

## Visual Communication: Exploring Representations of Vietnamese Culture in Advertising

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### ABSTRACT

**Keywords:** Visual communication; Vietnamese cultural values; Cultural studies; Intercultural communication; IMIVI framework

Visual communication has received much attention from studies in the field of foreign language education. In the Vietnamese context, however, little research has been conducted to explore the meanings of Vietnamese cultural aspects in visual advertising. To fill such a gap, this article investigated visual meanings of Vietnamese cultural values represented in visual elements of common advertising in the Vietnamese market. The data were firstly selected from various logos and images of popular brands in the Vietnamese market and then interpreted based on the Iceberg Model for Interpreting Vietnamese Images (IMIVI framework) (Huynh, 2022). The results revealed the selected advertisements carried core Vietnamese cultural values in terms of visible and invisible elements. Specifically, culturally specific images such as flowers, animals, and traditional clothing were identified as visible factors. Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist values were found as invisible factors in selected images of popular advertisements in the Vietnamese context. Findings reported this article might be helpful for research in visual communication, multimodality, and foreign language education. The outcomes of this article are also interesting for cultural studies, especially for the roles of culture in commercial advertising, intercultural communication, and foreign language education.

### Introduction

In the field of foreign language education, the role of understanding two different cultures in two different languages is highly significant. Soomro et al. (2015) claimed that "the understanding of target culture not only develops competence in communication but also raises awareness regarding the use of language in intercultural communication" (p. 3). Most communication challenges in an international environment are caused by a lack of cultural awareness (Le, 2022; Ngo & Ha, 2022; Pham, 2021; Soomro et al., 2015). This suggests that intercultural understanding not only assists language learners in performing the semantics fully

but also avoids misunderstanding.

As a means of communication, advertising is a multimodal source that carries various meanings created and interpreted by producers and consumers through textual elements, visual elements, sound, and so on. Advertising also carries cultural values (Emery & Tian, 2010). This means understanding cultural meanings in advertising will give a chance for people to enrich their cultural knowledge about a specific country. Our premise is that, in Vietnam, it is not always the case that all customers can realize the Vietnamese cultural values that advertisers want to convey through visual content. Some people may just care about the products' functions and price but forget or misunderstand the other values of the advertisement.

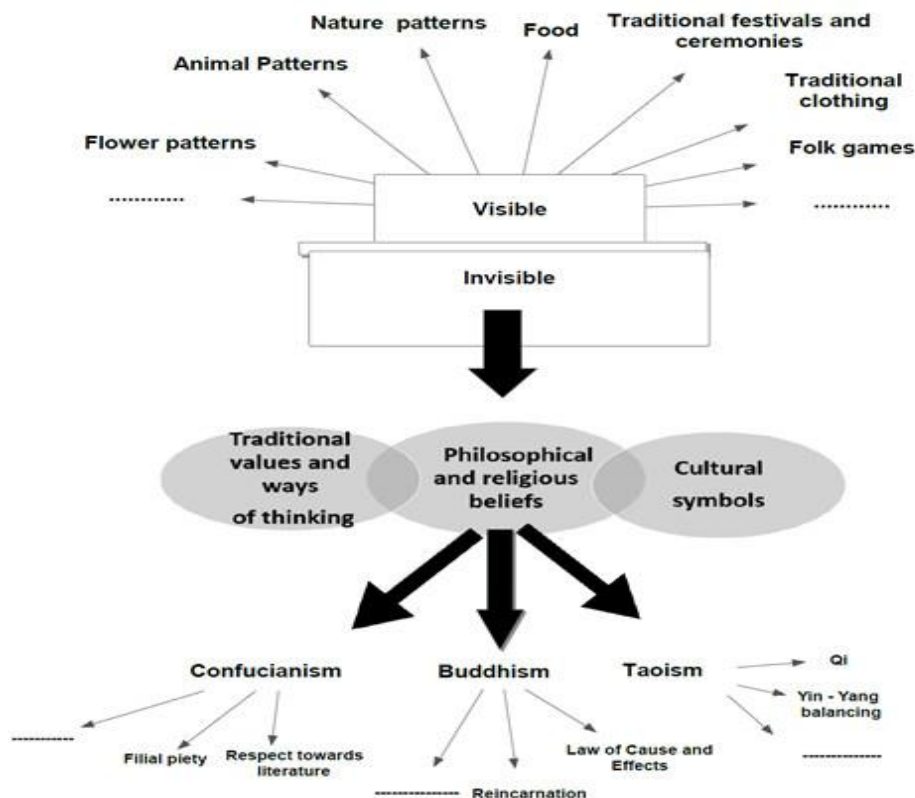
It is clear that cultural values always exist in advertising. In a qualitative analysis study by Abokhoza et al. (2019), which compared Pepsi's ads in Egypt and Pepsi's ads in Saudi Arabia, the findings showed that whether expressed explicitly or implicitly, most ad creators put cultural values first because advertising has both positive and negative influences on customers' life relying on the messages which reflect these values. This showed respect and preservation of their country's culture and helped introduce those spiritual values to other countries around the world. Moreover, cultural meanings are also one factor that contributes to product promotion's success, especially in expressing the value of the product, expanding the market, and attracting customers' attention. Therefore, this study aims to explore Vietnamese cultural values in advertising.

