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# Design communication: design of objects in life and public diplomacy

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## ABSTRACT

Design permeates every aspect of people's lives, influencing their clothing, eating, housing, and transportation. It is not only a fulfillment of functional and aesthetic tendencies, but, more importantly, it builds and shapes relationships and behaviors in interactions with people. People are being changed by their interaction with design outcomes. Design constructs and influences people's understanding and concepts in an intangible way, affecting a series of dimensions from behavior to cognition and concepts. This paper takes design as a form of communication, establishes a design communication model, and points out its corresponding characteristics in five aspects, from communication structure to communication effect. At the same time, this paper will use the design cases of IKEA and Coca-Cola to specifically present the design of the objects in life and public diplomacy under the framework of design communication, revealing the shaping of national image and international communication along the design communication path. What people experience is not just the "object" itself, but also the cognitive construction of the corresponding country or region.

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communication

## 1. Introduction

Design permeates every aspect of our lives, influencing people's clothing, eating, housing, and transportation. It is not only the satisfaction of functional needs and aesthetic pursuits but also constructs and influences people's understanding and concepts in an intangible way through experiential interactions. Professor Buchanan, who was the first to really take a designerly perspective on design thinking (Johansson-Sköldberg et al., 2013), has proposed four areas of design: symbolic and visual communications, material objects, activities and organized services, and complex systems or environments, which present the design's role in the world (Kimbell, 2011). He points out that these four areas are interrelated and interconnected, not simply corresponding to specific design categories, which implies a commonality of design thinking as discovery and problem-solving (Buchanan, 1992). In reality, design is the establishment and shaping of relationships and behaviors. When people enjoy design results, they are also being changed by it.

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This change permeates a series of processes from behavior to cognition and concepts. What people experience is not just the “object” itself, but also the cognitive construction of the corresponding country or region.

Public diplomacy emphasizes that a country influences or constructs the public’s perception of itself in other countries through channels such as information and cultural exchanges, thereby enhancing its national image and realizing national interests. In 1965, Edmund Gullion provided an early academic definition of “public diplomacy.”

... deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy; the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the process of intercultural communications. (Cull, 2006)

Public diplomacy creates a more favorable public image in “the open exchange of ideas and information” (U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, 1991, p. 16), as well as in “the transnational flow of information and ideas” (Snow & Taylor, 2008, p. 82), through specific mediated behaviors and creation or operation of the acting body, thereby building and realizing a better external interest environment for the subject. Its subjects are diverse, including governments, enterprises, social organizations, and individuals (e.g. Zhao & Sun, 2007, pp. 264–265), and its object is the public of other countries. Joseph Nye once divided public diplomacy into three levels and pointed out that brands, as non-direct public diplomacy means, often bring more effective results than the form of official speeches (Zhou, 2018, pp. 29–30). In implementing public diplomacy activities, by shaping and influencing the “impressions” of the public in other countries on their thinking, values, and consciousness, a series of bottom-up effects can be achieved, thus constructing a more favorable and influential national image. This is also what design communication is good at. In other words, design communication can also be seen as an important way to carry out public diplomacy.

## 2. Design communication

Design communication, using design as a means and form of communication, is a new interdisciplinary research field of design and communication studies. Currently, relevant research in this area is extremely limited, still in the early stages of development. Existing scattered research papers mainly focus on interpreting specific design project cases with specific communication methodologies (Li, 2021), representing point-to-point local discussions; or they tend to concentrate more on the field of visual communication design, conducting research on correlation within a single dimension rather than treating design as a holistic research subject. In contrast, the field of art communication (also seen in the use of the term “artistic communication”) has developed a relatively mature system (e.g. Bao & Kong, 2002; Shao, 1992). In Chinese universities, there are already independent programs for student training in the field of art communication, such as the Institute of Arts of the Communication University of China. It has established a secondary discipline in “Art Communication”. Moreover, Tsinghua University’s Department of Art

