

The Role of Aesthetic Congruity on Visual Design Education in Hong Kong

Derry Law

The Institute of Textiles and Clothing, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Abstract

Visual design is defined as the development of a relationship between visual forms and the receiving individuals. It is challenging to educate students on ways to determine the appropriate combination of non-verbal forms of presentation, such as color, proportion, and design principles which are able to elicit an intended response from the targeted audience. Therefore, it is important to train students to have visual sensitivity and educate them to ensure that they understand and recognize the necessity of structural (physical form) and communicative requirements (symbolic meanings) in designing visual presentations. However, the degree of aesthetic congruity in students can influence the level of understanding and creativity in the development of visual displays. Through the grounded theory method and practice activities that involved visual displays, 130 Hong Kong university students who were enrolled in a fashion visual communication course were observed with particular attention on their aesthetic congruity and development of visual display designs. The result shows that both design and non-design major students have a high level of tendency to look for design elements with high aesthetic congruity to create visual displays that makes their ideas look similar to each other. To enhance the visual sensitivity of these students and lessen the impacts of their aesthetic congruity, a new practical approach was developed. By assigning students with situations that are unrelated to the display theme, it is found that the impacts of aesthetic congruity are lessened when they create a visual design to attract different consumer segments through fashion preferences, brand identity, market positioning, and mood. In addition, the aesthetic cognitive knowledge of the students has also been widened. This research contributes new insights to design education by taking into consideration, students who have a strong sense of aesthetic congruity and strong perceptions towards the symbolic values of design elements.

Research Background

Design Education

Stimulating student creativity in design related subjects is always a challenge. It is argued that to inspire a number of new ideas and possibilities for a problem, brainstorming is highly recommended (Aleinkov, 2002). However, the method has been criticized in that new ideas may be generated, but the best idea will still be unknown (Fogg, 2003). Corepley (2001) suggested that a hierarchical technique can point out the attributes of a problem and generate many new solutions at the same time. However, the number of ideas depends on individual aesthetic perception and the impact of his/her surrounding environment (Dewey, 1929). West (1991) suggested that the best way to generate, select and organize new ideas is through visualization. Thus, mind-mapping is commonly adopted to capture and organize concepts, by linking different ideas together and presenting them on a map (Buzan, 2000, Rittuel, 1984). Apart from determining the best ideas through organizing them in a systematic manner, Bulter and Kline (1998) suggested that stimulation of student creativity can be realized through the association of different aspects towards a problem. The construction of a new idea through relating unrelated aspects helps to come up with unexpected options. It also stimulates creativity through divergent thinking (Cave, 1997). Gordon (1961) also shared similar thoughts in unrelated association with reference to an analogical thinking process to create new ideas. However, the success of the method relies on the ability of the creator to link and explore existing and previous components, and how they are put forth into a new direction (Dewey, 1958). Even though there are various creative-thinking methods, the critical factor of generating a creative idea lies in the creator himself/ herself. The challenge to maximizing creativity is to change the habitual thinking paradigm (Boden, 1993) and understanding the emotional drive that creates exciting intuitions in the mind (Osborn, 1948).

Aesthetic Congruity

Human beings respond differently towards the cognitive understanding of design elements (e.g. line, proportion, color, etc.). The different response is controlled by the internal processing algorithm of perceived aesthetics of different cultural groups (Veryzer, 1993; 1999) towards the understandings of the elements. Lauer (1979) proposed that the elements include various design principles. He argued that design preferences are learned from daily life and not innate. Also, there is a direct affiliation between design preference and aesthetic congruity. People tend to prefer design elements that are congruent to his/her aesthetic algorithm and therefore, unconsciously use it to judge design (Veryzer, 1999). However, the perceived symbolic meanings behind an object itself also intensify the process, evoking either positive or negative responses that determine the final response to the object (Bloch, 1995). Of course, the response of humans to aesthetics is not absolute; it is subject to change when one interacts with different aspects in life (Kreuzhauer & Malter, 2005). The affective responses generated by environmental stimuli can further affect cognitive judgment towards the aesthetic elements of an object (Eagley & Chaiken, 1993).

Chinese Perception on Aesthetics

Creativity is not associated with individuality in Chinese society; it has to cater to societal expectations (Rudowicz and Yue, 2002). It is very important to consider social harmony

by paying attention to general aesthetic preferences when creating something new among the Chinese (Dunn, Zhang and Ripple, 1988). However, it is also necessary to be innovative at the same time (Rudowicz and Yue, 2002). Both views are important to the Chinese, making the creative process different from the West which emphasizes on individual expression. For instance, Fan (2000) determined that there is uniqueness in terms of the interpretations of the symbolic content of design elements. Social perceptions and creative traits affect the evaluation of creative work (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Yang and Wang, 1999). Also, the uniqueness of aesthetic preferences is highly associated with the perceived symbolic messages of the applied design elements (Li, 1994). These preferences provide a sense of vagueness in standards. Liu (2006) suggested that the Chinese conceptualize human life as a free state whereas the West takes on a cognitive-rational spirit in interpreting beauty.