## Literature review

### *Definitions of Culture and the analytical framework for exploring Vietnamese culture*

Scholars in cultural studies have various views on the concept of culture. Berger (2000) offered two ways to understand the concept of culture. First, culture can be understood as artistic elements. Second, culture can be understood as the concept that describes human manners in their lives. In view of Hofstede et al. (2005), culture is a communal phenomenon because at least it shares the same characteristics of people living in the same area where it was known.

One of the influential models for studies on culture may be the Iceberg metaphor of culture (Hall, 1976; Weaver, 1993). According to Hall, culture has two aspects: the visible part and the invisible part. Dan (2020) asserted that deep culture refers to the part of the iceberg buried under the surface that includes thoughts, behaviors, traditions, and views that are impossible to see or cannot be seen at all. This view aligns with Byram's (1997) viewpoint on intercultural understanding: It is vital to thoroughly know about a particular culture's invisible part when reading materials containing cultural elements (Byram, 1997). To date, numerous scholars have applied Hall's Cultural Iceberg Model (Granatta, 2016; Lückmann & Färber, 2016; Makhmudov, 2020). Recently, Huynh (2022) developed an analytical framework for exploring the cultural meanings of Vietnamese images, namely the IMIVI framework. The current study relies on Huynh's (2022) analytical framework as a guide to exploring Vietnamese cultural meanings in advertising. This framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Iceberg Model for Interpreting Vietnamese Images (IMIVI)

(Adopted from Huynh, 2022)

According to Huynh (2022), the IMIVI framework is an extended model of Hall's iceberg metaphor of culture with two components: visible and invisible. In the visible category are flower patterns, animal patterns, nature patterns, food, traditional festivals and ceremonies, traditional clothing, folk games, and so on. In the invisible category, there are three analytical systems: *traditional values and ways of thinking*, *philosophical and religious beliefs*, and *cultural symbols*. There are sub-systems in the philosophical and religious beliefs, namely *Confucianism*, *Buddhism*, and *Taoism*.

#### *The roles of cultural representations in advertising*

It is vital to pay attention to cultural values in advertising, especially in global and international markets (Pratap, 2017; Woodford, 2018) because of several reasons. One of the primary reasons is that "cultural values and beliefs impose strong influences on people's lives and ingrain deeply in food choice and consumption" (Si & Couto, 2020, pp. 323-339).

Second, cultural meanings of images presented in advertising are not always identical because messages, symbols, rituals, and even colours can have significantly different meanings and messages across cultures (Woodford, 2018). For example, green in Iran has been linked with opposition to the government, while in Ireland, it is a national color. Importantly, a study about culture and consumption (McCracken, 1986, pp. 71-84) revealed that culture constitutes the

word by contributing its own meaning. Therefore, goods can be considered as a means to convey the categorical scheme formed by a culture which is a chance to make the cultural substance. Furthermore, Pratap (2017) indicated that even though things change over time, culture still affects how things work as well as human thoughts, preferences, and tastes. This suggests that the buyers would have a good impression of the brands when their advertisements talk about their culture. For instance, in a qualitative study about the role of culture in advertising, Lee (2019) demonstrated that understanding the cultural values of the target markets means that the brand has communicated successfully to potential customers through advertising. In some ways, focusing on cultural factors in advertising means an emotional approach used by the informational strategies to attract customers and increase customer consumption. It was recommended that the brand should make a great connection between its cultural values and its target markets (Pratap, 2017). In another comparative study, Czarnecka et al. (2018) analyzed 847 magazine advertisements from England, Hungary, Ireland, and Poland and showed that culture was transferred through advertising to consumers. The findings indicated that "Advertising brings the consumer good and a representation of the culturally constituted world together within the frame of a particular advertisement" (Czarnecka et al., 2018, p.8). This indicated the important role of understanding cultural meanings in advertisements.

