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A comparison of the covers of Elle magazine for Mainland China and U.S.

Xiaohan Chen
Iowa State University

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A comparison of the covers of Elle magazine for Mainland China and U.S.

by

Xiaohan Chen

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Graphic Design

Program of Study Committee:

Debra Satterfield, Major Professor
Lisa Fontaine
Dennis Chamberlin

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2014

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ABSTRACT

As the global community becomes more compact, the need for exploration of culture and cultural differences has increased. This study analyzes the influences of culture on one fashion brand, the fashion magazine, Elle. The subject of fashion was selected due to its great need for branding and advertising, which require the skills of photography and graphic design together and individually. Combining these aspects will allow graphic designers to analyze how cultural differences influence visual effects while becoming more aware of cultural subjects.

Elle is the No.1 fashion magazine in the world (Elle Official website), and was the first international fashion magazine in China (Fang, 2006). Therefore, Elle was selected as the fashion brand to be analyzed based on its great impact. Chinese and U.S. culture were selected based on two criteria: 1) for Chinese culture, fashion was a completely new concept from Western civilization with its own independent developing process, most of the time, isolated from Chinese culture. 2) U.S. culture has been known for absorbing different cultures from around and the world, coining from Europe, and fusing them together. Both cultures boast a large area but are very different from each other. These two cultures were selected for the limitation of formation.

Ten different covers of the Elle sold in Mainland China and ten covers of the Elle sold in the United States provide a basis for comparison, discussion, and evaluation. The variables for this comparison include: 1) cover models, including the facial expressions, postures, nationality, and general settings for the photo shoot; 2) graphic elements, (ex. the layout of the covers) including compositions and typography, an obvious difference between
the two from a cultural aspect; 3) titling, the wording in corresponding languages. The Chinese version of Elle uses a Chinese title, which provides a different meaning from the title used in the U.S. Elle, leading to the difference in typography. The title(s) serve as one of the most outstanding features on the cover(s), integrating the verbal aspect into the overall design. It’s important to see the different treatments of typography from two different languages.

This investigation of visual culture and its impact on Elle Magazine provides valuable information about cultural differences, branding and globalization. The body gesture, through the image of the photography, proposes the one major difference found between the aspects that were analyzed in both cultural magazines. It’s significant for manifesting the same branding purpose within two distinguished cultures by using human models and showing the visual differences through body gestures.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Problem statement

The commercial world is full of visual language. The daily life of an ordinary citizen provides ample evidence of how much visual language surrounds us every day. When a consumer goes out onto the street and looks around, he or she will probably see billboards with photographic images as well as the brand names. Photography has been an important tool in branding for a long time. It’s been so widely used that people can hardly find brands without photographic elements. Image adds a strong statement about the brand. It provides a concrete visual story that customers continuously perceive and recreate from their own personal experience worldview. The visual representation helps them to form their impressions and get a better understanding of a certain brand. For fashion brands, the use of photography is even more fundamental. Fashion brands are almost always the result of a thoughtful design rooted in the individual aesthetics of the specific brands or designers. It’s important for these brands to convey the ideas and messages behind the products, make their brands stand out, and give the brand a distinctive look or image. Photography helps tremendously with this goal in fashion branding.

There are quite a lot global fashion brands that use photography as one of their main marketing strategies. The diversity of the global market allows the photographic representations of the same brand to have different looks and styles. International brands use different photographic imagery to increase the appeal of the brand in different cultural markets and at the same time, maintain the consistency of the brand image.
1.2 Purpose of the study

This thesis will develop and use an effective design analysis method to analyze how the same fashion brand uses photography differently, specifically in the Mainland China market and United States of America market. The selected fashion brand is a global fashion magazine called Elle. Fashion magazines use photography a lot, especially fashion photography. Photos convey messages; these of which are guided in cultural reference. Every cover of a fashion magazine should be considered a sophisticated work of fashion photography.

This study will use fashion branding to demonstrate how the differences in photographic representation on Elle covers in different cultural markets reveal elements of visual culture that may have been overlooked or neglected. The purpose of this study is to examine and how effective cover designs work for both markets relating the design to the cultural, social, and emotional differences in their respective audiences.

The following research questions will be analyzed: 1) how do cultural differences have an influence on the body gestures throughout the covers of Elle and what are the visual differences? 2) How are the differences of graphic elements featured on the covers of Elle as part of the visual differences, in terms of the distinguish cultures? The differences include the composition of Elle covers, the typography and the color usage. 3) How do different titles of Elle work within the two cultures?

1.3 Thesis procedure and methodology

The proposed research was composed of four parts: 1) a general background study of the subject, 2) a literature review, 3) a case study 4) a thesis discussion and analysis. The background study contextualizes the information and furnishes a basic understanding of the
subject, and the literature review provides a solid foundation for the thesis discussion. The case study analysis is the focal point of the thesis in which examination of a specific case forms the basis for theory and discussion. The thesis discussion extracts the author’s analysis and comparison from the background study and literature review then uses it to examine how the elements are applied to the subject based on the needs of different target audiences.

1.4 Significance

*Elle* magazine is undoubtedly a very successful fashion magazine around the world. How *Elle* magazine maintains success in various countries while maintaining the consistency of the brand image is worth discussing. As a fundamental element in the brand image, the cover designs of *Elle* play an important role in appealing to the target audience at first glance. Sometimes, it’s the only reason customers pick a magazine up from a magazine stand. Therefore, it makes the cover(s) an important resource in exploring cultural differences. It is important to consider cultural influences in the process of decoding graphic messages found in *Elle* cover designs. This subject matters because *Elle*, as an international fashion brand, has such a strong influence on the fashion industry and on the women worldwide. To attain such an influence, *Elle* has to take cultural differences into consideration even adjusting the brand itself so as to appeal to local audiences in around the world. People from different cultural backgrounds have various responses and reactions to visual languages. The visual elements from the *Elle* covers change corresponding to what messages and implications they plan or need to convey to a given local audience. It’s important to understand the art of a culture, human image, and how that would be interpreted from a historical point of view for the purpose of passing the knowledge of human experiences. Learning how visual language works, through both photography and graphic design,
in people’s daily lives provides an irreplaceable framework for understanding how culture and art influence one another. The study of visual differences found on Elle Magazine covers also shows how a global brand expresses itself visually within different cultural discourses. Specifically, this includes the differences of photography and graphic design elements, including human models, arrangement of background(s), and layout to convey different messages. It is important to identify the diverse cultural signs found on Elle covers as they appear in different areas of the world in order to understand the art of a culture.

This study will demonstrate how strongly cultural elements impact the cover of a highly globalized fashion magazine such as Elle, by distinguishing the influence of two distinctly different cultural backgrounds. As Enkvist (1973:21) states, ‘‘The essence of variation . . . is difference, and differences cannot be analyzed and described without comparison.’’ Comparison and evaluation of twenty different Elle covers will inform this discussion of cross-cultural differences in visual language.
CHAPTER 2
BACKGROUND

This chapter will provide some general information on the brand to be analyzed as a case study. This case study will compare how cover designs and photography vary from one culture to another and how these differences express the cultural influences and differences native to the Chinese and U.S. markets. This chapter also provides an overview of the target audience of the international fashion magazine, *Elle*.

2.1 Overview of fashion magazine *Elle*

*Elle* was founded in France in 1945. By the 1960s, it was considered to "not so much reflect fashion as decree it", with 800,000 loyal readers and a then famous slogan: "Si elle lit elle lit Elle (If she reads, she reads Elle)". In 1981, Daniel Filipacchi and Jean-Luc Lagardère purchased Hachette magazines, which included the then-struggling *Elle*. *Elle* was then launched in the U.S. (Time, 2010)

*Elle* is the No. 1 fashion magazine in the world, with 44 editions; 23 million readers and 6.6 million copies sold every month worldwide. 88% of *Elle* audience is women. The median age for the audience is 34.4. 51.1% of the audience is between 18-34, 52% of the audience are between 25-49. 66.1% of *Elle* audience is employed. 42.6% of the audience is single. Readers per copy are 5.53. (*Elle* Official website)
2.1.1 Elle in U.S. Market

The U.S. edition reaches an audience of 5.6 million readers, who find in Elle a rich mix of fashion, beauty and culture that lets the reader discover their personal style and public self (Elle official website).

