

A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS AND CULTURAL VALUES OF MALAYSIAN AUTOMOTIVE TV ADVERTISEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Advertising is one of the marketing strategies to promote products to consumers. In fact, semiotic helps to get messages across to audiences in a persuasive way. This paper examines automotive TV advertisements in Malaysia to determine how advertisers seek to achieve their primary goal of persuading or influencing an audience by the use of both language and visual semiotic. How the advertisements encode national identity and cultural values is discussed. Semiotics' theory can be used as references for the Malaysian car advertising development, such as content analysis, semiology, audience research and in-depth interviews with advertising practitioners, media and opinion leaders are the main components of the data collection. Malaysia, with its ethnic, language and religious differences is an obvious choice of research to observe possible cultural influences on business practices. The ways in which the semiotic interact with each other within an advertisement is discussed, and these are related to the construction of cultural identities. This research is helpful and beneficial to finalize which are the most effective style of advertising in automotive sales, which they can adopt to achieve the best results. The findings suggests some significant implications which helps advertisers to create better local advertisements.

Keywords: Semiotics, PROTON, automotive tv advertisements, cultural values, Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

Advertisement is one of the marketing tools used in paid form as a mode of communication designed to woo the consumer. Every nation has its own way of living, traditions, values and norms. The study of semiotics provides a platform to understand how advertisement reflect and shape experiences of consumer's everyday life. Advertisement is also a form of social

communication and it reflects the culture it is set in. Culture plays an important role in the effectiveness of advertisements (Zhang & Neelankavil, 1995). The cultural practices vary among the countries all over the world. The advertisement itself, the messages conveyed and the actors performing in it depends on the cultural characteristics of the country. The developmental level of the countries may have an impact on the cultural values of individuals. Hence, advertisers have to focus on the consumers' interests, desires and aims which reflect their cultural values (Pollay & Gallagher, 1990). The purpose of this study is to propose a guideline for the effective use of semiotic content in automotive TV advertisements in Malaysia. The findings suggests some significant implications which helps advertisers create better local advertisements.

The automotive industry is important to the Malaysian economy. With the rapid economic growth in Asian countries and the sustainable improvement of national income, the Asian region is considered one of the highest potential automobile markets in the world. Presently, the Malaysian automotive market is dominated by Malaysia's national cars. Extensive advertising campaigns for automobiles contributed millions of dollars to advertising agencies (Davis, 2012). Throughout the history of the automobile industry in Malaysia, advertisements has been an important strategy for marketing automobiles and their features to consumers on a mass scale. The automobile industry normally establishes an automobile's brand image in consumers' minds through advertisement; therefore, such advertisements must accomplish two tasks: attract attention and deliver the message.

As Malaysia is a multicultural society, there is a high possibility that consumers may have different interpretations for the same advertising message. For the marketers it is very crucial to understand how consumers interpret the visual messages in advertisement. This perspective can be examined by a 'Semiotic analysis' on consumer's responses to identify patterns of meaning construction. The meaning of all verbal and non-verbal communication used in advertising are analyzed differently by consumers. Samli (1995) explains that in most cases, consumers' attitudes, awareness and behavior are largely driven by the framework of their own culture, which is not only communicated to people but also forms and modifies the communication among the people of a society. Individual cultural differences may call for certain adaptations in the messages, content and style of the advertisements for a certain target group. Advertisers in Malaysia has started to realize that cultural influence could also be used as the purchasing attribute that can influence the consumers. Based on this, TV

advertisements are a suitable tool to explore the current cultural values of a society. Given this background, this study extends application of Hofstede's framework to the Malaysian cultural context to investigate how the society's culture is related to its advertising content.

The subject of this paper is the semiotic analysis of automotive TV advertisements. In the paper, the researcher analysed PROTON TV advertisements for the purpose of exploring current cultural values of the Malaysian society. The current paper investigates more in detail the cultural values expressed in TV advertisements based on semiotics.

Semiotics Theory

Studies of meaning evolve from semiotics, a philosophical approach that seeks to interpret messages in terms of their signs and patterns of symbolism. The study of semiotics or semiology in France, originated in a literary or linguistic context and has been expanding in a number of directions since the early turn-of-the century work of C.S. Pierce in the United State and Levi Strauss and Ferdinand Saussure in France.

