

VERBAL CODE, LOCALIZATION, AND BRAND RISK IN INTERCULTURAL ADVERTISING

YuTian Zhang

Master of Arts in Communication, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, DC 20003, USA.

Abstract: This paper examines the widely circulated Pepsi slogan case in the Chinese market, in which the English slogan “Come alive with the Pepsi generation” has often been reported as being rendered into Chinese in a way that suggested Pepsi could bring ancestors back from the grave. Because the official status of this reported rendering remains contested, the case is treated not as a verified historical record but as a durable case narrative in intercultural advertising discourse. Using qualitative case analysis and secondary market data, this paper investigates how verbal code, cultural resonance, audience interpretation, and media repetition interact in global brand messaging. The findings reveal three main conclusions. First, direct translation can preserve surface wording but weaken persuasive equivalence, especially when idiomatic expressions are moved into a different cultural system. Second, cultural resonance determines whether a translated slogan is received as natural, persuasive, or inappropriate; therefore, localization should be understood as a strategic risk-management process rather than a technical language task. Third, media repetition can extend the reputational life of an intercultural advertising error, turning even a contested case into a long-term cautionary narrative for global brands. Based on these findings, the paper proposes a practical framework that includes transcreation, local cultural review, audience testing, and post-launch monitoring. The study contributes to applied intercultural advertising by showing that translation is not the final stage of campaign execution, but a central process through which global brands negotiate meaning, credibility, and cultural trust in local markets.

Keywords: Verbal code; Advertising translation; Transcreation; Localization; Brand risk; Intercultural advertising

1 INTRODUCTION

Global advertising depends on the movement of meaning across languages, markets, and cultural settings. A short slogan may appear simple on the surface, but it often carries a dense set of brand promises, emotional cues, identity signals, and cultural assumptions. When a message travels from one language to another, the main task is not only to reproduce words. The message must also recreate the intended effect for a different audience. This is why advertising translation is a strategic issue rather than a minor linguistic step.

The Pepsi slogan case offers a useful example. The English slogan "Come alive with the Pepsi generation" has been widely cited in marketing and translation discussions as having been rendered into Chinese in a way that suggested Pepsi could bring ancestors back from the grave. The historical accuracy of this reported rendering is uncertain, and the case should not be presented as an uncontested official advertisement without primary evidence. Nevertheless, the case continues to appear in professional and educational discussions because it captures a real problem in intercultural advertising: a metaphor that suggests vitality in one language can produce unintended associations when transferred too literally into another cultural setting.

The case is especially useful because it shows the role of verbal code. Verbal code refers to the way language is used to encode and organize meaning. In advertising, verbal code does more than name a product. It shapes emotion, builds brand memory, and guides the audience toward a preferred interpretation. The phrase "come alive" works in English as an idiom of energy, youth, and refreshment. If the phrase is processed too literally, however, it can move from vitality to resurrection. In that shift, the intended brand meaning changes dramatically.

The stakes of this issue are high. Global advertising has reached trillion-dollar scale. WARC reported that worldwide advertising spending was expected to top one trillion US dollars in 2024 [1]. DataReportal also reported that marketers spent close to 1.1 trillion US dollars on advertising in 2024, with global spending increasing by 7.3 percent compared with 2023 [2]. Digital media further increases the speed and visibility of advertising circulation. We Are Social and Meltwater reported that digital channels accounted for 72.7 percent of worldwide ad investment in 2024 [2]. In such an environment, a translation problem can quickly become a brand problem.

Consumer-language data also support the importance of localization. CSA Research surveyed 8,709 consumers in 29 countries and reported that 76 percent of consumers prefer products with information in their own language, while 40 percent will not buy from websites in other languages [3]. These figures suggest that language fit is connected to trust, access, and purchase intention. The present paper therefore asks three questions: how does the Pepsi case illustrate the

role of verbal code in intercultural advertising; how do cultural resonance and audience perception affect the interpretation of translated slogans; and what practical steps can brands use to reduce localization risk?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Verbal Code and Persuasive Equivalence

Advertising slogans are compact persuasive texts. Their value lies not only in literal information but also in the response they invite. Hendriks, van Meurs, and Poos found that English slogans that are easier to understand can improve comprehension and audience evaluation in advertising contexts [4]. Their finding is relevant because it shows that slogan effectiveness depends on audience processing. A phrase that is clever in one language can become ineffective if the target audience finds it difficult, unnatural, or misleading.