2.1.2 Elle in Mainland China market

Elle China was launched in 1988 and it was the first international fashion magazine in China. The magazine now reaches over 1.3 million readers and it has the biggest advertising market share among the high-end fashion magazines. (Fang, 2006) Elle China helps the Chinese audience investigate the latest fashion trend and help the readers find their own styles (Elle China Official website).

2.1.3 Target audience for Elle

The cover photography of Elle is one of the aspects that are going to be analyzed. The viewers are the target audiences of Elle. Knowing the viewers of the photography will be helpful in understanding the messages that are conveyed through the arrangement of photography.

Elle reaches over 21 million readers. The vast majority (82%) of Elle’s audience is made up of women between the ages of 18 and 49. Elle readers have a median age of 34.7 years. Forty percent of readers are single, and the median household income is $69,973. "Our readers are young enough to think about life as an adventure and old enough to have the means to live it", said Robbie Myers, editor in chief. The Elle reader is an independent thinker who sets her own agenda and uses fashion and beauty to express herself in every aspect of her life. She's hungry
for new experiences and has a wide range of interests to feed; Elle opens her appetite with ideas on what to wear, read, buy, see or try next. (Filipacchi, 2007)
CHAPTER 3
LITERATURE REVIEW

The first chapter of this thesis indicates the significance of the research topic: how the cultural differences have an impact on a consistent global brand image. The second chapter of this thesis provides the background and basic information of the case that’s going to be studied and analyzed. The third chapter will explore the theories that relate to the subject and provide a foundation for the thesis discussion and the evaluation parts of the study.

3.1 Study of semiotics

While viewing a photograph, every object in the photograph communicates different meanings to viewers. Each of the items in the photograph should be considered as a sign that speaks differently. What they mean to viewers may vary from one person to another, and the viewers will react differently to the images. There is a science that studies objects as signs, and how they have a communication with viewers, it is called "Semiotics."

According to Peirce, one of the pioneers of semiotics:

"A sign stands for something, to the idea which it produces, or modifies…That for which it stands is called its object, that it conveys, its meaning; and the idea to which it gives rise, its interpretant." He also specifies: "A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, it creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the
interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representation." (Eco, 1984)

Beyond the most basic definition as ‘the study of signs,’ there is considerable variation among leading semioticians as to what semiotics actually involves. One of the broadest definitions is that of Umberto Eco, who states that "...semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign" (Eco, 1976.7).

Semiotics involves that study not only of what we refer to as ‘signs’ in everyday speech, but of anything which ‘stands for’ something else. In a semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects. Contemporary semioticians study signs not in isolation but as part of semiotic ‘sign-systems’ (such as a medium or genre). They study how meanings are made and how reality is represented (Chandler, 2007).

Being absorbed in the task led viewers to accept unconsciously the terms in which reality was constructed within the medium. This is not likely to be a phenomenon confined to children, since when absorbed in narrative (in many media) we frequently fall into a ‘suspension of disbelief’ without compromising our ability to distinguish representations from reality (Chandler, 2007).

Charles Peirce reflected that, "...in contemplating a painting, there is a moment when we lose the consciousness that it is not the thing, the distinction of the real and the copy disappears" (Peirce, 1931-58, 3.362).
The two dominant models of what constitutes a sign are those of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce.

Ferdinand de Saussure offers a ‘dyadic’ or two-part model of the sign, which is not a link between a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-pattern. He defined a sign as being composed of:

- a 'signifier' (signifiant) - the form which the sign takes;
- and the 'signified' - the concept it represents.

![Signifier and Signified Diagram]

Figure 3.1 The relation between signified and signifier

3.2 Study of narratology

Fashion photography constitutes a fundamental part of *Elle* cover design, narratives can be abstracted from some fashion photographs; they are the messages behind the photos. They are
the stories that the editors and photographers want to share with the readers. Narratology is the science about narrative.

There are many definitions of narratology. Narratology refers to both the theory and the study of narrative and narrative structure as well as the ways that these affect our perception. (College of Liberal Arts, Purdue University) According to Mieke Bal, "Narratology is the ensemble of the theories of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that ‘tell a story’. Such a theory helps to understand, analyse, and evaluate narratives. A theory is a systematic set of generalized statements about a particular segment of reality." (Bal, 1997)

There are several specialized approaches to narratology that deserve mentioning. One is the psychology approach. This is a radicalization of the cognitive one, exclusively oriented to reception. A representative instance allows readers to judge for themselves (Bortolussi and Dixon, 2003). Another is feminist narratology. (Bal, 1997)

There are several important theories in narratology, one of them is the Actant. It’s a fundamental role at the level of narrative deep structure(corresponding to Souriau’s function, Propp’s dramatis persona, and Lotman’s archipersona).

The term was introduced into narratology by Greimas. By reworking the role typologies proposed by Souriau and Propp, Greimas arrived at an actantial model originally consisting of six actants: Subject, Object, Sender, Receiver, Helper, and Opponent. In a more recent version of Greimas’s actantial model, Helper and
Opponent are taken to be auxiliants and not actants. An actant can occupy a certain number of specified positions or actantial roles along its narrative trajectory. The subject, for instance, can be established as such by the Sender, qualified (made competent) along the axis of ability, realized as a successful performer, and rewarded for its performance. (Gerald, 1982)

3.3 Studies of branding and global marketing

*Elle* is famous and successful as a fashion magazine brand. Most of the time, when it comes to fashion brands, people are more likely to think about clothing or accessories, but and the success of a brand for a fashion magazine also contains some basic branding elements.

3.3.1 The Elements of a Brand

Brands are powerful and symbolic elements that have the potential of influencing cultures, societies and generations. They play a daily role in our lives from the product decisions and choices we make to the people we choose to speak to or associate with. They are also wealth-creators and a source of a steady income stream for the companies that own them. (Okonkwo, 2007)

The ingredients of a brand are the product itself, the packaging, the brand name, the promotion, the advertising and the overall presentation. The brand owner assembles these attributes and blends them in a unique way. It is a little like cooking — part of the skill is in the selection of the elements in the mix, part in
the blending and cooking and part in the presentation. The brand is therefore a synthesis of physical, aesthetic, rational and emotional elements. Essentially, however, the end result must be not only appropriate but differentiated from the brands of competitors — the consumer has to have a reason to choose one brand over all the others on offer. (Murphy, 1998)

3.3.2 Fashion branding and storytelling

Fashion branding has been defined as “The cumulative image of a product or service that consumers quickly associate with a particular brand, it offers an overall experience that is unique, different, special and identifiable.” (Kim, Sullivan and Cardona, 2007) Branding is also “A competitive strategy that targets customers with products, advertising, and promotion organized around a coherent message as a way to encourage purchase and repurchase of products from the same company.” (Brannon, 2005) “Branding is not just about individual products, but creates an identity for the company, for consumers, as well as for those who work within the organization.” (Hancock, 2009)

Fashion branding is the process whereby designers, manufacturers, merchandisers, strategists, creative directors, retailers, and those responsible for selling fashion create campaigns and give fashion garments a unique identity. But branding is not just about the product; branding is also about creating a clear vision and strategy for a company. Branding gives everyone involved a clear direction and focus. (ibid., p.6)

In the book, Storytelling: Branding in Practice, Klaus Fog, Christian Budtz, and Baris Yakaboylu describe storytelling as the means for a creating a brand. The
storytelling process relies on a company’s capability to make an emotional connection through their brand and to build target markets. Fog et al. believe that a brand reaches full consumption potential when an emotional attachment to consumers is attained; when the consumers and employees of the brand are able to understand the company’s values and messages. Storytelling is the vehicle that communicates these values in a process that is easy for consumers to understand. Storytelling speaks to the emotions of the target market, which in return becomes loyal to the company. (ibid., p.7)

3.3.3 Global marketing

As an international fashion magazine brand, Elle is able to market its brand successfully around the world, and for a better branding effect, it more or less adapts its brand culture to the local culture of the region.

