CHARACTERISATION AND LEITMOTIF: ARCHETYPAL IMAGERIES IN MALAYSIAN FESTIVAL TV ADVERTISEMENTS

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Abstract
This paper seeks to analyse archetypal imageries in some TV advertisements that are produced in conjunction with religious festivals and the Independence Day celebrations in Malaysia. Adopting literary archetypes as key concepts, the advertisement texts are textually analysed, focussing on the recurrent leitmotifs as well as characterisations in order to establish the presence of archetypal imageries. Jungian’s theorisation of the archetype is used as the main analytical perspective. We argue that as archetypal imageries function as a synecdoche for something more universal, it therefore is one of the most important reasons why these advertisements appeal to the mass audience. In addition, since cultural nuances inform the characterization and leitmotif of the archetypes, we opine, that they are able to expose contemporary anxiety.

Keywords: festival TV adverts; characterisation; leitmotifs; contemporary anxiety; archetypal imageries
PERWATAKAN DAN MOTIF UTAMA: IMEJAN ARKETAIP DALAM IKLAN PERAYAAN TELEVISYEN DI MALAYSIA

Abstrak

Kata Kunci: iklan perayaan TV; perwatakan; motif utama; kebimbangan kontemporari; imejan arketaip

Introduction
Traditionally, advertisement is often tenaciously linked to marketing and consuming products or services. This relationship is succinctly expressed by Joseph Turow who claims that “advertising is as old as selling itself” [original italic] (2009, p.593), an idea similarly noted by Croteau and Hoynes a decade earlier: “They [advertisements] address their audience as consumers [original italic] and celebrate and take for granted the consumer capitalist organization of society” (1997, p. 187). When a product is advertised, it is expected to be known by the audience, be it a general or specific audience. Seen this way, the ultimate objective of most advertisement is to be able to sell the product or service that is being advertised; however, the goal of advertisement is not merely to sell but also to let the audience consume as well. Only via consumption that the impacts of advertising strategies such as the consumers’ “thoughts, feelings and actions” (Wells et al, 2007, p.5) can be gauged and importantly, their lifestyle can be dictated and determined. This reflects Croteau and Hoynes’s argument
that “from the start, then, advertising was more about creating consumers than
selling individual products” (1997, p. 189). Though not systematically proven,
advertising practitioners usually view the effectiveness of their advertisement
through not only the audience’s awareness of the products or services after
being advertised but also by the number of products or services that are being
sold and ultimately consumed.

Communication and cultural studies scholars have different views with regards
to advertisement. On one hand, the main concern within communication with
regards to advertisement focuses on the idea that advertising basically means to
communicate the idea about a product or service on offer. The pre-eminence of
advertising is then located within the process of communicating the idea about
the products or services; this can then be gauged by the changes (or the lack of
it) in the consumer’s behaviour. Critical cultural studies scholars, on the other
hand, according to Baran and Davis, “view it as the ultimate cultural commodity”
(2009, p. 337), which means advertisement is intricately intertwined with the
discourse of culture – culture is often consequently consigned to the level of an
artifice. This disparate view between communication and cultural studies points
to the prevailing issues of pragmatic and ideology, respectively. This remains a
fundamental ferment in the idea about advertisement between communication
and cultural studies.

As such, this paper positions itself within the critical paradigm, addressing
the importance of critical perspective as it treats an advertisement as cultural
commodity. The criticism of advertisement from cultural perspectives is not
novel. Studies have shown that links have been made between advertising and
culture while foregrounding the idea about culture as an important economic
or even Fordian industrialised commodity. Commodity as a critical term
ubiquitous within Marxist economic discourse is often seen as “negative”. As an
illustration, Baran and Davis point out that “when elements of everyday culture
are selected for repackaging, only a very limited range is chosen, and important
elements are overlooked or consciously ignored” (2009, p. 335). Indeed, the
fear of or anxiety about what is selectively heightened by the advertisement
may not reflect the reality of the very culture that the advertisement is located
usually manifests itself as a common theme within this debate.