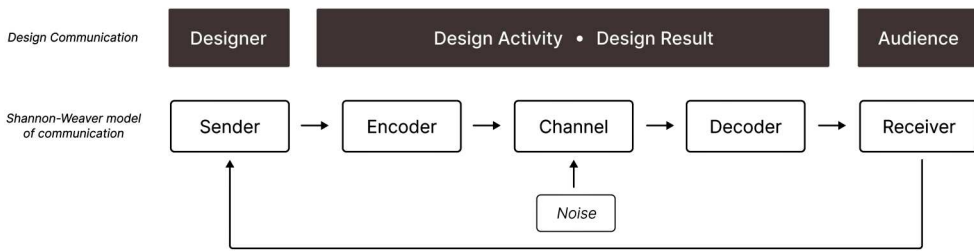
History offers the course “Art Communication” as part of the compulsory undergraduate curriculum, which uses public art and art activities as communication media. However, research in design communication appears to be extremely scarce. Design, as a unique form of art characterized by practical and applied features, also presents an impact and utility in the field of communication that other traditional art forms cannot match. However, research on design as a form of art characterized by practicality and applicability is currently lacking. This characteristic of design also enhances its impact and utility in the field of communication, an effect that often surpasses that of other traditional art forms. Therefore, the construction of a design communication studies system is an urgent topic that academia needs to address, as it holds significant academic and social value.

This paper explores design as a form and method of communication from the interdisciplinary perspective of design studies and communication studies. It proposes a design communication model centered on the design of everyday objects, discussing its foundational framework, operational modes, and key characteristics. Subsequently, the paper delves into a crucial component within this model—public diplomacy—by analyzing design cases from IKEA and Coca-Cola. These cases illustrate how national image and international communication are shaped through the communication pathways of everyday object design. The paper emphasizes that the objects people encounter in their daily lives—such as those related to clothing, eating, housing, and transportation—are not merely “objects” themselves but also encompass the construction of perceptions about the respective countries or regions.

## **2.1. Content of design communication**

The various objects in life that are closely related to people are the objects that become people’s contacts in the form of output after undergoing design activities, and what people experience is precisely this design result. In communication studies, a basic communication process consists of five elements: sender, receiver, message, media, and feedback (Guo, 2011, p. 49). In the late 1940s, American information scholars Shannon and Weaver proposed the famous Shannon–Weaver model of communication (1949). Through this model, we can see that information transmission involves the process from information source, transmitter, channel, and receiver to destination. The information source is the communicator, and the destination is the recipient. Messages are transmitted to the audience through the transmitter, channel, and receiver. The Shannon–Weaver model shows clear linear transmission characteristics, while DeFleur proposed the interactive process model based on this, which overcomes the linear limitations of the Shannon–Weaver communication model and forms a communication model that is more suitable for the interactive characteristics of human communication (Guo, 2011, pp. 52–53).

In the context of design communication (Figure 1), if we look at it in terms of the Shannon–Weaver model of communication, which could be called the mother of all models (Hollnagel & Woods, 2005, p. 11), designers are in the position of information sources, acting as the communicators of information. Through specific design activities, the message becomes an integral part of the design outcome. The design outcome, as the carrier of information, plays the role of media in communication, facilitating the



**Figure 1.** The process of design communication (Drawn by the author).

circulation of information and the formation of understanding through interaction with users. At this point, users are the audience in the communication process, including actual users and potential users.

