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Imaging Cultural China: A Case Study of Web Design Strategies for Pan-Chinese Identity in Singapore

Abstract

The Internet offers new ways of imaging and 'imagining' national belonging and cultural identities in contemporary Chinese societies such as Singapore and Hong Kong. Both societies are key representatives in Tu Wei-Ming's first symbolic universe - including China and Taiwan - under a 'Cultural China' (Tu 1994). Various cultural discourses indicate that the nation-states are capable of managing culture to maintain national competitiveness within global capitalism (Chua 1995; Wee 2000). This 'local national culturalism' is significantly manifested in Chinese media and entertainment websites particularly from Singapore. Within the Asia Pacific region, the notion of an emerging 'pan-Chinese' cultural identity for commercial exchange and interaction with regional and global markets has been an appealing economic construct (Nyiri 1999).

In Singapore, the Chinese media and entertainment websites employ design strategies to attract foreign investors and cater for local 'heartlanders' with success. Although the design strategies for representing a 'pan-Chinese' identity have yet to be explored, 'Cultural China' plays a major role in regional/global economic development. This paper interrogates the perception of 'Chinese' identity through an empirical analysis of user responses to visual interface design in web-based communication. In particular, comparative analysis of two design elements – visual metaphor and icon/symbol – are examined with reference to the social construction of local, 'glocal' and cultural meanings in this Chinese society. The research concludes with an argument for a 'Cultural China' identity in Singapore in contrast to a 'pan-Chinese' model.

Keywords:

'Cultural China' identity, interface design, visual metaphors, web design strategy

1.0 Introduction

Within the new arena of Internet technology, various discourses support the argument that cultural meanings are manifested in web communication when ‘imagining’ a nation’s identity in contemporary Chinese societies (Sun 1998; Wong 2003; Yang 2003; Chan 2006; Liu 2006). Chan articulates the various identity options of the Chinese immigrants in the virtual communities by projecting a pan-Chinese cultural identity to encompass a broader term of Chinese ethnicity (Chan 2006). Sun emphasizes that Chinese migrants connect the notion of Chinese identity in cyberspace as an emotional attachment to reconcile with their displacement from their homeland in real life (Sun 2002). However, discourses on Chinese web interface design have often considered Tu Wei-Ming’s (1994) concept of ‘Cultural China’ within the first symbolic universe - Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan as a common cultural entity (Yang 2003; Cartier 2003). These countries are also regarded as cultural markers and centers of orthodox Chinese culture in various cultural studies the diversity of socio-cultural differences and issues beyond geographical location is often overlooked. Yang suggests that online Chinese portal sites, such as news groups, online magazines and bulletin board systems have attracted Chinese users from the first symbolic universe of ‘cultural China’ to facilitate and mobilize protest against political events (Yang 2003). Cartier questions the concept of constructing ‘Chineseness’ homogeneously may contradict the economic business network of the Chinese in Malaysia since the priority of race and ethnic group is above business association in this country (Cartier 2003). Despite much empirical research on usability in the context of web communication, the studies have either ignored cultural differences of the end user or have placed too much emphasis on visual and emotional attributes, branding and user experience (Gobe 2001). It has been observed that international web designs are created using guidelines for a ‘generic’ culture and that increasingly web communication focuses on developing ‘global’ applications to capture a wider audience although the approach fails to consider distinctive cultural characteristics such as belief, value and experience (Smith, Duncley, French, Minocha and Chang 2004). As such, a meaningful interpretation of cultural significance should be addressed within the Chinese diaspora when considering web communication for the various Chinese societies. For this study, cultural representations such as, language, traditional symbolism and values are reference points to investigate Chinese cultural identity and web communication in Singapore.

