

The Impact of Symbolic Culture on the Understanding of Visual Figuration in a Cross-Cultural Environment

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the understanding of visual rhetorical figures as they appear in today's globalized advertising. A sound theoretical model (i.e., Phillips and McQuarrie 2004) is first reviewed to select a good representative sampling (i.e., 9 advertisements) of the behaviour domain measured. Then, a population of 60 English language students are questioned regarding these 9 advertisements. This study uses a combined methodology, resorting to basic quantitative data to reveal qualitative findings. Our discussion supports prior research (Callister and Stern 2008: 148) indicating that culture is essential for image understanding in a cross-cultural environment and stands in opposition to those who act on the assumption that visuals are universal and therefore understandable in all cultures of the world (Levitt 1983).

Keywords: *Visual figuration, understanding, symbolic cultural component, globalisation, Spanish context*

Introduction

Traditionally, advertising has been an object of study of rhetoric, a field dedicated since Aristotle to examining the persuasive value of communication phenomena and reflecting on the most persuasive forms of communication (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, edn. 1991). Advertising's interest in rhetoric accelerated with the birth in the mid-twentieth century of what was termed "the new rhetoric", and scholars such as Edward F. McQuarrie and his collaborators (cf. McQuarrie and Mick 1996, 1999; Phillips and McQuarrie 2004) developed the first noteworthy analyses of advertising phenomena.

The interest of rhetoric scholars in advertising redoubled thanks to the work of pioneers, such as Roland Barthes, Jean Cohen, Tzvetan Todorov and Gérard Genette, who decisively contributed to what is known as "visual figuration" (McQuarrie and Mick 1999). In a world like that of advertising, where the image is idolised, this increasing attention was not surprising. If verbal rhetorical figures have been defined as "artful deviations" (McQuarrie and Mick 1996:425) that infringe on the norms (i.e., phonic, grammatical, and semantic) of language, visual figuration contains figures that are constructed using incongruences between visual perception and the beliefs of the receivers regarding the real world. Studies on the composition of the visual component of ads (or the *ad system*) appeared (cf. Forceville 1996, 2008; Groupe Mu: 1992; Van Mulken 2006; Phillips and McQuarrie 2004). Approaches to the cognitive processes and interpretation of advertisements (or what is called *the human system*), however, were and are scarce. As Wang and Peracchio 2008: 205) claim, "although visual images are ubiquitous in advertising, little work has been done to systematically investigate how images are processed". Perhaps these gaps originate from the very nature of rhetoric, which has generally focused on figurative mechanisms and less on cognitive processes themselves.

This is an especially important research gap if we consider that visual incongruences have been shown to require larger doses of processing effort than textual rhetorical figures (Van Mulke 2006), in part, because, as Gibson (1971:34) argues, they are “freer and less stereotyped than verbal thinking”. This brings about problems of understanding, as noted by scholars, such as Phillips (1997), among others.

This neglect of visual advertising has occurred in an increasingly globalised world, where advertising messages reach the widest possible variety of consumers and contexts. The question then would be whether this cross-cultural setting impacts the understanding of ads and, if it does, in what way.

Levitt, credited by some with coining this term in his high-impact paper ‘The Globalization of Markets’ (1983), initiated a school of thought arguing that the English language is a “lingua franca” through which homogenised consumer wants are to be interpreted and appealed to. This view, however, is far from universal. Callister and Stern (2008:148), for example, argue that “people learn to interpret ads according to cultural rules, and these ad interpretations may be affected by all of the different cultural groups to which one belongs”. Localisers, in turn, take issue with Levitt’s proposal and claim that cultural values are essential for message processing and that markets should adjust their strategies to consumer perceptions across countries and cultures. Further, Mooji (2005:5) is clear: “Markets are people, not products. There may be global products, but there are no global people”.

Hence, following the “cultural turn” (see Nash 2001) and the “translation turn” (see Bassnett 1998:123-140), this paper proposes a cross-cultural approach to the understanding of visual figures in today’s globalised advertising. Our main goal is to test the following hypothesis:

When exposing speakers whose native language is not English (in our case, Spanish) to advertising images with symbolic cultural referents (i.e., icons, myths and rituals) designed for the Anglo-Saxon market, errors in comprehension and interpretation are detected that can be (partly) attributed to the absence of symbolic cultural schemata.

To this end, we first put forward a theoretical proposal revolving around the cultural component that aims to cover both the *ad system* and *human system*. Drawing on this proposal, we select 9 advertisements of different types and show them to 60 Spanish undergraduate students in the Translation and Interpretation Program at the Universitat Jaume I. Analysis of their responses is carried out by means of a combinatory methodology, in which simple quantitative data are used to shed light on qualitative findings.

In search of a theoretical framework to study visual figures in cross-cultural advertising

When putting together a theoretical framework upon which to build a cross-cultural study on understanding the visual in advertising, the study by Phillip and McQuarrie (2004) provides a good foundation. The reason for this is that these researchers designed a taxonomy that focuses on image (semantic and syntactic) features (i.e., the *ad system*) but also takes into consideration consumers’ cognitive responses to visual stimuli (i.e., the *human system*). In this sense, theirs is a comprehensive proposal that serves as a solid starting point that can be adjusted (as we will do here) for the purposes of each specific study.

In their taxonomy, Phillips and McQuarrie (2004) distinguish two main levels of components: meaning operations and visual structures. For the researchers, these component levels have a direct impact on consumers’ cognitive load.

The level of meaning operation concerns “the target or focus of the cognitive processing required to comprehend the picture” and addresses three modalities: connection, similarity, and opposition.

