still fail in foreign markets (H.H.C.M. Christiaans, 2007; Rocks, D., 2005; Terry, K. 2011). Lack of cultural relevance can be considered the main reason for products failure, although in some cases these failures are the result of poor marketing or ill-formed slogans and branding (S. D. Eppinger, 2006; Terry, K., 2011). Culture is a complex concept that, in many ways, can't be measured until viewed from a certain perspective and for a specific question (Souza, M.D., 1999; Zhang, Y., 2009; Terry, K. 2011).

2.1. The Three Cultural Levels of a Design

From the design point of view, K. Lee (2004) has proposed a culture structure with several layers, including layers including artifacts, values, and basic assumptions. Based on previous studies (Moalosi, Popovic, & Hudson, 2004; Wu, Hsu, & Lin, 2004; K. Lee, 2004; Leong & Clark, 2003), culture can be classified into three layers:

- (1) Materialistic culture including food, cloth, and transportation objects,
- (2) Socialistic culture including human relationships and social organization,
- (3) Idealistic culture - including art and religion.

Cultural objects are incorporated into design through three main design features identified, the inner level that includes various special content (stories, emotions, and cultural features) (2) the mid-level mainly dealing with function, operational concerns, usability, and safety, and finally (3) the outer level, that is concerned with color, line quality, form, decoration, texture, surface pattern, and detail. The same levels can be also applied on natural objects.

By using local features, both cultural and natural, in design as a strategy to create product identity in the global market, designers have noted the importance of associating products with cultural features in order to enhance product value. hence, emphasize the cultural value in a product through designing it with local cultural features has become an increasingly critical issue in the design process (Wu, Hsu, & Lin, 2004; R. Lin., 2005).

3. Understanding Cultural Designs

Cultural design, or culturally relevant design refers to the consideration and implementation of a target market's cultural elements into a product design for greater functional and emotional acceptance (Moalosi & Hickling-Hudson, 2008; Lin, R.-T., 2007).

Culture and design were never at odds with one another. Consider the implications of the newly globalized world like an unstoppable force of nature this progression has blended cultures together, creating new ones and dissolving others (Souza, M.D., 1999; (Moalosi & Hickling-Hudson, 2008). Moreover, more cultures are now able to manufacture the objects and artifacts of other ones through the modern capabilities of mass production and distribution. Some products are made by a culture for that culture and so are inherently culturally relevant (M. Razzaghi, 2008). Others are exported and may not be culturally relevant. What if a product is not made by the culture that uses it? Will it be accepted? Therein lies the importance of Cultural Design.

4. Important of Culture in Design

Non-culturally adapted products offer weaker interaction with their buyers. On the other hand, culturally oriented products create stronger bonds with buyers if they found a product that is culturally closer and meaningful to them.

Culture has always been a resource for innovation and inspiration where the integration of culture into products promotes success (Fincham & Rhodes, 1994 and Portugal 1997). Culture has been also considered a new dimension of competitiveness (De Souza, 1999). The relation between culture and communication in packaging design has been examined by Berg-Weitzel and Laar (2001). They concluded that adapting the local scene and showing the relationship between a country's culture and packaging is the most effective advertising approach for a product as people are continuously seeking their own identity in order to bring meaning to their lives.

The fact that culture, with no doubt, is part of one's personality is widely known. Lambourne et al, (1997) reported that people in the current era are looking for their own identity more than in any previous historical age and they are doing this in their own cultural way.

5. Islamic Art and Culture

The term 'Islamic culture' is generally used to represent many different Muslim cultural groups: the Asian, the Middle Eastern, the African, the European and the American Muslims, each with their own variations on customs and traditions. Nevertheless, all Muslims share some aspects of each other's culture, including art. Islamic art, like art everywhere, express many styles. It was influenced by the

pre-existing cultures of the peoples living in areas where Islam has spread. Therefore, Islamic art is not a form of purely religious art, but as an expression of people living in lands where Islam has an influence the daily life.

