

Exploring Consumer Taste by Award-Winning Product Designers via the Elite Interview

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the significance of taste in product design. Product design is a service-oriented discipline that encompasses the design and development of products catering to the diverse and evolving needs of users. Industrial designers often navigate the balance between the “form and function” of a product, harmonizing aesthetic appeal with practical utility. A deeper understanding of consumer tastes could enable designers to create products that better align with user preferences. In other words, a well-designed product should successfully satisfy the consumer’s taste. Researchers conducted elite interviews with ten award-winning product designers from Taiwan, who have received accolades such as the iF, IDEA, Red Dot, GD, and Taiwan Excellence Awards. Based on their perspectives and insights, valuable ideas and concepts regarding the relationship between consumer taste and product design were identified and summarized. The results of the interview indicate that: 1) the taste is constituted by two parts: invisible internal and visible external. Everyone’s taste is unique, subjective, consistent and categorized; 2) consumers choose products with personal taste features to express self-images, show their socioeconomic status, or achieve social identification and adoration; 3) when it comes to taste, consumers always have consistent demands for product design in similar properties or functions; 4) according to elite designers, developing novel user experiences is essential for advancing the understanding of consumers’ taste demands. Finally, we hope this study serves as an important guide for the product design process and methodology, particularly aiding future researchers conducting related studies.

Keywords: Product design, Aesthetics, Elite interview, Consumer taste

INTRODUCTION

Taste originally referred to the act of tasting food, but has expanded from oral sensation to encompass visual, auditory, and other sensory experiences. This ability enables someone to perceive the aesthetic properties of things and guides their judgment in choosing between good aesthetic experiences and those that fail aesthetically (Townsend, 1997). The explanation of taste theory in aesthetics originated with the German philosopher Kant (1952). He introduced that people have different levels of tastes, and the demarcation of whether the taste is in a high or low level involves individual choices, the degree of reasoning judgment and the cultural influence on the

individual. Thus, Kant pointed out that people are the subjects of aesthetics, and products are the objects of aesthetics.

Simply put, product design refers to creating products that are aesthetically pleasing and visually appealing (Blaich and Blaich, 1993). Appreciating product taste is one of human capabilities. The ability to enjoy diverse products is a uniquely human capability. This capability stems from our beliefs, attitudes, and values, all deeply influenced by our cultural and historical backgrounds (Kälviäinen, 2002). Consumer taste influences their product needs. During product design, designers must consider not only functionality but also consumers' aesthetic needs. Product innovation encompasses not only technology but also aesthetics. Even products with technologically enhanced functions and efficiency may still fail to satisfy users' aesthetic tastes in an age of technological innovation. For example, the quartz watch, a new technology of the 1970s, possessed numerous functional advantages. Then it faded from the watch market due to its lack of sophisticated aesthetics (Johnstone, 1999). Therefore, excellent product designers, with a deep understanding of humanities, social sciences, and psychology, can meet consumer preferences and needs, creating superior products with uniqueness and charm.

METHODOLOGY

An elite interview is a qualitative research method that involves conducting interviews with individuals who hold positions of power, influence, or expertise within a particular field (Dexter, 2006). These individuals are considered "elites" due to their unique access to knowledge, decision-making processes, or resources. In essence, elite interviews provide researchers with a valuable tool for understanding the perspectives of those who are at the top of their fields, contributing to a richer and more nuanced understanding of complex phenomena (Marshall and Rossman, 2006).

In general, immersion extending beyond a decade may be regarded as constituting design expertise (Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Römer, 1993). The distinction between these expert designers and novice designers lies in their greater experience and more developed strategies for problem-solving (Popovic, 2004). In a similar vein, they exhibit superior capacity for analogical reasoning (Ball, Ormerod and Morley, 2004).

The research interviewed ten outstanding product designers from Taiwan. These designers have received numerous awards, including the iF, IDEA, Red Dot, GD, and Taiwan Excellence Awards, among others (see Table 1).

Table 1: Ten award-winning Taiwan designers for interviews.