According to Robertson, globalization became a common term in intellectual, business, media, and other circles with a number of meanings and with varying degrees of precision. In 1990 he related the term globalization to modernity and postmodernity. The concept of globalization per se should be applied to a particular series of developments concerning the structuration of the world as a whole. These are the spread of capitalism, Western imperialism, and the development of a global media system. (De Mooij, 2010)
"Oxford university press defines Global Marketing as 'marketing' on a worldwide scale reconciling or taking commercial advantage of global operational differences, similarities and opportunities in order to meet global objectives" (Sharma, 2011). To market globally is a brand’s ability to promote their business in as many countries as it can. Global marketing requires the brands to stay with the original brand values and make it acceptable and remarkable according to the different audiences from various cultural backgrounds. For the purpose of conveying the original brand meanings, the brand keeps the core value of it, but make the performance of the brand adapts to the local culture.

3.4 The elements of photography

These elements are: the photographic frame and its borders, the aperture or lens and its effects on focus and depth of field, the shutter speed and its effects relative to time and motion, and the physical media used to create the aggregate image. The elements do not operate in a hierarchical or sequential manner; they each play a unique role as they combine to form a coherent visual statement. Consciously employed by a skilled photographer, these elements will add advanced levels of depth, dimension, and meaning to your photographs (Faris-Belt, 2012).

3.4.1 The usage of photography in branding

To create a successful brand campaign, all the touchpoints must be in harmony to communicate a consistent and meaningful message to the consumer. One of the keys to successful branding is developing an emotional connection between the brand and the market, and out of all the brand touchpoints, photography can be a one of the biggest
elements in making this connection possible. People are inherently drawn to images of other people, and the photographic image that represents the brand can be the difference between whether a consumer will relate to the brand or not. The specifics and details of the photographic image are critical as the image will ultimately be one of the most direct and clear expressions of the brand that the consumer sees. (Hill, 2010)

3.5 Studies of visual cultures

In his book, An Introduction to Visual Culture Nicoholas Mirzoeff notes: 'visual culture is not part of your everyday life, it is everyday life.' (Mirzoeff, 2009).

Clearly, visual culture amounts to more than simply the things we can “see” and extends to include the ways in which we “see,” known as “visuality.” As such, the study of visual culture is as much about the way vision is and has been “constructed” as it is about what we see, be it billboard advertisements, the window displays of department stores, works of art, magazines, or movies. In fact, visuality – the construction of seeing – is intimately related to not only how we make sense of the world of visual objects, but also how those visual objects were conceived in the first place (Rawlinson 2009).

Within the academy ‘visual culture’ is a term used conventionally to signify painting, sculpture, design and architecture; it indicates a late modern broadening of that previously contained within the definition of ‘fine art’. Broadening this designation further we might suggest that ‘visual culture’ could be taken to refer
to all those items of culture whose visual appearance is an important feature of their being or their purpose. (Jenks, 1995)

There are different cultural elements embedded in the covers of Elle for Mainland China and Elle U.S.A., and they are present in the visual vocabulary of the covers. The covers, including their photography and design, have been adjusted to the local market and reflect different messages according to the different cultural discourse. Therefore the visual vocabulary varies with the culture. This visual vocabulary is based on the different cultural heritages of the two countries. A part of the heritage of China comes from eastern Asia, especially Buddhism, which permeated every social and cultural aspect of ancient China. The heritage of U.S. comes from western civilization with the immigrants from Europe hundreds of years ago. The visual culture for U.S.A. could be implied in pop culture from different aspects like social and economical, and tends to have been imported by western society.

3.5.1 The example of visual culture of Mainland China

The visual culture of modern Mainland China has been strongly influenced by its traditions, and Buddhism is a fundamental part of Chinese tradition. Buddhism and its art style are so deeply embedded in the modern visual culture of Mainland China that few are consciously aware of its influence. A great part of the Buddhist art style is revealed in its paintings and sculptures, and this aesthetic has been embodied by the great achievements in Chinese art. The great achievements of Chinese art extend through several branches or sculpture and also across different regions and historical periods in ancient China. The tradition of Chinese sculpture has produced various subjects and diverse styles tracing back to the more ancient traditions.
3.5.1.1 Examples of hand gestures in Dunhuang Mogao Caves

One of the most important subjects in ancient Chinese sculpture is Buddhist art. Photography on the cover(s) of Elle China use hand gestures often, many of which could be found in Buddhist art. The impact of ancient Chinese sculptures could be found in modern Chinese visual culture, especially in fashion photography. The details that show the visual aesthetic and culture in the photographs are very subtle and usually blended with other visual elements in the photographs. These same details are also integrated with other aspects of everyday life so that people are not being clearly aware of their source. One of the details that is worthy of discussion is the hand gestures.

Figure 3.2 A jataka story from a mural painting at Dunhuang, China(after DRA 1981)

Figure 3.3 Various Buddhas with different hand gestures (mudras) signaling such things as ‘concentration’ (second from left) and ‘fulfilling of the vow’ (second from right) (after Sullivan 1973: 112)
In the early centuries of Buddhism, pictorial art was used to decorate the stone gates and railings of stupas in northern India. Themes were often drawn from the corpus of 547 jatakas (stories of the Buddha's previous lives) written in the Pali language (Fig. 3.2), and a series of motifs were developed from scriptural references to refer to the historical Buddha 'in absentia'. The four major motifs were the white elephant (symbolizing Siddhartha Gautama's conception as the entry of a mythical elephant into his mother's womb), the banyan tree under which he attained enlightenment, the wheel of the law (symbolizing Sakyamuni's first sermon), and a mound for his 'great decease' (Dutt 1957: 181).
Such aniconic representations stand in stark contrast to the great iconic sculptures of the buddha and bodhisattvas that developed in Mahayana Buddhism. By the medieval period, iconic representations had also penetrated the Hinaydnan traditions, and large buddha sculptures are found even in Southeast Asian countries. The hands of these buddha representations are often arranged in meaningful gestures (mudra) (Fig. 3.3, meanings described in captions), and bodhisattva figures can always be iconographically identified by their jewelry and rich robes, showing they have not yet fully rejected this world (Fig. 3.4).(Barnes, 1995)

3.5.2 Example of Visual culture in U.S.

A great part of the American population is from Europe. When European immigrants moved to American Continent, they not only brought their living habits and traditions, but also their cultures and civilizations. Although the United States of America’s history is just about two hundred years, the culture has evolved from the deeper and traditions of western civilization.

The European art history has been a powerful influence on the visual culture of the U.S. Contrapposto positioning, one of the significant elements in European art history, appears frequently in paintings and sculptures, and has an huge impact on people’s aesthetic. Contrapposto suggests a counter position that emphasizes womens body features.

3.5.2.1 An Overview of Contrapposto

Contrapposto is an Italian word, meaning counterpoise, or as one art historian describes it, a “balanced non-symmetry of the relaxed natural stance (Janson, 1997).” The term, contrapposto, refers to the natural pose of a figure where “the parts of the body are placed asymmetrically in
opposition to each other around a central axis.” The statue, Cidian Aphrodite, from 340-330 B.C. exemplifies the use of contrapposto in Greek sculpture (figure 3.5). Of this Greek discovery, one author writes, “contrapposto brings about all kinds of subtle curvatures: the bending of the free knee results in a slight swiveling of the pelvis, a compensating curvature of the spine, and an adjusting tilt of the shoulders.” (Ibid) (Quinn, 2000).

Figure 3.5 In this rendering of the statue, Cidian Aphrodite, from 340-330 B.C., contrapposto is demonstrated by the S curve of the axial skeleton in relation to the tilt of the hips and shoulders in opposite directions.

