



Conveying Ningxia's 8 Treasures Tea Cultural Values through Packaging Design: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract. “Eight Treasures Tea” is a unique type of herbal tea from Ningxia province in China. It is recognized as a cultural legacy of Ningxia due to its unique recipe, medicinal properties, health benefits, and rich history of thousands of years. However, the public in China, especially the young generation, seems unaware of these cultural and nutritional characteristics of Ningxia’s Eight Treasures Tea. A preliminary observation has shown that visual and verbal elements of the existing Ningxia’s Eight Treasures Tea packaging design are insufficient to articulate its ‘values’ as a cultural object to the public. The study develops a conceptual framework based on a literature review to address this gap. It proposes a practice-based research methodology using various data collection methods, including visual analysis, semi-structured interviews, and reflective practice, to produce a creative packaging that can effectively embody the cultural values of Ningxia’s Eight Treasures Tea. This study demonstrates the interrelated connection between research and training and the critical role of a practitioner as a researcher rather than just an information processor.

Keywords: Cultural values; Ningxia’s Eight Treasures Tea; Packaging design; Practice-based research

1. Introduction

The story of tea began in China. According to ‘The Classic of Tea’ (Lu & Jiang, 2015), tea has been a popular beverage since the Tang Dynasty, and the Chinese proudly refer to it as a national drink. The Chinese population consumed over 288 billion yuan of tea in 2020, around 5.54% more than in 2019 (CNFIA, 2020). The China Tea Marketing Association (CTMA, 2020) predicted that the tea consumption rate in China would grow in tandem with the increased awareness of the Chinese of the health benefits of tea in the following years. Tea products have enormous potential in today’s Chinese consumption market.

The different varieties of teas embody the histories, cultures, and customs of other regions in China. The distinctiveness of an area may give its tea and tea culture a unique identity. “Eight Treasures Tea” is a signature herbal tea of Ningxia province, China, with an abundance history of more than 1,400 years (Huang, 2007). It is one of the cultural heritages listed in Ningxia (Zhang, 2022). In addition, Cao et al. (2018) highlighted that the making and drinking process of Ningxia’s Eight Treasures Tea involves displaying and transmitting specific cultures, rituals, and customs. These features are different from the tea cultures of other regions in China. In light of this, Eight Treasures Tea can be considered

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a significant cultural object of Ningxia.

Although the populace of Ningxia appreciates Eight Treasures Tea, their awareness of its cultural, historical, and nutritional values is rather limited (Cao et al., 2018). The issue is undeniable among the young generation. Experts claimed that there is an urgent need to explore channels to promote the cultural features of Ningxia's Eight Treasure Tea more effectively (Cao et al., 2018). CBNData & Tmall Tasty (2020) report indicated that packaging is ranked as the third most important factor, besides quality and taste, when people select tea products. The above arguments imply that packaging is a potentially strategic tool used to promote the cultural values of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea to potential consumers.

However, a preliminary observation conducted by the authors of this study indicated that the visual representations of the existing packaging design of Eight Treasures Tea brands in Ningxia are very similar in terms of their choices of optical elements, such as colors, typography, and graphic imageries. Moreover, the packaging only includes basic information (as shown in Figure 1). In other words, the design's visual and verbal elements have yet to adequately integrate the cultural values of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea. Nevertheless, having said all these, limited literature is available on investigating and interpreting the different dimensions of the cultural values of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea, which creates difficulties and challenges for such integration practice to take place successfully.



Figure 1 Eight Treasures Tea packaging design, observed and collected by the author of the study in Ningxia's market

The study argues that tea packaging from different countries or regions should convey the cultural stories and values of the tea distinctively to enhance its competitive advantages. It is not an exception for Eight Treasures Tea packaging. As a cultural object of Ningxia, Eight Treasures Tea offers culturally meaningful information for practitioners to consider when designing the packaging. Therefore, the objective of this study is to integrate the four-dimensional cultural values of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea as a cultural object based on a literature review. It develops a conceptual framework and proposes a practice-based research methodology using various data collection methods. It consists of visual analysis, semi-structured interviews, and reflective practice to produce a packaging design that can effectively embody the cultural values of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cultural Objects and Cultural Values

Culture significantly influences society and its constituents regarding values, customs, practices, and rituals (Brons, 2005). Hofstede's theory of cultural dimension describes the influence of culture on the behavioral preferences of society members. Setyaningrum et al. (2022) attempt to investigate the impact of the cultural product on customer satisfaction

in Indonesia through a model based on the Hofstede cultural dimension. Hence, culture is a broad term that plays a vital role in guiding people's behavior.

