

# Relation between culture and communication in packaging design

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## **Abstract**

*Nowadays, globalisation and localisation are hot topics. Brand owners have to decide between global or local packaging design. What is the best option? To adapt product design, communication and packaging design to local preferences or to choose for a global solution? Research has shown that it is more effective to adapt the execution of advertising to local preferences as cultural dimensions influence the way in which people perceive (and accept) different advertising forms. From this perspective it is likely that the same holds for packaging design, as it is a communication tool as well. The results of this research on the influence of culture on the communicative value of packaging design might help brand owners to make decisions on globalisation and localisation of their brand representatives.*

*Borders are growing more vague and consumers are beginning to look more and more alike. Many products are marketed in a number of different countries – some even worldwide. In this context, the issue of whether it is better to opt for a local or a global packaging design also comes up more frequently. Is a global packaging design possible? This is the question is examined in this paper.*

## **INTERNATIONALISATION**

This trend has far-reaching consequences. Consumers more readily accept products from abroad and are also likely to be adding foreign dining experiences to their previously restricted diet of a bite to eat down the street. The real question, however, is the extent to which this internationalisation represents a loss of the consumer's own identity. Is it true to say, in the wake of European unification, that the Dutch are now identical to the Germans and that a Pole might just as well be a Spaniard? Or is it precisely the reverse – does this blurring of borders make the different nationalities more conscious of their own roots and therefore revert to them more often? For producers, the choice is a difficult one: to have just one product, one type of packaging and one form of advertising worldwide – the most cost-effective solution – or to have product, packaging and advertising variations for each country?

## **INFLUENCE OF CULTURE**

In order to reduce the risks that follow on from these decisions, it is necessary to determine how a country's culture influences the way its consumers behave. And, more specifically, how it affects product use, communication effectiveness and the perception of packaging. Research by de Mooij (1) into the effect of national culture on the incidence of various kinds of advertising concluded that culture does indeed influence consumer acceptance of different kinds of advertising. The use of metaphor in advertising, for example, and the type of metaphor used is culture-dependent. Comparative advertising is also a type of advertising that is not accepted in every culture. In addition to her findings on advertising, de Mooij(2) was able to establish that product ownership and product use are influenced by culture. This is perhaps most clearly exemplified by different consumer preferences around the world when it comes to buying cars. There are only a handful of models that are sold with identical specifications throughout the world. Most are adapted for local conditions and even these adapted versions do not sell equally well in every country. The European consumer, for example, tends to prefer somewhat smaller, rather more sober vehicles, whereas in the United States larger models with air-conditioning, cruise control and can-holders are very popular.

