Visual Vernaculars Across Emerging Markets

Inter-Cultural Perception of Global Advertising

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Abstract

Given the predominance of visual image over language copy in global advertising this research explores its inter-cultural perception across emerging markets worldwide. Discourse analysis was conducted on the qualitative responses to global print advertisements by target segments in emerging markets of three geographic regions. Both similarities and differences of perception were found between the selected markets in the Middle East, Latin America and East Asia regions, among the upper middle-class target segment for up-market fashion products. Hence the author proposes that visual perception of global advertising be conceptualized as a continuum of vernaculars, rather than as discrete modes suggested by established inter-cultural typologies. Effective execution of global advertising campaigns for emerging markets therefore calls for contingency approaches to optimizing creative strategies.

Keywords: *Visual perception, inter-cultural communication, global advertising, emerging markets*

The Issue

Much academic research on advertising worldwide has centred on highlighting differences of execution styles, information content, creative appeal, even gender portrayals, via content analysis of print advertisements and television commercials. Invariably this is studied by the selective use of contrasting cultures such as Western and Asian, mostly notably US versus China or Japan. Thus, research on comparative advertising worldwide in the late 20th and early 21st centuries typically features quantitative methods to test hypotheses about advertising strategy in *a piori* divergent or contrasting cultures (Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1992; Zhou, *et al* 2005; Lee, 2018). Given that research design, explanations of the variation tend to be based on geographic distance, national stereotypes or cultural typologies, but offer little insight on any cultural homogenization via globalization.

Furthermore, no acknowledgement is made that the countries compared, often from the industrialised-developed and emerging economy worlds, differ as much economically as culturally. Limited comparative research has been done between lower-contrast cultures, such as within Western Europe versus North America or between emerging-market regions of the world, such as Asia and Africa. Far less research has been done on visual perception across broad geo-linguistic region such as the Middle East, Latin America or East Asia. Reviewing the growing global advertising research over the prior decade, Taylor (2005) acknowledges that generalizations have been developed into theory, but criticizes it being based simplistically on inter-cultural differences between two divergent countries, and explained by pre-established cultural dimensions. Consequently, he advocates that research locate respondents actually in terms of culture, especially in an era of some cultural convergence or globalization, and this is a stance that the present exploratory research adheres to.

Framing Images

Despite the ubiquity of images in contemporary advertising, how their persuasive messages first created in one particular cultural, historical and economic context are given meaning in multiple other contexts remains unexplored worldwide. Especially with online media these images are accessible even to audiences that are not specifically targeted, but the issue is still relatively under-researched. Hence, a critical need persists for marketers to be able to distinguish between creative concepts which might cross cultures and which do not translate so readily. Extant conceptual frameworks tend to analyze the antecedents of standardization versus adaptation strategies in global advertising, while culture is often cited as the explanatory for differences in comparative creativity. So this literature will be surveyed before focusing on the issue of visual perception by consumers of advertising imagery, for framing the present research in the intercultural context.

Advertising Strategies

The issue of standardization versus adaptation strategies or the relative merits of and necessity to globalize or localize has been an unresolved debate in global marketing and advertising for decades. Arguing that few prior studies since have identified the critical antecedents for adopting advertising standardization strategies, Griffith *et al* (2003) hypothesized four self-evident factors: market similarity, process standardization, environmental similarity and mode of entry. Testing these through surveys and interviews in the limited context of US firms operating in India, they claimed confirmation of their hypotheses, while admitting to have questionably ignored the significant factor of culture. In explanation for similar inconsistent findings, Samiee *et al* (2003) suggested that the country of origin of multinational corporations (MNCs), size of their subsidiaries abroad and organizational structure, among other factors such as culture, were influential in standardization strategies adopted away from headquarters. Furthermore, through ethnography of advertising agencies, Kemper (2001) illustrates the subtleties of cultural differences that bedevil producing advertising for multi-cultural societies like Malaysia and Sri Lanka, rendering cultural typologies simplistic. Even in our contemporary convergent world, incorporating comparative advertising in an campaign globally can prove challenging as Kim (2016) demonstrate experimentally with Koreans displaying negative responses while American were quite positive towards the practice, with perceived assertiveness identified as the cultural mediator.

