Could creative design help Chinese knitwear bands develop?

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Abstract

Chinese knitwear brands have been losing their market share over the past decades. Their traditional market share is shrinking, and the consumer base is aging. There is also homogenization in products and brands across the Chinese knitwear industry, so that brands lose their distinct identify. This paper argues that a lack of a creative design culture is a contributing factor to the challenges Chinese knitwear brands face; and proposes solutions on how to improve their competitiveness for their business sustainability.

The paper is based on studies conducted between 2014 to 2017; that included 48 face-to-face interviews with business and academic stakeholders, 2 online consumer surveys with 883 people, an industrial case study and design practice research, where a knitwear collection was created in collaborated with a Chinese knitwear brand for exploring future design direction. This paper concentrates on design practice for using Chinese design aesthetics to improve the culture sustainability as a means of developing brands' competitiveness in their fashion business; and attracting younger generations to become their new consumers. Furthermore, the paper also addresses the behaviour of knitwear customers in China through literature studies and observation; and argues that homogenisation of

designs across brands and a lack of awareness of international fashion alienates younger customers, despite consistent high-level quality.

The results of the design practice research indicate creative design and distinguished brand characters can attract different aged consumers, including younger generations. 95% of surveyed people preferred high quality knitwear with unique design styles and Chinese cultural design languages. The conclusions suggest that knitwear companies need to develop creative design and brand culture by re-building brand positioning and market segmentation and re-designing their products. In addition, suggesting using Chinese design styles can help build a brand's distinguished character and design style. Furthermore, it should meet their targeted consumers' real needs, which is an essential condition for the future success of knitwear brands.

Keywords*:* knitwear brand, Chinese markets, design creativity, design culture, sustainability

1. Introduction

Currently, the Chinese knitwear industry suffers from development problems. Most traditional knitwear brands have been gradually losing their market shares in this past decade. On the one hand, there is fierce competition between Chinese brands and international brands in the Chinese fashion market, especially since China became a member of WTO in end of 2001(www.wto.org). At the same time, influenced by globalizations, Chinese consumers requirements have changed / improved, now they have more choices in the fashion markets. Furthermore, their lifestyles and consumption habits have changed. However, knitwear brands are still running in their traditional ways, just as they did when the brands were established. For new and existing customers, they would appear to lack attractiveness in both their product designs and brand images.

Traditionally, most Chinese knitwear companies operate with two main business models. Firstly, to act as a knitwear supply business for international or national fashion brands and, secondly, running their own labels as knitwear brands. Observing the knitwear industry, it can be found that there is an interesting phenomenon in the knitwear companies: Over 75% of cashmere products consumed globally come from Chinese manufacturers, but most of them are sold as foreign brands (Yang, 2009). That means they have good manufacturing capability and quality to offer high-class knitwear for most of the world's influential brands. In contrast, their own brands are at a totally different level. Their products have good quality and held a significant market share in China during the 1990s and 2000s. However, for most of these knitwear brands, there has been a declining trend in sales performance after their peak period in the late 2000s.

According to a Chinese cashmere brand white paper (Anon, 2008), Chinese knitwear brands have to face reductions in both their sales performance and retail channels. When compared with Chinese womenswear, menswear and international brands, most knitwear brands suffer from poor competitiveness in the market. This appears to be because most of them are still in the primary brand stage with single products structures, limited sales systems and old-style fashion products. In the knitwear industry two types of knitwear brands play an important role in the Chinese retail market: Merino wool garments, mostly located in Zhejiang province, and cashmere knitwear and related products with their main areas in Inner Mongolia, Zhejiang Province and Shenzhen city. Chinese knitwear traditionally occupied large sale areas in most department stores in China, with strong sales performances. However, since their peak around the year 2000, many Chinese knitwear brands faced a shrinking market and ageing consumers (Anon, 2008).

There is serious homogenization in Chinese clothes brands (Ren, 2010). Compared with womenswear and menswear, this situation is more serious in the knitwear industry (Anon, 2008). In fact, Chinese fashion brands may have similar styles and brands characters. But at least, they use many different

materials for different product categories, while knitwear brands use a few types of materials(yarns) in their brands with single product structure. Thus, most knitwear companies offer highly similar products (in design, material and texture) in their shops. It is hard to distinguish one brand from another without examining their trademarks. For the product homogenizations, there are two main factors that cannot be ignored in Chinese knitwear brands. These are inadequacies in designing and also in branding; both of which are not strong enough to support knitwear brands' continued development.

