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# CAN DESIGN TRANSLATE CULTURE? VISUAL STRATEGIES IN GLOBAL COMMUNICATION

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**Abstract.** This paper examines how visual communication design functions as a vehicle for cultural translation in global contexts. While translation studies have traditionally centred on verbal texts, designers operate as cultural mediators whose decisions on typography, colour, imagery, and layout carry meaning across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The study argues that design is not a culturally neutral language but a discursive practice rooted in the conventions of its originating community. Drawing on intersections between visual communication theory and translation studies, the paper analyses the strategies through which designers reconcile cultural specificity and global intelligibility. The findings indicate that successful global communication depends on layered cultural competence, the negotiation of identity through visual codes, and a methodologically rigorous adaptation process. Design, therefore, emerges as both a translator of culture and a producer of new cultural meaning.

**Keywords:** visual communication design, cultural translation, cross-cultural adaptation, global communication, semiotics, cultural identity, visual rhetoric.

## **1. Introduction**

Contemporary global communication operates in a landscape where messages cross cultural borders almost instantaneously, yet meaning rarely travels intact. Brands, institutions, and public bodies increasingly rely on visual communication design to address audiences whose languages, values, and aesthetic conventions

differ substantially from those of the message's origin. A familiar question from translation studies takes on a new dimension in this context: if words can be rendered from one culture into another, can the same be said of images, layouts, and typographic systems? This paper proposes that design, like translation, is an act of cultural mediation rather than a transparent transmission of content. The aim is to examine the conditions under which visual communication design can be said to translate culture, and to identify the strategies designers deploy when working for audiences that do not share their cultural reference system.

## **2. Design as a Practice of Cultural Translation**

Translation theorists have long argued that moving meaning between languages cannot be reduced to lexical substitution. Katan and Taibi insist that translation, interpreting, and mediation are forms of cultural practice in which the mediator constantly negotiates frames of reference, contextual presuppositions, and identity positions of source and target communities [2, p. 14]. This view dismantles the older idea of translation as a purely linguistic operation and reframes it as a form of intercultural communication in which the translator is an active interpreter of culture rather than a neutral conduit.

If translation is reconceived in this way, the boundary between verbal and visual translation becomes considerably more porous. Designers, like translators, encounter source materials laden with cultural meaning and must decide what to retain, what to adapt, and what to replace altogether.

A logo created for a domestic market may carry connotations that are unintelligible or even offensive elsewhere; the designer who modifies it for a different region is performing an operation that closely resembles cultural mediation as a re-encoding of meaning that respects both fidelity to the original intent and the conventions of the receiving culture [2, p. 22]. Yudhanto and colleagues develop this view from the side of design itself, arguing that visual communication design must integrate cultural and communication approaches in order to function effectively, because every visual choice from colour palette to compositional rhythm is read through the cultural codes of the audience [1, p. 81].

### **3. Cultural and Communication Approaches in Visual Design**

A closer look at design practice confirms that cultural translation operates at several levels at once. Yudhanto and colleagues identify communication and culture as the two interdependent pillars of effective visual design work, noting that a message constructed without attention to the audience's cultural background risks miscommunication regardless of its formal sophistication [1, p. 83]. The designer must analyse the cultural context of both originator and recipient, treating visual elements as semiotic signs whose meaning is conventional rather than natural.

This semiotic understanding aligns with how Brisset, Gill, and Gannon describe the translator's task. They observe that translation involves searching for a native language a register and idiom that feels indigenous to the receiving culture rather than imported from outside [3, p. 291]. A poster, an interface, or a packaging system can be visually "translated" so that it appears to belong to the target culture, or it can retain markers of foreignness that signal its external origin. Brisset, Gill, and Gannon emphasise that translation always negotiates between domestication, which assimilates the source to the target, and foreignisation, which preserves the source's strangeness [3, p. 302]. Designers face an equivalent strategic decision when choosing between localising a typeface to match regional conventions and retaining a distinctive global identity. Yudhanto and colleagues add that the designer is not merely choosing between two poles but constructing a hybrid register in which culturally specific symbols are reinterpreted through forms accessible to a wider audience [1, p. 86].

### **4. Visual Identity and the Search for a Native Language**

The parallel between translation and design becomes especially clear when cultural identity is at stake. Brisset, Gill, and Gannon argue that translation is one of the principal sites through which collective identities are constructed and renewed, because the choice of how to render a foreign text always entails a position on what the receiving culture is and what it should become [3, p. 296]. Design carries the same weight. Visual systems produced for national institutions or diasporic communities frequently aim to articulate a distinctive identity in dialogue with global

aesthetic norms, and the designer must decide which visual elements to elevate as markers of authenticity and which to translate into a register legible to outsiders. Yudhanto and colleagues observe that successful community-oriented design strategies tend to draw on traditional motifs without freezing them, allowing the visual idiom to evolve while remaining recognisable as belonging to a particular culture [1, p. 87]. This dynamic resonates with the way communities at certain historical moments invest in translation as a means of building a national language capable of carrying both local meaning and universal aspirations [3, p. 310].

### **5. Methodological Implications: Adaptation and Validation**

If design is to be taken seriously as a form of cultural translation, it must accept the methodological rigour that translation studies have developed for cross-cultural work. Cruchinho and colleagues describe a structured process for translating and culturally adapting research instruments, emphasising that effective adaptation requires more than linguistic equivalence: it requires semantic, idiomatic, experiential, and conceptual equivalence between source and target versions [4, p. 2705]. Each criterion has a clear visual counterpart. A re-designed pictogram may preserve its denotative meaning while losing its idiomatic charge; an illustration may be conceptually equivalent yet experientially alien if it depicts scenarios outside the audience's everyday life [4, p. 2710]. Cruchinho and colleagues also emphasise the importance of validation through expert review and pretesting with members of the target community [4, p. 2718]. Translated designs benefit from analogous procedures, including cultural consultation, audience testing, and iterative refinement practices that treat the audience as a co-author of meaning, echoing the dialogic conception of translation advanced by Katan and Taibi [2, p. 31].

### **6. Conclusion**

The convergence of these perspectives suggests that the question posed in the title should be answered carefully rather than enthusiastically. Design can translate culture, but only when designers approach their work with the awareness and discipline that translation theorists have long demanded of verbal translators. This involves recognising that visual conventions are culturally specific rather than

universal, that strategies of domestication and foreignisation carry rhetorical and political implications, and that adaptation requires layered equivalence rather than surface modification. Such an approach reframes the designer as a cultural mediator whose decisions shape how meaning circulates across borders, with practical consequences for design education and professional practice. Future research could productively extend this conversation by developing empirical frameworks for evaluating visual translation, examining how digital interfaces translate cultural conventions, and exploring how artificial intelligence in design alters the dynamics of cross-cultural communication. The designer in a global era is, whether named as such or not, a translator of culture.

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