A CULTURAL-SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO ROMANIAN AND JAPANESE ADVERTISING DISCOURSE. CASE STUDY: PUBLIC SERVICE PRINT ADVERTISEMENTS

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Abstract: The present paper aims to reveal the differences between Romanian and Japanese print advertisements from a cultural-semiotic perspective. Starting with Peirce's trichotomy of signs and Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions (1980, 2001) we intend to describe the particularities of advertising discourse in the proposed context in order to find possible explanations for the variations in discourse construction. Our hypothesis is built around the idea that advertisements are a reflection of a society's view of the world and therefore a cultural-semiotic analysis will provide significant insight into how norms and values are conveyed through signs. Considering that advertising discourse can be perceived as a collective good in which values and ideals are expressed through symbols a diachronic analysis of the words of advertisements can work as a powerful markers indicating how societies change. Perhaps the most visible change in discourse construction is the shift from an explicit to an implicit meaning and this phenomena be observed through the use of symbols and visual cues rather than words. Through the analysis of four Japanese and Romanian public service print advertisements created after 2015 we aim to explore the constituent signs of advertising discourse focusing on both language and context in order to show the connection between language and culture in discourse construction. The findings suggest that cultural adaptation is a decisive factor in persuading the viewer.

Keywords: advertising discourse, semiotics, Japanese advertisements, Romanian advertisements, discourse analysis

Introduction

The polysemy of the term "discourse" comes from the interferences with a variety of studies such as politics, media, economy etc. and therefore there is no universally accepted definition. In the present paper we shall refer to "discourse" as "text and context together interacting in a way which is perceived as meaningful and unified by the participants".[1] Our aim is to analyze advertisements as discourse and to consider context as important as language because advertisements are not created in isolation, but are a result of a society's culture, values and norms. Thus, it is of high importance to observe when and where the message is communicated, through what medium and in what kind of society.[2]

[1] Cook 2005:4.
[2] Cook 2005: 1.

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Advertising has become a field of interest from many perspectives such as sociology, linguistics and media studies because it can reveal a society's values and ideals in a certain framework. The study of advertisements as discourse provide knowledge about the current state of affairs and also about the differences in perception among the receivers as members of a certain community. If we admit that a culture can be defined by the sum of its discourses, then any type of discourse can be seen as a radiography of that society or more generally speaking the conventions adopted guide the specifications of that culture (Williams 1977: 177). Advertising discourse is a multimodal type of discourse and implies a series of interconnections of social, cultural and economic nature, but most importantly it seeks for maximum effect with minimum effort. It is perhaps one of the most complex types of discourse because of its capacity to transfer abstract meanings by mixing visual communication with text and motion with audio-video in its most complex forms, but the present article aims to describe the particularities of print advertisements therefore it will not tackle this matter.

Advertisements can be roughly categorized in two types considering their purpose: commercial (concerned with selling a product, service) and non-commercial (concerned with citizen's welfare, done for public interest)[3]. In both commercial and non-commercial advertisements the main goal is to persuade the viewer and this feature is often perceived as a distinguish one among other genres.[4] In the proposed analysis we are focusing on the latter, more specific to Public service advertising which is commonly associated in this category. This type can be undertaken by public bodies as well as businesses and the main difference consists in its non-profit oriented vision. For example, railway companies, trash and recycling services, environmental posters etc. can be placed in this category. In the case of railway companies the main purpose of ads is to create model commuters and to draw attention to commuter etiquette. In the same category of promoting good manners and working together for keeping the city clean are the advertisements made at the request of city halls. These types of posters are often displayed in public spaces like parks and main squares, pedestrian areas. There is a significant difference between posters displayed in Romania and Japan and the main reason is due to cultural background and views of the world. We shall focus on this aspect in the last part of the paper through an analysis on four Romanian and Japanese posters which aim to highlight the importance of keeping the city clean and raise awareness of the environmental issues.

