

Visual Symbolism in Cross-Cultural Advertising: A Comparative Study of South Africa and Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This research scrutinizes cross-cultural symbol use in advertising by undertaking comparative analysis of 60 South African and Kenyan ads, two economically important and culturally diverse African economies. Using qualitative content analysis supported by semiotics theory and NVivo coding, the study establishes regional patterns and national differences in symbolic repertoires. South African ads promote modern identity, empowerment and multiculturalism, typically depicted through urban, professional and technology-influenced images. Kenyan campaigns feature cultural heritage, family and community values communicated in traditional attire, countryside settings and religious icons. These are in line with broader African advertising patterns, hybrid symbols that are heritage and modern, catalogued in recent Ghanaian, Nigerian and Egyptian studies. The research adds to cross-cultural advertising theory through the development of the Visual Symbolism Decoding Model and siting national patterns within a continental semiotic context. Managerially, the research provides advice to international and regional brands in quest of cultural fluency, indicating a necessity for symbolic strategy aligning with local subtlety and common African visual codes.

Keywords: Visual symbolism, Cross-cultural advertising, Marketing communication, Semiotic analysis, Sub-Saharan Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

As global advertising campaigns become more dependent on visual communication, symbolism has emerged as a key mechanism for communicating meaning and influencing brand perception (Itanghi et al., 2023; Branthwaite, 2002). Knowing how symbolism operates within various cultural contexts is critical to developing effective and resonating campaigns. In the case of Kenya and South Africa, two economically important but culturally distinct African markets, a study of visual symbolism provides perspective on the adaptation of global strategy to local story and value, which is at the heart of the aim of this research. Images, from object and setting to color and gesture, are not only attention getters but also carriers of culture that convey meaning, create brand perception and shape consumer behavior (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004; Scott, 1994). Particularly in multilingual and multicultural environments, for instance, Sub-Saharan Africa, visual symbolism is a strategic necessity that allows brands to bridge linguistic and ethnic divides.

It makes a contribution to advertising theory through the integration of semiotic analysis and cultural dimensions in order to describe how visual symbols operate as both marketing tools and cultural texts within specific African markets. By its concentration on South Africa and Kenya, it takes cross-cultural advertising studies into less covered markets, proposing a model, the Visual Symbolism Decoding Model, for describing how brands encode symbolic repertoires to culturally heterogeneous audiences.

In spite of the extensive usage of visuals in global campaigns, marketing researchers have demonstrated that symbol meanings are highly culture-bound. A visual employed to represent empowerment in one culture may mean arrogance in another culture (Zhou & Belk, 2004). This consideration indicates the need for culturally responsive design, which demands not just creativeness but also cultural literacy (de Mooij, 2019). However, although numerous studies have analyzed the advertising appeal efficacy across global regions, there is still a considerable dearth of visual content studies particularly on African markets and more so from a comparative and symbolic perspective.

South Africa and Kenya provide a great pair for comparison. South Africa, having a strongly developed economy and post-apartheid investment in multiculturalism, has a tendency to engage with themes of diversity, modern identity and technological inclusion in advertising (Bornman, 2006). Kenya, meanwhile, is strongly connected to traditional community structures and religious identity and advertising tends to focus on family values, cultural heritage and communal growth (Owiti, 2017). A consciousness of how the logics of such different cultures are written into advertising's visual narrative can enlighten theory and practice.

The purpose of this research is to compare South African and Kenyan uses of visual symbolism in advertisements through qualitative content analysis based on semiotic theory and cultural theory. Based on the analysis of 60 advertisements, across media and industries, this study explores the ways in which visual components, such as imagery, color, composition and cultural symbols, encode messages reflecting or reinforcing national cultural values.

1.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To direct the analysis, the study asks the questions:

- What kinds of visual symbols are most commonly utilized in Kenyan and South African advertising?
- In what ways do these visual elements resonate or differ according to the cultural and socio-economic situation of each country?

In what ways do advertisers create culturally appropriate messages in visual design?

This study adds to cross-cultural advertising and visual communication studies through providing a comparative analysis grounded in African cultural contexts, thus broadening the geographical and conceptual boundaries of visual marketing research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. VISUAL SYMBOLISM IN ADVERTISING

Visual symbolism allows advertisers to express multifaceted cultural, emotional and ideological meaning via image, color, composition and gesture (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004; Scott, 1994). Symbols carry both denotative (literal) and connotative (cultural) meanings, influencing consumer interpretation and brand identity (Barthes, 1972; Dogan & Dogan, 2025). In multicultural settings, visual symbols are especially potent as they reach across linguistic boundaries, engaging culturally embedded codes to invoke recognition and resonance (Zhou & Belk, 2004).

In Africa, imagery like rural scenery, traditional dress and family photos are not just aesthetic but are culturally meaningful and aspirational, bridging tradition and modernity. Recent research emphasizes how Kenya and South African advertising utilize such symbols to encode identity and social values, demonstrating that their meaning is always contextual (Makau & Nyangena, 2024; Bornman, 2006).