- A. In *connection*, two images are related to one another (“A is connected to B by ...”). Essentially, “[t]he rhetorical purpose of the connection operation is to increase the salience of some aspect of element A – the aspect that provides the link to B” (2004: 189). That is, the connection is the simple relationship between two images that are associated in a more or less logical way.

- B. For *similarity*, the comparison between two images is established (“A is like B”), enabling one to draw multiple possibilities between the source domain (‘which pertains to the predication’) and target domain (the ‘topic about which something is predicated’) (Forceville 2008, 179); it is thus more figurative and interpretive.
- C. In *opposition*, the source and target objects are presented as opposites (“A is not like B”), and the advertisement invites the reader to make analogies regarding their differences; another way to explain this concept is that their meanings contrast with one another.

According to Phillips and McQuarrie (2004, 116), the level of significance varies with regard to ‘richness’. An operation is richer based on the greater number of alternative references that it can propose. Richness is a fundamental property that affects cognitive elaboration. Thus, for both scholars (Phillips and McQuarrie 2004, 117-118), it seems clear that comparison – whether of similarities or differences – is richer (and requires higher doses of elaboration) than a simple connection. It also appears to both scholars that in terms of opposition, comparison is the richest of the three meaning operations and hence the greatest challenge (of the three) for mental processing.

Visual structure concerns “the way the two elements that comprise the visual rhetorical figure are physically pictured in the ad” (Phillips and McQuarrie 2004:116). Thus, three classes of distribution of the elements of an advertisement are distinguished: juxtaposition, fusion, and substitution.

1. In juxtaposition, two images representing the source and target domains appear separately, and their positioning can vary spatially (e.g., up/down, left/right, inclusion in the space of the other).
2. In fusion, images merge or annex themselves in a manner that creates a hybrid, which can become distorted and create something unrecognisable.
3. In substitution, the target domain is not shown (or, if it is, it appears in the form of a logo or small title); only the source domain is presented, which requires the consumer to make a hypothesis regarding what is being advertised and how.

The three visual structures directly impact the complexity of the figures. This, in turn, is another of the main properties affecting cognitive elaboration; furthermore, ‘complexity can be expected to produce greater elaboration as part of comprehension efforts’ (Phillips and McQuarrie 2004, 119). Juxtaposition (i.e., the presence of 2 separate images) involves less processing than fusion, in which one must untangle advertising constituents; simultaneously, both of these structures require less effort than deciphering the puzzle of substitution, in which the product is absent (Phillips and McQuarrie 2004, 116-117).

By combining the three visual structures and three meaning operations, we obtain nine different types of visual figures. Overall, the authors state that by ‘[p]utting the two dimensions together [...] the typology ranges from relatively simple and readily interpretable figures to highly complex figures open to a wide range of interpretations’. In effect, these nine figures cover an ample spectrum of visual richness/complexity and cognitive elaboration. Phillips and McQuarrie (2004) warn readers, however, that their predicted hierarchy is only valid *ceteris paribus* (in other words, under the same conditions). Thus, potential discrepancies between their construct-based taxonomy and real consumer interpretations could be attributed to the presence of moderating factors (ibidem, 119) that also impact cognitive elaboration. Phillips and McQuarrie (2004) mention a set of common moderating factors, among which we find cultural competence (or “cultural assimilation” in their own words; Phillips and McQuarrie 2004: 129), which is closely related to the topic of the present research; however, they do not delve into this factor. We must turn to cognitive studies to find more information about it.

In cognitive studies, cultural competence is associated with mental schemata. The term ‘schema’ was coined by the British psychologist Bartlett in 1932 and further developed by Johnson-Laird (1983), who considers the conceptualisation of consciousness to be an intricate network of mental structures that represent an understanding of the world. Cultural schemata, then, represent “the degree of knowledge about a society’s symbols, values, traditions, conventions, interpretive lens, and other culture-based

components of communication” (Huhmann 2008:103). There are three main types of cultural schemata: icons, myths, and rituals. Cultural icons “are persons or things widely regarded as the most compelling representative symbol of their beliefs, values, and lifestyles of a culture” (Torelli 2013:36). Myth implies “a story containing symbolic elements that represent the shared emotions and ideals of a culture” (Solomon et al. 2013:467). Finally, a ritual is defined as “a set of multiple, symbolic behaviours that occur in a fixed sequence and tend to be repeated periodically” (ibidem, 469).

These schemata (with symbolic value) may therefore serve to complement Phillips and McQuarrie’s (2004) taxonomy for a cross-cultural study of understanding the advertising image. By combining the nine types of visual figures with the three types of symbolic artefacts, we obtain a complete set of visual figures with cultural moderating input covering an ample terrain of visual complexity/richness. This is arguably reliable material with which to test various scenarios that may arise when decoding cross-cultural advertising images.

Methodology

With the intention to contribute to filling the gap regarding the understanding of images in a cross-cultural world, this paper tests the hypothesis presented in the introduction and is repeated below:

When exposing speakers whose native language is not English (in our case, Spanish) to advertising images with symbolic cultural referents (i.e., icons, myths, and rituals) designed for the Anglo-Saxon market, errors in comprehension and interpretation are detected that can be (partly) attributed to the absence of symbolic cultural schemata.

The subjects who participated in this investigation were 60 second-year students in the Translation and Interpreting Program of the Universitat Jaume I (Castellón, Spain). Thus, they were Spanish speakers with a mastery of English superior to that of the average Spanish citizen. This population sample consisted of consumers who, without having English as their native language, possess privileged linguistic knowledge in the “global village”. In sum, we sought to demonstrate the impact of the symbolic load on the understanding of visual figures when the subjects of the study are not native (but proficient) speakers of English.