Hofstede's cultural dimension applied to advertising discourse analysis

The six national cultural dimensions proposed by Hofstede emphasize on understanding cultural differences and the factors which lead to differences in terms of perception and categorization.[5] Starting with "power distance", "individualism/collectivism", "masculinity/feminity", "uncertainty avoidance", "long/short term orientation" and "indulgence/restraint" the proposed model has been applied to a variety of studies and in the case of advertisements is a means of understanding local habits and consumer motives[6]. The model

[3]Mohan 2008: 344.
[4] Cook op. cit.: 10.
[5] Marieke de Mooij and Geert Hofstede 2010: 86.
[6] Ibidem p.85

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has its grounds based on Geert Hofstede's research started in late 1960s conducted in 72 countries and its main purpose was to reveal how societies cope with different issues and the results revealed significant differences in matters of perspective and thus, of solutions to those issues. Power-distance dimension is described as the ability to offer "different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality"[7], individualism is perceived as opposed to collectivism and the emphasis is on the perception of the "self", masculinity to femininity with focus on "desirability of assertive behavior against the desirability of modest behavior"[8], uncertainty avoidance is regarded as the relationship with the future. The following dimension, long-term orientation is defined in the light of "fostering of virtues oriented toward future rewards—in particular, perseverance and thrift […] whilst short-term orientation "stands for the fostering of virtues related to the past and present—in particular, respect for tradition, preservation of "face," and fulfilling social obligations."[9] The later added dimension, indulgence vs. restraints refers to the "tendency to allow relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun."[10] The measurement scale is from 0-100 for each dimension and each country can be indexed through explicit tables.

Applying Hofstede's model to Romanian society we obtain the following scores: 90 on the power distance scale, 30 on individualism, 42 masculinity, 90 uncertainty avoidance, 52 long term orientation and 20 on indulgence[11]. The data reveals the specificities and tendencies followed by the members of the society which tend to accept a hierarchical order quite easy and in which no further justification is needed. Moreover, with a score of 30 on the individualism scale it is perceived as a rather collectivistic society guided by the motto "working in order to live" and people tend to have a rather pessimistic view. This is a brief description which can help in understanding cultural values and thus, discourse construction.

On the other hand, Japan scores 54 on the power distance scale, 46 on individualism, 95 on masculinity, 92 on uncertainty avoidance, 82 on long term orientation and 42 on indulgence.[12] At a very first look the two data reveal that the most significant difference is noticed on the power distance scale, masculinity and long term orientation (fig.1). Japan, a borderline hierarchical society, not as collectivistic as other Asian countries, one of the most masculine societies in the world guided by competition between groups (motivation, hard work etc.) and people perceive their lives as a short moment in time, thus the Japanese live guided by virtues and practical good examples. These particularities reflect in discourse construction and in this case in the role of advertising in society.

[7] Hofstede 2001: 29.
[8] Hofstede 2010: 186.
[9] Hofstede op. cit.: 239.
[10] Ibidem: 281.
[11] https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/romania/.
[12] https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/japan/.

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Having completely different historical and economic backgrounds, Romania and Japan cannot be characterized on the same principles, but the purpose is to observe differences in terms of perception of the "self" in order to expose the use of certain symbols over others. Collectivistic cultures tend to avoid direct and explicit interactions and the focus is always on the wellbeing of the group. Even though the difference between the scores marked on the individualism/collectivism scale between the two countries seems not so relevant it must be perceived in context. By "context" in this case we refer to all elements that form discourse. For example, in the case of Japanese the tendency is to avoid emitting subjective judgments therefore, discourse is often ambiguous. In general pronouns are omitted and the most important information comes at the very end, but accompanied by sentence-final words such as *deshō* ("possibly", "probably"; polite form) or *darō* ("possibly", "probably"; plain form) marking probability. "The Japanese language is so constructed as to be particularly conducive to the effect of ambiguity […]"[13] and this can be an explanation for the constant concern of preserving group harmony referred in Japanese as "*wa*". Also, another aspect to be taken into account is Japan's long history in acknowledging one's place in society with humble is reflected in the following saying: "*Deru kui wa utareru*" (lit. "The nail (stake) that stands up gets hit/hammered down"). This expression is often quoted in studies as a statement for Japanese conformity nature and also it reflects the importance of acting as a group without anyone standing out. These characteristics also reflect in discourse, thus Japanese discourse is characterized as indirect, implicit, and inductive as opposed to Romanian discourse, which is described as direct and deductive.