### *Research Question*

The present study aims to seek answers to the question: 'How are Vietnamese cultural values represented in the visual contents of selected ads?'

## **Methods**

### *Design of the Study*

The current study aims to analyze the cultural values in advertising, so the researcher decides to conduct a qualitative study which supports to the analysis of the data deeper and more exactly. Advertising logos/posters are selected from the top popular products in Vietnam and are highly appreciated by consumers for their quality.

### *Procedures, Data collection, and Data analysis*

With regard to the procedures, the present study was conducted with the following steps:

- Step 1: Selecting popular advertising logos/posters;
- Step 2: Selecting cultural elements carrying Vietnamese culture in those advertising;
- Step 3: Dividing the defined categories into two factors: visible and invisible, according to the framework of "*Iceberg Model for Interpreting Vietnamese Images (IMIVI)*" (Huynh, 2022);
- Step 4: Analyzing and interpreting the whole materials;
- Step 5: Reporting findings.

The researchers selected six representative advertising images from well-known brands such as Kinh Do cake, Ensure milk, Knorr seasoning, Tiger beer, Nestle brand, and Vietnam Airlines brand to collect data. The researchers used these advertisements because of the popularity of

these brands with Vietnamese consumers. They have been on the market for a long time and have received great attention from consumers. Moreover, these advertising images are aimed at the Vietnamese market, so they are even more imbued with Vietnamese cultural identity. Therefore, exploring cultural values in these advertisements is suitable and necessary.

## Findings and discussion

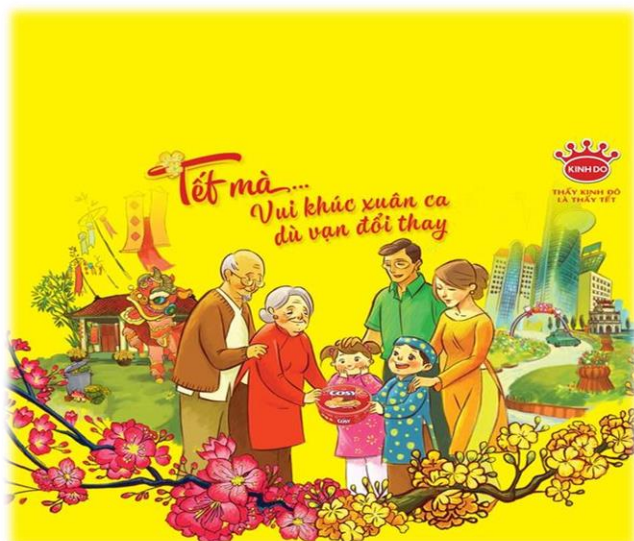
### *Visible Aspects of Vietnamese culture*

After analysis, this study identified some Vietnamese cultural values contained in advertising. There are three typical visible elements: flower patterns, animal patterns, and traditional clothing.

### *Flowers patterns*

Vietnamese advertisements use the image of flowers as a great contribution to attract the first attraction of customers. In particular, in advertising the Tet festival, many brands used the image of apricot and peach blossoms in full bloom – kinds of typical flowers that symbolize the Tet festival, creating a fresh, warm, warm, and full of spring atmosphere. The yellow of the apricot blossom and the pink of the peach blossom contribute to creating an attractive look full of life (as illustrated in Figures 2 and 3). Through a full-color view of the apricot blossom and peach blossom in bloom, the viewers seem to hear the sound of liveliness and throbbing to match the emotional rhythm.

**Figure 2.** An advertising of KINH DO cake – full of apricot and peach blossoms in bloom



**Figure 3.** An advertising of KINH DO cake – full of Tet flowers



Today, with the hustle and bustle of modern life, no one can admit that they fully understand the meaning of this flower, but they only know that decorating apricots and peach blossoms on New Year's Day has become a custom. In the advertising images, red, yellow, and green are preferred. According to the Eastern concept, red and yellow represent good luck; Green



represents lush trees, a year of bountiful crops. The blooming yellow apricot branches on New Year's Day are a symbol of luck, prosperity, abundant health, happiness, and wealth all year (Anh & Lee, 2008; Huynh, 2022).

Moreover, in Viet Nam, the presence of flowers in advertising is not only for the beauty of the advertising, but flowers also have become a symbol representing a brand name of stature and prestige. In particular, Vietnam Airlines used a logo that is stylized by the lotus image (Figure 4).