In this process, designers correspond to the “communicator” in the five elements of communication (Guo, 2011, p. 49), and the design result is the “media” of communication. “Audience” includes actual users and potential users, while “message” mainly covers the following aspects: functional information, design concepts, cultural ideas, values, and consciousness. Functional information is the most fundamental information layer that the design seeks to convey. The design must first establish and operate functional relationships, corresponding to the research of the “uses and gratifications approach” in communication studies. While ensuring basic functional satisfaction, the designer’s design concepts, cultural ideas, values and consciousness will also be incorporated into the design activities, bringing a more profound impact to users. This incorporation may be conscious, or it may be an intangible expression and transformation at the level of thinking. Eco (1986) posited that architecture functions as communicative acts, solidifying widely accepted lifestyles and attitudes within the framework of fulfilling human needs. The formation of a designer’s design concepts is also influenced by the cultural ideas, values and consciousness of specific regions and societies. Design itself is a culture, carrying the thinking and culture of different ethnic groups. At the same time, design is also a product of the times and a constructor, presenting and responding to the changes and developments in human society in its unique way. This paper is based on Maletzke’s mass communication system model (1963), and establishes a model of design communication as shown in the following Figure 2, according to the characteristics of design communication. This paper adopts the Maletzke mass communication system model as its foundational framework for several reasons: (1) Maletzke (1963) indicates that mass communication transmits information indirectly to dispersed audience members through technical means; (2) Maletzke’s mass communication model illustrates the relationships and interactions of C-M-R (communicator-message-receiver) within mass communication, emphasizing the social communication structure in a systematic framework; (3) the model also highlights the “field” of various social interactions, including socio-psychological reception, stressing the factors that influence and constrain C-M-R (Guo, 2011, p. 56) and integrating a psychological perspective (Ioniță & Păstae, 2017). These aspects closely align with the development of design communication, thus this paper utilizes its C-M-R structural framework to construct the design communication model. For specific similarities and differences between the design

communication model and Shannon-Weaver model of communication, DeFleur's interactive process model, and Maletzke's mass communication system model, please refer to Table 1 in the following section.

## 2.2. Characteristics of design communication

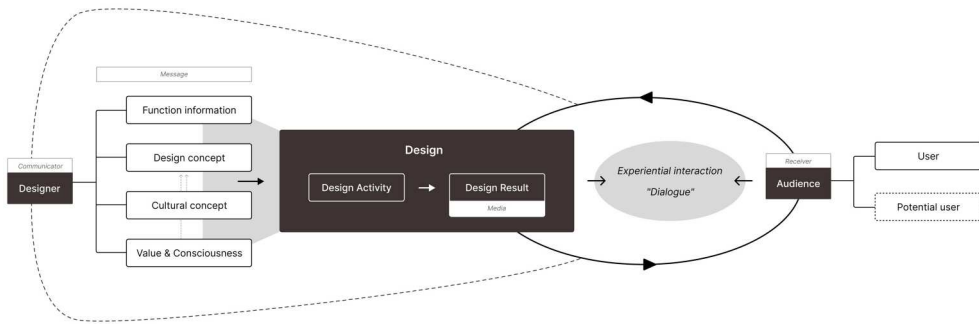
In the communication structure where design is used as a means of communication, the communication process exhibits clear nonlinear characteristics. Therefore, the Shannon-Weaver communication model with a one-way linear form cannot better represent the communication structure of design communication. De Fleur's interactive process model overcomes the linear limitations of the Shannon-Weaver communication model, forming a more suitable communication model for the interactive characteristics of human communication (Guo, 2011, pp. 52–53). “Interaction” is typically used to signify “mutual or reciprocal action or influence” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2022).

[n]ew interactive environments are responsive, active, sensitive, and in a constant dialog with people in the environment. The environments themselves are in some sense becoming more *agential* and *goal driven*. Because interactivity is understood here as requiring agency of some sort, interactivity is not only about being reactive and responsive but also about *pushing reality* in a certain direction. (Janlert & Stolterman, 2017, p. 118)

Defleur and Maletzke's concept of interaction emphasizes, at its core, a connective relationship, which can be understood as the development of connections between points in a chain-like structure. However, the kind of interaction presented by De Fleur still differs from the “interaction” that “design” possesses. The interactive process brought by design is an experiential interaction. Design builds a platform (field) for dialogue between the sender and the receiver, allowing users to actively engage in this conversation, rather than passively receiving meaning. In this

**Table 1.** Comparison of design communication with three representative communication models.

Communication model	Shannon-Weaver model of communication	DeFleur's interactive process model	Maletzke's mass communication system model	Design communication
Process nature	Linear model	Cyclical and interactive model	Social interaction process	Experiential interaction
Communication structure	One-way	Two-way	Two-way	Two-way
Communication form	Chain-like connection	Chain-like connection	Systematic structure, but the action lines still focus on chain-like connections	Circular connection, co-creation
Result of information transmission	The audience passively receives information	Feedback occurs, but the audience remains passive in each transmission process line.	Influenced by social impacts, including psycho-social factors, which may alter the information to various degrees (Ioniță & Păstae, 2017)	The audience actively engages from within, constructing cognition from the inside out (initiative, co-creation —joint completion of information transmission)
Mode of information reception (primary)	Conscious/directed	Conscious/directed	Conscious/directed	Unconscious or subconscious