The aim of the paper is to discuss the solutions and possibilities from design perspectives for helping Chinese knitwear brands to deal with their problems. It will present a mixed methodology approach including qualitative, quantitative and design practice research. The objective of the qualitative and quantitative research was to map the problems and the underpinning reasons of the Chinese knitwear industry and related areas. The design practice research objective was to explore possibilities of using Chinese culture and model design language to build brand personality and, therefore, to improve brand images and culture sustainability. Thus, to build a healthy and competitive business model. In terms of sustainability, there are two main meanings : Firstly it means 'the quality of being able to continue over a period of time'; and secondly, 'the quality of causing little or no damage to the environment and therefore able to continue for a long time' (dictionary.cambridge.org). In this study, sustainability is used with both these meanings. Firstly, to try to build sustainable business models which can help the brands continually developing and grow in the future. Then secondly, using unique and recognizable design language for improving the brand images and the design levels of the brand to enhance the products' values, which can increase the products user cycles. Therefore, reducing unnecessary waste to protect the environments and related resources.

The first part of the paper introduces the knitwear industry in China. Following this the mixed methodologies use in the study are described. The results of the design practice research are then introduced. Based on these approaches the main findings are discussed in detail and finally conclusions are drawn on the potential of the research to contribute to the sustainability of the Chinese knitwear industry.

2. Size and shape of the knitwear industry in China

The Chinese knitwear business began post-1978 following China's opening and reform. 'Like the whole textile industry European knitwear companies are under continuous threat from low labour cost countries' (Eckert, 1997). New China with enormous low-cost labour attracted many fashion brands. Thus, most Chinese Knitwear Companies began their business as knitting factories to make knitwear products for international orders (Zhang & Xiao, 2014). Indeed, until now, most Chinese knitwear companies still have to support their businesses by producing and exporting knitting products for international brands, which includes both low-end and high-end markets. For instance, according to

Fung Business Intelligence Center's report: 'China is the largest supplier of sweaters in the US. Import data indicated that in 2014, 88.7% of cotton sweaters in the US were imported from China, as were 90.2% of wool sweaters, 78.9% of man-made-fiber sweaters and 87.8 % other-vegetable-fiber sweaters' and China was also 'the major sourcing country for sweaters in Europe, too' (Anon, 2015). The woollen knitwear industries are located in three main areas in China, which consist of Puyuan in Tongxiang city Zejiang province, Hengshan in Wujiang city Jiangshu province and Haiyang city in Shandong province (Zhang & Xiao, 2014). For the cashmere industries, they are also developed in three main distribution centres including Linhe city in Inner Mongolia, Qinhe prefecture in Hebei Province and Wulin city in Ningxia Municipality (Zhang & Xiao, 2014, He 2015).

Brand and Design Culture

Several authors have argued for the role of brand and design culture in the success of clothing companies. According to Pappu et al (2005) 'Branding is a powerful means of differentiation' Furthermore, 'brands are crucial drivers for product purchasing and usage decisions' (Burmann, et al., 2009). Thus 'strategic brand management involves the design and implementation of marketing activities to build, measure and manage brand equity (Keller et al 2012). Bands also need positioning to ensure consumers can recognise them against competitors (Keller 2008). This requires. According to Kamakura and Russell (1993) and noted by Doyle (1990)'s research: 'brand value is the outcome of long-term investment designed to build a sustainable, differential advantage relative to competitors'; and is carried out by global Brands (Rolls 2006) to offer consumers a valued emotional reward for loyalty (Hameide, 2011). In this study, branding will focus on design perspectives for how to build strong brands in the fashion field, to find a way to improve Chinese knitwear brands.

Furthermore, design culture needs to be considered and embedded in the design production and consumption systems (Julier 2008). It should be a way of thinking (Forlizzi 2008). Manzini (2016) indicated that design culture consisted of knowledge, values, visions, interactions and quality standards areas that occurs in the design activities.

Based on these viewpoints, design culture for the Chinese knitwear brands should focus on the whole design and related processes, design management, the decision making, the productions and promotions, the design thinking, design value and understanding, and the brands design histories and context.