Sculptors in classical Greek and Roman periods often used the contrapposto posture. In this, by putting most weight on one leg, the other leg can be shown in a relaxed and semi-flexed position. This undulating between tension and relaxation will animate the figure. A person with normal muscular function and a normal back can perfectly well pose in this way with relaxed hip abductors on the weight bearing side, a descending hip on the opposite side, and a compensating scoliotic posture (Hansen, 2002).
3.6 The overview of gesture language

The different postures of cover models on *Elle* speak differently to contrive the narratives of the cover story. A visible gesture includes what seem to be nothing but physical features; for example, the look of the movement a hand and arm make. It is also quite obvious that many such particular gestures differ in just these physical features. What is not at all obvious is how to determine precisely what and how much difference must be introduced to change one such particle into another. That determination cannot be made simply by comparing the appearance of the gesture, no matter how fine-grained the examination becomes. It requires instead finding out by careful procedures (e.g., ask no leading questions) how the makers of the gestures and those at whom they are directed understand them, and it results in finding that sometimes, the change is so small as to be all but imperceptible to the uninitiated, at other times large and clear, but it also transpires that gestures grossly different in appearance (or sound) may be interpreted as carrying the same message. (Armstrong, D. F., & Wilcox, S. E., 1995)

3.7 Fashion photography and image of women

In *The Face of Fashion*, Jennifer Craik provides an historical account of the techniques of fashion photography from early photographic pictorialism of the nineteenth century, through the gendered constructions of the 1920s and 1930s which increasingly represented women as commodities, to the increasing dominance of the fashion photographer in the 1960s and the influence of filmatic techniques which led to clothes becoming more and more incidental within the fashion photograph. (Wells, 2000)

The way in which women read fashion image of women has also been explored (see Evans and Thornton 1989: ch.5). As berger commented:

In fashion photography the consumption of ‘Other’ worlds is domesticated through the familiar context of the fashion magazine and the more-often-than-not white model. In some cases it is hard to know where one genre ends and the other begins. Within fashion, the ordinary is made to appear extraordinary, and vice versa. Fashion photography, is blatantly concerned with the constructed photography. It is also concerned with what is exotic, dramatic, glamorous and different. The isolated space of the studio removes the subjects from their own time and space, and gives the photographer free rein to create every aspect of the image. (Wells, 2000)

Several signs or features of the fashion image which have been pointed out by various writers are worth considering together in order to understand the genre. First, the transitory nature of fashion has impacted on the fashion image. Evans and Thornton have discussed this in terms of the ability of the fashion image to take ‘extraordinary liberties’ and get away with images which are unduly violent, pornographic or outrageous. Polly Devlin has pointed out the contradictory nature of the fashion image’s transitoriness, since it aims to be both timely and timeless: ‘Its subject is a product with built-in obsolescence, and the result may be an amusing, ephemeral picture or a monumental statement’ (Devlin 1979: 113)

The mass media have been viewed as oppressing women through stress on the reproductive, homemaking functions of women (Miles, 1975; Busby, 1975). Media aimed directly at specific types of women (e.g., the women's magazines) are particularly prone to reinforce this image (Silver, 1976; Franczwa, 1974, 1975; Owen, 1966; Flora, 1971, 1973; Ferguson, 1978). In fulfilling these female functions, at once degrading and spiritually uplifting,
women have been presented as passive, a characteristic that justifies the expectation that they do tasks demeaning to others who profit from this unpaid labor (Memmi, 1968).

Much of the research implies that media images of women are static, relatively unchanging across time and space (Tuchman et al., 1978). Yet students of ideology are beginning to realize that hegemonic ideology, a concept which includes the way in which women are viewed and the ways in which they are expected to act, is flexible, adapting to changing historical conditions (Kellner, 1978: 51). Kellner claims that:

Ideology is not effective or credible unless it achieves resonance with people's experience. And to remain credible, it must continually incorporate the new, responding to changes in people's lives and social conditions.... They are continually modified by social experience and constantly respond to historical changes (1978:53).

Since person's experiences vary according to position in the class structure, as well as by sex, it is logical to expect differing images of women to emerge in magazines aimed at audiences of different class positions, and for those images to reflect changing economic conditions. (Flora, 1979)

Female dependence, a characteristic relegating one to the protected, domestic sphere with the implicit fulfillment of reproduction functions, when presented, was most often seen as desirable for middle-class women in 1970. (Flora, 1979)

3.8 Overview of different ways of thinking for Westerners and Easterners

The Elle covers reflect how designers from both cultures think differently. The contemporary Westerners would (a) have a greater tendency to categorize objects than would Easterners; (b) find it easier to learn new categories by applying rules about properties to
particular cases; and (c) make more inductive use of categories, than is, generalize from particular instances of a category to other instances or to the category as a whole. We might also expect that Easterners, given their convictions about the potential relevance of every fact to every other fact, would organize the world more in terms of perceived relationships and similarities than would Westerners. (Nisbett, 2004) In the Western tradition, objects have essences composed of mix-and-match abstract qualities. These essences allow for confident predictions about behavior independent of context. In the Eastern tradition, objects have concrete properties that interact with environmental circumstances to produce behavior. (Nisbett, 2004)

For East Asians the world is seen much more in terms of relationships than it is for Westerners, who are more inclined to see the world in terms of static objects that can be grouped into categories. (Nisbett, 2004)

The decontextualization and object emphasis favored by Westerners, and the integration and focus on relationships by Easterners, result in very different ways of making inferences.
CHAPTER 4
METHODOLOGY

4.1 Literature review

The object of this study is to identify and compare culture-specific visual elements found on the covers of the versions of *Elle Magazine* marketed in two quite different cultural environments, Mainland China and the United States of America. This study will conduct a comparison of the fashion photography and graphic design on the covers of Elle in order to identify culturally specific references that address the visual vocabulary of these rather different target audiences.

The content from the literature review will be used to generate a framework for the analysis of the magazine covers. Each theory provides specific information that will structure the discussion.

Semiotics provides information about the specific meaning behind each item that is planned and placed in a photograph. Viewers perceive the story or the idea conveyed by the photograph by combining the meanings of the various elements, to arrive at a visual construct or narrative. The theory of Narratology will help us to understand these story lines. The narratives embedded in the covers visuals are planned to impart certain impressions to the audience so as to promote the brand and increase the loyalty of the audience. This strategy builds up its brand image, and is one of the important aspects of branding. Storytelling is widely used in branding, especially fashion branding, and it helps the brand to attach emotional content and connect with the audience. The elements of photography become relevant in the examination and discussion of the actual photographic structure and technique. Different visual elements are present in the
photographs appreciated by different cultures. The fact that these elements are also present in
everyday life, explains the way visual culture influences the viewer and also why we don't
usually realize that these elements have attached cultural significance.

4.2 Case study

The selected case is Elle Magazine, a well-known to the world-wide fashion magazine.
Elle Magazine was chosen as the case study in this thesis for several very good reasons. The first
reason is that Elle magazine operates successfully across cultures, and has for a number of years.
As an originally French Fashion magazine, Elle has spread itself worldwide, and it’s not only
popular among western countries, but also has large audiences in Asian countries. Second, as a
fashion magazine, Elle uses a lot of fashion photography. The fashion photographs used by the
magazine are well produced with a lot of thought and effort on the part of the editors and
photographers. The photography not only reflects good taste about fashion, but also are great
photographic works by themselves. Even more important, though, the brand image is being
constructed through the photographs, conveying ideas that are designed as communication for
the target audiences. The third reason Elle Magazine was chosen is that the different versions of
Elle marketed in different parts of the world are each strong a medium for visual cultures in their
respective cultural discourses. The cover of each version differs while maintaining a consistent
brand image. Visual culture is present in basically everything in viewers’ daily lives but it is so
much a part of daily life that it tends to go unnoticed. As part of it this visual culture, Elle
Magazine is a good example for analysis so as to see how cultural elements have been
represented.
Twenty covers from the issues of Elle Magazine were selected to form the basis of discussion, ten of them are from Mainland Chinese version, and ten of them are from version sold in the United States of America. The ten different covers for both countries are from same month and year. Here are the Elle covers selected to be analyzed.

Figure 4.1 Chinese Elle cover (April, 2011)  Figure 4.2 U.S. Elle cover (April, 2011)
Figure 4.3 Chinese Elle cover (May, 2011) Figure 4.4 U.S. Elle cover (May, 2011)

Figure 4.5 Chinese Elle cover (June, 2011) Figure 4.6 U.S. Elle cover (June, 2011)
Figure 4.7 Chinese Elle cover (July, 2011)
Figure 4.8 U.S. Elle cover (July, 2011)
Figure 4.9 Chinese Elle cover (Aug, 2011)
Figure 4.10 U.S. Elle cover (Aug, 2011)
Figure 4.15 Chinese Elle cover (Jan, 2012)  Figure 4.16 U.S. Elle cover (Jan, 2012)

Figure 4.17 Chinese Elle cover (April, 2012)  Figure 4.18 U.S. Elle cover (April, 2012)
Figure 4.19 Chinese Elle cover (July, 2012)  Figure 4.20 U.S. Elle cover (July, 2012)
CHAPTER 5
THESIS DISCUSSION

This chapter will be a discussion of the basic theories put forth in Chapter 3. These theories are semiotics, narratology, photography, and examples of visualization of both the U.S. and Mainland Chinese cultures. This discussion will utilize these theories to analyze the Elle covers from different aspects, and discover the visual cultural elements that are present.