Following Phillips and McQuarrie’s (2004) adjusted taxonomy (to focus on ads with symbolic artefacts), these 60 subjects were administered a test with these 9 inputs or advertisements, all of which displayed at least one symbolic artefact (these 9 ads will be described as part of the analysis in section 4):

C O M P L E X I T Y	Visual structure	RICHNESS →		
		Meaning Operation		
		Connection (A is associated with B)	Comparison	
			Similarity (A is like B)	Opposition (A is not like B)
Juxtaposition (Two side-by-side images)	Kris Kris: British Style White Bread	London Olympic Games. "Sporting Gold.	Brooks. Unquestionable British Tradition.	
Fusion (Two combined images)	Penguin Audiobooks	SCROODGE MCDUCK. Really Realistic	UKIP. No border. No control	
Replacement (Image present points to an absent image)	The Royal British Legion: Something Missing?	KitKat. Have a Break. Have a KitKat	Sainsbury's	

Table 1: 9 images under study

It should also be noted that these ads came from well-known advertising campaigns[1] (indeed, many of them are award-winning) and had received attention from experts in the field (advertisers) or the manufacturers themselves, both of whom had previously published detailed explanations of their intended messages.

The subjects were shown each image with the following instructions (originally in Spanish, but reproduced in English below):

In your own words, please describe the advertisement and explain the message that is conveyed by it. If this message is based on cultural referents, do not neglect to indicate what these referents are. If you do not understand the image, leave the question blank.

The research following the compilation of subjects' responses belongs to a "combinatory paradigm" of mixed qualitative and quantitative methods. In practical terms, the qualitative methodology consisted of a reader-response approach in which participants wrote openly and without any constraints about the descriptions and interpretations of the ads and their intended meaning. Afterwards, the data were collected and explanatory arguments and potential interpretations were produced. An important benefit of the qualitative paradigm is "to discover new variables and relationships, to reveal and understand complex processes, and to illustrate the influence of the social context" (Shah and Corley 2006, 1824)

A simple quantitative paradigm was applied when subjects' responses were grouped into three categories, labelled as "Same/Different/No Answer". "Same" indicated that the surveyed individual identified the product and could articulate an explanation of the image that coincided with that of the publicist, which means that (s)he could detect the cultural references linked with the advertisement and the underlying message. "Different" indicated that there was a communicative lapse between the subject's interpretation as well as that of the publicist and that the ad's message was therefore not (fully) processed. "No Answer" meant the subject left a blank, which arguably entails that s(he) found the image too complex to process. After collecting responses, we proceeded to the ordering and descriptive statistical treatment of the data obtained. An important benefit of the quantitative methodology is that it may be used to increase the systematicity and rigour of research.

Analysis and Results

Advertisement images are described below. We start with Connection (A) visual figures, combined with Juxtaposition (A.1), Fusion (A.2) and Substitution (A.3). We do the same with Similarity figures (B.1, B.2. and B.3.) and conclude with Opposition visual figures (C.1, C.2 and C.3). After each description, we reproduce the results obtained from subjects' responses. Guided by the qualitative part of our combinatory methodology, we explore and interpret these results individually.

A.1. Connection-Juxtaposition

The Greek bread company Elbisco,[2] which exports traditional English bread to all of Europe (note that this advertisement is the only one used in the study that is not English that intends to sell its product as such), offers us an association between two separate images: the target object, i.e., the bread "Kris Kris. British Style White Bread" (whose package appears in the image), and the source product, i.e., a standing stone from Stonehenge, the edges of which are slices of bread. Thus, the advertising message ("Monumental Taste") communicates that both objects (i.e., the standing stone and the bread) are related inasmuch as they are "monuments" of English culture. The deviation or incongruence that this rhetorical figure creates concerns a visual perception and a concept. The cultural component is clearly represented by the icon of Stonehenge, which is a symbol of British prehistoric architecture.

