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Abstract

This Master's thesis studies the influence of Japanese culture on product form. The purpose of the thesis is to understand the preferences for product form in Japanese culture, and illustrate which cultural features should be considered in export products targeted for the Japanese market.

The form of a product has become increasingly important in modern consumer societies. From marketing perspective, visual style of a product constitutes the essence of product form. Visual style of a product is an aesthetic and semantic expression composed of shapes and colors. However, the perceptions and interpretations of colors and shapes are not same in all markets but vary between cultures. The cultural differences provide challenges for international marketing and visual style of export products often needs to be adapted to the local environment. In Japan, the visual style of the consumer products is often emphasized as the country's history and traditions support visual communication. This study attempts to find the characteristics of visual style in Japanese consumer products by comparing Japanese products with Finnish equivalents.

The empirical part of the study was carried out as an observation of two consumer product categories: chewing gums and mobile phones. The Japanese products were observed in Osaka in November 2002, and the Finnish market leaders' products were used as a comparison in the analysis. The results of the observations indicated a difference between the countries as well as between the product categories. Visual style of the observed chewing gums communicated real product features, whereas the communicative function of mobile phones emphasized abstract product features. Within the chewing gums, visual style was rather similar between the two cultures although the overall use of visual elements and wrappings was wider at the Japanese market. The abstract associations of mobile phone features therefore illustrated a difference of cultural values between the two countries. The Japanese consumers value conformity over individualism, and hence, tend to prefer phones with very similar visual styles. The results of the study indicate that the preferences of the Japanese consumers for product form are influenced by the habits and values of the culture, and typical visual attributes for the particular product category.

Key words	Product form, design, visual style, culture, Japanese consumers, consumer products
Further information	