Yet in investigating culturally-similar societies, namely the US and Australia, researchers Frazer, Sheehan and Patti (2002) still note differences of appeals, strategies, humor and propositions in their advertising. Addressing specifically the argument that cultural similarity, such as supposedly found in the Middle East, favors the use of standardized advertising, Karande *et al* (2006) demonstrate that significant socio-economic differences across national markets nonetheless dictate diversity of advertising content on product information, price information and type of appeals. Thus Alden *et al* (1999) propose global consumer culture positioning as a construct quite distinct from its more common foreign and local counterparts typically found in the consumer behavior literature. Even so, in a meta-analysis of research published on global advertising over four decades, Fastoso and Whitelock (2006) bemoan the fact that theory had not moved much beyond whether to use standardization strategies and to what degree. Over a decade on, Taylor and Okazaki (2015) argue that global consumer culture has become a more feasible positioning strategy for adapting execution within global advertising, more so for print than for electronic media, which the present study will explore.

Comparative Creativity

Although cultural typologies are typically used in research to analyze differences in advertising creativity, these have seldom proved sufficient without factoring in other factors economic and media availability. For instance, Wiles *et al* (1996) find differences in visual portrayals of models imperceptible between the advertising of US and Sweden, despite these countries belonging to distinct Hofstede cultural clusters. Likewise, Koudelova and Whitelock (2001) discover similarity of creative strategies in the advertising of a majority of product categories they investigated across both Czech Republic and the UK, respectively from differing Eastern and Western European cultural clusters. In contrast, within the culturally similar Greater China region, Tai (1997) observes that most multinationals differentiated their advertising for each market. Yet Cheong *et al* (2011) note that advertising of global products tended to remain

standardized despite mainland China being the target market, while even that of its domestic products also used 'western' values. Nonetheless in the context of global brand websites, An (2007) posits a clear difference of visual strategies adopted for two groups of countries selected, duly classified 'western and 'eastern'. Correlating these with being low-context and high-context cultures respectively, he predictably contrasts their use of symbolism, celebrities, photographs and product portrayal.

For more nuanced understanding of personal values, advertising persuasion and gender differences within and between cultures typically considered similar Shavitt *et al* (2006) propose an additional horizontal/vertical variation on the individualism-collectivism Hofstede dimension. More recently, House *et al* (2010) advocate the utilization of their Project GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness) theoretical model to global advertising research. In an early study focusing on one of those cultural dimensions, Diehl *et al* (2008) find that a globally standardized advertisement is perceived quite differently on its performance-oriented appeals in the four different countries studied. Similarly focusing on another single GLOBE dimension, Terlutter *et al* (2010) note that in more culturally assertive markets, stronger assertive values in an advertisement were necessary for consumers to perceive that appeal. After evaluating the newer models for inter-cultural comparison that partially overlap and diverge from Hofstede's typology, de Mooij (2015) warns against their unthinking application to interpreting advertising, which the present study will aim to shed light on.

Visual Persuasion

While the performative power of visual imagery has long been recognized, its persuasive workings have not been adequately conceptualized. In an increasingly multi-cultural world, Lau-Gesk (2003) argues against the mono-culturalism of consumers usually assumed, demonstrating that bi-cultural consumers who compartmentalize cultures tend to react favorably to both individual and interpersonal appeals in advertising, while integrators who blended cultures tended to be conflicted in their preference. Similarly, Lin and Wang (2016) demonstrate that the congruence between local-global identities of monolingual consumers and the language code-switching of advertisements affected persuasive power. Recognizing that the product category can be an additional factor, as with luxury products using advertising in a foreign language to imply sophistication, they recommend more research in emerging markets as is the case with the present study.

As Meyer *et al* (2013) argue, the meaning of cultural artifacts is constructed by synthesizing both the visual and verbal, with implications for social knowledge and business practice. Using experiments in the US, Phillips *et al* (2014) show that aesthetically sophisticated consumers were almost as sensitive as professional art directors were to incongruities in visual brand identity or the holistic combination of style elements in advertising. Conducting content analysis of advertisements in four European countries Czarnecka *et al* (2018) finds that there are both similarities and differences in the appeals selected by marketers did not necessarily coincide with cultural dimensions as hypothesized, suggesting that homogeneity and heterogeneity of consumer cultures in each country may have been influential. Based on interviews of young adults in the United Kingdom and Hong Kong, Fong *et al* (2017) note that while equally aware and accepting of brand placement in movies, there were cultural differences in the extent to which the two groups were critically perceptive and actively interpretive of the message thus conveyed. Of particular relevance may be the growing divide between what van der Groot *et al* (2018) term the internet, television and newspaper generations in six 'western' markets with regard to media use and advertising avoidance. For though verbal language may still be dominant in developed societies, visual communication is on the rise worldwide and having had different histories in other societies, could have differing future trajectories.

