# Semiotic Literacy, Post-Modernity, Malaysia and Japan; How Television Advertising Reveals Political-Economic Development and Change

# Semiotic Literacy, Post-Modernity, Malaysia and Japan; How Television Advertising Reveals Political-Economic Development and Change[1]

Todd Joseph Miles HOLDEN

*Graduate School of International Cultural Studies, Tohoku University, Sendai, Japan*

This paper focuses on how advertising formats can be utilized as inductive tools to assess the political, economic, intellectual and cultural "development" of a society. It does so by focusing on two essentially different countries: Japan and Malaysia. We find that while both countries utilize the same four formats identified by Leiss et al. (1990) in their historical survey of American and Canadian print ads, they do so in different measure. Specifically, in Malaysia *Product Information* and *Product Image* formats occur with greater frequency, whereas in Japan the *Peronalization* and *Lifestyle* forms are more common. Implicit in Leiss et al.'s work was a developmental logic. Simply put, one could hypothesize that nations at a lower level of political-economic development tend to favor the "cruder", more product-centered formats, while those countries at the higher level more often invoke the more sophisticated, entertainment-oriented communications. The comparative data here tends to confirm this. These associations are bolstered by the fact that in Japan, though not in Malaysia, we encounter a fifth presentation format—what I call the 'Post-modern Format'. One further task of this paper is to explore an array of postmodern approaches.

   In conclusion I seek to understand why such patterns have resulted. My explanation is twofold. From the production side it involves matters of political organization and economic development—factors impinging on ad creation. From the audience side, it entails semiotics and, in particular, an ad reader's sign-processing capacity. We end with questions of globalization. Advertising is one of the few "language systems" which has spread worldwide that is also understandable (at some level) to all recipients. Yet, because it is dependant on semiotic literacy and because such literacy is dependent on political and economic factors rooted in the context, the question whether Malaysian advertising will ever "develop" to the level of Japanese advertising—with a similar dominant status in society—is yet an open question.

KEYWORDS: advertising, comparative sociology, national development, communication theory, semiotic literacy

## Introduction

This paper focuses on the form of commercials—in particular, how advertising formats can be utilized as inductive tools to assess the political, economic, intellectual and cultural "development" of a society It does so by studying two essentially different Asian countries: Japan and Malaysia.

Doing so, we find that while both countries are home to the same four formats identified by Leiss et al. (1990) in their historical survey of American and Canadian print ads, they do so in different measure. Specifically, in Malaysia it is the more pragmatic, product-centered formats—*Product Information* and *Product Image*—which occur with greatest frequency, whereas in Japan it is the ideationally diffuse, less product-oriented formats—*Personalization* and *Lifestyle*—which are most common. Perhaps in part because of this formatic preference, Japanese ad messages aim at entertaining. They emphasize frivolity, downplay rationality and offer more aggrandized representations of the social world. This, in turn, suits the social milieu which, more so than in Malaysia, is focussed on pop and youth culture, conspicuous consumption, immediate gratification, ephemeral existence, trends and fashion.

Implicit in Leiss et al.'s work was a developmental logic. Simply put, looking at the historical progression of formats, one could hypothesize that nations at a lower level of political-economic development (defined, perhaps controversially, in terms of liberalism) tend to favor the "cruder", more product-centered, less entertaining formats, while those countries at the higher level more often invoke the more sophisticated communication forms. In fact, the comparative data here tends to confirm this.

These associations are bolstered by the fact that in Japan, though not in Malaysia, we encounter a fifth presentation format—what I call the 'Post-modern Format'. This approach manifests a number of sub-types, including: (a) fragmentation, (b) product-least and product-less presentations, (c) irony, absurdity and humor, (d) style over substance, (e) cultural reference and (f) entertainment. One further task of this paper is to introduce these various postmodern approaches.

In conclusion I seek to understand why such patterns have resulted. My explanation is twofold. From the production side it involves matters of political organization and economic development—factors impinging on

ad creation. From the audience side, it entails semiotics and, in particular, an ad reader's sign-processing capacity. Perhaps more than any other communication form, advertising relies on signs to deliver meaning. And, the signs associated with the higher level formats require a greater level of what I call 'semiotic literacy' than those utilized in the lower level formats. Most immediately, what this means is that in terms of information processing, Japanese audiences and Malaysian audiences are exposed to different orders of communication; they are being asked to process signs differently. With political and economic development—i.e., with a change in the forces impinging on ad production—an attendant shift in the formats employed should result. When this occurs, particularly in Malaysia, increased semiotic literacy will likely be developed and employed. For now, however, this is a fundamental communication difference between the societies.

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## About Method

The study of the relationship between ad form and a society's contextual elements gains by comparison; it gains most by widening the net of its comparison. Ideally, that comparison would not only be based on essential dimensions such as politics, economics, culture, morality and social practices, but also a comparison of these measures across a number of countries. With enough countries sampled there would exist the basis for making meaningful generalizations about ad form and context. Unfortunately, while such a design is preferable, it is far from easily realizable. The financial and intellectual resources, as well as the time required to conduct such a study are monumental.

As a consequence, in the instant research, it was necessary to settle for half-measures. Two countries were selected which, given their striking differences along a number of key dimensions, might offer the best opportunity to obtain provisional validation (or summary falsification) of the research premise. Assuming confirmation, the next steps might then be undertaken: comparing countries that might vary in only one or a few particulars.

## About Malaysia and Japan

Among the Asian countries, two excellent candidates for the developmental thesis are Japan and Malaysia. Though space militates against an extended comparison, Suffice it to say that they are quite different. This is no clearer than when we consider their respective political situations. While both are constitutional monarchies practicing parliamentary democracy and each can be characterized as virtual one-party states, these are but phenotypic similarities. In point of fact, Japan's politics are more volatile both within the ruling party, as well as among parties holding or sharing in power.[2] Moreover, government control over information, speech and public activity is less restricted and rarely subject to government censure.[3]

In Malaysia, by contrast, cases of censorship—either government-directed or self-imposed—are far from rare. The swift (and many might assert steamrolled) trial of Anwar Ibrahim and subsequent suppression of the political movement that grew in his wake is but one example. A second recent example involved the bureau chief of the Far Eastern Economic Review. He was jailed for six weeks for failing to exercise "self-restraint" when reporting on perceived favoratism in the Malaysian judicial system. Such incidents drive analysts to quandary; typing Malaysia as not quite "liberalized authoritarian," but not exactly "limited democratic," either (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986).

In other respects, as well, the countries differ considerably. To wit: their histories of independence (Japan for virtually its entire lifetime, Malaysia only since 1957), their contact with foreigners (Japan primarily with Portugal, China and America; Malaysia, in the main, with Holland, Britain and—to a lesser extent—Japan), and the place of religion in everyday life (ubiquitous in Malaysia; rather peripheral in Japan).

