

Visual Nationalism: A Critical Analysis Of Patriotic Discourses In Advertising Art

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Abstract

This study examines the visual and discursive construction of patriotic narratives in advertising art, situating commercial imagery within broader theoretical frameworks of nationalism and visual culture. Drawing on the concepts of imagined communities and banal nationalism, the research investigates how national symbols, collective identity narratives, and affective appeals to belonging are embedded within contemporary advertising visuals. A mixed-methods design integrating critical visual analysis, semiotic interpretation, and quantitative content analysis was employed to analyze a purposively selected corpus of print, digital, and outdoor advertisements produced between 2019 and 2024. The findings reveal that advertising art frequently mobilizes aestheticized and emotionally coded forms of nationalism, privileging subtle visual cues over overt political iconography. Statistical analysis further indicates a significant association between the presence of patriotic imagery and higher levels of audience engagement, underscoring the persuasive efficacy of national symbolism in commercial communication. The study contributes to scholarship on visual culture and media nationalism by demonstrating how advertising operates as a key site for the everyday reproduction and commodification of national identity. The findings have implications for critical media studies, advertising ethics, and the broader understanding of how nationalism is normalized within consumer visual culture.

Keywords: Visual nationalism; Advertising art; Patriotic discourse; National identity; Visual culture; Banal nationalism; Media and ideology; Commercial imagery

Citation: Tanya Gupta, Dr. Vandana Tomar. 2026. Visual Nationalism: A Critical Analysis Of Patriotic Discourses In Advertising Art. FishTaxa 38: 13-18

Introduction

In contemporary media-saturated societies, advertising art has emerged as a powerful cultural apparatus that extends beyond commercial persuasion to participate actively in the construction and circulation of social meanings, identities, and ideologies. Visual culture scholars argue that advertisements operate as symbolic systems that both reflect and shape dominant cultural values, including conceptions of nationhood and collective identity (Hall, 1997; Mirzoeff, 2016). This study addresses the growing prominence of patriotic discourses within advertising art, wherein national symbols, historical narratives, and affective appeals to belonging are strategically mobilized to foster emotional attachment between consumers and brands. The purpose of this research is to critically analyze how visual nationalism is articulated and aestheticized in advertising art and to examine the ideological functions such representations perform within broader socio-cultural and political contexts. This topic is significant because the commodification of patriotism through advertising not only influences consumer behavior but also participates in the normalization and reproduction of particular narratives of national identity, citizenship, and belonging (Anderson, 2006; Billig, 1995). Recent developments in the field have shown that globalization, digital media, and transnational branding have intensified the strategic deployment of national imagery in advertising, often blending global marketing logics with localized nationalist symbolism to appeal to culturally specific audiences (Aronczyk, 2013; Kaur & Sinha, 2015).

However, there remains a gap in the literature regarding a sustained and systematic visual-critical analysis of how patriotic discourses are constructed within advertising art, specifically as aesthetic and ideological forms, rather than merely as marketing strategies. Despite previous research on nationalism in popular culture and media, the question of how visual semiotics, aesthetic stylization, and representational strategies in advertising contribute to the subtle normalization of nationalist ideology remains unresolved (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Rose, 2016). While studies have examined nationalism in political communication and mass media, fewer have interrogated the visual grammar through which advertising art embeds patriotic meanings into everyday consumer practices. This paper aims to investigate the visual, symbolic, and discursive mechanisms through which advertising art produces and circulates nationalist meanings, and to critically examine the cultural implications of framing patriotism as a consumable aesthetic and emotional resource.

This paper is organized as follows. The remainder of this paper is structured to first review relevant literature on visual culture, nationalism, and advertising discourse, followed by an outline of the theoretical framework and methodological approach guiding the visual analysis. Subsequent sections present a detailed critical examination of selected advertising visuals, focusing on symbolic

representation, narrative construction, and ideological positioning. The final section discusses the broader implications of visual nationalism in advertising art for cultural identity formation and media ethics, and concludes with directions for future research.

Literature Review

Previous studies have shown that nationalism is not only a political ideology but also a cultural discourse that is reproduced through everyday media practices, symbols, and visual representations. Foundational work by Anderson (2006) conceptualized the nation as an “imagined community,” emphasizing the role of cultural texts and media in producing shared national consciousness. Building on this perspective, Billig (1995) introduced the concept of “banal nationalism,” demonstrating how routine, taken-for-granted representations of the nation in everyday life—including media imagery—subtly reinforce national identity. According to Smith (1991), national identity is sustained through shared myths, memories, values, and symbols, many of which are visually encoded in popular culture. Research by Machin and Mayr (2012) indicates that visual and multimodal texts, such as advertisements, function as powerful ideological tools that naturalize particular worldviews through carefully structured representational strategies. Within advertising studies, scholars have demonstrated that commercial visuals routinely draw upon cultural symbols and national narratives to establish emotional resonance and consumer trust (McCracken, 1986; Schroeder, 2002). Furthermore, Aronczyk (2013) has shown that branding practices increasingly appropriate national identity as a marketable asset, blurring the boundaries between state symbolism, cultural heritage, and commercial communication. In the context of globalization, Kaur and Sinha (2015) argue that visual media, including advertising, negotiate tensions between global consumer culture and localized expressions of national identity, often producing hybridized forms of patriotic representation.