5.1 Discussion of the form of the analysis

Twenty Elle covers will be analyzed and compared. They will be analyzed to see the differences in cultural representations.

5.1.1 Discussion of the use of Semiotics and Narratology on Elle covers

A solitary female figure is typically the only visual element in the foreground of the photograph of most Elle covers for both cultures. However, the way in which semiotics and narratology are used on the Elle covers is different from a cultural standpoint.
5.1.1.1 Discussion of how Mothers are portrayed differently on both cultural issues.

Figure 5.1 Chinese Elle cover (June, 2011)

The June 2011 issue of Elle from Mainland China has two children and a woman on the cover. The children look to be about 2 and 4 years old. The girl held by the woman looks smaller and younger. The standing girl has a smile on her face, and seems to be happy with both of her hands holding her skirt. The younger child’s facial expression doesn’t look as pleasant as the older child, and seems a bit unsure and frightened in her facial expression. One of her arms is behind the woman, and another arm is slightly bent and doesn’t look completely relaxed. The woman is standing and holding the younger girl in her arm, and she puts her other hand on the older girl’s head. The background is an outdoor environment. The above are the signs that have signified meanings from the photograph.
The interpretations of these signifiers are as follows. 1) The smiling girl holding her skirt shows a happy girl with the woman’s hand on her head. 2) The younger girl in the woman’s arm, with her facial expression and her gesture, shows that she doesn’t feel very secure, and seems like she is requiring more care from the “mother”. 3) The woman has a big smile on her face indicating that she is in a good mood, and that she enjoys her identity as a mother. In the real world, the woman is a celebrity in Hong Kong, and she has two sons. She has a ‘motherly’ image in public’s eyes. The pink typefaces are strong signifiers for femininity. The Chinese titles on the cover show that this issue is mainly about mothers. The photograph shows the theme of this issue really strong, with all the signifiers. All these signifiers construct a story: a mother going out on a walk with her two daughters. One girl is happy with her mother’s hand on her head for reassurance, and the younger girl needing more reassurance from her mother.

Another thing to note is the woman’s fancy dress and curly hair. In the real world, when a mother tries to take care of two children at the same time, she won’t look as good as the model on the cover. The cover of this issue requires a maternal narrative, but at the same time it also requires a suitable photograph for a fashion magazine to maintain its brand image. The beautiful dress and curly hair show that the role of the “mother” on the cover is also that of a model posing for a fashion magazine cover. The additional details add more meanings to the narrative of a caring mother with two children. With the slightly leaning of the model and the supporting arm on the child’s head, it could be interpreted that it takes quite a lot of efforts for the beautiful mother to be caring and charming at the same time, but she manages it. Now the story of the motherly figure is more complete for the modern woman, who is able to be a good mother, stay energetic, and beautiful at the same time. It also fits the brand image of showing a confident woman and a good mother at the same time.
In comparison the U.S. Elle cover has a different story about mothers.

On this *Elle* cover from the United States, there is a pregnant woman holding her tummy. She has both of her hands holding her tummy. She has a red dress, and looks glamorous with her flowing hair. It’s clearly an indoor photograph and there are no indications of a background in the photo displayed on the cover. The story is simpler compared to the Chinese version. The position of both of her hands is an indication of a caring mother for her future baby. Her facial expression and her hair show that she tries to look good despite her pregnancy. She is able to show this with her confidence. Although she is pregnant, she still poses in a way that shows her great body shape. The story that could be interpreted from this cover is simple: a woman can still be sexy even when she’s pregnant. This message fits the brand image of *Elle* with the charming woman still able to be charming even when she is pregnant.
In conclusion, Mainland China *Elle* cover presents a motherly figure in a way that the main female figure is interactive with other children in by contrast the U.S. *Elle* cover presents a mother only through the main figure as a pregnant woman.

5.1.1.2 Discussion of how a male figure is presented differently on both cultural issues.

![Figure 5.3 Chinese Elle cover (July, 2012)](image)

On this *Elle* cover, there is a famous soccer player. Most of the time, the models on *Elle* covers are female. This issue is abnormal in the *Elle* magazines; the indication of this is the model himself. David Beckham has a good reputation in Mainland China as being handsome and a fashion icon. This issue is about fashion in London according to the Chinese titles. Instead of showing a beautiful female model for this issue, the editors chose a handsome British man for
the subject. His pose is leaning on his back with one hand on his head and the other hand in front of him. Having both of his hands around his head has an emphasizing effect. His head along with his attractive eyes immediately become the focal point of the cover for the viewers and gets more attention. The leaning pose shows that he is relaxed. The pose looks like he is lying on a bed or couch which provides even more for the viewers’ imagination. The story from this issue is simple: a British man showing his sex appeal through his strong eyes staring into the female viewers’ eyes. It’s simple, but with the gentle gaze from a handsome man, the audience is engaged with the model on the cover. This contrasts with the other issues which have female models showing the ideal female form from which to build the brand image. This issue helps draw the audiences interests in and keep them engaged.

For this issue, instead of showing the target audience a female celebrity figure with great body and face, it presents a male celebrity to play on the sex appeal of the female audience, which shows the target audiences a range of fashionable lifestyles.
This issue is from August 2011. It has one male model with a female model, both of which are celebrities. They are the main signifiers of this photograph, but actually their interaction signifies more. The male model has one hand on the waist of the female model, and the female model has one hand on the male model's chest. They are standing very close to each other with both of them gazing strongly in one direction. Their poses signify that they are having an intimate interaction, at the same time, the gaze from both of them and the turning head of the female model says that someone from that direction is interrupting them. The male model has slightly frowned eyebrows, showing that he is not happy with the interruption. The female model has her turning head with her three quarters face and she doesn’t look as upset as the male model. The background is of an outdoor setting with grass, bushes, and a bridge or wall. The narrative is enhanced with an invisible third person. A couple was enjoying some secret intimate moment in a park or garden until this unexpected interruption. The third person is invisible, but actually
when viewers stare at the cover and gaze at the models, thus putting the viewer in this third person role. The models are not a couple in reality, but actors from the movie “Friends with Benefits” in which they portrayed a couple. The title on the left side of the cover shows that there is an article about sexual attraction in this issue.

In conclusion, the Mainland China Elle cover presents a male figure for the purpose of showing a lifestyle that attracts target audiences, while the U.S. Elle cover presents a male figure for marketing purposes. In this one example, the way the two different cultural issues present the same subject through semiotics and narratology leads to the different narratives that are present.

5.1.2 Visual culture elements within fashion photography

Hand gestures have been used in many images in Chinese fashion photography; by contrast, the contrapposto pose has been seen quite often in advertising in U.S. fashion market.

The fact that hand gestures have been seen in a lot of Chinese fashion photograph shows that this is a very important element in Chinese culture. It’s been used frequently from ancient Chinese art through art and images that we see today. However, it has been applied without clear awareness. Here are some examples of ancient art compared to fashion photography. The fashion photographs that were chosen for comparison are all taken by Chinese photographer Man Chen, an internationally renown fashion photographers. Her work has been seen on numerous fashion magazine covers.
This Buddha is from Japan, but originally from India via China.

In figure 5.5, the Miroku Buddha has his eyes closed and his index finger and middle finger bent. His other fingers are straight with a soft look to them. The model in figure 5.6 has her index finger, middle finger, and pinky bent. She also is looking down with eyes slightly
closed looking less energetic. These images are not exactly alike, but they look similar enough to see that the hand gestures are meant to have the same effect. The overall impression that both give is also very similar.

Here are other examples showing the similarity between ancient Chinese art and modern Chinese fashion photography. Figures 5.7, 5.9, and 5.11 are from the book, *Dunhuang Hand Gestures*. This book documents different hand gestures based on an ancient Chinese cave system. The modern photographs for comparison are taken by Man Chen.
Figure 5.7 Hand gesture of holding a flower from No. 249 cave of Dunhuang caves. Dynasty of West Wei (持花手 莫高窟第 249 窟 西魏)

Figure 5.8 Fashion photography by Man Chen
Figure 5.9 Buddha hand gesture from No. 272 cave of Dunhuang caves. Sixteen countries period.