As for communication and economy—to name two important factors for the purposes of this paper— Malaysia and Japan occupy different positions along the developmental continuum. Japan is often referred to as a "post-industrial" ("information" or "knowledge") society; Malaysia, at best, as an industrial society with postindustrial aspirations. However, in both societies communication—and, in particular, commercial communication—is integrated into daily life under the aegis of satellite, cable and (mainly) broadcast television. Again, however, the extent of development differs considerably. Japanese television communication (measured

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[2]For a summary of the recent history of Japanese political rule, see my "How can we say it in 15 seconds?': Assessing Japan's New Mass-Mediated Reality," *Japanese Society*, Vol. 2 (1997): 77-97.

[3]The two most visible recent exceptions being: (1) the Education Ministry's annual strict censure of descriptions of Japan's wartime activities—most prominent being the genocide in Nankin, the "recruitment" and use of "comfort women", and the infamous chemical research unit; and (2) the recent stripping of the doomsday sect *Aum shinrikyou* of its religious organization status.

in terms of number of stations, homes reached, televisions per capita, the breadth of geographic coverage, and hours per operating day) far outstrips that of Malaysia. By the same token, (whether measured in terms of money spent, the cost of producing and airing commercials, the number of products advertised and/or the assets of the companies involved), electronic commercial messages are more dominant in Japan than Malaysia. In short, we are looking at advertising markets that are diametric opposites. Whether viewed politically, economically, socially or morally,[4] Malaysia and Japan are very different environments in which to evaluate commercial messages.

## About Advertising

### The Function of Advertising

For some, the question might remain: "why advertising?" The answer is simple. Entering the 21st century few other forces can be said to exert such a profound influence on society. In support of this view it has been claimed that advertising is the engine of capitalism (Williams 1980). Without it this ubiquitous mode of economic production—a driving force in globalization according to Wallerstein (1979) and Giddens (1990), among others—capitalism would disintegrate. In a related vein, others have argued that advertising has become so pervasive as to become ensconced as the official art form of industrial nations (Dyer 1982). As such, it is a major vehicle of communication, an institution with the power to organize thoughts, values, activities and professions. This is because ads are, in my words, "directive" and "selective" (Holden 1995). They tell us what to think about, in what possible ways, when, where and (to a limited extent) why. In short, they serve an agenda-setting function for society and its members (Holden 1997). Moreover, as capitalism comes to be more and more dominated by the production and circulation of popular cultural-related objects, advertising becomes one of the major (and most efficacious) media for achieving such purposes (Holden 1999b).

Still others have viewed advertising as an essential tool for the perpetuation of ideology (Williamson 1978; Vestergaard and Shroeder 1985). The ideologies are many (among them, power, gender, class and racial-stereotypes), with the ability to reproduce structural relationships implicit in each.[5] For this reason, many assert, there is utility in "reading ads" for their so-called secondary content.[6] Today, almost without a second thought, scholars engage in semiotic readings of ad content (e.g. Goldman 1992; Rutherford 1994) seeking to uncover the underlying messages and structure of society. Working with American, Japanese and Malaysian ads over the past decade I have uncovered extensive connotations concerning freedom (1994), the prioritization of political values such as social control, equality, liberty and individualism (1995), health, body and sexuality (1996), nationalism (1997), desire (1999a) and national development (forthcoming).

In the present study I approach second-order signification in a different way: by focussing on form rather than content, and by doing it across countries, rather than within one socio-cultural context.

### Theorizing Advertising: Stages of Development

Social theory is rife with evolutionism—one of the most pervasive areas being economic development. From Aristotle[7] on up to Marx[8] and, more recently, through to Braudel[9] and Wallerstein,[10] we see staged logic employed. While often criticized as overly simplistic and/or deterministic, evolutionism persists as a compelling analytic frame, defying wholesale dismissal.[11]

[4]I have covered the question of advertising, politics, morality and national development in other work (Holden 2001, Holden and Husin forthcoming). In brief, that work has found that ads (like all communications) are viewed in Malaysia as positive tools for social development. As a consequence, a concerted effort has been made by the Malaysian government to create mechanisms for social shaping and control. Thus, for instance, stict regulations have been issued by the Ministry of Information concerning what is and is not permissible in advertising. This code, revised in 1990 and "renewed" in 1998, declares that its aim is to "protect the rights of the public, nation and government from elements that can harm the country's harmony and development through the broadcasting media." Reflecting the country's volatile political history, an avowed objective of the code is to ensure that communications be "sensitive to the atmosphere in Malaysian society, which is multi-religious, multi-racial and multi-customed. (Ads) should not hurt the feelings (of certain groups) or demean the sexes, politics or individuals."

In addition, the code declares, it was "created from the sense of obligation and sensitivity that the government has towards society's needs, its morals, the nation's culture, and also the government's desire to build a civilized nation, highly cultured and with high morality."

To ensure that this goal is met, ads must go through a grueling process of scrutiny. This process is composed of twelve separate steps between original ad conception and actual airing on television. In addition to this exhaustive process, other potential checks on advertising include: the Ministry of Trade and Industry's Consumer Affairs Division (which investigates consumer complaints), the Consumer Association of Penang, and the Advertising Standards Authority (the advertising industry's own watchdog body).

[5]For more on this point, and particular, for its applications to the ideologies of gender and power, see Goffman (1979) and O'Barr (1994).

[6]What Barthes (1957) called their "connotative" dimension or "second order signification".

[7]See, for instance, The Politics (1964).

[8]See, for example, The Communist Manifesto (1967).

[9]The Wheels of Commerce: Civilization & Capitalism 15th to 18th Century, Volume 2 (1979).

[10]See, for instance, Unthinking Social Science (1991): 261.

[11]From the wealth of contemporary examples, see Nisbett (1969), Drucker (1993) and Sanderson (1995).

Table 1:   The Development of Media, Marketing and Advertising Source: Leiss et al. (1990:6).

| Media For Advertising | Newspapers/Magazines | Radio | Television | Television |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Marketing Strategy | Rational | Non-rational | Behaviorist | Segmentation |
| Advertising Strategy | Utility | Product Symbols | Personification | Lifestyle |
| Period | 1980 1900 1910 | 1920 1930 1940 | 1950 1960 | 1970 1980 |
| Elements in Ads | Product qualities, Price, Use | Product qualities, Symbolic attributes | Product Person prototype | Product Activity (person /setting) |
| Metaphoric-Emotive Themes in ads | Quality, Useful, Descriptive | Status, Family, Health, White magic, Social authority | Glamour, Romance Sensuality, Black Magic, Self-transformation | Leisure, Health, Groups, Friendship |
| Cultural Frames for Goods | *Idolatry* Product is abstracted from process of production, presented as pure value | *Iconography* Products are embodiments of attributes, configured in social judgments | *Narcissism* Products are personalized, satisfaction is judged in inter-personal terms | *Totenism* Product is Emblem of group-related consumption practice |

Evolutionism has also tended to be employed in writing about advertising: from histories[12] to informal theory involving cycles[13] to formal conceptualization centered on developmental stages. In the latter class, Leiss et al.'s (1990) work, is particularly compelling. The authors posit four distinct "cultural frames for goods" (a way that goods are conceived and re-presented to consumers), then convincingly link them to historical epochs—stages of socio-economic development in a focal society. Importantly, though, the data from which they derived these categories was North American and covered a period coincident with the creation and growth of the advertising "industry"—two mitigating factors in any effort to generalize their findings to other societies and eras.