Exploring Perception

Citing numerous cognitive experiments as well as observational and anecdotal evidence, Nisbett (2004) concludes that culture shapes perceptions, or more specifically that Asians and Westerners think diametrically differently. Replicating his research in Asia, Frith and Karan (2006) find that respondents from Singapore tend to be perceptually closer to the Americans than those from India. Consequently, they speculate that economic development, income levels and relative globalization may be intervening

factors, and advocated going beyond simplistic notions of 'east' versus 'west'. Hence, the present study seeks to address the following issues arising from prior research:

- Do consumers in distinct geo-linguistic regions tend to perceive visual elements of global advertisements similarly or differently?
- How might global advertisers optimize intercultural visual strategies to communicate effectively in diverse emerging markets?

Qualitative Approach

In their review of global advertising research, Okazaki and Mueller (2007) point out that content analysis and surveys remain the dominant methods employed. Given that prior insights about the phenomenon of intercultural perception are modest and the problem relatively unstructured, a qualitative method was most appropriate for the present exploratory research (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). As the phenomena of perception can best be understood through language that people use to describe meanings assigned, Bryman and Bell (2011) would advise an interpretivist methodology for analysing such socially constructed knowledge. Thus in order to understand inter-cultural visual persuasion, our current research elicits interpretive responses to global advertising images by target consumers across diverse emerging markets.

Regional Respondents

The growing upper middle-class and more globalized-cosmopolitan consumer segments of emerging economies are increasingly the target of multinational marketers via their global advertising. Thus, it was deemed appropriate for the research to be conducted among participants in an MBA programme of an accredited European management school delivered on-site in a dozen countries that are classified as emerging economies. Since much research has focussed on the big emerging markets typified by the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) countries, a deliberate decision was made to conduct the present study in smaller emerging markets from different continents. The specific major globally connected cities in culturally diverse regions selected for this study were: Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) in Vietnam; Cairo in Egypt, and Lima in Peru.

The respondents were in the age range of late-20s to early-40s, citizens of the countries in which they were studying, and mostly middle-to-senior managers keen on an internationally-accredited education to achieve their career ambitions within the global economy. The table below (Table 1) was compiled from class-lists, since the response forms were anonymous. At the locations in Vietnam and Peru the gender balance was about two-third to three-quarters male, though in the Egypt the classes were predominantly male. While Hung *et al* (2007) noted Chinese young women tend to temper 'western' feminist notions with 'eastern' ones of collective morals, femininity and hard work, such gender influence was not possible to explore in the present research. All three samples were quite homogeneous culturally, mostly drawn from the major ethnic groups in urban areas namely Kinh in Vietnam, Arab in Egypt and Mestizo in Peru. Thus apart from the geographic and cultural difference, the sample groups were equivalent educationally and economically.

Table 1: *Composition of respondents*

Research Location	Male	%	Female	%	Class Size	Number of Responses	Participation Rate
Ho Chi Minh	34	65%	20	35%	52	25	48%
Cairo	31	81%	7	19%	38	33	87%
Lima	15	60%	10	40%	25	21	84%

Study Procedure

The MBA students were invited to participate voluntarily in this relevant study and this was generally met with much interest with response rates ranging from 80-90% of the class, with the exception of Vietnam where possibly a more limited English-language facility of some may have constrained their participation in the study. Nonetheless, students in all three locations had achieved IELTS or TOEFL scores demonstrating above-average competence in English as a prerequisite of their admission into that MBA programme and this is indicative of their personal acculturation to a cosmopolitan globalism. All these MBA students were undertaking a course in international business, conducted in English by the author, to which the study was relevant.

As with the earlier study by Firth and Karan (2006), a selection of the advertisements from the global fashion magazine *Elle* were utilised for ease of comparability of the findings (Figures 1-3). The objective was for the respondents to express their visual perceptions of global images and so all text was removed from the advertisements. In fact, no mention was made to the respondents about the origins of these images in print advertising and using an outdated magazine issue disallowed easy identification of the relevant brand campaigns. All four visuals were printed one per page with 15 blank lines beneath in the form of a booklet, in black-and-white due to logistical constraints abroad. However, the colour visuals were projected overhead on Powerpoint slides at the rate of three minutes each while the respondents wrote their spontaneous interpretations in English on the lines provided below their printed images without any prompting. All administrations of the study were conducted by the author during his stints there as a visiting professor from Europe.