Figure 5.10 Fashion photography by Man Chen
Figure 5.11 Buddha hand gesture from No. 251 cave of Dunhuang caves. Dynasty of North Wei

Figure 5.12 Fashion photography by Man Chen
Figure 5.13 Painting by Daqian Zhang, copied from the wall painting on Dunhuang caves

Figure 5.14 Fashion photography by Man Chen
Figure 5.15 Ancient wall painting on Dunhuang caves

Figure 5.16 Fashion photography by Man Chen
From the examples above, the relationship between ancient Chinese art and fashion photography are evident. It is clear that this ancient aesthetic has been embedded in modern fashion photography without necessarily questioning the historical and cultural origins of the gestures. In addition, these hand gestures have been applied frequently in Mainland China Elle covers for these same visual and culture reasons.

5.2 Comparison tools

In this section, content assessment tools for evaluating the Elle magazine covers are developed. A discussion of how these assessments can be used to discover the different visual elements on covers of Elle magazine for different culture circumstances is given for each tool.

5.2.1. Introduction of content assessment tools

The content assessment tools used in this study were based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative assessments of the Elle magazine from different cultural backgrounds.

This analysis will be over different aspects of Elle covers from both China and the United States. It will compare 1) models, including the facial expressions, postures, nationality, general settings for the photo shoot and other factors; 2) graphic elements, including compositions, typography, color; 3) titling, including the name in correspond languages.

5.2.2 The content assessment on Mainland China Elle and U.S. Elle

The table blow will list and compare the different parts of the covers for Mainland China Elle and U.S. Elle. Through the comparison, the differences are evaluated in a quantitative way.
Table 1 Variables on *Elle* of Mainland China and U.S.

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Mainland China Elle covers show smiling faces in 3 out of 10 covers, three quarter faces in 6 out of 10 covers, Chinese style hand gestures in 9 out of 10 covers, a complex background in 9 out of 10 covers, and complex color patterns in 9 out of 10 covers.

U.S. Elle covers show smiling faces in 6 out of 10 covers, faces looking straight forward in 8 out of 10 covers, contrapposto body posture in 8 out of 10 covers, a solid color background in 7 out of 10 covers, and color palette of black, white and red in 8 out of 10 covers.

5.2.2.1 Models and photo shoot settings

Facial expression, as indicated by the above chart, indicates that there 6 smiling faces on U.S. *Elle* covers, while there are only 3 on Mainland China covers. One reason for this is that Americans use smiles to indicate their friendliness toward strangers. For Chinese people, smiling doesn’t necessary just mean being friendly; there are different expectations in terms of meaning and situation. An additional reason is that Chinese people are less expressive, this is especially true for women. Chinese society and culture has been tempered and shaped throughout history by several religions. In addition to Taoism and Confucianism, foreign-born religions, particularly Buddhism and Christianity have exerted an impact upon Chinese culture and society. Prior to 1840 Confucianism had the largest impact on Chinese culture (Fan, 1997). Confucianism based its doctrine on the ancient yin-yang doctrine of polarity (Fan, 1997). According to this doctrine, in order to achieve a complementary social harmony, women should operate in the domain of yin, which is fundamentally passive. Confucianism incorporated the yin-yang doctrine into its rationalization of human interaction. It advocated a strict and inflexible social hierarchy by emphasizing the static social roles of different categories of people and especially of women in their relationship to men (Fan, 1997). Confucianism, essentially, is a system of social ethics to
regulate human desire in ancient China. In Confucianism, one harsh reality was that the yin-yang doctrine was adopted to confine women to a subordinate position. Women were relegated to an inferior role because they were designated weak by nature. Female education consequently taught women total submission to men. Physical constraints, in particular footbinding, served as a practical means to confine women to the home. Female bodies, therefore, were restrained to actualize and symbolize their subordinate role (Fan, 1997). Historically, if a woman smiled too frequently this signified her role as a prostitute. Confucianism ruled China for thousands of years, and still dominates the main value and ethic system in today’s Chinese society. Therefore, when it comes to Elle covers, the U.S Elle covers use smiling faces more to convey the cover narrative, while smiling faces only shown on three covers of Elle from Mainland China.

Postures: For the angles of the models heads, 6 out of 10 issues of Chinese Elle covers have models posed with a head gesture showing three quarters of their faces; by contrast, only 3 out of 10 issues for U.S. Elle covers have a similar angle for the position of the head. While 8 out of 10 covers in the U.S. magazine show straight forward faces (There is one issue of U.S Elle containing two models). The eye contact of the models in a three quarters face pose is less strong than models posing with a straightforward face. A straightforward face shows more confidence and the willingness to have a direct communication. There is a cultural reason for the three quarters face showing more on Chinese Elle covers, it is based on the Chinese’s preference for implicit (In Chinese, Hanxu) communication. In Chinese, han means “to contain,” “to embody” or “to reserve”; xu means “to store,” or “to save”. Put together, hanxu suggests an implicit and indirect Chinese approach to communication. “The Chinese phrase hanxu refers to a mode of communication (both verbal and nonverbal) which is contained, reserved, implicit, and indirect. “To be hanxu, one does not spell out everything but leaves the ‘unspoken’ to the listeners” (Gao
& Ting-Toomey, 1998: 37). Confucianism has also contributed to East Asian communication patterns of process orientation, differentiated linguistic codes, indirect communication emphasis, and receiver-centered communication. In contrast, North American patterns of communication represent outcome orientation, less-differentiated linguistic codes, direct communication emphasis, and sender-centered communication (Yum, 1998). The phenomenon of U.S. Elle cover models having more straightforward faces could be associated with the tendency of American communication to be more direct; on the other hand, the Chinese tendency to be indirect to some extent.

For the poses that are on the covers, there are 4 issues out of 10 for Chinese Elle covers that have models in a sitting pose, while for the U.S. there are none. Almost all models on Mainland China Elle covers place their hands in a certain gesture, for example, on the thigh, in front of the chest, or on the upper arm, etc. In contrast, U.S. models usually place their hands next to their waists or hips to emphasize their body features. There is more diversity in Chinese models’ poses with the hand gestures. In Chapter 3 of the literature review, the contrapposto pose is one important cultural element that is displayed, and it exists in most U.S. Elle covers (8/10 from selected cover examples). This is also one of the cultural differences behind the poses.

Nationality: On the U.S. Elle covers, all the models are Caucasian, on Chinese Elle covers, most models are Chinese, while there are 3 Caucasian models on 3 issues. In the U.S. fashion industry, there is a tradition to use Caucasian models, and they dominate the fashion world. There are many reasons for that. One is that fashion started in Europe, and Caucasian models were widely used in the early stage of fashion design. This tendency was adopted into magazine spreads and advertisements. With this tradition, the association between Caucasian models and fashion has continued to grow. As a consequence, Caucasian models are the
strongest representatives for fashion and luxury. As former model, and now sociology professor, Ashley Mears writes in her expose, *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model*; when people of color are included in fashion spreads and advertisements, they are overwhelmingly used in a manner which, while giving a superficial appearance of cultural and racial diversity, actually cements whiteness as the central human experience by almost always casting a white, Western woman as the main subject in the image (Mears, 2011). For Chinese, fashion is not part of their traditional culture; it’s the culture integration from the western civilization. It dates back about twenty years ago, when fashion was first introduced into Mainland China; it was considered to be from an advanced culture, and something to look up to. Nowadays, fashion is not as mysterious as it was from the past. With the symbolic effect of representation of Caucasian models for fashion and luxury in China, the use of Caucasian models still creates more positive feelings and gives the impression of a high-end brand image to a company.

The art direction of the photo shoot: 7 out of 10 U.S. Elle issues use only one color as background, and among those, 6 are white and one is a gradation of grey. For Chinese *Elle* issues, 9 out of 10 have a more complicated visual background arranged to go with the model and create a visual narrative. The only single color background on a Chinese *Elle* cover pairs a Chinese model with a Caucasian model. This difference in background imagery comes from the fact that Americans tend to focus on the main character in a composition vs the holistic view that the Chinese viewers take. Chinese people are inclined to attribute behavior to context and Americans tend to attribute the same behavior to the actor (Nisbett, 2004). In this case, the relationship between a model and the setting of the photo shoot background. In addition, there are more stories that could be told from the Chinese *Elle* issues. For example, June 2011 the Chinese *Elle* issue has one female model holding a child, with her hand on the other child’s head in a touching
or petting gesture. She has a gentle smile on her face. The implied message is that is she that likes to have a close and loving interaction with her kids. This gives her a motherly image. The April 2010 issue of Elle in the U.S. also has a maternal image. The difference is, instead of showing a female model with children, the issue uses a pregnant model. She has both of her hands touching her stomach to emphasize the fact that she cares for her unborn child.