While ‘Cultural China’ that is based on Neo-Confucian ideology, is playing a major role in regional/global economic development, the notion of a potential ‘pan Chinese identity’ is emerging as a result of transmigration of the Chinese across geographical boundaries (Nyiri 1999). The research method for this study discusses design implementation and its cultural meaning for Chinese media and entertainment website in contemporary Singaporean Chinese society within the framework of ‘Cultural China’. As the media and entertainment sector forms a key aspect of popular culture in Singapore, there is an increasing trend to incorporate pop culture consumption in national policies. For instance, Chinese pop songs, pop idols and television celebrities have become media network spokespersons for the promotion of the official Chinese language in the Speak Mandarin Campaign. This is to captivate learning Mandarin among young Singaporean as part of the continuing national plan for economic ties

with China. Furthermore, it is argued that 'pop cultural' products are serving as a criss-crossing transnational network of economic exchanges (Chua 2004). This study examines the perception of 'Chinese' identity among Chinese Singaporean youth through an empirical analysis of user responses to visual interface design in web-based communication. A culture-centered interactive prototype for media and entertainment is developed and two design components – visual metaphor and icon/symbol – are examined with reference to the social construction of local, 'glocal' and cultural meanings for the selected Singaporean Chinese youth. A survey was conducted as part of a pilot study with a group of Singaporean Chinese youth to identify user response to the prototype in relation to cultural meaning and significance.

2.0 Cultural Model

Various models have been proposed to present best practice in cross-cultural discourses concerning globalization and localization. Each cultural model establishes its own set of parameters and agendas to address consumer or corporate needs by identifying global information, cultural bias, cultural metaphors plus an assessment of the degree of localization (Galdo and Nielson 1996). The 'Iceberg' model is an example of a popular cultural model used in cross-cultural communication. The model categorized culture into three layers - surface, unspoken and unconscious rules. Similar to the 'Iceberg' model, the 'Onion' cultural model, proposed by Fons Trompenaars, determines culture in three layers, namely the explicit culture, norms/values and implicit culture. In contrast, the metamodels of culture proposed by Stewart and Bennet refer to objective and subjective cultural issues. While subjective issue presents the unconscious awareness and the psychological feature of a culture such as values and patterns of thinking, objective issue addresses the economical, political structure and social customs that are attached to the artefact (Galdo and Nielson 1996).

Although the various models have established appropriate criteria for consideration when designing cross-cultural business, they place much emphasis on theories that ignore the design processes pertaining to the specific social cultural constructs. The research method for the interactive prototype adopts the conceptual cultural model developed by E. M. Fleming which articulates a five-fold classification of the basic properties of an artifact – history, material, construction, design and function – and set of four operations – identification, evaluation, cultural analysis and interpretation (Fleming 1982). In Fleming's model, the multiple layers of segmenting the design process acts as a reflective mental guide between the designer's and the user's perception. The model demonstrates a potential design process and guidelines that focus on target users in their specific socio-cultural contexts. This analytical model highlights both theories and design choices at every level of the design process that considers usability, connects the user emotionally and conveys cultural identity.

3.0 The Interactive Prototype

The interactive prototype examines two design components – visual metaphor and icons/symbols – as part of the cultural analysis. With reference to Fleming's conceptual cultural model, the analysis of the prototype focused on the design and function classification, and sets of four operations in presenting

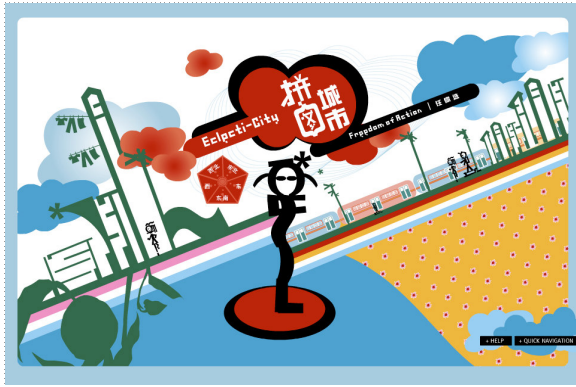
the data of this study.