Name	Position Title	Award
Chen, Ching-Glang	Product Division Manager	Red Dot
Fang, Yu-min	Senior Design Manager	iF
Lee, Jeng-Yi	Senior Design Manager	iF
Lee, Zu-Nan	Design Division Manager	Red Dot
Liu, Da-Chi	Senior Design Manager	iF

(Continued)

Table 1: Continued.

Name	Position Title	Award
Liu, Shian-Jin	Assistant Manager	Taiwan Excellence
Lu, Hau-Wen	Design Director	GD
Wu, Jiun-Ting	Product Design director	IDEA
Pan, Jau-Tsai	President	Taiwan Excellence
Zeng, Yi-Wen	Senior Design Manager	Red Dot

The study involved interviews with ten elite designers, curated based on their decades of practical experience and distinguished professional records. Beyond their technical expertise and holistic design approach, their numerous prestigious awards attest to a proven track record of balancing aesthetic and functional objectives. These interviews yielded incisive perspectives on consumer taste, providing critical insights for future product development.

Using interview questions grounded in philosophical, sociological, and aesthetic concepts of taste, the researchers explored various taste-related issues with these distinguished industrial designers (see Table 2).

Table 2: The issues in each interview question.

Question No.	Issues of Taste
Q1	Definition and explanation of taste Involving basic sensory content The quality of taste
Q2	The hierarchy of human's taste The criteria for one's taste distinction
Q3	Innate or acquired Designers' Taste Compared with Ordinary People's
Q4	Forming of personal taste Changes of someone's taste
Q5	The role of taste on an individual Aesthetics and function preferring Reasons influencing personal taste
Q6	Product design requirements for personal taste Similar or different product categories
Q7	Interviewee's recommendations and feedback

Using structured interview questions and voice recordings, the data was analyzed with the qualitative analysis software. Each interviewee reviewed and confirmed the results of their analysis. For the consumer taste issues in the study, these interviewees were asked about the following topics:

Q1: What are your views and opinions on consumer taste?

Q2: Is there a hierarchy of taste? Do different social classes or groups have distinct tastes? What are the factors or conditions that distinguish different tastes?

- Q3: Is taste innate or influenced by cultural, historical, social, or familial conditions? Do designers have better taste compared to ordinary people?
- Q4: Does taste change over time, and if so, what are the reasons? Self-experience, age, epiphanies, or other factors?
- Q5: What is the impact or influence of using or owning products that match personal taste on an individual's identity and image? And what are the reasons for this?
- Q6: Do consumers' design preferences for products relate to their personal taste? Are one's preferences for items like cars influenced by their taste in clothing? Are preferences across different categories likely to be similar?
- Q7: Based on your personal experiences, which aspects or elements of design are related to consumers' tastes? And which of these is worth mentioning during the interview?

After interview, the researcher converted the interview recordings into transcripts. The qualitative analysis software tool, NVivo, was used to assist in managing the interview transcripts and conduct content analysis on the meanings or related concepts expressed by the products or things and content related to the concept of taste (see Figure 1).

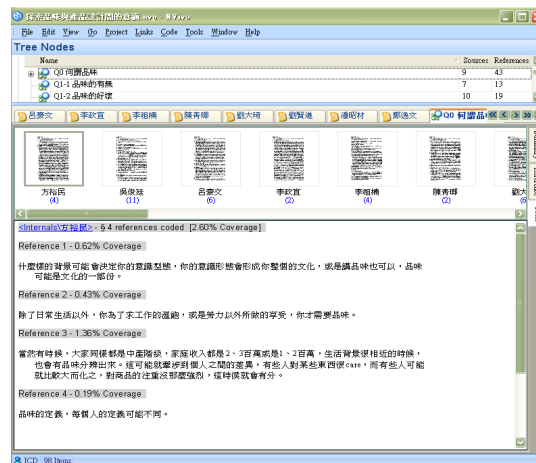


Figure 1: Interview topics coded into tree nodes. (Screenshot from NVivo operating).

