Nama Jurnal
DOI
ISSN
ISSUE
Vol

Unpacking Cultural Semiotics in German Commercials: An Intercultural Framework for Foreign Language Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

Background: Achieving communicative fluency in foreign language acquisition necessitates a deep comprehension of intercultural competence. However, authentic media integration—specifically commercial advertisements—remains underutilized in bridging cultural gaps for EFL/ELE learners. Objective: This study investigates how German Christmas traditions, social values, and cultural practices are represented in commercial advertisements produced by major German supermarket chains (Lidl and Edeka), and evaluates their pedagogical potential for intercultural foreign language learning.
Methods: Utilizing Roland Barthes' semiotic framework (denotative, connotative, and mythical dimensions), this qualitative study analyzed verbal, visual, and image signs extracted from two 2024 YouTube Christmas advertisements by Lidl and Edeka. Data were interpreted within Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) framework.

Results: The semiotic analysis revealed four main cultural themes: (1) spiritual and conversational expressions (e.g., 'frohe Weihnachten', church bell symbolism), (2) traditional culinary heritage (e.g., Würstchen mit Kartoffelsalat, Gewürzspekulatius, Brussels sprouts, roasted turkey), (3) festive iconography (e.g., Advent calendar, Weihnachtsmann, Schneemann), and (4) family solidarity practices (e.g., Bescherung gift-giving, Christmas tree decorating, communal singing). Lidl emphasized active family participation, whereas Edeka utilized Christmas iconography as an atmospheric background within professional supermarket settings.

Conclusion: Commercial advertisements serve as highly accessible, authentic multimodal texts that bridge foreign language instruction and intercultural literacy. Integrating semiotic decoding of commercial media enables learners to navigate socio-cultural nuances and minimize cross-cultural misunderstandings.

Keywords: *Intercultural Communicative Competence; Semiotic Analysis; Roland Barthes; German*

Christmas Traditions; Commercial Advertisements; Foreign Language Pedagogy.

2. Introduction

Achieving fluency in foreign language learning extends beyond acquiring structural grammar and vocabulary; it fundamentally requires the mastery of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) (Byram, 1997; Radoš et al., 2022). Integrating cultural studies with language pedagogy enhances learners' contextual understanding, boosts learning motivation, and sharpens interpretive skills necessary for real-world interactions (Iswandari & Ardi, 2022). When communicating with native speakers, learners must demonstrate openness toward cultural differences and possess the analytical capability to decipher implicit cultural meanings embedded in everyday discourses (Davidovich et al., 2023).

With the rapid advance of digital technology, learning contexts have become flexible and unconstrained by geographic boundaries (Prasakti et al., 2024). In this digital ecosystem, mass media—particularly commercial advertisements—presents a rich source of authentic multimodal input. Advertisements function not only as commercial instruments but also as psychological mirrors and cultural representations of societal life, constructed through language, symbols, and visual narratives (Hall, 1997; Machin, 2014). For foreign language learners, commercial ads provide concise, culturally dense materials that reflect contemporary societal norms, values, and practices.

In German-speaking contexts, festive holiday commercials published by major retail brands carry significant socio-cultural representations. Holiday traditions in Germany, much like major socio-religious celebrations in other non-Western cultures (e.g., Eid al-Fitr in Indonesia), serve as pivotal cultural events that reinforce social cohesion, empathy, and collective identity (Majid, 2025). Comparing culturally parallel events allows foreign language learners—such as Indonesian learners of German as a Foreign Language (GFL)—to map cultural similarities and distinctions effectively, thereby facilitating deeper intercultural comprehension.

Despite the pedagogical potential of commercial advertising, empirical research examining how commercial ads can be systematically decoded for intercultural language education remains limited. Most existing studies focus either on traditional literary texts or explicit grammar instruction, leaving a gap in understanding how multimodal commercial media represents evolving cultural practices. To bridge this gap, this study applies Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to analyze the visual, verbal, and pictorial representations of German Christmas traditions in commercial advertisements produced by retail giants Lidl and Edeka. The primary objective is to demonstrate how semiotic decoding of multimodal commercial texts can serve as an effective framework for developing intercultural competence in foreign language education.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in semiotic multimodal discourse analysis. A qualitative semiotic approach is particularly suitable for discovering underlying social meanings, cultural values, and myths encoded within visual and verbal signifiers in commercial media (Barthes, 2017).