3.1 Visual Metaphor

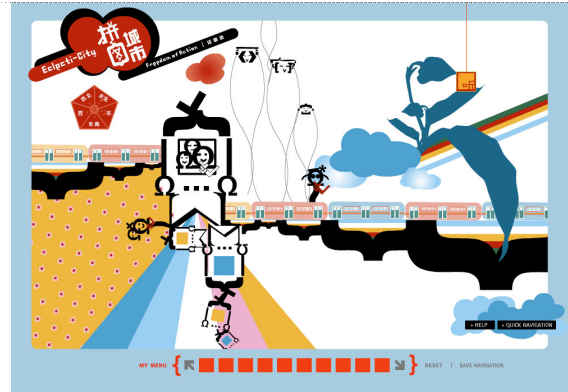
The visual metaphor is a powerful communication tool in user-interface design as it provides a unifying structure that ensures more than just a collection of disparate elements. Moreover, it helps to 'facilitate learning by allowing users to draw upon the knowledge they already have about the reference system' (Nielson 2000). If the metaphor is used appropriately, it can attract attention, engage one's emotion and shape our attitudes towards the artifact (Messaris 1997). Beyond the technical functionality and aesthetic enhancement, it has been demonstrated that the visual metaphor is cultural specific. As such, a designer needs to consider the value of culture as well as the needs and preferences of the user when developing an interface metaphor. This can be achieved through research and understanding of the end user's socio-cultural background followed by application and testing of localized metaphors and symbolic representations that are familiar to the user. Hence, if the metaphor is successfully applied, it can promote usability through cultural narratives that resonate with the user (Shen, Woolley and Prior, 2005).

The visual metaphor for the prototype explores the theme of an 'Eclectic City'. The title 'Eclecti-City' is derived from the word 'eclectic'. In Oxford English dictionary defines 'eclectic' as a wide range of objects, ideas and beliefs from different sources (Oxford American Dictionary and Thesaurus 2003). The last alphabet 'C' extracted from the word 'Eclectic' forms a new word 'City'. In this context, the metaphor presents exciting content and user experience to entice the vibrant urban lifestyle in Singapore. The prototype aims to present an urban energetic feel where modern activities are taken place. It appeals to a Singaporean Chinese youth culture with a non-conformist challenge. Plate 3.1 shows the visual representation of an eclectic lifestyle in contemporary Singapore society. The 'street' lifestyle narrates the themes of youth activities and behaviours such as hip hop shopping malls, suburban activities and social events. The metaphorical concept of street culture is further augmented by the Chinese character for cloud – *yun* 云 – as a typographical element and visual pun to symbolize abundance, luck and happiness (Forty 2003). Hence, the metaphor for the prototype embodied rich symbolic meanings, values and cultural references appropriate to the socio-cultural characteristics of the user.

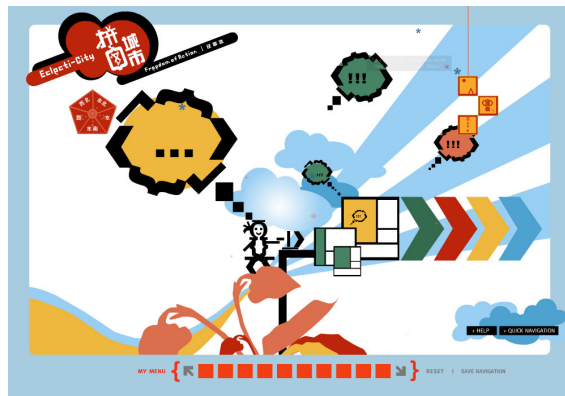
Plate 3.1: Interface design for interactive prototype – Visual representation of an Eclectic Street Life.



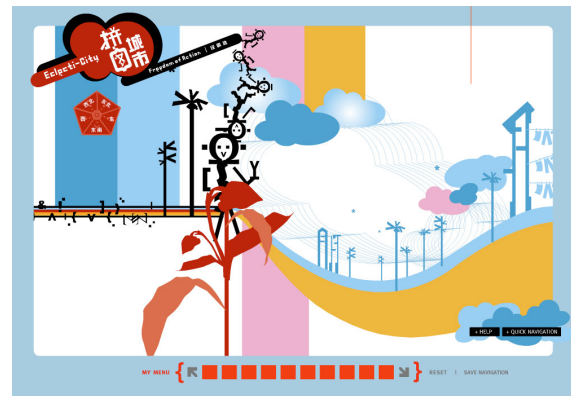
Main Page: Central focus of an eclectic street lifestyle represented by various urban activities such as skating, traveling by train and people moving around the city.