Conterminous with this is the issue surrounding the commodification of
culture that defines cultural heritage such as the architectural artefacts, religious
or cultural festivities and the nation itself in economic terms. The branding
of a nation and what it entails mutates culture and identity into a product to
be consumed; this is a bona fide capitalist dream. Shazlin Amir Hamzah, for
instance, argues that “advertisements feed our consciousness by appropriating
typical representation of who we are and these depictions are what we take to
be our identity as a nation” (2010, p. 13). While Shazlin’s argument is placed
within the “whether advertising shapes society’s values or simply mirrors
them” (Wells and et al, 2007, p.75) debate, this paper, takes this discussion
to a different realm by analysing advertisement’s use of typical imageries as a salient resonance of the manifested contents of collective unconscious or universal imagery and relating it to contemporary concerns. This positioning effectively privileges culture over economy. In this case, this is not only about what it mirrors, but it is also about how the mirror is shaped in the first place as archetypes help us see how universal ideas are domesticated. Advertising images are useful in this analysis as it is, according to Roland Barthes, “frank, or at least emphatic [original italic]” (1999, p.34).

We therefore seek to analyse archetypal imageries in some festival TV advertisements that are produced in conjunction with religious festivities and the Independence Day celebrations in Malaysia. Most festival TV advertisements in Malaysia are produced by large, local, corporate organisations and aim to instil value and nurture ties among society as part of the organisation’s corporate social responsibility (CSR). These advertisements were chosen as a corpus not only because they have solid narratives that privilege cultural messages over product promotions, more importantly, but also due to their socially responsible nature that appeals to many levels of Malaysia’s multicultural society. Adopting literary archetypes as key concepts, the advertisement texts will be textually analysed, focusing on the recurrent leitmotifs as well as characterisations in order to locate the presence of archetypal imageries. Jungian’s theorisation of the archetype will be used as the main analytical perspective. In short, we argue that the archetypal imageries present in these advertisements communicate contemporary anxiety experienced by the nation, hence functioning as a synecdoche for universal cohesion of humanity.

Archetypes

In embryo, in his theorisation of “collective unconscious”, Carl Jung (1968) introduces the term archetypes to delineate and reify his conceptualisation of the psyche of humanity. The term “collective unconscious” refers to “psychic inheritance”, which is “the reservoir of our experiences as a species, a kind of knowledge we are all born with. And yet we can never be conscious of it” (Boeree, 2006, p.5). Jung introduces the archetypes as a way of further distinguishing “collective unconscious” from that of Freud’s subconscious or “personal unconscious”. Against that backdrop, Freud’s personal unconscious becomes rather trivial and petty: “But while personal complexes never produce more than a personal bias, archetypes create myths, religions, and philosophies that influence and characterise whole nations and epochs of history” (Jung, 1968, p. 68). This conceptualisation of collective unconscious resonates well with the principal concerns in literature, that is, “being the place of people in the natural world” (Peck and Coyle, 2002, p. 145).

In effect, whereas Freud scrutinises the personal repressed memory to articulate personal trauma, Jung dissects the collective unconscious to communicate the universality of human experiences. The raison d’être of collective unconscious
is also shared by other theories such as in the theorisation of “superorganism” in behavioural biology (Edward O. Wilson), “conscience collective” in sociology (Emile Durkheim), “The Group Mind” in social psychology (William McDougall) and “morphic resonance” in theoretical biology (Rupert Sheldrake) (in Sheldrake, 1087). Jung’s idea of the existence of universal patterns of humanity is then not alone.

How do we understand or experience collective unconscious in our everyday’s lives? Collective unconscious is not visible to the naked eyes; indeed, it usually finds meaning in symbolic manifestations such as the feeling of dejavu, the first love, in the universality of artistic or aesthetic meanings, and in symbols or myths. Oftentimes, one experiences with archetypal images with a sense of familiarity and universality (universal theme – as an example). What this essentially means is that these archetypes, which are the contents of collective unconscious, are “a form of communication from the unconscious” (Cicchetti, 2006). The contents provide a template of the human psyche, or in short, humanity itself. Nonetheless, they do not appear as the facsimile of primordial images as Rudman figures that “the archetype acts as a schema, providing the basic concept onto which the details are attached” (2005, p.2). Archetypes are only visible through archetypal images, and these images are constantly changing according to time and culture, creating variegated imageries that convey meanings specific and relevant to the very time and culture. In that vein, Jane Cicchetti (2006) avers that “it is the task of each age to understand the archetypal symbols in a new way, as each age has its own challenges”. In other words, the symbols usually communicate contemporary concerns, angst, anxiety or even fear or trauma.

