



JENSEN yrkeshögskola  
TRÄNING FÖR VERKLIGHETEN

# - **Cultural Interfaces**

## - A Comparative Analysis of UX Design Elements in Chinese and Western Digital Ecosystems

Degree project

FRK23S

Vår 2025

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## Abstract

This research examines fundamental differences between Chinese and Western digital interfaces through comparative analysis of user experience (UX) elements. The findings reveal how cultural frameworks shape interface design across information presentation, functionality integration, and visual symbolism.

Chinese digital interfaces demonstrate higher information density and integrated multi-functionality compared to Western counterparts. This distinction reflects cognitive patterns documented by Nisbett et al. (2001), who identified holistic processing tendencies in East Asian cultures versus analytical processing in Western traditions.

While Western interfaces compartmentalize functions into separate applications, Chinese platforms like WeChat integrate diverse services within unified "super app" ecosystems, reflecting cultural preferences for contextual completeness rather than isolated functionality. Case studies of Starbucks and Coca-Cola illustrate effective adaptation strategies transcending mere translation.

Both companies demonstrate how successful market entry requires fundamental rethinking of user journeys rather than superficial localization. Visual elements highlight further cross-cultural divergences. Color symbolism varies dramatically: red signals danger in Western interfaces but represents prosperity in Chinese contexts; white conveys cleanliness in Western design but carries funeral associations in Chinese tradition.

Similarly, emoji interpretation differs significantly, with standardized emoji conveying opposite emotional meanings across cultures.

These findings carry significant implications for international companies targeting cross-cultural markets. Effective digital interfaces must address fundamental differences in information processing, ecosystem expectations, and visual interpretation.

*Keywords:* user experience design, cross-cultural design, digital interfaces, Chinese digital ecosystems, Western digital ecosystems



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## **1. Introduction**

Cross-cultural misunderstandings in digital interfaces often emerge from seemingly minor elements that carry vastly different connotations across cultural boundaries. An emoji that conveys friendliness to Western users might signal sarcasm to Chinese recipients, while color schemes considered professional in one context may unintentionally evoke negative associations in another. These subtle variations impact user engagement with digital interfaces across different regions.

For multinational corporations seeking market expansion, understanding these cultural nuances transcends academic interest represents a business imperative. Digital products that effectively bridge cultural divides can enhance user adoption and foster brand loyalty in diverse markets. This becomes particularly relevant when considering China's vast population exceeding 1.4 billion people (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024), which represents an enormous market opportunity compared to the combined 800 million residents of North America, Western Europe, and Scandinavia.

The significance of culturally appropriate digital design becomes evident when examining unsuccessful market entries. Numerous Western companies have attempted to penetrate the Chinese market with minimally adapted digital experiences, only to encounter unexpected resistance despite offering objectively superior products or services. Conversely, Chinese applications entering Western markets sometimes struggle with adoption due to interface designs that Western users find overwhelming or confusing. These challenges underscore the necessity of understanding cultural dimensions in user experience design.

This research examines adaptation strategies employed by leading international companies navigating both Chinese and Western digital landscapes, revealing mechanisms through which thoughtful UX modifications serve as cultural bridges between diverse user populations. By identifying patterns of successful cross-cultural adaptation, the study aims to develop frameworks that can guide international companies seeking to create more culturally responsive digital experiences.

## **2. Purpose and Questions**

This study analyzes digital design elements across Chinese and Western digital ecosystems, focusing specifically on website design patterns, color preferences, and



emoji usage. The research examines how cultural factors shape digital aesthetic choices and user experience expectations across these regions, with implications for international companies seeking cross-cultural market expansion. The deliberate focus on Chinese-Western comparisons, rather than broader international analysis, allows for precise examination within manageable boundaries. While global digital design exhibits tremendous variety, the Chinese digital ecosystem represents a particularly distinctive development path due to its relative isolation from Western platforms. This parallel evolution has created unique design approaches worthy of specific examination.

Three questions guide the investigation:

1. To what extent do cultural dimensions influence user experience design decisions in digital products?
2. How do major international companies adapt their digital interfaces when targeting Chinese and Western markets?
3. How do cultural differences in color symbolism and emoji usage manifest in Chinese versus Western digital communication platforms?