Nonetheless, under the conditions bounding their study, Leiss and his team demonstrated that advertising reflected distinct *"thought styles"*[14] in marketing (from *rational* to *non-rational* to *behaviorist* to *segmentation*), adhering to distinct socio-economic periods. Each thought style carried with it a gestalt about how to package a good, moving in an orderly progression from emphasis on *product* to *symbol* to *consumer* to *activity*. Moreover, each period was shown to speak in particular "emotive themes"—from *quality* to *status* to *glamour* to *leisure*. According to Leiss's group, the overarching cultural frame in advertising evolved from *idolatry* to *iconography* to *narcissism* to *totenism*—with corresponding effects reflected in consumer beliefs and consumption patterns. Leiss's group's major developmental arguments are summarized in Table 1.

One question that I wish to broach as we work with these categories is whether what Leiss et al. were measuring was a *weltanschauung*—a measure of socio-economic development, an arbitrary industrial mind-set, or something else entirely. Is it not possible that such shifts are related (either wholly or partially) to an audience's interpretive competence? In other words, the change in preferred communication may not only lie in the prevailing ideological frame of a culture, but the perceptual frame of the culture's constituents, as well, that determines the way ad messages are packaged.

*Testing the Model*

Given our Asian focus, a question that arises is "how generalizable is such a model? "Developed from a sample of North American ads during a particular historical period, is this four-stage thesis applicable to other contexts, subject to differing cultural, historical, political and economic forces?

The short answer is "yes", although not without important caveats. Above all, as the present data[15] is not

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[12]See, for instance, Tumer (1952); Dyer (1982).

[13]See Fox (1984).

[14]This term is not used by Leiss et al. It belongs to Fleck (1935). I invoke it here in hopes the reader will pass this passage through the prism of sociology of knowledge.

[15]I have described this data in other studies (see, in particular, Holden 1997; Holden and Husin 2002, Holden 2001). To summarize: at the time of this research Malaysia had five national networks (a sixth was added in 1997). Two were (as they still are) government-owned: TV1, which is mostly local programming in Malay; and TV2, which consists of entertainment and movies—generally in Chinese, Indian and English and apportioned into specific language/ethnic time blocks. A third, TV3, was the first privately owned station and is currently the most popular, with a 60 percent viewership. Its programming is generally in Malay, although, as with TV2, time is reserved for other language/ ethnic groups. A second private station, Metro-vision, consists mostly of English-language entertainment. Mega-TV, a TV3 associate, is Malaysia's first cable station. It has five channels—CNN International, the Discovery Channel, ESPN, HBO and the Cartoon Network. Since this research was completed, a 15-channel satellite station has come on line. The five stations operative during the study period all carry advertising. For reasons of access and resource limitations (of both the researcher and the general population) the ads contained in this sample were recorded from the three non-subscription stations: TV1, 2 and 3.

sufficiently longitudinal, there is no way to evaluate the historical dimension. In turn, this means that we cannot conclude whether a sequenced logic is at work in Japan and Malaysia.

Nonetheless, what we *do* find is not without merit. Above all, all four formats are present in each country. Equally important, the formats are present in the two locales in differing measure. Let's investigate these findings in greater detail.

### The Four Formats

Leiss's "cultural frames for goods" clearly delineates how the advertisements in any one format *should* be configured. From actors' interactive patterns to their relationship to the product; from the cinematic tropes and codes of lighting, editing, camera angle and expression to ad copy, narration, music and sound effects, these structuring elements in an ad flow together to deliver a singular, culturally-framed meaning. Importantly, though each approach is associated with a particular developmental "era" in advertising, all four types are present in both countries today (though, as we will later consider, in differing measure). To see this, let's consider eight ads—four from Malaysia and four from Japan, one each in the voice of each respective cultural frame. As a set they serve as representations of the contemporary presence of the four frames in the two societies. Following Leiss et al., I will refer to these examples as: (1) the product information format (idolatry); (2) the product image format (Iconography); the personalization format (narcissism); and the lifestyle format (totenism).

### The Four Formats in Malaysia and Japan

The following ads have been selected from each country.[16] (See Table 2)

Table 2: The Four Formats in Japan and Malaysia.

| FORMAT | COUNTRY | |
|---|---|---|
| | *Malaysia* | *Japan* |
| *Product Information* | Colgate | LLAOX |
| *Product Image* | Sprinter | Afternoon Tea |
| *Personalization* | Hong Leong Bank | DeBeers |
| *Lifestyle* | Salem | Coke |

Recording occurred over a two-week period in December 1996. Unlike my past comparative work with American and Japanese ads (Holden, 1994, 1996a), recording was neither scheduled nor systematic. Lacking the financial, physical and human resources to construct an 'ideal week' of ads (where every minute of every day on every station is recorded, then randomized and content analysed), I asked confederates to randomly record up to eight hours of programming every day over a peiod of two weeks. I advised them on *modus operendi*, but ultimately had to rely on their discretion and diligence to rotate stations and juggle recording times. I believe what has resulted has been a fair distribution of days of the week, time periods and stations. Discounting repeats, the full sample numbers 234 ads.

As for Japan, I have consistently employed a longitudinal design, collecting ads in six one-month waves over the course of the past decade. Doing so, I have managed to cull a sample that now exceeds 5,000 ads. Each wave has resulted in the construction of an "ideal week". These weeks are built out of one month of four hour broadcast blocks for each 20 hour broadcast day on each of the four nationally-affiliated non-commercial stations in Sendai, Japan, the most populous urban center in Northern Honshu. Following recording, each block is assigned a number and then, utilizing a random number chart, placed in its appropriate position (in terms of day of the week and time), until the seven days of that ideal week are filled.

One objective in constructing the ideal week is to provide every station an equal chance of representation in any particular time slot (i.e. morning, noon, afternoon, evening, late night) throughout the broadcast day. One result of this approach is that each station ends up gaining roughly equal placement in the variegated slots. Presumably, and as a consequence, following the same logic, every commercial aired during this period has about an equal chance of being represented in the final sample.

