ARCADA

The impact of visual appearance on brand image

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Abstract:

The topic of the thesis paper is "Impacts of laptop's visual appearance on its brand image among college students".

Both secondary and primary research methods were used in the writing of this paper. In this paper, the secondary research aims to review published literature materials from libraries and the Internet. Main theories in this area were about the implications of visual appearance, brand associations that build up the brand image and the components of brand image. The primary research includes interviews with ten college students. The aim of the primary research is to examine the existence of the six implications of laptop's appearance, and attempt to explore what kind of associations, that were able to affect the brand image of certain laptop, were aroused in college students' minds.

Since the research is only focus on the laptop's visual appearance and on college students, the results of this thesis may not apply to other electronic devices or other customer segments. Since the number of the interviewees is limited, the results do not represent the perspectives of all the college students.

This paper endorses that laptop's visual appearance possesses six implications: attention drawing ability, communication of aesthetic value, communication of symbolic meaning, communication of functional value, communication of ergonomic information and establishing recognition for the brand. Influenced by these implications, the college students were able to perceive messages delivered by the brands through the laptops' visual appearances. Thus valuable brand associations, which influence the brand images, were aroused among the students.

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1   INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Nowadays, due to the increasing competitive pressure, product updates, product reformulations, product line extension and reposition, companies are obliged to pay more attention on the visual appearances of its products. (Hart & Murphy 1998 p.51)Companies have come to realize that product design is very important in the overfilled market. Design is a strong distinguishing factor and can be used to contribute to the process of brand development. (Riezebos 2003 p.136)A successful brand is an integration of good physical, aesthetic, rational and emotional elements. (Hart & Murphy 1998 p. 3)

Just as packaging, the visual appearance of a product counts on design elements (shape, form and colour) to make emotional connections to the target consumers in order to form the essence of the brand image. (Hart & Murphy 1998 p. 51).

College students work on laptops highly frequently. Some students are attracted to certain laptop brand because of the performance; some value more of portability; while some care more about the visual appearance. In this paper, the author discusses the impacts of laptop's visual appearance on its brand image among college students.

With extensive selection of similar products at the moment, the visual appearance of a product becomes one crucial aspect of a brand mix. (Hart & Murphy 1998 p. 59) Visual appearance plays an active or a passive role in brand development. If a design of the product does not create any associations to the brand in the consumers' mind, the design is passive to the brand development. (Riezebos 2003 p.136) This thesis studies the main implications of laptop's visual appearance to college students first, and then explores what kinds of associations are aroused to affect the brand image because of these applications.

1.2 Motivation

Laptop is a common and valuable tool that is widely used among college students. The author has been long attracted by good-looking appearance of laptops. The messages delivered through visual appearances of laptops can influence consumers' perception of the brand image. Many brand related associations are aroused in the author's mind when looking at a product. For example, Apple's laptops possess unique, simple and elegant appearance. The material and colour make the laptops appear to be of high quality. Thus the author has good brand image of Apple. Visual appearance of a laptop is very important for a brand. The author is very curious about whether other college students hold the same view on laptop's visual appearance or not.

The author believes that the awareness of how laptop's visual appearance affect brand image is of great importance to companies. The aim of this degree thesis is to help companies be aware of the importance of making right decisions on the visual appearance of its products and gain and retain good brand image through the laptop's visual appearance.

Therefore, these are the motivations of the author to study the impacts of laptop's visual appearance on its brand image among college students.

1.3 Research question

The research question of this thesis is "How does laptop's visual appearance impact its brand image among college students?"

1.4 Limitation

Since this research is only focused on the laptop's visual appearance and only pays attention to college students, the result of this thesis may not apply to other electronic devices or other customer segments.

Moreover, the number of college students interviewed in the primary research is limited. Therefore, the result of this thesis does not represent the perspectives of all the college students.

1.5 Research method

In this thesis, both secondary and primary research method were used. The secondary research was conducted by reviewing literature materials from libraries and the Internet. Published books, articles in the journals are the main sources for the secondary data used.

Since the aim of the primary research of this study is to examine the implications of laptop's visual appearance to college students, and try to explore what kind of associations would be aroused in consumers' mind to affect the brand image because of these implications, qualitative research method was used for the primary research. Ten college students were selected to conduct the in-depth interviews for the in depth answers. The author sent interview questions to each of the interviewees through emails before the interviews. These ten interviews were audio recorded.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 The Design

The most important effects of design are felt in image, target group research and turnover increase. Design provides opportunities to improve the function of information flows and to clearly deliver the product characteristics. (Riezebos 2003 p.134) It is important to balance the design elements. Every combination of these design elements provides different possibilities. (Riezebos 2003 p.140)

The visual appearance of a product consists of its shape, color, material, structure, logo and character. They are the critical parts of the brand identity and they represent the brand personality. (Hart & Murphy 1998 p. 61)

Visual appearance of a product is very important for a consumer at the point of sale because it presents a brand instantly and tangibly (Hart & Murphy 1998 p. 61)

Developing a product or service should define the benefits it will offer first. The benefits are communicated and delivered by product attributes, for example product quality, product features, product style and design. (Kotler& Armstrong 2004 p.283-284)

Quality has a big impact on a product's performance. It delivers the values and satisfaction to customers. Features are important tools for differentiating the company's products from the competitors'.(Kotler& Armstrong 2004 p.283-284) For instance, the product features of a MacBook Air are all-day battery, fourth-generation Intel Core processors, flash storage, multi-touch trackpad etc.(Apple Inc. 2013).

Product style and design helps a company to deliver its values to customer. Attracting attention, improving product performance, cutting production costs and giving the product a strong competitive advantage in the target market can be achieved by good product style and design. (Kotler& Armstrong 2004 p. 284) MacBook Air features a 'unibody' design for both the enclosure and the display. Unibody construction means using less complex design with fewer parts to make the laptop look higher-precision, thinner and lighter. (Apple Inc. 2013) Apple's design attracts incredible amount of loyal consumers.

2.1.1 Design as a brand instrument

There are several instruments in brand strategy. Design plays a large role as a brand instrument. Design makes the product's quality, technical performance, reliability, safety or ease of use visible. Design differentiates products, creates a unique selling position and evokes desire and interests. Consumers' decisions can be influenced by design. According to Riezebos, there are four important roles of design as a brand instrument.

1. Identification: People can know the owner, producer, or sender of the branded article or advertising message. Recognition and categorization are two functions of design. Better visibility and a strong profiled image can influence the consumers' decisions.

2. Differentiation: Through distinctive design, a brand stands out from the competition in the eyes of consumers.

3. Transfer of material brand values. Design contributes to the perceived performance of the brand through the physical aspects. For example shape, size, colour, material, structure and image.

4. Transfer of immaterial brand values: Design contributes to the psychosocial meaning of the brand, shows certain character traits being attributed to the brand through the visual expression. (Riezebos 2003 p.129-130)

2.1.2 The importance of a Brand's Visual Identity

Visual identity of a brand includes its logo, symbol, form and packaging, even includes the environment in which it appearance. It is said that a person dedicates 80 percent of his/her brain to recognize the visual stimulus. A person's first impression to most of the things is visual. A product's visual appearance communicates the product features, benefits, brand's personality, and values of the brand with consumers. Consumers can gain associations about the brand from a product's visual appearance. Visual appearance of a product is a powerful tool to create brand loyalty. A brand's visual identify is very important for brand identification and brand communication. (Hart & Murphy 1998 p. 46-47)

2.2 Implications of visual appearance

Two recent studies (Creusen&Schoormans 2005, Person 2007) have described six implications of product appearances. These implications are communication of aesthetic product value, communication of symbolic meaning, communication of functional product value, communication of ergonomic product information, attention drawing ability and establishing recognition for the brand. (Creusen&Schoormans 2005, Person 2007)

2.2.1 Communication of Aesthetic product value

Visual appearance of a product conveys its aesthetic information to consumers. A consumer may value the look of a product without consideration of utility (Creusen & Schoormans 2005). The values can be such as ugly, beautiful, interesting, simple and modern. As the most essential feeling and emotional response, aesthetic response cannot be objectively judged as right or wrong (Bamossy *et al.*1983).

The properties of a product's visual appearance influencing the aesthetic judgment are unity, proportion, symmetry, color, and prototypicality of the product's category (Creusen & Schoormans 2005).

A product with attractive form may arouse sensory pleasure. Contrarily, a product with unattractive form may arouse dislike. When there are two products that have the same function and price, consumers is more likely to buy the one that they consider more aesthetically attractive. (Bloch 1995)

It is also found that cultural, social and personal factors influence consumers' design taste. (Creusen & Schoormans 2005, Bloch 1995)

2.2.2 Communication of Symbolic Meaning

A product can communicate symbolic meaning to consumers directly by its appearance. Consumers sometimes may see the symbolic meaning as a critical determinate in the product selection. Consumers may form meaningful associations with a certain style of appearance. Consumers choose products or brands to express self-image and express what kind of people they want to be. (Creusen & Schoormans 2005)

A product or a product appearance can strengthen brand image. This is because that the product appearance describes the brand identity or brand meaning visually. For example, a company uses the bright colour and the large size on its newly launched cars. It is easy to position the car brand as aggressive. A company can use consistently certain design elements to its future products, which would ensure, to a great extent, consumers to recognize its products and brand easily. For instance, a company uses a particular color combination, a distinctive form element or style to make its products recognizable or differentiable (Creusen & Schoormans 2005).

The influence of consumers' perception to certain design elements may be diverse, because of the cultural, individual and time-specific differences. It seems that there are some certain relatively constant associations from some design elements. For example, a product with an angular form is associated with dynamism and masculinity. A product with a roundness form is associated with softness and femininity. (Creusen&Schoormans 2005)

2.2.3 Communication of Functional product information

The functional product information involves the product's utilitarian functions. Consumers may feel the utilitarian functions (its use) directly from a product's appearance. For example, a product with a handle means it is portable (Creusen & Schoormans 2005).