## **CULTURE AND PACKAGING DESIGN**

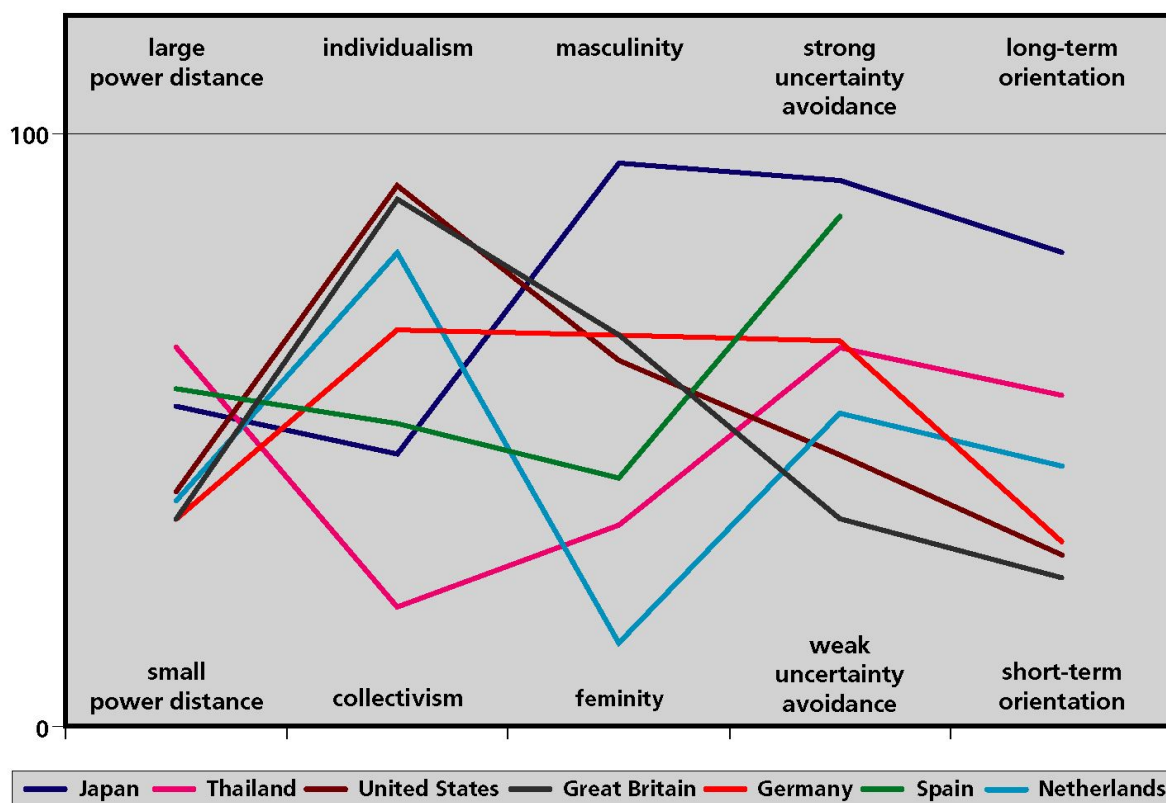
De Mooij's recommendation is quite clear: the most effective advertising campaigns are those in which the various aspects of advertising are adapted to the local scene. What does this signify for packaging design? To what degree is packaging culture sensitive and to what extent should cultural differences be taken into account in the development of packaging? Questions such as these become all the more relevant when

it is considered that the packaging of many products is as much a part of the product as a means of communication. To answer these questions, the brand consultancy Claessens Product Consultants based in The Netherlands initiated research into the influence of culture on packaging as a means of communication. The research results were intended to clarify whether culture influences packaging design and, if it does, use it to develop an instrument to support the systematic implementation of local adaptations in packaging design. Culture can be defined as 'the totality of behaviour patterns in people's lives'. It is the basis on which people are tied to each other and the basis on which they think similar thoughts, feel themselves to be the same, and behave in the same way. There are various levels of culture. Cultures can be based on national borders, age, lifestyle, sex, social class, profession, religion etc. In marketing, countries are often used as the level of segmentation. This can be seen in packaging design: this is a field in which segmentation often takes place at a national level. For this reason, the research into the influence of culture on communication through packaging design was planned as an investigation at a national level. In order to research the effect of national culture on packaging design, a model is needed that enables us to describe national cultures. A model that lends itself admirably to this task, and which was also used by de Mooij in her research, is Hofstede's 5-dimension model. Hofstede (3) found that national cultures have five characteristics in common, varying only in the extent to which these characteristics (or 'dimensions') are present in each culture. The five dimensions involved are:

- **Power distance** The degree to which less powerful members of institutions or organisations in a country expect and accept that power is not shared equally.
- **Collectivism versus individualism** Collectivism signifies a society in which people belong from birth to strong, closely-knit groups that offer life-long protection in return for unconditional loyalty. Individualism is the opposite of collectivism. Individualism signifies a society in which the mutual ties between individuals are loose: everyone is considered to be concerned only with looking after themselves and their immediate family. People in individualist societies are more 'I'-oriented, with identity residing in the person, as opposed to the 'we'-orientation typical of collectivistic societies, where identity is to be found in the group.
- **Femininity versus masculinity** Femininity signifies a society in which social sex roles overlap; men as well as women are held to be modest and gentle and focused on quality of life. Masculinity is the opposite of femininity. In a masculine society the sex roles are clearly differentiated: men are thought of as assertive and tough and intent on material success: women are expected to be modest and concerned with quality of life.