Sub-page 1: Youth activities that revolve around pop culture such as listening to pop music, watching movie/dramas and tracking pop stars news.



Sub-page 2: Online activities such as gaming, downloading and chatting online that characterizes the highly media-oriented youth.



Sub-page 3: Outdoor activities such as dancing and skating in the neighbourhood environment show the vibrancy of a suburban youth culture.

SOURCE: A selection from the interactive prototype designed by the author.

3.2 Icons and Symbols

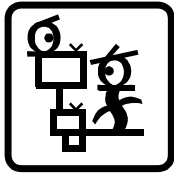





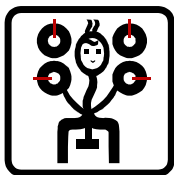
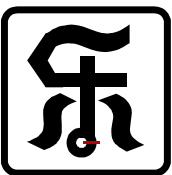
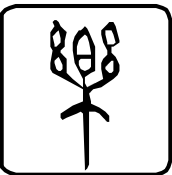
Expressed in the simplest interpretation of Peircian semiotic analysis, ‘an icon is a pictorial sign, an index, a pointer sign, a symbol, a conventional sign’ (Scott 1995). The influx of pictorial information and moving pictures have developed a ‘real’ pictorial language (computer games, manga, MTV, World Wide Web and mobile telephone). It has been argued that there is a shift from using conventional alphabets as our principal communication and a trend of reading visual imageries for the new generation (Crow 2006). Since pictorial messages present the ‘idea’ entirely by encapsulating the visual form as an image for directing to the eye of the human mind, the ‘stylizing’ of pictures and signs has become an alternative process of reading printed text (Frutiger 1989). ‘Iconizing’ information design for screen design has also become a popular global communication tool, and if designed and applied appropriately, icons can be entertaining and visual appealing (Marcus 1992). The use of

consumer icons is demonstrated in the many fields of communication design: corporate branding, packaging, interface and information design. Global icons have also been localized or glocalized to meet local requirement so as to be understood by local tradition (Evamy, 2003).

Icons and symbols are used as graphic narrative devices for navigation in the interactive prototype. The icons are developed from Chinese oracle bone inscriptions as a reference point although the final forms do not necessarily show any resemblance to the original characters. Selected characters for Chinese oracle bone inscription are chosen for several reasons. This earliest form of Chinese communication is based on a pictographic system which provided the rudimentary forms from which the Chinese writing system evolved. It is argued that the spoken Chinese language consists of various dialects, each with its distinctive pronunciation system, so a standard writing system derived from pictorial elements played a significant role in facilitating written communication among the various dialect speaking groups (Frutiger 1989). Moreover, as contemporary Chinese culture is not isolated from regional and global influences, the reference to the unique characteristics of Chinese oracle bone inscriptions is significantly symbolic of cultural history and identity, even though Singaporean Chinese youth can recognize the characters as Chinese without the ability to read the ancient script.



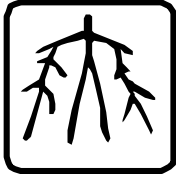






The design of the navigational icons provides potential for resonating with contemporary Singaporean Chinese youth culture in this interactive Chinese media and entertainment prototype. Every section displays a navigation icon integrated with the 'Eclectic' lifestyle metaphor. This design exploration traces the visual genealogical descent of Chinese oracle bone inscription and examines how technological development has contributed to the structure and visual qualities of the current digital icons/symbols in the context of Singaporean Chinese youth culture (Plate 3.2). The icons draw references from past practices and aesthetic conventions that go beyond mere historical facts, and experiments with current design traits pertaining to the creation and production of digital icons/symbols. The navigational icon serves to symbolize the original meaning of the oracle bone inscription with a pictorial reference that integrates with contemporary Singaporean Chinese youth culture. The elements of the icons mimic the strokes of the oracle bone inscription characters and are presented as animation using lines and forms derived from punctuation marks and symbols in black and white. The 'strokes' of the icons are morphed further into contemporary bilingual (English and Mandarin) typographic expressions in animated forms (Plate 3.3). The narrative attempts to present an interplay of Chinese characters and English words through an interpretation of digital icons derived from historical Chinese pictorial writing to represent a bilingual system in contemporary Singapore. Through the testing of user response to the icons and interactive prototype, this study examines whether the design typologies derived from traditional and historical representations contribute to the communication of cultural identity to Singaporean Chinese youth in the nation state.