**Figure 4.** Vietnam airlines uses the stylized lotus flower



The reason for the brand to choose Lotus is probably because of purity but simply the very nature of Vietnamese people. This makes us even more proud of the flowers, which became the symbol of Vietnam reaching out into the international sky. In Viet Nam, the Lotus was officially chosen as the national flower in 2011 (Trần, 2019). In addition, some other countries around the world also appreciate the image of Lotus, such as India and Egypt. Lotus flowers have many colors, and each color has its own meaning. Pike (2018) said that white was the symbol of purity, while pink exhibited a devotion to Buddha. Blue, with its wisdom and lucidity, stood for enlightenment. Purple symbolized spirituality, and green was known as the color of rebirth. The yellow color of the Lotus symbolizes quality and, perfection, luxury. Lotus represents enlightenment and perfection; ordinary and noble and sacred; graceful and soft, but no less strong and poised (Anh & Tin, 2021; Cleary, 1991; Pakditawan, 2017). Those are the precious qualities of the Lotus and are the reason Vietnam Airlines chose the Lotus as its new symbol (An, 2016).

#### *Animals patterns*

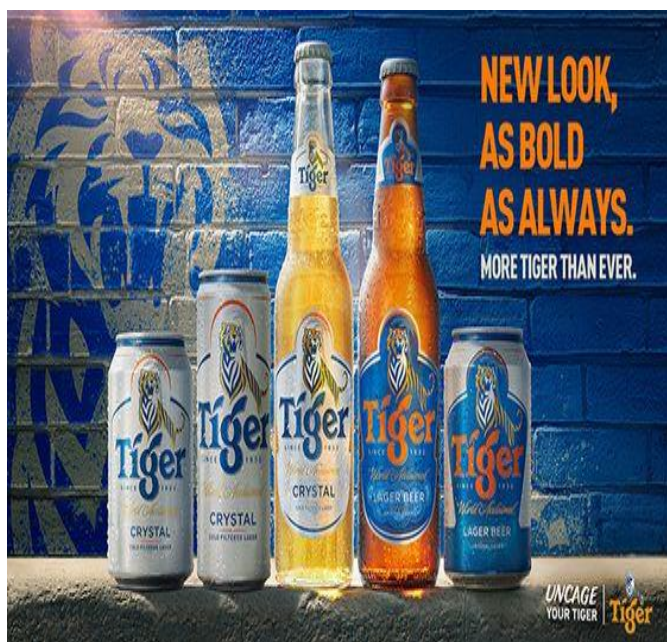
In Vietnamese culture, animals also contribute a special value. In fact, in an advertisement of **KINH DO**, this brand used the lion dances as a contribution (Figure 5). The Lion dance is an indispensable activity during holidays and Tet, which symbolizes power, wisdom, and superiority. Performing lion dance on big and important holidays to "bring good fortune and chase away evil spirits. It is performed to bring prosperity and good luck for the upcoming year" (Cindy, 2022; Thinh, 2009). Therefore, the ad creators applied the lion dances in their advertising to increase the good values of the products.

**Figure 5.** Lion dance in advertising



Another brand famous for beer, *Tiger*, used the image of a mighty and majestic tiger on the advertising posters (as illustrated in Figure 6). It is opening its mouth wide and looking at us with a majestic appearance. The harmonious combination of warm and cold colors, such as red, yellow, and blue, strongly attracts viewers. The brand name and the symbol of the products are the same, creating familiarity with the customers.

**Figure 6.** Tiger in Tiger Beer advertising



It would be remiss not to mention the *Nestlé* brand in using the animal image as a symbol. Although it has undergone a few changes, the Nestlé logo retains the image of a mother bird and two baby birds (as in Figure 7). They look at each other in a nest, giving viewers a glimpse of a family image. Nestlé took inspiration from this meaning and changed it a bit when adding the image of a mother bird feeding three young birds. It represents a mother's love and concern

for her child, like the purpose of the brand's products. It shows that, no matter what happens, the mother is always by her side, accompanying her for life. It cannot be denied that a mother's love is possessive affection because their mother will protect them at all costs (Sam, n.d), and it is valuable and priceless (Lewis & Symank, 2008). This deeply highlighted the value of Vietnamese culture by bringing the value of sacred motherhood.