### **3. Method**

This research employs a qualitative methodology through comparative analysis to examine cross-cultural UX design variations between Chinese and Western digital ecosystems. As a qualitative study, it prioritizes in-depth exploration of cultural nuances and contextual understanding over quantifiable metrics, allowing for rich interpretation of how cultural dimensions manifest in digital interfaces. This approach is particularly appropriate for investigating the complex interplay between cultural frameworks and user experience design, where many relevant factors resist simple quantification.

The research synthesizes insights from existing literature, industry publications, case studies, and visual analysis of digital platforms. This qualitative framework enables comprehensive exploration of established patterns across multiple dimensions of digital design, revealing connections that might not emerge through more narrowly defined quantitative approaches.

The research methodology comprised three principal components:



1. **Comparative Visual Analysis** examining interface characteristics across key platforms in Chinese and Western markets, including layout structures, navigation patterns, information architecture, visual density, interactive elements, color schemes, and typography. The analysis focused particularly on parallel platforms serving similar functions—contrasting WeChat with Western messaging applications and Xiaohongshu with Western social commerce platforms. This visual analysis involved systematic documentation of interface elements across platforms, noting differences in information presentation, functional organization, and visual styling. The analysis maintained consistency by focusing on equivalent user goals rather than superficial similarities.
2. **Case Study Examination** of Starbucks and Coca-Cola, multinational corporations that have successfully navigated Chinese and Western digital ecosystems. The analysis documented adaptation strategies and specific design modifications implemented by these companies as they expanded across markets.

These corporations were selected based on their established presence in both Chinese and Western markets, substantial digital footprints, and documented adaptation strategies.

For Starbucks, the examination focused on their WeChat integration, specialized product offerings for Chinese consumers, and mobile payment implementation.

The Coca-Cola analysis explored their linguistic adaptation, cultural marketing campaigns, and digital platform integration specific to the Chinese market.

3. **Cultural Element Analysis** exploring culturally variable visual elements across three domains: information density preferences, color symbolism across cultural contexts, and emoji usage patterns with their varied interpretations.

This analysis drew from both academic research on cultural cognition patterns and industry publications documenting specific manifestations in digital interfaces. The color symbolism analysis compared traditional cultural associations with their application in contemporary digital interfaces, noting both consistencies and evolving interpretations.



Similarly, the emoji analysis examined how seemingly universal visual elements acquire culture-specific meanings through usage patterns and contextual interpretation.

This research relies on article review rather than direct qualitative or quantitative data collection, synthesizing insights from existing literature and industry publications. While this approach limits the generation of new primary data, it enables comprehensive integration of diverse perspectives from both academic and professional sources.

The qualitative orientation allows for nuanced interpretation of cultural factors that might be difficult to capture through statistical analysis alone, particularly when examining subtle variations in visual communication and user behavior across cultural contexts.

The qualitative nature of this study does introduce certain limitations, including potential researcher bias in interpretation and the challenge of generalizing findings across highly diverse user populations. However, these limitations are balanced by the method's capacity to reveal meaningful patterns and cultural insights that can guide international companies in creating more responsive crosscultural digital experiences.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 To What Extent Do Cultural Dimensions Influence UX Design Decisions?**

Cultural dimensions profoundly influence UX design decisions across Chinese and Western digital ecosystems, manifesting in distinctive patterns of information presentation, functionality integration, and interaction design. These differences reflect deeper cultural frameworks rather than merely aesthetic preferences or technological constraints.



### **4.1.1 Integrated Functionality vs. Compartmentalized Design**

WeChat exemplifies a fundamentally different approach to digital services compared to Western paradigms. While Western users typically navigate between discrete applications for social media, messaging, and e-commerce, WeChat integrates these functions within a unified ecosystem. This all-in-one platform architecture creates a seamless experience where users can access diverse services without switching between multiple applications. This integrated approach transforms the user experience. Chinese users accomplish diverse tasks—ordering meals, conversing with friends, accessing brand promotions—without leaving a single application environment. The seamless experience eliminates the contextswitching friction common in Western digital interactions.