Cultural objects describe the creation, use, and distribution of objects that could communicate culturally meaningful messages or values to others (Lipe, 1984; Mangone, 2018). Griswold (1994) defined a cultural object as "shared significance embodied in the form". It is an audible, visible, tangible, socially meaningful expression (Griswold, 1994). What distinguishes 'cultural objects' from 'ordinary objects' is their 'cultural worth', or so-called 'cultural value' (Lipe, 1984). Cultural value is a multifaceted concept. People of different cultures appreciate the value of a particular cultural object because of various reasons (Lipe, 1984). It is learned from the literature (Lipe, 1984; Griswold, 1994; Mangone, 2018) that cultural objects interpret cultural values from four main dimensions. These dimensions are (1) artistic value, (2) health benefits, (3) spiritual significance, (4) historical importance.

2.2. Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea

Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea is significant evidence of the prosperity of trade and commerce in ancient China. It originated from the Silk Road during the Tang Dynasty. Those traders boiled tea with dried fruits to help them to get rid of fatigue, and later such tea boiling methods became a habit of welcoming the guests (Cao et al., 2018). As illustrated in Figure 2, several edible and medicinal ingredients made the original Eight Treasures. It is prepared by considering a scientific formula and caused by tea leaves as raw materials and blends, especially with generally eight to ten kinds of ingredients such as wolfberries, oleasters, walnuts, cinnamon meats, sesames, raisins, jujubes, rock sugar, and so on (Huang, 2007; Cao et al., 2018). The history and origins, the customs that have developed over time, and the nutritional properties of the ingredients directly or indirectly reflect the cultural value of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea in different dimensions.



Figure 2 The formula of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea contains several healthy ingredients, Song Min (2020)

Chinese Health Concerns Big Data (2019) indicated that wellness had become a prevalent issue, and there is enormous potential for wellness products, especially in China's post-90s and post-80s consumer markets. Likewise, a report (Yu & Yang, 2018) also suggested that Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea sales exceeded 300 million yuan in 2018. Despite the increasing popularity of Eight Treasures Tea in the Ningxia market, however, Cao et al. (2018) mentioned that the general public in Ningxia or other regions of China, especially the young generation, has insufficient understanding of Eight Treasures Tea. It (Yu & Yang, 2018) also emphasized that the competitive advantages of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea are not apparent in the local and international markets.

2.3. Packaging Design

Over the years, the importance of packaging has been recognized by many designers and experts in different fields. Packaging is described as 'the silent salesman' (Pilditch, 1961) and is one of the key attributes in determining consumer preferences (Suzianti et al., 2015). Attractive packaging contributes to product differentiation in the marketplace (Ambrose & Harris, 2018). Packaging not only provides a surface to communicate product information (Silayoi & Speece, 2004), but also functions as a unique visual image of the brand, helping consumers to identify it among hundreds of other competitors (Ambrose & Harris, 2018). According to Underwood and Burke (2001), the proliferation of brands available to consumers in the market has led to efforts to improve the successful differentiation of products through packaging design.

Packaging design chooses and integrates various elements that can achieve a particular sensory impact to influence consumers' purchase decisions. The aspects of packaging design can be divided into visual elements, which are color, form, size, materials, and graphics, as well as verbal components, including product information, brand, manufacturer, and country of origin (Silayoi & Speece, 2004). The studies (Borgman et al., 2018; Kuo et al., 2021) have found that the visual and verbal elements of packaging design play a critical role in influencing consumers' purchase intention and decision-making process.

2.4. Previous Studies on Cultural Values and Packaging Design

Integrating cultural elements into packaging design has gained increasing attention over the last decade. Previous studies demonstrated that 'cultural concept' plays an essential role in designing and determining the visual style and information of the packaging (Min et al., 2018; Wan & Razali, 2019; Celhay et al., 2020; Hu, 2020). Packaging can stimulate interest among potential consumers when various cultural characteristics and the top represent information (Silayoi & Speece, 2004). The visual and verbal elements of unique packaging design can showcase different cultures to consumers (Ambrose & Harris, 2018).

As the packaging industry continues to evolve, a considerable amount of literature has focused on investigating the application of 'cultural concept' when designing packaging. Undoubtedly, these studies have helped to advance the understanding of the creative process and impact of applying cultural values and related elements in packaging design and contributed to new marketing insights into promoting particular products. Wan and Razali (2019) offer a meaningful packaging solution by combining indigenous Malaysian cultural elements and traditional graphics using a contemporary style. Their study creates packaging for a Malaysian medicinal bath product brand. Hu's study (2020) developed a practice-led process of visualizing traditional cultural symbols. According to Hu (2020), such a practical approach to incorporating traditional Chinese characters into the design elements of tea packaging demonstrates how contemporary visual communication design can effectively represent cultural identity. Several researchers (Min et al., 2018; Celhay et al., 2020) suggested that conveying the desired cultural meanings and aesthetic styles using visual symbols in packaging can eliminate language and cultural barriers. Their perspectives mean that consumers from different regions or cultures can comprehend the meanings through graphic signs more efficiently, even if they are unfamiliar with the portrayed cultures.