**Figure 7.** Nestle logo – The image of a mother bird and two baby birds in their nest



#### *Traditional clothing*

On special occasions, Vietnamese people always choose discreet, modest Ao Dai for themselves. After many years, Ao Dai still retains its position in Vietnamese women's hearts and has become the first choice of Vietnamese people on important occasions such as Tet because it is an outfit that fully shows the pure and feminine beauty of women in both body and soul (Cao et al., 2014; Hoa, 2021; Huynh et al., 2020). Capturing those thoughts, the ad creator cleverly created the character in the ad in Ao Dai costume on traditional ceremonies (Figure 8). Besides that, Ao dai, with bright colors, symbolizes good luck.

**Figure 8.** The ad with characters wearing Ao Dai





### *Invisible Aspects of Vietnamese culture*

In addition to visible Vietnamese cultural values such as flowers, animals, and clothes, each advertisement contains its own invisible aspects of Vietnamese culture. Significantly, the researcher has explored two typical components in advertising, which are Traditional values and ways of thinking about the image of the family reunion and some Philosophical and religious beliefs in terms of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

#### *Traditional values and ways of thinking*

##### *The image of a family reunion*

The values of family reunion come from the advertising of Kinh Do cake, Ensure milk, and Knorr seasoning (Figure 9). Although the manufacturers offer three different products, they all have several typical common meanings. In Vietnamese traditional values and ways of thinking, Tet is an occasion for descendants to come back to their homes, and of course, these gifts are necessary, and the manufacturers want to show that their products are the best choices because they not only show love and care but also have high nutritional values, good for their parents' health. The gifts will show the descendants' responsibility because, in Vietnamese thoughts and culture, children must take care of their parents in their old age to repay their birth (Tran, 2020; Van, 2020). Moreover, the images of families gathering around a meal on New Year's Day in Vietnam are very meaningful and precious. As more and more children gather that year, the family has a very crowded and happy Tet season, thanks to being full of laughing and chatting. Besides that, a family meal is a great opportunity to reunite and meet to connect family members together as well as to chat and share joys and sorrows in life (*Traditional Vietnamese Family*, 2018; Trickett & Jones, 2017). Dao (2021) said that in addition to surviving, eating a family meal means eating the culture of Vietnamese. As a consequence of Vietnamese cultural values, a family meal stands for the traditional culture of the people and the territory. Most Vietnamese people admitted that a family meal was one of the effective ways to maintain their family in high spirits and create close-knit relationships. At this time, the meal was not simply comprehended as lunch or dinner; it can be known as sensitivity and sympathy, distribution and concern (Tran, 2020).

**Figure 9.** *The reunion images of happy families on advertising*



## *Philosophical and religious beliefs*

### *Confucianism*

These advertisements (advertising posters of Kinh Do cake, Ensure milk Knorr seasoning) share the same point of the core values of Confucianism about "*Filial piety*". Filial piety is a philosophy of Confucianism that makes the descendants remember their roots respectively. In the first half of life, children can live in peace and prosperity thanks to the love and care of their parents, and then in the other half of life, adult children have to take good care of their parents to repay their gratitude (Johnson, 2021). Children must always love and respect their grandparents and parents in some simple ways. First, after a year of hard work, the descendants visit and reunite with their grandparents and parents. They tried to return to their homeland where they were born to share a meal of reunion with best wishes to their loved ones. Tet is an opportunity for the whole family to come back together wherever they go.

In Vietnam, filial piety is one of the fundamental values in families and is so significant that children have been taught since childhood. Understanding these values, the advertiser has applied them to introduce the products. For example, the advertising of Knorr used the image of a family gathering at a meal, which gave a hand to increase the value of the brand. Besides that, these advertising products designed as a gift, such as Ensure milk and Kinh Do cake, were not only good-cared products for long-term health but also a presence for their thanks and their love to their loved ones. They contained valuable spiritual medicine for grandparents because parents' smiles are a priceless gift for their children and the motivation for them to try harder every day.

### *Buddhism*

In Buddhism, *The Law of Karma* is also implied in advertising. The ad creators aim for Vietnamese long-term traditional values. According to the Law of Cause and Effect, every action brings a certain result. It means that "If we act motivated by greed, hatred, or delusion, we are planting the seed of suffering; when our acts are motivated by generosity, love, or wisdom, then we are creating the karmic conditions for abundance and happiness." (Goldstein, n.d). It cannot be denied that if the descendants are filial and respect their grandparents and parents, they can be treated like that when they get old. Indeed, loving one's parents is the best way to teach children about filial piety to themselves later on.