Figure 1: *Group*

Figure 2: *Pair*   **Figure 3:** *Individual*

Inter-Cultural Discernment

In line with the subjectivist epistemological stance of this research, discourse analysis was adopted for data analysis because it considers language as constructing social reality (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009). Given the conventions of such analysis the discursive data in the written responses was subjected to a three-stage process of open coding of each market's responses, then axial coding to relate those categories to concepts and finally thematic coding. Consequently, the three key themes of visual perception emerged through this interpretive analytic process which appear to interact moderately with extant literature on inter-cultural issues in visual perception. These inductively derived themes are illustrated using selective quotes from respondents in each of the markets in turn, before analytical commentary is made on the comparative differences and similarities between each group.

Foreground-Context

Based on his use of a non-advertising image Nisbett (2003) finds that Americans tend to focus on the foreground of the visuals in print advertising while Asians on the wider context in their perceptions. Such a 'western' / 'eastern' dichotomy of perceptual propensity was not borne out by the present research across East Asian, Middle East and Latin American markets using realistic advertising visuals.

Vietnam

The focus of respondents in Vietnam seemed to be on the people in the foreground of Figure 1, with no mention of their environment:

> *'man, woman, child'; 'three persons and one lovely girl'*.

Even the respondent observing the lighting in Figure 2 emphasized its impact on the models portrayed:

> *'sun is shining but people see it's dark'*.

Respondents concluded that Figure 3 was an advertisement for the bag in the foreground, though the overall scene was vaguely described as:

> *'old and messy but novel'; 'a little mystery'*.

While many noted that the model upfront was lying uncomfortably on a cloth-covered desk, table or shelf, only one respondent noted the background:

> '*picture in the wall behind the sofa…a woman face*'.

Egypt

Most respondents noted the three persons in the foreground of Figure 1, though there was some allusion to the background:

> '*family photo – husband, wife and their girl with rabbit*' and '*lovely family*';
> '*the young man seems to be at hospital; the girls seem to be his daughters*';

Almost all of the respondents identified the visual in Figure 2 as 'advertising for glasses' with some elaborations on the foreground like:

> '*two models posing for professional-like photograph*'.

Most Egyptian respondents readily identified the source of Figure 3 as an ad for the handbag the foreground:

> '*everything else in pic seems unclear*'; '*red bag is very obvious in the picture*'.

Only a tenth of respondents noticed the background:

> '*some photos on wall behind*'; '*big face on the back of sleepy girl*'.

Peru

Quite uniquely among the cultural groups, these respondents tended to notice the background. The scene in Figure 1 was speculated specifically on:

> '*resort*'; '*couch*'; '*sofa with pillows*'.

A few were detailed about Figure 2 seeing not only the foreground models but the background context:

> '*the man is hugging the woman*'; '*outside someplace… sunny day*'.

The majority of Peruvian descriptions to Figure 3 were quite elaborate, focusing on the woman in the foreground as:

> '*absolutely relaxed, resting, almost sleeping*'; '*fatigue… thinking*';
> '*young girt arrives from shopping and is very tired*'.

However, about half the respondents noted that there were other elements:

> '*coverlet*'; '*bed or something like that*'; '*face behind the girl*'.

In an essay citing significant theorists, Jay (2002) queries cultural relativism, and championed instead the notion that visual images can often be understood and identified with universally. Nevertheless, upon research conducted in both the US and Russia, Mikhailitchenko *et al* (2009) conclude that image-intensive advertising does not result in similar levels of recall, given different levels on brand familiarity cross-nationally. Despite some variation across the respondents found in the present research, any attempt to relate such bias in foreground-background perception to extant cultural classifications of high-context/low-context cultures (Singh and Matsuo, 2004) fails, as all three countries researched are deemed high-context.

Persons-Group

Even though respondents in all three markets related positively to the group in Figure 1, the Vietnamese waxed poetic about the Confucian ideal of filial piety. This seems in keeping with the Zhang and Gelb (1996) finding that Chinese consumers respond more favorably to collectivistic appeals for socially visible products as here with fashion goods, and to individualistic appeals for privately-consumed products. The Egyptians were more matter-of-fact about the importance of family, ambivalent about the

couple, and critical of the single woman portrayed in Figures 2 and 3 respectively. While affirming the group portrayed as a family, the Peruvians tended to be more preoccupied with the emotions inherent in all the visual images, and conceptualised sensitively in the context depicted (Barrett et al, 2011).