Plate 3.2 Icons designed to symbolize historical and contemporary cultural meanings

Navigation	Digital icons	Stylized contemporary Chinese characters	Historical source – oracle bone inscription	Metaphor
Drama, 戏 (xi)				In oracle bone inscription, the eye on top watches someone performing (Xie 1997). The digital icon is represented by figures watching a screen. The Chinese words ‘戏迷特区’ (Xi Mi Te Qu) represents drama zone.
Pop star, 星 (xing)				星 refers to shining stars. The bone inscription shows three squares representing stars ¹ . The digital icon shows pop idols performing on stage with glowing stars above the heads. The Chinese words ‘超级明星’ (Cao Ji Ming Xing) represents Super Pop Star.
Music, 乐 (yue)				In oracle bone inscription, 乐 is pictured as a musical instrument with strings stretched over a piece of wood ² . In contemporary usage 乐 means ‘music’ which is pleasing to the ear that gives satisfaction to people. In the digital icon, 乐 is represented by a youth character spinning discs and playing music. The Chinese words ‘乐耳动听’ (Yue Er Dong Ting) means the music is pleasing to the ears. While ‘悦’ – yue is the

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

				correct Chinese character to use in this context, the word 乐 that shares the same phonetic is used for the representation to align with the metaphorical concept.
Dance, 舞 (wu)				In oracle bone inscription, 舞 resembles a figure dancing with branches or ribbons in hand ³ . The digital icon shows a character dancing. The Chinese words ‘舞林宝典’ (Wu Ling Bao Dian) symbolizes ‘dance’. In this context, it represents dance manual or tactics.
Food, 食 (shi)				In oracle bone inscription, 食 resembles a raised vessel full of food with a lid above and symbolizes food to be eaten ⁴ . The digital icon shows a character admiring a plate of food with delight. The Chinese words ‘饮食天堂’ – (Yin Shi Tian Tang) means food heaven.
Fashion, 衣 (yi)				In oracle bone inscription, 衣 is a visual outline of clothing with the top showing upper garment and sleeves, and the bottom wavy robes ⁵ . The digital icon retains the drapery effects with a contemporary silhouette. The Chinese words ‘衣尚指南’ (Yi Shan Zi Nan) refers to fashion trends/directions.