Most traditional arts, including the Islamic art and despite its variety, fit into one of the four general categories known; 1) Geometric designs, including tiling and tessellating designs, 2) Organic and figural designs as in human figures, animals and plants and, 3) Calligraphic designs that use Arabic blocked in decorative ways, and 4) Medallion designs.

6. Cultural Product Design Model

Cultural product design is a process of rethinking or reviewing cultural or Natural features and then redefining them in order to design a new product that can fit into society and can satisfy consumers (Ho et al., 1996). In addition to promoting the uniqueness of a local culture in the global market, using cultural features adds extra value to products that benefit the economic growth of a society. (R. Lin, 2006).

While design is a very old practice, modern industrial designs are being in a state of constant change during the last century where, customers are no longer accepting the products only for their form and function (McCullagh, K. 2011; Murray, T., 2005). A product must meet a consumer's expectations and values in order to be desirable in such competitive market. The product must be usable, safe, communicable, and emotionally relevant (Moalosi & Hickling-Hudson, 2008; Chapman, J., 2009; Richie, 2011). And to have these things in a product requires a deep understanding of the end user's personality traits. Now add the complications of a cross-cultural design situation, made common by the globalized marketplace, and for designers, the challenges are even greater where, designers have turned to ethnographic research to develop some ideas for designs of cultural meaning. Unfortunately, the research methods and principles are an extension of design methods from domestic design scenarios (Ann, E., 2003). A true cultural design framework must define culture in terms of design as there is no solid theoretical framework linking design and culture (Moalosi & Hickling-Hudson, 2008; S. D. Eppinger, 2006; Lin, R.-T., 2007). It will describe what to look for, where to find it and how to extract it.

The aim of the present work is to create a cross-cultural product design model, and illustrate its steps on how to make a design with cultural insights and develop products rich in cultural values that address the needs of the global market.

Here, a cultural model was built. And based on that model, designs were made inspired by Islamic unique cultural elements. Those designs were then implemented in suggested products.

7. How this Model was Built

A Primary cultural product design model was built (Fig.1), through two main phases: the fictional phase and the actual phase. The fictional phase focuses on how to extract features from a cultural or a natural object and then transfer these features to a creative design. While the actual phase consists of three steps:

- 1). Identification: extracting cultural features from an original cultural object.
- 2). Translation: transforming these features into design elements.
- 3) Implementation: designing the cultural product.

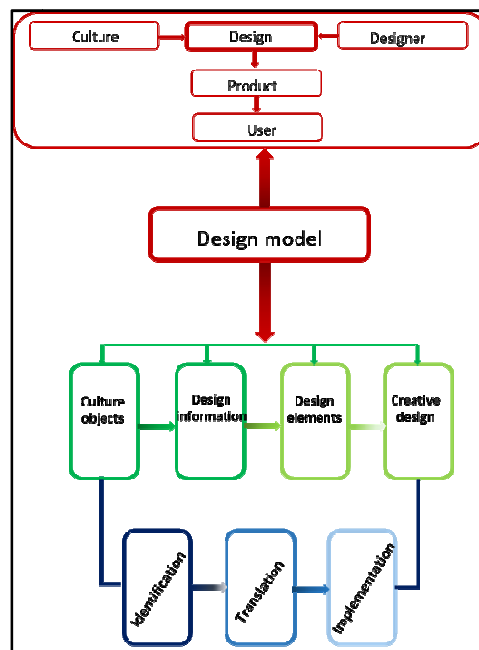


Figure 1: Primary cultural design model

Based on the cultural product primary design model (Fig. 1), the cultural product is designed using filmmaking approach, which is modified from scenario and story-telling approach (Lin, R. T., 2006). In a practical design process, three steps are used to design the

cultural & natural product, namely; Investigation (looking and feeling), Development (writing and casting), and Implement (shooting and presenting), as shown in Fig. (2). The three steps of this cultural product design process are further described as follows:

7.1. Investigation/Looking and Feeling

The first stage is finding cultural related art objects and then investigating the key features within this original object (looking and feeling). First, during the looking and feeling stage, the designer seeks to determine the key features that can be applied to represent the product through analyzing the artistic features of the object in order.