Vietnam

Most respondents tended to emphasize the group over the individuals, and even when there was strictly no group in the image, its absence was noted. Their responses to Figure 1 revolved around notions of family:

> *'mother's head is resting on husband's chest.. holding daughter with arm around'*
> *'daughter hugging her pet…spending happy time with parents'*.

In two instances the couple in Figure 2 were described by Vietnamese respondents as being more than individuals but having a relationship, given their physical proximity:

> *'lovers', 'friends'*.

A few perceived Figure 3 as portraying someone seemingly unhappy in social isolation:

> *'a lady with lack of friends… no confidence to stand up'; 'a dispirited woman'*.

Egypt

The visual in Figure 1 prompted affirmations of familial relationships but there was ambivalence evident over inclusion of the pet:

> *'family life, feeling with warmth, home sweet home'*.
> *'family is very important for healthy society'*.
> *'father and mother and their daughter - 'also we can see the family dog'*.

While affirming gender hierarchy, some interpreted Figure 2 as implying security while others saw it menacingly:

> *'the woman is in safe hands with the man's shoulder';*
> *'they gonna divorce or they have fight'; 'isolation between the couple'*.

Comments on the single woman in Figure 3 were generally disparaging and Egyptians inferred intoxication which is abhorrent to their culture:

> *'looks like woman who have extra dose of drugs';*
> *'dispirited girl, lonely, overdosed'*.

Peru

The majority of the responses to Figure 1 were that this was a family and a 'united' one at that. Most Peruvians readily counted the rabbit as part of the family, a pet to have fun with as well to show off. Others speculated on them being related in some way:

> *'mom, dad, little girl and a pet'*
> *'two sisters and a brother'; 'friendship'*.

Peruvians' comment on the individuals in Figure 2 were all suggestive of the cultural importance of individual attractiveness:

> *'handsome', 'nice boy, eh!' and '30-year old blond'*.

A few respondents were sexist and critical with comments that the girl in Figure 3 was:

> *'with anorexia', too skinny'*
> *'a provocative position'*.

While there are seeming similarities in the responses from all three markets, the rationale behind their perceptions of gender and relationships differ considerably. Amongst other authors, Lepkowska-White

(2004) commend the Hofstede dimensions for explanatory value in understanding cultural differences but their unthinking use in deciding whether to standardize or adapt advertising campaigns globally could be questionable. For instance, Tartaglia and Rollero (2015) find with the portrayal of gender in European advertising, women are sexualized in both Italy and Netherlands to different degrees, mirroring national values rather than aspiring to promote more egalitarian 'western' values. The inductively generated findings of this study suggest that finer-tuned typologies of culture such as the newer one developed by Javidan (2006) in the context of work-based research may be worth exploring in intercultural advertising. Yet cultural factors, however important, may not be sufficient motivations for adopting different creative approaches in advertising for each market.

Cosmopolitan-Parochial

Visual advertisements can be textured, even abstruse, and that their interpretations culturally-bound, if not idiosyncratic, as Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver (2006) argue in a review of imagery research in global advertising. In the US context, the race of the model portrayed in advertising has been demonstrated as being more than a peripheral cue influential to consumer preferences (Spira and Whittler, 2004). A recent experimental study in China likewise finds that ethnicity of models plus cultural values embodied trigger perceived incongruence even if the advertising message is not rejected totally (Cui et al, 2016). Responses from all three markets in the present study underscore the likelihood that visual perception is more nuanced about what is deemed foreign and local, than previously acknowledged.

Vietnam

Notably, these respondents were tentative about identifying ethnic cultural otherness. Most identified the models in Figure 1 being mostly foreign, with some even speculatingon race despite the image being in black-and-white:

> 'maybe Asians due to black hair'; 'elder (sic) woman has brown skin'.

For Figure 2, about half the respondents immediately identified it being from an advertisement for sunglasses or possibly clothes. Without mentioning their foreignness, some went further to describe the models variously as:

> 'sexy woman and man'; 'cool and modern'.

Without any reference to ethnicity of the girl in Figure 3, some Vietnamese respondents said that the visual could be for:

> 'women's wear'; 'textiles'.

Egypt

There was considerable cultural distancing by these respondents with attempt to designate the visual in Figure 1 as being about other cultures:

> 'Asian girl married with white man and the girl comes mixed';
> 'American family'; 'young family chilling-out, probably Latinos'.

