RESONATING
WITH YOUTHS IN SINGAPORE:

Managing Cultural Identity in Web Design
Singapore Media & Entertainment Websites

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Studies demonstrate that traditional mainstream media such as newspapers, television and radio play a key role in the management of cultural inter-ethnic relations in Singapore (Kuo, 1999). Design strategies for cultual web communications are a new way to express the formation and representation of new national and cultural identities in contemporary Chinese communities. Internet culture has influenced lifestyle and cultural identity of youths in the global economy. Recent surveys in Singapore have also shown that connectivity (via electronic means) is among their top Five'C's[1] in the their social priorities (Yen, 2005).

In this study, media and entertainment websites are used as an empirical resource for the investigation and understanding of the definition of Chinese youths in Singapore. An understanding of 'youth cultural identity' is fundamental in analysing their response to global cultural influences: it would resonate with their consumption of information from the web medium. Media and entertainment websites are integral because this industry forms a key aspect of popular culture in Singapore. Moreover, there is an increasing trend to incorporate pop culture consumption in national policies. For instance, Chinese pop singers, pop idols and television celebrities have become media network spokespersons for the promotion of the official Chinese language in the state-initiated 'Speak Mandarin' Campaign[2].

This research contributes to the theoretical discussion on the notion of a potential 'East Asian Identity' among the Chinese youth group. 'East Asian Identity' is constructed on the basis of the criss-crossing consumption of popular cultural products (pop music, movies, fashion and food) across geographical boundaries in the region (Chua, 2004). The analysis is also examined with reference to the local cultural environment (Singapore) in the context of the growing economy in China.

Based on a cultural analytical model, this study will examine how cultural characteristics are manifested through various Singapore media and entertainment websites while focusing on key components of visual interface designs such as colour, metaphor and information architecture. These components shall be studied in relation to their socio-cultural environment. Visual languages will be chosen for the analysis as these design components have increasingly played a primary role for members of the younger generation especially in verbal expressions and its respective comparisons. As observed by Frutiger, the influx of pictorial information and moving visuals such as computer games, manga, Music Television Video (MTV) have encapsulated the 'idea' in visual form, directing the eye to the human mind. The 'stylising' of pictures and signs has become an

Ai Yamaguchi
'Hyaku no hana, yuki wa furitsutsu', 2003/06
Fiction@Love exhibition in Singapore Art Museum, 12 May to 2 July 2006
Courtesy of Ninyu works. Photographed by Third Eye Studio, Singapore

alternative process of reading printed text (Frutiger, 1989). This analysis demonstrates that different design approaches implemented by the media and entertainment corporations yield different visual responses, leading to the varied manifestations of Singapore cultural identity, and its impact on the changing trends of regional and global development.

Conceptualising Singapore Cultural Identity and the Internet: Singapore Chinese Youth

The Internet provides a new channel in the formation of national and cultural identities for Chinese communities. In the midst of globalisation and with China now an economic superpower, the learning of the Chinese language in Singapore has been continuously reinforced in the recent years. This includes an increasing number of online virtual communities that aim to foster community building and Chinese language learning, in bilingual (Mandarin and English language) sites such as OMY[3] (www.omy.com.sg) and STOMP (Straits Times Online Mobile Print - www.stomp.com.sg). Both of these news and interactive web portals provide young users with an interactive platform to share their views and opinions online and also through new media channels such as SMS, MMS, vodcast and podcast.

The OMY interactive portal is targeted at online users between the ages of 18 and 35, who are comfortable

with speaking Mandarin but are not used to reading Chinese. The portal offers various functions such as 'text to speech' listening and display 'Hanyu Pinyin' pronunciation to help readers read Chinese words. These online interactions have successfully served as a potential space for state government to address economic agendas and shape national and cultural identities of the nation-state.