7.2. Then Comes the Development/Writing and Casting Stage

Which is the design realization stage where an idea, based on the initial stage of looking and feeling, is developed to a sketch on paper. This sketch could go through several modifications for the sake of transforming the cultural meaning into a design (writing and casting). While writing and casting, the designer has to justify why a consumer would feel the need to buy such product.

7.3. Implement/Shooting and Presenting

By this stage this stage the designer already identified the cultural features and the context of his/her design. At this point, all features should be sketched clearly, as a way to help the designer check the design features being applied in the design process. In addition, the designer needs to evaluate the features, meaning, and appropriateness of the design. Based on the evaluation, he designer may make changes to his/her initial design and then implement it in a shooting and presenting process. To reach the final blueprint where a product can be extracted based on it, the improved design may be subjected to further evaluations.

The three steps used to design the cultural product, namely; Investigation, Development, and Implement, are shown in Fig. (2).

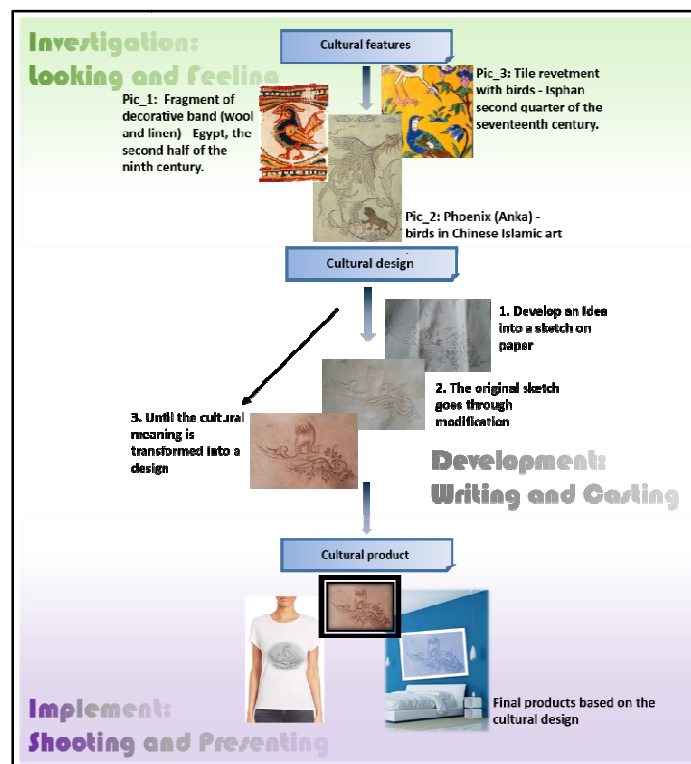


Figure 2: The cultural product design process

The whole cultural model was put together in Figure (3).

8. Cultural Product Design Based on the Islamic Art

Using its own unique artistic language, as Islam is not only a religion but also a way of life, the cultural product design based on the Islamic art fostered the development of a distinctive culture. Moreover, what made the Islamic art aboriginal the fact that it was subjected to a wide range of regional and even national styles and influences by, at least in the beginning, the lands newly opened by the Muslims, as well as changes within the various periods of its own development. Remarkably enough that even under these circumstances, Islamic art has always retained its intrinsic quality and unique identity (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-2017).