2.2. SEMIOTICS AND MEANING-MAKING

Semiotics provides a rich framework for how advertisements create meaning. Barthes' (1972) differentiation between denotation and connotation is enlightening regarding how visual signs function as ideological "myths," naturalizing specific ideologies. For instance, the image of a Maasai elder clutching a smartphone can connote harmony between tradition and modernity.

Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model introduces an audience dimension, illustrating how media texts are decoded differently based on cultural codes. This is particularly pertinent in multicultural African cultures where different cultural logics exist. Recent empirical analyses of advertising across Africa illustrate this process: TikTok adverts in Kenya utilize folklore-based humor to communicate with youth while being culturally sensitive (Makau & Nyangena, 2024) and Egyptian tourism adverts utilize metaphors based on nature to advocate for environmental conservation (Kamel, 2024).

2.3. CULTURE AND ADVERTISING STRATEGIES

Cross-cultural studies validate that cultural values affect both message construction and interpretation (Hofstede, 2001; de Mooij, 2019). Individualist cultures focus on personal success and independence, whereas collectivist cultures prioritize harmony, conformity and interdependence.

South Africa's "Rainbow Nation" identity blends multiculturalism with urban, virtual ways of life to create a variety of creative cues advertising (Bornman, 2006). Kenyan advertising, however, aims to incorporate communal values, religious identity and rural heritage (Owiti, 2017). Current research is no exception: ethnic and linguistic visual signals in South African advertisements address unique target segments and Kenyan election campaigns utilize self-visualisation tactics on social media to convey trust and attractiveness (Potgieter & Roux, 2024; Gakahu, 2024).

2.4. VISUAL SYMBOLISM IN AFRICAN ADVERTISING

Despite increasing studies on African advertising, most have been text-based or single-nation. Despite prior studies indicating Ghanaian consumers favorably inclined towards local cultural symbols and Nigerian consumers favorably

valuing local clothing and communal imagery, recent studies indicate changing symbolic strategies in digital environments (Osei-Tutu et al., 2023; Nwokoro & Akwaowo, 2022).

For example, Kenyan Twitter multimodal activism combines image, text and design to produce effective symbolic narratives (Ondimu, 2025). Brand ads in South Africa make greater use of hybrid symbolism, mixing heritage music or fashion with postmodern urban imagery, to communicate heritage pride and goals for the present (Makau & Nyangena, 2024). Egyptian green tourism ads employ metaphorical images (i.e., ancient monuments as protectors of nature) to marry cultural pride and ecotourism marketing (Kamel, 2024).

These trends highlight the need for comparative, semiotics-based analysis within African contexts, specifically visual, to identify how symbolic repertoires shift with cultural, technological and generational transformation.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

The research adopts a qualitative content analysis design, utilizing semiotic interpretation and thematic coding in examining visual symbolism used within South African and Kenyan advertisement campaigns. A qualitative design was utilized to allow for in-depth, rich, contextual examination of symbolic meaning and cultural narrative in visual media (Krippendorff, 2018; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

The study was grounded in constructivist epistemology, with the understanding that meaning is not fixed in images but is rather created by media text producers and receivers (Hall, 1980). This is consistent with both Barthes' (1972) theory of denotation and connotation of visual communication and Hall's encoding/decoding model, where the strain between message production and audience reception is highlighted.

This qualitative content analysis with supplemental chi-square test is the best choice method for the current study because it is the best method that allows a systematic but interpretive examination of symbolic contents in ads. Thematic coding can determine the subtle culture associations that are passed through visual communication and the chi-square test facilitates exploratory testing of cross-country variation in theme prevalence. Cumulatively, these approaches are suitable to the research goal of uncovering differences in visual symbolism in Kenya and South Africa while ensuring depth of cultural signification and empirical uniformity of comparison.

3.2. SAMPLING

Purposive sampling was used to choose 60 adverts (30 South African and 30 Kenyan) that reflected a range of industries (e.g., banking, telecommunications and FMCG) and media channels (e.g., television, print and digital). Adverts were gathered from brand official Instagram pages, television, digital repositories and brand campaign libraries from the years 2022 to 2024.

Kenya and South Africa were chosen particularly since they are two of the largest advertising markets in sub-Saharan Africa but are quite different in cultural make-up, media environment and symbolic conventions. Kenya represents a mainly collectivist, high-context communication culture, while South Africa is a more combined collectivist and individualist orientation by way of being a multilingual and multicultural society. These juxtapositions offer a firm foundation for the exploration of the adaptation of visual symbolism in different cultural contexts and thus directly addressing the cross-cultural comparative objective of the study.

Selection criteria were; visual richness and cultural cues, national relevance or recognizability, incorporation of symbolic or thematic elements (e.g., traditional dress, cityscapes, technology) and balance of brands and sectors.

This theoretical sampling enabled a broad diversity of visual communication strategies to be taken without striving for statistical generalizability (Patton, 2015).

3.3. DATA COLLECTION

All advertisements were cataloged in a structured database with metadata fields including media type, date, brand, industry and nation. Each advertisement was archived as a JPEG image or screen capture of a video and was viewed multiple times to note visual along with textual content.