In the past, their parents have worked hard to "drink the sun and dew" all their youth to raise them to be successful, through so much bitterness and hardship, sacrificing everything for their children. Therefore, when their descendants grow up and achieve success, they must return to care for their parents in their old age. No matter where we go, let's go back home during Tet because home is where we were born and raised, and most especially, our parents are always looking forward to us every day. Advertising posters serve as a necessary and useful reminder for children.

### *Taoism*

In advertisements, Taoist values seem to be less prominent because Taoism probably has little influence on Vietnamese culture. According to Huynh et al.'s (2021, p.22) research, "the Taoism

principle of Yin-Yang balancing is perceived as an important technique for Vietnamese painters and illustrators in creating their artworks". Indeed, when observing advertising posters, we can see the advertiser's consideration of Yin-Yang factors. In advertisements for the Tet holiday, such as Kinh Do cake and Ensure milk, the ad creators tend to focus on the Yang elements (brightness color) to generate brilliant and striking posters in a cheery atmosphere, which bring luck and happiness. Besides, the harmony of Yin-Yang also creates a pleasant look for customers. Depending on each advertising message, the ad creators will have specific ways to balance the two factors Yin - Yang. This also contributed to the creation of Qi in Taoism, which created the color of life, vitality, prosperity, and development.

## Conclusion

This paper aims to explore the Vietnamese cultural values which are reflected in advertising. Through my analysis, I have found that most Viet Nam advertising contains some distinctive and meaningful cultural characteristics of Vietnamese culture. It is hoped that this research can widen the awareness of the cultural aspects which gives a hand in commercial, intercultural communication, and academic environment in terms of translation.

This study demonstrated that two aspects of culture need to be preserved and promoted in the advertisements, namely visible and invisible aspects, which are explored based on the framework of "*Iceberg Model for Interpreting Vietnamese Images (IMIVI)*" by Huynh in 2022. In addition, further interviews show that the customers also pay great attention to the cultural aspects of advertising.

These findings are significant for researchers and creators, both Vietnamese people and foreigners interested in Vietnamese spiritual values, particularly in comprehending more about Vietnamese culture in the mass media to satisfy the objectives of teaching, learning, and research.

For researchers, this article can be used as a reference for scholars who want to explore this study in the Vietnamese version or as a document for comparative studies between Vietnamese advertising and advertisements from other countries. For teachers, they can update this method of analyzing cultural values in the teaching of Professional Communication. For students, this study provides many new and diverse cultural perspectives, which help students gain more cultural knowledge and thereby have a greater sense of pride in Vietnamese culture. For foreign students in Vietnam, this article will help them improve their cross-cultural communication skills and avoid misunderstandings caused by cultural issues. Finally, this article is also a reminder for future ad creators to focus on both tangible and intangible issues. In summary, the careful analysis of cultural factors has contributed to the reader's deeper understanding of culture in advertising. According to the framework of Huynh (2022), advertising posters meet most of the given criteria.

This study also faces to some limitations. First of all, the biggest limitation of this study is the number of promotional logos selected. Because of the limitation of time, the researcher can only select a few typical advertising samples as a representative for analysis and not yet exploit all advertising posters in various fields. At the same time, this study also encountered the

limitation of consumer opinions. Instead of only getting opinions from consumers, specifically students, it will be more interesting and accurate to get opinions from many groups of participants, such as advertisers, merchants, and foreigners.

After conducting the study, the researchers have some recommendations. First, for manufacturers and ad creators, advertising is not only for business purposes but also one of the methods of communication between people, specifically between producers and consumers. It will gain greater customer support as well as have a deeper spiritual meaning if the ad creator focuses more subtly on this aspect. Second, in translation, translators must realize the importance of the context of the sentence because culture gives language different contexts. The translation products need their literal meaning and must convey the meaning in the context of the target culture. The same words passed down from one culture to another have slightly or completely different meanings. Sometimes those differences in meaning represent small or large value differences that can be very important in a translation. Besides that, for foreign language learners, understanding the cultural values of a language deeply will give a hand to achieving this language because language exists and develops on the basis of culture. Next, for domestic and foreign consumers, domestic or imported goods must be considered more carefully before choosing a commodity product to be smart and sophisticated consumers. This also helps them feel proud of their good traditional values and long-standing cultural identities by values drawn up over thousands of years of history, which are the people's spiritual life. Finally, for further research, it is advised that this is a very interesting and meaningful field so hopefully, there will be more scientific research articles in this area. Another piece of advice for upcoming studies is that researchers should explore more deeply the cultural values of Vietnam as well as the number of advertising images and survey participants to get the most satisfactory and authentic results.

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## Biodata

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