Saussure (1983: 66) divides linguistic signs into two components- the signifier (the sound, image, or word) and the signified, which is the concept that the signifier represents, or carries the meaning. As Berger (2004) points out, the problem of meaning arises from the fact that the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and conventional. In other words, signs can mean anything, and they can mean different things to different people. The distinction is true in most written and spoken language; however it is clear that visual signs are not arbitrary (Chandler, 2007: 14). Dyer (1996: 123) points out that "Advertising, like language, is a system consisting of distinct signs. It is a system of differences and oppositions which are crucial in the transfer of meaning."

This phenomenon differentiates between the first order and a second order creation of meaning. The first-order imputation of meaning, at the level of denotation, produces the sign function of the object — i.e., meaning according to its immediate function. The second order imputation of meaning, or the connotative meaning, signifies its social context. It is this level that transfunctionalizes the object to socially prescribed meanings (Gottdiener, 1995: 174).

Cultural Values and Advertisement

Advertisement is not only a communication tool between marketers and their customers but also a cultural artifact. The reason being that it reflects only certain behaviors and values of the relevant culture and supports only certain lifestyles and attitudes of that culture. In that manner, the advertisements helps sell their products (Uray & Burnaz, 2003). Culture is defined as the pattern of values, traits, or behaviors shared by the people within a region (Herbig, 1998: 11). One of the clearest distinctions is between high-context and low-context communication of collective and individualistic cultures. Hall (1976: 91), a high context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low context communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code.

In addition, individualistic cultural communication is more or less synonymous with information, in collectivistic cultures communication varies with roles and relationships, with concern for belonging and occupying one's proper place. According to Hofstede (1984: 149), the relationship between the individual and the collective in human society is not only a matter of living together, but it is intimately linked with societal norms. Individualistic cultures specify that individuality and independence are a priority in the society, while collectivistic cultures indicate that social ties are paramount within the group.

Advertisements are one of the most important cultural factors molding and reflecting our life today. Malaysia has approximately 29 million people, with three main ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese and Indian). It has a mixture of languages with Malay being the official language while various Chinese dialects - Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien and Mandarin, as well as English is also being spoken. A number of religions are also being practiced namely Islam, Buddhist, Taoism, Hinduism and Christianity. However, even with the diverse cultures, the regulation for advertisement is strict in Malaysia due to the government's cautious stance towards foreign cultural influences appearing in advertisements (Wah, 2005). Malaysia, with its ethnic, language and religious differences is an obvious choice to observe possible cultural influences on business practices. The ways in which the semiotic context interact with each other within an advertisement is discussed, and these are related to the construction of cultural identities.

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the content and direction of Carlist.my/news and LiveLifeDrive.com, as well as coming up with ideas to promote their client's automotive brands. According to Hans Cheong, "Malaysian automotive TV advertisement is very traditional". Huang Ean Hwa, a professional and experienced businessman, is popular and well known in the advertising industry. He is a co-chief creative officer and founding partner of Merdeka. LHS advertising agency was started in Kuala Lumpur in 2013. According to Huang Ean Hwa:

"the main difference in automotive TV advertisement products between Malaysia and other countries is that by and large, local advertisement is a reflection of the culture of this country. His opinion on the use of semiotics in automotive TV advertisement by the Malaysian advertising agencies, is that every piece of advertisement needs to be meaningful to the viewer. It needs to touch them emotionally."

Specifically, this study analyzed the Advertising Code for Television and Radio (1990), where it states that culture and religion go hand-in-hand in Malaysia. The Code heavily promotes Islamic values, affecting the content, dress code, and messages in advertisements. Waller and Fam (2000) found that this is due to religious and cultural sensitivity.

METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

In the study, we have tried to understand the parameters of semiotics used in advertisements and the variation in its choices, appeals and values among consumers. One of the chief methods that cultural studies use to understand culture is through semiotics. Semiotics is simply the study of signs or words. A semiotic analysis of the images in advertisement would look at the different images as if they were words or signs. Saussure believed that semiotics could be used to analyze a large number of sign systems, and for this reason, there is no reason why it could not be applied to any media or cultural form (Stokes, 2003). According to Berger (1987), the method involves putting into words how images work by relating them to the ideological structure which organizes meaning. The object of analysis are the dominant values appearing in the advertisements studied. The sample used in the semiotic and cultural values analysis consists of five Malaysian automotive TV advertisements extracted from PROTON. The rational for choosing Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional Berhad (PROTON) is that; it is a Malaysian automobile company, which was incorporated in 1983 to manufacture, assemble and sell motor vehicles and related products. In 1985, PROTON produced its first Malaysian car, the PROTON Saga model. 30 years

later, the establishment of a national car is in need of being re-examined by the Malaysian public as a major customer as well as the sustainability of the national car in the industry.