Therefore, the concepts of local and global or traditional and modern packaging are not opposites but mutually supporting and reinforcing, depending on the strengths and weaknesses of the consumer markets in which the different products or packaging are

exposed. Since cultural values of a product play a significant role in determining the visual aesthetic and content information of its packaging.

3. Proposed Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature review, Figure 4 depicts the conceptual framework of this study. This framework consists of five interrelated concepts. Firstly, the characteristics of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea determine its identity as a cultural object. Its cultural values interpret in four key dimensions, i.e., (1) artistic value, (2) spiritual significance, (3) historical importance, and (4) health benefits. Afterward, through creative practice, these dimensions of cultural values are reflected in the visual and verbal elements of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea packaging design. By looking at the packaging, consumers in the market or a wider public can be aware of the cultural values of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea.

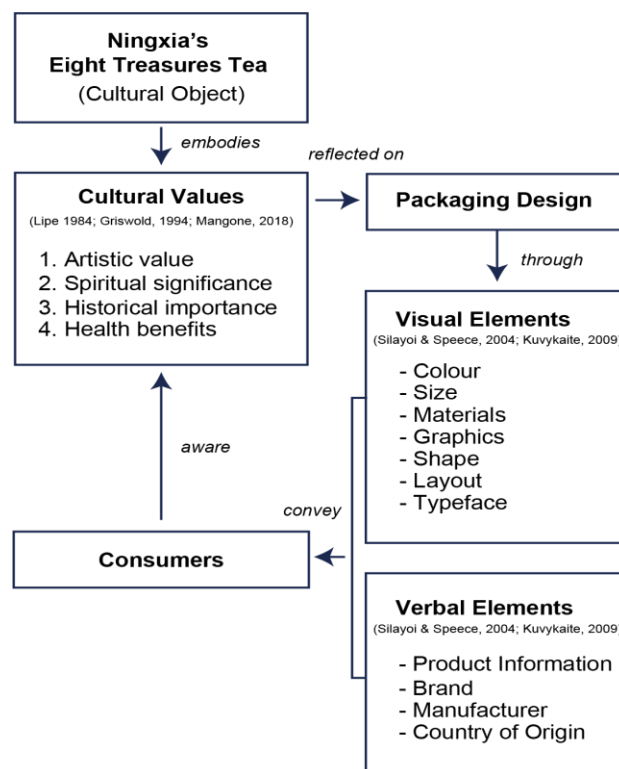


Figure 3 The proposed conceptual framework of the study

4. Proposed Methodology

4.1. Practice-Based Research

The present study aims to identify the more specific and in-depth cultural values of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea and explore how these values can be more effectively communicated through its packaging design. Therefore, it adopts practice-based research in which the emphasis is placed on the investigation of the process and creative outputs of the practice (Candy & Edmonds, 2018). In other words, original claims and contributions to knowledge would be evidenced through innovative processes and outcomes (Muratovski, 2016). This means that practice and research operate together in such a way to answer the research questions (Skains, 2018). In this sense, practice-based research is a powerful yet suitable vehicle that the study can use to create new Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea packaging. The cultural values of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea are to be explored thoroughly in the creative process to determine how they can be best represented visually and verbally on the packaging.

4.2. Research Design

In practice research, a wide variety of data collection methods can be utilized flexibly to answer the research questions (Skains, 2018). As illustrated in Figure 4, this study is divided into three phases to achieve the research goal of conveying the cultural values of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea through packaging design.