- **Uncertainty avoidance** The extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unfamiliar situations.
- **Short-term versus long-term orientation** Short-term orientation signifies a striving for virtues linked to the past and the present – in particular, respect for tradition, not losing 'face', and fulfilling social obligations. Long-term orientation is the opposite of short-term orientation. Long-term orientation signifies a striving for virtues that will be rewarded in the future – especially perseverance and thrift. (4)

The five dimensions described above can be regarded as linear scales along which countries are positioned at particular points. These positions are expressed as relative national scores for each dimension. A country's five dimension scores taken together constitute its cultural profile (see diagram). By then comparing the five dimension scores of various countries, it is possible to begin to understand the cultural differences between the countries concerned.



## RESEARCH DESIGN

If cultural differences, as recorded in Hofstede's five dimensions, have an effect on the way in which packaging is designed in a particular country, it is necessary to find the relationship between the country's cultural profile and the packaging design that is used to market products in that country. One might expect, for example, that packaging in more masculine countries would also exhibit more masculine aspects. In

order to establish whether culture influences packaging design, Claessens Product Consultants in collaboration with Marieke de Mooij (Cross Cultural Communications Company) and the sub-faculty of Industrial Design Engineering at Delft University of technology compared the cultural profile of seven countries – Japan, Thailand, USA, UK, Germany, Spain and The Netherlands – with their national packaging design characteristics. The selection of countries for study was based on the diversity of their cultural profiles. The composition of the sample attempted to ensure that two ‘extreme’ countries would be represented in each dimension. The other countries should, as far as possible, exhibit a spread of scores. Germany, for example, is a ‘small’ power-distance country, whereas Thailand scores very high in the dimension: the collectivist countries are represented by Thailand (and to a lesser extent by Spain and Japan) and the individualist countries by the UK and the USA; The Netherlands represents the feminine countries and Japan the masculine ones; the UK has a weak uncertainty avoidance culture, while Japan has a strong one; the USA has a short-term orientation, whereas Japan, on the other hand, is a society with a long-term orientation. In order to compare cultural with design characteristics, examples of packaging in five product categories from the selected countries were assembled: deodorant (for women), mineral water, soup, cigarettes and cigars. This resulted in a total of 481 examples of packaging, an average of 68.7 items in each category. The packaging was evaluated by four experts based on a list of 20 design aspects. These experts had all had considerable experience in packaging evaluation and development. The 20 design aspects that were used for the evaluation included use of colour, shape, use of verbal and non-verbal codes, symbolism, and several aspects relating to brand name/logo. Using this system, 20 scores were assigned to each group of packaging (per country, per product category). Using the factor analysis function of the SPSS programme, these scores then formed the basis for grouping the design aspects into five design factors. The names given to these factors reflect their content:

- **Expressiveness** This factor covers aspects such as the use of colour (soft versus bright, harmonious versus contrasting) and shape (rounded versus angular), the aggressiveness of the typography and the contrast value of the brand name/logo. These aspects give packaging ‘character’.
- **Context** The context factor has to do with the way in which information is conveyed through the packaging. In so-called ‘low-context’ cultures, people communicate explicitly (with an emphasis on facts, figures and other information); in ‘high-context’ cultures, communication is more implicit, for example through the use of symbolism. This factor includes location, size and contrast of the brand name/logo, verbal communication of the content and degree of structure.

- **Symbolism** Three aspects go to make up this factor: the use of symbolism, the creation of an emotional response (rather than an emphasis on product characteristics) and the amount of detail. This all has to do with the creation of the 'atmosphere' the image conveys.
- **Information** This factor relates to the way in which the packaging informs the consumer and comprises the following aspects: quantity of text, non-verbal communication about the contents of the packaging, the degree of structure, the amount of detail and the shape (rounded versus angular).
- **Identification** There are two aspects to this factor: the size of the company name (the producer) and the use of lower case (small) letters as opposed to upper case (capital) letters.