The genesis of this super app model stems partly from practical considerations. Chinese smartphones historically had limited storage capacity, restricting the number of apps users could install. The South China Morning Post (2020) reports that these constraints "created market conditions favoring integrated solutions, leading to ecosystem development that Western markets are now attempting to replicate." However, what began as a practical adaptation has evolved into a distinctive design philosophy that shapes user expectations. WeChat's Mini Programs exemplify this integration—lightweight applications within the platform that eliminate the need for separate downloads. This approach enables brands to engage users without requiring them to leave the primary application environment.

According to Business of Apps (2023), WeChat hosts over 4.3 million Mini Programs on its platform, which generated 2.7 trillion RMB (approximately \$400 billion) in transactions in 2021. This demonstrates the scale and significance of this integrated approach.

This integrated approach contrasts markedly with the Western preference for specialized applications that excel at specific functions. Western digital ecosystems typically compartmentalize experiences, expecting users to switch between applications designed for distinct purposes—messaging in one app, shopping in another, banking in a third. While this specialization can enable deeper functionality in specific domains, it creates friction through repeated context-switching that Chinese digital ecosystems largely eliminate.

### **4.1.2 Information Density and Cognitive Processing Styles**

Chinese applications typically embrace information density in their design approach, while Western users generally "prioritize simplicity and clarity, with minimal text and an emphasis on negative space" (Raw Studio, 2025). Research



indicates that these UI/UX differences reflect deeper cultural influences that shape how users from different backgrounds prefer to interact with digital products.

This distinction becomes immediately apparent when comparing parallel platforms. Chinese e-commerce interfaces typically present substantially more information per screen than their Western counterparts, with multiple product options, promotional banners, and navigation elements visible simultaneously. Western e-commerce designs, conversely, typically emphasize focused attention on fewer elements with more negative space and progressive disclosure of additional options.

Asian designs frequently incorporate complex layouts presenting detailed information, multiple categories, and numerous actions simultaneously. This reflects a distinctive approach to user engagement—where Western designs emphasize quick, simple experiences, Asian designs create comprehensive environments addressing diverse needs simultaneously. Numerous design researchers have observed that while Westerners may view Chinese websites full of buttons, tabs and choices as 'busy,' 'cluttered,' or 'hard to navigate,' the Chinese sensibility sees them as superior to the emptier, more minimalist screens in Europe and the United States.

This contrast mirrors deeper cognitive patterns identified by researchers studying cross-cultural cognition. Research published in the International Journal of Design found that "Chinese, Korean, and American participants employed different viewing patterns when viewing the webpage, revealing a positive relationship with Nisbett's cognitive theory" about holistic versus analytic thinking styles (Kim, 2010).

## **4.2 How Do Major International Companies Adapt Their Digital Interfaces for Chinese Markets?**

Expanding into Chinese markets requires international companies to substantially reconfigure their digital interfaces. Success in this environment demands understanding the fundamental structure of the Chinese internet, particularly the Tencent and Alibaba ecosystems that form the backbone of China's digital landscape.

Analysis of successful international brands reveals systematic adaptation approaches that transcend superficial localization. Research from multiple design agencies indicates that effective market entry requires understanding Chinese



preferences for information-rich interfaces and integrated functionality. This often necessitates fundamental redesign of user journeys and interaction patterns rather than mere translation of existing elements.

International companies that have achieved sustainable growth in Chinese markets demonstrate comprehensive adaptation strategies addressing both technological integration and cultural nuance. Rather than attempting to replicate Western digital experiences in Chinese contexts, these organizations have reimagined their digital presence to align with local user expectations and ecosystem structures.

The most successful adaptations involve deep integration with Chinese super-apps and payment systems, reconfiguration of information architecture to align with Chinese cognitive patterns, and thoughtful translation of brand values through culturally resonant visual elements. These adaptations require substantial investment but enable effective engagement with Chinese consumers in ways that superficial localization cannot achieve.