Consumers even may feel the intangible attributes of a product via its appearance. For example, a large sized hair dryer may be seemed as it has more power than a small one. Consumers may form an impression about a product's quality according to its appearance. For example, a product looks solid and reliable may be seemed as it has good quality.(Creusen&Schoormans 2005)Other functional performance can be service life, horsepower, shelf life, resistance to environmental stress and maintainability (Bloch 1995).

2.2.4 Communication of Ergonomic product information

Ergonomics or human factors concern the interaction and reasonable combination of human, product and environment. Ergonomics makes the products be suitable for the usage habits of human. It ensures the effectiveness, ease of use, comfort and safety of human when people are using products. (Kerm*et al.* 2008) Characteristics such as weight, texture, material and shape influence the ergonomic performance (Bloch 1995). Usability, comprehensibility of a product is essential in ergonomics. In addition, correctly communication of utilitarian functions is concerned about. Consumers can value the usability through a product's appearance. Consumers can get an impression about the ease of use, operation, weight, stability and enjoyable and comfortable usage experience. By seeing a product that has a handle, consumers may consider that whether it is comfortable to hold. By seeing a telephone that has a small amount of buttons, consumers may consider that whether it is easy to operate. (Creusen&Schoormans 2005)

2.2.5 Attention Drawing Ability

Consumers have higher probability of paying attention to a product, when they notice that the visual appearance of the product stands out in comparison with the others. Attention drawing, in most cases, is the first and essential step in the purchase situation. In a store, a product may draw more attention by its distinctive colors, size, styles and shapes. For example, if most products in a certain category are black, when one of them

has a bright color, it is more likely for this product to attract more attention from con-sumers. (Creusen &Schoormans 2005)

Product appearance delivers information about the product to consumers through cap-ture and maintains the attention of customers. Moreover, the more distinctiveness of a product, the more attention drawing it receives. However, this does not necessarily imp-ly that consumers will prefer this distinctive appearance and buy the product (Person *et al.* 2007)

2.2.6 Establishing Recognition for the brand

Consumers can recognize the products that from the same time period, life style seg-ment, or brand based on the visual appearance (Person *et al.* 2007). For example, when covering the brand logo and asking consumers to guess which brand a certain laptop, the thin shape, silver colour and the round edges may easily lead them to guess it is an Apple product, even though it is not necessarily true. . This is because Apple regularly uses consistently design features in its products, to make them looks concise, smooth, and delicate. Companies are often advised to identify their visual brand styles in order to make consumers recognize their products and brands and to produce brand equity (Person *et al.* 2007).

Nonetheless, a company should also consider the balance between its well established brand style and new or repositioned products with new visual styles (Person *et al.* 2007). Many brands are not only known for their great products, but also for their great designs. The consistent and recognizable design features used in the product portfolios have helped these brands become enduring. Visual design features carry references to the character of the brand and define the core brand value to the customers. (Karjalainen 2007) Thus, identifying the brand's defining style elements is important for companies.

2.3 Product appearance perception

The product's visual appearance should be meaningful and understandable for consumers. Consumers can get the meanings that are derived from product appearance. The perception process can be summarized in two steps, (Blijlevens et al. 2009) which can be seen in figure 1.
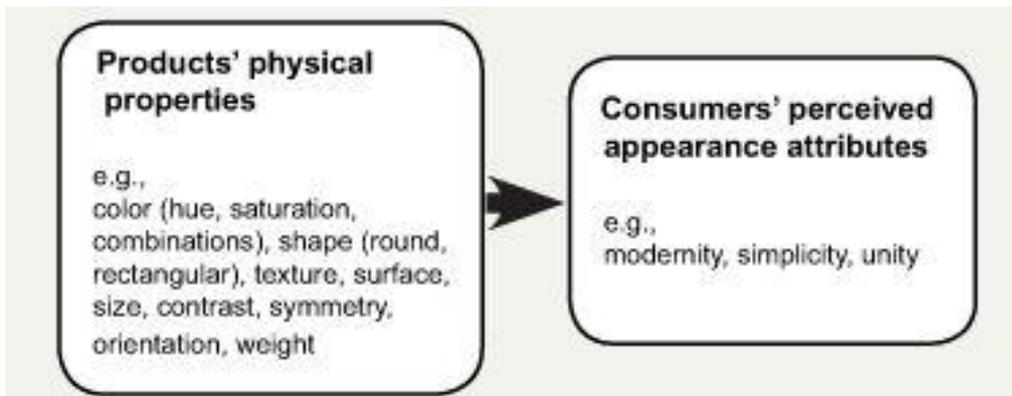
Figure1. A two-step model of product appearance perception (Blijlevens et al. 2009)

First, when consumers see a product, they perceive certain physical properties that together build up the appearance of the product (e.g. colour, shape, texture, surface, size).(Blijlevens et al. 2009).

Second, the combinations of colours, materials and other physical aspects make the look of the product has a certain appearance attribute. For example, a DVD player with an angular, metallic and smooth looking may be perceived as modern. (Blijlevens et al. 2009)

The appearance attributes together provide an overall impression for the consumers. Productappearance attributes are more abstract than physical aspects. Product appearance attributes can be harmony, unity, symmetry, proportion, typicality, massiveness, naturalness, delicateness, modernity, simplicity, playfulness, etc. (Blijlevens et al. 2009)

2.4 Branding

2.4.1 Components of a branded article

Riezebos (2003 p. 31) uses intrinsic attributes to refer to the characteristics of the product itself. Riezebos uses extrinsic attributes to refer to all other characteristics added to the product. Intrinsic attributes and extrinsic attributes form the branded article. (Riezebos 2003 p. 31)

Both intrinsic and extrinsic attributes play a large role on the consumers 'evaluations process to the product (Riezebos 2003 p. 41).

Extrinsic attributes are attributes that are not part of the product itself. Examples are brand name, price, packaging and information about the branded article (country of origin and year of market introduction).(Riezebos 2003 p. 44)

Intrinsic attributes are those properties of a product. When they are changed, the product itself is changed. Two aspects are relevant to intrinsic attributes. The first one is the presence of an attribute. The second one is the quality of an attribute. For example, cocoa butter is one of the attributes of the chocolate bar. And the quality of the butter will influence the taste perception. Functional, structural and aesthetic attributes are all included in the intrinsic attributes. Structural attributes can be shape and diameter, because they are the manner to form the functional attributes. Aesthetic attributes can be characteristics make a product visually attractive. For example, design and colours used on the cars. (Riezebos 2003 p. 41-42)

There are non-distinguishing intrinsic attributes and distinguishing intrinsic attributes (Riezebos 2003 p. 32). For example, all the mobile phones have screens, but not all the mobiles phones have touch screens. Form design is a distinguishing intrinsic attribute. For example, the three-headed top Philips shaving machines. This form design is a brand-distinguishing sign for Philips and it is legally protected. (Riezebos 2003 p. 33)

Figure 2 below summarizes the components of the branded article.
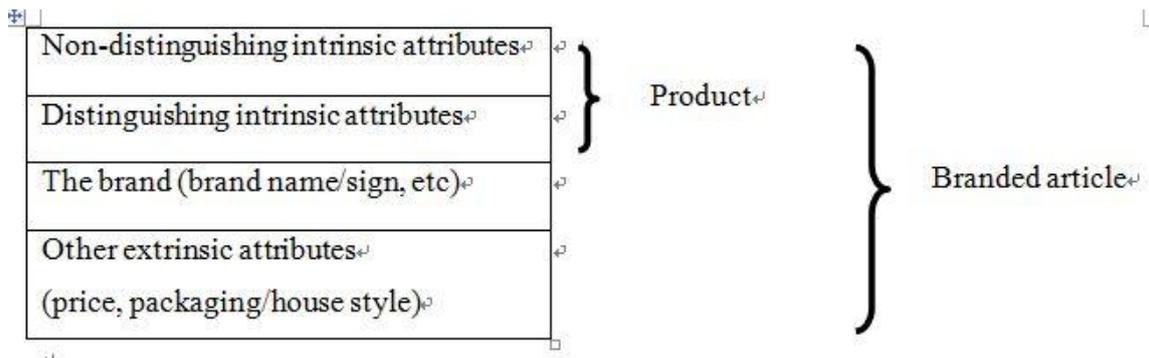
Figure 2. Components of the branded article (Riezebos2003 p.34)

2.4.2 Brand and Branding

According to Kotler &Armstrong (2004 p.285),a brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of these, intended to identify the goods or services of a maker or seller. Consumers perceive the added value from the branded article which most closely meets their needs. These added values maybe good brand's quality, good brand image to consumers, or they may bring easier search behavior to consumers. Brand is successful when it keeps produce these added values to consumers. (Blythe 2008 p.133)

Figure 3 shows the relationship between commodity products and branded products in terms of price and image. Commodity products have low price differentiation, low product characteristic differentiation and low brand image differentiation. In contrast, branded products have high differentiation on all three factors.

Figure 3.Commodity products v branded products(Blythe 2008 p.134)

A consumer may recognize the benefits that a product may give him through the brand name. Buyers can know the benefits from a branded article when he always buys it. He knows that he will get the same benefits from this branded article, such as quality and product features.(Kotler& Armstrong 2004 p.285)

Branding is a big range of activities across the whole marketing mix. It delivers the brand image to consumers. Consumers receive messages and arouse associations about self-image, quality, cost, expected performance, brand features and status. For example, People buy Porsche cars not only for the purpose of transportation but also for expressing their posh lifestyle. This is because that consumer knows that Porsche has a brand image of engineering excellence, sporty, wealth and success. (Blythe 2008 p.137) Unique brand associations can be established through designing product attributes, names, packages, distribution strategies and advertising. They emphasis the basis of differentiation and reduce the primacy of price for the buying decision. (Aaker 1991 p.7-8) The brand is the 'personality' of the product (Blythe 2008 p.145).