In this study, cultural values concepts will combine with semiotic analyzing of these automotive TV advertisements to find their inter discursive features according to what was proposed by Hofstede's Dimensions (2001) and Kress and van Leeuwen (1996). In analyzing the data, the researcher analyzes the meaning of the pictorial aspect or an object in the advertisement and the contexts that gives context to an object in an advertisement, and the text of advertisement as the linguistic symbol. The visual data was in written descriptive form as the domains for observations are visual elements of an advertisement's reflections of sight, image, movement. The aspect of emotion in gestures, situations or words are also studied. The spoken and visual message included product name, information, delicate messages and terms used in local or standardized language or bilingually. Characters will be analyzed in term of gender and endorsement styles. Influence of religion and history will also be expounded upon.

All quoted concept definitions and the introductory information about the advertisements are sourced from Huang Ean Hwa. The latter has worked as art director, creative group head and executive creative director for international agencies like Leo Burnett and McCann and worked with PROTON for a number of years. The analysis of the Malaysian automotive TV advertisement has uncovered the following values and themes that are important for local people:



Figure 1 Screenshots of “PROTON Sepanjang Raya” (2014)

Table 1 Content and semiotic analysis of Figure 1

Signifier	Signified
Favourite artistes from 3 generations such as Datuk Jamal Abdillah, Raja Ema, Yusri of KRU and Black Mentor in producing this amazing music video advertisement. (Sound)	Over 30 years of PROTON fond memories, the song will help audience rediscover the nostalgic Hari Raya experience that we all remember and love.
Producing an artistic and graphic light trails drawn from the cars. 30 years PROTON Models Featured: Proton Saga, Proton Satria GTi, Proton Suprima S, Proton Wira, Proton Perdana, Proton Persona, Proton Inspira, Proton Prevé , Proton Waja and Proton Exora. (Image)	Check out PROTON history and achievements over the years, how they stand among the competitors.

No matter how much life has changed, the audience can always bet on PROTON to bring them home safely every year. For over 30 years, the PROTON songs have helped audience rediscover the nostalgic Hari Raya experience with fond memories that all audience remember and love. The song Selamat Hari Raya Aidilfitri from PROTON is a chime remembered by many. The idea was to demonstrate the driving excitement on a trip back home. Malaysia is a multiracial country with a diverse range of religions, leading to a broad range of religious festivals throughout the year. Many corporations have thus adopted the idea of reaching out to their customers in accordance with the ethnic groups to which they belong to during their respective religious festivals. It is hoped that by doing so, their customers or prospective customers, will be drawn further to their company and become more receptive to the product or service that they are selling (Sen & Morwitz, 1996).

TV advertisements are not only to promote or educate the public on a new product; they are now also used to promote or educate the public on the values and norms of the religion and culture of one's community. Linking socially responsible behaviour with the brand can be essential in developing the brand's values and personality (Kitchin, 2003), as well as creating value in terms of differentiation within the market (Johnson, 2003). Greeting their customers during the festive season can also be viewed as a form of social responsibility by the company in enhancing ties among the different ethnic groups in Malaysia. As customers become increasingly demanding, both in terms of price and quality, as well as the firm's social responsibility (Sen & Morwitz, 1996), corporate giants especially want to show that they care about society besides managing the profits of the company. The Muslim group in Malaysia has their own cultures such as their dressing and tradition festivals. The visual culture juxtaposition has provided

a strong significance where TV advertising visuals are able to steer, promote and subjugate cultural values as an identity or icon of Malaysia. PROTON advertisement targeted one of the main religious festivals celebrated in Malaysia. The advertisement for the religious festive season of Hari Raya highlights the common traits of Malay Muslims to remind them of values that are important. Many audiences are touched by the TV advertisement as they are prompted to remember the values and norms of being a good Malay and Muslim.