### **4.2.1 Starbucks' Strategic Adaptation to China's Digital Ecosystem**

Starbucks has achieved remarkable success in China through strategic digital presence adaptation. By 2024, China had become Starbucks' second-largest market globally, with over 7,600 locations contributing significantly to the company's revenue growth (Daxue Consulting, 2024). This success stems partly from Starbucks' thoughtful approach to digital ecosystem integration and cultural adaptation.

The company created menu items exclusively for Chinese consumers—specialized offerings like tea lattes and holiday-themed products designed specifically for Chinese celebrations. South China Morning Post (2020) reports that "international brands succeeding in China have recognized the necessity of adapting to local digital ecosystems rather than expecting Chinese consumers to adopt Western digital habits."

This localization extends beyond products to their digital ecosystem integration, particularly through WeChat partnerships. Starbucks implemented a comprehensive WeChat strategy incorporating loyalty programs, mobile ordering, and gift card functionality within China's dominant social platform.



Business of Apps (2023) notes that "WeChat has over 1.3 billion active users," making it an essential platform for international brands seeking to establish a presence in China.

Harvard Business Review (2023) confirms that "companies entering the Chinese market must integrate with established super apps to reach consumers effectively"—a principal Starbucks embraced through partnerships with Tencent enabling mobile gifting and payment functionality within China's dominant social platform. This approach aligns with the holistic thinking patterns prevalent in Chinese digital culture, where interconnected services and social integration are valued over compartmentalized experiences.

Despite this success, Starbucks faces increasing competition in China, particularly from Luckin Coffee, which expanded to over 16,000 stores by late 2023—more than double Starbucks' Chinese footprint. This competition highlights the dynamic nature of the Chinese market and the need for continuous adaptation strategies rather than one-time localization efforts (Daxue Consulting, 2024).

## **4.2.2 Coca-Cola: Digital Campaigns and Visual Identity Adaptation**

Coca-Cola's journey in China demonstrates successful cultural and digital adaptation beginning with linguistic transformation. Having first entered China in 1927, withdrawn during World War II, and returned in 1979, Coca-Cola has established itself as a dominant beverage company with over 50% market share in the Chinese soft drinks category.

When first entering China, the company faced linguistic adaptation challenges to effectively communicate its brand to Chinese consumers.

The company developed "可口可乐" (Ke Kou Ke Le), meaning "happiness in the mouth"—preserving phonetic similarity while communicating positive associations aligned with brand values. This transliteration succeeded by matching the original phonetic feature while adding imaginative and emotional connotations that resonated with Chinese consumers.

Coca-Cola strategically targeted emerging urban centers in China. Their distribution strategy recognized the importance of establishing presence not only in major metropolises but also in the rapidly developing second and third-tier cities where significant portions of the population and retail businesses were located. This



comprehensive market approach helped cement Coca-Cola's dominant position in the Chinese beverage market.

Lu (2019) frames Coca-Cola's adaptation success through cultural adaptation theory, noting that the brand "eventually overcame culture shock by adopting the strategy of integration" put forward by Berry. Lu further applies Young Yun Kim's "stress-adaptation-growth" model to analyze "each dynamic process of how Coca-Cola adapted to the Chinese market successfully," emphasizing that brand translation is "a key access for foreign customers to know the product" in international business contexts

### **4.2.3 Key Adaptation Strategies**

International brands entering the Chinese market must fundamentally rethink their user journeys, information architecture, and interactive patterns. This is particularly evident in how these brands need to integrate with Chinese super apps rather than expecting users to download standalone applications. Typical Western approaches to onboarding flows may need to be reconceived to accommodate WeChat OAuth social login conventions and user expectations around immediate value delivery.

Digital Creative (2023) observes that "Over decades of separate internet evolution, Chinese preferences around user experience design have diverged into a distinct aesthetic and functional philosophy. For international companies, thriving in this high-context market means completely rethinking notions of visual appeal, engagement, and local relevance."

The comprehensive redesign often includes integration with WeChat's miniprograms, adoption of QR code functionality (which achieved earlier and more widespread adoption in China than in Western markets), and alignment with Chinese aesthetic preferences.