Once an ideal week is completed, the data are reduced to "second generation tapes" which are shed of programming, such that only commercials are present. The ads on these tapes are then subjected to qualitative coding procedures, often by teams of three trained researchers, in an effort to reduce bias. Coding is informed by a standardized coding sheet that has grown, over the course of the research process, to a size in excess of 100 formatic and content codes. In an effort to introduce a certain degree of standardization, these coding sheets served as the basis for initiating the Malaysian phase of the analysis.

[16]It is worth taking time to consider this particular data. In response to an earlier version of this paper, a reviewer wondered why commercials from the same corporation were not compared in the two contexts. Two comments are in order First, it was not the case that ads from the same company were available in both countries in any one format—let alone all four. This lack of comprehensive comparability vitiated any potential meaning gained by locating and presenting one or more cases of concurrence. Presenting one (or two) pairs would only make the conclusions reached in this portion of the analysis more ambiguous. Secondly, it is essential to observe that even had ads from the same company been present in both countries in the identical format, this would *not* have been helpful in advancing (or refuting) the present argument. In fact, it is erroneous to assert that the argument for socio-economic development could be measured (at all, or even better) by studying communications emanating from the same company. For, in such cases it is unclear just what one "proves". Are ads in the same format under the aegis of one corporation an indicator of a nation's socio-economic development or of globalization? In fact, the presence of the second variable (globalization) in some ways serves to muddy the focal analysis of socio-economic development. By contrast, finding the same format from different companies tends to *strengthen* rather than weaken the developmental argument. For one, it sets the globalization factor to the side. Second, it buttresses the notion that many companies (not just multi-nationals) tend to perceive and present the ad message in terms of these rhetorical forms.

In the first paired set, we gain a sense of how products have been extracted from the production process and presented purely for their use value. Thus, for example, the Malaysian ad entails a demonstration of how one half of a seashell will become brittle after being dipped in a natural acid, aimed at simulating the corrosive effects of food. By contrast, the side of the shell coated with Colgate will not break—even after being dipped in the acid. This use of demonstration and emphasis on comparison works together as a rational appeal—a staple of the earliest stages of advertising development. Japanese ads also utilize rationality—often by communicating specific information. In the case of the ad selected, information comes in the form of the wide array of products available at an electronics store.

The second set of ads presents products as embodiments of attributes that, once validated by the social mirror, suggest that the audience might do well to obtain such goods. For instance, in the Malaysian ad, a young man is at first treated with suspicion and even disrespect by the regulars on the test track. However, once he purchases a product that transforms his motorcycle into a veritable rocket, he quickly gains their approval. The attributes of super performance that flow from bike to product to product purchaser are those, the ad implicitly claims, that the audience would wish to have—and *can* acquire merely by purchasing the good. We are encouraged to follow the lead of the once-skeptical track regulars and run to purchase the product.

Similarly, Japanese ads play (prominently) with notions of group sanction. This should come as little surprise insofar as Japan is often viewed as a group-oriented society, where deviation from the majority is looked upon with scorn and even distrust. In the particular example selected here, a British man drives leisurely down the streets of London in his fashionable "touring" car. He is passed by a loud, grungy, hairy biker who leaves a trail of vile smoke in his wake. While the biker nearly mows down a troupe of elderly women, the "proper gentle-man" brakes for them, enabling them to cross the street. After receiving their nod of approval, the respectful man reclines in his car, enjoying his spot of afternoon tea. As the ad makes clear, the product is only for those with the proper temperament (refinement, manners, time, an appreciation of leisure). It is certainly not for the aggressive and uncouth. In turn, the product is presented as bestowing positive—socially redeeming and/or beneficial—qualities upon its user.

A third set of ads reveals what Leiss et al. call "personalization". Under this tack products are embodied in the persona of an individual. More, the audience is able to gauge the positive qualities of the person via interpersonal relations and productive exchange. On the face of it, this might seem similar to the "product image" approach, but in fact, the order of signification (i.e. person prior to product, rather than person from product) differs.

Thus, for instance, we find that (in the Malaysian example) a bank derives quality from its employee—not the other way around. It is the banker who has personality (as the theme song tells us) and, because she is so personable, cheerful, engaging and (most importantly) trustworthy, by extrapolation, the bank in which she works is all of these things, as well. In short, the bank embodies the qualities we see played out in a series of vignettes from her daily life. Similarly (in the Japanese ad), it is the diamond that is a reflection of the bearer—rather than the person who derives identity from the diamond. The sparkling necklace does not confer status on the supermodel; instead, she tells us, the piece harmonizes with her character, values and lifestyle. In this way, the audience is made to believe, the product derives value from its user.

Turning to the fourth format, we see that the product facilitates the objectives or complements a larger set of activities engaged in by a discernible group of people. In this way, "lifestyle" becomes the centerpiece of the ad. Such ad frames generally first depict an activity pursued by an aggregation, then seek to show how well the product articulates with the pursuits of the group. In this way the product serves as an emblem of the group; it is a badge that is worn (most often) following the culmination or (sometimes) during the course of their collective action. In the case of Malaysia, it is a twenty-something group of men and women reliving their wild bike ride through rugged mountain terrain. In the case of Japan, it is the unusual colors, smells, tastes, sights and activities experienced by black Americans and an assortment of Japanese generations, alike, during the traditional festivities for the new year.

### Noting Patterns: Preferred Formats in Malaysia and Japan

Thus, all four formats can be found in both countries. Yet, this does not mean that both countries manifest the same distribution of formats. In fact, a certain contextual logic—a local pattern—*does* inhere between the two in a way I find meaningful. To wit, while we can find evidence of *personalization* and *lifestyle* in Malaysia, such formats are less prevalent than in Japan. Conversely, a greater number of *product information* and *product image* formats can be found in Malaysia, whereas they are less pervasive in Japan. Stated alternatively, the ostensibly more politically and economically "advanced" society (Japan) manifests a larger number of commercials adhering to the "higher end" (i.e. later-evolving) formats of the Leiss model; by contrast, the politically and economically less developed society (Malaysia) evinces a greater number of the "lower end" (i.e. nascent) formats. In this way, one might infer a positive correlation between degree of political-economic development and preferred formats.

## Drawing Preliminary Conclusions

There are a number of factors which I believe contribute to this result—all of them related to context. Above all, structural conditions certainly determine ad format. The most obvious structural factor is politics. As others have demonstrated (e.g. Frith 1987; Ngu 1996), there is considerable government constraint on ad production. This is manifested in a strict advertising code which concerns itself with everything from language to dress to race to religion to foreigners to secondary, pro-social messages; it is monitored by a strict twelve-step process of review, modification and approval. As is true of all countries, Japan also has an advertising code. However, what is absent is the similarly stringent, interventive review process (as exists in Malaysia), through which we can discern the heavy hand of government.

