

# *Cultural patterns in product design ideas: comparisons between Australian and Iranian student concepts*

Mohammad Razzaghi, Faculty of Applied Arts, The University of Art, Tehran, Iran

Mariano Ramirez Jr. and Robert Zehner, Faculty of the Built Environment, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

*In the product development process, cultural influences arguably come into play, such that the concepts created by industrial designers are partly shaped by the designers' own cultural and societal values. This study investigates the integration of the cultural preferences of designers into their product design concepts as well as notes the culturally related similarities and differences in their product development approaches. Examination of data from a product conceptualisation exercise involving industrial design students from Australia and Iran revealed ten patterns within each cultural group. In studying these patterns, it became clear that there are links between the cultural characteristics of designers and the patterns that emerged from the concepts.*

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*Keywords: cultural aspects of design, conceptual design, industrial design*

All aspects of human life are influenced by culture (Hofstede, 2001). The works of designers can be influenced by their own culture (Press and Cooper, 2003), notably in the way designers structure a product in the early stages of concept development. This paper explores the extent to which designers' cultural preferences show themselves among the qualities of the products they design.

Culture can play a role in establishing a framework through which meaning is communicated to the intended user of the product. Zec (2002) contends that when manufactured products are exported, the people in the recipient country may be afforded an insight into the cultural identity of the people of the origin country, perhaps even a glimpse into the lives, needs, wishes, hopes and fears of those people.

While the authors concede that knowledge of consumer behaviours, preferences and user satisfaction are important in product development, it must be underscored that these topics are not the focus of this paper. Much attention has already been devoted in the literature to understanding how

**Corresponding author:**  
Mohammad Razzaghi  
m.razzaghi@art.ac.ir



[www.elsevier.com/locate/destud](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/destud)

0142-694X \$ - see front matter *Design Studies* 30 (2009) 438–461

doi:10.1016/j.destud.2008.11.006

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user preferences can be incorporated into products. We believe that such a user-centric slant leaves a relatively submissive and passive role for designers, who are supposed to be the progenitors of product ideas. Our study emphasises the contribution of designers rather than the latent needs of users, and suggests an approach where the designer's input in a product development process receives as much attention as the consumer's wants and preferences. Tarasewich and Nair (2001) refer to this as a 'designer-moderated product design' method, in which the designer's input is paralleled with that of users to optimise the outcomes of a product design process.

It is thus not surprising that the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design [ICSID] considers culture to be a significant issue in industrial design. Defining design as a 'crucial factor of cultural and economic exchange', the Council emphasised that one of the tasks of design is promoting 'cultural ethics', or 'supporting cultural diversity despite the globalisation of the world' (ICSID, 2002). Furthermore, the ICSID Code of Professional Ethics for Designers (ICSID, 2001) highlights the enrichment of cultural identity, stipulating that:

'Industrial designers acknowledge that the environments, objects and services created as a result of the design process both reflect and help to define the cultural identity of their nations and distinct societies within nations. Designers shall strive to embody and further the cultural traditions of their national societies while incorporating the best characteristics of international design principles and standards.' (Article IV)

In 2008, 124 members of the Cumulus International Association of Universities and Colleges of Art, Design and Media signed the Kyoto Design Declaration (Cumulus, 2008), where they committed themselves as being responsible for building sustainable societies. In this statement design is recognised as a broader instrument for fostering social, environmental, cultural and economic development for current and future generations. Underscoring the significance of cultural traditions and the necessity to revitalise them, design educators accepted that an era of 'cultural productivity' has already started and posit that the cultural values and symbols may soon be given greater importance than physical products.

The design literature frequently reports into the importance of integrating culture into the design of products; however, there are reasons to believe that this is usually not taken seriously by manufacturing companies for a train of reasons. For instance, Whitney and Van Patter (2004) report that because companies aim to reduce product development time, there is little time left for designers to impress cultural characteristics into their designs.

We argue that culture can be integrated among the qualities of product via two pathways: 'consciously', where design teams deliberately aim to arrive at

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