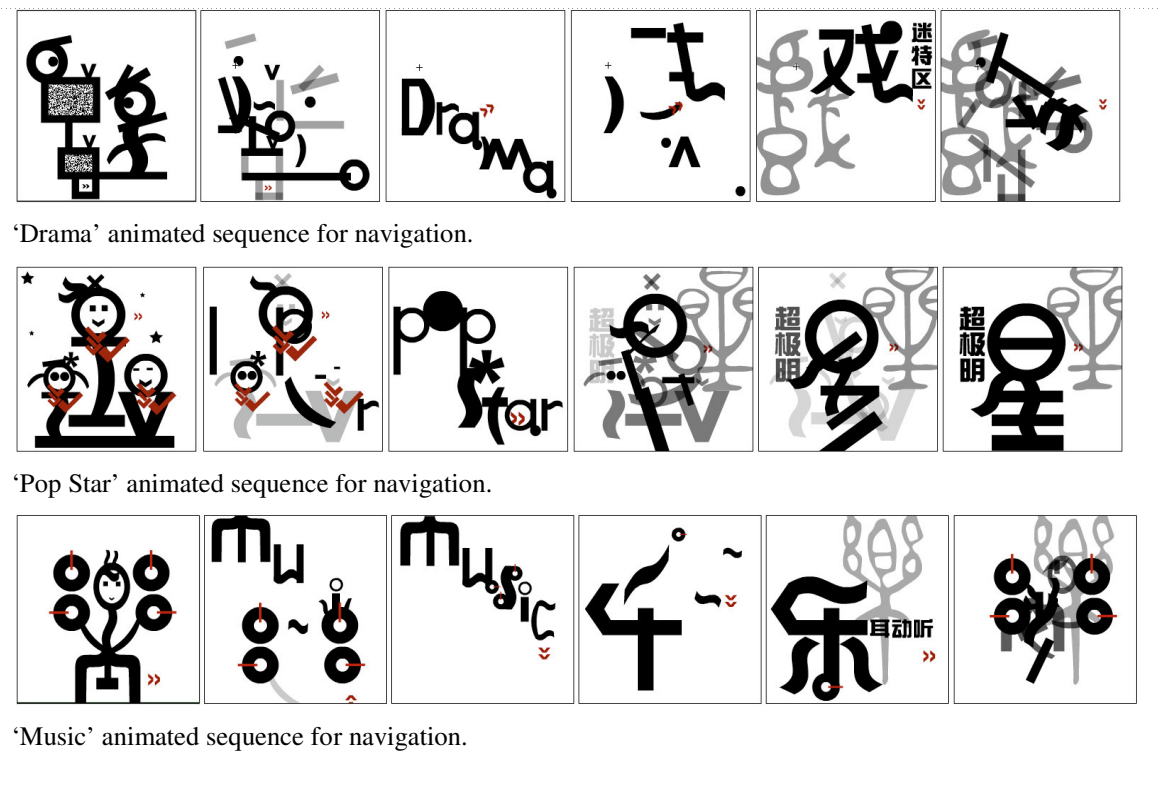
SOURCE: A selection from the interactive prototype designed by the author.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Plate 3.3 Set of symbols in animation sequence



SOURCE: A selection from the interactive prototype designed by the author.

4.0 The survey

The objective of the survey is to evaluate Singaporean Chinese youth response towards the use of icon/symbol and metaphors in the interactive prototype. The questions of the survey were based on observation of behavioural patterns in the demographic group. It is an attempt to explore the potential of using digital icons with local and historical references and a metaphorical framework to communicate cultural resonance and significance. The survey aims to provide an understanding of how Singaporean Chinese youth from different social and cultural backgrounds identify with the representation of cultural identity in response to the use of icons and the metaphor as a visual narrative. The survey data will address implications for communication designers when introducing strategies with cultural concerns within local and global contexts.

4.1 Sample Size

This preliminary study was based on a sample group of fifty-first year design students from the School of Design at Nanyang Polytechnic, Singapore. Given the parameters of conducting public surveys in Singapore, the author acknowledges the bias in the selection of the sample group from an educated cohort with knowledge and experience of communication technologies, fundamental visual literacy skills, and experience in popular culture from local and global sources. Due to the complex stratification of Chinese identities in contemporary Singapore as a result of bilingualism, biculturalism and globalization, the sample of respondents were categorized under five Mandarin Proficiency Levels (Table 4.1). This is to provide an understanding of the responses to cultural significance in the design

components of the interactive prototype with specific attention to the nuances in Chinese language proficiency within the sample group.

4.2 Survey Procedures

With approval from the University of New South Wales Human Research Ethics Advisory Committee, the survey was conducted with Nanyang Polytechnic students who were recruited to participate in a computer laboratory with the interactive prototype installed in the computers. The participants were asked to complete the survey form after interacting with the prototype. The data collected was encoded as inputs for analysis by SPSS/PC+ software. Frequencies analysis and mean were used to analyze the information gathered. For each question in the survey form there were five points representing a gradation from positive to negative opinions for the respondent to choose from. This five points scale allowed a neutral or no opinion mid-point response at 3. The rating scale in which a high figure '5' was considered very good and a low figure '1' was very poor.