Of course, economy is an area where a government's hand *is* perceptible. Whether it be laissez-faire capitalism or state-sponsored communism, the authoritative decisions of government lie behind all economic activity. Development is the discernible product of government's authoritative decisions. One measure of development is "quality of life"—with societies at lesser stages of economic development being more concerned with subsistence, while those at more advanced stages, less concerned about meeting basic needs than finding uses for disposable income and spare time. Thus, it is not of great surprise that the formats of the ads in the two countries tend to reflect the prevailing economic conditions. In a word, Malaysian ads emphasize themes of utility (stage one) and status (stage two), while Japanese ads play up themes of personal gratification or narcissism (stage three) and lifestyle (stage four).

Such a division is consistent with the two contexts. Specifically, Malaysia houses a population that is: (a) concerned with making rational decisions about how to stretch their scarce personal financial resources (utility), and /or (b) striving to improve their lot and ascend the social ranks (status). Japan, by contrast has basically been through these initial steps. Though branded goods are certainly used by many as a symbol of status, advertising is far less focussed on this idea. Instead, ads work to show how individuals often give meaning to products (narcissism/personalization) and how products complement the array of fun, attractive, leisure pursuits engaged in by all (at least, according to the ads) Japanese consumers.

Other contextual elements also impinge on ad formats. For instance, the ability of corporations—sponsors and ad makers—to invest in ad messages, as well as the competitiveness of the market are factors impinging on both the quantity and quality of ad production. Japan's ad market, the second largest in the world in terms of expenditures and revenues, places a premium on style, attention-grabbing techniques, situations and themes. Such factors exert a pressure toward higher-end, audience-centered communications.

It is this attention to the audience—a feature of later-stage formats—that I wish to key on as we near conclusion. For now, let us merely note that audience is a major constituent of the context within which advertising operates. Let us also assert that it is the message producer's awareness of and attention to an audience's decoding competence that may account for—but most certainly enables—format shifts. We will resume this thread in a moment.

To summarize the preliminary conclusions, though, one might safely say that ad formats (or cultural frames for goods) reflect the prevailing socio-political values and level of economic development of a focal society. In Malaysia, the frames adopted are those concerned with goal-directed, society-sustaining and other-regarding activity; in Japan, the frames often are less utilitarian, less rational, and less other-oriented. The approaches best suited to fulfill the former requirements are the *product information* and *product image* formats; those able to complement the latter are the *personalization* and *lifestyle* formats.

## Analysis

### Further Glimpses of Developmentalism (1): Format Melding

It is Leiss et al's contention that the present stage of advertising in North America should be characterized as "totenism". One feature of this stage, they argue, is a blending of prior approaches—*personalization* with *product image*, for instance, which are then combined with *lifestyle*. This tendency is certainly apparent in this data—where, for instance, the DeBeers ad in Japan manipulates messages of image and personalization to fit within or bolster messages of lifestyle.[17] Importantly, such melding is conspicuously *absent* in the Hong Leong Bank ad from Malaysia, where *personalization* (alone) is the only cultural frame the ad seeks to communicate.

This relative presence versus absence speaks a great deal about context—about how (here, economic and semiotic) development bears on ad format. Howso? First, the act of format melding serves as indicia of an advanced,

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[17] I should note that the personalization format is one that is favored in Japan—both due to convention, but also, I believe, for cultural reasons. There is, among Japanese, the penchant for following the group, avoiding the "rusty nail that sticks up gets pounded down" syndrome. Thus is it that the rampant use of credible sources—in the form of *talento*—to hawk product serves as one measure of social (i.e. group) sanction for viewers to key in on. As Husin (1999) has shown in her interviews with ad readers, product purchase serves as a means of deriving "image capital" from the popular, high visibility, well-defined spokesperson.

fully-developed market (i.e. one in which, according to the Leiss model, all four styles have experienced distinct "careers" of creation and use). Why? Because prior to melding, each stage must have run its individual course. Again: why? For the simple reason that until ad readers are capable of decoding each format in isolation, they are unable to manage such missives in concert. Bringing us, again, to the audience. For, the interpretation of mixed formats is a higher level intellectual function; one requiring greater semiotic literacy on the part of the message recipients.

*Further Glimpses of Developmentalism (2): The Postmodern Format*

The evidence appears overwhelming that structural factors have accounted for the evolution of advertising formats. As we've seen, one reflection of context is the fourth format's emphasis on self and lifestyle. This formatic preference often results in advertising messages packaged as entertainments. As such, ads in these latter stages emphasize frivolity, downplay utility, and offer more aggrandized representations of self in a social world. This framing of goods in the consumer's world, in turn, suits the kinds of products and context that is contemporary Japan. More so than in Malaysia, this is a milieu focussed on pop and youth culture, conspicuous consumption, immediate gratification, ephemeral existence, trends and fashion. Such tendencies are augmented even more by the steady move toward a fifth stage of advertising – what I call the "Postmodern Format". Significantly (from the developmental perspective emphasized on these pages), it is a stage entirely absent in Malaysia today

*"Post-modernity" in Ads.* "Postmodernity" is the term coined by Lyotard (1972) to denote "the breakdown in the grand narrative." This view, which has come to gain wide currency, posits that all unities have been nullified by multiple forces of challenge: race, ethnicity, gender, ideology, religion, language, knowledge, interpretation. The result is rampant decomposition, fragmentation, contradiction, possibility. The loss of meaning, though considerable, is dwarfed by the multiplication of meanings. The post-modern condition is chaotic and free; unchained, adrift, open and infinitely unclosable.

As a concept of fragmentation, mutation and generation, post-modernity has been applied to all manner of cultural analysis: humor, MTV, the X-Files, movies such as *The Terminator* and *Wayne's World*, architecture such as The Bonaventure Hotel.[18] In important ways, post-modernity underpins the essential social theory of Foucault (1972) and Baudrillard (1986). In particular, it is through the work of the latter (with his concepts of *simulation* and *hyper-reality*) that advertising qualifies for inclusion in the parade of postmodern textual analyses.

More than an abstruse intellectual concept, though, post-modernity has come to take corporeal form—under the aegis of Japanese advertising. Above all, postmodern traits can be found in Japanese ads' use of: fragmentation, irony, humor and abstract association, style (surface) over substance (depth), consistent intertextual and cultural references, and intentional merging of popular and elite culture. As time passes, more and more advertisers are picking up the postmodern thread, working to introduce more of these distinctive elements into ad text. I would like to now consider some recent examples in terms of the categories they represent.

*Fragmentation*

Over the decades breaking down the grand narrative has devolved to the disruption of any narrative—no matter how large or small. "Deconstruction" was post-modernity's first mantra and it has been widely applied not only in the analysis, but in the creation of cultural texts, as well. Thus is it that postmodern advertising aims to shake the foundations of discourse. Via shagginess in narrative, a diffusion of center, a jumble of images, sounds, edits and film speed: linearity, continuity and "reality" all come under attack. It is the audience's job to make sense out of the diverse, discontinuous elements, as I have shown in other work (1999b).