The literature states that Chinese people not only focus on individual expression, but also the degree of expected social acceptance towards the design elements during the creative process. Thus, they may rank aesthetic congruity as an important factor while selecting a combination of aesthetic elements for creative work. However, this has not been thoroughly studied in research on design related education. Thus, this study aims to study how aesthetic congruity influences the creative process by applying unrelated aspects to stimulate the analogical thinking of students. It is anticipated that the findings will contribute to the current knowledge in design related education.

Methodology

In order to investigate the impact of aesthetic congruity on the level of creativity, the grounded theory method (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) was selected and experiments were carried out. Subjects were divided into groups and instructed to complete two visual display assignments, based on the same theme to generate visual data for assessing aesthetic congruity. A combination of design elements (e.g. color, design principles, apparel styles) were compared between the different types of work. To investigate and understand the rationale behind the selection of the design elements and their symbolic interaction with the students, focus groups were established. In this study, 130 students from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University enrolled in *Fashion Visual Merchandising* were invited to participate as a course credit. In order to evaluate the impacts of aesthetic congruity on creativity, students were instructed to set up two window displays. For the first task, all of them were asked to develop a window display with a certain type of product. The students then participated in a discussion at the first focus group to share creative concepts and the rationale behind the selection of the design elements after completion of the task. After three months, the same student groups were required to set up a second window display with a specific theme – “casual wear for college students”. In the second task, unrelated aspects (Boden, 1993; Dewey, 1958; Osborn, 1969) were applied in setting the project brief. Apart from instructing the students to work on the casual wear window display, they were to go on a picnic with an assigned route. The students had to visit the assigned checkpoints and observe the details in the surrounding environment from the viewpoint of design elements. Photos were taken during the trip and all the design concepts were required to be linked with the selected design elements,

such as color scheme; display layout; form of the props; mannequin selection; set design; and fashion styling direction. Students had to explain the rationale behind the design element combination in the second display during the follow-up focus group. There is diversity in the aesthetic backgrounds among the participants, who range from fashion design, retailing to marketing majors. The differences made the findings comparable and all-rounded. Qualitative data were analyzed in accordance to the research process indicated by the grounded theory, including three phrases of coding: open, axial and selective (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The findings were categorized in an open-coding procedure; different codes were generated and relationships were formed to facilitate further data collection. Additional data collection was implemented in axial coding to obtain information with regards to the relationships previously formed. For the axial and selective coding, theoretical sampling was done in which the participants were selected based on the emerged concepts in previous coding. (McDaniel and Gates, 1998). Finally, the central concepts were developed from selective coding to wrap up the research.

Findings and discussion

A grounded theory analysis of the narratives from the ten focus groups among the 130 participating Hong Kong university students generated findings in two key areas in the selective coding stage. These two areas are the standardization of aesthetic form and the enrichment of aesthetic perception, respectively

The standardization of aesthetic form

Students were asked to set up a window display for a fashion store by applying design and color principles during a hands-on lesson. Focus groups followed to collect the rationale behind the choice of design element combinations. The findings showed that there are standard aesthetic patterns that govern the selections. These patterns can be divided into two areas, namely, 1) contextual bounded aesthetics, and 2) form perception. For contextual bounded aesthetics, it was found that the need to perfectly match an occasion was very high in terms of the symbolic message of the props, color and design principles. Figs.1 and 2 are fashion displays for lingerie and children wear, respectively. They give a feeling of elegance and being high-end. The students tended to select materials and colors that exhibit lavishness, such as burgundy velvet, vintage wooden colored furniture, and a floral picture with a white female human form mannequin for the lingerie display. For the children's wear display, burgundy satin, paired with wine glasses and a glossy black backdrop were selected to present an elegant image. The students claimed that the selected materials were congruent to the requirements for the selected mood, and precisely matched the mood. Although the students were instructed to develop a creative display under a predetermined mood; that is, elegance, it was found that the students adhered to social interpretations of elegance and therefore, made the final decision based on general expectations. In terms of form perception, the adoption of vintage wooden furniture (lingerie display), and wine glasses (children's wear display) implies that subjects had a specific perception of elegance, which also governed the choice of props to a certain extent. Furthermore, it was found that the degree of creativity in the students was also governed by the perceived social response. This served as the standard or the marking scheme for their creative work. It was found that the students

greatly intended to meet perceived social standards due to the high expectations of “group face”. If the students went too far and came up with ideas that deviated from the perceived standards, they may be afraid that they might be criticized by the instructor or other classmates. The criticism will give them a feeling of “losing face” in public which is not desirable for Chinese people. Therefore, they tend to choose design elements and color schemes that are congruent to general expectations. Consequently, their creativity was suppressed.