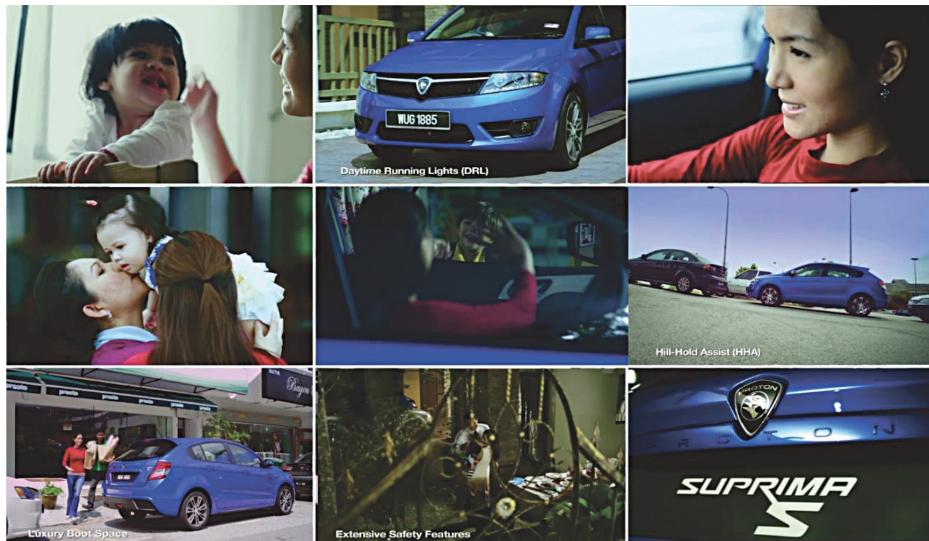


Figure 2 Screenshots of “The All-New PROTON Suprima S” (2013)

Table 2 Content and semiotic analysis of Figure 2

Signifier	Signified
Women (Image)	Women in our society, or readers of this advertisement, who identify with the feelings and emotions signified are likely to want this product for the social meanings attached, for the positive feelings and emotions this semiotic signifies.
Different driving situations. (Image) ‘Suprima S’. Hill-Hold Assist. Luxury Boot Space. Extensive Safety Features. (Text)	Showing in exceptional details the features of the car. Its purpose is to show a relationship or “oneness” with the car.

This advertising style can be said to be visual with explicit textual communication of information in the exceptional detailed features of PROTON Suprima S along with various beauty footage of the car in different driving

situations. The name ‘Suprima S’ is derived from the root word “supreme” and reflects superiority in engineering, safety and performance that has been incorporated into the model. The youthful hatchback was conceived to meet the demanding needs of modern lifestyle as suggested by its dynamic and sporty shape, a premium interior and superior engine performance. LOTUS Ride and Handling was developed for the Suprima S giving it exceptional dynamics. Whether tackling the city streets or a winding country road, the agile chassis of the Suprima S delivers an incomparable driving experience and enjoyment behind the wheel every time. Advanced technology along with an impressive standard of specifications promises an unprecedented combination of great style and driving pleasure with genuine affordability. Everything you need and want, packed into a stylish and dynamic cabin that offers, comfort, convenience and driving pleasure.

The car in this image, PROTON Suprima S, is the closure’; it entices with its cool, smooth, blue freshness. It signifies safety, security, peace, relief and comfort, as in the blue skies and oceans of our leisure. There are other significant and relevant signs and meanings in semiotics in advertisements especially to do with family values and ideologies. According to Lezotte (2012), the rise in the number of female drivers, along with the freedom and mobility that it came with, broke the stereotype of only men capable of driving cars. It allowed women to utilize it as a tool in fulfilling their role as a wife, mother, consumer and caretaker. The advertisement supports family and places the woman as the caregiver, nurturer and supporter of the family, while remaining indomitable. This automotive TV advertisement is selling to women in the innate human need to be safe, equal, important and independent. “The All-New PROTON Suprima S” TV advertisement displays collectivistic values, emotional expression, and soft sell appeals using a mother. The advertisement talks about love and emphasizes the enduring attachment of belonging to a family. It features an emotional image of persons in harmony with her family.