Translation theory also supports this position. Pym describes translation as a set of choices shaped by purpose, uncertainty, risk, and cultural transfer [5]. In advertising, these choices are particularly visible because slogans have little space for explanation. If a translated slogan produces an unintended association, the brand may lose control over the message before it has a chance to clarify the intended meaning. This makes persuasive equivalence more important than surface equivalence. The translated line should not simply resemble the original. It should perform a similar persuasive function for the target audience.

Transcreation offers a useful concept for this problem. Ho defines marketing transcreation as a process in which optional shifts are made to achieve intended persuasive effects in the target language [6]. This means that creative change is not a betrayal of the original message. Instead, it can be necessary for preserving the original communicative purpose. For a slogan such as "Come alive," transcreation would begin by asking what the phrase is meant to make the audience feel: energy, refreshment, youth, or belonging. The target-language wording would then be created around that desired response, rather than around the literal structure of the English phrase.

2.2 Culture, Consumer Interpretation, and Localization

Culture influences how consumers respond to advertising messages. De Mooij argues that consumer behavior and advertising interpretation are shaped by cultural values, perception patterns, and local meaning systems [7]. This does not mean that all members of a market respond in the same way, nor does it justify reducing any culture to a fixed label. It does mean that advertisers must consider the associations that words may activate in a specific audience environment.

In the Pepsi case, the reported problem centers on the association between vitality and ancestors. In English, "come alive" is an idiom that normally suggests renewed energy. If the idea is rendered in a way that evokes bringing ancestors back from the grave, the message enters a very different symbolic field. Ancestors in many Chinese cultural settings are linked to family continuity, memory, respect, and ritual seriousness. A soft drink slogan that accidentally touches this field can feel strange or inappropriate, even if the brand intended only a youthful tone.

Recent work on Chinese and English advertising slogans also supports the need for cultural sensitivity. Hu Nan compared presuppositions in Chinese and English advertising slogans and argued that cultural and contextual factors need rigorous consideration when companies create slogans for Chinese markets [8]. Ji Siyu also discussed automobile advertising translation and noted that literal translation can fail when surface meanings do not match deeper cultural meanings [9]. These studies support the view that advertising translation should be evaluated not only by linguistic correctness but also by cultural resonance.

2.3 Digital Circulation and Brand Risk

The digital advertising environment changes the consequences of translation errors. In earlier media settings, a poorly adapted slogan might have remained largely local. In the current environment, screenshots, blog posts, platform discussions, and marketing articles can recirculate an error for years. Reuters reported that global advertising revenue was projected to reach 1.08 trillion US dollars in 2025, with digital advertising projected to represent 73.2 percent of the total [10]. This suggests that brand messages now circulate in a media system where visibility is fast, searchable, and durable. Katan and Taibi describe translation as a form of cultural mediation, not just text transfer [11]. This view is especially important for brands. When a company enters another language market, the translator, copywriter, and local reviewer all act as cultural mediators. They help determine whether the campaign will be read as natural, persuasive, and respectful. Without this mediation, a brand may unintentionally create a gap between what it sends and what audiences receive.

3 METHOD AND DATA SOURCES

This paper uses a qualitative case-analysis design supported by secondary market data. The case-analysis approach is suitable because the Pepsi slogan example is not only a linguistic problem. It is also a cultural, brand, and media

circulation problem. The analysis focuses on the reported slogan narrative as it appears in advertising and translation discourse, while carefully noting that the official status of the reported Chinese rendering is contested.

The study uses three types of material. First, it analyzes the English slogan "Come alive with the Pepsi generation" and the widely circulated account of its reported Chinese mistranslation. Second, it reviews recent literature on advertising slogans, transcreation, consumer culture, and translation risk. Third, it uses secondary industry data to explain why localization matters in current advertising practice. The data are not used to prove what happened in the historical Pepsi campaign. They are used to show the broader market environment in which language and localization affect brand strategy.

Table 1 summarizes the secondary data used in the paper. The table includes only publicly traceable sources and is cited in the text. These figures support the claim that advertising localization has strategic relevance because advertising investment is large, digital circulation is dominant, and consumers show strong preference for product information in their own language.

Table 1 Secondary Market Data Supporting the Strategic Relevance of Advertising Localization

Data point	Figure	Use in the paper
Worldwide advertising spending in 2024	Close to US\$1.1 trillion	Shows the financial scale of advertising localization [2].
Growth of advertising spending from 2023 to 2024	7.3 percent	Shows continued expansion of advertising investment [2].
Digital share of worldwide ad investment in 2024	72.7 percent	Shows the speed and visibility of digital circulation [2].
Projected worldwide advertising revenue in 2025	US\$1.08 trillion	Shows continued market scale in the following year [10].
Projected digital share in 2025	73.2 percent	Shows continued dominance of digital channels [10].
Consumers preferring product information in their own language	76 percent	Shows the relevance of language fit for consumer trust [3].
Consumers avoiding websites in other languages	40 percent	Shows a direct market-access risk for weak localization [3].