3. Methodology

The paper is based on a PhD study, which aimed to explore the problems of Chinese knitwear brands and the reasons behind this; and to look for solutions to help these brands continue to improve and develop.
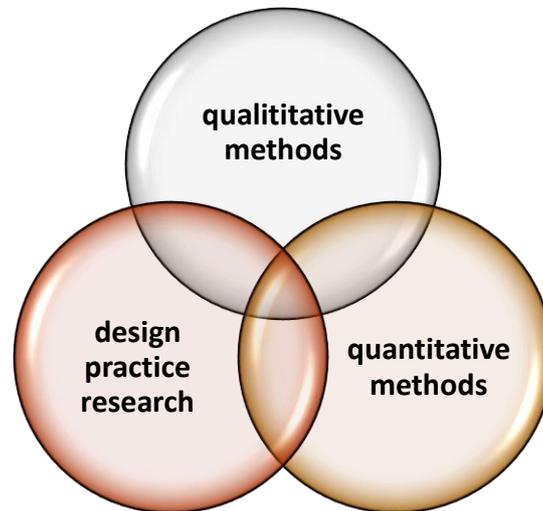

Figure 1: the structure of mix research methodology

In order to explore and answers the problems of these brands, the research is designed as practice-based research with a combination of mixed methodologies with qualitative, quantitative and design practice approaches (see figure 1). It will be divided two main parts in this paper to explain.
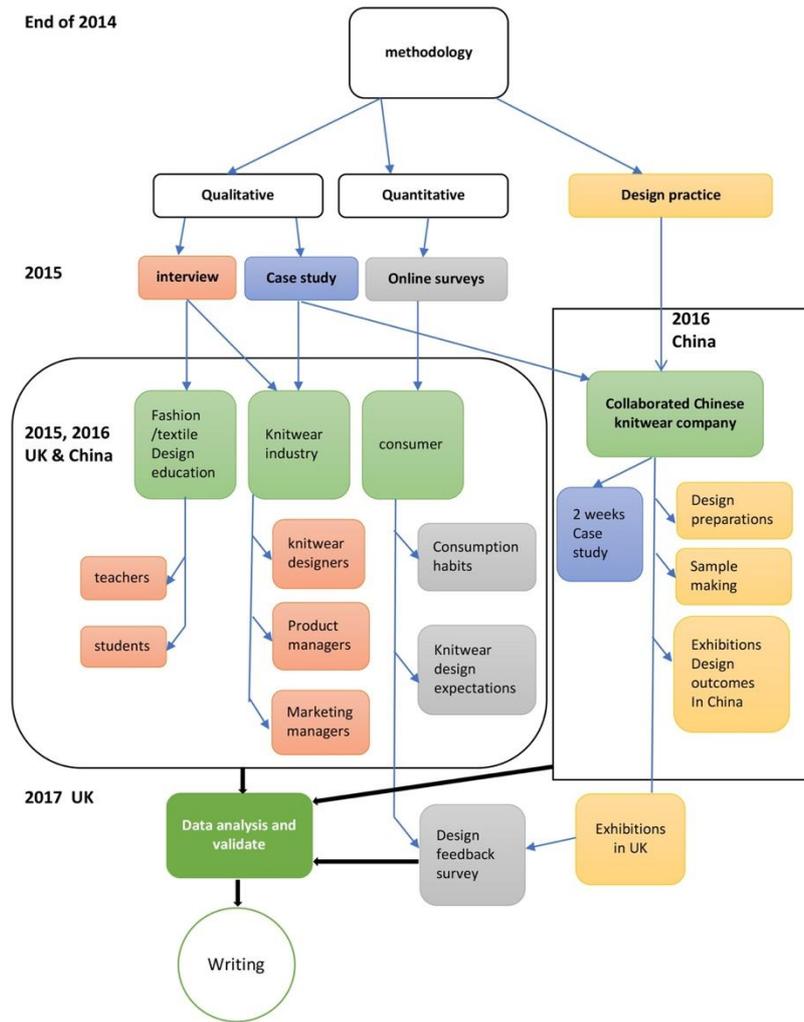
Figure 2: the time line and research processes

The first part of research is empirical studies includes qualitative and quantitative research methods, which consist of face-to-face interview, case study and 2 online surveys, and the second part is a design practice research (see Figure 2).