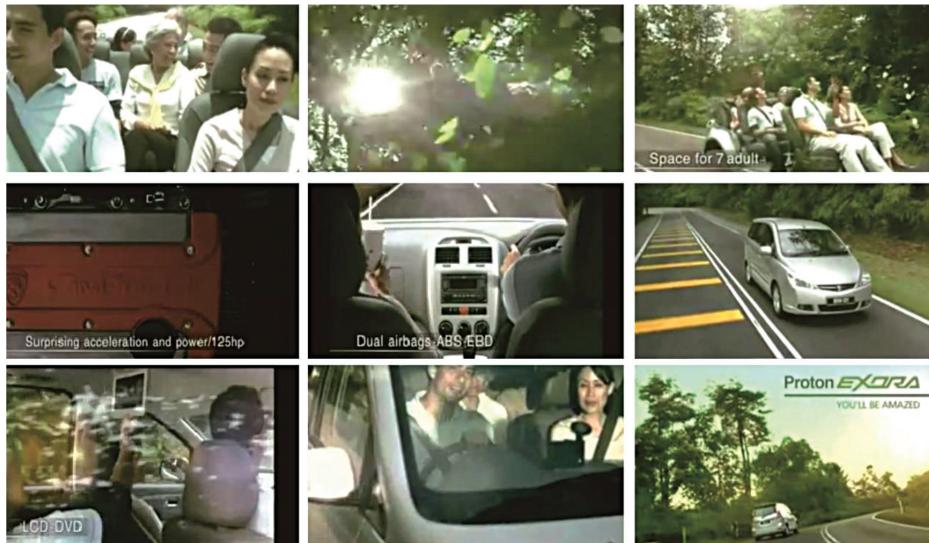


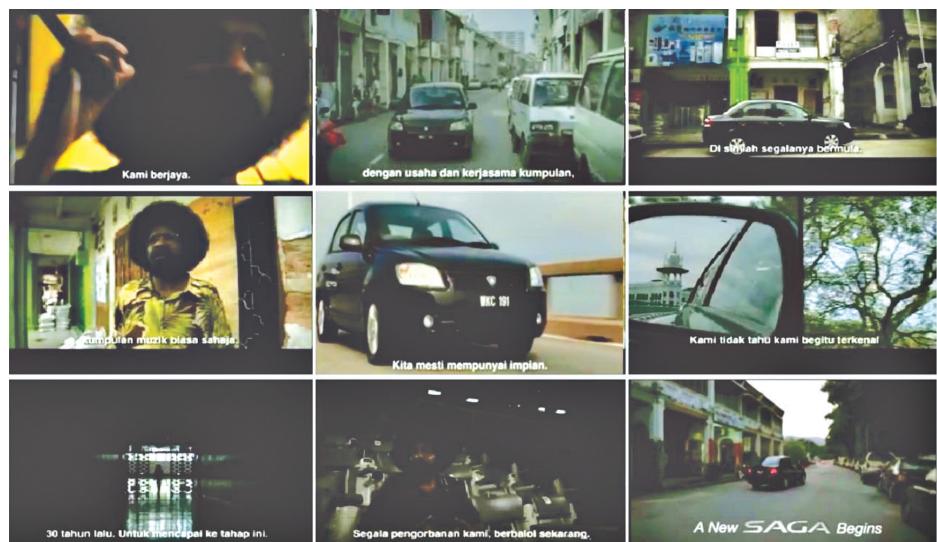
Figure 3 Screenshots of “PROTON Exora” (2009)

Table 3 Content and semiotic analysis of Figure 3

Signifier	Signified
The whole family is driving a PROTON. (Image)	It shows a small car like PROTON with big interior space, so that the family can relax and enjoy the drive with one another's company in the roomy interior.
The scene that shows part of a car moving and slowly joining into one whole piece as a completed puzzle. The car is driven on the road with green trees on both side of the road. (Image)	The advertisement shows the complete Exora driving around. Showing MPVs are used for long distance travel, lacking nothing in comfort, performance and protection.

It makes the advertisement cleaner and simpler. They had to literally ‘build up’ the car in front of the viewers’ eyes, so a simple country background was preferable to a city landscape. Also, most MPVs are used for long distance travel. The advertising agency wanted to show what the Exora was made out of, so they began with the 7-seater arrangement, then showed the body structure, the engine and the rest of the vehicle. Again, literally showing Malaysians what the Exora was made of was the aim of the entire advertisement. Showing the actors relaxed and enjoying the space was a subtle part of the advertisement. It forms a creative element of what they do, intrigues the viewer and demonstrates the product in a new way, thereby making it a better advertisement.