2.4.3 Brand Image

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A brand image is a set of associations. It usually organized in meaningful ways (Aaker 1991 p. 109). The design elements of a product's visual appearance must make emotional connections with the consumers and form the essence of the brand image (Hart& Murphy 1998 p.51)

Brand image is on the side of receiver. Image is how consumers perceive a product, a brand, a politician, a company or a country. Image refers to the way consumers perceive the signals from the products, services and communication of the brand.(Kotler 2008 p.174)

Brand Identity is on the side of sender. The purpose of brand identity is to explain the brand's meaning, aim and self-image in detail. Brand image is the result of the explanations. In terms of brand management, brand identity must form before brand image.(Kotler 2008 p.174)

Brand identity refers to how the owner wants the consumers to perceive the brand (ideal). Brand image refers to how the consumers really think of the brand (reality).

Figure 4 shows the difference between brand identity and brand image. An image is a synthesis made by the public of brand messages. These messages can be brand name, visual symbols, products, advertisements, sponsoring, patronage, articles.
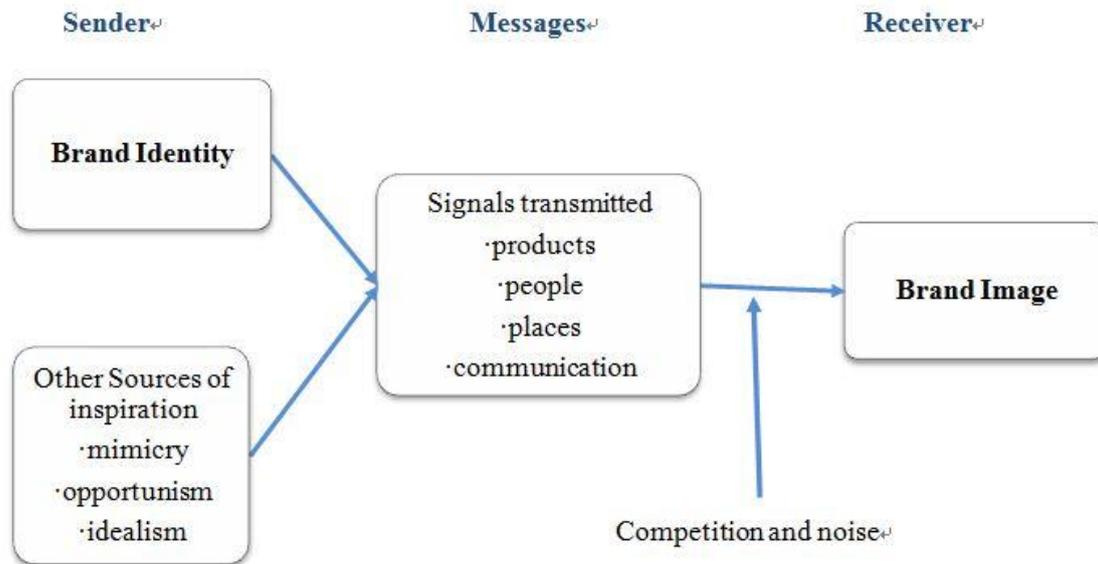
Figure 4. Identity and Image(Kotler2008 p.174)

• Image forming

The central question of image forming is that how associations can be tied to the brand name. Inductive inference and deductive inference are two processes in image forming. (Riezebos 2003 p.65)

The process of deductive inference is important when on hope to carry the brand associations from one brand over to another brand. It can be called image transfer. (Riezebos 2003 p.65-66)

Inductive inference means that consumers create a brand image through the contact with the branded article, expositions and advertisements. Inductive inference includes confrontation with brand article, marketing communication, consumption experiences and social influence. Marketing communication gives content to the brand image. They give consumers the first impression about the brand. Also, the brand images in consumers' mind are difficult to change at a later stage. Companies should try to guide the brand image in the direction of the brand identity through the marketing communication. The

image called up in marketing communication should not be in conflict with the image called up in consumption experiences. (Riezebos 2003 p.65-66) For example, the effect of advertising is greatest when the product realizes all the benefits promised in the advertisement.

A brand image can be created through inductive inference, because the branded article, marketing communication, consumption experiences and social influence have significant influence on a brand image. It can be seen from figure 5 that four aspects generally influence the brand image.
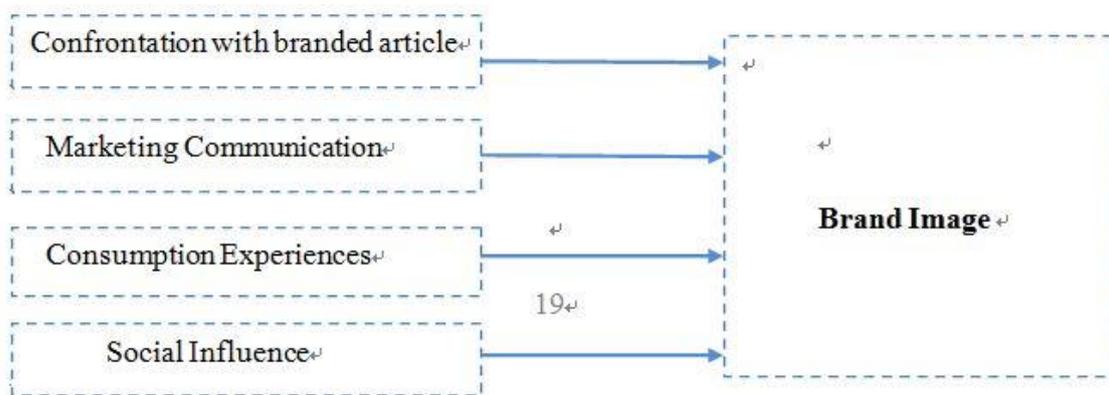
Figure 5. A summary of the four aspects that have influence on brand image (author of the thesis)

A brand image contains many associations from confrontation with the branded article, marketing communication, consumption experiences and social influences. These associations should correspond to the planed brand identity as accurately as possible. (Riezebos 2003 p.66)

• Components of a brand image

"A brand image is a subjective mental picture of a brand shared by a group of consumers (Riezebos 2003 p.63)."

Brand image are networks elements stored in long-term memory. The core of the network is a brand name, which is linked to a number of other knowledge elements or associations. (Riezebos 2003 p.68-69)

Brand image has three components. They are content, favourability and strength. Favourability and strength can be combined into a term called 'reputation'. The content of a brand image means the associations a brand name may generate. Associations refer to cognition (knowledge), feeling, smells, sounds, etc. (Riezebos 2003 p.68-69)

There are distinction between material and immaterial brand associations. Material brand associations can be associations about the nature of certain material aspects (reliability and durability, function, quality and aesthetics) and associations of the presence or absence of certain attribute. Material brand associations are related to the product itself. Immaterial brand associations can be associations not related to the (physical) product, such as associations of a certain lifestyle and experience. (Riezebos 2003 p.64-65)

The favourability of a brand image means the feeling that consumers have about the associations. The feeling can be negative and positive. The strength of a brand image means the extent to which the association is experienced as negative or positive. (Riezebos 2003 p.64-65)

• Brand associations

In the following content, this thesis researches more deeply discuss about the brand associations that build up the brand image.

The importance of brand image has inspired business scholars to form the concept of 'brand equity' (Aaker 1991). Under this concept, brands are seen as valuable assets, which can help companies generate revenues. Brand equity can be divided into four main categories: brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand association. (Aaker 1991 p.16) Meanwhile, brand associations are divided into eleven types.

They are product attributes, intangibles, customer benefits, relative price, use/application, user/customer, celebrity/person, life style/personality, product class, competitors, and country/geographic area. (Aaker 1991 p.115) Brand associations are shown in Figure 6.
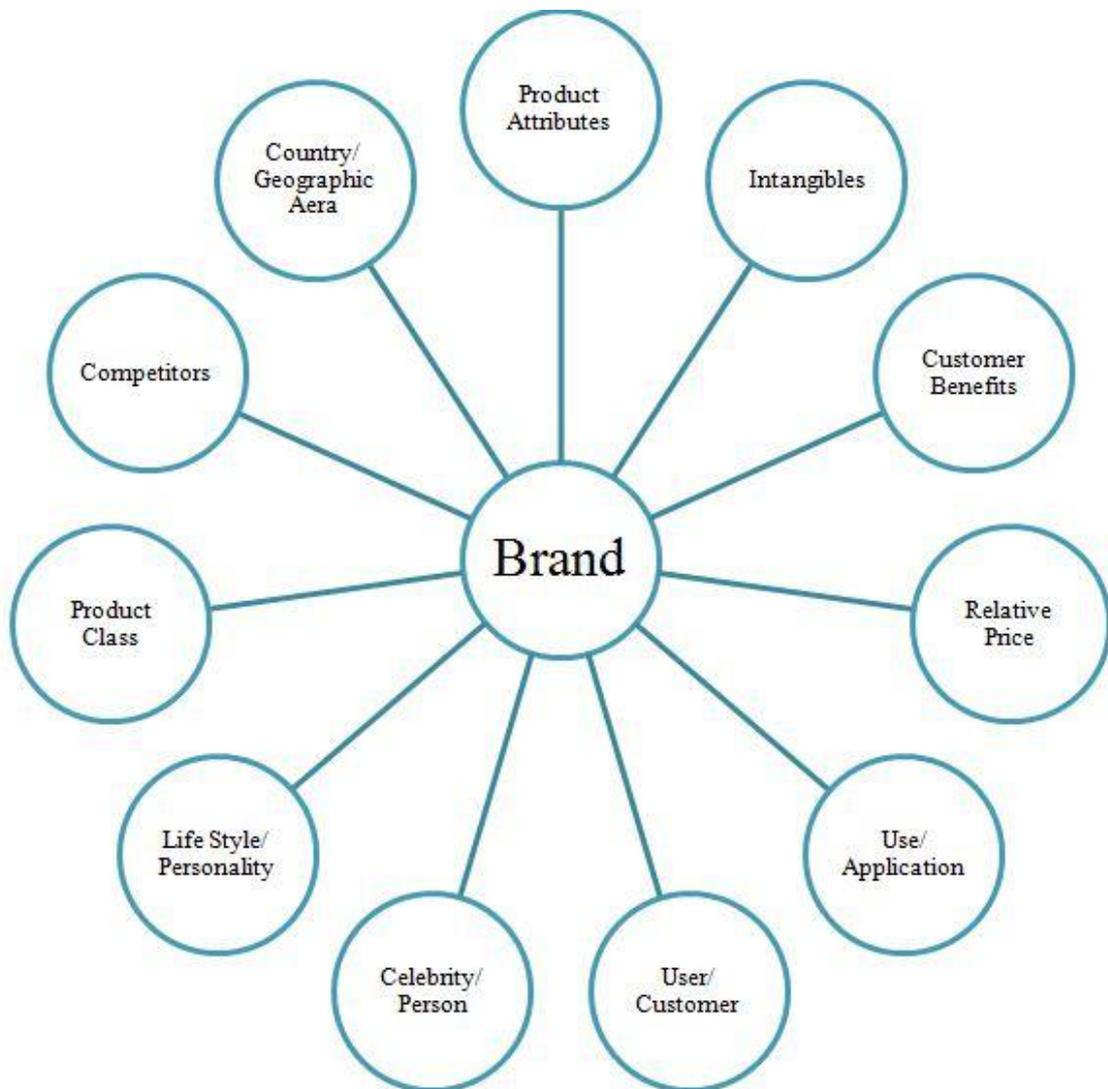
Figure 6. Brand associations (Aaker 1991 p.115)