5.2.2.2 Differences of graphic elements

Composition: The proportional size of models’ heads in the cover images of all U.S. *Elle* issues are equal to or greater than the height of the title text itself for the word “Elle”. For Chinese *Elle*, there are three covers where the proportion of the models’ head is shorter than the text Elle, in the other issues of Chinese *Elle*, the heights are equal to or greater than the height of the text ELLE. All of the models on U.S. *Elle* covers feature a standing posture. From the unified length of the models’ heads on U.S. *Elle*, one observation could be made; that the fashion photographs used on the covers of U.S. *Elle* are all cropped from the thigh of the standing models. This kind of cropping emphasizes the contrapposto pose of the model’s body properly. It also places the model in the center of the cover to again emphasize the contrapposto pose. For Chinese *Elle*, the smaller heads of the models indicate more of the models’ body is shown on the cover photograph. Comparing to U.S. *Elle* covers, the photographs on Mainland Chinese *Elle* covers definitively have more variety with regard to the postures of the models’ body, for example models are shown standing, sitting and laying down. One observation from the selected 10 Chinese *Elle* covers is that half of the hand gestures are placed near the center of the cover. Three are placed next to the models’ head (on the head or holding the head), where the audiences’ attention is directed. One is on the waist and there is one cover that doesn’t show any
hands in the image. The purpose for the various postures could be interpreted to make the hand gestures stand out. The combination of the models’ posture, with the hand gestures and the background could help the viewer perceive a narrative for the cover. The difference of composition makes a contribution to emphasize one of the major cultural differences, which is the hand gesture versus contropposto. The posture difference could also be seen as part of the reason for the difference in composition, and is one of the visual distinguishing elements based on culture.

Typography: 1) The title of *Elle*. The text ELLE is fixed on the top of both U.S. Elle covers and Mainland China covers, and a serif typeface is used for both. On U.S. *Elle* issues, the letters for the text Elle are all shown on the covers, but are more or less covered by the heads of the models according to the different composition of photos. On Chinese *Elle* covers, three issues have only three letters out of four of the word “Elle”, and for these three issues, the letter L is covered by the heads of the models. For the rest of the Mainland China Issues, the typography is always on the photograph, and there is no obscuring of the title from the photograph. The additional text on Chinese Elle is the Chinese translation of the title for Elle. The typeface for the Chinese title is featured with a Chinese calligraphy, which was generally used in ancient China. Elle started it’s magazine in Mainland China in 1988, and most Chinese magazines from that time period featured a calligraphic title. Although it’s a different era from 20 years ago, this traditional use of calligraphy on Elle is used to maintain consistency. In addition, calligraphy is still used for formal communication in modern China. The calligraphy title for Chinese Elle is typically is on the top of the cover, and it is on 9 out of 10 covers. In one exception, it is underneath the model’s head. The difference of languages leads to the different typography treatments of titles. For U.S. Elle covers, the letters are more critical as being seen as a title and
to ensure customers’ understanding. For Mainland China Elle, the letters of Elle are less critical than the presence of the Chinese Elle title. The difference in languages leads to the different typographical treatments, which is part of the visual difference.

2) The secondary text for the titles of the content in each issue.

Color: The color palette of the magazine serves as one of the elements that attracts customers’ attention at first glance. Elle, as the best selling fashion magazine in both the Mainland China market and U.S markets, uses different color strategies in each market. In addition, color is one of the most easily observable visual differences. Therefore, it’s necessary to examine the color differences.

U.S. Elle covers usually have bold dramatic color palettes. On U.S. Elle covers, 8 out of 10 issues have the same color palette, which consists of black, white and red. The May 2011 and July 2012 issues use a different color palette. The color palette for the May 2011 issue was black, white and orange. For the July 2012 issue the color palette was black, white and yellow. Except for these two issues the color pallet was the same for the U.S. Elle.

![Figure 5.17 U.S. Elle cover (July, 2012)](image)
The fashion photography for U.S. Elle issue July 2012 has a blue sky with an ocean and waves as the background. The overall tone of the background is blue; in addition, the color of the model’s dress is gold. If the color palette of black, white and red was applied in the secondary text, the yellow would be replaced by the red. The color palette of blue, red and white, for Americans’, usually refers to the U.S. national flag, and that doesn’t speak about fashion most of the time. In addition, yellow text versus blue background makes the text stand out, since the value of the blue tone is dark, and the value of the yellow tone is light.

Figure 5.18 U.S. Elle cover (May, 2011)

The color palette of the secondary text for the May 2011 issue was black, white and orange. For the fashion photography of this issue, the background is white, which works with the red text since red stands out nicely against the contrast of a white background. However, the model in this issue wears a dark dress and the part of the dress that interacts with the text is brown. The text lands on the dress with an angle, and has a bigger size compared to other
secondary text on the cover. The text stands out and grabs the attention of the audience, which is the editor’s intention. If the color palette of black, white and red was applied, then the orange angled text would be replaced by red. However, with the brown dress, the emphasis would be weakened since the orange that is used for the cover is brighter than the usual red.

Although these two issues have different color palettes than the typical black, white, and red, their color palettes still present a bold and dramatic feeling overall. This maintains consistency with the rest of the issues and helps maintain the brand image.

For the rest of U.S. *Elle* issues, which have the color palette of black, white and red, 5 out of 8 issues have a white background. Most of the models on these covers have a piece of black, white or red in their clothing, except for the July 2011 issue. For this issue the model wears a yellow dress, and the background has a light grey and yellow tone. This still works with the black, white and red color palette, since the text still stands out on the issue. For the September 2011 issue, the model wears a black dress, and the background color is a gradient grey, which is dark overall. Black doesn’t get applied in this issue, and the white text works well with the dark background, but the red on the background is getting faded, and some thin typography is not quite legible.

Comparing the color palette of U.S. Elle to the palette of the Mainland China Elle, there is more variety in Mainland China *Elle* color palettes. For example, a palette of white, green, and pink is used in the January 2012 issue; and a palette of white, yellow, and green is used in the November 2011 issue. White is the color that appears in every cover of both Mainland China *Elle* and U.S. *Elle*. This is probably due to the fact that what has good visual contrast and stands out from all other colors. The Mainland China *Elle* magazine covers utilize a lot of bright colors
to compliment the white, especially warm colors like pink and yellow; while U.S. Elle covers usually have black, white and red. Black and white are both high contrast colors.

It could be observed that the color palettes of Elle covers from both cultures work with the color palette of the photography. The color palettes of the photography are shown in the clothing of the models and the backgrounds. For the Mainland China Elle, the narrative usually comes from the combination of the human models and a complicated background, while for U.S. Elle the narrative, for the most part, comes from the human models. In Chapter 3 of Geography of Thought by Nisbett, the different ways of thinking between Easterners and Westerners are compared and identified by the different patterns of attention and perception. For Eastern culture, people attending more to environments and for Western culture, people attending more to objects. Easterners are also more likely to detect relationships between events than Westerners. It seems to be necessary for Chinese Elle covers to have various color palettes as well as complex background settings to support the Easterners’ preferred way of thinking. The narratives conveyed by the Chinese directors and photographers not only have an influence on the presence of narratives on the covers (The main figures and complex backgrounds), but also require the usage of the color palette for the typography to be collaborative. While for the U.S. Elle covers, the attention is drawn to the human models through the use of solid color backgrounds and similar color palettes. This creates less distraction and is therefore more in alignment with the Westerners’ way of thinking.

5.2.2.3 Titling

Name of “ELLE” in English and Chinese languages
Elle is a worldwide lifestyle magazine of French origin that focuses on fashion, beauty, health, and entertainment. Elle is also the world's best selling fashion magazine. The title, in French, means “she”. Elle is a French word. It’s a short word and strong enough to be a name for a fashion magazine. French words and phrases are considered fashionable for Americans. As a world’s best selling fashion magazine, the word Elle has an image of being elegant and chic. In addition, the name is short and strong. Although it’s a French word, there doesn’t seem to be a problem for American women to memorize it and associate it with high fashion. In addition, from a typographic point of view, the repetition of E and L make it visually symmetric.