1. Analysis of multiple successful international brands in China reveals several consistent adaptation strategies:
2. Integration with Chinese super apps (particularly WeChat) rather than standalone applications.
3. Adoption of information-rich interface designs that align with Chinese preferences
4. Cultural adaptation of visual elements including color schemes and imagery



5. Localization of products and services beyond mere translation
6. Engagement with Chinese social platforms through specialized campaigns

## **4.3 How Do Cultural Differences in Color Symbolism and Emoji Usage Manifest in Digital Platforms?**

Effective cross-cultural digital communication requires careful consideration of visual elements that may carry different meanings across cultural contexts. As international companies expand their digital presence across markets, understanding these nuanced differences becomes crucial for successful user engagement.

### **4.3.1 Cross-Cultural Color Symbolism in Digital Interfaces**

While traveling to China, one can see red everywhere in the cultural landscape. As That's Mandarin (2022) explains, "This is because in Chinese culture, red means vitality, long life, happiness, success. It is a color that is thought to bring luck, recognition, and fame." This cultural association makes red particularly effective for call-to-action elements in Chinese digital applications, particularly for promotional content or important functionality.

Red's prominence extends beyond traditional contexts into modern digital interfaces. According to Wikipedia (2025), "Red paper lanterns for sale in Shanghai. The color red symbolizes luck and is believed to ward away evil." During holidays like Chinese New Year, red dominates not only physical decorations but also digital platforms, with special themes and promotional elements leveraging this auspicious color. That's Mandarin (2022) further notes that "Red is a color that is present during weddings too" and "is thought to keep the devil away," reinforcing its protective qualities.



Understanding this cultural color preference helps explain why major Chinese platforms strategically incorporate red elements in their interfaces. That's Mandarin (2022) highlights that "red is a dynamic, expansive, and blooming color that symbolizes fire and represents the summer season," conveying energy and vitality. Wikipedia (2025) adds that red is "associated with masculine yang energy, fire, good fortune and joy," qualities that make it ideal for important notifications, promotions, and transaction-related functions in digital design. By aligning with deeply held cultural values around color symbolism, these design choices create immediate emotional connections with Chinese users.

### **White in Chinese Culture**

White reveals another significant contrast between Western and Eastern design philosophies. While Western interfaces employ white backgrounds to convey cleanliness and simplicity, Chinese culture traditionally associates white with different meanings. According to Wikipedia (2025), "White (白, bái) corresponds with metal among the wuxing and represents gold. It symbolizes brightness, purity, and fulfillment. White is also the traditional color of mourning." This traditional association with mourning creates subtle negative impressions among Chinese users, potentially affecting how they perceive white-dominant interfaces. This cultural association doesn't preclude using white in Chinese interfaces, but it may influence how extensively white space is employed and how it balances with other colors. The preference for higher visual density in Chinese interfaces may partly reflect this cultural association, with designers intuitively avoiding excessive white space that might create unintended negative impressions.

### **Other Color Associations in Chinese Culture**

Other colors with different cultural interpretations include yellow, which Wikipedia (2025) notes was historically significant: "In imperial China, yellow was the color of the emperor, and is held as the symbolic color of the five legendary emperors of ancient China, such as the Yellow Emperor." This contrasts with Western associations of yellow with caution or warning.

Blue represents another interesting cultural difference. Wikipedia (2025) explains that "Old Chinese did not make a blue-green distinction, having a single verdant color (青, qīng) that encompassed both." This color was "associated with health, prosperity, and harmony," creating a richer symbolic association than the Western connection of blue with trustworthiness and stability.

Purple carries special significance in Chinese tradition. As Wikipedia (2025) states, purple is among the "five intermediary colors (五間色 wǔjiànsè)" formed as



combinations of the five elemental colors. This gives purple associations with divinity and increasingly romance in China, contrasting with Western associations of royalty.