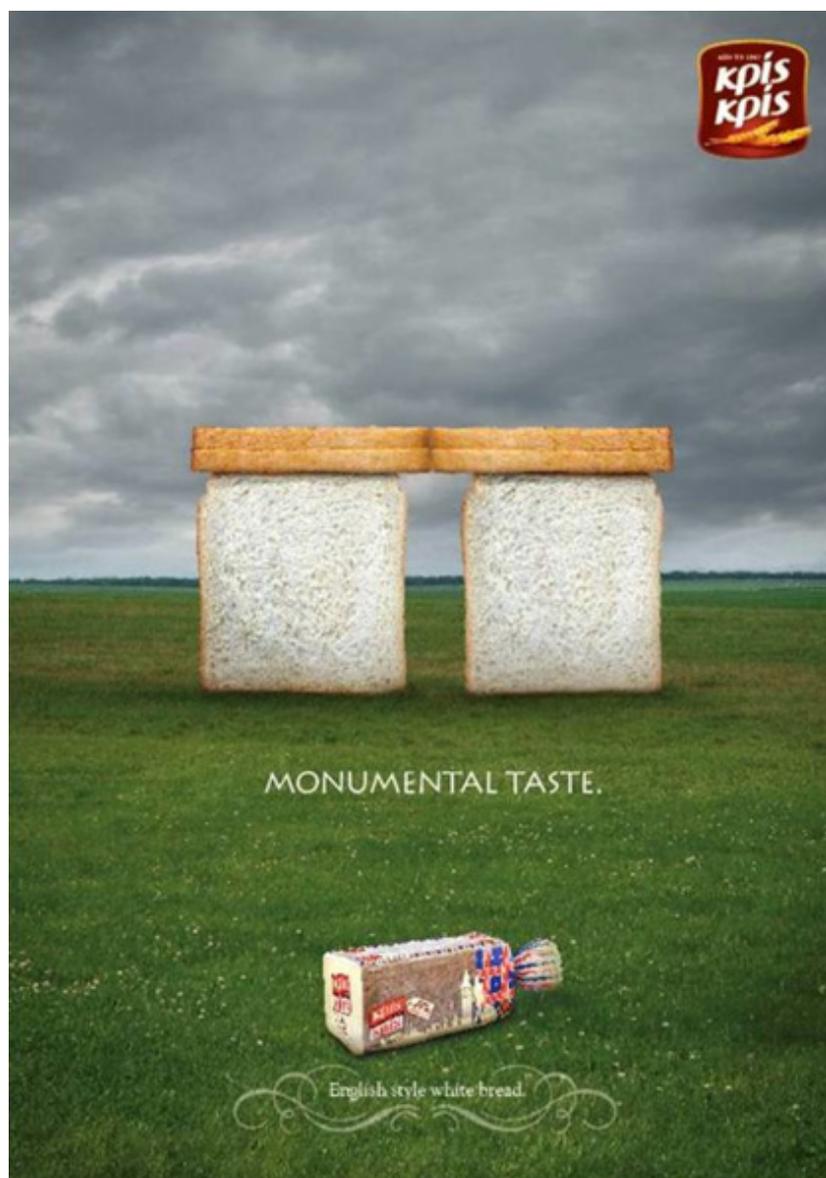


Image 1: Kris Kris: British Style White Bread.

The results clearly indicate (88.3%) that the subjects had no problem deciphering the product or the illocutive value of the message, which involves identification of the Stonehenge icon, while 6.7% got it wrong and 5.0% did not answer:

There appear to be clear reasons for this exemplary result. a) The image offers minimal incongruence in the association of the British bread with the standing stone from Stonehenge. b) The cultural component is detected by the overwhelming majority of the surveyed population, which is not surprising because the set of megaliths is known worldwide. Several subjects referred to the structure without mentioning its name (e.g., “a Neolithic monument”). Others located it in Scotland. Regardless, this imprecision does not disturb the connection between the “magnificent English bread and the magnificent prehistoric standing stone” (the literal response of a student).

A.2. Connection-Fusion

After the initial failure of classic audiobooks,[3] Penguin launched an advertising campaign with the goal of attracting the attention of a public that was both young and expert. The campaign consisted of distinct advertisements in which the fusion of two images was employed: headphones and the faces of famous classic authors – “well-known literati”– such as Shakespeare, Twain, and Wilde. The campaign was a notable advertising success and increased sales by approximately 15%. The advertisements developed the concept of visual incongruence to the extreme, posing the writers in nearly acrobatic postures. Regarding the cultural component, Penguin used icons of English language literature whose images are generally

recognisable throughout the world. Shakespeare is instantly identifiable. Wilde trails him in visibility. The face of Twain is perhaps less universally recognised and thus constituted one of the inputs of our test.

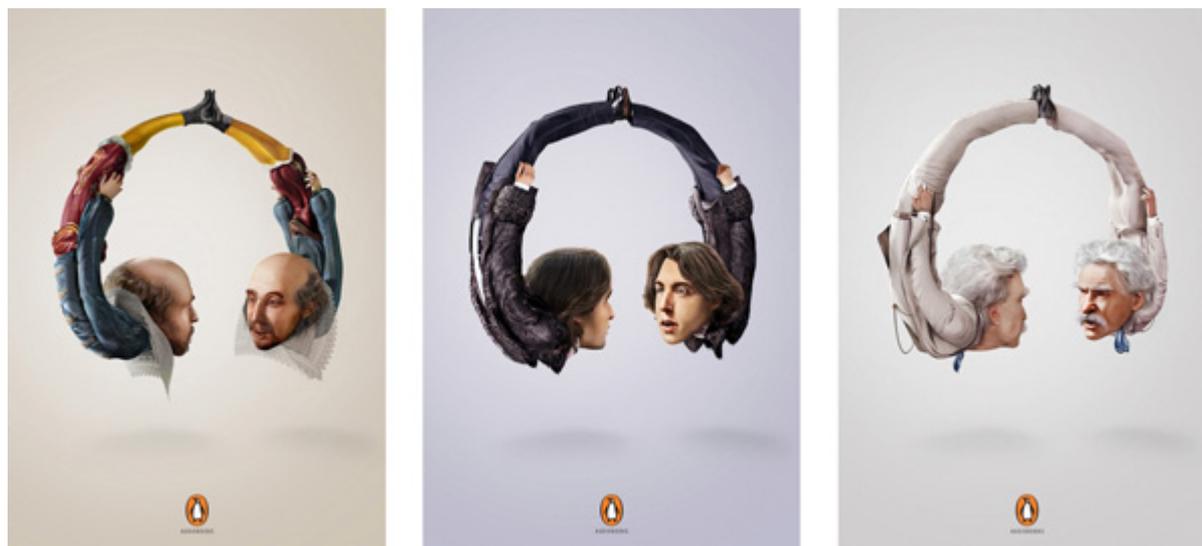


Image 2: Penguin Audiobooks

In this case, the results reflect 6.7% “Same” compared with 93.2% “Different” or “No Answer” (i.e., 50.0% “Different” and 43.3% “No Answer”). These results suggest a lack of (partial or total) understanding of the advertisement.