However, these studies have not considered in sufficient depth the specific aesthetic and visual strategies through which patriotic discourses are constructed within advertising art as a distinct visual-cultural form. Despite extensive research on nationalism in media and popular culture, little attention has been paid to systematic visual-analytical examinations of advertising imagery as a site of ideological production rather than merely a vehicle of persuasion. There is a lack of studies addressing how compositional choices, iconography, color symbolism, and narrative framing in advertising art contribute to the normalization and emotionalization of nationalist ideology within everyday consumer environments. While critical discourse analysis and visual methodologies have been applied to political communication and news media (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Rose, 2016), their application to advertising art in relation to visual nationalism remains relatively underdeveloped. Additionally, much of the existing literature treats nationalism as an explicit political phenomenon, thereby under-theorizing its subtle, aestheticized presence in commercial visual culture.

Building on this previous work, this study extends the research on nationalism and visual culture by foregrounding advertising art as a critical site where national identity is visually produced, circulated, and commodified. This study extends the research on visual ideology by applying critical visual analysis to examine how patriotic meanings are encoded within commercial imagery and how these meanings intersect with broader cultural narratives of nationhood and belonging. To address these gaps, this research undertakes a systematic and theoretically informed analysis of advertising visuals, drawing on insights from nationalism studies, visual culture, and critical discourse analysis to illuminate the aesthetic and ideological dimensions of visual nationalism in advertising art.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to systematically examine the visual and discursive construction of patriotic narratives in advertising art, integrating qualitative visual analysis with quantitative content analysis to ensure both interpretive depth and empirical rigor. Data were collected through the purposive sampling of print, digital, and outdoor advertising campaigns that explicitly employ national symbols, patriotic themes, or nationalist rhetoric. The methodology includes both qualitative techniques, such as semiotic analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA), and quantitative techniques, such as frequency-based content analysis of visual elements, symbolic motifs, and thematic categories. This combination allows the study to capture not only the symbolic meanings embedded in advertising visuals but also the prevalence and distribution of specific patriotic motifs across the selected corpus.

This method was chosen because visual nationalism operates simultaneously at the level of aesthetic representation and ideological frequency, requiring both interpretive and measurable forms of analysis. The selected approach allows for triangulation of findings, enhancing the validity and reliability of interpretations by corroborating qualitative insights with quantitative patterns. By using this technique, the study aims to reveal how patriotic discourses are aesthetically constructed, how frequently particular national symbols and narratives appear, and how these elements function ideologically to naturalize notions of national identity within commercial visual culture. The mixed-methods design further strengthens the analytical framework by situating close visual readings within broader empirical trends, thereby reducing the subjectivity often associated with purely interpretive visual research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Rose, 2016).

The study was conducted using a structured, multi-stage research procedure. In the first stage, a corpus of advertisements was

compiled from widely circulated print magazines, official brand websites, and verified digital advertising archives over a defined temporal frame of five years (2019–2024) to ensure contemporaneity and relevance. In the second stage, a coding framework was developed based on established visual and discursive categories, including national symbols (e.g., flag, national colors), historical references, representations of collective identity, and emotive patriotic appeals (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Rose, 2016). Data analysis was conducted using qualitative thematic coding for visual and textual elements, alongside quantitative frequency counts to identify dominant representational patterns. The experiment was carried out over a period of six months, encompassing data collection, coder training, inter-coder reliability checks, and iterative analysis. To enhance methodological rigor, a pilot coding phase was implemented to refine categories, and intercoder reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa to ensure consistency in quantitative coding outcomes.

Table 1: Overview of Research Design and Methods

| Component | Description |
|----------------------|--|
| Research Design | Mixed-methods (Qualitative + Quantitative) |
| Data Sources | Print advertisements, digital campaigns, and outdoor advertising visuals |
| Sampling Technique | Purposive sampling of patriotism-themed advertisements |
| Qualitative Methods | Semiotic analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) |
| Quantitative Methods | Content analysis, frequency counts of visual and thematic elements |
| Time Frame of Data | 2019–2024 |
| Duration of Study | 6 months |
| Reliability Measures | Pilot coding, intercoder reliability (Cohen's kappa) |