For Mainland China Elle issues, the title of the magazine has been completely changed from the original meaning. The duplication of tile in Chinese is “世界时装之苑”, which literally means world’s fashion in one place. The Chinese title of Elle is, 9 out of 10 selected examples, is on the top the every other element of the cover. This is clearly a visual difference in terms of culture. At the same time, the French word Elle is still being present behind the Chinese title of Elle, which serves more as a symbol for Elle instead of serving as a title. Therefore for the Mainland China Elle, the meaning of French title Elle is less critical, and being placed behind the Chinese title of Elle. As a function of being a symbol for Elle, the French title Elle maintains a consistent brand image to unify the global market and brings the Mainland China Elle a feeling of being international.

The different features of the languages lead to the visual difference of presenting the titles for Elle in both cultures. For U.S. Elle, the letters are important for both purposes of serving as a brand symbol and presenting the meaning, while for Mainland China Elle the letters of “Elle” serves more as a symbol for the brand, and the duplication in the Chinese title for Elle is the one that has the verbal meaning.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSIONS

This study focused on the comparison and content assessment of Mainland China Elle covers and U.S. Elle covers, exploring the culture influences of fashion photography and graphic design on both covers. It indicates that cultural elements are usually applied clearly without awareness. People in one cultural background get used to their cultural visual elements present everywhere in life and don’t consciously realize that they are confronting them on a daily basis. The variables for the comparison are 1) human models, including their facial expressions, postures, nationality, general settings for the photo shoot and other similar factors; 2) graphic elements, including composition and typography; 3) titling, including the brand name in corresponding languages.

Cultural Differences in human models

After analyzing the factor of human models from the thesis discussion, the finding shows that, for Mainland China Elle covers, hand gestures are often used in the photography to attach meaning and to make a contribution to the overall narrative of the cover. Traditional hand gestures are often present in various forms of ancient Chinese art, and it is quite possible that the Chinese photographers are directing their models in an indicative way of traditional art. These hand gestures are directed in ways that best communicate the visual narrative of the cover design. These gestures have meanings such as picking flowers, holding flowers, holding a lotus, listening to Buddha’s words, dancers’ hands, musicians’ hands, and bodhisattva’s hands from Buddhism. These gestures are a part of people’s daily life. For U.S. Elle covers; the contrapposto pose is
being shown in most of the covers to accentuate human models’ body features. Hand gestures are also being used but usually being placed next to the women’s body features to attract the reader’s attention to that area. These are the messages being discovered under two totally different cultures that have different origins. These different visual cultural elements are being used in fashion photography to construct narratives that could speak for the same brand within different cultural discourses.

The face is another example where cultural differences occur. The use of the three quarter face for Mainland China Elle covers is in contrast to the straightforward faces for U.S. Elle covers. Comparing the tendency to be indirect in Mainland China, almost every model on U.S. Elle covers has a straightforward face with direct eye contact or gaze towards the viewers. In addition, there are more smiling faces in U.S. Elle than the ones in Mainland China.

Another finding for human models is the nationality. For U.S. Elle covers, all the human models are Caucasian while for Mainland China Elle covers, three human models are Caucasian, and the rest are Chinese models. One of the reasons Western fashion world traditionally applies Caucasian models dramatically more than the rest of the other races is that the origin of the fashion industry in Europe. For Mainland China Elle covers, both Caucasian models and Chinese models are being used. The use of Caucasians makes the cover of Mainland Chinese fashion magazines seem more fashionable, luxurious and international.

After analyzing the human models in the photo shoot, the general settings that accompany the models also indicate some cultural differences in storytelling and visual narrative. The photo art direction of the background setting is the main element that differs between the storytelling in both cultures. For Mainland China Elle covers, the backgrounds in every issue are usually complex with furniture or other outdoor backgrounds, such as gardens. The backgrounds work
with the posture, gestures and facial expressions to compose a complicated narrative. For U.S. 
*Elle* covers, due to most of the backgrounds being solid, the narrative usually comes through the 
human model herself and her different postures. The backgrounds seem to be less important for 
U.S. *Elle* covers than they do for Mainland China *Elle* covers.

Cultural Differences in Graphic Elements

After analyzing the composition of *Elle* covers for both cultural audiences, the results 
show that the composition for U.S. *Elle* covers is quite unified with the human models’ head, 
most of the time, staying equal or longer than the height of the text “Elle”. The fashion 
photographs used on the covers of U.S. *Elle* are all cropped from the thigh of the standing human 
models to emphasize the contrapposto. For Mainland China *Elle* covers, the composition is more 
diverse with the variety of human models’ postures. The difference of composition serves the 
purpose of emphasizing the hand gesture or contrapposto pose, which composes part of the 
narrative of the covers.

Another outcome of the cultural difference from graphic elements is the typography. The 
first part of typography is the title *Elle*. For U.S. *Elle* covers, the letters for the text are all shown 
on the covers, with some coverage from the human models’ heads. For Mainland China *Elle* 
covers, letters from the brand name *Elle* are often eliminated for the purpose of showing the 
human models’ faces. For other Mainland China issues, the fashion photographs are under the 
text *Elle*. In addition, the Chinese title *Elle* is usually on top of Mainland China *Elle* issues, 
featuring a historical typeface of traditional Chinese calligraphy.

The second part of typography is the color usage. For Mainland China *Elle* covers, the 
color palette is usually black, white and another one or two bright colors consisting of pink or
yellow. For U.S. *Elle* covers, it’s usually black, white and red, often replacing red with another bright color, such as orange. The repeated color usage for U.S. *Elle* states that the color palette is appealing to U.S. audience and sales. The color palette strategies for the both cultural *Elle* collaborate with the photography of the covers, both serving a purpose for the cover narratives.

**Cultural differences in titling**

After analyzing the differences in the titling of *Elle*, the results demonstrate that for U.S. *Elle* issues, the title *Elle*, which is a French word, has been used for a long time. French is considered an elegant language by Americans. The French word Elle is short and easy to remember. Although *Elle* is French, there are no difficulties for U.S. *Elle* audiences to memorize the brand name and associate it with high fashion. For Mainland China *Elle* issues, the French word “Elle” and Chinese title *Elle* are being used. The Chinese title for *Elle* literally means world’s fashion in one place. The French word Elle is still being present behind the Chinese title of *Elle* on all Chinese issues. The purpose for this is to keep consistency and unify the global markets as “Elle” being used as a symbol for *Elle* rather than just a title for a brand.

The tables in the discussion section, consisting of variables used to assess the graphic elements on the *Elle* covers, assist designers in implementing design solutions for cultural specific audiences. With *Elle* being the best-selling fashion magazine worldwide, there are some elements that should be taken into consideration to make the cover design more effective and appealing, while assisting in sales. If a designer is designing for audiences from Mainland China, the first element that could be included is the ancient Chinese art inspired hand gestures, often used on the covers. The second is to efficiently use the background settings to make the narrative more informative and effective. The third is a bright color palette, utilizing white for contrast.
The forth is subdominant to the first three elements, it is an indirect eye contact with viewers. It includes the model’s head pose and whether or not it’s a direct or indirect gaze. If a designer is designing for audiences in the U.S., there are different elements to consider for a better sales purpose. For example, the contrapposto pose assists in displaying the femininity of women. The second is to utilize a clean and solid background. The third is to have a bold and dramatic color palette, for example, black, white and another bright color. The forth, which is less important than the first three points, is to have a solid color background for the photography on the covers.

Limitations

The study is limited to Mainland China and U.S. cultures. Since Elle originated in Europe it is an outsider to both of these cultures. The reason for analyzing the two cultures is due to their comparable size and relatively diverse and isolated development processes. Elle was chosen for the study due to its status of best-selling fashion magazine worldwide. The subject of fashion magazine was selected because it usually requires a collaboration between a photographer and a graphic designer. The covers of the fashion magazine are only being compared for the reason that the covers are used to sell the magazine and must be appealing to culturally specific audiences. The advertisements of fashion magazines weren’t chosen for analysis because some international fashion brands use the same photography in different cultural markets. Only 10 issues of Elle are being analyzed because fashion trends are based on yearly developments.

Further study could be explored to uncover more interesting findings. A survey tool could be developed with multiple variables to discover more of the different cultural elements on the covers.
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