3.1. Empirical studies

3.1.1. Qualitative methods

This project mainly explores what, why and how questions of the Chinese knitwear industry, visit knitwear companies and interview people from the industry are the effective way to find the answers. In this study, the research questions are exploring the reasons and their surroundings. Therefore, a qualitative perspective becomes the main research approach for this study, to understand why individuals or groups act in particular ways (Keegan, 2009).

Interviews

'Interviews are one of the major ways of collecting data in qualitative research' Kvale, 2007). For this study, understanding the Chinese knitwear brands development processes and their brand and design cultures were a main research focus. Thus, face-to-face interviews were designed as an important method for generating and collecting data, from knitwear industry and design education systems. The key relevant individuals from 9 knitwear design companies were interviewed during 2015 to 2016. A total of 24 interviews (with 23 people) for the knitwear industry were undertaken. These interviews were used to collect data from knitwear designers, product and marketing managers. The questions focused on branding, designing, marketing, business and management styles. For the academia interviews, professors from 14 top design universities in China, UK and Italy were undertaken along with 10 design students during 2015 and 2016. Teaching methods, educational concepts, curriculum structures and education systems, being undertaken, were derived from design teachers and teaching staff. For the design students, the data was collected on future and career expectations, study methods, and the attitudes to design creativity.

Case study

Based on Yin's theory: 'Case study typically involves the collection of field-based data', when there is a need to explore 'explanatory' and 'descriptive' research questions to answer, 'what is happening or has happened' or 'how and why did something happen' (Yin, 2012). Therefore, in order to obtain deep understandings of the focus industry and their businesses, a single-case study with a Chinese knitwear brand was designed as a part of qualitative methodology of the research. The research focuses on the common problems of the Chinese knitwear brands, and the evidence from industry has been collected using interview and observation to develop a case study. The case study aimed to help develop the deep understanding of Chinese knitwear brands. King Deer company was selected and became the case study brand for this research. The case study was undertaken over 16 days visiting its company headquarters in Baotou city Inner Mongolia in 2016 summer. The first author was based at the design department with other designers during the case study period. She observed its designers working processes, had conversations and open-ended interviews with these designers and related managers and the company leadership. A total of 12 face-to-face open-ended interviews were undertaken during that period.

3.1.2.   Quantitative methods

Quantitative analysis was another important research method for this study. Generally, quantitative data provides a 'general understanding', which 'arises from examining a large number of people and assessing responses to a few variables' (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018).

Online surveys

The online survey method was designed to be used in this research to collect consumers' data. It is an effective way to collect masses of target consumers' information. In order to understand Chinese knitwear consumers and their preferences of knitwear design and consumption, two surveys were designed in 2015 and 2016. Both of them use close-ended questionnaires to do the surveys. The first survey was designed to collect female consumers' dressing habit and knitwear consumption preferences, both in China and UK. A total of 583 responses were collected in the first survey consisting of 450 Chinese and 133 international consumers in 2015. The second survey was designed to collect consumers purchasing habits and expectations of cashmere knitwear. 300 responses from female consumers were collected in China. These two online surveys helped to understand the different habits between Chinese consumers and international consumers in knitwear purchasing. In the second survey, the data helped to understand what Chinese female consumers expected in cashmere knitwear products.

3.2. Design practice research

This is a research gap relating to how to improve Chinese knitwear brands from the design perspective. There is lack of research both focusing branding and designing for the knitwear brands. there are some researchers who have focused on knitwear design for Chinese market, such as Song (2008) examined creative design methods in knitwear, including yarns and decorations and technique support. Ye and Lou (2011) investigated cooperation design between knitwear and woven clothing. However, none of them linked their ideas with brands improvements and design process and ideas of development. Thus, it is an efficient way to cooperate with a Chinese knitwear company in the design practice research; to enhance the whole research value. It also offered an example on how to develop a knitwear design collection that differs from the existing knitwear styles, particularly with regard to exploration and innovation. Finally, it prepared for building a cashmere brand with clear styles and characteristics for the Chinese market.

3.2.1. Design plan and development

To obtain good results from the design practice research, the author decided to design for an assumed target brand for this design study; it was designed imagining a new knitwear brand. The brand is positioned for 20 to 40 years old urban female consumers; the target consumers are presumed to be preferring elegant styles with unique details. The design plan began with design inspirations and creative ideas development (see Figure 3 and Figure 4).