As for other ads, which emphasize exogenous content over product, I have recommended the term "product-least advertising" (1999b). In such ads what is normally considered the "primary content" of an ad is made secondary to social message, flashy visuals or story-telling. At times, this can have the effect of rendering unclear just what is being advertised. With certain ads we end up with a complex culturally-framed sign equation as follows: product, less than information, less than image, less than personality, less than lifestyle, less than disembodied symbols, equals ad message. The success of such product-decentering has been underscored in interviews with ad viewers, who indicate that when exposed to fifth-format ads, it is difficult to predict during the viewing just what the product is. Only in the final frame (and sometimes not even then) does one know what is being sold.[19]

*Product-Less Advertising*

Nonetheless, while 99% of *product-least* content is unrelated to product, a good for sale generally *does* ap-

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[18]An excellent compilation of such analyses is Berger's *The Postmodern Presence* (1998).

[19]This evidence has been assembled by Husin in her unpublished doctoral dissertation *Living with Television Commercials* (Tohoku University).

pear. Increasingly, however, cases crop up in which the product is wholly absent. I have recommended that such cases, which are not entirely uncommon, be designated "product-less advertising".

A recent example of this approach is a Nike ad featuring Ronaldo as big game hunter. Here the striker—hailed as the world's best soccer player—pursues his prey (soccer goals, of course) on the African savanna. His weapon: a soccer ball. His stealth, keen eye, and reputation are enough to make a goal quake in place, then flee. Not far or fast enough, we learn by ad's end. For there, in the drawing room, on view for Ronaldo's moments of quiet reflection, is the bagged goal—a trophy he brought back to civilization.

What is the product? The ad provides very little indication—other than a brief glimpse of the shoes and ball assisting his pursuit. Only in the final frame, when the sponsor's famous icon appears, does the viewer know that this has been an appeal on behalf of Nike sporting goods. Clearly, there is very little discourse about sports products in the ad. Perhaps the inference that the shoe is swift or the ball is accurate. More than product, clearly, what is of import is the ad's exo-product discourse: its style, its look, its humor, its ability to entertain. In this respect, it is the paragon of postmodern ads: one whose texture, whose surface, reigns over its content (which is all but absent).

## Humor: the Importance of Absurdity and Irony

The previous ad "works" in large part because of its absurdity. Don't misunderstand: one of advertising's oldest devices—it's major standby—has been humor. There is nothing essentially post-modern about the attempt to get an audience to laugh with or at a protagonist. For years this has been one way to deflect critical scrutiny of product merits (and demerits), while, at the same time, working to establish recall. Without question, such a ploy can be easily located in a country such as Malaysia.

For instance, in an ad for a cellular phone, all three major ethnic groups are portrayed in situations which seek to build humor out of personal calamities—all of which play upon traditional cultural stereotypes. A Chinese woman finds herself trapped in a stalled car—driven to seek refuge there by a pack of monkeys which have dropped in from an overhanging tree; a successful Malay businessman enters the airport still wearing his house slippers—to the utter horror of his oh-so-image-conscious wife; a traditional Indian wedding threatens to disintegrate into inter-family warfare when the groom's cart bearing wedding gifts overturns downtown.

The humor in the Malaysian offering is firmly rooted in present reality with its identifiable ethnic groups, familiar social situations and long-standing cultural stereotypes concerning superstitious Chinese, slothful Malays and combative Indian in-laws. This set of representations bears almost no relationship to the brand of humor currently flowing through Japanese ad-space where, for instance, a pop idol is chased through the curved corridors of a futuristic building by a gigantic rhinoceros. The "joke" lies in the juxtaposition of the real (the pop idol) and impossible (the giant rhino). In this way, the postmodern ad is an anti-ad. It presents situations one could never conceive of and then goes on to boldly declare that *this* is precisely the situation the product is needed for! Far from the typical hard-sell advertising formula of yore.

## Style over Substance

The previous comment is what one would expect from an analysis of advertising of another era, reflecting earlier stages. However, advertising is in the midst of swift, dramatic change. It is no longer about convincing a skeptical audience that a product works or that it is good. Advertising in the postmodern stage is about the look and feel of a product, as much as its benefits. This is one reason why postmodern advertising is so well-suited for Japan: a culture based (for centuries) on feeling. In addition, though, a contemporary culture in which stars and talent—who generally look so good—are the primary vehicles for product presentation. Thus, it is the look, the style, and the feeling that the star brings to the ad that is most essential. It is not the drink, nor even the grotesquely immense beast, nor even the absurdity of the situation that matters in the rhino ad; rather it is the fact that it is "*Kimutaku*"—the aloof, affected, moody, cuddly idol—squeezing out the product that most matters.

In the same way, ads deprived of stars in the age of postmodern communication shoot for a feeling, a texture, a set of lumpy, fuzzy, grating, puzzling, intriguing, sensual sounds and images that the reader must struggle to work through, fit together, make sense of—but, above all, connect with.

## Cultural Reference

A central aspect of many Japanese ads is their exogenous reference to other media, cultures, eras and ideas. In media studies this is often labeled "intertextuality" and post-modern ads are full of references to cultural products from other places, times and media forms. Japanese ads, in particular, are rife with references to art, artists, events and objects from external contexts. Among the class of 2000: the Beatles, the Mona Lisa, Charlie Chaplin, Salvador Dali, Marilyn Monroe, Natsume Soseki, Greek goods, Apollo moon landings, Lady Diana's marriage to Prince Charles, the reunification of Germany... the list goes on and on.

In fact, cultural reference is a staple of Japanese advertising and one vehicle for the selective reproduction of culture. Under post-modernity, it is the appropriation, juxtaposition, reinterpretation and outright transforma-

tion of these cultural objects which is most glaring (and noteworthy).

For one to appreciate just what the appropriation and juxtaposition means, it is necessity to possess a high level of semiotic literacy. To grasp the way the ad reinterprets and transforms meaning demands a critical ability by the ad reader to actively work with these signs. This is where prior conceptions of intertextuality differ from present practices of postmodern advertising. The former argues that it matters little whether the reader possesses knowledge of the referent; the latter presumes such knowledge and, in fact, treats it as integral to the completion of meaning, based on the numerous signs in the text. This is another way of saying that under postmodern conditions the demand for high semiotic literacy in ad reading is especially high. Without it, the intended meaning of the ad producer cannot be completed. A successful communication becomes less likely.[20]

Numerous examples can be found. One, of particular note, involves a painstaking recreation of the climactic scene from the Hollywood movie, "Close Encounters of the Third Kind." If a viewer doesn't recognize this correspondence, then they are unlikely to care much about the product: a cable station devoted to movies. While the text can be read as a simple entertainment, (the alien ends up zapping an earthling for failing to properly decode his charade-like gestures), the text is trying to convey to the reader that the station owns and will air the movie "Close Encounters", along with other movies of similar quality.