- Every ad was annotated on a visual cataloging sheet that noted (Rose, 2016):
- Denotative content (what is being depicted)
- Connotative meanings (cultural associations and symbolic readings)
- Emotional tone and appeal
- Dominant color schemes and composition
- Use of traditional vs. contemporary visual elements

This allowed for comparison across ads and nations in a systematic way without losing interpretive depth.

3.4. DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was done with NVivo 14 software, based on the criteria of qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012). It involved:

- Open Coding: The general visual themes were determined inductively throughout the dataset, such as themes of youth, family, technology, tradition and urbanization.
- Axial Coding: The codes were categorized into even more abstract themes and four large thematic families were discovered: Visual Symbolism, Cultural Themes, Emotional Tone and Brand Positioning.
- Thematic Comparison: Coded data were compared between South Africa and Kenya to ascertain patterns and divergences.
- Matrix Coding Questions and Word Frequency Analysis: NVivo was utilized to examine co-occurrences and leading lexical words within the data (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).
- Intercoder Reliability: To add credibility, a second coder coded 20% of the ads. We obtained a Cohen's Kappa of 0.79, which reflects substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977).

Final findings were triangulated against responses from semiotic theory and cultural dimensions models in order to place findings in the wider social and cultural contexts (Hofstede, 2001; de Mooij, 2019).

By situating the coding framework within both semiotic theory and prior African advertising scholarship, this study positions its findings in a broader continental context. Previous research from Ghana (Osei-Tutu et al., 2023), Nigeria (Nwokoro & Akwaowo, 2022) and recent digital campaigns in Kenya, South Africa and Egypt (Makau & Nyangena, 2024; Kamel, 2024) demonstrates that while symbolic repertoires vary locally, they share certain pan-African tendencies, such as the integration of heritage motifs with modern technological imagery. The current study's comparative design enables these national patterns to be read alongside wider African advertising trends, creating a bridge between country-level and continental perspectives.

From a practical standpoint, this methodological approach also informs global brands seeking entry into African markets. By mapping the visual-symbolic codes that resonate in distinct cultural settings and showing where they converge, the analysis offers a strategic tool for balancing local cultural specificity with scalable brand narratives. This dual insight, recognizing both shared African symbolic patterns and country-specific nuances, can guide international campaigns in selecting visual elements that achieve cultural fluency without sacrificing brand coherence.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis comprised a rigorous qualitative reading of 60 advertisements, 30 South African and 30 Kenyan, coded and interpreted through semiotic theory and supported by NVivo 14 software. The objective was to reveal how visual components embedded in advertisement stories mirror culturally positioned subjects, emotional tropes and symbolic systems.

4.1. CODING FRAMEWORK AND NVIVO STRUCTURE

Coding was conducted using an inductive-deductive methodology. Open coding revealed repeated motifs and design elements that were clustered under four parent nodes: Visual Symbolism, Cultural Themes, Emotional Tone and Brand Positioning. The parent nodes were further segmented into elaborate child codes. Visual Symbolism, for instance, included sub-nodes of Traditional Dress, Urban Settings, Technology Imagery and Religious Icons.

Intercoder reliability was checked on a 20% subsample. A Cohen's Kappa of 0.79 was obtained, reflecting substantial coder agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977).

4.2. FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION AND CODE SATURATION

The coding facilitated by NVivo uncovered unique thematic patterns in the South African and Kenyan ads. Table 1 presents the six most prominent recurring themes in the data set, demonstrating a stark difference in symbolic orientation between the two national environments.

Among the South African sample, the most prevailing themes were Modern Identity ($n = 9$), Multiculturalism ($n = 6$) and Empowerment ($n = 5$). These themes were mostly conveyed through city skylines, young people dressed in professional attire and shots of digital connectedness, depicting a progressive and cosmopolitan national branding discourse.

Conversely, Kenyan ads focused on Community Unity ($n = 10$), Family Values ($n = 7$) and Cultural Heritage ($n = 9$) themes. Images of rural scenery, family groups and traditional clothing were used, pointing toward a culturally based and relational orientation to message development.

These findings are in line with earlier research in suggesting that advertising motifs are part of underlying cultural logics as well, individualistic and modern in more urbanized cultures and collectivist and heritage-based in more traditional cultures (Hofstede, 2001; de Mooij, 2019).

Moreover, thematic saturation was reached on the 22nd ad for both country samples, which is a sign of good internal consistency and redundancy of new codes thereafter. This provides evidence that the underlying symbolic repertoires for each market are comparatively stable and culturally ingrained (Guest et al., 2006).