Quite uniquely among the cultural samples Egyptians mention the attributes of the likely product in Figure 2 as being clearly foreign:

> 'western, fashion, future'; 'cool, modern.. irrelevant to (our) own culture'.

Once again, some of respondents' comments on the single woman in Figure 3 were quite disapproving:

> 'around a poor neighbourhood but dressed in a fashionable way';
> 'model lying on a sheet... surrounding very untidy'.

Peru

Most respondents did not necessarily perceive the context of Figure 1 as being foreign but quite possibly being universal pursuit of leisure:

'weekend'; 'resort'; 'a comfortable space'; 'a party session'.

Much speculation by Peruvians on Figure 2 demonstrated a positive cultural attitude towards foreign celebrity in advertisements (Biswas, *et al* 2009):

'main actor and actress of a film'; 'Gucci campaign'; 'Russian model'.
'luxury', 'vogue...innovation'; 'narcissistic...frivolity, superficial life'.

A few respondents spun explanatory narratives about Figure 3 being evidently foreign in setting but without overt disapproval:

'Saks Fifth Avenue stuff'; 'campaign for summer...for tropical countries'
'Arab immigrant in some western country'.

The above responses illustrate that the reality of meaning construction from visual images can be highly complex and ambiguous inter-culturally. Similarly, in multi-cultural Malaysia, Wilson *et al* (2006) find greater identification with and persuasion by advertising for a global product set in a local context by consumers but considerable alienation towards the advertising of a local product being given a global setting. Yet academic business research, ranging from information processing and conditioning models to semiotics tends to be reductionist in explaining intercultural visual persuasion. The findings of the present exploratory study lend support for the application of visual rhetoric, as advocated by Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver (2006), in the analysis of global advertisements.

Symbolic-Literal

All responses in the present study seem confirmatory of the findings of Barrett *et al*(2011) that the cultural context influences the perception of emotions portrayed in visual images. Thus divergence of perception was found across the markets studied with the Vietnamese respondents sympathetic of the single woman in Figure 3, highlighting the notions of being fashionable, individualistic and confident conveyed in the images. The Egyptians appreciated the marketing intent of the visual images, yet read into them considerable negativity about the foreign culture portrayed. The Peruvians on the other hand generally celebrated the visual images and emphasised their portrayal of style, luxury and the like, including some enigmatic elements.

Vietnam

There was a definite tendency among these respondents to look beyond the surface images and speculate on symbolic meanings.Attempts were made to draw conclusions on Figure 1 being about:

'comfortable life', 'peaceful condition'; 'friendly and easy-going'.

Among the extrapolations of the visual message in Figure 2 were that it was about:

'life with unique style – be ourselves'; 'sense of function and fashion'.

Perhaps culturally influenced by the colour red featured (Aslam, 2006), most Vietnamese interpreted the model's posture in Figure 3 broadmindedly, though some centred on her sensuality:

'free life with taste' and 'appearance looks sexy and fashionable';
'left hand on her side of head and drag skirt by right hand'.

Egypt

Assumptions were made by respondents on the male in the group in Figure 1 as the patriarch of the family and suggesting his portrayal has deeper meaning:

'father probably wants some space and time of his own';
'the father is the source of safety.. knows where to look'.

Some couched their ambivalence about the inclusion of the pet as symbolizing the natural order:

'intimacy amongst species – male-female-child and animal';
'little things – kids and dogs – make life happier'.

A few Egyptians attempted to draw deeper symbolism in Figure 2 as being about:

'trust in yourself'; 'realistic vision and dreaming'.

The more esoteric interpretations of the female model in Figure 3 included:

'items about rebellious teens.. about chaos'; 'looks for new generation of youth';
'contemporary art.. using real-life model'.

Peru

As with the other cultural groups, responses here reified the message of the images. Some Peruvian respondents elaborated on Figure 1 as being about:

'enjoying moments in family'; 'look very close'; 'tenderness';
'love, good feelings, talking'; 'lot of love together'.

Uniquely among the cultures studied, a number of Peruvians discerned something sinister in Figure 2:

'bad guys'; 'serious, radicalism', 'coldness... seriousness'; 'expression is defiant'.

Others went as far as to speculate, quite non-judgementally about the individual, that Figure 3 represented:

'poverty mixed with modernity... world of contrast';
'money is not everything'; 'girl bored about the social rules'.