### Entertainments

As just mentioned, the replication of a movie scene in ad text is one of the current "gimmicks" in Japanese ads. A trick aimed at making ads more entertaining and, therefore, maximizing their ability to communicate with an audience. This naturally leads us into a final class of postmodern ad: the entertainment.

One of the central impacts of post-modernity has been to shred the veil separating elite and popular culture—making both equally accessible to all people. Through the medium of television, in general, and advertising, in particular, the two domains of culture have become increasingly consolidated. One way that this has happened is via the transformation of advertising into something other than simple vehicles for capitalist reproduction. By weaving real people (such as the American President, Bill Clinton, or the sumo star, Takanohana) with invented characters (a nerdish college kid or a cranky salaryman), contemporary Japanese ads have managed to become popular cultural objects in and of themselves.

Such ads amount to something more than a simple "here's our drink, it tastes good, buy it" or "here's the star, he likes it, buy it" approaches of earlier stages. In the most recent ad for Boss 7 (canned coffee), Kanda Uno, a talent who (in the "real world") is known for her strong will and individualist lifestyle (and is often criticized for it in the press), tells a male friend "everyone is against me". Her friend replies "I will stand by you, no matter what"—a pledge that is suddenly severely tested when governments and peoples from around the world rise up as one to call the man out for a showdown. The ad closes with an American military helicopter hovering outside the window, the besieged couple in its gunsights.

This is but one ad in an on-going series. By now, the unwavering formatic elements (the loudmouth, the theme of "put up or shut up", the confrontation with a clearly superior opponent, the spaghetti western showdown music) are all well known to the audience. Thus, the viewer long ago became habituated to the absurdity of the depicted situations. What makes for continued watching, though, is the spectacle: the enormity of the production, the blending of the fictitious with the real. Such ads are less about commerce than about entertainment.

### Summarizing

For all who have viewed MTV or a Tarantino movie, the post-modern approach to audio-visual communication is familiar. Significantly, it is a mode of discourse, a packaging of information, a construction of "reality", which has increasingly come to pervade Japanese television advertising. Equally salient: it is a form of advertising wholly absent from Malaysian advertising.

## Discussion

### Conceptualizing Message Production and Audience Reception

Let's now turn our attention to trying to understand why such patterns have emerged. Earlier I suggested that factors rooted in context—structural features such as political organization and economy—were essential. So, too, however, are the message recipients. This has been rather well accepted wisdom since the advent of Hall's (1980) notion of the "cultural circuit" (depicted in Figure 1).

Hall's "innovation" was to recognize that there are two parties to a communication—not the one, omnipotent, process-initiating message producer that previous communication research took as gospel. This simple insight had the effect of redirecting the spotlight toward the message recipient. After 50 years of political and sociological studies in which "media" was conceptualized and analyzed in terms of producers—often with incon-

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[20]For a more thorough explanation of semiotic literacy see Holden (2001) on Malaysian literacy and Holden (2000) on literacy in Japan.

programme as

"meaningful discourse"

encoding meaning                                        decoding meaning

structures 1                                            structures 1

frameworks                                              frameworks

of knowledge                                            of knowledge

- - - - - - - - - - -                                   - - - - - - - - - - - -

relations of                                            relations of

production                                              production

- - - - - - - - - - -                                   - - - - - - - - - - - -

technical                                               technical

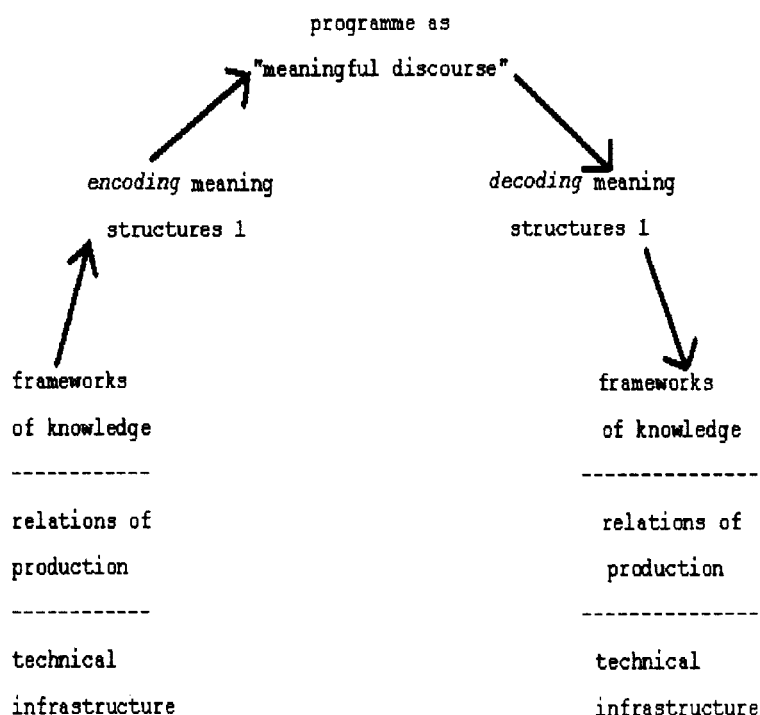infrastructure                                          infrastructure

Fig. 1:   Hall's "Cultural Circuit" of Message Production and Processing: Encoding and Decoding

clusive results—Hall's model worked to usher in a new, frenetic era of microscopic studies centering on the audience.

In my view (and others—e.g. Cashmore, 1994) this development has strayed far afield. Suddenly, it is widely claimed, message producers have little power; receivers are extremely potent. Such a version, however, is consistent with the current *weltanshauung*: the postmodern turn which emphasizes subjectivity, interpretation, contentiousness and resistance. Nonetheless, this account of reader power is less compelling when we look at a country like Malaysia, with its myriad formal checks on media content.[21] Under such conditions Hall's model ought to be refashioned as in Figure 2.

In this way Hall's model is re-envisioned as a junction-box. That is, a circuit breaker exists on the production side—the master circuit. Via its operation, the channel can be tripped, at numerous times during the ad-production process—thereby blocking or even halting the flow of information.

*Semiotic Literacy: Decoding and Audience Competence*

In addition, not only political structures, but factors of economic development can impinge on ad creation, as we have considered above. Such factors certainly are reflected in technical infrastructure and relations of production. However, drawing on Leiss's formats and evidence of a fifth stage in Japan, I wish to suggest that developmental features are also reflected in "frameworks of knowledge". Cultural frames reflect where a society has been and (more importantly) presently is; in turn, such frames are precise measures of what constituents presently know, think and do. Because this is so, we can say that a society's political, economic, cultural and intellectual development is reflected in both the ways messages are encoded (on the production side) and decoded (on the recipient/reader side). It is this framing which I call "semiotic literacy"—the fluency with which an audience reads (processes, manages, interprets, decodes) and works with the messages distilled in signs.