Source: Compiled by the author based on CSA Research, DataReportal, and Reuters/WPP Media reports [2-3,10].

4 CASE ANALYSIS

Before analyzing the slogan, this paper clarifies why a case-study approach is appropriate. Yin argues that case studies are useful for examining complex phenomena in real-world contexts and are generalizable to theoretical propositions rather than to populations [12]. Therefore, the Pepsi case is not used to represent all advertising translation failures. Instead, it is selected because it offers a concentrated example of how verbal code, cultural association, and media repetition can reshape the meaning of a global advertising message.

4.1 The Slogan Encodes a Lifestyle Promise Rather than a Literal Claim

The English slogan "Come alive with the Pepsi generation" is not a product-feature claim. It does not primarily describe taste, price, or ingredients. Instead, it positions Pepsi as part of a lifestyle. The phrase "Pepsi generation" invites consumers to imagine themselves as members of a youthful and energetic audience group. The product becomes a symbolic marker of freshness and modern identity.

This kind of slogan relies on connotation. The words are simple, but their function is complex. "Come alive" suggests feeling renewed, excited, and socially connected. The phrase works because English audiences generally process it idiomatically. They do not read it as a literal statement about death or resurrection. The slogan therefore depends on shared knowledge of idiomatic English. Once the phrase is transferred into another language, the idiom cannot be assumed to function in the same way.

4.2 Literal Transfer can Reverse the Intended Association

The reported Chinese rendering becomes meaningful as a case because it shows how a slogan can reverse its intended association. The source slogan connects Pepsi with vitality. The reported version connects the brand with ancestors and the grave. This is not a small stylistic difference. It changes the symbolic direction of the message. The brand moves from youth and refreshment to death and ritual memory.

The case therefore illustrates the difference between lexical similarity and pragmatic effect. A translation may be connected to the original word field of life and aliveness, yet still fail because the target-language expression activates the wrong cultural associations. In advertising, this failure is serious because audiences respond quickly. They often do not

ask whether the translator made a technical mistake. They simply remember the brand as careless, awkward, or culturally unaware.

4.3 The Case has Become a Durable Cautionary Narrative

The Pepsi example also matters because it has continued to circulate as a cautionary narrative. Many people encounter the case not through the original campaign but through later discussions of advertising translation. This repeated circulation turns the story into a professional lesson. Even if the historical record is uncertain, the case remains useful because it expresses a widely recognized risk in global advertising: a brand may intend one meaning but become known for another. This afterlife also shows why brands need to think beyond the launch moment. A slogan does not disappear when a campaign ends. If it is unusual, funny, or embarrassing, it may be quoted again in articles, classrooms, and professional training. The reputational life of an error can therefore become longer than the media life of the campaign itself.

5 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Direct Translation Undermines Persuasive Equivalence in Advertising

The first finding is that direct translation can preserve surface wording while damaging persuasive meaning. Advertising slogans are designed to create emotion, memory, and identification. Their success depends less on word-level closeness and more on whether the target audience receives a comparable effect. In the Pepsi case, the English phrase "come alive" works as an idiom of energy and renewal. When transferred too literally, the idea can move toward unintended meanings related to resurrection. The problem is therefore not only semantic inaccuracy. It is the loss of persuasive equivalence. This finding supports a function-first approach to advertising translation. The translator and brand team should begin with the intended effect. They should ask what the slogan is supposed to do in the audience's mind. If the original wording cannot achieve that effect in the target language, the wording should change. In this sense, creative adaptation is not optional decoration. It is a core requirement for preserving the brand message.

5.2 Localization Functions as Strategic Risk Management in Global Branding

The second finding is that localization should be treated as strategic risk management. Global advertising now operates in a fast-moving digital environment. Campaign messages can travel across platforms, markets, and languages within hours. This means that a mistranslated slogan can become more than a local problem. It can become a wider reputational issue. The market data in Table 1 reinforce this point. Advertising spending has reached trillion-dollar scale, and digital channels now represent the majority of worldwide advertising investment. At the same time, consumer-language research shows strong preference for local-language product information. These facts indicate that localization affects both exposure and trust. A brand that invests heavily in media placement but neglects language adaptation risks wasting attention or turning attention into criticism.