Several reasons explain this result. a) The image exhibits a substantial incongruence between form and content, which a number of subjects found to be “surrealist” and “absurd”. Thus, there were respondents who did not proceed beyond a description of the advertisement. Among these respondent, two subjects, who did not recognise the headphones, spoke of “torsos in acrobatic positions, like a mirror image”. Additionally, many answers were left blank. b) Absences of cultural schemata occurred. On the one hand, the Penguin brand was not recognised. On the other hand, the face of Twain was not identified. In a majority of cases (14 respondents), Einstein was mentioned instead of Twain. In another case, García Márquez was identified. Several respondents sought a metaphorical interpretation and referred to “a pop singer or a writer who reads or whispers his work through the headphones”. In sum, only two subjects explicitly named Twain. Another two indirectly identified Twain (i.e., as “the author of *Tom Sawyer*” or “the author of *The Prince and the Pauper*”).

A.3. Connection-Substitution

In the following advertisement for The Royal British Legion,[4] soldiers who died in war are associated with the symbol of the poppy. The symbol can be noted on the lapel of the jacket and appears as a logo in the lower right corner of the image. The poppy was the flower that grew in the French fields where war dead were buried during the First World War. Thus, the image is a substitution figure that replaces the memory of the English combatants who died in action with the presence/absence of the two poppies. The deviation is clearly perceptible and appears in the absurd image of a poppy-shaped void in the man’s jacket lapel. In the advertisement, we note two cultural references: the icon of the poppy (in memory of the British fallen in combat, as explained) and the ritual of Remembrance Day, a commemoration by the British in which even the Queen, in an important social and political appearance, presents wreathes of flowers at the Monument to the Fallen Soldier while proudly displaying her poppy. The message of the advertisement (“Shoulder to shoulder. With all who serve. Don’t forget your Poppy”) is an anchor that reinforces the importance of the ritual and, in passing, requests financing for causes associated with the advertiser (“To donate or for more information visit poppy.org.uk”).



Image 3: The Royal British Legion: Something Missing?

This advertisement also achieved low percentages of “Same” answers. Only 6.7% of the subjects confirmed understanding the advertisement’s message compared with 65.0% “Different” and 28.3% “No Answer”.

In this case, we want to emphasise that except for the odd poppy cut-out in the lapel, this advertisement in itself does not seem to display a substantial deviation between form and content. The absence of shared schemata is evident in triplicate, however: the poppy, Remembrance Day and The Royal British Legion. These absences provoke various interpretations, some logical and others curious. The poppy icon inspires descriptions (e.g., “the English wear poppies on their lapels”). The subjects confessed, however, that they were unaware of the reason for this custom and attributed their incomprehension of the advertisement to this fact. They also noted an unawareness of Remembrance Day (e.g., “I don’t know what Remembrance Day is”). The Royal British Legion (which is a benevolent organisation) was compared with the Spanish group of the same name, “La Legión” (which originally consisted of volunteer soldiers “who sought to be redeemed through armed service”), which demonstrates that not only does the absence of schemata make the communication of visual figures difficult but also that the existence of divergent cultural schemata confuses the understanding of the image.

B.1. Comparison-Juxtaposition

In the midst of the 2012 London Olympic Games, Church End Brewery launched an advertising campaign to introduce its new beer, Sporting Gold.^[5] The campaign employed a comparison-juxtaposition that presents, in the mode of deviation, the logo/icon of the games (i.e., the source domain) as a pub patron who is ready to lift his pint of beer (i.e., the target domain). Additionally, the spirit of competition is expressed in the name and the legend of the product: “Sporting Gold. The winning blend of British hops”. The cultural background that illuminates the advertisement is clear. Everyone has become “Olympic”, and the ritual of the daily visit to the pub to drink a beer, in this case, Sporting Gold, is presented as an attractive way to view an international sporting event.