The problem of brand associations has also been discussed by Keller (1993). In figure 7, a picture of the components of brand image is presented.
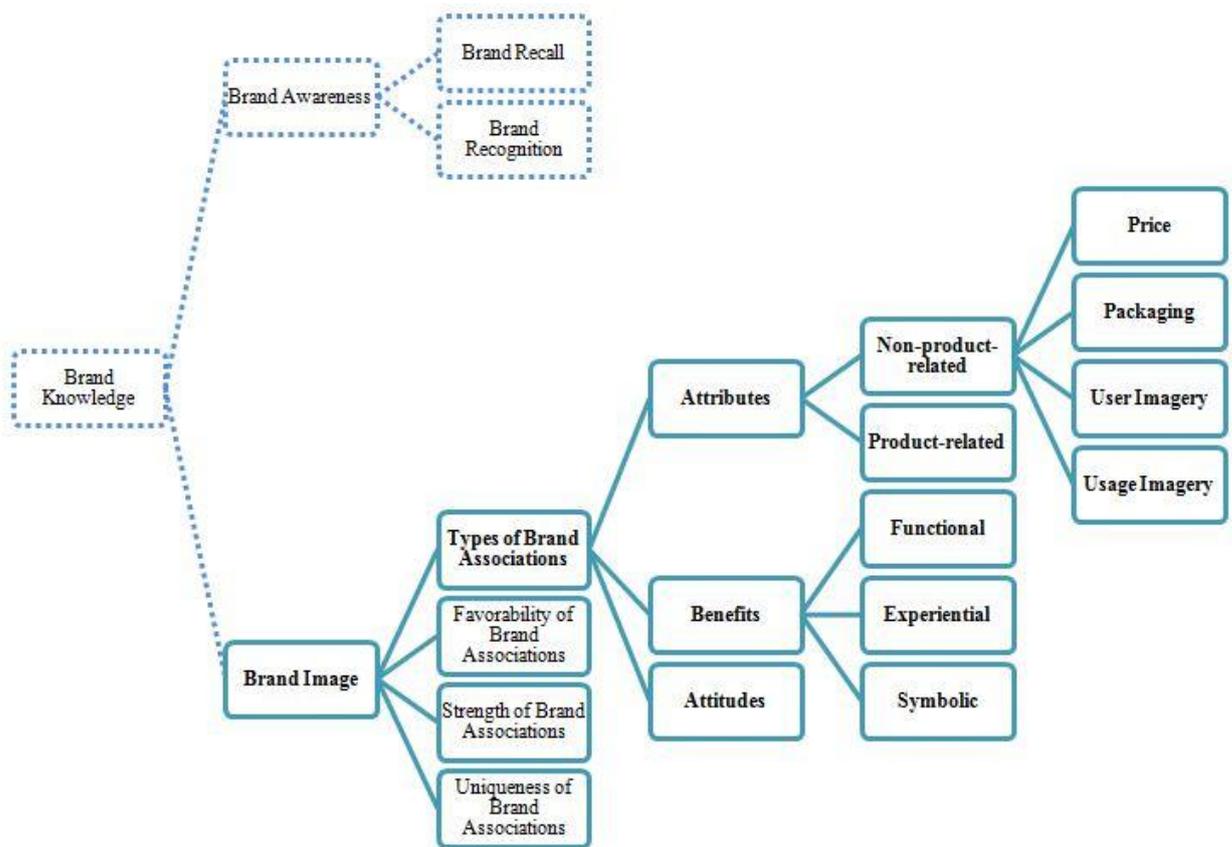
Figure 7. Components of brand image (Keller 1993 p.7)

Keller classified the brand associations into three categories: attributes, benefits and atti-tudes (Keller 1993).

Attributes can be either product related or non-product related. The product related attributes are defined as the necessary ingredients for performing the products or servic-es functions. They are related to the physical aspect of a product. The non-product re-lated attributes are defined as the aspects related to purchase and consumption. There are price attribute, packaging attribute, user imagery attribute (a consumer's image of who uses the product) and usage imagery attribute (a consumer's image of when and the situation in which the product is used).User and Usage imagery attributes can produce brand personality attributes (youthful, colourful and gentle).(Keller 1993)

Benefits are the values that consumers attach to the product attribute (what the consumers think of the product can do for him or her). Benefits can be divided into three categories: functional, experiential and symbolic benefits. Functional benefits are usually corresponding to the product related attributes. They meet the consumer's need to solve their problems. Experiential benefits are about the feelings of using a product. They are corresponding to the product related attributes. Experiential benefits can be such as sensory pleasure, wellbeing, variety and cognitive stimulation. Symbolic benefits are usually corresponding to non-product related attributes. They satisfy the needs of social approval, personal expression, the desire to be seen, to play a social role, outer-directed self-esteem, and the needs to belong to a group. (Keller 1993)

Brand attitudes are the overall evaluation of the consumer to the product. They form the basis of consumer behavior and brand choice. They have the relation with the products, perceived quality, non-product related attributes, functional benefits, experiential benefits and symbolic benefits. Consumers may use the signals such as the colour of the product appearance and the scent to evaluate the brand and the product quality. (Keller 1993)

In conclusion, the different types of brand associations build up the brand image. The brand associations includes product and non-product related attributes; functional, experiential and symbolic benefits; and overall brand attributes. (Keller 1993)

According to the discussions of Riezebos(2003)Aaker(1991) and Keller (1993), this thesis reviews the literature regarding brand associations which build up the brand image. Detailed classifications are shown in the table 1 below.

Table 1. Brand associations that build up the brand image

Brand associations which build up the brand Image	
Product related associations	**Non product related associations**
Product sort	Lifestyle/personality
Functional attributes	Use/ application
Reliability	User/ customer
Durability	Price
Quality	Country/ Geographical area
Aesthetics	Competitors
Product class	Company
Feels/ Experiential benefits	Events
	Celebrity/Person
	Symbolic benefits

(Source: author of this thesis)

3 METHODS

Generally, research methods can be categorized into quantitative research and qualitative research. Quantitative research focuses on analyzing numerical date based on representative samples. Qualitative research focuses on researching people's in depth meanings, attitudes, feeling and motivations. (Rubin&Babbie 2008 p. 390)The aim of the primary research of this study is to examine the implications of laptop's visual appearance to college students, and try to explore what kind of associations would be aroused to build up the brand image in consumers' mind. Therefore in this study, qualitative research method is more suitable for the primary research.

Ten college students were selected to conduct the in depth interviews. Ahead of the interviews, the author made appointments with the interviewees. The author made the confirmations about the interview dates and times and the interview places with each of the interviewees. The interview questions were sent to each of the interviewees through emails before hand, so that the interviewees could get a chance to be familiar with the interview questions and be prepared for the interview in advance. The interviews were conducted through face-to-face communications or phone calls. These ten interviews were conducted in three days. Each of the interviews lasted for approximately 20 to 30 minutes. These ten interviews were audio recorded. The interviews were then transcribed for analysis purpose.

There are seven questions asked in the interview:

Question 1 aims to let every interviewee recalled a laptop brand that has the most impressive laptop appearance to him/her. In the next six questions, interviewees would answer the questions based on that laptop brands recalled in question 1.

1. Which brand's laptop appearance is most impressive to you?(Either positive or negative impression)

According to the six implications of product's visual appearance from the theoretical framework, question 2 to 7attempts to ask whether there are the six implications of laptop's appearance to college students as noted in the theoretical framework. Accordingly, from their answers, the author can find out what kind of associations can be aroused to build up the brand image because of the six implications.

Questions 2 to 7 are:

2. Are you attracted to its visual appearance? Why?

3. Does it meet your aesthetic standard? How do you get the aesthetic feeling from its visual appearance?

4. Do you think its visual appearance embodies symbolic meaning? Why?

5. Can you infer its functional attributes and performance by its visual appearance? How?

6. Can you infer its usability, comfortableness, portability and safety by its visual appearance? How?

7. Can you recognize its brand by its visual appearance? Why?

During the interviews, further questions were asked to get elaborated information.
The interview questions can be found in the appendix of this thesis.