5.3 Media Repetition Extends the Reputational Life of Intercultural Errors

The third finding is that media repetition extends the life of intercultural errors. The Pepsi case remains visible because it is repeatedly used as a teaching example. This circulation gives the story symbolic power. The case has become shorthand for what happens when global brands treat translation as a mechanical task. For brands, this means that reputation is shaped not only by the original message but also by later retellings. A mistake can be reframed, simplified, exaggerated, and taught to new audiences. For researchers, this means that the media afterlife of a case is part of the case itself. The significance of the Pepsi example lies not only in the reported slogan but also in the way the story continues to organize professional thinking about localization failure.

6 PRACTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR GLOBAL ADVERTISERS

6.1 Begin with Transcreation

Brands should use transcreation rather than direct translation for slogans and campaign lines. The team should define the intended audience response before drafting the target-language version. For Pepsi, the intended response would likely include energy, refreshment, youth, and social belonging. A target-market should be built around these effects rather than around the literal words "come alive."

6.2 Add Local Cultural Review before Approval

A formal cultural review stage should be added before campaign approval. This stage should not be limited to checking grammar or word accuracy. Instead, it should examine whether the message works naturally within the target cultural environment. The review team should include native-speaking copywriters, local marketing specialists, translation professionals, and reviewers who are familiar with the everyday language habits of the target audience. Their task is to evaluate whether the slogan sounds natural, whether it may produce unintended associations, and whether it touches sensitive cultural symbols.

This step is important because many advertising problems do not appear at the level of literal meaning. A slogan can be linguistically correct but still sound awkward, humorous, or inappropriate in a local context. In the Pepsi case, the core issue was not only the possible mistranslation of individual words, but also the failure to consider how ideas related to life, death, and ancestors might be interpreted by Chinese audiences. A cultural review process would help brands identify these risks before the campaign enters the public market. It would also make intercultural judgment a formal part of advertising approval, rather than an informal or last-minute concern.

6.3 Test Audience Response before Launch

Audience testing should evaluate not only comprehension but also emotional association. Before a translated slogan is launched, brands should test it with members of the target audience through focus groups, short surveys, interviews, or small pilot campaigns. These methods can show whether the audience understands the slogan in the intended way and whether the message creates the desired emotional response. The key questions are simple but important: What does the slogan make people think of? What feeling does it create? Does anything sound strange, funny, uncomfortable, or inappropriate?

This type of testing is especially necessary in intercultural advertising because marketers may not be able to predict local audience reactions from outside the culture. A phrase that appears energetic or creative to the original brand team may be decoded differently by local consumers. Audience testing allows the brand to move from assumption to evidence. It also helps identify small problems before they become public issues. If a slogan produces confusion or unintended associations during testing, the company can revise the wording before the campaign is widely released. In this sense, audience testing is not only a research tool, but also a preventive strategy for protecting brand meaning.

6.4 Monitor Reception after Launch

The meaning of an advertisement continues to develop after it enters public circulation. Brands should track audience feedback, media discussion, social media comments, and platform reactions after a campaign is released. This monitoring can help identify whether the slogan is being understood as intended or whether it is beginning to circulate in a negative or humorous way. If a phrase begins to attract criticism or unintended attention, the brand should respond quickly and adjust the message if needed.

Monitoring cannot replace careful preparation, but it can reduce the chance that a small issue becomes a long-term reputational narrative. The Pepsi case shows that a translation story can continue to circulate for many years, even when the historical details are uncertain. Once a communication mistake becomes a public example, it may be repeated in marketing articles, classroom discussions, and professional training materials. For this reason, brands need to treat post-launch monitoring as part of intercultural communication management. It allows companies to respond before public interpretation becomes fixed and before the mistake becomes part of the brand's long-term image.

7 CONCLUSION

The Pepsi "Come Alive" case remains valuable because it reveals a broader problem in intercultural advertising. Even though the official status of the reported Chinese rendering is contested, the case shows how easily persuasive meaning can shift when verbal code is transferred without cultural adaptation. A phrase that suggests vitality in English can produce unintended associations if it is translated too literally into another language.

This paper has argued that the case should be understood through the interaction of verbal code, cultural resonance, audience interpretation, and media repetition. The analysis shows that direct translation can undermine persuasive equivalence; that localization functions as a form of strategic risk management; and that repeated media circulation can extend the reputational life of an intercultural error. These findings move the case beyond the level of a humorous anecdote. They show that translation is central to brand strategy.

The practical implication is clear. Global advertisers should not ask only whether a slogan is linguistically correct. They should ask whether the message produces the intended effect in the target market. Transcreation, local cultural review, audience testing, and post-launch monitoring provide a workable framework for reducing risk. As global advertising investment continues to grow and digital channels accelerate cross-market circulation, careful localization will become even more important for brands seeking to communicate with accuracy, respect, and persuasive force.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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