Design Concept

chinese culture + modern style

Inspriation:

Chinese tea culture
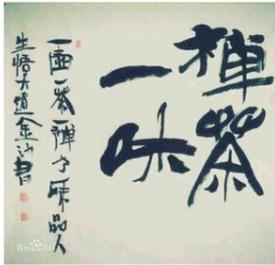
Figure 3: the design concept and inspiration

Figure 4: inspiration picture and the selected colours of the collection

The design concept was a combination of modern with traditions. In this research, the author selected Chinese tea culture as the design inspiration for two reasons: firstly, it was decided that the design concept was to combine a traditional Chinese culture with modern design language in order to create a contemporary style collection with Chinese genes. Secondly, tea is influential in the culture of both western and eastern countries. Therefore, it makes a good focus for the expression of the design styles

suitable for the practice research of this study. The designs plan and design ideas development took around three months from July to September 2016. Limited by budget and resources, it was designed as a single product collection, which consisted of different functional cashmere knitwear which can match each other as integrated looks and outfits. Because in a good design collection 'the pieces should be able to be worn together or fit in as accent items that can be sold alone' (Gehlhar,2008). It was designed as a complete collection with reasonable structure and clear character; which is a basic requirement for most luxury brands and fashion brands. However, this aspect is ignored by most Chinese knitwear brands, where their products lack design structures and are without close links and clear styles between each design. The author anticipates the whole collection offers wearable and fashionable knitwear designs. The aim is to attract younger generations to purchase cashmere knitwear, to deal with the problem of aging consumers. Subsequently, around 12 weeks of research, ideas development, creation of design styles and 7 weeks of production manufacturing, led to 21 knitwear outfits being created as the cashmere collection for the research.

3.2.2.   Sample making process

Sample making is an important process taking two-dimensional design pictures to real clothes. It was also a good opportunity working with the knitwear company King Deer at its headquarters of Baotou city in Inner Mongolia China. It was the second time to visit the company after the case study in the summer of 2016. In this study, the King Deer company helped making the design samples for the collection and it would give feedback for the design research outcomes and results. Thus, the author prepared and finished the design preparation and inspiration and theme research and development and the design sketches in UK during July to September 2016, and then visited the King Deer Company again for the design collection on October 2016.During the sample making period, the author was working on the collection in the office of King Deer's design department with their designers. The whole sample making processes and management followed the same methods normally carried out by the designers. That means the knitwear sample making processes not only helps the design ideas become knitwear clothes, but also gave the opportunity to observe, and gain primary research information for the whole running process, and the related management systems in the company. A total of 55 pieces of cashmere clothing for the 21 outfits were created

3.2.3.   Observation

During the sample making and case study periods, the first author closely observed the knitwear retail markets and the products from the collaborated company. It was found that there is lack of structures of the knitwear products in most Chinese knitwear brands. There is an absence of clear themes and colour tones of these brands. Most knitwear brands have mixed multi-styles in their brands without clear brand characters. In the sample making period, the author had observed over the design process and sample making and design management process. First, the authors design with the same steps and

managements processes from MIS (manufacturing Instruction Sheets) to the finished knitwear samples, second, the author needed to follow and check all the steps and make sure they were working smoothly and could be finished on time. During that period, the author was frequently visiting the Planning Department, the Dyeing Workshops and the Yarn Warehouse, the Technique Departments, the Knitting Workshops, the Finishing Workshop and the Package Workshop. At the same time, it was also the designing and sample making period for the following year for their own design team of the company. When the author arrived at the company, most of designers were on their business trips for collecting market information. After they were back, most of them begin their designs in a few days with existing photos from trends websites, magazines or markets. Using existing design as an inspiration to develop a series of design. There was a lack of themes and mood boards to link all the designs together.

3.2.4. Exhibitions

Five exhibitions were held from late 2016 to summer 2017. These included two showroom exhibitions in King Deer company and Birmingham City University, and three fashion shows both in China and the UK. During the exhibitions and the fashion shows, the author collected feedback from different audiences, including industry peers, academics, people from fashion fields and other potential consumers from different fields.