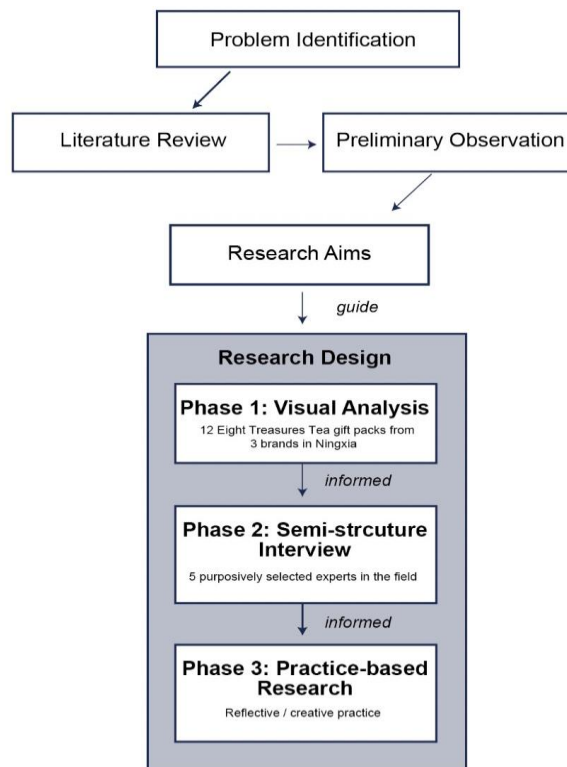


Figure 4 The proposed research design for the study

4.2.1. Phase 1: Visual Research

Visual research is the process of interpreting objects, evaluating and criticizing the quality of works through the connoisseurship of the visual information presented and the visible impressions formed (Muratovski, 2016). Before the creative practice takes place, visual research is conducted to analyze the visual and verbal elements of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea packaging. The analysis looks at visibility, information, emotional appeal, and workability. The visual analysis process may deepen the authors' understanding of their preliminary observation and allow for evaluation of whether existing packaging effectively covers cultural values.

Specifically, this phase selects 12 popular gift packs of three Eight Treasures Tea brands in Ningxia for visual analysis.

4.2.2. Phase 2: Semi-Structure Interview

Semi-structured interviews (SSI) can be utilized as an instrument to gather data and information (Manzo & Rodríguez, 2022). It provides a level of relevance to the topic but without overly standardized questions and could help the ability to delve into unanticipated issues while maintaining participant response (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Researchers can use SSI when they know enough about the topic to identify the domain and main components of the subject but cannot predict all possible answers (Adams, 2015).

SSI is conducted with experts to collect their views and useful resources on the cultural values of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea from the four dimensions referred to previously. Purposive sampling selects specific groups or individuals (Creswell & Plano, 2017). Five participants are chosen based on their level of experience or expertise in the field of

Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea. The interview participants include the manufacturer, frontline sales staff, tea master, cultural inheritor, and academic experts. To identify further the unknown and unanticipated characteristics and cultural values of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea. In addition, their experiences and perceptions associated with the industry of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea will provide new insights into the existing packaging design. Thus, the SSI not only focuses on exploring data related to cultural values but also complements the findings generated in the study's first phase.

4.2.3. Phase 3: Reflective/Creative Practice

For practice-based researchers, the perspectives gained in reflective practice contribute to the outcomes of innovative research (Candy & Edmonds, 2018). Reflective practice defines as the activity of reflection, and the object of contemplation explains as the work itself (Mollo & Falzon, 2004). Action and thought are complementary, 'doing' extends 'thinking', while 'reflection' facilitates 'doing' and its results (Schön, 1983). Reflective practice is one of the most applicable structured self-evaluation methods to evaluate the design process (Thompson, 2008). This process produces unexpected shifts in the practitioner's actions, adding new perceptions and efforts to respond to the issues that arise. In the consequences of action, more can be achieved than was anticipated or described in advance.

Based on the above arguments, the third phase of the practice process primarily involves reflecting on the understandings derived from the first and second phases regarding the thematic packaging design of the cultural values of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea. These new understandings are continuously extracted, evaluated, modified, and integrated into visual representations, thus contributing to the creative practice of packaging design.

5. Contributions

Several contributions can emanate from the conceptual framework and research design proposed for the study. Firstly, this study examines and integrates existing literature and theoretical knowledge on cultural values of cultural objects, visual and verbal elements of packaging design, and the relationship between cultural values and packaging design. It formulates a conceptual framework to guide the creative practice of designing the packaging for Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea. The framework also serves as an example for the future creative practice of packaging design of other cultural objects. Moreover, in the research design, the practice-based research process sought to shift the multidimensional academic concept of cultural values into tangible and concrete visual representations through three phases of visual analysis, SSI, and creative practice. The new packaging design of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea is central to the practice-based research process, which is also a means of acquiring new knowledge in the study. New understandings gained from drafting, designing, reflecting, and evaluating can feed directly back into the packaging. The process of creating a unique packaging design for Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea not only provides a new way of looking at the product but also contributes to the generation of new ideas, leading to the constant renewal of output. This research design contributes strategies for innovative packaging design of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea to meet the opportunities and challenges of the contemporary tea market.

6. Conclusions

This is on-going research for a master's degree thesis. The study identifies Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea as a cultural object and elaborates on the potential cultural values in

terms of history, health, art, and spirituality based on its characteristics. In addition, the study finds packaging can communicate cultural values as a means, and the cultural values of a product play a significant role in determining the visual and verbal elements of its packaging. These findings facilitated the development of a conceptual framework to produce a packaging design that conveys the cultural values of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea. The authors hope the study's creative processes will develop a new, and meaningful solution for Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea packaging. Especially in conveying its cultural values through the visual and verbal elements and making the younger generation aware of the unique tea culture.

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