Since the rise of pop cultural products in the region during the 1980s, Chua observes the

Chiho Aoshima Swirling Zombies, 2004-2006

Chromogenic print (1100 x 1076 mm)
Courtesy of Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris & Miami (c)2004-2006 Chiho Aoshima/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd.
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Japan through the roots of manga are produced, consumed and widely accepted by the younger generation. The aesthetic concept of Asian pop culture in visual art form from a group of contemporary western and eastern artists was presented at a contemporary art exhibition – Fiction@Love organised by the Singapore Art Museum in 2006. The aesthetic hallmarks of pop imageries, such as artworks by Ai Yamaguchi and Chiho Aoshima, are often presented with vivid visuals, bright

emergence of a potential 'East Asian Identity' among the younger generation. This East Asian pop culture presents the development, production, exchange and consumption of pop cultural products across China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. Chua concludes that Singapore would remain a location of consumption of East Asian pop culture than a production and export oriented location due to its limited domestic market. Hence, driven as a capitalist activity, the consumption of these cultural products defines a large part of everyday life in contemporary Singapore. The new generation can easily embrace the trends of cultural products regionally and internationally. As these cultural products are transnational, the criss-crossing phenomenon draws a vague distinction between what is local and what is foreign among young, urban and middle class consumer lifestyles (Chua, 2004).

Popular imageries, that include Animamix art (Animation and comics) are manifested in both conventional and unconventional art forms such as comics, video games, manga, anime and graphic communication. Anime, originated from

colours, use of metaphors and humourous contents. Similar to Chua's discourses of East Asian cultural products, Lu observed that the creation of Animamix Art is also a cross-industry integration due to the great amount of material and financial and human resources involved. This Neo-Aesthetics of Animamix Art created from the Asian perspective is going to shape the visual trend and emerge as a new identity of pop culture in Asia (Lu 2006).

Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew commented that Singapore will not evolve into a homogeneous group but neither will it emerge with any distinctive identity as a result of modern technology and advancement. He pointed out that Chinese Singaporeans must adapt to changes in technology and a 'digital' lifestyle as well as accommodate to a multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-cultural society (Peh, 2006).

Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong further elaborated his new metaphor representing the two groups of Chinese Singaporeans – the Chinese educated ('heartlanders') individuals and the English educated bilingual ('cosmopolitan') indi-

viduals. The 'heartlanders' are characterised as the 'culture carriers who play a major role in maintaining our core values and our social stability'. In comparison, the 'cosmopolitans' are the professionals who are 'valued for their economic contributions and international outlook to operate and produce goods and services for the global market. Their loyalties are fluid and dictated by economic considerations'. It is also observed that the English educated Chinese ('cosmopolitans') are regarded as being the elites and the centre of power and influence with the Chinese educated ('heartlanders') at the periphery (Tan, 2002).

Living in a globalised and technological era, Singapore's new cultural identity will continue to evolve more rapidly than before. While Singapore's youths continue to accept foreign ideas, traditional values will constantly be revitalised. A hybrid pluralistic identity influenced by transnationalism and its complex socio-cultural network may be formed eventually with an essence of local peculiarities. This socio-economic development discursively intertwined with cultural and cognitive changes – such as values, beliefs, norms, attitudes and lifestyles as well as the dense flow of cultural products – are some determining factors in shaping one's cultural identity on local youths.

Approaches to Cultural Model

In recent studies, 'cultural modeling' has become a popular analytical tool in implementing design and communication strategies for cross-cultural marketing. According to del Galdo and Nielson, cultural modeling helps to identify global information, cultural bias, and cultural metaphors and assess the degree of localisation. Every cultural model establishes its own agendas, and addresses the consumer or corporate needs (del Galdo & Nielson, 1996). Similarly, the notion of a culturally centered design in web communication needs to illustrate a profound understanding of the socio/cultural environment of society.

Fleming's Design Process Model

The proposed methodology for web analysis is derived from the cultural analytical model developed by E. M. Fleming

Chiho Aoshima
In sane Karuna, 2000

Inkjet print on paper (1700 x 465 mm)
Courtesy of Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/ Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris & Miami
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(1982). Fleming's cultural analysis seeks 'to examine in depth the relation of artefacts to aspects of its own culture'. Fleming designed a five-fold classification system on the basic properties of an artefact, namely its history, material, construction, design and function and set of four operations, namely, identification, evaluation, cultural analysis and interpretation. In this context, identification refers to the distinctive facts about the artefact. Evaluation is a set of judgments about the artefact that is usually based on comparisons with other examples of its kind. Cultural analysis examines the various interrelationships of an artefact and its contemporary culture. Interpretation refers to the meaning and significance of the artefact in relation to its own culture (Fleming, 1982).