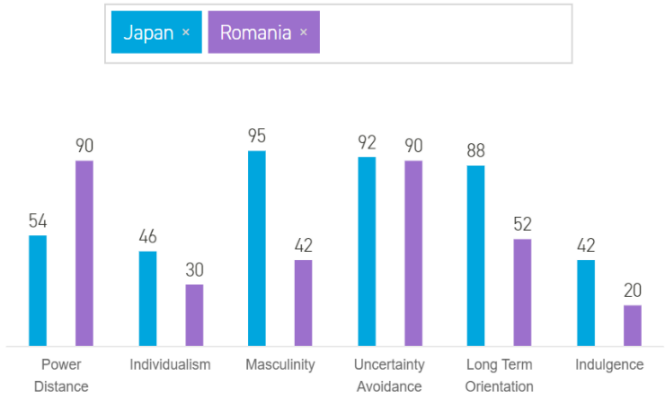


Fig. 1: Japan-Romania comparison (Japan-blue scale; Romania-purple scale);
Source: https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/japan,romania/

In Romania, a country with a communist background the principle of submission and equality between members of the society was a key element at that time, but it was an artificially created one, implemented with force and nurtured by fear. Of course we are not aiming to thoroughly describe the historical background of these two countries, but it is important to have a brief description which can help in understanding the differences reflected in discourse construction. In fact, only after a few years after the fall of the communism print advertisements were displayed again in magazines. Nevertheless, our analysis is concerned with the language of public service print advertisements, thus discourse construction was influenced solely by the values promoted by the communist party. In that period there was a tendency to use "wooden

[13] Doi: 81.

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language" and tautologies (imposed by the Soviet Union), characterized by abstract or embellished words meant to distract citizens from real issues. The "legacy" of communism can be traced down in different writings of that period and words such as "tovarăș", "securist", "cooperativă" which were not indexed with a pejorative meaning in the dictionary have come to carry bad connotations because of language users who associated these words with enslavement and supervision. Our analysis is focused on contemporary posters, thus we will not tackle the issue of communist words and their impact, but it is important to observe discourse construction retroactively in order to understand its becoming. As many other languages Romanian is in a continuous process of borrowing words of anglo-sexon origin and this is clearly observed in advertisements of any kind. Besides this, "French as a language of culture in the last 2 centuries […] justify the existence of extremely numerous words of this origin in Romanian. […] English took the place of French and Romanian has many Anglicisms, entirely, partially or at all adapted to its phonetic and morphologic systems."[14]

Our research premises is that each culture has to be understood from its roots, that is in the case of advertisements "the future is to be found in its past".[15] Perhaps the common feature between Romanian and Japanese advertising discourse can be found in the popularity of foreign words and the fast pace with which Anglicisms and French words are adapted except that in most Japanese advertisements these words are not chosen for their semantic properties,[16] but for their capacity to suggest. This is a common practice especially in the case of beauty print advertisements because foreign words suggest exoticism and novelty. In Japanese advertisements these words are usually written in *katakana* (a Japanese syllabary) for emphasis and this usage is usually compared with the use of italics in languages which use alphabets for writings or left exactly like in the source language. In the case of Romanian advertisements there is a tendency to create the sense of individuality, exclusivity by addressing a second person singular receiver through the pronoun "tu", whilst in the case of Japanese as we already mentioned discourse is constructed in a more objective way by refraining from direct forms of address. Of course when discussing commercial advertisements this will not always be the case, but in the case of non-commercial advertisements usually the receiver is not directly addressed and this can also be a statement for the constant care of preserving group harmony.

Case study: public service print advertisements

In this last part of the paper we shall analyze two Romanian non-commercial print advertisements and two Japanese in order to reveal differences in discourse construction determined mainly by the perception over the world. Peirce's trichotomy of signs and Hofstede's national cultural dimension will serve as a premise which will help in exploring and understanding the constituent signs and the context for each advertisement.

[14] Rehm, Uszkoreit (eds.) 2012: 50.
[15] Becker 1985 qtd. in Moeran 1996: 6.
[16] Tanaka 2001: 55.