Fig.1 Fashion display 1 (stage one)

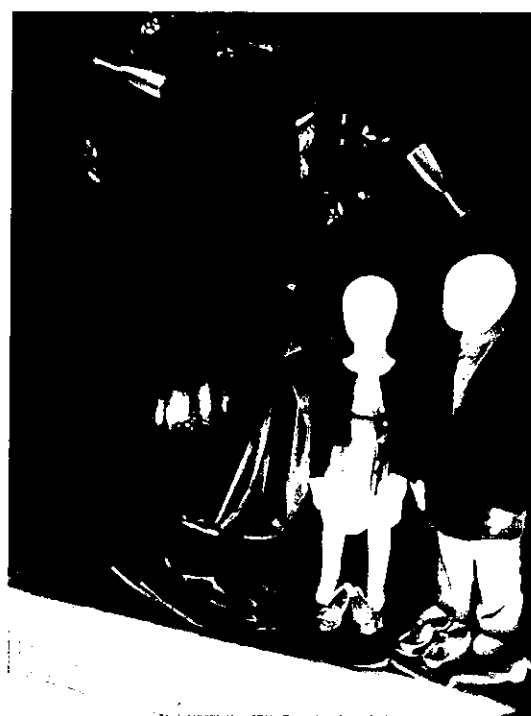


Fig.2 Fashion display 2 (stage one)

Enrichment of aesthetic perception

The same groups of students were told to complete another window display at the end of the course. Unrelated aspects were integrated into the project, in which they were required to visit an assigned location, take pictures at the checkpoints and apply them to the final display. A theme was given to all of the students, which was to complete a display that sells casual wear for young college students. Figs. 3 and 4 are the final products. It is found that there is a significant difference from the first round of displays. For Fig. 3, the students were assigned to a location that has a beautiful seaside. For Fig. 4, the students were assigned to a location with many Chinese temples. The resulting work revealed that the students deviated from the general perceived image of a college student. Also, no campus-inspired props and backdrop, colorful or dynamic graphics were included in the display. The data collected from the field trip were transformed and adjusted in order to integrate with a casual and youthful feeling. It was indicated from the focus group that there is a difference in the cognitive understanding of the assigned location when unrelated aspects were used. As they were forced to integrate ideas from the assigned locations, the focus on matching contextual aesthetics was lessened and

shifted to the transformation and integration of ideas from the trip to match the college casual wear theme. Therefore, the semiotics and perception of the “right” design element combination for casual wear became less important. The aesthetic perception of the students was also enriched when they took the elements of the visited site into consideration for the youthful casual wear display. The shift of focus even allows the students to pay close attention to minor details on the trip and turn them into a core concept in the display. As a result, the students are not focused on the degree of aesthetic congruity and the expansion of ideas from the trip dominated the creative process of the window display.



Fig.3 Fashion display 3 (stage two)

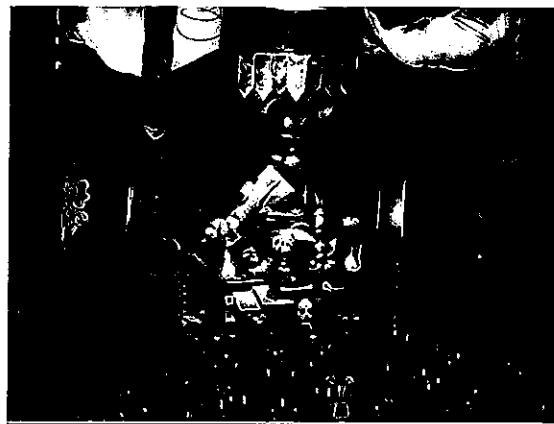


Fig.4 Fashion display 4 (stage two)

Conclusion

Aesthetic congruity plays an important role among highly conformed groups such as the Chinese during the creative process. By applying unrelated aspects, the focus on fulfilling perceived aesthetic standards can be diverted. Unrelated materials taken from different surroundings have enriched the individual aesthetic perception of the students involved in this study, which helps to stimulate other possible views in the design process. Consequently, this leads to an improvement in creativity.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank The Hong Kong Polytechnic University for granting the research fund (1.14.37.4648) to support the project.