**Figure 2.** Preliminary design communication model (Drawn by the author).

conversation, the transmission of information and the construction of consciousness are naturally completed in a self-aware form. Users are a crucial component, as their active involvement underpins the ultimate generation and circulation of meaning. Eco highlighted the reader's significant role in textual meaning and construction (1979), asserting "text's intention" arising from reader engagement (1990). In design, the reader corresponds to the user. Eco emphasizes the reader's construction of the text, while design focuses on the bidirectional movement between objects and people. Design is a problem-solving creative activity, with meeting functional requirements as its prerequisite, which gives the "text" a more significant role. People, through their contact with objects, engage in a two-way interaction through design, forming new, specific constructs and orders in this intangible interaction. This is a naturally constructed cognitive structure and thinking concept from the inside out, in which the audience is internally and actively involved, whether consciously or subconsciously. This also means that at this point, the message delivery is no longer passive "output", but a shaping and influencing with subjective consciousness. Table 1 presents a comparison of the characteristics between design communication and the Shannon–Weaver model of communication, DeFleur's interactive process model, and Maletzke's mass communication system model.

The entire process of processing the information that people come into contact with during the interaction will be initiated and guided by the pervasive emotional state. Through this influence on cognitive activities, emotion implants emotional valence into people's judgment of mutual relationships. (Ji, 2015, pp. 122–123)

In the interaction process with design, people are being subtly changed, and new emotional and cognitive definitions are accumulating and occurring bit by bit. As a result of design, products should not only meet basic functional needs, but also take into account the deeper emotional needs of human beings, spanning from the basic visceral level of emotional experience to the reflective layer of social value and symbolic representation (Norman, 2004). This narrative mode is no longer limited to language, symbols, or symbolic techniques, nor is it confined to traditional official or folk, internal or external, comprehensive or singular, descriptive or inferential meanings. It possesses a natural cross-cultural nature. The effectiveness of traditional media communication is often influenced by factors such as the receiver's regional cultural environment (including language) and cognitive level. Common international communication media such as print media (newspapers, literature, etc.), electronic media (radio, television, etc., e.g. Cheng, 2006; Guan,

2004), including the increasingly popular social media and other internet media, are affected. Existing communication studies have focused more on the above-mentioned communication media, with a noticeable lack of attention to the design of living things as a means of communication, which is pervasive in every aspect of our lives. They are often easily overlooked as they integrate into people's lives. As a more intimate medium of communication for people, everyday objects are not limited by differences in the receivers' language, regional culture, knowledge level, cognitive structure, and other aspects (Table 2). Through experiential interaction with people, they invisibly influence and shape people's cognition and concepts. For example, the IKEA home product design and the shaping and dissemination of the Swedish national image, people can establish a general understanding of the Swedish national image through the IKEA brand. As a medium for conveying information through design, objects in our lives no longer encounter the rigid collision of cognitive barriers, but rather break through natural cross-cultural boundaries. This is also a major characteristic of the narrative paradigm in design communication. At the same time, this also implies a natural disappearance of noise in the communication process. Noise refers to anything that is not intentionally transmitted by the source and is superimposed on the signal (Severin & Tankard, 1979). Information receivers may be limited by certain subjective and objective factors or conditions, which may lead to discrepancies in information dissemination. However, design communication, with its life-oriented media and experiential dialogue as a means of information transmission, can effectively reduce and resolve the occurrence of this risk.