Interpreting the final visual, Figure 3, proved the most challenging for all consumers, regardless of market. Yet most seemed empathic towards her sadness, boredom, health and the weather while some were critical of an apparent slothful attitude portrayed. Although considerable research has been done on visual aspects of advertising, Jeong (2008) points out that product belief and purchase intentions are influenced by the use of the visual over verbal modality, leading to the conclusion that visual rhetoric leads people to accept messages discerned, rather than explicit messages from the advertiser. The present research demonstrates that advertising which incorporates visual metaphors tends to be more provocative to interpret emotionally and thus prone to greater diversity of responses inter-culturally.

Contingencies to Consider

The findings of the present exploratory study on emerging-economy markets across geographic and cultural regions are partially at odds with prior research on contrasting markets which have tended to explain apparent differences of visual advertising in terms of pre-defined cultural and economic categories. Its inductively-derived dimensions of visual perception indicate unsystematic similarities and differences between consumers East Asia, Middle East and Latin America. Thus upper middle-class target segments in emergent economies may be acquiring hybridized global-local cultures, inasmuch as developed or industrialized economies have grown increasingly cosmopolitan culturally. As Mueller and Taylor (2013) acknowledge, economic and cultural convergence of markets attendant on relentless globalization has meant that the standardization-adaptation debate is now to be superseded by the rhetoric of global positioning coupled with localized execution as necessary.

Theoretical Implications

Extant research has implied that there could be much variation of inter-cultural perception of advertising even within a geographic region. In Western Europe, Bjerke and Polegato (2006) notice that visual images are perceived somewhat differently by potential consumers with a subtle divide between the three 'Latin' and two 'Northern European' cities sampled. Similarly Dahl (2004) reports quite distinct preferences expressed by consumers in UK, Netherlands and Germany for culturally-congruent

advertising of their own country, but quite negative perceptions towards advertising from the other two countries, despite them being in proximate Hofstede cultural clusters. Scant allowance has been made in extant research for multi-culturalism of regions, much less of countries, nor of the influence of globalization or hybridity of cultures on visual perception of advertising.

Furthermore, Okazaki and Mueller (2007) note that Asia has collectively dominated the regions researched, followed by North America and Western Europe, with the Arab world and Central-Eastern Europe having a miniscule number and Africa as well as Latin America none. It is noteworthy that none of the Nisbett (2004) experiments compared various Asian cultural groups with each other, let alone groups from other geo-linguistic regions as the present study has.

Certainly, research in various markets is imperative for fine-tuning global advertising by product category, target segment and advertising medium for intercultural effectiveness. Nonetheless, as a consequence of the present study it is possible to generate some tentative propositions for further research:

1. That the divergence in visual perception of global advertising between emerging markets across geographic regions may be just as significant as that between any such markets and industrialized 'western' ones.
2. That differences in visual perception across emerging markets may be less pronounced among their cosmopolitan middle classes for globalized advertising of up-market brands such as in fashion and luxury products.
3. That variations in visual perception of global advertising across emerging markets, due to differing historical-political and social-cultural contexts, may necessitate contingency approaches to adaptation-standardization of strategy.

Noting the diverse disciplinary roots of the burgeoning field of visual studies in their review of academic publications, Barnhurst *et al* (2004) classify these as being either philosophical, sociological, psychological or technological. The philosophical perspective raises theoretical issues of visual culture, communication, growth of visuals, technological enhancement and the like. The sociological one deals primarily with the mass media, and draws relationships with society, politics and culture. The psychological school is concerned largely with visual perception, literacy, knowledge and information usually at the individual level. Finally, the technological approach explores new media forms, seeing their impact as either revolutionary or evolutionary. Drawing on interdisciplinary sources, Borgerson and Schroeder (2002) raise further the ethical issue of misrepresentation in inter-cultural marketing communication through the irresponsible use of stereotypical, provocative, demeaning, even false images. With its focus on visual perception, the psychological perspective predominate in the present study, though its comparative context suggests that elements of the sociological and philosophical ones are also influential.

Practitioner Applications

Marketers are invariably keen to devise secondary messages that are persuasive without being offending, so as to optimize product consumption, thus monopolizing control over the meaning of the advertisement. Using eye-tracking, Pieters and Wedel (2004) confirm that the visual image in any advertisement is more significant than text-size and even brand in capturing consumer attention. Through visual portrayal of the good life alone, advertising is able to promote the attendant cultural values of materialism without allowing for much dissent via verbal argumentation. The present study suggests that the use of visuals may represent the ultimate personalization of advertising to a target market segment. With the use of images the consumer is subtly welcomed into creating meaning out of an incomplete message which then evokes identification and involvement, causing such advertising to prove memorable and more persuasive of purchase.