As human civilisation throughout history uses myths and symbols to represent archetypal images to essentially record how they cope with nature or the wrath of nature in general, these archetypal images are often embedded in literary traditions, be it cave drawings, campfire stories or the copious Greek tragedies. In literature for instance, the leitmotif of a young hero’s rite of passage, which involves him rescuing a damsel-in-distress as a way of reaffirming his heterosexual masculinity and entry into man-hood, transcends time and space. The leitmotif and the type of characterisation these exemplify have infiltrated into popular imagination via the products of popular culture such as films, as exemplified by Star Wars, the Harry Potter films and even videogame-influenced film, Scott Pilgrim Vs the World. Characters like Cinderella and the evil step-mother are also archetypal in nature as their present day reincarnations pervade popular imaginations. For instance, in the classical noir film, this character axis is replaced by the redeeming woman (usually the wife) and the femme fatale (La Belle Dame Sans Mercy figure – blond and sexually dangerous), with the latter representing the “deep-seated fear of women’s freedom [which is mutated] into a blame on their economic, moral, and sexual independence” (Jamaluddin Aziz, 2005).
Popular culture product is the best place to understand how the realm of the collective unconscious finds its meanings. David M. Hart, in his analysis of the Batman’s character, raises one existential question with regards to the way Batman has been portrayed in different movies: “Does Batman do what he does because he has chosen a path that he believes is right, or does he do it because he feels like he simply can’t do anything else?” (2010, p. 214). This “determinism Vs freewill” dichotomy points to the fact that the Batman character follows archetypal template of the Hero, but with variations and nuances as informed by temporal and spatial location of the different versions of Batman’s films.

In advertising itself, even though the term archetype is eschewed, several studies have been carried out regarding the importance of cultural symbols. The study of cultural symbols indeed harks back to the notion of collective unconscious. One such study is done by Barbara Phillips (1996) (in Dominick, 2005, p. 364) who examines the role of trade characters in American culture and argues that while “mass-produced products have little cultural meaning [...] Trade characters, however, give meaning and significance to otherwise indistinguishable products by linking a product to an image that has a cultural meaning. One way that trade characters create this meaning is by employing commonly accepted mythical symbols – images that convey cultural meaning”. On the surface, allusions to magical power of the mythical figure employed as a trade character are used to exaggerate the value or usability of a product, making it stand out better than other similar products. Beneath the veneer, however, it is the sense of indescribable familiarity with the trade character that actually warms us towards that product.

An aspect of archetype is that it can invoke certain cultural practices that have certain universal cohesion. The terms local culture and global culture are often seen more as conflicting than complementing each other. When the term globalisation is perceived as a pervasive form of cultural imperialism, local culture is irrefragably subordinated. Studies that look at advertising as a cultural commodity often relate it to the sense of identity by foregrounding the narrative of nation building. For example, Mohd Helmi Abdul Rahim and Mohd Nizam Osman’s study concluded that “Malaysian television commercials have adopted mostly the local cultural identities in their advertising creative executions. There are attempts to use the global (universal)” (2005, p.39). They also caution that “advertising practitioners to be cautious of cultural, social and religious systems and national identity underpinning, that create an impact on advertising” (2005, p.40). What is conflicting about this study is that it separates and consequently adumbrates local cultural identities from global ones, while albeit in bracket, refers to global as universal. The severance of local identities from global seems ridiculous as the sum total of local cultures, in our opinion, is global and that local cultures are domesticated manifestations of the archetype, or the universal as Mohd Helmi and Mohd Nizam have it. By adapting the literary representation of archetypes, this paper discusses these domesticated
manifestations by structuring them around two common key concepts, which are characterisation and leitmotif.

**Characterisation**

In literature, a character is a device used to illuminate aspects of the story such as theme and plot. Existing within contextual pattern, Peck and Coyle argues that “they [characters] are members of a society, and the author’s distinctive view of how people relate to society will be reflected in the presentation of every character” (2002, p. 117); this is what characterisation is all about. Laurence Perrine, moreover, discusses three principles in characterisation and one of them is that “the characters are plausible or lifelike. They must be neither paragons of virtue nor monsters of evil nor an impossible combination of contradictory traits” (1984, p.67). In this vein, it is important to note that the context (time and space) in which a character exists lends more credibility or sense of reality to the characters, humanising it in the process. This humanising effect is of paramount importance in placing human stories or humanity itself at the centre of the story. Jung (1968) refuses to provide a list of archetypal characters as for him these characters may appear in different forms. Some common models of archetypal characters are hero/heroine, the mother, the anima and animus, the mentor, the scapegoat, the holy child, the outcast, and the woman figure.