4 PRIMARY RESEARCH

4.1 Implications of laptop's visual appearance

4.1.1 Laptop brands that have the most impressive laptop visual appearances

In question 1 of the interview, every interviewee recalled a laptop brand that has the most impressive laptop appearance to him/her. Either positive or negative impression could be recalled. The aim of this question is to create a base point for both the interviewee and the author in the following six questions. Question 1 was:

1. Which brand's laptop appearance left you the most impression?(Either positive or negative impression)

The brands are listed in table 2: Interviewee 1to 9 recalled a laptop brand that left positive impressions to them. Interviewee 10 recalled a laptop brand that left negative impressions to him.

Table 2.The laptop brands by the interviewees

Interviewee No.	Laptop brand	Interviewee No.	Laptop brand
Interviewee 1	Apple	Interviewee 6	Apple
Interviewee 2	Apple	Interviewee 7	Dell
Interviewee 3	Apple	Interviewee 8	SONY
Interviewee 4	IBM ThinkPad	Interviewee 9	SONY
Interviewee 5	Apple	Interviewee 10	IBM ThinkPad

(Source: author of the thesis)

The pictures of the laptops college students were talking about can be seen below:

Interviewee No.3 mentioned Apple MacBook Pro.

Figure 8. Apple MacBook Pro (Haotian0905 2012)

Interviewee No.5 mentioned Apple MacBook.

Figure 9. Apple MacBook (Stein S. 2009)

Interviewee No. 1, No. 2, and No. 6 mentioned Apple MacBook Air.

Figure 10. Apple MacBook Air (Hudson P. 2010)

Interviewee No. 4 and No. 10 mentioned IBM Thinkpad.

Figure 11. IBM Thinkpad R51 (Andre Karwath aka Aka 2004)

Interviewee No.7 mentioned Dell studio 1557.

Figure 12. Dell studio 1557(Techspot)

Interviewee No.8 mentioned SONY VAIO C series laptop.

Figure 13. Sony Vaio CA10(Nate 2011)

Interviewee No.9 mentioned SONY FS58C.

Figure 14. Sony FS58C (Dragonfly 2006)

4.1.2 Attention drawing Ability

In question 2, the interviewees were asked, "Are you attracted to its visual appearance? Why？". The thesis finds that all of the interviewees agreed that they were attracted to the laptop's visual appearance. Thus, it can be conclude that Laptop's visual appearance has attention drawing ability to consumers.

Two interviewees recalled that the distinctive design of logos on the top covers attracted their attentions.

"I like the big logo on Sony's laptops. The font is streamlined."

Interviewee 8

"When the top cover opens, the apple logo starts to glow. This feature was very attractive."

Interviewee 1

Three of the interviewees recalled that the overall appearance draw their attentions. They use the terms like elegant, simple, think, heavy, special, and unique to express the overall image of the laptop's appearance.

"The overall appearance drew my attention. It was elegant and simple."

Interviewee 2

"ThinkPad was a heavy black brick. It was thick and heavy."

Interviewee 10

"The product has a relatively special appearance. It is very unique. You can feel its difference. It was rather an overall impression. In regards to its appearance, the product is so simple, that you cannot remove anything from it. There is nothing excessive… its details are extremely accurate. What attracted me first was its unity as a piece of perfect metal. There isn't any excessive label, or complicated indicators."

Interviewee 3

Some interviewees mentioned that nice color, fashionable form, material, curved surface and an illuminated keyboard attracted their attentions.

"When I was in the retail store, all laptops seemed to be the same except for the black, matte coated ThinkPad. It felt heavy."

Interviewee 4

"Metallic silver… color and material."

Interview 9

""The color makes a difference. Most laptops were black while Apple's laptops were white. It was quite a contrast. What else, it has more curved surfaces, more feminine rather than masculine. Girls might like it."

Interviewee 5

"Apple's form is long-lasting. It will not wear out easily. It is never outdated."

"The illuminated keyboard is special."

4.1.3 Communication of aesthetic value

The issue of whether laptop's visual appearance communicates aesthetic value with consumers or not was examined in question 3: "Does it meet your aesthetic standard? How do you get the aesthetic feeling from its visual appearance?" Nine of the interviewees agreed that the laptop's appearance of his/her recalled brand met their aesthetic standards. One interviewee pointed out that the appearance of IBM ThinkPad does not meet his aesthetic. It was because that ThinkPad looks black and heavy. It has no sign of liveliness. In his opinion, ThinkPad is suitable for government employees. It does not meet his taste.

"ThinkPad is black and heavy. It has no sign of liveliness…like something dig from a grave. It is way off my taste. It suits businessman, perhaps, or governors. It seems to be reliable. No youngsters will choose that. I'll choose Apple.

Interviewee 10

Nevertheless, aesthetic response cannot be objectively judged as right or wrong (Bamossy *et al.*1983). All the interviewees got aesthetic values from the laptop's appearance. Nine of them got positive aesthetic value, while only one got negative aesthetic value.

Among the interviewees who said the laptop's appearances meet their aesthetic standards, one said that the laptop is good-looking because it is thin. He also likes the back illuminated keyboard. He thought that Apple's laptop looks nice because of its stylish and continuous design.

"Apple's laptop looks nice. It's stylish. The design is continuous from generation to generation. There are no radical changes in its appearance, so it won't be outdated; the current design has lasted for almost 10 years, yet it still feels very trendy, it is suitable for designers, musicians, and students. It fits me well."

<div align="right">Interviewee 6</div>

"Yes. The laptop looks thinner. Its keyboard illuminates."

<div align="right">Interviewee 7</div>

One interviewee said that the characteristic designed logo on the top cover of SONY is mysterious, and it is in line with his aesthetic standard.

"Sony laptop has very big logo on the top. Yet you can't recognize what was written. It is ambiguous and mysterious. I like the streamlined font though. It is in line with my aesthetic standard."

<div align="right">Interviewee 8</div>

Three more interviewees mentioned the well-designed logo on the laptop's covers as well. They also mentioned more of the good-looking colours, favorable aluminum material and elegant overall feeling.

"Yes，Its material… I don't like plastic that much. Apple's laptop is made from aluminum. And its logo was well designed."

<div align="right">Interviewee 1</div>

"Yes. It is thin, light and modern. It maintains some sort of elegancy by placing a simplistic logo on top of its silver top cover. It is good-looking. I will have good mood with it."

<div align="right">Interviewee 2</div>

"Yes. It is white. I like the color. The logo is simple and easy to recognize. The material feels nice. MacBook is very thin. I like its colour, shape and the overall feeling of holding it. It's just feels nice in hand; it's something that I'd… l like to own."

<div align="right">Interviewee 5</div>

One interviewee mentioned the processing technique that makes the laptop surface sophisticated. When the Apple laptop is closed, the gap between the top and bottom parts is even. He also likes its simple appearance without superfluous colours or decorations.

"Yes. Its material is real alloy, processed into a matte, humble surface. That's why it seems to be sophisticated. It was CNCed to keep a high level of accuracy. For example, when the cover is closed, the gap between the top and bottom parts is even. The appearance cannot be simpler. There's one logo only on the top. There're four identical black rubber stands and a trial of tiny laser-engraved announcement. No colour or decorations what so ever other than that."

<div align="right">Interviewee 3</div>

Two interviewees mentioned the colours and materials of the laptops. One of them likes the colourful SONY laptop. The other one likes the black colour of IBM ThinkPad. She also likes the classic design of ThinkPad redcap. On the contrary, to the perception of ThinkPad of interviewee 10, black means tough and is a long-lasting colour. The same design features of a laptop cause different attitudes of consumers.

"Yes. It is made of metal. I like the color. I like the other colors too, for example green and red. They don't necessarily suggest bad taste. I like the metallic texture of it."

<div align="right">Interviewee 9</div>

"ThinkPad is black. It is made from Magnalium, tough and light. Black will not get dirty or wore out. It is a long-lasting colour. When the cover is opened, there's a classic design – the redcap. It excites me. I feel more productive working on a laptop like this."

<div align="right">Interviewee 4</div>

From the interviewees, this thesis finds that thickness of the laptop, characteristic design attributes, logos, colours, materials, overall feelings of the style and accuracy of

processing technology all affect the aesthetic feeling of consumers. Consumers can receive aesthetic values from laptop's visual appearance.

4.1.4 Communication of symbolic meaning

Question 4 in the interview was "Do you think its visual appearance embodies symbolic meaning? Why?" The aim of this question is to exam whether laptop's visual appearance communicates symbolic meaning to consumers. The author found only one interviewee who did not think of symbolic meaning.

Two interviewees said that they care about how others see them. They thought people might see him as a person with good taste if they use Apple laptop, which looks nice. It can be seen that these two interviewees could perceive symbolic meanings from laptop's visual appearance.

"It's fashionable to use Apple laptop in business environment. People who cares about design uses Apple product. They are considered to be voguish. I consider if the appearance of the laptop suits me or not. I care about how others see me, if I am unusual or if I am conventional. It is about taste. I cannot be a person with bad taste if I use Apple laptop."

Interviewee 1

"Apple laptop improves the quality of my life. It is suitable for office work and creative work as well. Businessmen use it for writing plans. Students use it for assignments and projects. People will think the apple user has some sort of taste."

Interviewee 2

There are four interviewees mentioned the usage imagery attribute (a consumer's image of when and the situation in which the product is used). For example, one interviewee said that the metallic color of SONY laptop is classic, it will not be outdated. She can use it all the time.

"I prefer this metallic colour, the colour is classic, it will not be outdated, I can use it all the time. People who are mature and successful will choose this laptop. I tend to choose classic things like this. It lasts longer."