4. Outcomes of the design practice research

4.1. Feedbacks

After the knitwear collection was finished, people have asked when the knitwear will be on sale after finishing the exhibitions. These people included the staff from King Deer company, the students and teachers from Tsinghua university, the audiences from the fashion shows in China. In the UK, when the author was doing the photo shooting in a photographic studio, with the collection in the fashion shows, there were also some ladies asked how and where they can buy the knitwear. These various feedbacks show a good signal for the collection with many potential consumers both in China and the UK, it also gave the author confidence in the design research and the design styles and ideas.

During the design practice research process, the author found that: many Chinese consumers like to wear high-class knitwear, they just do not find designs and styles they preferred from the Chinese knitwear brands. In fact, many younger people from 20s to 30s also prefer the high-quality knitwear like cashmere products, but when they select the products, their requirements are higher than older generations. Not only good materials and qualities, but also higher requirement for the styles, colours and designs. Compared with the feedback between western and Chinese people, it was similar from the potential consumers. But, if compared with the potential consumers and Chinese industry, it produced different results. Most responders were interested in the knitwear collection, and most of them also said they prefer to wear the designs, because they thought the design collection is creative. Interestingly,

some of them thought the designs are quite conservative and common for daily life. However, in contrast, most of the Chinese industry peers thought the collection too creative for ordinary consumers. They liked the designs, but they believed the designs are just suitable for small groups of fashionable and high-class people. In this point, the Chinese knitwear companies have more conservative attitudes about designs and styles. They were concerned about the design risk of creativity but ignored being too conservative with no change in designs also causing risks in the market.

4.2. Design process and creativity gap

The design practice research has showed a whole design develop processes, which includes design inspirations, the background culture research, the design ideas development, including the colours, the textures, and the design styles. In the design collection, all the elements are based on the same theme. Thus, when all the clothes put together as a collection, they match each other and with harmonious styles. It is a common method used by many successful western fashion brands, especially by those famous luxury brands. For the designer working methods and styles, the author was also familiar with western designers, which means the designers taking more time to develop their ideas and follow the whole design process themselves. Therefore, after developing the created new design styles, the author also following the whole production process, discussing details and difficulties with the technicians. Body size cutting patterns for the unusual structures and silhouettes were made by the author to support the technicians' jobs. After the clothes were finished further design and decoration details such as beads and buttons were added by herself.

In contrast, a different design process is used in many Chinese knitwear brands. For one, their designers have a really short time to design their new collections. Furthermore, most of their designs were separately created by different designers without guidance from a shared mood board and themes for the styles and design directions. The only link was colour which was managed by the design director for the designs from different designers in the company. Another problem was that they do not have enough time to develop their ideas because they had to meet their deadlines at the end of the year. The designers are used to creating new designs after their market information collecting in October and December when most new knitwear products appear in Chinese markets. During these periods, their designers were visiting different shopping malls and department stores in Beijing, Shanghai or other cities for checking the new knitwear designs. They take photos of the design styles or details they like. Because the leaderships believe the feedback and information from retail markets will help to guide the designers to create more popular products, they believe it is a good way to reduce the risk from new design ideas. Thus, the design time is compressed to around two months after the winter products appear. For example, one designer told the author he had to finish his 150 design styles in 2 weeks, because the factories were extremely busy in the winter when their international and national processing business

clients need new design samples. The company's own designers have to wait in a long queue for their design samples to be prepared.

In the company, creative new ideas are less supported by the technicians and others. If the design is not easy to make, most of the technicians do not want to spend time looking for solving methods for the challenges they meet. The reason is because the technician's incomes are related to the quantities of garments they make. Spending more time for new design ideas will influence the technicians' incomes. It means the company leaders do not realize the management and rules for the technical department's influence on design results and design creativities! Or they just do not believe it is worth spending time and money to try some creative design ideas from their designer teams, which may solve the products problems. Thus, under the quantity requirements and deadline stress, the designers are keen to design in a safe way to avoid experimental ideas.

Because there is lack of creative atmospheres and supporting systems in the company, the designers are not encouraged to challenge themselves to create original innovative designs. It is not only a schedule and management problem, but also a reflection of design understanding and how they value their own design issues.