In the information transmission process using design as a mode of communication, information and culture undergo a specific orientation of circulation and can realize self-realization within the subconscious or unconscious of the audience. Communication is a two-way process that is inherently interactive (Servaes, 1999), which can be seen as an ongoing process of meaning constructions (van Ruler, 2018). Communication is unfolding within people's daily "conversations," realizing the communication of information and the construction of concepts. This kind of "quietly nurturing" communication style possessed by design communication presents high integration and immersion,

**Table 2.** Comparison of common communication media and everyday object-based communication.

Media	Common Communication Media: Traditional Media & Social Media	Everyday Objects
Content	Traditional media: television, radio, newspapers, etc. Social media: personal social network sites (Lin, 2016)	Objects that permeate all aspects of daily life, including clothing, eating, housing, and transportation.
Examples	Traditional media: The little mole (Czech: Krtek, Krteček) Social media: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube	IKEA
Limiting factors	Significant limitations	Minimal limitations, can transcend regional cultural environment, cognitive level
Form of communication process	Information is directly transmitted, and the audience passively receives it	Forms an experiential interaction with the audience, subtly influencing and shaping their cognition and concepts
Cognitive construction process	From the outside in	From the inside out
Communication effectiveness	Temporal	Deep, immersive, and enduring

often making people easily overlook its existence. The occurrence and operation of information communication are achieved in a more natural and unconscious way, creating new constructions. Ultimately, a native symbolic order will be formed through the active participation of the audience. At this point, communication relations are constantly being redefined and integrated in contact, achieving “attraction and persuasion are socially constructed” (Nye, 2011). The information transmission and cultural exchange in design communication are continually realized through the active participation of the audience, and it is a process of internal, natural initiation of construction, also confirming that “culture is a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Wendt, 1999, p. 186). Unlike other familiar “cultural media” that focus on media as the core subject of information transmission, design communication is more like a generation and realization of native relationships and cognitive structures. It achieves the flow of information and the shaping of relationships through the active integration from within the audience. A new relationship and structure are being constructed, from the internal to the external actions of the audience, including various levels from metaphysical concepts to behavioral choices. The resulting communication will also present a deeper and more profound communicative power.

In conclusion, we can find that the field of design communication has the following characteristics:

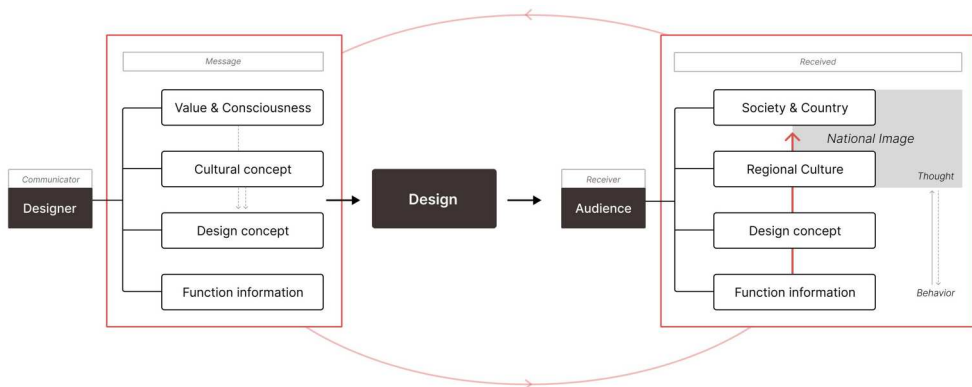
- (1) **Communication structure:** Non-linear nature. Design communication completes the transmission of information and the shaping of ideas through interactive experiences with the audience. The communication method is not simply a one-way output but emphasizes the development of experiential dialogue.
- (2) **Communication process:** Communication is completed through the active participation of the audience, rather than traditional passive reception. Communication unfolds through invisible two-way interaction with the audience subject, and is a conscious construction of information, cognition, ideas, and relationships from within the audience.
- (3) **Narrative mode:** The communication media of design communication has a natural cross-cultural nature, breaking the traditional media’s communication limitations in language, culture, cognitive structure, knowledge level, and dissolving noise interference factors that affect communication outcomes.
- (4) **Communication method:** Communication often occurs unconsciously or subconsciously in the audience. This communication method has a distinct integrative and immersive nature, achieving the circulation of information and ideas in a gentle and quiet way.
- (5) **Communication effect:** Based on characteristic (4), it is evident that design communication has a higher communicative and influential power, realizing communication results with greater breadth, depth, and sustainability, influencing dimensions from concepts to behavioral choices.