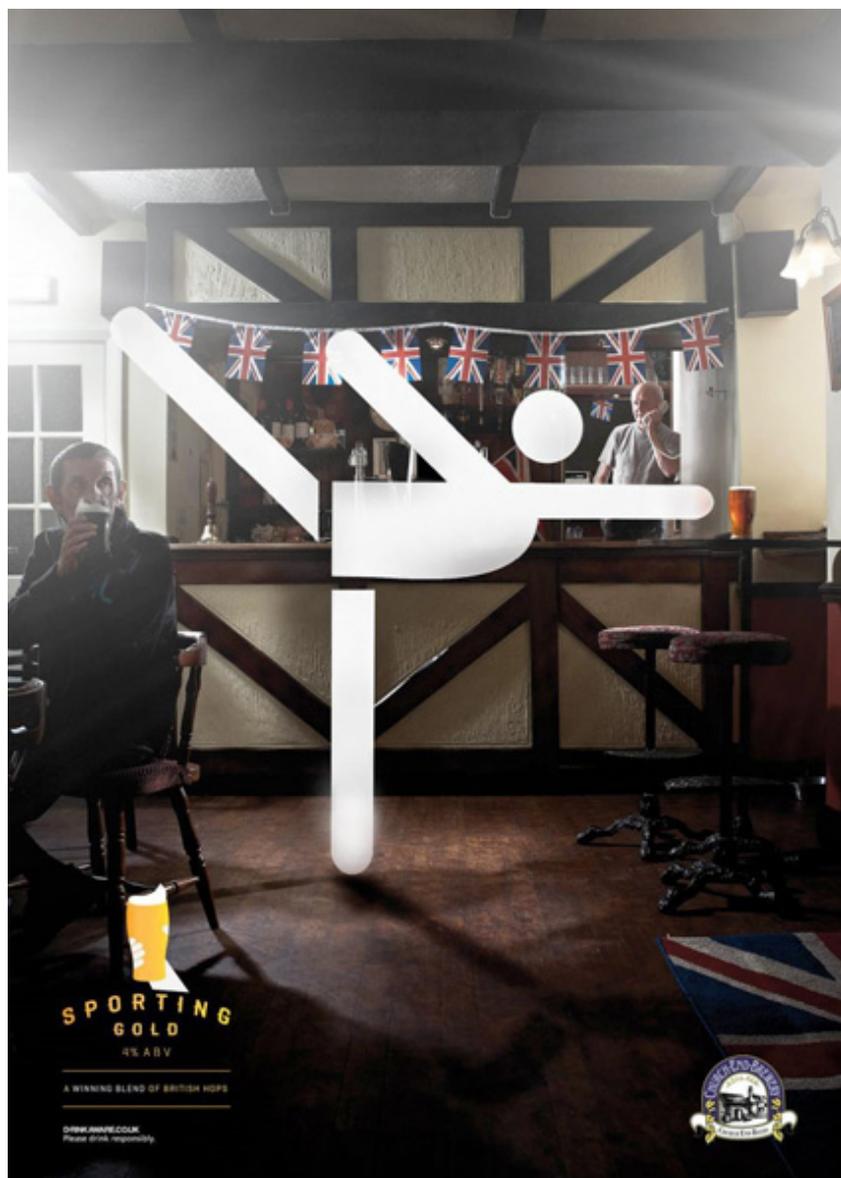


Image 4: London Olympic Games. Sporting Gold.

This advertisement also achieved low percentages of correct answers. Only approximately 6.7% of the subjects confirmed understanding the advertisement's message compared with 65.0% "Different" and 28.3% left blank.

Based on the received commentaries, a majority of the subjects recognised the ritual of "going to the English pub to socialise with a beer" and could accurately describe pubs as meeting places "for seeing sporting events that involve substantial rivalry". The difficulty in understanding the image concerned the logo/icon that represents the 2012 London Olympic Games. Given the absence of this schema, an information "short circuit" occurs. The most cautious subjects took refuge in the most referential level of the advertisement (e.g., "a celebration with the beer of the ad"). Other respondents were more creative, however, and focused on the figure of a "skater" (i.e., the logo), who is making a pirouette to pick up his favourite beer.

B.2. Comparison-Fusion

Loewe presented its *SCROOGE MCDUCK*[6] advertisement to promote its Loewe Flat TV with Image+. This advertisement fuses the screen of the television that is being advertised and a broadcast of the *Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, as symbolised by the icons of the top hat of the protagonists, the gold coins (which represent greed), and the duck (notice that Dicken himself mentions a goose). From a cultural viewpoint, the story to which the advertisement refers is a myth that is so well known in the English-speaking world that the name of its central character (i.e., Scrooge) has become a term to

describe a stingy, egotistical person. In addition, the title of the advertisement (and its reference to Scrooge McDuck) connects the viewer not only with the Dickensian classic but also with one of the tale's most popular re-writings: the animated Disney cartoons, in which the principal protagonist is a duck who is named Rico McPato or Tío Rico (in Latin America) and Tío Gilito (in Spain). Thus, the advertisement combines icons and myths from high and popular culture. It also serves as a point of encounter for the heritage of the British (i.e., Dickens) and American (i.e., Disney) worlds, thus broadening its echo among English-speaking consumers. The incongruence of the image is in the bizarre perception of the icons (and ultimately myth) on the television screen. The anchor, "Really Realistic", corroborates this incongruence by transmitting the message that the image of what supposedly is a fictional story is as real as the life that the literary text describes.



Image 5: SCROOGE MCDUCK. Really Realistic

Here, the advertisement's comprehension is divided between 45.0% "Same" and 60% "Different" and "No Answer" (i.e., 41.7% "Different" and 13.3% "No Answer").

As in the previous section, this advertisement produced two types of interpretations that were accepted as correct. a) Two subjects noted the broadcast of the mythical *A Christmas Carol* on a television set from Loewe. These same subjects recognised the icons of the story: the top hat that refers to Mr. Scrooge, the coins that represent the lust for money, and the bird that is associated with Christmas dinner. b) In contrast, 25 of those who were surveyed alluded to Disney's Scrooge McDuck. In sum, without knowing the title of the advertisement, few candidates prioritised Dickens' spirit of Christmas: the majority focused their attention on the stinginess of Tío Gilito. The message of the myth is the same, however, and here, a conflict of opposites is offered: greed compared with generosity. Finally, it is important to note the greater knowledge of the Disney version of the story, which was assumed to be the original.

B.3. Comparison-Replacement

In the following advertisement for KitKat,^[7] Nestlé, whose logo appears in the lower right corner, intends to substitute its famous chocolate bar with a metaphor of a tense work meeting during which the conference table breaks in a disconcerting way and divides the meeting attendants into two different groups. With this image (and without the need for a verbal anchor), the advertisement recalls the popular motto for the chocolate bar: "Have a Break, Have a KitKat", which has become a myth associated with

the product. It would be difficult for us to understand this shocking image (a table that splits in two while people are gathered closely around it) if we were not already familiar with this motto. The advertisement provides an excellent example not only of perceptive deviation but also, and above all, of the importance of the cultural referent required to decipher the advertisement's message.



Image 6: KitKat. Have a Break, Have a KitKat

For the second time, we found results in which the correct and the incorrect responses were equal (i.e., 50.0% “Same”, 40.0% “Different”, and 10.0% “No Answer”), which indicates acceptable intelligibility of the advertisement.

Half of the students correctly interpreted the image, using words drawn from the motto in Spanish (e.g., “a large table for meetings split in the middle, possibly after a turbulent business meeting, represents the need to take a break to continue negotiating”). A total of 24 students offered divergent interpretations that emphasised the “crunchy nature of the chocolate bar” while failing to allude to the motto/myth associated with the product. Six students, who did not understand the incongruence of the image, chose not to answer. We chose this advertisement because we hoped that its well-known motto would be easily understandable for a substantial majority of the respondents. As seen above, however, we found that half of the subjects were not familiar with the iconic motto, which forced us to conclude that it is not easy to export mental schemas from one culture to another.