The first archetypal character commonly found in the Festivities Adverts is the son character. This son character appears in almost every advertisement and takes the archetypal role of the hero. In a Petronas’ Eid Ul-Fitr advertisement in 2003, it begins with a written text that says “Tersebut alkisah seorang janda beranak tujuh” or “Once upon a time there was a divorcee and her seven children”, which is reminiscent of a fairy tales format. The seven children are all boys and six of them embark on a journey across the river to get some meat and liver for the mother for her to prepare some dishes for their Eid celebration. This fairy tales format is a common template used in literature that deals with archetypal characters. Even though the search for a piece of meat sounds trivial, what is at stake is actually them hurting their mother’s feeling and hope for a complete and joyful celebration. The boys are then considered a hero character on a heroic journey of “saving” the person they love. The text written at the end of the advertisement claiming that, “Paradise is under a mother’s foot” summarises this archetypical narrative. Similarly, in Telekom Malaysia’s 2009 Eid Ul-Fitr advertisement, the son (Pierre Andre) promises his mother that he will be back to celebrate the festive season with her. He, nonetheless, has a task that he has to endure before he can go back. He sacrifices his journey home to help two of his co-workers to finish up the job, which has been slowed down by falling rain. However, the journey back is made possible by the help of these two co-workers. The pre-eminence of both adverts is that the sons will do anything to protect the mothers from being emotionally hurt, typical of an archetypal narrative. The mother figures in both advertisements are archetypal,
making the stories universally relevant and sympathetic.

Other festival advertisements such as for Deepavali and Chinese New Year also provide an agglutination of hero characters who have close relationship with other family archetypes such as the grandmother and father. This proves that rituals such as religious and cultural festivities have universal cohesion whose meaning is conveyed by archetypal characters. In a Petronas Deepavali advertisement for 2003, four Malaysian Indian friends in their hip-hop costumes – led by Diggy D - go out to “party” with some girls, but they end up meeting Diggy D’s “paatti”, or grandmother in Tamil. In this advert, the archetypal hero character is Diggy D (a.k.a Muniandy Chinnadorai), who thinks that his journey to become a real man involves partying with girls; instead, by fate he encounters a family archetype - his own grandmother. It is she, by asking him to take some food she bought for his mother, who excavates universal cohesion as the advertisement situates her as a nurturing figure (archetypal mother quality). What sets to be a celebration of new global youth culture, as represented by the costumes they wear and the Ghetto-like English that they use, this advert through its familiar comic moment becomes a cautionary tale – sans its homiletic aphorism (The world is changing, but we will always be proud of who we are), which is a propitious manifestation of an archetypal narrative structure.

On another note, there are two archetypal characters that are depicted in the 2005 Chinese New Year advertisement for Petronas entitled “Little Stick”. These characters are the holy child, who is usually associated with a struggle between the good and bad force that wants to possess him or her, and the grandfather, who is a threshold guardian archetype. The child character is holy in the sense that he is seen by the old man as the person who will continue the family tradition, or the good force. The bad force will be new culture that eliminates family union, and therefore annihilates the use of the chopsticks he is carving. The pair of chopsticks, which is in a phallic shape, represents another archetype, which is the Mana. The old man, being the grandfather, is the child’s mentor. “The Stick” shows how the grandfather imparts knowledge and hope of family tradition to his curious grandson. The Mana, which is unlike Freud’s sexually laden phallic symbol, represents something more spiritual in Jung’s psychoanalysis. It symbolically means fertility and strength, and in the context of this advertisement, the holy child’s devoir is to ensure that the “sticks” will continue to be used by the next generation so that traditions will not die out.