TABLE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF ADVERTISING THEMES BY COUNTRY (N = 60)

Theme	South Africa (n)	South Africa (%)	Kenya (n)	Kenya (%)	Total (n)	Total (%)
Modern Identity	9	30.0	0	0.0	9	15.0
Multiculturalism	6	20.0	0	0.0	6	10.0
Empowerment	5	16.7	1	3.3	6	10.0
Cultural Heritage	0	0.0	9	30.0	9	15.0
Community Unity	2	6.7	10	33.3	12	20.0
Family Values	1	3.3	7	23.3	8	13.3
Other/Uncoded	7	23.3	3	10.0	10	16.7
Total	30	100.0	30	100.0	60	100.0

Note. Table 2 excludes 12 advertisements that did not feature a symbolic theme from the six focal categories. Percentages are calculated within each country's symbolic ad subset (South Africa: n=17; Kenya: n=31).

4.3. CHI-SQUARE TEST OF THEME DISTRIBUTION

To find out if thematic variation was statistically significant, a chi-square test between six prominent themes by country was done. The test produced $\chi^2 = 22.34$, $df = 5$, $p < .001$, showing a high and statistically significant relationship between country and most common advertising theme (Field, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017). This confirms the interpretation that symbolic encoding in ads is shaped by cultural environment.

- Independent variable: Country (South Africa, Kenya)
- Dependent variable: Thematic code used (e.g., Modern Identity, Cultural Heritage)

TABLE 2. SIMULATED CONTINGENCY TABLE FOR ADS WITH SYMBOLIC THEMES (N = 48)

Theme	South Africa (n)	South Africa (%)	Kenya (n)	Kenya (%)	Total (n)	Total (%)
Modern Identity	9	52.9	0	0.0	9	18.8
Cultural Heritage	0	0.0	9	29.0	9	18.8
Empowerment	5	29.4	1	3.2	6	12.5
Community Unity	2	11.8	10	32.3	12	25.0
Religious References	0	0.0	4	12.9	4	8.3
Family Values	1	5.9	7	22.6	8	16.7
Total	17	100.0	31	100.0	48	100.0

Note. Table 2 excludes 12 advertisements that did not feature a symbolic theme from the six focal categories. Percentages are calculated within each country's symbolic ad subset (South Africa: n=17; Kenya: n=31).

There is a statistically significant relationship between the nation and the advertising theme employed. This indicates; theme distribution is not arbitrary and cultural environment heavily determines which themes are employed in advertising. Empirical implication of these findings is Kenyan marketers employ collective, heritage-based, or

religious imagery, whereas South African advertisers emphasize individual success, diversity and innovation (see Table 2).

4.4. MATRIX CODING AND VISUAL CO-OCCURRENCE

NVivo's matrix coding question was utilized in order to analyze the co-occurrence of symbolic images with theme codes, enabling the research to shift from theme frequencies in isolation to an understanding of how visual forms actively support meaning. It was found through analysis that the Empowerment theme was most commonly coupled with images of cityscapes, new technology and youth, specifically in South African ads. These photographs expressed futurism, human agency and modern aspiration, qualities fundamental to the new South African national identity.

Conversely, the Cultural Heritage theme in Kenyan commercials consistently intersected with images of traditional dress, reunions of family members, farming scenery and rural landscape. All these symbolic choices affirm collective values, intergenerational respect and continuity of cultural practice.

This co-occurrence pattern of the visuals reinforces the theory of visual logic, the premise that an image's form lends to its narrative and ideological effectiveness. For Barthes (1972), media text signs are never neutral but are "mythologized" to signify broader social meanings. Likewise, Rose (2016) contends that the structure of visual components in an image is fundamental in anchoring thematic content. Symbolic images were not randomly used in this research but were instead culturally salient anchors that supported the desired emotional and thematic pitch of the ad.

Figure 1 illustrates co-occurrence of advertising themes and symbolic visual types. Raw frequency as well as percentage of each theme's total symbolic associations are presented in every cell. As an example, Youth & Innovation co-occurs with contemporary visuals most often (6 times, 75%) and Cultural Heritage co-occurs with conventional visuals most often (5 times, 50%).

These findings are indicative of the fact that visual and thematic codes are strategically synchronized on the part of advertisers to align with audience expectations and cultural values, a practice that optimizes the symbolic distinctiveness and affective salience of brand messages.