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Figure 2 is an example of a non-commercial print advertisement from 2017 created at the request of Sibiu Town Hall. The purpose is to raise awareness on waste disposal and it was displayed all over town in the main public areas. The headline of the poster is written in Romanian with bold characters "Gunoiul nu are aripi" (lit. "Litter doesn't have wings") and it is meant to emphasize the importance of keeping the city clean. The communicative and socio-cultural context is very important in the process of analysis, thus questions like what, who, where, when, why and how[17] can lead to better understanding discourse construction. What is particularly interesting in this advertisement is the use of irony to convey a powerful message. The construction "GUNOIUL nu are aripi" (lit. "Litter doesn't have wings") is a metaphor that would normally be continued by the statement "therefore it cannot fly". Although it does not appeal to a direct form of address at first sight the text at the bottom left of the poster continues in a more subjective note: "Hai să avem grijă ÎMPREUNĂ ca acesta să ajungă unde trebuie." ("Let's ALL make sure it goes where it should"). The words written in capital letters, "GUNOIUL" ("LITTER") and "ÎMPREUNĂ" ("TOGETHER"), "NOSTRU" ("OURS"), "CONTEAZĂ" („MATTERS") emphasize on the importance of collaboration for the greater good of the community. The receiver can be a citizen of Sibiu or just someone passing by and this can be observed from the construction "Sibiul este orașul tău, al meu, al NOSTRU" ("Sibiu is your city, mine, OURS"). The motto of the series is written at the bottom of the poster: "Fiecare gest CONTEAZĂ" ("Every effort COUNTS") and it encompasses the basic principle on the role of a model citizen. These forms of direct addressing through 2nd person possessive are very efficient in persuading the viewer. The pictorial component along the linguistic component work together towards persuading the receiver. In this case, the accent is mainly put on the text, but the image comes to explain the repercussions or to exemplify such bad conduct. By creating a realistic message through concrete examples (litter on the streets of Sibiu) and through direct forms of addressing in a serious tone the receiver is warned over seriousness of the problem.



Fig. 2: Sibiu Town Hall campaign, 2017;
Source: http://www.turnulsfatului.ro/2017/11/08/campanie-de-educatie-civica-statiile-de-autobuz-gunoiul-nu-aripi/

In the same manner, figure 3 is an example of a Japanese print advertisement from an anti-litter campaigns to raise awareness. The difference between the two advertisements is visible from the start in terms of visual signs, at least. This poster is part of a 2019 campaign started at the initiative of Sapporo City Hall. Even though the two posters were created for the same purpose the constituent signs differ considerably and this can be explained from world view which is strongly related to culture and traditions. In this sense, advertisements can be perceived as a reflection of a specific culture and society in a specific timeframe. As opposed to Romanian public, non-commercial advertisements Japanese ones have the tendency to

[17] Segovia 2007: 159.

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"camouflage" serious matters such as littering, smoking, alcoholism etc. through unrealistic, comic book-like Universes and to send awareness messages through fantastic characters. One possible explanation for this phenomena can be found from the analysis of the cultural key-concept, "*amae*", referred to as the constant need of need-love.[18] Nevertheless, the importance of maintaining group harmony is reflected also in discourse construction, thus the characters depicted in posters (often in funny, defenseless stances) along the text marked with vivid colors appeal to the receiver's emotions by suggesting vulnerability.

The text is written entirely in Japanese except the negation word "no" which is marked with red and written in English in order to emphasize the importance of obeying the rules. Even though it is not common that these sort of advertisements emphasize on negation words and imperative forms, but rather on a more indirect form of addressing in this case there is a mix between direct, explicit assertions and implicit one manifested through *kawaii* (‚cute') aesthetic *via* a cute mascot. Text orientation is horizontally, from left to right, different from the traditional norms, vertically, from right to left. Colors have an important role in advertisements and in this case it creates connections between signs. In figure 2 the dark shades used and the puddles suggest an apocalyptical scene, an irreversible process, a warning message that is meant to scare the viewer. On the other hand, in figure 3 the mascot, a fictional white bear with a sad expression is anthropomorphized and plays the role of the "model citizen". The vivid colors used help in creating and sending a positive vibe to the receiver by appealing to emotions and compassion. The headline is emphasized in yellow characters, *Poi sute*「ポイ捨て」meaning "Littering" followed by further explanations: *nado bōshi jyōrei*「等防止条例」"and other prevention regulations". Delimited by a different color, a vivid green symbolizing nature and green zones the next section of the poster is concentrated in exposing morally bad or wrong behaviors. The motto is represented with white characters and states: *Rūru o mamoru to, machi wa motto kirei ni naru*「ルールを守ると、街はもっとキレイになる」"If we respect the rules, our city will be cleaner". The Japanese is a pro-drop language, thus in the Japanese version there are no personal pronouns, but if we consider the type of discourse and its purpose in context the words "we" and "our" are indispensable in conveying the essence of the message. Also, in contrast with the



Fig. 3: City of Sapporo anti-litter campaign, 2019;

[18] Doi 2005.