4.3 User Satisfaction Results: Mandarin Proficiency Level

The preliminary results of the survey on the interactive prototype show positive feedback from all participants (Table 4.1). Although the sample size of fifty respondents represent a small cohort for analysis, the data provides an insight into the positive responses to the 'cultural' communication of the design approach using icon/symbol and visual metaphor as tools to represent cultural significance.

In terms of icon/symbol design, the overall results from the respondents in the five levels of Mandarin proficiency signified that the higher the Mandarin proficiency level, the better the respondents could distinguish the fusion between 'Eastern' and 'Western' visual styles, and recognize Chinese historical/traditional traits in the animated digital icons. The majority of the respondents acknowledged that Chinese historical reference was a design feature when designing for cultural significant interfaces. However, respondents from all levels of Mandarin proficiency displayed varied opinions with regards to using digital icons as connections to their familiarized lifestyles.

Respondents from the five Mandarin proficiency levels demonstrated various mean opinions when responding to the metaphor concept in relation to the user's socio/cultural expectations as well as a recognizable and familiar lifestyle. It can be interpreted from the data that the respondents opted for the metaphor of the eclectic street life as a visual solution regardless of their Mandarin proficiency levels. Responses to the metaphor of the 'Eastern' and 'Western' cultural mix of the interface demonstrated that the higher the Mandarin proficiency level, the better the user could relate to the visual stimulus.

Table 4.1 Overview of survey results

Mandarin Proficiency Levels	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 4	LEVEL 5
Language Classifications	Respondents who do not read and write Chinese characters.	Respondents who recognized a few hundred Chinese characters but does not read and write Chinese language materials.	Respondents who recognized a few thousand Chinese characters and read Chinese-language materials, such as newspapers, magazines and perform basic writing.	Respondents who read Chinese-language materials frequently.	Respondents who read and understand Classical Chinese text, write poems, stories and scholarly writings.
Icons The digital symbol demonstrates a blend of Eastern and Western visual styles.	O	X	XX	XX	XX
The digital symbol relates to the life style with which I am familiar.	O	X	O	X	X
The animated forms derived from traditional Chinese characters.	X	X	X	XX	XX
Metaphors The metaphor of an eclectic street life relates to my visual, and social/cultural expectations.	X	X	X	XX	X
The metaphor provides a recognizable and familiar experience of my lifestyle.	O	X	O	X	X
The interface design reflects a mixture of an Eastern and Western	O	X	X	XX	XX

cultures.					
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SOURCE: Summarized from the survey designed by the author.

Note: 'O' represents neutral opinion, 'X' represents agreeable and 'XX' represents strongly agreeable.

5.0 Conclusion

This study is exploratory in nature as the concept of 'Cultural China' is part of continuing discourses on Chinese culture and identity. However, while the phenomenon of transmigration continues to evolve, Chinese cultural identities will further diversify and continue to revolve and evolve, revitalizing itself in the realm of rapid globalization. In general, the survey has revealed how a selected group of Singaporean Chinese youth responded and interpreted visual information online. The results are significant for the preliminary study since the design model is built around a Chinese culture-centric dimension resonating with the diverse Singaporean Chinese identities. Although design issues with regards to visual representation of a familiarized lifestyle has shown diverse opinions, the survey has displayed an interesting outcome concerning the idea of homogenizing Chinese cultures. Within a small nation-state, the findings have shown cultural diversity as well as common consensus among the Singaporean Chinese youth respondents. Nevertheless, the strategy of integrating language with pop culture in media and entertainment is a significant and potential step to reach out to the young audience.

The empirical findings and design model suggest a number of areas for further research. The results will contribute to growing investigations on design typologies and cultural meanings and to a fuller user evaluation with a larger Chinese population. Issues such as language commonly spoken among the Singaporean Chinese raise further questions for research. Moreover, while the majority of the respondents are locally born Singaporean Chinese, the increasing number of Chinese immigrants to the nation-state may necessitate the notion of a 'Pan-Chinese' identity since the use of icons with historical/traditional references may have different implications to the respondents than what was presented in this study. Further research will provide significant directions for this conceptual model.

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