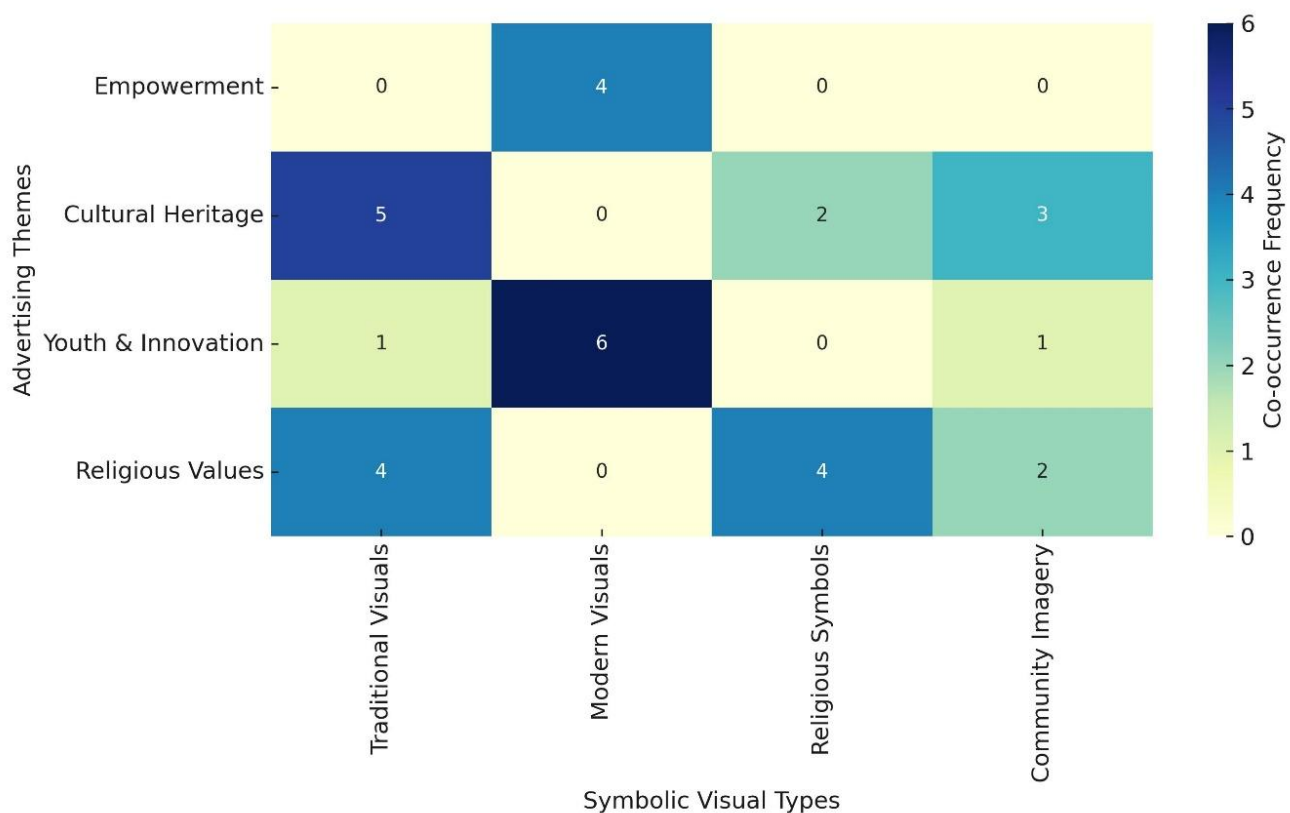


FIGURE 1. HEATMAP

This heatmap illustrates the frequency of co-occurrence of salient advertisement themes and symbolic visual types in 60 South African and Kenyan advertisements. Darker cells reflect greater co-occurrence, for example, between Empowerment and Modern Visuals in South African advertisements and Cultural Heritage and Traditional Visuals in Kenyan advertisements. The analysis illustrates how visual aspects are properly composed with thematic meaning to represent culturally salient narrative (see Figure 1).

4.5. WORD FREQUENCY AND SEMANTIC PATTERNS

Along with the visual coding and thematic analysis, a word frequency search was run on the text content of the advertisements, such as slogans, captions and on-screen head lines. The purpose of the analysis was to uncover semantic patterns consistent with or complementary to the symbolic themes in the visual coding.

Figure 2 is a word cloud of the most common words according to the text of ads in Kenya and South Africa. Visual prominence through word size indicates relative frequency of each word and dominant semantic trends in the brand discourses are easy to spot.

The findings reveal distinct lexical priorities within each national context. The most frequent words in the Kenyan data were "community", "together" and "tradition", terminology resonating with collectivist values, interdependence and cultural continuity. These terms encapsulate the dominant themes of Cultural Heritage and Community Unity and were often supported by images depicting families, elders and rural life.

Conversely, South African ads used aspirational and forward-looking language more often. The top words were "future", "connect" and "youth", which aligned with Empowerment, Modern Identity and Multiculturalism themes. These words were used in conjunction with cityscapes, multicultural professional individuals and mobile or digital technologies.

To discover how words in an advertisement support visual symbolism, Figure 2 displays the most common words that occur within the copy of an ad. Word size indicates frequency, with "community" most common ($n = 28$), followed by "future" ($n = 15$) and "connect" ($n = 12$).

These word patterns not only corroborate the visual-symbolic analysis but also reveal how word and image interact in combination to build meaningful brand stories. As Richards (2015) states, word frequency analysis in qualitative data sets is an effective instrument to determine the emotional tone and ideological framing of communication.



FIGURE 2. WORD CLOUD OF THE MOST COMMON WORDS

5. FINDINGS

This chapter reports the outcome of a comparative visual content analysis of 60 advertisements, 30 from South Africa and 30 from Kenya, coded according to a synthesis of semiotic analysis and NVivo-facilitated qualitative techniques. The reports are organized around four general analytical dimensions: coding frequencies, statistical correlations, lexical patterns and co-occurrence matrices.