### 3. Design communication and public diplomacy

Based on the previous discussion, we can see that the communication content of design communication involves a series of dimensions from the most basic functional message layer to the regional culture, and the national image (as shown in [Figure 3](#)).

As a key tool for shaping national image and external communication (Zhou, 2018), public diplomacy conveys specific knowledge, culture, and values through the constructs and narration of information and symbols, to establish a corresponding national image in the minds of foreign publics. Through the selection and construction of knowledge, the nation's co-optive power, or so-called soft power is shaped (Wang, 2017), which is also the top-level flow contained in the paradigm of design communication. In this process, the “cultural media” as the construction and narrative play a very important role, and its selection and operation will directly affect the results and effectiveness of the transmission. In the current research on public diplomacy, it is not difficult to see discussions on interactive media such as film and television, literature, radio, performance, and the internet. However, the discussion on using everyday objects as the design result for dissemination media seems to be extremely lacking. This is actually due to the highly integrated and immersive communication characteristics of design communication itself. They invisibly construct and influence people's behaviors, perceptions, and concepts by integrating them into people's lives. This also means that public diplomacy activities conducted through design communication can move towards the true dialogue described by Martin Buber (1958). In recent years, the field of public diplomacy has also seen a demand for the development and research of public diplomacy based on dialogue rather than one-way monologue communication (e.g. Cowan & Arsenault, 2008; Pamment, 2014). Design communication provides the audience with a unique “dialogue” platform, where communication takes place through experience. What people experience here is not just the “object” itself, but also the message of a country or region, which involves the cognitive construction of the corresponding country or region.

As a result of design, objects in life complete the transmission of information and the construction of concepts during interaction with people. Cultural thinking and values are conveyed in the interaction, and they begin to construct and build the audience's perception of the corresponding region and national image. The shaping of national image and international communication methods in design communication is not simply a one-way passive transmission of information, but rather a platform for experiential dialogue in which the audience actively participates. Communication occurs naturally in this dynamic two-way interaction and moves toward self-realization. The complete design



**Figure 3.** Information transmission in design communication (Drawn by the author).



image. This construction of concepts and impressions has also gradually moved towards the shaping of concepts and cognitive modes under collectives or groups, due to the living attributes of the medium and the great range of fields to which it applies. As the media commented, “it is more than a store, it is a religion” (*The Guardian*, 2000). In 2009, Olle Westberg, Director General of the Swedish Institute (SI), a public body responsible for spreading knowledge about Sweden internationally (public diplomacy), remarked: “IKEA has done more for Sweden’s image than all the combined efforts of the government” (Valerisha & Ahadisuryo, 2020). The external perception of IKEA’s image reflects the positive views of Sweden at the time, such as the attitude of the Singaporean embassy (Kristoffersson, 2014/2022, p. 110).

#### **4.1.1. IKEA’s “Democratic design”: humanistic functionalism**

IKEA describes its design as “democratic design”, which is the perfect combination of five dimensions: function, form, quality, sustainability, and low price. Its entire marketing mix is based on design thinking, which drives IKEA’s corporate culture, profit (luxury at a low price), and narrative (minimalistic, functional design for ordinary people) (Trendafilov, 2018, p. 173). IKEA’s home product design embodies Scandinavian style, modern style, and Swedish characteristics. In the trend of functionalism, utility and rationality are given top priority. However, when it comes to the pursuit of functionality and utility, there are still significant differences between the Bauhaus design style and the Scandinavian style. Nordic design emphasizes providing a comfortable function and visual experience in a simple nature. The products are mostly presented in natural organic forms, avoiding “too rigid and harsh geometric forms” in the use of soft lines (Wang, 2018, p. 440), which exude a strong sense of practical simplicity and a humanistic functionalist design style with a “human touch” (Huang, 2015). In the context of the United States, it symbolizes a sense of gentleness and warmth, while for German modernism, it reflects a clear humanistic concern and a democratic character (Kristoffersson, 2014/2022, pp. 81–82).