Fleming's multiple layer system of segmenting the design process acts as a reflective mental guide between designer and user perception. It provides a wider set of considerations when analysing an artefact as evaluation is encouraged at every stage of the design process (with considerations on cultural relevancies, functionality and design).

Using this model of respect and understanding of the user's culture, contemporary designers can implement better design solutions that not only improve usability, but also convey cultural identity and help connect the user emotionally. Although such emotionalised brand expressions are common practice in print media, the key component of effective design solutions – colour, metaphor and information architecture – are key criteria for creating strong visual and sensory identity in web communications. For instance, the multifaceted meaning of colour that displays cultural differences is subjected to regional context (Peterson, 2000). Visual metaphors 'facilitate learning by allowing users to draw upon the knowledge they already possess about the reference system' (Nielson, 2000). Information architecture is also argued as a 'metaphor' because it shows how items on the page are saliently presented in hierarchical association that draws users attention across the page. It presents a reading pattern or blue print to help users reach their goals on web interfaces (Veen, 2001).

Homepage of MediaCorp Pte Ltd
Courtesy of MediaCorp Pte Ltd

Homepage of Channel 8's English website
Courtesy of MediaCorp Pte Ltd

A Case Study of Media and Entertainment Websites

Visual design constitutes an important area for visual communications. In this case study, three design components of websites from the local media and entertainment industry were selected. They are colour, visual metaphor and information architecture. These were then tested with the socio/cultural background of Singapore society. The websites include state-owned MediaCorp Pte Ltd's website (MediaCorp) (www.mediacorp.com.sg), Channel 8 websites (Chinese[4] and English[5] versions, http://ch8c.mediacorptv.com/ and http://ch8.mediacorptv.com/) and Chinese Pop iwebsite[6] (http://ch8.mediacorptv.com/cpop/). The purpose of the visual analysis elucidates patterns of visual and cultural presentation and its management of youth culture.

Colour

While language, religion, customs and beliefs are some key features that reflect different cultures, colours used in interface design comprise one of the central non-verbal visual communication languages. Each colour bears a different symbolism and meaning that evokes immediate emotional response from people. In addition, colour is also one of the visual languages in international commerce that resonates with the country's cultural and national preferences (Peterson, 2000).

The meanings of colours are continuously influenced by western culture in contemporary Asian societies as a result of international marketing. This is clearly reflected in the main website of MediaCorp (Chinese version) and the Eng-

lish version of the Channel 8 website. 'Blue' is predominantly the corporate brand colour and the primary essence colour for these websites. Blue has no significant spiritual or mystical meanings in Chinese colour symbolism[7]. However, it represents quality, value, durability, strength and authority in international marketing and is often a favourite and popular colour for corporations and organisations in the western context (Peterson, 2000; Fletcher, 2005).

MediaCorp's corporate site displays professionalism with strong western connotations in projecting themselves as an international media station. This sophisticated corporate presentation is in contrast to the Chinese Channel 8 website where the use of orange and maroon colours renders it more "Chinese". Orange, a blend of red ('yin') and yellow ('yang') signifies the 'ying' and 'yang' symbol in Chinese colour symbolism (Peterson, 2000). The radiance and shimmering orange colour on the header of the page reinforces the concept of wealth, prestige and status.

In comparison, the Chinese Pop website presents an interesting colour vernacular resonating with the young audience and pop culture. The palette combination includes colours which show traces of Chinese symbolism and references to youthful colours that are commonly used in pop imageries.

From the analysis of these main media and entertainment corporate websites, it is evident that MediaCorp has been very careful in implementing design strategies. The division of four sets of colour palettes demonstrates this: (1) the corporate front that targets foreign investors aligns with its economic development agendas; (2) warmer colour

shades resonate the Chinese cultural identity that appeal to Chinese 'heartlanders'; (3) cooler colour shades like blue, target mainly the English-speaking Chinese Singaporeans ('cosmopolitans'); (as seen in the English language version of the Channel 8 website. As English is understood to be the neutral and shared language of all ethnic groups in Singapore, colours implemented here are therefore more neutral); and lastly (4) youthful colours used for the Chinese Pop website that consciously avoids any local cultural associations, but reflects the vivid and bright colours commonly presented in Asian anime.