5. The problems with the industry
5.1. Brand culture
The research undertook a major case study with a typical traditional Chinese knitwear brand King Deer in 2016. Furthermore, the author interviewed 24 knitwear company's bosses, managers, designers, technicians, products managers, marketing managers and sale assistants from 7 other Chinese knitwear companies between 2015 and 2016. The companies included Chinese large-scale, middle-scale and small-scale cashmere knitwear companies. Thus, the research results closely represent the common situations for a range of traditional Chinese knitwear brands. After analysing and evaluating all the data from the industry, it was found that there is lack of brand culture and brand understanding in the Chinese knitwear industry. Most knitwear brands do not really have clear brand positioning, they do not understand what their brands should be, who are their consumers and what are their consumers lifestyles and consumption preferences. These brands are also do not know how to build and manage their brands. They use simple business model running for their brands without brand structure and image controls. For the brand strategy, most brands are used to promote their products by low discount. But, they do not know what kinds of brand strategies can help the brands grows and improve.

5.2. Chinese consumers

According to the Chinese Cashmere White Paper, the main consumer group are between 40 to 55 years old and above for Chinese knitwear brands (Anon, 2008). In fact, for many Chinese knitwear brands, both their products and brands images are less attractive for younger consumers. Throughout the research interviews and the case study, it was found that most of Chinese knitwear brands do not build a strong links and feedback systems with their consumers. Actually, these brands might roughly target consumer groups, but most of the knitwear companies do not have a deeply researched understanding of their target consumers. They do not really know who their consumers are; and what are they really need for fashion and knitwear products; what are their consumption preferences and their lifestyles.

There is a gap between knitwear brands and their consumers' expectations. Most knitwear brands do not understand their consumers' real needs. In the interviews, most of interviewees from industry believe their consumers are unfashionable with conservative attitudes for new design. However, the online surveys from this study show totally different results. In survey 1, When people decided to buy a knitwear, over 40.30% responders make decision for styling, 36% of them for attractiveness, only 23.88% for warmth. In survey 2, for the cashmere knitwear buying decisions reasons, 49.5% responders for fashionable new styles, 38.44% for good material and quality, 12% people for beautiful colours. For the rank of influencing factors for buying cashmere knitwear, the top three factors were design, silhouette and colour, followed by cashmere percentage, good fit, co-ordination, prices and warmness. The results of the surveys show that the knitwear brands do not understand their consumers, and the consumers' requirements and expectations in design styles and aesthetic perceptions which are much higher than these brands offer.

5.3. Design culture

The research indicated there was an apparent absence of creative design culture and design understanding in the Chinese knitwear industry. According to Cross's design culture theory there needs to be: design thinking, the comprehension of how designers think and work (Cross, 2011). Furthermore, it should involve design understanding, design process and management, which relates to the "designer's role in the creation of value" (Julier, 2006), design education and design abilities. Generally, there is a lack of "value creation" and "less focus on innovation" in many companies in China (Roll, 2005). From the findings of this research, most Chinese knitwear brands design culture is missing the following aspects: design creativity, clearly defined design processes, valuing designers, thought-through product structure and design understanding.

There is a lack of design creativity in the Chinese knitwear industry. This statement is based on the observation that most knitwear brands are based on manufacturing models for running their business. Their businesses have focused on their production abilities, expensive rare materials and making quality

products. However, they never consider creative design in their evolving history from the 1990s until now. They offer mass knitwear products for ordinary consumers and it is fair to say many brands obtained successful market shares in the past. However, these kinds of products can be made by most cashmere factories without any designer teams, and in thousands of knitwear companies of different scales in China. Thus, the knitwear market is full of similar products; albeit with different quality and prices in the markets. Thus, it is apparent that there is a lack of design creativity in most Chinese knitwear brands, which can be divided into two main aspects.

There is lack of creative space for knitwear designers in most Chinese knitwear brands. With the hot style culture being popular in the industry, the companies and franchisers are pursuing a single hot style rather than the whole brand's value and development. A hot style is an item that generates sales significantly greater than others. Therefore, the knitwear designers in these brands are under the stress of sales quantity for their design. Different to fashion brands, knitwear brands have more conservative attitudes for creative design ideas. On the one hand, the weak competitiveness from their conservative products makes the companies realise their products need to improve their design by supporting more creative ideas. On the other hand, the companies do not understand what kinds of design directions their brands should go for.