<div align="right">Interviewee 9</div>

There are 8 interviewees mentioned the user imagery attribute (a consumer's image of who uses the product). For example, one interviewee mentioned that the black colour of ThinkPad means reliability and professionalism. She thought that high-end business people would choose ThinkPad.

"I think black is the colour of professionals, although it can be suppressing. I tend to think a person who uses black coloured computers is more reliable and professional. I think elite business people will choose ThinkPad. Usually, ThinkPad users pursuit hedonic values less. They use ThinkPad because of its reliability and professionalism."

<div align="right">Interviewee 4</div>

The aspect of user's lifestyle, personality, personal value and social status can also be communicated by the laptop's appearance. Three interviewees mentioned these aspects. For example, one interviewee said people who lead a high quality lifestyle and with relatively high salary will use Apple laptop.

"Designers, musicians, and people who lead a simple yet high quality lifestyle will use Apple laptop. These people are sort of perfectionist, with relatively high salary. They pay more attention to the objects they use."

<div align="right">Interviewee 3</div>

4.1.5 Communication of functional information

Question 4 of the interview asked the interviewee "Can you infer its functional attributes and performance by its visual appearance? How?" The answer showed that only one interviewee claimed that he couldn't infer the functional information from laptop's appearance. Nine interviewees could infer some aspects of functional attributes

and performance by laptop's appearance. Thus, laptop's appearance has the implication of communicate functional information.

Two of the interviewees could infer the tangible functional benefits from the laptop's appearance. For example, interviewee No. 7 was talking about Dell's laptop. She mentioned it was something special, that instead of having to put CDs in a tray, it takes in the CD like a slot machine taking in coins. What else, she liked the feature that the keyboard was illuminated. She considered it convenient to use in a dark environment.

"Instead of having to put CDs in a tray, it takes in CDs like a slot machine takes in coins. Its keyboard is back illuminated, so you can see it easily in dark environment."

Interviewee 7

Interviewee 4 talked about the reliability of the laptop. She trusted the accuracy of the classic design of the redcap of ThinkPad.

"It won't be closed by itself no matter how small the distance between the hood and the body is. I will consider the redcap is more accurate than touchpad. It looks reliable."

Interviewee 4

The first interviewee thought that Apple's laptop is much thinner. It makes him think that it has a simple and intuitive system. And that it is easy to get hands on. However its operating system does not seem to be very powerful. He inferred that its memory, CPU and other aspects would not be as strong as other PCs.

"Apple's laptop is much thinner, I assume it has a simple and intuitive system, it is easy to get hands on, but its operating system will not be very powerful, its memory, CPU and other aspects will not be as strong as other PCs."

Interviewee 1

One interviewee said the silver color of Apple's laptop makes him think it is technologically advanced.

"The colour of Apple's laptops is always silver. It makes me think that it is technologically advanced."

<div align="right">Interviewee 6</div>

There are other intangible functional attributes and performance the interviewees could infer by just looking at a laptop's appearance. These interviewees could infer the build quality and durability of the laptop through the intermediaries like material, colour and precision.

Four of the interviewees mentioned that they were able to judge the quality of the laptops by their appearance. Below are two examples:

"Its matte surface does feel like real metal. I like that sort of feel. It makes me think that it is of high quality. It is thinner and lighter, and is easier to carry around."

<div align="right">Interviewee 2</div>

"Through the exterior, I can feel it is different internally. When closed, the seam is even. It is a good quality product."

<div align="right">Interviewee 3</div>

Two interviewees mentioned the durability of the laptop. One interviewee said the white colour of Apple's laptop looks that the laptop is easy to fragile and to break. The other interviewee mentioned he could tell whether it is resistant to abrasion or not by its material.

"I don't think Apple's laptop is of high quality judging from its appearance. It looks fragile…easy to break. The white colour makes me think that it is flimsy. It is also very thin. I think thinner the laptop, the easier it is to be broken."

<div align="right">Interviewee 5</div>

"The case of SONY's laptop is mainly made of plastic, with a few alloy. I judge the material by its touch, look and weight. I can feel whether it is resistant to abrasion or not. I will think what would happen if I accidently drop it on the ground. And based on that I will evaluate its price."

<div align="right">Interviewee 8</div>

4.1.6 Communication of ergonomic information

Question 4 in the interview is "Can you infer its usability, comfortableness, portability and safety by its visual appearance? How?" The result is that interviewees could infer the usability, comfortableness, and portability by the laptop's appearance. Moreover, one student could judge whether the laptop meets his using habit. Laptop's visual appearance has the implication of communicating its ergonomic information.

Among the ten interviewees, two of them talked about the usability aspect. One student said that Apple's laptop does not come with a numeric keyboard. So it seems to be easy to operate. The other student said that the touch pad seems to be responsive because it feels nice.

"Some laptops are equipped with a numeric keypad. I will think such laptops are more powerful. Apple' laptop does not come with that; it seems to be easier to operate. It is comfortable to use."

<div align="right">Interviewee 1</div>

"I like the touch of the keyboard and touch pad… it seems to be a responsive touch pad."

<div align="right">Interviewee 5</div>

There are four students mentioned the aspect of comfortableness. One student thought about the feel of the laptop rested on the laps through the form of the laptop,

"I will judge if it feels good to put on the lap."

<div align="right">Interviewee 2</div>

One student would consider the comfort of his eyes through the quality of display.
"I will consider the quality of the display, if it's of high quality, it will not stress my eyes."

<div align="right">Interviewee 3</div>

One student would judge whether the heat sink generates too much heat to make some use occasions uncomfortable by the position of the heat sink.

"I'll think when lying on the bed, I put it on my chest. It shouldn't be too heavy. I'll as well find the place of the heat sink… if the heat sink generates too much heat, and if the screen hinge is easy to break."

<div align="right">Interviewee 4</div>

Four students mentioned about portability. For example, one student said:

"It meets my requirement of portability. It's light and thin enough."

<div align="right">Interviewee 6</div>

No student thought about safety when thinking about laptop's appearance. However, one student mentioned that he would consider if this laptop suit his habit. It is because that the laptop is smaller than the one he is using.

"This laptop looks smaller, maybe… I will not get to a new computer after having been using one for a long time."

<div align="right">Interviewee 8</div>

4.1.7 Establishing Recognition for the brand

For the purpose of examining whether laptop's visual appearance has the implication of establishing recognition for the brand. All of the ten interviewees were asked "Can you recognize its brand by its visual appearance? Why?" Nine interviewees agreed that they could recognize the brand from the laptop's visual appearance. Only one said that the there is nothing special with the exterior design of Dell's laptop.

Among the nine interviewees who could recognize the brand by the laptop's visual appearance, all could distinguish the characteristic elements of the branded laptop's appearance.

Four interviewees pointed out that the characteristic logo on the appearance of the laptop is an important element of the laptop brand. For instance, one interviewee said that the illuminating apple logo is fairly unique. One interviewee said that the curved 'Vaio' logo is distinguishable. He would know it is a SONY's laptop.

"Yes. The illuminating apple logo is fairly unique. I can distinguish it from the other brand and immediately."

<div align="center">37</div>

"The curved 'Vaio' logo is distinguishable. Even if there's no Sony logo, you'll know it's a Sony laptop. The color is pretty different from the other brands. It was the first one that introduces vivid colors to laptops."

Some interviewees brought up that the special exterior material, colour, distinctive style would tell them which brand the laptop belongs to. For example, one interviewee said that all the laptops of Apple's series are metallic silver and all of them have very simple styles. One interviewee said if the laptop looks like a black brick, it must be ThinkPad.

"Yes. The groundbreaking part of Apple's computer is that they are the first that used metal. Its color is unmodified, original color of aluminum alloy. The whole apple product line adapted to the aluminum case. It is deeply integrated to the brand. Its continuity is what other brands don't have. The specialty of the aluminum casing is what attracts me most."

"Positive. It is ThinkPad. It is a black brick."

Some interviewees pointed out some unique features help them to distinguish the brands. For example, the classic redcap that comes with ThinkPad laptop. The distinguishable shape and colour of Apple's keyboard which is white and square.
"Yes. Now matter how much it changes, the ThinkPad always comes with black casing and the classic redcap."

"Yes. I don't know what exactly the material is. But it feels different. Other brand's laptops come with black keyboard, and a conventional shape. Apple's are different. It's white, square or rectangle."

4.2 Relationship between implications of laptop's visual appearance and brand associations

Through the analysis of the ten interviews, the author found that laptop's visual appearance has six implications. They are attention-drawing ability, communication of aesthetic product value, communication of symbolic meaning, communication of functional product value, communication of ergonomic product information and establishing recognition for the brand. When the interviewees were affected by these implications, they could arouse powerful brand associations, which build up the brand image.

The author analyzed the answers of the interviewees to find out the aroused brand associations.

4.2.1 Attention-drawing Ability and brand associations

The attention-drawing ability of the laptop's appearance attracts the interviewees' attention when they look at a laptop. They would pay more attention, and spend more time on examining the product. Thus associations to the brand are aroused. The associations will affect brand image. All of the ten interviewees claimed that the aesthetic feelings to the laptops were aroused. Nine interviewees said they got positive aesthetic feelings. Yet one interviewee got negative aesthetic feelings.

For example, one interviewee said he feels that the laptop of certain brand looks elegant and simple.

"The overall appearance draws my attention, it is elegant and simple."

Interviewee 2

Two interviewees were attracted by the appearance of ThinkPad's laptop. Judging from the black colour and matte coated material, they both thought that this laptop must be very heavy in hand. It is related to the association about feels and experiential benefits.

"ThinkPad is a heavy black brick. It is thick and heavy."

Interviewee 10

"When I was in the retail store, all laptops seem to be the same except for the black, matte coated ThinkPad. It feels heavy in hand."

<div align="right">Interviewee 4</div>

Because of the white colour and the curved surface of the laptop, this interviewee had the association about who are the target users of Apple's laptop.