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apparent childish nature of the issue represented through the white bear wearing a funny jumpsuit the poster ends in a serious tone pointing out the 1,000 yen administrative fine.

At first glance one would expect this poster to be part of a comic book series considering the visual signs, but a more detailed analysis reveals that this type of discourse construction is a complex manifestation of world view. The constituent signs convey the idea of group cooperation, a recurrent theme in Japanese advertisements as opposed to individualistic societies in which the receiver is encouraged to find his defining treaties. Both posters represented in figure 2 and 3 must be perceived as a form of manifestation of culture and world view and thus, the differences reflect in discourse construction.

The poster represented in figure 4 is another example of Romanian public service advertisement considering littering and its impact on the environment. It is part of a 2017 anti-littering campaign conducted in Aiud, a small city in Alba County at the request of the City Council. The message is constructed around the idea of fear and consequences by invoking 24/7 surveillance through the representation of a camera in an unrealistic size and an almighty Eye watching over, an index for spying like Orwell's Big Brother. The headline is written in capital white letters, "NU ARUNCA GUNOIUL PE JOS!" ("Do not litter!") and this negative construction is backed-up by the message "CINEVA TE VEDE!" ("Someone is watching!"), thus it creates a clear link between bad conduct and possible repercussions.



Fig. 4: City of Aiud anti-littering campaign, 2017;
Source:
https://ziarulunirea.ro/campania-campionii-arunca-la-cos-la-aiud-primaria-a-demarat-o-actiune-de-solidarizare-a-aiudenilor-in-jurul-ideii-de-a-pastra-

The poster is delimited in three sections as the previous one (fig. 3) and this is marked by the use of colors. In the first section we have the warning messages followed by the representation of a typical family with three children and the later section with explanations regarding the importance of keeping the city clean. The portrayal of the family works as a means for persuading the receiver by creating a utopic scene in which every family members acknowledges the importance of this issue. In contrast with the Japanese poster analyzed (fig. 3) this poster is constructed around the idea of accurate representation of real life situations. The idea of community and cooperation for the welfare of the city is constructed both through visuals and linguistics signs: "Fii alături de noi cu un simplu gest: aruncă ce nu-ți mai trebuie în containerele speciale care îți sunt la îndemână. Pentru că nu este suficient să facem curățenie, **trebuie să și păstrăm**!" ('Help us maintain the city clean with a simple gesture: through away garbage in the special containers within your reach. It is not enough to clean, **we must keep it that way**!" With a score of 46/30 on Hofstede's cultural dimension scale both countries are perceived as collectivistic and this characteristic reflects in discourse construction as well, but the differences in approach towards the same issue (in this

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case, littering) can be traced from the visual and linguistic signs used. In this case the approach is based on the concept of order in social and civic life, whilst in the previous analyzed poster (fig. 3) it is based on emotions and affectiveness expressed through symbols.

The last example (fig. 5) is a poster displayed on walls and in trains and it is part of a campaign started in 2018 by Tsukuba Express, a Japanese railway line of the Metropolitan Intercity Railway Company. The series title is *Yasashii Yasai* 「やさしいやさい」meaning "Kind Vegetables", a continuation of the series *Meiwaku Kudamono* 「めいわくくだもの」, "Bothersome Fruits". Both series are meant to raise awareness towards safety, morality and social manners among commuters. The theme of the selected poster (fig. 5) is littering and its repercussions and it follows the same idea used in the previous series with minor changes. Both Japanese posters (fig. 3, fig. 5) are constructed around anthropomorphism in a rather casual, friendly approach throughout the poster. Both linguistic and visual signs create a childish, fantastic universe without any reference to the real world. The preference for using *katakana* for several words which have a Japanese correspondent or even for Japanese words that are usually written in *kanji* or *hiragana* is explained through the fact that these words have the capacity to communicate more of a modern feel and to catch the audience's attention.[19]