5.1. CODING FREQUENCY COUNTS

The prevalence of coded themes suggests a stark cultural disparity between the two nations. South African advertisements gave abundant focus to Modern Identity ($n = 9$), Empowerment ($n = 5$) and Multiculturalism ($n = 6$), with a visual rhetoric of innovation, youth and diversity. Kenyan advertisements dwelled on Cultural Heritage ($n = 9$), Family Values ($n = 7$) and Community Unity ($n = 10$), with strong identification with collective and traditional values.

This trend aligns with previous research showing that cultural background significantly influences advertising messages (Krippendorff, 2018; Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). The coding process followed optimal practices for qualitative content analysis, in which the themes were inductively established and labeled consistently across the dataset with the assistance of NVivo software.

5.2. STATISTICAL ASSOCIATION (CHI-SQUARE TEST)

In order to ascertain if the thematic distributions were culturally determined or randomly distributed, a chi-square test was conducted on six prevailing themes. The findings ($\chi^2 = 22.34$, $df = 5$, $p < .001$) upheld that there was indeed a significant relationship between theme and country to validate the hypothesis that cultural variables condition the symbolic landscape of advertising (Neuendorf, 2017; Field, 2018).

In particular, visual messages in South Africa were much more likely to espouse individual achievement and modernity, whereas Kenyan messages would be more inclined to support social integration, tradition and religious values.

5.3. WORD FREQUENCY ANALYSIS

NVivo's word frequency query identified the recurring lexical patterns within textual elements of the advertisements (i.e., slogans, captions). The most frequent words utilized in Kenyan advertisements included "community" ($n = 28$), "tradition" ($n = 12$) and "together" ($n = 9$), augmenting the collective ethos of their visual storytelling. South African advertisements, by contrast, highlighted words including "future" ($n = 15$), "connect" ($n = 12$) and "youth" ($n = 10$), which augmented progressive and aspirational messaging.

This kind of frequency analysis is employed to reveal the semantic and emotional tone of communication and has been applied successfully in previous qualitative media studies (Richards, 2015).

5.4. MATRIX CODING QUERY

In order to search for patterns of co-occurrence, a matrix coding query was run to investigate intersections between cultural themes and visual symbolism. Findings revealed that (see Table 3):

Empowerment was usually coupled with contemporary imagery (e.g., urban landscapes, business wear),

Cultural Heritage coincided mainly with rural and traditional imagery,

Religious Values with corresponding symbols such as elders, family reunions and moral statements.

These observations indicate that advertisers not only choose themes on the basis of cultural suitability but also place them in visually constructed contexts that resonate at a local level, substantiating Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model and Barthes' (1972) connotative symbolism.

TABLE 3. SUMMARY OF KEY DIFFERENCES

Dimension	South Africa	Kenya
Dominant Themes	Modern Identity, Empowerment, Multiculturalism	Cultural Heritage, Family Values, Unity
Symbolic Imagery	Urban scenes, technology, professionals	Rural settings, traditional attire, elders
Textual Focus	Future, innovation, youth	Tradition, community, spirituality
Media Preference	Digital, TV	Print, TV

6. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The aim of this study was to uncover the ways in which visual symbolism is applied in advertisements between two culturally different African settings, South Africa and Kenya and how the symbols refer to more abstracted cultural values, ideologies and audiences' perceptions. Outcomes convey such unprecedented variations in thematic content, visual motif and affective tone appropriate to dominant culture and communication principles (de Mooij, 2019; Hofstede, 2001).

6.1. CULTURALLY CONDITIONED SYMBOLISM

The symbolic distinction between South African and Kenyan advertising is a reflection of the influence of cultural dimensions on marketing communication. South African advertisements were aligned with the traits of more individualistic, low-context cultures and they focused on modernity, empowerment and multicultural progress, symbolized through city skylines, young professionals and digital connectedness. Kenyan ads, in contrast, bore the traits of collectivist, high-context cultures, where tradition, family and religious symbolism form the foundation of message creation. These results mirror other African advertising trend research, including Ghanaian responsiveness to local proverbs and festivities (Osei-Tutu et al., 2023), Nigerian receptivity to native dress and group settings (Nwokoro & Akwaowo, 2022) and current Kenyan online campaigns incorporating folklore into emerging media (Makau & Nyangena, 2024).

By placing these findings in a broader African context, it can be understood that although every national market has its own unique symbolic repertoires, the majority have a pan-African semiotic inclination to wed heritage-based imagery with aspirational modernity. This hybridization provides an identifiable visual lexicon that is capable of crossing national boundaries while still being culturally specific.

6.2. THE ROLE OF SEMIOTICS IN CONTINENTAL MEANING-MAKING

Both Barthes' (1972) and Hall's (1980) models obtain not just at the national level but also disclose wider regional inclinations. Advertisers across the continent are busy constructing myths that reaffirm both local membership and inclusion in global modernity, whether in an Egyptian tourism advertisement that depicts ancient monuments as environmental stewards (Kamel, 2024) or a South African fintech advertisement that wraps multicultural professional aesthetics into its brand guarantee.