Visual Metaphor

MediaCorp's ambition to present itself as 'Home of your Favourite Entertainment' (tagline) and to be 'Asia Top Media' (corporate vision) is reflected in the imageries presented throughout the website. The meanings of these messages are significantly illustrated in a series of animated collages of high-tech images on its homepage. The image shows a satellite from a low angle perspective, which fades to two news presenters facing the audience on the production set. It then transforms into a group of employees working together and finally to three close-up shots of renowned artistes in Singapore. According to Kress's theory of 'reading' images, such detailed and visible reflection of their facial expressions aim to reveal their individuality and personality so as to help audiences get acquainted with these young artistes (Kress, 1996). All these visual metaphors collectively present Singapore as an efficient, and professional nation-state highly committed to quality.

As perceived by Gobe, emotional attachment is an important aspect when designing for online web communica-

Homepage of Channel 8 Chinese website
Courtesy of MediaCorp Pte Ltd

tions. He argues that the future of the Internet will eventually dwell on content development since it has the capacity to provide that 'human touch' and bring emotional connections to the user. However, beyond content development, visual elements and any sensory expressions (sound, video, animation) of the website would reinforce the overall emotional and sensorial experience of the user (Gobe, 2001). In this context, the Channel 8 website features mainly animated images of their current television productions in order to connect with the local 'heartlanders'. The narratives of the

animation are given more consideration using taglines and video clips depicting the story line for every local drama, such as "Falling in Love" and "Like Father, Like Daughter".

The Chinese Pop website shows various iconic anime style mascots that are vibrantly appealing to the young. Expressed in the simplest interpretation of Piercian semiotic analysis, 'an icon is a pictorial sign… a symbol, a conventional sign' (Scott, 1995). 'Iconising' information design for screen design has also become a popular global communication tool, such as corporate branding, packaging,

Homepage of the Chinese Pop micro website. The micro site is part of the 'Speak Mandarin' Campaign initiative
Courtesy of MediaCorp Pte Ltd

interface and information design. If designed and applied appropriately, icons can be entertaining and visually appealing (Marcus, 1992). The iconic mascot appearing on the homepage of Chinese Pop website is presented with reference to the pop Asian anime style that has no strong local cultural association, but aims to appeal to the local youth group.

The only localised connection is the various movie clips of the local pop stars and star idols explaining the meanings of Chinese idioms that are depicted in local Chinese drama serials and Chinese pop songs. As highlighted by Chua, 'youths in Asia, as in other parts of the world, draw from an 'image bank' that is internationalised through popular mass media. The reference point in the imaginary is, therefore, a globalised image of youth rather than local cultural images. It is the global rather than the local that provides the identity of 'youths' (Chua, 2000).

Information Architecture

The content of global navigation and information architecture is one of the components in the web structure that could determine local preferences of entertainment as well as government economic agendas in the local community. Speculated from the author's perception, the information structure for MediaCorp is presented in three sets of entry point navigations targeted at investors and local 'heartlanders'. The navigation items include investors' content such as 'Media Release', 'Tender', 'Finance' and links to the corporation's services, such as programme channels targeted for the locals. The last category shows business-oriented news such as, 'Finance', 'Currencies', 'Business News' and 'Flight Information'.

In the Channel 8 website, the content of the global navigation is entertainment driven with even more snapshots of local artistes. This is meant to appeal to the 'heartlanders'. This strategy aims to influence high-level foreign investments such as financial partnerships with the corporation as well as to connect local Singaporeans with its homegrown young artistes.

In order to perpetuate the interest of youths in Chinese culture and language, the Chinese Pop website has been very careful to integrate learning Mandarin with pop culture. Young local Chinese pop stars, super idols and news presenters the likes of Terence Cao, Jeanette Aw, Ng Chee Yang (Campus Superstar champion) and Huang Xiuling (MediaCorp News anchor) have become the spokespersons of the recent state-initiated 'Speak Mandarin' Campaign. These four prominent local celebrities capture a wide spectrum of fans from all walks of life in Singapore. Chinese pop culture elements are cleverly intertwined and strate-

gised together to appeal to the expectations of the youth.