PROTON Exora (2009) TV advertisement communicates to the viewers about the joy PROTON Exora offers in a generous seven-seater interior space in a family trip. Aaker, Stayman and Hagerty (1986: 366) defined warmth as “a positive, mild, volatile emotion involving physiological arousal and precipitated by experiencing directly or vicariously a love, family, or friendship relationship.” This description positions family warmth in a positive role. It concerns high context of culture and soft sell appeals respectively. This “PROTON Exora” TV advertisement involving a higher level of affective impressions and emotional resonance about family love is a typical example to reflect Malaysian cultural characteristics. The messages of cultural traits were very subtlety embedded into the advertisement. The TV advertisement see a family trip taken together which symbolizes an act of bonding.



PROTON Saga – Alleycats



PROTON Saga - Dr Kenny



PROTON Saga – Astronaut

Figure 4 Screenshots of “PROTON SAGA” TV advertisement using three prominent personalities

Table 4 Content and semiotic analysis of Figure 4

Signifier	Signified
Three prominent personalities: a singer from a small town, a doctor who shuns money for the greater good of the under-privileged and an astronaut reaching for the stars. (Image)	The advertising agency chose as characters three easily recognized Malaysian personalities who believed in their dreams and went on to pursue them. Regardless of people who doubted them, they went on to chase and live their dreams. This alludes to living one's dream when driving the PROTON Saga.
A new Saga begins. (Text)	The Saga name was resurrected for this new model. And like the first Saga, this is the car that helped many Malaysians get mobile. So they have come full circle.

The above three TV advertisements were different in terms of using Malay, Chinese and Indian characters and the three TV advertisements were released in the same year of 2008. The Saga is the car for all Malaysians, so typically the advertising agency chose the traditional three main races -Malay, Chinese and Indian- that make up Malaysia. The TV advertisement has provided insights into the sociocultural context of Malaysia. The setting and characters in the scene revealed the multicultural heritage in Malaysia through the different ethnicities of the characters are portrayed. Television plays a significant role in the multi-racial nation. Close relationship between the various race, despite forces trying to erode it has been maintained through a spirit of harmony and compromise. Customs and traditions are safe-guarded (Asmah, 1985).

The option of inviting the stars, the Alleycats to speak for the PROTON brand appeals to increase their public awareness. Regardless of whether he is a singer from a small town, a doctor who shuns money for the greater good of the under-privileged or an astronaut reaching for the stars, they overcame odds to achieve their dream. It is a parallel story to what PROTON had to go through. From the first Saga to the new Saga, they believed and persisted. These were the TV advertising message to the viewers. The slogan is anchored by means of interpretation as it connects well with the connotation of this advertisement, thus controlling or driving the thoughts of the receiver in a particular direction with PROTON, "A new Saga begins". The Saga is the car for the people. The Saga has come a long way. The Saga is a new re-birth for PROTON. Adjectives are said to be the key parts of speech for advertisers. The adjective 'new', as in this TV advertisement, is supposed to be the favourite due to its applicability to any number of features (Dyer, 1996).



Figure 5 Screenshots of “PROTON _ Most Heartfelt Independence Day” (2006)

Table 5 Content and semiotic analysis of Figure 5

Signifier	Signified
The teacher and the playful student. (Image)	It's up to the viewer to decipher. You might say that the teacher is PROTON and the student is the public - being a disbeliever. Or that the teacher represents then Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad and the students, Malaysians in general.
The teacher patting his old PROTON even when seeing a newer model. (Image)	Longevity and reliability of his old car.

This advertisement was incorporating elements of patriotic duty, brand positioning and thanksgiving into the Independence Day advertisement. It is a specially made Malaysian Independence Day TV advertisement from PROTON. Independence Day serves as a reminder to all Malaysians to appreciate the tough fight their ancestors had fought and to educate the current generation about the spirit of Independence, regardless of where they are. The TV advertisement from PROTON reinforced the importance for viewers to instill the spirit and values and celebrating the values that the country was founded upon. The message is about tenacity and believing in oneself. The message “Life is a journey - Together our journey ahead continues” was the included in the TV advertisement and delivered to the viewers. Viewers relate to their individual personal experience in school years ago so it seems fitting that the story revolved around a teacher and a student.