The poster in figure 5 is an example that shows the capacity of an advertisements to generate connections between a general desirable behavior and emotions, thus in this case through the anthropomorphism of a zucchini and other visual signs the receiver is persuaded by appeals to irrational, imagination, fantasy. The construction *wandafuru bejitaburu* ("Wonderful vegetables") 「ワンダフルベジタブル」position in the upper-most part of the poster, along words like *yasashii* ("kind") and *kirei* ("nice", "clean") have the capacity to convey good vibes and to create a relaxing atmosphere while connecting these treaties to the act of keeping the train clean. Overall these constructions can be interpreted in a humorous note due to the association with vegetables, in this case zucchinis. The posture of the personified zucchinis is on one hand an index of anger and disregard towards the rules and on the other one of obedience and tranquility of a model citizen meeting society's expectations. The construction isolated through square brackets: *Gomi o hōchi shinai kirei zukkinii* ("Nice zucchinis do not litter") is a statement of the fusion, the interferences between real and surreal and it creates a link between a real occurrence and fantasy. The idea is exploited further in small print: *Yasashii yasai no "Zucchini" wa, ekikōnai ya shanai no naka ni gomi wo okippanashi ni shitenai ne. Seiketsu de ureshii ne.* ("Nice



Fig. 3: Tsukuba Express, Yasashii yasai series, February 2019; Source: http://www.mir.co.jp/feature/points/amenity/poster/yasashii/vegetable11.html

[19] Takashi qtd. in Goldstein 2011: 7.

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Zucchinis do not litter in trains and station premises. They are happy because it is clean.") Through casual patterns and humoristic visual signs the advertisement creates a relaxing, friendly atmosphere based on mutual cooperation and mutual principle between Japanese citizens: maintaining *wa* ("group harmony"). The lack of personal pronouns can lead to ambiguity for someone unfamiliar with the particularities of the language, but this is a common practice in advertising because it widens the range of audience by referring to all commuters in this case.

These examples (fig. 3, fig. 5) are relevant in terms of understanding the way Japanese cultural key concepts such as *wa*, *amae* or *kawaii* manifest in advertising and how the reality of the society is influenced and mirrored via advertisements.

Conclusions

The analysis conveyed through the specter of cultural semiotics and national cultural dimensions revealed differences in terms of world view and discourse construction. The selected advertisements have common features such as: targeting citizens on the problem of littering, displayed in public places and created at the request of authorities. Hofstede's scale of cultural dimension served as a basis for understanding and decoding the constituent signs in each of the advertisements. Discourse analysis cannot be conducted by disregarding context from language, thus we have tried to interpret all constituent signs by considering external factors.

The analysis revealed that advertisements are a reflection of a society and advertising discourse analysis cannot separate text from context, thus we have integrated cultural particularities for a better understanding of the connotations. In the case of Romania, a country with a communist background we have observed a tendency to address the receiver in a direct way in public service print ads. Moreover, the appeal to a dystopian Universe is a recurrent theme and the focus is mainly on the possible repercussions. Imperative forms along indexes of surveillance and constraints are used in order to persuade the receiver, thus this technique can be explained by analyzing Romania's historical background. Another statement in this sense is the very low score on "Indulgence/Restraint" scale which is described by the tendency to cynicism and pessimism, therefore these general treaties influence discourse construction. Overall, both posters intend to send a serious warning message by appealing to direct addressing in order to refer to the viewer's own self and to explicit visual signs. On the other hand, in Japan the needs of the group take precedents over the egocentric self and this is a belief perpetuated through key concepts such as *giri* ("duty") vs. "*ninjō* ("feelings") and *wa* ("harmony"). Moreover, the appeal to anthropomorphism in advertisements can be interpreted as a manifestation of emotions and empathy through characters and mascots. Opposed to Romanian print advertisements the Japanese posters are constructed around indirect addressing (pro-drop language) and detachment from reality. Instead, in this case there is a fusion between real and surreal observable through the analysis of the constituent signs. The Japanese posters evoke various feelings and emotions through the use of casual conversation patters and intertextuality (traces of Japanese comic book writings, *manga*).

Needless to say, advertisements can be perceived as a cultural artefact in which values and norms both reflect and are shaped and the analysis of advertisements as discourse is of

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significant importance in understanding how language and context blend in creating a persuasive message.

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