MediaCorp has been very successful in 'instrumenting' national messages by weaving media and entertainment elements seamlessly together. The visual outcome of the site is not only hip and engaging, but also meaningful in the method by which messages are conveyed. The navigation and content of this website is bilingual (English and Chinese) with entertainment news from Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, Korea and even Japan. Unfortunately, at the time of this study, the site content has not been diligently updated. The Chinese Pop website could become redundant if more effort is not spared to maintain fresh content.

Conclusion

Preliminary research has indicated that the three design components - colour, visual metaphor and information architecture - are potential areas of cultural manifestation. The analysis of the various interface design of media and entertainment websites in Singapore demonstrates an 'institutional memory' while respective design strategies deployed by the nation-state distinctively shape cultural identities of the local youths, and ultimately the public in general. The analysis also argues that to create a more emotional user-connection, website design components should take into account the understanding of aesthetic, social and cultural elements.

The MediaCorp's website has been mindful in projecting both international as well as local visual imagery by segmenting its diverse target audience and deliberately drawing them separately to micro sites. While the Chinese pop website has been very successful in connecting the 'East Asian' image for the youth group, the inability to maintain the site with fresh and up-to-date content may lead to fading interest and eventual failure.

This research is exploratory in nature as the framework of 'East Asian Identity', facilitated by the production and consumption of popular culture, are empirical questions in contemporary discourses (Chua 2004). Chinese cultural identities will continue to revolve and evolve, challenging itself in the face of rapid globalisation. The method and guidelines presented in this research will have to be further enhanced to remain relevant as these cultural identities evolve. The author acknowledges that while there is an innate level of bias in the web analysis, it does not deviate from its visual components aspect. As the analysis involves a subjective interpretation by the author from a Chinese perspective, the author makes no claim that the result of this research is representative of all Chinese youths in Singapore.

Future study should also take into consideration the textual analysis and marketing strategies of MediaCorp.

It would comprise comprehensive quantitative analysis that evaluates design appeal and cultural appropriateness of website design among Singapore youths. Nevertheless, the findings of these results will contribute to the existing, yet ever-expanding research studies in design typologies and investigation into the context of a diverse Chinese culture and its experiences.

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ENDNOTES

1. The 'Five Cs' – cash, credit card, car, condo and country club are materialistic cultural ethnos representing a Singaporean dream. Recent surveys reported a paradigm shift in terms of the aspiration for the new generation. The new 'Five Cs' are connectivity, choices, cheek, causes and consumers.

2. The Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC), first launched in 1979 by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, is held all year round. The objectives were to reduce the speaking of dialects and encouraged a common communication language amongst Chinese Singaporeans. More information could be found in http://mandarin.org.sg.

3. OMY and STOMP web portals are launched by Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) in 2007. Both sites are one of the most extensive interacting and entertaining web portals in Singapore that connects and engages with readers on the web and via mobile phone messaging.

4. Channel 8, a local Chinese channel that is positioned as the market leader in Chinese entertainment and information in the region. It is a popular channel that caters to both the viewing needs of the 'heartlanders' and 'cosmopolitans' (modern city dwellers). The Chinese channel also has a sizeable percentage of Malay and Indian followers.

5. Channel 8 English website is mainly targeted at English speaking Singaporeans, which include Malays and Indians as well.

6. Chinese Pop website is launched as part of the recent 'Speak Mandarin Campaign' mission to re-educate young Chinese Singaporeans about Chinese culture and heritage in order to stay competitive in the China–dominated world economy. The recent slogan 'Speak Mandarin, Cool' attempts to encourage English-speaking Chinese Singaporeans to speak Mandarin and that conversing in this language is sophisticated (Promote Mandarin Council, Media Release 2006).

7. Traditional Chinese colour symbolism is represented by the Five Chinese elements of nature, points of the compass, regions of the country and the seasons. The Five elements and their colours are earth (yellow); metal (white); water (black); wood (green),and fire (red) (Peterson, 2000).

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