There are many subtle cues in this advertisement. It depicts their own personal experience when they were students. When the PROTON Saga first appeared, all the classmates ran to the classroom window to catch a glimpse of our first national car. PROTON believes that until today, all Malaysians react the same way. However, it's a love-hate relationship that Malaysians have with PROTON. And people know that they are toughest on the ones they love. So, the strategy was to emotionally remind Malaysians of how far they have come. The good times and the bad times. This brings home the point that life isn't a destination but a journey which they must strive to better themselves along the way. There is not much PROTON information conveyed to the buyer, which makes this advertising style close to high context culture.

CONCLUSION

This research is designed to analyze semiotic in the content of Malaysian car TV advertisements. Advertising appeals embedded with cultural values and characteristics are the focus of this study. From the general findings, Malaysian car TV advertisements contains semiotic elements and reflections of cultural values. The advertisements relied more on soft sell appeals, displayed collectivistic values and exhibited high context culture values. Soft-sell appeals and the TV advertisement rely on building atmosphere and arousing consumers' emotions associated with the product. The use of background music, emotional approach and much enhanced facial expressions and body movements of the characters are used to carry the message across. The focus in Malaysian automotive TV advertisements are on building trust rather than giving direct information, hence are typically more detailed and long. They use an indirect style of communication which is elaborate to discuss the important features of the product.

This study analyzed PROTON TV advertisements to show semiotic trends in Malaysian TV automobile advertisements. We determined that not only do semiotic car advertisements attempt to shape public outlook but also serve as a reflection of cultural values and public attitudes toward the automobile and have the potential to pointing the way for future research. According to Lezotte (2012), for more than a century the automobile has been associated with masculinity and mobility. According to Hofstede's (2010), Malaysian car TV advertisements, unlike most traditional automobile TV advertisements with an intermediate score of 50, the Malaysian masculine culture is a preference which cannot be determined with its focus on the notion of the female and male. In the selected car TV advertisements used to promote Malaysian car, TV advertising

differed in features and styles. These represent the symbol of male and female's empowerment. According to Hofstede (2010), Malaysia rates on a very high power distance culture score of 100. However, the analysis showed that most TV advertisements revealed Malaysia to be high power distance, with the use of celebrities in PROTON TV advertisements, such as Alleycats, Datuk Jamal Abdillah, Raja Ema, Yusri of KRU and Black Mentor. What makes Malaysia high power distance, as celebrities are show hierarchies and status symbols and lead societies, which proves Hofstede's statement of Malaysia being more high power distance than low power distance to be correct.

In denotation, the meaning of each PROTON TV advertisements signified to produce a meaning about PROTON as the best car product. At this level, the audience are influenced to buy a car by seeing each of the advertisement. This denotation of meaning supports an idea about collectivistic values system and people habit as cultural and ideological term which describes a connotation of meaning. Mostly, the researcher found a symbolic code, narrative code and cultural code in car TV advertisements that the researcher interpreted. After analyzing PROTON TV advertisement, the researcher decides to summarized that the signs in PROTON TV advertisement used as many structures of sign system as possible. Each of the sign has a system and is formed through a combination of pictorial element, texts and context. Thus element had contribution to give meaning to each signifier in pictorial element, text and signified in denotation and connotation of meaning. There are similarities of sign systems in almost all advertisements of PROTON. The usage of semiotics, especially the usage of slogans symbolizes the commitment to be better. The slogan "It's in the Drive" is a brand mark signifying PROTON car products in general. The slogans "Committed to be better" and "It's in the Drive" is a trade mark of PROTON and used to symbolize every advertisement of PROTON.

Scenes from Malaysian everyday life are used to better relate to the viewers. TV advertisement not only plays a crucial role in selling a product but also reinforced cultural values, it can also be argued that advertising is only a mirror reflecting the prevalent values and changes of culture which have already existed in a particular society. According to Hofstede's (2010) cultural dimensions, Malaysia is a collectivistic society which places emphasis on relationships such as family. Symbolic values are still widely used in Malaysia, as seen from the frequently used traditional value of "family" in the selected car TV advertisements. Consequently, this cultural dimension would be apparent in Malaysian advertisements, where local consumers would likely respond to messages and images consisting of family values. Advertisers can take this finding

into consideration by emphasizing family importance and values in marketing strategies in order to convey the intended message effectively.

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LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

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