The Nordic people have the values and consciousness of the “Jante Law”. They do not like ostentatious appearances, emphasizing simplicity on the inside, which has formed values of inner reserve and self-restraint. This also led them to emphasize practicality (Başak, 2021, p. 182). However, the practicality in this case is more accurately the corresponding adaptability. This is because there is also a natural, essential humanism and democratic trait within it.

Furthermore, IKEA’s products also reflect the influence of the modern democratic political concept of *folkhemmet* (People’s Home) in Sweden, embodying the development of a social welfare society (Lindqvist, 2009). This top-down democratic concept and social environment are integrated into Swedish humanistic functionalist design, providing a gentle practical experience.

#### **4.1.2. A natural design style: the use of wood**

The embodiment of IKEA’s humanistic functionalism is also indispensable for the Nordic people’s high admiration for nature. In the Nordic style represented by IKEA, we can see a large amount of wood with natural texture and color. The use of wood as the main raw material for products is partly due to Sweden’s abundant forest resources. According to the latest official statistics from Sweden, Swedish forests cover 69% of the

land area (Sweden.se, 2024). The number of forests in Sweden is increasing year by year, with a total wood volume exceeding 3 billion m<sup>3</sup>sk (Swedish Wood, n.d.). Sweden is also the world's second-largest exporter of pulp, paper, and sawn wood products (Swedish Wood, n.d.). The selection and application of the main materials for products also reflect the characteristics of the local natural geographical landscape.

Another major reason why Nordic people love wood is rooted in their reverence for nature since ancient times. In Norse mythology, the universe is composed of Yggdrasil, the world tree, divided into three main areas and nine major realms (Roesdahl, 1998). Nordic people have a special affection for trees and a love for nature. This kind of thinking and consciousness is subtly and implicitly influencing and revealing itself in their designs, forming the Nordic style as we currently understand it.

#### ***4.1.3. Color selection: the formation of white and black series***

IKEA products also leave a deep impression on people in terms of color. They do not have the vibrant and flashing colors of the United States, nor the resplendent and magnificent colors of Italy, but they provide an extremely pure color difference experience with the main tones of natural wood and white. This is mainly due to the extreme northern geographical location of the Nordic region, where they need more abundant light perception to compensate for the natural deficiency. The use of white can increase lighting and give people a sense of brightness. At the same time, it is also due to climate limitations that Nordic people are more prone to depressive feelings, so we can also see the embellishment of colorful elements in the monochromatic series. However, the use of pure colors such as white and black gives people the natural and quiet experience and the understated and the understated feeling that Nordic people pursue, showcasing their natural concept and character orientation.

Overall, the “democratic design” of IKEA not only interprets the company’s pursuit of creating “a better everyday life for the many people,” but also brings out the values of the Scandinavian tradition, the “Jante Law” of the Nordic people, and the concept of building “people’s homes” in Swedish democratic politics. Their natural design style not only embodies Nordic design but also vividly presents their distinctive natural geographical features and their reverence for natural myths. Meanwhile, their use of single-color pure colors tells the story of their lifestyle and personality characteristics in a clear and warm manner. However, there is sometimes a certain gap between the Swedish national image brought by IKEA design and its current situation. For example, the vision of the welfare state has become a paradise lost in everyone’s mind from the late 1990s to the twenty-first century (Andersson, 2009), which is also a possible authenticity gap in design communication.

#### ***4.2. Case 2: Coca-Cola and the American national image***

Coca-Cola, as a powerful symbol of the American national image, is also a representative case in the field of public diplomacy research (e.g. Wu & Xie, 2015). Globally, 1.7 billion people consume Coca-Cola every day, with an average sales volume of 19,400 bottles per second (The Coca-Cola Company, n.d.[a]). Coca-Cola conveys the spirit and culture of the United States worldwide. Khrushchev once said that when Soviet people think of

America, the first things that come to mind are Coca-Cola and Marilyn Monroe (Wu & Xie, 2015).

Currently, discussions in the field of public diplomacy about Coca-Cola are mainly focused on corporate development and brand marketing. This paper, however, will take the perspective of design as an entry point to present the shape of the relationship between Coca-Cola and the shaping and dissemination of the U.S. national image under the perspective of design communication.