### **4.3.2 Emoji Usage Across Cultural Boundaries**

WeChat features a distinctive emoji ecosystem that differs markedly from Western platforms. Academic research indicates that certain emojis, particularly the standard smiling emoji, have evolved to convey sarcasm among Chinese users—contrasting sharply with Western interpretations where the same emoji typically signals genuine happiness. According to recent experimental studies, "the smiling emoji (😊), originally designed as a genuine smile, has evolved into 'a mysterious smile' to signal sarcasm or speechlessness among Chinese youth" (Hu et al., 2024). While significant scholarly research exists on emoji interpretation, a gap remains in cross-cultural studies specifically examining Chinese versus Western contexts. UX Matters (2023) argues that "the interplay between Western and Asian design is dynamic and has shaped the ever-evolving landscape of digital products," highlighting how seemingly universal elements like emoji can develop culturally specific interpretations.

This phenomenon may correlate with high-context versus low-context communication styles often discussed in cross-cultural research, though that connection was not explicitly established in the examined literature. KAWO (2023) notes that "despite the iPhone offering over 3,600 emojis, WeChat still added 40 exclusive emoji options that reflect specific Chinese cultural expressions." These platform-specific visual elements create additional potential for cross-cultural misinterpretation when Chinese and Western users communicate digitally. WeChat's custom stickers frequently incorporate text elements, creating hybrid visual-verbal communication that resists simple cross-cultural translation. Understanding these interpretive differences becomes crucial when designing digital interfaces that bridge Chinese and Western markets, as seemingly universal visual elements may convey unintended meanings across cultural boundaries.

## **5. Conclusions**

This comparative analysis reveals significant cultural differences influencing user experience design across Chinese and Western digital ecosystems. The research findings illuminate how cultural frameworks shape digital interfaces at multiple



levels---from information presentation and functionality integration to visual symbolism and interaction patterns.

Three key findings emerge from this investigation:

1. Chinese digital interfaces typically feature higher information density and integrated functionality, reflecting holistic thinking patterns prevalent in Chinese culture. By contrast, Western digital designs prioritize minimalism, negative space, and focused functionality---mirroring analytical thinking patterns that compartmentalize complex systems. These differences stem from deeper cognitive frameworks identified by researchers like Nisbett et al. (2001), whose work demonstrates how cultural backgrounds influence information processing styles.

Neither approach is inherently superior; rather, each reflects culturally specific adaptations that shape user expectations and preferences in digital interfaces.

2. Successful adaptation to Chinese digital environments requires understanding the integrated nature of Chinese platforms. The "super app" model exemplified by WeChat represents a fundamentally different approach to digital experiences compared to the compartmentalized Western model. Companies entering the Chinese market must recognize that users expect seamless integration of multiple functionalities within unified platforms---a preference that extends beyond mere convenience to reflect broader cultural values around holistic experiences.

Starbucks and Coca-Cola demonstrate how international companies can successfully integrate with these ecosystems while maintaining brand consistency.

3. Visual communication elements reveal profound cultural divergences affecting user response. Colors and emoji carry significantly different meanings across cultural boundaries, influencing user trust, comprehension, and engagement with digital products. Red signifies danger in Western contexts but represents luck and prosperity in Chinese culture; white conveys purity in Western design but is associated with mourning in Chinese traditions. Similarly, certain emoji have evolved distinct emotional connotations across cultures, creating potential misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication. These differences extend beyond aesthetics to affect fundamental user perception and emotional response to digital interfaces.

The successful adaptation strategies demonstrated by Starbucks and Coca-Cola highlight that effective cross-cultural digital products must transcend superficial localization.

International businesses need to address fundamental differences in information processing, social integration patterns, and visual symbolism when creating digital experiences for diverse cultural markets. Digital Creative (2023) observes that "Over decades of separate internet evolution, Chinese preferences around user



experience design have diverged into a distinct aesthetic and functional philosophy. For international companies, thriving in this high-context market means completely rethinking notions of visual appeal, engagement, and local relevance"--a principle that applies broadly across cross-cultural digital design. This research contributes to broader understanding of cultural dimensions in user experience design, offering frameworks that can guide international companies seeking more effective cross-cultural digital strategies. By recognizing how cultural backgrounds shape user expectations at multiple levels, designers can create more resonant digital experiences that respect cultural differences while maintaining brand consistency.

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## 7. Appendices

### Note on Appendices

The appendices referenced throughout this document are compiled in a separate supplementary file. This decision was made to enhance the readability and flow of the main text.