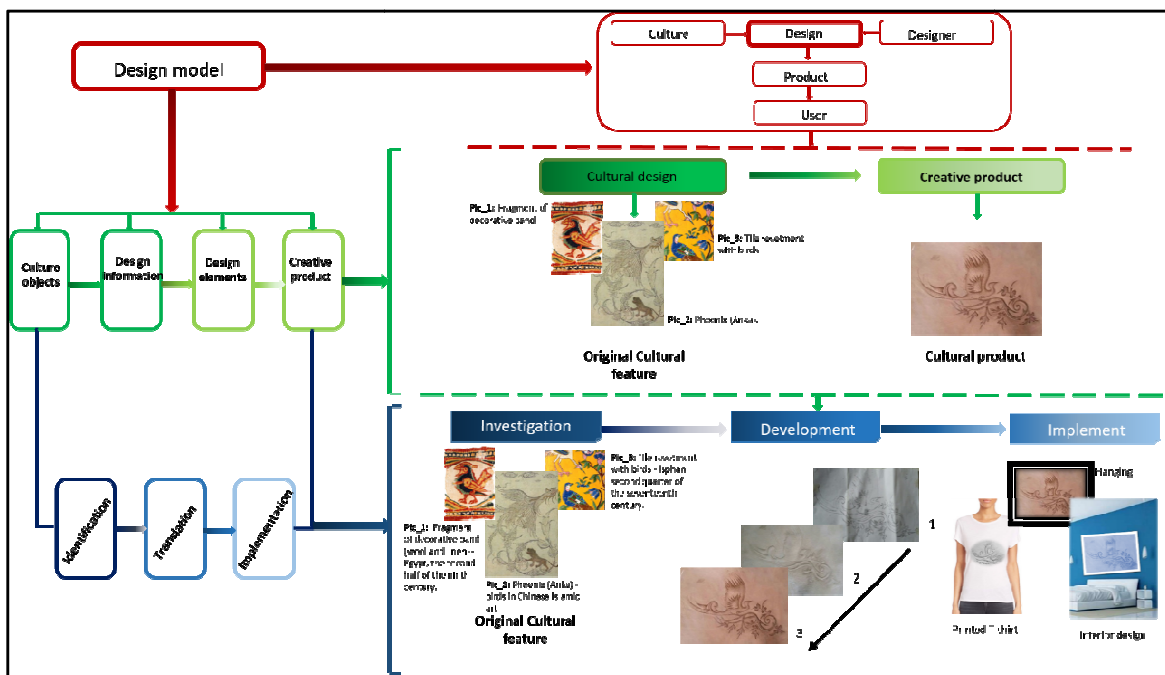


Figure 3: Cultural design model

This unique art was reflected in all ways through Muslim world where, it was not only shown in the way that service the Muslim faith like mosques and their furnishings, but also in almost all types of products as artists freely adapted and stylized basic human and animal forms, giving rise to a great variety of figural-based designs. Islam depicts birds in many forms including protectors, messengers, nutritional sustenance, and symbols of the soul. The importance of these creatures to Islamic culture cannot be overstated. And beyond being mentioned in “Qur’an”, the holy book of Muslims, birds are found in other written sources from Islamic culture (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-2017).

As shown in Figure (2), several types of birds are presented in the Islamic art, coming from several countries including; Egypt, Iran and China.

Based on the three steps of the cultural design process, the filmmaking goes like this; a designer would see and feel those pictures of different types of birds from different countries, but all coming from the Islamic art and start analyzing their artistic features. Then an idea is developed into a sketch on paper that goes through several modifications until the cultural meaning is transformed into a design that could be applied to a final product like a T-shirt, a hanging or even in interior designing (Fig. 2 and 3).

9. Conclusion

Two types of products sell well anywhere: products that people absolutely need, and products that people absolutely want. The most effective driver of product success is arguably being emotionally significant. Thus, capturing cultural elements that evoke emotions and memories will add the greatest value to a product. Making connections to people’s traditions and stories is like weaving a product into the fabric of a culture. The product will then be able to influence the very values that inspired it as it has the potential to become part of that very culture/nature. Designers have noted that in order to increase a product value, local features must be used to create a product identity for a design in the global market, hence comes the importance of linking products with cultural features. Therefore, a critical issue in the design process is to always design a product with local features in order to emphasize its cultural value (Wu, Hsu, & Lin, 2004; R. Lin., 2005).

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