"The color makes a difference. Most laptops were black while Apple's laptops were white. It was quite a contrast. What else, it has more curved surfaces, more feminine rather than masculine. Girls might like it."

<div align="right">Interviewee 5</div>

This student thought that Apple's laptop could be more fashionable over time. It is the association of when is suitable to use the Apple's laptop.

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"Apple's form is long-lasting. It will not wear out easily. It is never outdated."

<div align="right">Interviewee 6</div>

4.2.2 Communication of aesthetic products value and brand associations

From the finding of the interviews, Laptop's appearance provoked visually aesthetic feelings to all the students, and all of the ten students could perceive either positive or negative aesthetic values. The implication of communicating aesthetic values can directly affect the aesthetic associations to the brand. Moreover, students aroused product reliability, use/application, user/customer and feel/experiential benefits associations from the laptop's appearances.

Below, interviewee No. 10 said that the appearance of ThinkPad does not meet his aesthetic standard. However he thought that ThinkPad seems to be reliable. And he thought that it is suitable for businessman or government workers. In his answer, associations of aesthetics, reliability and association the target user of the laptop is founded.

"ThinkPad is black and heavy. It has no sign of liveliness…Like something dig from a grave. It is way off my taste. It suits businessman, perhaps, or governors. It seems to be reliable. No youngsters will choose that. I'll choose apple.

<div align="right">Interviewee 10</div>

Another student mentioned that Apple's laptop feels very fashionable. He said it will not be outdated and it is suitable for designers, musicians and students. Associations of when and who is suitable to use the product were found.

"Apple's laptop looks nice. It's stylish. The design is continuous. There are no radical changes in its appearance, so it won't be outdated; the current design has lasted for 10 years, yet it still feels very fashionable, it is suitable for designers, musicians, and students. It fits me well."

<div align="right">Interviewee 6</div>

There are two students mentioned that Apple's laptop is good-looking. They thought that they would have good mood with it. The product would feel nice in hand. Another student said that the redcap of ThinkPad excited her. She would be more productive working on a laptop like ThinkPad. These three students got aesthetic feelings, and feels/experiential benefits associations from the laptop's appearances.

"Yes. It is thin, light and modern. It maintains some sort of elegancy by placing a simplistic logo on top of the silver top cover. It is good looking. I will have good mood with it."

<div align="right">Interviewee 2</div>

"Yes. It is white. I like the color. The logo is simple and easy to be recognized. The material feels nice. MacBook is very thin. I like its colour, shape and the overall feeling of holding it in hand. It's just feels nice in hand; it's something that I'd… l like to own."

<div align="right">Interviewee 5</div>

"ThinkPad is black. It is made from Magnalium, tough and light. Black will not get dir-

ty or wore out. It is a long lasting colour. When the cover is opened, there's a classic design - red cap. It excites me. I feel more productive working on a laptop like this."

<div align="right">Interviewee 4</div>

4.2.3 Communication of symbolic meanings and brand associations

According to the interview, this thesis found that the laptop's appearance has the function of communicating symbolic meanings. The appearance roused interviewees' associations to usage imagery, user imagery, and user's lifestyle/personality. It also aroused the associations of product class and related price.

There are four interviewees who were aroused the usage imagery associations (a consumer's image of when and in which situation the product is used). For example, one interviewee said that the metallic color of SONY laptop is classic. It will not be outdated. She can use it at any time.

"I prefer this metallic colour, the colour is classic, it will not be outdated, I can use it at any time. People who are mature and successful will choose this laptop. I attend to choose classic things like this. It lasts longer."

<div align="right">Interviewee 9</div>

Eight of the interviewees mentioned that they were aroused user imagery associations (a consumer's image of who uses the product). For example, one interviewee mentioned that the black colour of ThinkPad shows reliability and professionalism. She thought that elite business persons will choose ThinkPad.

"I think black is the colour of professionals, although it can be suppressing. I tend to think a person who uses black coloured computers is more reliable and professional. I think elite business persons will choose ThinkPad. Usually, ThinkPad users pursuit less hedonic values. They use ThinkPad because of its reliability and professionalism."

<div align="right">Interviewee 4</div>

Three interviewees were aroused the associations of user's lifestyle, personality, personal value and social status. For example one interviewee said people who have high quality lifestyles and relatively high salaries will use Apple laptop.

"Designers, musicians, and people who lead a simple yet high quality lifestyle will use Apple laptop. These people are sort of perfectionist, with relatively high salary. They pay more attention to the objects that they use."

<div align="right">Interviewee 3</div>

It can be seen that consumers were aroused the associations of product class and the laptop's related price.

"I think it's a mid-range Dell laptop. It is more fashionable, rather than 'business'. It targets the youngsters, so I assume it won't be expensive."

<div align="right">Interviewee 7</div>

4.2.4 Communication of functional product value and brand associations

Laptop's appearance has the implication of communicating functional information. It affects the functional attributes association, quality association, reliability association, and durability association directly. Moreover, the associations of related price and usage imagery, feel/experiential benefits can be aroused.

For example, the Apple's laptop looks very thin. It made one interviewee think that it has a simple and intuitive system, and it is easy to get hands on. But he inferred that its operating system will not be very powerful, its memory, CPU and other aspects will not be as strong as other PCs.

"Apple's laptop is much thinner, I assume it has a simple and intuitive system, it is easy to get hands on, but its operating system will not be very powerful, its memory, CPU and other aspects will not be as strong as other PCs."

<div align="right">Interviewee 1</div>

Four interviewees were aroused the quality association from the laptop's material, colour and workmanship.

"Through the exterior, I can feel it's different internally. When closed, the seam is even. It is a good quality product."

<div align="right">Interviewee 3</div>

One student was aroused the reliability association from the redcap of ThinkPad.

"It won't be closed by self no matter how small the distance between the screen and the body is. I will consider if the redcap is more accurate than touchpad, is it reliable."

<div align="right">Interviewee 4</div>

Two interviewees were aroused the durability association to the laptop. For example, one interviewee said the white colour of Apple's laptop made the laptop seemingly easy to get break. Based on the evaluation of the laptop's durability, the interviewees were aroused the related price association.

"I don't think Apple's laptop is of high quality judging from its appearance, it's fragile…easy to break. The white colour makes me think that it is fragile. It is also very thin, I think thinner the laptop is easier to get break."

<div align="right">Interviewee 5</div>

"The case of SONY's laptop is mainly made of plastic with a few alloy. I judge the material by touch, look and weight. I can feel whether it is resistant to abrasion or not. I will think what would happen if I accidently drop it on the ground, and based on that I will evaluate its price."

<div align="right">Interviewee 8</div>

One interviewee was aroused the usage imagery association from the illuminated keyboard. She thought that this Dell's laptop could be used in dark environment.

"Instead of having to put CDs in a tray, it takes in CDs like a slot machine takes in coins. Its keyboard is back illuminated, so you can see it easily in dark environment."

<div align="right">Interviewee 7</div>

Another interviewee was aroused the feel/experiential benefits association due to the high quality material used on the laptop.

"The metal appeals to be high quality material. The keyboard feels good to type with."

<div align="right">Interviewee 6</div>

4.2.5 Communication of ergonomic information and Brand association

According to interviews, this thesis found that laptop's appearance has the implication of communicating ergonomic information to consumers. The interviewees could infer usability, comfortableness, portability, and judge whether the laptop meets his/her using habit. This implication prompts the feel/experiential benefits association directly. Furthermore, this implication arouses the reliability association.

Four students mentioned the aspect of comfortableness. One student would assess the feel when resting the laptop on the lap through the form of the laptop.

"I will judge if it feels good to put on the lap."

<div align="right">Interviewee 2</div>

Four students mentioned the portability. For example:

"It meets my requirement to portability. It's light and thin enough."

<div align="right">Interviewee 6</div>

One student indicated that he would consider whether this laptop fits his using habit. It was because the laptop is smaller than his own.

"This laptop looks smaller, maybe… I will not get to a new computer after having been using one for a long time."

<div align="right">Interviewee 8</div>

Because of the comfortable feel of touch pad, this interviewee assumed that the touch pad is responsible. He was aroused reliability association.

"I like the touch of the keyboard and touch pad… seems to be a responsive touch pad."

<div align="right">Interviewee 5</div>

4.2.6   Establishing Recognition for the brand and the brand association

On the basis of the interview, this thesis found that laptop's appearance shows the implication of establishing recognition for the brand. This implication strengthens the image of the laptop brand in consumer's mind, and emphasizes the uniqueness of a brand. The interviewees could recognize the laptop brand only when there are consistent design features of this brand. For example, one interviewee said that there was no consistent distinctive design feature on Dell's laptop; she could not recognize that the brand was Dell.

"No, I can't recognize its brand. There's nothing special about the exterior of Dell's laptop."

<div align="right">Interviewee 7</div>

Characteristic logo, special exterior material, special colour, distinctive style would tell them which brand the laptop belongs to.

"Yes, the illuminating apple logo is fairly unique. I can distinguish it from the other brand immediately"

<div align="right">Interviewee 1</div>

"The curved 'Vaio' logo is distinguishable. Even if there's no Sony logo, you'll know its Sony laptop. The colour is pretty different from the other brands. It was the first that introduces vivid colours like that."

<div align="right">Interviewee 9</div>

"Yes. The ground-breaking part of Apple's computer is that they are the first that used metal. Its color is unmodified, original color of aluminum alloy. The whole apple product line adapted to the aluminum case. It is deeply integrated to the brand. Its continuity is what other brands don't have. The specialty of the aluminum casing is what attracts me most."

<div align="right">Interviewee 3</div>

Some designs features make the employees distinguish the brands. For example, the classic red cap of ThinkPad. The distinguishable shape and colour of Apple's keyboard which is white and square or rectangle.

"Yes. Now matter how much it changes, the ThinkPad always comes with black casing and the classic red cap."