The iconic contour bottle of Coca-Cola is also a classic in the design world. The renowned industrial designer, Raymond Loewy, once commented,

The Coke bottle is a masterpiece of scientific, functional planning. In simpler terms, I would describe the bottle as well thought out, logical, sparing of material and pleasant to look at. The most perfect “fluid wrapper” of the day and one of the classics in packaging history. (Glancey, 2015)

The unique contour bottle design of Coca-Cola was inspired by “the curves and grooves of the gourd-shaped cocoa bean,” as the designers believed that this ingredient was present in the product (The Coca-Cola Company, n.d.[c]). The initial design was too rounded, causing it to tip over on the factory production line. Therefore, it underwent revisions and the standard Coca-Cola contour bottle was officially established in 1920 (Glancey, 2015). The contour bottle became a distinctive symbol of Coca-Cola, “bottle so distinct that you would recognize it by feel in the dark or lying broken on the ground” (The Coca-Cola Company, n.d.[d]). According to statistics, in 1949, 99% of Americans could identify which was Coca-Cola by its shape alone (Rock Hill Coca-Cola Bottling Company, 2020). Coca-Cola’s wavy shape is the company’s core design element and a way of communicating with the outside world. Coca-Cola’s wave shape is the company’s core design element and a way of communicating with the outside world (Meron, 2020). Consumers around the world can instantly recognize its distinctive curvy bottle, with its iconic contoured design symbolizing both the brand and its cultural significance (Gersen & Scott Hemphill, 2023).

From the curved glass bottle to the current plastic bottle, the distinctive contour design, tactile texture, and vibrant red color have become symbols of American culture. The iconic red color of Coca-Cola, created by blending three different shades of red (Nelson, 2018), has become another distinctive identity element of Coca-Cola (Butler & Tischler, 2015). As former Coca-Cola archivist Ted Ryan said, “you see a red disc icon on a storefront, and you know that you’ll be able to get delicious, ice-cold Coca-Cola there”, and “it became a promise in a way” (The Coca-Cola Company, n.d.[b]). Coca-Cola brings freedom, passion, happiness, equality, and other representative American elements to the world. It has been a significant presenter and communicator of the “American way of life” and “American creed” described by Huntington (2004). When the world-famous pop artist Andy Warhol wanted a shape that could represent popular culture, he chose the Coca-Cola bottle (The Coca-Cola Company, n.d.[d]).

The design process involves not only superficial functions and forms but also the construction and shaping of audience relationships and behaviors. Design is a product and carrier of the times, as well as an important carrier of national thinking and culture. The product design of Coca-Cola is not just about meeting basic functional needs, but it also

serves as an important carrier and communicator of American spirit culture and national image. While consuming Coca-Cola, people are also invisibly experiencing American national culture and establishing a cognitive image of America. The construction of such cognition is also influenced by the traditional beliefs and social values of the audience's region. For instance, the consumerism and individualism embedded in Coca-Cola may conflict with the traditional values of certain regions or communities, thereby affecting subjective experiences and cognitive construction.

## 5. Conclusion

In the aspects of clothing, eating, housing, and transportation, design influences people's behavioral choices, cognitive concepts, and more. It is not just about satisfying functionality and aesthetic tendencies, but, more importantly, it shapes and constructs relationships and behaviors in interaction with people. As an important means of information transmission and cultural dissemination, the design of objects in life completes the transmission of information and the construction of consciousness gently and quietly. In the experiential dialogue platform brought about by the design, the audience participates in an active form. In this interaction, the communication also realizes the natural construction from information to concept from the inside out. This includes the construction of the national image. Information communication in design communication is no longer a passive and one-way "output," but emphasizes the dynamic interactive process, that is, the form of experiential dialogue. In the non-linear communication process and the cross-cultural narrative characteristics of design communication, more profound and influential communication results can be achieved. This paper explored the basic theoretical framework of design communication. In the future, we can refer to the grammatical framework of visual modality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) to further explore issues of design modal grammar, among other topics.

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