**Table 1** Relationship between design factors and Hofstede dimensions

	Deodorant	Mineral water	Soup	Cigarettes	Cigars
<b>Expressiveness</b>	Masculinity –	Uncertainty avoidance +			Power distance +
<b>Context</b>	Individualism +				
<b>Symbolism</b>	Masculinity +		Uncertainty avoidance –		Masculinity –
<b>Information</b>		Power distance – Individualism + Uncertainty avoidance –			
<b>Identification</b>	Uncertainty avoidance –		Long-term orientation –	Power distance – Long-term orientation –	Individualism +

– = negative correlation; + = positive correlation

The scores that the different groups of packaging received for these five factors were then correlated with the seven countries' dimension scores. From the results of this analysis it can be seen whether there is a relationship between a nation's culture and the packaging design for the products sold in that country.

The analysis shows that there is, in fact, a relationship between culture and packaging design, even though the relationship differs for each product category. Some product categories have packaging that quite clearly speaks a more international language than others. In itself, this is not an illogical finding, since the effect of culture on products also differs from category to category (5). Some products are indeed more internationally accepted than others. Of the five products groups surveyed, deodorant turned out to be the most, and cigarettes the least, subject to cultural influences. The table below summarises the influence of cultural on packaging design. What strikes one immediately is that, for every product category except mineral water, identification correlates with culture. This factor correlates, for the various product categories, with



**Photograph 1 Japanese (Mas+) deodorant packaging uses soft colours and round shapes**

avoidance cultures) seem to sell themselves in these cultures without the need for strong support through, for example, advertising. In other cultures these products do receive strong support in order to persuade the consumer to purchase. In weak uncertainty avoidance cultures, producers of mineral water evidently try to extol the virtues of their product by emphasising the design aspects that go to make up the *Information* factor. In practice this means a large amount of text and more non-verbal communication (through the use of illustrations, symbolism etc.) about the contents of the packaging and a less structured packaging design that has a differentiating effect within the category.

### **Deodorant and culture**

A more detailed explanation based on an example of the influence of culture on deodorant packaging will serve to clarify the results of this research. The first relationship between deodorant packaging design and culture is a negative one between Expressiveness

small power distance, individualism and weak uncertainty avoidance, each of west Europe and the USA. The lack of and significant correlation between Identification and culture for mineral water may be explained by the fact that mineral water is not really a north-west European product. Mineral water is a 'strong uncertainty avoidance product' that is more popular in southern and central/eastern Europe where stronger uncertainty avoidance cultures such as Spain and Germany are found. For mineral water, the analysis reveals a significant correlation with *Information* and small power distance, individualism and weak uncertainty avoidance (the configuration found in the countries of North-west Europe). Products that fit in well with cultural characteristics (in the way that mineral water does in relation to strong uncertainty



**Photograph 2 USA (IDV+) deodorant packaging has a large, prominently placed brand name/logo**



**Photograph 3 Dutch (MAS-) deodorant packaging uses little symbolism**

and Hofstede's masculinity. It appears that in masculine societies the packaging of deodorants for women has come to be given even more of a feminine accent through the use of round shapes, soft and harmonious colours, low contrast and non-aggressive typography/lay-out (see Photograph 1). This reflects the difference in the role patterns as between men and women that is characteristic of masculine cultures. Deodorant packaging in feminine cultures uses greater contrast (in terms of both colour and brand name/logo) and bright colours.

The second relationship that was found for deodorant is a positive correlation between *Context* and individualism. The *Context* factor has to do with providing clarity (prominent location of a brand name/logo that is large and contrasts with the background, verbal communication about the contents of the packaging, structured, aggressive typography/lay-out); it fits in with the so-called 'low-context'

cultures, in which the emphasis in human communication is on the verbal. More use is made of text, argument, facts and information. In general, individualist cultures are low-context cultures, which makes the identified correlation a logical one. Deodorant packaging in individualist cultures clearly communicates its own identity. The brand name is large, contrasting and prominently positioned on the packaging (see Photograph 2). The structure and the aggressive typography/lay-out reinforce the clarity of the packaging's identity. In line with the behaviour of individuals in individualist societies, the brand derives its identity from itself and not from the collectivity of the group.