3.2 Dataset and Media Corpus

The primary data corpus consists of two official Christmas commercial videos published in 2024 on YouTube by major German supermarket chains: Lidl ('Magische Weihnachtszeit') and Edeka ('Die EDEKA Weihnachtsverstärkung'). These retail brands were selected due to their pervasive presence in German daily life and their strategic reliance on local cultural motifs to foster consumer engagement and brand connection (Shambodo et al., 2025). YouTube accessibility allows these videos to serve as accessible, global learning resources for international GFL learners.

3.3 Analytical Framework and Data Analysis

Data were extracted and categorized into three sign units: verbal signs (spoken utterances and text), visual signs (objects and artifacts), and image/action signs (interactive social behaviors). The data were analyzed through Roland Barthes' three-tiered semiotic framework (Barthes, 2017):

1. Denotative Analysis: Documenting the literal, direct, and surface-level linguistic and visual content observed in the advertisements.

2. Connotative Analysis: Unpacking the symbolic, socio-cultural meanings, norms, and emotional resonances associated with each sign within German society.

3. Mythical Analysis: Explicating the broader cultural beliefs, socio-historical narratives, and contemporary commercial shifts (e.g., secularization, globalization) underlying the representations.

4. Results

The semiotic analysis identified ten primary signifiers across the Lidl and Edeka advertisements, categorized into Verbal Signs, Visual Signs, and Image/Action Signs. Table 1 summarizes the semiotic breakdown across denotative and connotative dimensions.

Sign Type & Item	Denotative Meaning	Connotative & Cultural Meaning
Verbal: 'Wenn die Glöckchen läuten...'	Imperative to make a wish upon hearing church bells.	Spiritual calling to Christmas Mass; reflection and hope (Balz, 2014).
Verbal: 'Frohe Weihnachten'	Formal/informal festive greeting.	Expression of empathy; culturally constrained to Dec 25–26 (Cammann, 2024).
Verbal: 'Würstchen mit Kartoffelsalat...'	Statement identifying potato salad with sausages as #1 food.	Frugality, family simplicity, and practical heritage on Heiligabend (Deutschlandradio, 2022).

Visual: Gingerbread (Lebkuchen)	Human-shaped spiced baked cookie.	Warmth, winter comfort; historical evolution from Brothers Grimm folklore (MacGauffin, 2025).
Visual: Gewürzspekulatius	Pre-packaged spiced biscuits in supermarket.	Preservation of Sankt Nikolaus lore; modern commercial adaptation of festive baking (Luard, 2019).
Visual: Brussels Sprouts & Turkey	Dishes served on a decorated dinner table.	Seasonal agricultural adaptation (sprouts) and globalized festive influences (turkey) (Smith, 2006).
Visual: Advent Calendar & Snowman	Numbered 24-day calendar; inflatable snowman.	Structured anticipation (Adventszeit) and seasonal winter joy (Woitsch, 2022).
Image: Family Dinner & Tree Decorating	Gathering around dinner table; hanging ornaments on fir tree.	Intergenerational connection, active family participation, and warm domesticity (Sezer et al., 2016).

4.1 Verbal and Linguistic Representations

In the Lidl advertisement, the phrase 'Wenn die Glöckchen läuten, wünsch dir was' (When the bells ring, make a wish) serves a dual semiotic function. Denotatively an imperative statement, connotatively the bell chime represents the traditional spiritual call to Christmas Vigil service, inviting contemplation and spiritual hope (Balz, 2014).