C.1. Opposition-Juxtaposition

The following advertisement for Brooks saddles[8] exhibits the attraction of advertisers to using rituals (e.g., social, personal, family, civic) that have a special resonance in our lives. With a figure of opposition (“good” opposed to “evil”), it situates bicycling on the same plane as the cruel sport of fox hunting. This opposition is reinforced by the verbal anchor “Unquestionable British Tradition”. For the advertiser, the “good” tradition is unquestionably bicycling, whereas the “bad” or questionable (in fact, today, prohibited) tradition is that of those who hunt and kill foxes. In the image, the good bicyclists also protect the poor fox from being lynched in one of the most ancient and bloody rituals of British society. Here, Brooks confers on its saddles the elitist quality of one of the most typical rituals of the British upper classes.



Image 7: Brooks. Unquestionable British Tradition.

This advertisement also produced poor interpretation results. Only 26.7% of the subjects comprehended the advertising message, whereas 43% had a divergent understanding, and 30% left their reply blank.

It is interesting that only slightly more than one-quarter of the subjects understood that the image was a comparison of opposites between the ritual of fox hunting and bicycling, the latter of which is a sport that according to the responses “is practiced by the same ecologists that defended the fox”. This small percentage of correct answers was not the result of a lack of cultural schemata (i.e., the majority of subjects who answered alluded to this British ritual), however, but to the lack of a clear verbal anchor for those surveyed regarding the product being advertised. If we investigate in detail, we observe that the Brooks firm defines itself as a seller of “Saddles, bags, etc.”, which for many of those who were surveyed was totally unknown. Regarding other interpretations, eight subjects use the referential level and only mentioned “this cruel British ritual in contrast with the poor fox and the couple of ecologists who are saving it”. Another three respondents mentioned that the advertisement is based on the Disney film *The Fox and The Hound*, which concerns the friendship between a fox and a dog. As in Image 5, the results confirm that cinema remakes leave an important cultural trail, and in this case, one observes that this phenomenon could both help (Image 5) or interfere (here) with the understanding of the advertisement.

C.2. Oposition-Fusion

With the following billboard, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)[9] asks British citizens for their vote in the elections of May 22, 2015. In the billboard, we are shown an image that combines the White Cliffs of Dover, an icon that represents the border of the United Kingdom, with an escalator, on either side of which appears the legend “No border. No control”. In this way, the advertisement notes that the present British government facilitates uncontrolled access to the country through harmful immigration (far from being an icon of progress, the escalator is converted into a weapon). This message is contrasted with the motto of the UKIP (situated on the right edge of the image in yellow on a lilac background): “Take back control of our country”.



Image 8. UKIP. No border. No control.

The comprehension of the advertisement can also be considered to be acceptable (i.e., 56.7% “Same”, 28.3% “Different”, and 9% left blank).

It would seem logical to think that in this globalised world in which the politics of various countries are highly interrelated, the emergence of a British party of the extreme right would not pass unnoticed among European citizens. Half of the surveyed group was not acquainted with the UKIP and its ideology, however, and therefore incorrectly interpreted the advertisement. Several respondents saw the escalator as a means for upward social mobility (perhaps influenced by the schema that has resulted from the current ethical degeneration in Spanish politics). Others perceived in the elevator a symbol of the contrast between “underdeveloped countries and a United Kingdom, rich and advanced”. Many respondents did not answer.

C.3. Opposition-Replacement

In 2014, Sainsbury’s,^[10] the well-known British supermarket chain, wished its clients Merry Christmas with an image of opposition-substitution in which one can observe two soldiers, one British and the other German, shaking hands. This image contrasts by implication the rigours of war with the wide selection found on the shelves of the supermarket. The cultural content of the image pays homage to a mythic truce that spontaneously occurred on Christmas Day in 1914 (in the midst of the First World War). The absence of the brand (“Sainsbury’s”) in this ad clearly causes miscomprehension, although in reality the ad was shown in Sainsbury’s outlets (which was a good hint of the message) and on television, where the spots offered the contextual clues (for example, the name of the firm) that were necessary to understand the advertisement.



Image 9

In this case, the numbers speak for themselves. Only 18.3% of the subjects produced a convergent interpretation with the intended message, whereas 18.3% differed from it; 63.3% did not answer. In fact, this advertisement is one of those that most clearly demonstrate that schemata are indispensable for comprehension.

The communication lapse originates in the lack of shared mental schemata and the absence of a verbal anchor for the product or institution that is advertising it. In the first case, only 11 subjects were aware of the spontaneous truce of Christmas Day 1914 (in the midst of the First World War). This lack of awareness may seem surprising for the Allied countries. It is not unusual in Spain, however, which did not participate in the Great War and whose citizens have little factual or emotional information on this historic event. Similarly, the absence of a verbal anchor that sheds light on the image means that the Spanish students can only offer a factual description of “two soldiers shaking hands, as a sign of peace”.

Discussion of Results

We now present a collective evaluation of the results to confirm or reject the initial hypothesis:

- a. Only one advertisement achieved 88.3% correct responses.
- b. Only two advertisements attained between 50% and 56.7% correct responses.
- c. A total of three advertisements achieved between 26.7% and 45% correct responses.
- d. A total of four ads received between 6.7% and 18.3% correct responses.