Thirdly, a positive correlation was found for *Symbolism* and masculinity. In masculine societies, women are expected to be gentle and caring, in contrast to what is expected of men. This seems to be reflected in the design of packaging for deodorants for women. The packaging uses nature symbols and the creation of an emotional atmosphere to communicate gentleness and softness (Photograph 3 shows the opposite). This is further reinforced by



**Photograph 4 Spanish (OVI+) deodorant packaging has a large company name**





**Photograph 5** Left to right the original German Life Time packaging and the changes made for the Dutch, Uk and Japanese markets

the use of soft, harmonious colours, round shapes, non-aggressive typography/lay-out and a brand name/logo that is subdued in its contrast with the background (see the correlation between *Expressiveness* and masculinity).

The fourth and last relationship found for deodorant packaging is that between *Identification* and

uncertainty avoidance. In strong uncertainty avoidance cultures the company name on the packaging is large (see Photograph 4). It appears that in cultures of this type the deodorant brand name is less important than the name of the producer. The use of lower case letters (rather than capital letters) also correlates positively with uncertainty avoidance. The use of lower case letters ensures a more recognisable word image. It is well known that words written in lower case letters are more easily recognised than words written in capitals. It may be the case here that lower case is used in the design of deodorant packaging so that the consumer recognises the brand more readily. Because consumers in strong uncertainty avoidance cultures exhibit greater brand loyalty (7), recognition of a brand's familiar word image plays a part in the consumer feeling secure about purchasing his or her trusted brand. Combining the cultural characteristics of countries with the various aspects of packaging that are appropriate to them gives packaging designers guidelines with which to develop packaging that is suited to the market in any particular culture.



**Photograph 6** The Dutch deodorant sample

As an example, the research results were used as a basis for changing the design of an actual German deodorant, Life Time, to make it more appropriate for three other cultures. The research results indicated that the design of deodorant packaging is affected by the position of a culture on three of the five Hofstede dimensions: individualism, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance. The positions of The Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Japan on these three dimensions were combined with the factors for which correlations were found (*Expressiveness, Context, Symbolism and Identification*). This resulted in a brief that served as a basis for the modification of certain aspects of the German Life Time packaging. The packaging aspects that were included in the brief were:

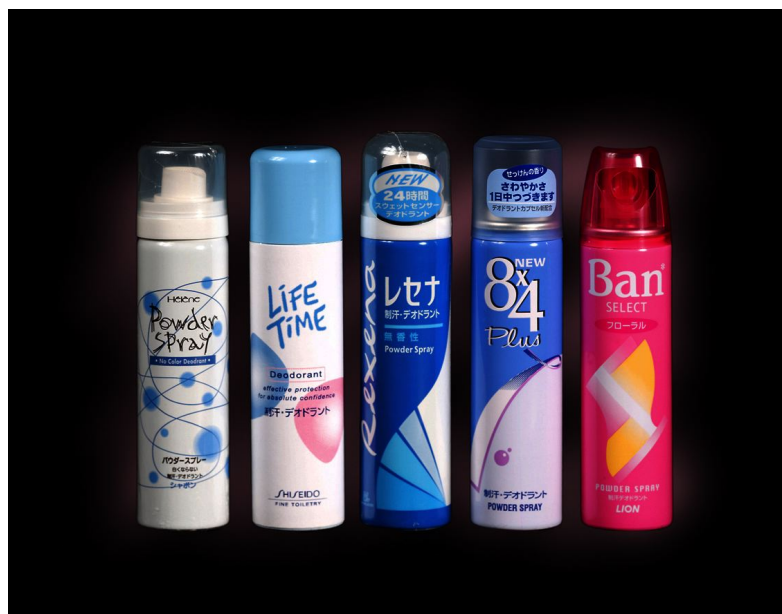
- contrast, position and size of the brand name/logo;
- quantity of verbal (textual) information and the ratio of lower case (small) letters to upper case (capital) letters used;
- aggressiveness of the typography;
- use of colour (harmonious versus contrasting and soft versus bright colours);
- use of shape (rounded versus angular);
- use of symbolism;
- packaging image (emphasis on emotional content or product characteristics);
- degree of structure and detail in the packaging design.