In short, an audience's ability to read signs is a function of an array of contextual factors: political and economic development, cultural knowledge and audience capacity. All of these factors are taken into account by and/or reflected in the way ad producers translate signs and encode them into a cultural frame.

*Toward a Comparative Model*

Looking at Malaysia and Japan, I would conceptualize the contextual factors which influence encoding/decoding in advertising in the following way (see Table 3):

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[21]As mentioned above, I have detailed this in Holden (2001) and Holden and Husin (2002).
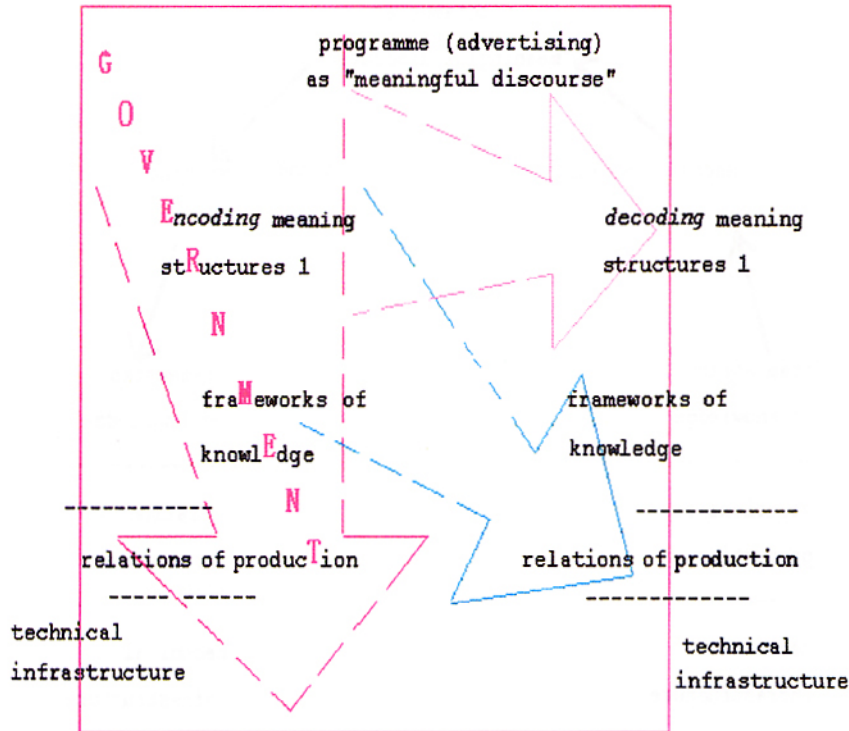
Fig. 2:   Hall's "Cultural Circuit" through the Filter of Malaysian Advertising: Government as Junction box.

Table 3:   Contextual Factors Influencing Encoding/Decoding: A Comparative Model.

| CONTEXTUAL FACTORS | COUNTRY 1 (Malaysia) | COUNTRY 2 (Japan) |
|---|---|---|
| Regime Type | Liberalized Authoritarian (Repressive/responsive) | Liberal Democratic (Pluralist) |
| Economic Configuration | Market/Industrial | Market/Postindustrial |
| Ideational Voice | Ideology | Postmodern |
| Advertising Stage | Rational-Utilitarian/Rudimentary Semiotic | Advanced Semiotic/Postmodern |
| Textual Content | Unisemy | Polysemy |
| Literacy Level | Low to Medium | Medium to High |

## Semiotic Literacy and Stages of Development

Let's be clear here: this is not to say that achieving deeper levels of semiotic literacy is impossible; that such an audience is "backward" or their ideational space is impoverished. It is only to say that, like understanding quadratic equations or speaking another language fluently, a certain amount of groundwork must be laid, skills must be imparted, worked with, mastered. Only then can the next higher level of abstraction, the more sophisticated function, transpire. A large amount of this depends on quality of life factors: political organization, economic development and cultural values.

As for our focal countries, advertisers in Malaysia—unlike Japan—apparently do not wish to risk sending higher staged messages. I would suggest that this is simply for efficiency's sake. The environment is not yet geared to treat messages of consumption in terms of narcissism, leisure or entertainment. For this reason, the audience has not yet been trained to "see" the world this way. To send such messages would be to mitigate communication effectiveness.

## In Sum: Reevaluating Audience Power

Despite the recent clamor in Cultural Studies' circles about the empowered audience, this study suggests that the information audiences receive, manage and make sense of is as much a function of societal development as their own intellectual capacity. In short, how audiences receive must be explained in terms of context (the producers' and mediators' sympathetic perception of an audience's processing capacity) as much or more than in

terms of individual power. It is a society's framing factors which bear on an audience's ability to receive, process, decode and manipulate symbols; in turn, it is this ability which becomes reflected in advertising form and content.

## Conclusions in the Form of Hypotheses

This paper, in large measure has worked to reinterpret Leiss et al.'s staged analysis of advertising. It has sought to do so in a grounded way—by comparing two very different advertising contexts: Malaysia and Japan. Doing so, we have been able to formulate, consider and generally confirm (or, at least, *not* disconfirm) four hypotheses concerning the advertising sign. First, that there is a particular career to advertising (in the guise of formats) which, second, may be correlated to environmental factors such as polity, economy and/or cultural history. Third, there is a particular career to *audience receptivity* toward such sign/formats. Audience competency in decoding advertising's signs—what I call *"semiotic literacy"*—is a function of degrees of exposure to and fluency with signs. And fourth, that semiotic literacy is causally connected to the procession of advertising's stages. Stated alternatively, advertising's audience must have prior experience with and acculturation to the decoding of ad sign/formats.

These hypotheses become more compelling when advertising is viewed in terms of the contemporary (post-industrial/postmodern) condition: globally, liberal political institutions have increasingly been installed which, in turn, have smoothed the way for capitalist economic organization. Increasingly, the world of products, practices and ideas has become more uniform—joined into a relatively interconnected "world system". Thus is it that goods are created by multi-national firms and transmitted via relatively more immediate and widely-distributed media such as television. Under such conditions, commercial communication is less constrained by national boundaries, local histories and hermetic cultural traditions. Such insular parameters are more susceptible to sudden semiotic (encoding/decoding) leaps stimulated from the outside.

This leads to hypotheses of globalization. Advertising is one of the few language systems which has spread worldwide that is also understandable (at some level) to all recipients. Yet, because it is dependant on semiotic literacy and because such literacy, in turn, is dependent on political and economic factors rooted in the context, the question whether Malaysian advertising will ever "develop" to the postmodern level of Japanese advertising—securing a similarly dominant status in society—is yet an open question.

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