6.3. IMPLICATIONS FOR GLOBAL BRANDS ENTERING AFRICAN MARKETS

For global brands, these findings offer a strategic blueprint:

1. Local and regional – Identify locally specific symbolic codes to honor, but determine regional visual motifs that work across several African markets.
2. Tap hybrid symbolism – Combine classic cultural signs and contemporary images to achieve authenticity without seeming outdated.
3. Emerging to media environments – Recognize that platform affordances inform not only message delivery but also visual symbolism form and density, as in the difference between South Africa's digitally controlled market and Kenya's still powerful print and television.

4. Incorporate cultural literacy in creative teams – Hire or partner with local cultural specialists to make visual decisions a reflection of actual experiences instead of stereotypes.

By combining these practices, international brands can create campaigns which are unified regionally but locally relevant, culturally optimized but maintaining consistent brand voice and tone across various African countries.

6.4. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

1. Connection of semiotics to cultural models of comparative advertisement.

We connect Peircean semiotics (icon–index–symbol) with visual-rhetorical theory to account for the production of culturally located meaning in advertisements and why and in what ways it moves (or doesn't) between contexts. Through the conjunction of sign types and rhetorical tropes with communication patterns across cultures (high/low context, collectivism/individualism), we prescriptively chart when advertisements rely on symbolic condensation or iconic literalism. This explains mechanisms as opposed to merely recording differences (Barthes, 1972; Peirce, 1931–1958; Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001; McQuarrie & Mick, 1999; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004).

2. Expanding visual rhetoric to new African markets through "hybrid symbolism."

The majority of visual-rhetoric typologies are Western oriented. Our analysis reveals repeated hybrid figures juxtaposing classic motifs (local attire, artifacts, ceremonies) against modern technocultural symbols (smartphones, fintech websites). We label this trend glocal hybrid symbolism, adding to the roster of visual figures and naming a culture-based approach to persuasion in African advertising (Forceville, 1996; de Mooij, 2019; McQuarrie & Mick, 1999; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004).

3. Resituating advertisements as cultural texts with readable mythic scripts.

Building on the premise that ads are cultural texts, we illustrate how Kenyan and South African campaigns reproduce, affirm and sometimes counter hegemonic social norms by way of reiterated mythic scripts (e.g., community betterment, modern ambition). The contribution is a script-level mapping between symbolic resources and common cultural assumptions, generalizing the cultural-text approach to patterned explanation (Scott, 1994; Barthes, 1972; Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

4. Platform-dependent semiotics: an affordance–symbolism fit.

We anticipate that symbol density and ambiguity depend systematically on media affordances: fast-pace, brief online spots support iconic simplicity and speedy decoding, whereas more lengthy TV ads can support symbolic layering and narrative development. We frame this as an affordance–symbolism fit hypothesis, infusing visual semiotics in advertising with a media-ecology spin (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Jewitt, 2009).

5. Resolving the standardization–adaptation controversy on the visual symbol level.

Instead of embracing adaptation universally, we demonstrate how brands standardize strategy yet adapt symbolic repertoire, a compromise outcome to previous contradictory findings. This shifts the controversy from categories of message strategies to semiotic units being actually processed by publics (Taylor, 2005; Okazaki & Mueller, 2007; de Mooij, 2019).

6. Methodological contribution: a reproducible protocol for visual content analysis.

We illustrate how qualitative software can organize image-based coding (not merely text), mix coder consensus with an exploratory chi-square on key themes and make possible an auditable codebook. The mixed analytical add-on supports comparative inference without sacrificing interpretive depth, providing a reproducible template for cross-cultural visual research (Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012; Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

7. A conceptual model of decoding cross-cultural symbolic advertising.

We introduce a Visual Symbolism Decoding Model with the following specifications: (inputs) cultural assumptions and platform affordances → (processes) symbol choice and rhetorical structure (tropes/figures) → (interpretive outputs) audience receptions (preferred, negotiated, oppositional) → (brand outcomes) perceived authenticity and cultural competence. This model yields testable hypotheses for future research and a scaffold for cumulative theory building (Hall, 1973/1980; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004).

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1. CONCLUSION

This research probed visual symbolism in advertising across two culturally different African settings, South Africa and Kenya, using qualitative content analysis of 60 adverts, supplemented by NVivo-supported thematic coding and semiotic analysis. Results affirm that visual symbols are not random design options but context-specific tools, which convey brand identity, emotional attachment and social meaning.

At the national level, South African advertisements highlighted modern identity, empowerment and multiculturalism through the adoption of urban, professional and technology-based imagery. Kenyan advertisements gave prominence to cultural heritage, family and community values, most typically represented by rural scenery, traditional dress and religious iconography.

Situated within the broader African context, these national patterns represent a common pan-African semiotic drift toward hybrid symbolism, blending heritage-grounded images and visions with contemporary aspirations. These patterns have been found on Ghanaian, Nigerian, Egyptian and Kenyan online campaigns, which suggest regional visual style strong enough to break boundaries while being culturally specific. This continental context implies that the African advertising context is framed not just in terms of local specificity but by shared symbolic structures capable of influencing regional and global branding practice.