While emerging markets may be at a similar stage of economic development, they do have differing cultures, histories, political systems, levels of technology and media exposure. Depending on the mix across markets, de Mooij (2005) astutely reminds global advertisers that they have a choice of six communication strategies, ranging from fully-standardized to one-concept/different-executions.

Otherwise consumer incongruence with the marketer's approach could lead to distaste and consequently an unfavorable response to the product, as experiments on advertising images using local/foreign models and local/foreign brands by Zhou *et al* (2015) demonstrate. Thus, effective execution of global advertising campaigns for emerging markets necessitates adopting a contingency approach to optimizing creative strategies. Given that the current research has discerned general predispositions in visual perception by certain emerging markets, these are suggestive of a tentative spectrum of adaptation strategies for globalised advertising (Table 2).

Table 2: *Perception predispositions and visual strategies*

Emerging Market	Foreground-Context	Persons-Group	Cosmopolitan-Parochial	Symbolic-Literal		Visual Strategy
Vietnam	Slightly foreground-focussed	Moderately group-oriented	Mildly parochial / fairly tolerant	Highly interpretive / symbolic	⇨	Moderate adaptation advisable
Egypt	Mostly context-focussed	Strongly group-oriented	Fairly parochial / rather conservative	Highly interpretive / symbolic	⇨	Significant adaptation preferable
Peru	Fairly context-focussed	Moderately group-oriented	Rather cosmopolitan / more liberal	Moderately interpretive/ literal	⇨	Limited adaptation imperative

While the operationalization of the concept of 'glocalization' (Kerin and Peterson, 2001) has often proved problematic, the present exploratory study proposes a range of visual strategies for emerging markets in diverse geo-linguistic regions. In order to build strong global brands, multinational corporations should paradoxically focus on being perceived visually as quasi-local. Thus, marketers need to be flexible about incorporating adaptations in advertising execution recommended by their regional counterparts. Nonetheless, all marketing communications, from advertising to order processing have to be in alignment with the global corporate positioning as Schroeder (2004) advocated. Perhaps a pragmatic approach might be to identify shared consumer needs rather than differing cultural values, as Sadarangani *et al* (2016) propose for advertising of services in China and India. Even when its economies-of-scale sound attractive, standardized advertising is seldom the optimal approach because of the risks eliciting the undesirable perceptions in certain markets even of similar economic development as the present study findings imply.

Envisioning the Future

Digitization of both still and moving images and their ease of transmission via the internet especially have contributed in recent years to a visual revolution in global marketing. The inexorable trend towards online and social media has spawned a whole new producer and consumer vocabulary drawn from other art forms, which has been inadequately tackled in academic research despite being clearly overdue. Arguably the global shift towards image-dominant communication – already in the contemporary generation and in emerging economies as well – may resemble the perceptual orientation of indigenous peoples who have lacked a dominant print culture of language (St Clair et al, 2000). Hence visual imagery may supersede the need for rationale proposition in any advertisement, thus rendering any reinforcing text or copy almost redundant. On the one hand, this extensive use of images in advertising and other commercially-driven media might be distracting consumers from thinking through verbal propositions about products and brands, towards deciding purchase based on emotional response to the visual images. On the other, if intercultural perception of visual imagery is neglected in advertising practice, then the risks of non-

communication and mis-communication could spell reputational and financial consequences for global marketers, about which the this study may serve as a salutary reminder.

Finally, this research article advocates conceptualizing visual perception of advertising worldwide as a continuum of vernaculars, rather than as contrasting or discrete modes typified by earlier research. Often based on somewhat dated cultural typologies, results from the latter may not coincide with actual perception, attitudes and decisions of adult consumers from the target markets. As Cayla and Arnould (2008) advocate, research on global advertising and branding needs to be culturally and historically grounded, sensitive to symbolisms of context, if it is to overcome an inherent ethnocentric bias from the developed or industrialized world. The inductively derived findings of the present qualitative study may not lend themselves as readily to generalizable hypotheses on cultural difference as prior studies have tended simplistically to promote. While academia may tend to be predisposed towards explanatory models on the intercultural appeal of global advertising, marketers may be more amenable to experimenting with contingency approaches in regional markets taking into account history, economy and culture. In an era of pervasive media access, it is imperative for global marketers to ascertain whether visual images utilized are perceived as dynamically equivalent by intercultural target segments if their advertising is to communicate effectively in competitive emerging markets.

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