<div align="right">Interviewee 4</div>

"Yes. I don't know what exactly the material is. But it feels different. Other brand's laptops come with black keyboard, and a conventional shape. Apple's are different. It's white, square or rectangle."

<div align="right">Interviewee 5</div>

5 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1 Effect of laptop's visual appearance on consumer's brand image

To sum up the answers outlined in the last chapter, Figure 8 shows how the laptop's appearance affects brand image among the college students.
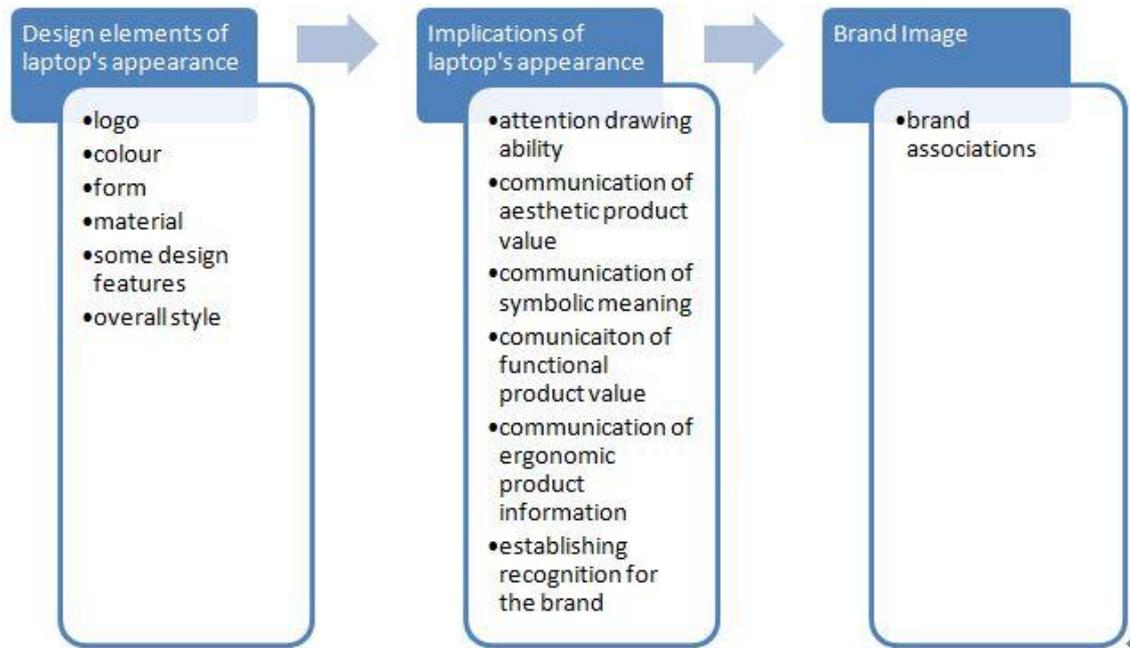

Figure 15. How laptop's appearance affect brand image(source: author of the thesis)

The design elements includes logo, colour, form, material, some design features, overall style etc. These elements have the implication of drawing attention, communication of aesthetic product value, communication of symbolic meaning, communication of functional product value, communication of ergonomic product information and establishing recognition for the brand. When college students were affected by these implications, they are aroused powerful brand associations, which affect the laptop's brand image. The detailed discussion of findings is presented later.

5.1.1 Attention drawing ability

Product appearance delivers information of the product to consumers by capturing and maintaining the attention of customers. (Person *et al.* 2007) Attention drawing is the first and essential step in the purchase process. A product may draw more attention by its distinctive colors, size, styles and shapes. (Creusen&Schoormans 2005)The design elements of colour, logo, form, overall style etc. can emphasis the uniqueness of the laptop, and further attract consumers' attention. Because of the attention drawing ability of the laptop's appearance, students were attracted to look more into the laptop of a brand in a store. Consequently, they were aroused aesthetic associations, usage imagery associations, user imagery associations and feels/experiential benefits associations to brand which affect brand image.

5.1.2 Communication of aesthetic product value

Through the design elements of colour, form, material, overall styles, and special design features etc., aesthetic feelings were generated in student's mind. Further, the students were aroused either positive or negative aesthetic associations.

Moreover, students aroused product reliability associations, usage imagery associations, user imagery associations and feels/experiential benefits associations from the laptop's appearances. All these associations could affect the brand image.

5.1.3 Communication of symbolic meaning

Consumers may have associations from a certain style of appearance. Consumers choose products or brands to express their self-image and express the kind of people they want to be. Product appearance describes the brand identity or brand meaning visually. (Creusen&Schoormans 2005)The characteristic design elements of laptop's visual appearance contain symbolic meanings. Laptop's appearance has the implication of communicating symbolic meanings to consumers. Communication of symbolic meaning

prompts college students arouses usage imagery associations, user imagery associations, and user's lifestyle/personality associations to the brand. What else, product class associations and related price association could also be aroused.

5.1.4 Communication of functional product value

College students can receive the functional product value through laptop's colour, material, workmanship, thickness and some special design features. College students' functional attributes association, quality association, reliability association, durability associations can be aroused by the communication of functional product value directly. Moreover, the associations of related price, usage imagery and feel/experiential benefits, which can affect the brand image, can be aroused as well.

5.1.5 Communication of ergonomic information

Laptop's appearance has the implication of communicating ergonomic information to consumers. Students could infer usability, comfortableness, portability, and judge whether the laptop fits his using habit through the design elements of laptop's appearance. Communication of ergonomic information prompts the feel/experiential benefits association directly and arouses the reliability associations, which affect the brand image.

5.1.6 Establishing Recognition for the brand

Consumers can recognize the products from certain time period, life style segment, or brand based on the visual appearance of the products (Person *et al.* 2007). College students can recognize the laptop brand when there are consistent design features of the brand. For example, characteristic logo, special exterior material, special colour, distinctive styles are parts of the consistent design features. Laptop's appearance has the impli-

cation of establishing recognition for the brand, strengthening the image of the laptop brand and strengthening the uniqueness of the brand. A consistent and distinctive design of the products' visual appearances of a brand is very important. Lots of brands are not only known for their great products, but also for their great design. The consistent and recognizable design features used in the product portfolios help the brands become enduring. Visual design features carry references to the character of the brand and define the core brand value to the customers. (Karjalainen 2007)

6 CONCLUSION

The research question of this thesis is "How does laptop's visual appearance impact its brand image among college students?"

Both secondary and primary research methods were used to find the answer of the research question. In the theoretical framework, theoretical supports such as implications of product's visual appearance, brand associations and components of brand image are presented. The primary research is conducted by interviews with ten college students. The aim of the interviews with college students is to examine the implications of laptop's appearance, and to explore what kind of associations were aroused in students' mind that affect the brand image.

By using secondary research and primary research, this thesis finally finds out how does laptop's visual appearance impact its brand image among college students?"

This thesis first finds that the design elements (including logo, colour, form, material, some design features, overall style etc. of the laptop's visual appearance) could create six implications. These implications are attention drawing ability, communication of aesthetic product value, communication of symbolic meaning, communication of functional product value, communication of ergonomic product information and establishing recognition for the brand. Second, when students were affected by these implications, students were aroused powerful brand associations, which affect the laptop's brand image.

When college students were attracted by a branded laptop, they would be aroused aesthetic associations, usage imagery associations, user imagery associations and feels/experiential benefits associations to the brand. Through these associations, the brand image was affected.

Laptop's appearance evokes aesthetic feelings to college students, so the students were aroused aesthetic association to the brand directly. Then, students were aroused product reliability associations, usage imagery associations, user imagery associations and feels/experiential benefits associations from the laptop's appearances, by which the brand image is affected.

When college students perceive symbolic meanings from the laptop's visual appearance, they were aroused usage imagery associations, user imagery associations, and user's lifestyle/personality associations to the brand. What else, product class associations and related price association can be aroused.

Laptop's appearance communicates functional product value with students. Functional attributes association, quality association, reliability association, durability associations can be aroused by the communication of functional product value. Further, the associations of related price, usage imagery and feel/experiential benefits can be aroused as well.

Students could infer usability, comfortableness, portability and judge whether the laptop meets his/her using habit through the design elements of laptop's appearance. Communication of ergonomic information prompts the feel/experiential benefits association directly and also arouses the reliability associations, which affect the brand image.

Laptop's visual appearance is an important tool for the recognition of laptop brand. College students can recognize the laptop brand when there are consistent, unique design features of the brand. Characteristic logo, special exterior material, special colour, distinctive style would tell them which brand the laptop belongs to. Laptop's appearance has the implication of establishing recognition for the brand and strengthens the image of the laptop brand in consumer's mind, strengthen the uniqueness of brand.

All in all, laptop's visual appearance can deliver or imply the messages and meanings of the product itself and its brand. These messages and meanings help the students to create/strengthen the valuable brand associations, and build up the brand image.

It is recommended that companies introduce characteristic and consistent design features to the laptop's visual appearance. The design features should try to communicate the brand identity or brand meaning correctly, so that consumers can build up brand image that correspond to the brand identity.

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APPENDIX

Interview questions

Hello, I am a student studying in College of Applied Sciences. I am now working on my Bachelor's thesis. My thesis topic is "Impacts of laptop's visual appearance on its brand image among college students". Thank you very much for your answers.

1. Which brand's laptop appearance is most impressive to you?(Either positive or negative impression)
2. Are you attracted to its visual appearance? Why?
3. Does it meet your aesthetic standard? How do you get the aesthetic feeling from its visual appearance?
4. Do you think its visual appearance embodies symbolic meaning? Why?
5. Can you infer its functional attributes and performance by its visual appearance? How?
6. Can you infer its usability, comfortableness, portability and safety by its visual appearance? How?
7. Can you recognize its brand by its visual appearance? Why?