Most knitwear companies pay little attention to developing their design abilities and brand strategies. This has led to some of them going out of business. For example, 5 of 9 Chinese knitwear brands contacted for this research no longer had their own designers. They had given up on creating and producing new products for their own brands by replacing them with purchasing finished knitwear garments in wholesale markets and then inserting their own label into the product. This reflects a lack of understanding of what design should do for a brand, and a belief that design is not important for the competitiveness of a brand. Another reason for not having their own design team is the lack of well-trained knitwear designers. For example, when the author interviewed a knitwear company owner in 2016, he explained that designers were too expensive to employ for his brand. In the late 1990s his company had designers and around 60 retail stores, but he gradually lost this business and closed all stores until only two were left in Hohhot city in 2016. In his experience, the designers who were working for his company were not helpful in developing the business.

6. Making the Chinese knitwear industry sustainable

In order to improve the integral level of the Chinese knitwear brands, all the interrelated parts need to improve, including industry, design universities, and academic researchers and experts. In order to make the knitwear industry sustainable developing and growing, most knitwear brands need to re-design and re-organize their products and re-build their brands. The universities need to re-think their education concepts, need to reform and improve the whole teaching and studying systems, in order to

accommodate creative designers to meet the industries' needs and expectations. Academics and researchers should pay more attention to focus on the systematic design thinking and design idea developing.

The following steps are needed to improve the industry, and a further three main aspects needed to improve the Chinese educational system. Indeed, all of these elements are needed from both the industrial and education sided to progress Chinese brands in the future.

1. To clarify brand positioning and market segments, and to define a target customer for the brand are necessary.
2. Rebuilding the designer teams by hiring young designers who are western trained or recently graduated will help the design creativity.
3. Re-designing the products with stronger brand personalities, and give designers time, money and space to develop their design.
4. Improving business strategy, invest in building up a brand: stores, marketing, advertising and fashion shows. Improve design educational systems, improve students independent design and creative design abilities.
5. Offer complete and reasonable design course for students, offer more design practice opportunities, in order to training design students, design thinking and development methods.
6. Build platforms to link between universities and related industries, to understand each other and benefit and improve each other.

For the design aspect, to use Chinese culture in design as brands' features can help to build distinguish characters with cultural sustainability, to offer complete series collections with other products and knitwear. To build stylish brands with four seasons products can help to attract younger consumers to visit the stores, therefore to build the brands business sustainability is effective way for the brands development and survivals. For many knitwear brands, they need to build their brand personalities if they want to improve their brands. Thus, using Chinese culture as their brands genes, combining Chinese traditional styles, pattern cuttings, or other Chinese elements with model design language to create unique styles, is an effective way for Chinese brands. Furthermore, Chinese design language is easy to understand and develop for Chinese design teams. In addition, for consumers acceptability, the designs which contain Chinese elements are always popular in domestic fashion markets.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, the paper focused on the design problems of the Chinese knitwear brands. A mixed research methodology was employed for exploring the reasons and looking for methods to deal with the problems. During 2014 to 2017, 48 face-to-face interviews have undertaken both from knitwear industry and design educations. Two online surveys with 883 people for consumers research. A case

study and a design practice research have done with Chinese knitwear brand King Deer in 2016. Throughout these research, the problems of the Chinese knitwear brands and their reasons are clarified. The consumers surveys show that most knitwear brands do not really understand their consumers, which is important reason of their business decline.

The design practice offered an example for how to create knitwear collection for middle and high-class younger market. In the design practice research, the author uses Chinese culture as a design inspiration, combine traditional Chinese culture with modern design language together for new brands for new collections. The design tried using Chinese cultural as design language to build distinguish style and character. In order to improve the culture sustainability as a means of developing brands' competitiveness in fashion business. And attracting younger generations to become their new consumers. The results of the design practice research indicate creative design and distinguished brand characters can attract different aged consumers, including younger generations. The research shows 95% of surveyed people preferred high quality knitwear with unique design styles and Chinese cultural design languages. In addition, using Chinese design language can help build a brand's distinguished character and design style can be useful way in the future.

For most Chinese knitwear brands, re-building their brands and re-designing their products are necessary. Clarifying brands positioning and market segments are the first step to build a successful brand. For their products design, it is important to create complete collections with different products which can match each other as a whole. Moreover, offering four season products is necessary both for business and brand images, although for many knitwear brands, summer is a slack season. In addition, building a unique brand characters are important for improve brand equity and brand awareness. Furthermore, it should meet their targeted consumers real needs, which is an essential condition for the success of knitwear brands in the future.

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