Compared to the German design (far left in Photograph 5) the Dutch adaptation (second from left) uses more contrast, a greater degree of structure, and aggressive typography. The British design (second from right) includes more verbal communication about the contents of the packaging, uses more capital letters and the brand name/logo contrasts less with the background that it does on the Dutch packaging. The Japanese Life Time (far right) has soft colouring, less aggressive typography/lay-out, creates a more emotional atmosphere and carries the company name on the front of the packaging.



**Photograph 7 The UK deodorant sample**

The Japanese adaptation is clearly smaller than the other three designs. The size of the packaging is a product dependent aspect and this makes it only indirectly susceptible to cultural influences. Because the direct influence of culture on packaging design was the subject of the research, the size of the packaging was not considered in the evaluation. However, the size of packaging is part of the brief that the designer gets from the client and is therefore a known factor at the beginning of the design process. In order to make this example as realistic as possible, the size of the packaging was made to conform to the size of the local sample that was evaluated as part of the research. Photographs 6 to 8 demonstrate that the Life Time adaptation do in fact fit in better with the local samples than the original German Life Time design. The changes that were made to the German design in order to adapt the packaging to local characteristics go further than the elements that need to be changed according to the research results. These results should be used as a general guideline. As well as using the guideline, it is essential to analyse examples of local packaging from the product category for which packaging is being designed before starting on the design process proper. This analysis in the case of the Life Time example clearly shows, for instance, that relatively abstract symbolism is used in Japanese deodorant packaging, whereas the German packaging makes use of more concrete symbols. The research results were



**Photograph 8 The Japanese deodorant sample**

only able to establish the extent to which symbolism was used but not the way in which the symbols had been employed. This demonstrates that, although the outcomes of this research clarify the influence that culture has on packaging design, it is nevertheless important to analyse local packaging on the colours used and the graphic style within a category.

### **International packaging**

Although culture has a definite influence on packaging design, are there brands that actually use the same design worldwide? Why opt for a global design? The choice of a global or a local design is up to the client, who may base his decision on the results of a cost-benefit analysis. The research has shown that various aspects of design are subject

to cultural influence. The client should be aware that, if he opts for a global design, it might be better to keep these aspects of packaging design as neutral as possible. If a local design is chosen, it is precisely these aspects that can be exploited to gain the consumer's confidence.

## **Conclusion**

This research reveals that a nation's culture has repercussions for its packaging design. How this is handled is up to the owners of a brand to decide. If a packaging design is to be adapted to the perceptual framework of local consumers, the research results offer a reference point for establishing the areas in which design changes might be made. On the basis of the research results, the following points should be taken into consideration when intercultural packaging is to be designed:

1. Weigh up carefully the pros and cons (consumer appeal, costs etc) of a local versus a global packaging design.
2. Use the results of this cost-benefit analysis to make a well-founded choice between a local and a global design.
3. If you decide on a packaging design adapted to local conditions, determine the areas in which the design(s) should be changed, based on the cultural characteristics of the target country or countries concerned.
4. If a global design is chosen, it might be better to avoid the extreme use of aspects that are influenced by individual cultures as far as possible.
5. Take into account the influence of culture in other forms of product communication, so that the various forms of communication support and reinforce each other rather than diminish the combined effect.

The research has produced important new insights into intercultural packaging. The results offer a clear reference point for exploiting the opportunities that exist for taking packaging into the international arena based on sound principles.

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