In the Edeka commercial, the utterance 'Frohe Weihnachten' encapsulates pragmatic communication norms in Germany. While universally recognized as a greeting, connotatively it reflects empathetic goodwill. Pragmatically, the greeting is strictly bound to December 25th and 26th; using it past December 27th violates German sociolinguistic conventions (Cammann, 2024). Furthermore, the statement 'Würstchen mit Kartoffelsalat, das Nummer 1 Weihnachtsessen' highlights a defining culinary tradition. Connotatively, serving simple potato salad with sausages on Christmas Eve (Heiligabend) signifies humility and pragmatism, allowing families adequate time to attend church services without burdensome kitchen preparation (Deutschlandradio, 2022).

4.2 Visual and Material Culture

Visual signs in both advertisements convey rich historical and seasonal narratives. The human-shaped gingerbread (Lebkuchen) in Lidl signifies winter warmth. While human shapes stem from Anglo-American influences (Antonia, 2018), German gingerbread traditions trace back to Brothers Grimm fairytales like Hansel and Gretel, which popularized gingerbread house crafting in the 19th century (MacGauffin, 2025). Similarly, Gewürzspekulatius packaged on Lidl shelves bridges historic wood-carved bakeries depicting St. Nicholas legends with modern retail distribution (Luard, 2019).

Culinary visuals such as Brussels sprouts reflect historical reliance on seasonal winter harvests (Spence, 2021), whereas the roasted turkey represents commercial adaptation and global

secular influences merged into traditional German menus alongside goose or duck (McCann, 2021; Whiteley, 2008).

4.3 Comparative Narrative Strategies: Lidl vs. Edeka

A critical finding lies in the contrasting narrative strategies employed by the two retail brands. Lidl centers its visual narrative on domestic intimacy—showing active family engagement in gift-giving (Bescherung), Christmas tree decorating, and communal singing. Conversely, Edeka situates Christmas iconography (Advent calendars, St. Nicholas figures, snowmen) within a commercial, workplace setting (a supermarket aisle). Edeka uses cultural symbols as atmospheric background elements to enhance retail identity, whereas Lidl utilizes active social practices to evoke emotional resonance.

5. Discussion

The empirical findings of this study demonstrate that commercial holiday advertisements are not merely marketing vehicles; they are dense semiotic artifacts that encapsulate cultural continuity, commercial adaptation, and societal values. The presence of both traditional elements (e.g., Kartoffelsalat, Adventskalender) and globalized practices (e.g., roasted turkey, Anglo-American Santa Claus iconography) reflects the dynamic, hybrid nature of contemporary German Christmas culture, influenced by globalization and secularization (Perry, 2010; Sfetcu, 2021).

5.1 Theoretical and Pedagogical Implications

From an educational standpoint, integrating semiotic analysis of commercial media directly advances Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) framework. Language learners frequently struggle with pragmatic appropriateness and cultural nuance when instruction is restricted to textbook dialogues (Radoš et al., 2022). By examining multimodal commercial ads, learners acquire critical visual literacy, enabling them to decipher implicit cultural norms (e.g., the temporal boundaries of greeting phrases or the cultural value of pragmatic simplicity in festive meals).

Furthermore, using parallel cross-cultural concepts—such as comparing German Christmas family gatherings with Indonesian Eid al-Fitr traditions (Majid, 2025)—provides a relational bridge that lowers cognitive load and fosters empathetic cross-cultural reflection among learners.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

This study is subject to certain limitations. First, the data corpus was restricted to two commercially produced holiday advertisements from a single broadcast year (2024). Second, the study focused primarily on textual and semiotic decoding without empirically measuring student learning outcomes in a live classroom setting. Future research should expand the corpus across longitudinal commercial campaigns and incorporate empirical classroom

interventions to quantify the impact of semiotic ad decoding on learners' intercultural pragmatic development.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that commercial advertisements from Lidl and Edeka serve as powerful multimodal texts for unpacking German social norms, culinary traditions, and festive practices. Through Barthesian semiotic analysis, the study uncovered how linguistic expressions, material artifacts, and family rituals articulate core German values of family solidarity, pragmatic simplicity, and historical continuity amidst modern commercialization. Incorporating multimodal semiotic decoding into foreign language curricula equips learners with the interpretive tools necessary to achieve genuine intercultural communicative competence.

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