Overall, we observed that only three ads exceeded 50% “Same” answers, whereas six were (considerably) below this level. These data indicate that the surveyed subjects had significant problems understanding most of the visual rhetorical figures. Consequently, after administration of the test described in the paper, the hypothesis on which the study was based is confirmed as valid:

When exposing speakers whose native language is not English (in our case, Spanish) to advertising images with symbolic cultural referents (i.e., icons, myths and rituals) designed for the Anglo-Saxon market, errors in comprehension and interpretation are detected that can be (partly) attributed to the absence of symbolic cultural schemata.

Similarly, in the course of corroborating this hypothesis, we collected data that provide further information about other potential sources of deviant interpretations of the visual:

Multiplicity of symbolic artefacts seem to bear negatively on comprehension, as supported by images 3 and 4 (with an icon and a myth, and the lowest convergent results, 6.7%). The exception here seems to be Image 5 (which also has a variety of symbolic artefacts, but a much higher score of convergent answers, 45%). Here, however, symbolic artefacts come from two different (high-culture, popular culture; British, American) channels, which give cross-cultural Subjects a better chance of being acquainted with these artefacts.

It seems logical to speculate that clearer anchoring in ads (name of company, brand or product, a good motto, etc.) would result in improved comprehension. A good anchor may be the extra help required to sell the product (see, for example, Image 7). An unclear anchor may have pernicious effects upon comprehension at worst and an innocuous impact on understanding at best (as in Image 7). At any rate, images without anchors (e.g., Image 9) show poor comprehension scores.

Similarly, miscomprehension can result from the interference of the schemata that belongs to the target culture. For instance, in Image 3, we observe interference from the Spanish Legión in understanding the image.

The analysis above shows that subjects react differently to different lapses in comprehension:

Sometimes subjects choose not to react, leave their responses blank, and abandon their interest in the advertisements. Image 9 and Image 2 are the most notable examples of this behaviour.

On other occasions, subjects limit themselves to the referential level and record the denotative significance of the image while missing its symbolic and metaphorical value; for example, in Image 4, one of the respondents produced the following descriptive reply: “a simple celebration with the beer of the ad”.

*Finally, there are yet other moments when subjects contribute with creative (or bizarre) interpretations, such as some replies for Image 4, where the logo is interpreted as a “skater”, or certain answers for Image 9, when some receivers thought that the Brooks advertisement (Image 7) was based on the Disney film *The Fox and the Hound*.*

This latter response in Image 7 is but one indication (see also Image 5) that cinema is able to create international schemata that may come handy in advertising. Cinema (i.e., Hollywood cinema) has been one of the most innovative and international languages of the twentieth century and continues to leave its imprint on consumers of the twenty-first century (such as those surveyed for this study).

A final comment seems pertinent to put an end to the discussion. We should not be surprised that the advertisement with the highest level of “Same” answers (i.e., the highest level of understanding) is that of *Kris Kris, British Style White Bread* (Image 1). This text is transnational from the beginning. The manufacturing company is Greek and is making progress in the international market. It advertises a product that is sold as if it were British. To do this, it appeals to (totally/partially known) cultural

schemata. In sum, this advertisement is the result of previous linguistic and cultural adjustments that facilitated its success with consumers.

Conclusion

From the previous discussion, we may conclude that cultural schemata had a great impact upon our sample population regarding their understanding of images of very different types. Hence, we oppose Levitt's (1983) proposal of English as a universal filter for today's globalised, cross-cultural advertising and side instead with localizers and other experts and practitioners who advocate the need to take cultural idiosyncrasies into consideration. This paper, however, is concluded with a word of caution. These findings cannot be generalised beyond our sample population, and indeed, further research is required to confirm or reject our findings. Nevertheless, we believe that the combined methodology used in this paper provides a good orientation as to what may be done in the future. On the one hand, by resorting to Phillips and McQuarrie's taxonomy, we can be fairly certain that we have covered a wide spectrum of the visual in advertising. On the other, by focusing on symbolic icons, myths, and rituals, we have also tested diverse types of cultural schemata. The quantitative data support qualitative interpretations, and our data seem to elicit interesting information to contribute to the debate.

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- [1] Advertisements may be accessed at <https://adsoftheworld.com>.
- [2] The explanation of the advertisement is based on <https://www.behance.net/gallery/3010927/KRIS-KRIS-TOAST-BREADS> (consulted May 4, 2015).
- [3] The explanation of the advertisement is based on <http://blog.unitedreprographics.com/simple-eye-catching-print-ad-generates-audiobook-buzz> (consulted May 4, 2015).
- [4] The explanation of the advertisement is based on <http://balkanist.net/the-problem-of-the-poppy-how-people-and-institutions-wear-symbols-ofremembrance/> (consulted May 4, 2015).
- [5] The explanation of the advertisement is based on http://adsoftheworld.com/media/print/church_end_brewery_go_for_sporting_gold_gymnast (consulted May 4, 2015).
- [6] The explanation of the advertisement is based on <http://es.coloribus.com/archivo-de-publicidad-y-anuncios/al-aire-libre/loewe-flat-tv-with-image-scrooge-mcduck-10785605/> (consulted May 4, 2015).
- [7] The explanation of the advertisement is based on <http://www.trendhunter.com/trends/kit-kat-campaign> (consulted May 4, 2015).
- [8] The explanation of the advertisement is based on <http://blog.brooksengland.com/wps/brooks-unquestionable-british-tradition/> (consulted May 4, 2015).
- [9] Although we repeatedly asked for permission to reproduce the advertisement, we received no response. To view the advertisement, see http://www.ukip.org/ukip_reveals_new_billboard_design (consulted May 4, 2015).
- [10] The explanation of the advertisement is based on <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/sainsburys-christmas-advert-nothing-says-merry-xmas-folks-like-trench-warfare-9861367.html> (consulted May 4, 2015).