With a research framework and clear concepts for the qualitative research, researchers can first establish the node system and then proceed to coding (Huang and He, 2009). This study already has an initial framework of the taste issues, so each topic is used as a tree node structure in the initial stage of analysis, and then coded according to the concepts, meanings or attributes of the interview texts. Then, the coding contents were analyzed and summarized into new tree nodes, which were named and finally formed into research groups and attributes (see Figure 2).

Finally, elite interviews reflect the diverse aspects of social facts, so the study adopted the member check method to confirm the validity of the research results. The member check is a method of making research more accurate through the concept of "Informant Feedback" (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea,

2006). After the interviewees reviewed the records and results of this study and provided their feedback, the researcher respected their opinions and made appropriate revisions to the research results.

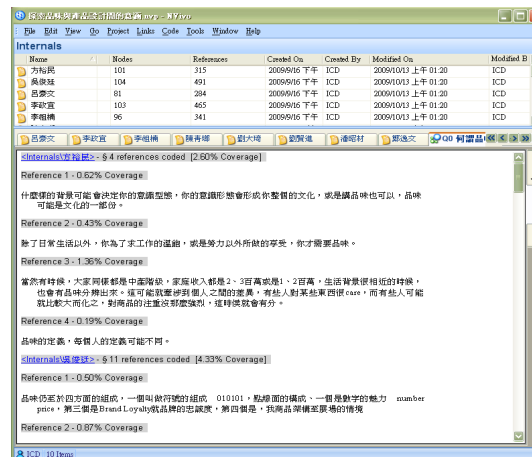


Figure 2: Analyzing the concept codes and keywords. (Screenshot from NVivo operating).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Because the interview is a qualitative study, the research results are very large and complex. At present, the study have summarized and sorted out the parts of the interview topics that have reached consensus, including consumer tastes, simple distinctions in tastes, etc. The results of the elite interview indicate that:

1. The taste is constituted by two parts: invisible internal and visible external. Everyone's taste is unique, subjective, consistent and categorized. Taste is based on personal subjective judgment and has unique individual persistence and views. Someone without their own choices and opinions is deemed to have no taste.
2. Consumers choose products with personal taste features to express self-images, show their socioeconomic status, or achieve social identification and adoration. Accumulated experience and personal understanding solidify people's persistence and opinions on their taste, creating a consistent characteristic over time.
3. When it comes to taste, consumers always has the stable product design demands in similar properties or functions. This may be to show one's self-image, to highlight one's identity and status, personal recognition, or idol/brand worship. Regardless, an individual's taste tends to be quite consistent over a certain period of time.
4. It is suggested that the designer should try developing new experiences to further understand consumers' taste demands. Because industrial design is to be able to meet the various needs of consumers for products. Designers should try to understand the tastes of more different groups so as to provide complete product value.

Elite designers possess more than ten years of practical experience. Along with their extensive expertise in product design and design thinking, their award-winning achievements demonstrate that their products meet both aesthetic and functional objectives. This research highlights their unique insights into taste, offering new directions for product design and development. The better a designer understands consumer tastes, the more effectively they can meet users' needs. In essence, products created through design are aesthetic objects that should fulfill the needs of users, who are the aesthetic subjects.

CONCLUSION

The core content of industrial design is the product, focusing on the balance between functional use and aesthetic appearance to meet the needs of various consumers. These unique and subjective design requirements reflect consumers' demands for taste. Therefore, for certain design technologies or methods used in the product development, the research results of consumers taste should serve as the basic assumptions and conceptual premises for designers' references.

Although the study mainly discusses products with manufacturing characteristics when explaining aesthetic objects, and emphasizes the practical aspects of the product design field, and does not explore the perspectives of fashion and society, it will also be of great academic significance if it can inspire other researchers to develop issues such as style, symbols, and images on the aesthetic content of products and form research related to localized taste.

Finally, these taste implications related to product design will serve as a reference for subsequent research and development of product design procedures or technologies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Thanks to these Taiwanese senior designers for their selfless and generous willingness to participate in the interviews amidst their busy work schedules. Their experiences and insights provided designers with some future references.

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