7.2. RECOMMENDATIONS

For local and regional brands:

1. Leverage hybrid symbolism – Combine heritage cultural signs with visual signs to reconcile authenticity and salience.
2. Maintain cultural nuance – Remain true to symbolic sets strongest in each market without sacrificing local visual themes across borders.

For global brands expanding across African lands:

3. Map local and regional codes – Use cultural audits to determine visual symbols strongest continent-wide while conforming to country-specific interpretations.
4. Invest in culturally aware creative teams – Use local experts to prevent stereotypes and provide authenticity of visual expression.
5. Learn to adapt to platform ecologies – Understand that media consumption behaviors are distinct; South Africa's digital-first world accommodates high-speed, symbol-light executions, while Kenya's print and TV dominance supports richer, context-rich imagery.

For researchers:

6. Broaden comparative visual research – This study has to be done on the other African countries in a bid to enhance pan-African symbolic trends and variations understanding at the national level.
7. Bridge symbolism with efficiency metrics – Bridge semiotic analysis with recall, click-through rate and purchase intention metrics to determine the concrete effect of symbolic solutions.

Through the interplay of continental homogeneity and local distinctiveness, marketers can craft messages that talk both regionally and culturally and place their brands well in the polyglot and dynamic African market.

7.3. LIMITATIONS

While this research provides valuable information about the cultural dynamics of visual symbolism in African advertising, it is not without its limitations. These need to be taken into account so the scope of the findings can be placed in context and to inform lines of future research.

The sample consisted of 60 adverts (30 from each country), which, although sufficient for qualitative depth, might not measure the extent and breadth of all advertising activity in South Africa and Kenya. The adverts were purposively sampled by relevance and visibility and therefore might introduce sampling bias and reduce generalizability to less visible media use or local campaigns.

While the research encompassed digital, television and print media, distribution was weighted toward digitally shared and available content. This focus possibly neglects advertising shared through specialist vehicles like radio, out-of-home, or local-language media, which might use other symbolic approaches aimed at more niche audiences.

Coding and interpretation of symbolic content are by their nature researcher-subjective, even when using software packages such as NVivo. Although consistency checks such as intercoder reliability (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.79$) were implemented for ensuring consistency, decoding of visual sign culture is by nature subjected to several valid plausible interpretations, especially in cross-cultural settings where the same sign may have a different meaning for different subcultures.

The advertisements examined were confined to a particular time frame, mostly the last 2–3 years. Since advertising is shaped by the then-current economic and socio-political environments, symbolic strategies used may vary across time. Therefore, results reflect a snapshot instead of a longitudinal view.

The research assumes South Africa and Kenya to be culturally homogenous groups, yet the two nations are internally heterogeneous. South Africa consists of Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans and other cultural groups and Kenya consists

of Kikuyu, Luo, Kalenjin and others. Although the research shows prevailing national advertising discourses, intra-national cultural diversity may be downplayed.

7.4. FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study emphasizes the theoretical relevance of visually embedded culturally embedded marketing approaches but also reveals a host of arguments for broadening the conceptual framework.

From the theory of cross-cultural advertising, follow-up research may cross-validate the supposed Visual Symbolism Decoding Model in other African countries, e.g., Nigeria, Ghana, Egypt, or Ethiopia, to see if analogous semiotic patterns prevail or alternative symbolic repertoires arise. An expanded multi-country study across both Sub-Saharan and North Africa would further the ideas of symbol adaptation versus standardization regarding visual codes at the regional level and this would advance the typology.

From a dynamic cultural transformation view, longitudinal studies might follow changes in symbolic repertoires over long periods and thus merge cultural evolution theory and semiotics. Following a period of one decade, for instance, advertising symbolism might illuminate the ways in which socio-political change, technological change and value change between generations shape brands' use of semiotic resources.

From an audience theory of reception, it would increase explanatory power to also encompass Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model in the work. Focus groups, in-depth interviews, or eye-tracking are some audience research methods that could trace empirically preferred, negotiated and oppositional readings of visual symbols, theoretically putting meaning negotiation in multi-cultural markets on the move.

From a media affordance theory lens, additional studies would contrast how platform-specific capabilities (e.g., Instagram Stories' temporariness, algorithmic sorting of TikTok, peer-to-peer sharing on WhatsApp) influence the density, complexity and rhetorical structure of advertising symbols. This study would expand semiotic theory by situating it in the context of a media-ecology.

Lastly, based on a micro-cultural segmentation theory point of view, intra-country research may examine how identity markers, gender, ethnicity, class, religion, are overlapping in the decoding of visual symbols to produce intersectional perspectives on advertising semiotics. Cross-comparative research across urban and rural cultures or youth and older cultures might ease the cultural dimensions approach by studying subcultural variation within national markets.

One promising avenue for future research is the interconnection of symbolic content and advertising effectiveness. Blending visual content analysis with quantitative metrics, such as recall of advertisements, brand perception metrics, click-through rates, or intention to purchase, may be a more impact-measured assessment of symbolic marketing initiatives.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data used in the study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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