Similarly, in Petronas’ 2010 Independence Day advertisement, the figure of a son is prominent and is important in foregrounding the idea of the advertisement as a synecdoche for larger or universal relevance. In this advert, three young adolescent boys enter an automobile invention competition. While being tormented by a rival group, it is noticeable that the stream of consciousness of the narrative lies within one of the boys who is not related to the father character. However, as this father figure is avuncular; hence, known as an “uncle” to them, he assumes an archetypal figure of a father. The father character sells traditional
dessert by the roadside to fend for his family. When he was nearly involved in an accident while it was pouring rain, his son explained to his friends that his father had refused help as he did not want him to follow his footsteps. The event triggers the boys’ creativity and they invent an automobile that is useful for the father to carry out his business; they subsequently win the competition. Their success over the boy who always sneers at them marks their archetypal hero role.

Leitmotif

In literature, leitmotif is a recurrent theme that forms the main unifying message of a story. Sometimes, the unifying theme of the story is considered the moral lesson that the story is trying to impart. Nonetheless, for this paper, leitmotif is used as a critical term that avoids moralising over the story told in the advertisement as, according to Perrine, this “should keep us from trying to wring from every story a didactic pronouncement about life” (1984, p. 92). Some recurrent archetypal leitmotifs are the quest, the initiation or rite-of-passage, the first love, death and rebirth, the ritual as well as the battle between good and evil. These leitmotifs are prevalent in many of the advertisements discussed earlier.

The leitmotif of nature as subliminal and cathartic for the hero’s journey of (self)-discovery is prominent in many of the adverts discussed earlier. In Petronas Eid Ul Fitr Advertisement in 2003, the six boys embark upon a journey to find meat and liver for their mother to prepare complete festive dishes. The mother, feeling disappointed at being let down by her boys, sighs: “What is to become to all of you?” The boys left their youngest sibling and jumped into a sampan. The leitmotif of nature as subliminal finds its expression in their journey through the river in pursuit of the meat and liver, which by now represent their mother’s happiness. This archetypal journey is common in literary work, and the advertisement provides a comic variety that alludes to Romantic poets’ idea of nature as subliminal and cathartic, providing a universal cohesion in the idea that nature cleanses the soul. With their eventual success in bringing back “meat and liver” by the river, they have redeemed themselves as good sons.

Similarly, in Telekom Malaysia 2009 Eid and Petronas’ 2010 Malaysian Independence Day advertisements, pouring rain is used to contextualise the importance of the hero-figures’ honesty and sagacious loyalty to their loved ones. In the first, pouring rain acts as the story’s conflict; this ultimately coruscates the hero-figure’s sense of loyalty to both his friends and mother. The reward is that he is able to meet and please his mother. By the same token, the downpour in the second advertisement provides an epiphany to the young adolescent heroes, allowing them to see the struggle of the father-figure to make ends meet as their own journey of self-discovery. As both adverts use the leitmotif of nature as the cleanser of the soul, this in return indicates the archetypal relevance of a cleansed soul in a rite-of-passage narrative.
Besides nature, animal archetypes are also commonly used in festivities adverts to conjure the theme of destruction and restoration. The leitmotif of “destruction and restoration” (1968, p. 61), according to Jung, is often symbolised by the animal archetypes such as the horned serpent, worms, fish and a small mouse. If in an adolescent boy’s journey he would be devoured by a monstrous animal, he would nevertheless miraculously emerge heroic again. In Petronas’ Malaysian Independence Day advertisement, the scene in which the three boys were bitten by bees precedes the advertisement’s focal idea that is, it is through the destruction of harmony by the bees at the outset that their friendship is forever restored, only separated by death. The same theme is also apparent in Petronas’ Eid advertisement for 2007 in which an old father annoys his son by repeating the same question (“What bird is that?”) even after he has answered religiously. In this case, the said bird, a magpie, is an archetypal animal that destructs the harmony between the father and son. Nonetheless, the memory of how he used to repeatedly ask his father the same question about the species of the bird causes the young man to restore his love for his father. In short, the animals in these films are local re-imagination of the animal archetypes and they form a leitmotif of unconditional love, born out of destruction and restoration.

**Conclusion**

The paper reveals that archetypal imageries in Malaysian festival TV advertisements function as synecdoche for universal appeal and cohesion. The analysis of the characterisation and leitmotif suggests that archetypal images are informed by cultural nuances. Even though these cultural nuances evince local issues and concerns, they are inevitably universally relevant. The boy-hero may articulate local myth, but the leitmotif of unconditional love resonates beyond local space and time. The images may be local; in contrast, the characters and leitmotivs form parts of the eloquence of the collective unconscious, the universality of human stories.

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