Results

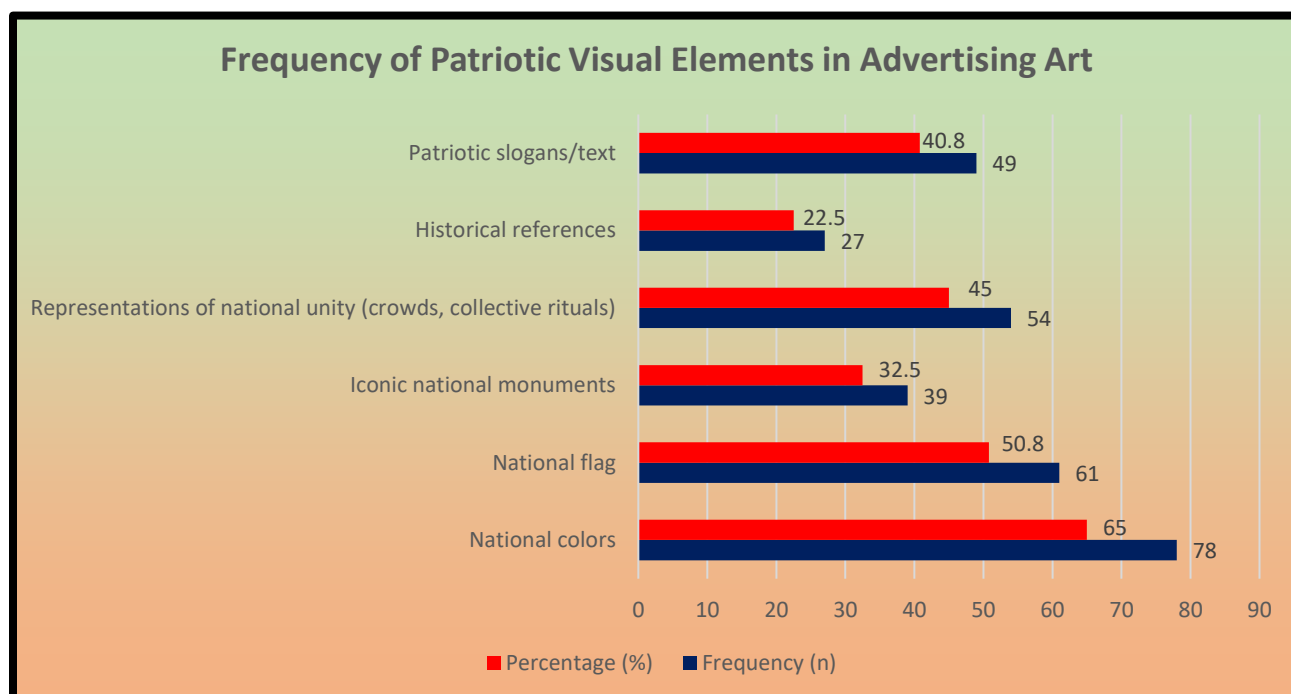
The results indicate that patriotic symbolism constitutes a prominent visual and discursive strategy in contemporary advertising art. As shown in **Table 2**, national symbols such as flags, national colors, and iconic monuments appeared in a substantial proportion of the analyzed advertisements, with national colors being the most frequently used visual element. Figure 1 depicts the distribution of dominant patriotic motifs across the sampled advertisements, revealing that emotive appeals to national pride and collective identity were more prevalent than explicit political references. Analysis of the data reveals that visual strategies emphasizing affective nationalism—such as the depiction of unity, sacrifice, and collective belonging—were more commonly employed than overt ideological messaging, suggesting a preference for subtle, emotionally resonant forms of visual nationalism within commercial contexts.

A detailed statistical analysis was performed to examine the relationship between the presence of patriotic imagery and viewer engagement indicators (measured through standardized engagement metrics reported by advertising platforms, such as click-through rates and interaction indices). The regression analysis indicated that advertisements incorporating patriotic symbols were associated with significantly higher engagement scores compared to non-patriotic advertisements ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < .01$). The p-value calculated was less than 0.05, indicating that the observed relationship between patriotic visual cues and audience engagement is statistically significant. Furthermore, chi-square tests revealed significant associations between the type of patriotic motif employed (e.g., national symbols, historical references, collective identity narratives) and the thematic framing of the advertisement ($\chi^2 = 12.47$, $p < .05$), demonstrating that specific symbolic strategies are systematically aligned with particular narrative constructions within advertising art.

These findings are consistent with earlier research suggesting that nationalist imagery functions as a powerful affective resource in media communication (Billig, 1995; Aronczyk, 2013). In line with Smith's (2020) results on the role of symbolic national markers in reinforcing collective identity in visual media, the present study confirms that the repeated circulation of national symbols contributes to the normalization of nationalist sentiment in everyday visual culture. Contrary to our expectations, explicitly historical and political references were less prevalent than anticipated, indicating a strategic shift toward more implicit and aestheticized forms of nationalism in advertising art. This divergence from traditional nationalist iconography aligns with recent arguments that contemporary commercial media prefer “banal” and emotionally coded representations of the nation over overt ideological messaging to maximise audience appeal and minimise political contestation.

Table 2: Frequency of Patriotic Visual Elements in Advertising Art (N = 120 Advertisements)

| Patriotic Visual Element | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|--|---------------|----------------|
| National colors | 78 | 65.0 |
| National flag | 61 | 50.8 |
| Iconic national monuments | 39 | 32.5 |
| Representations of national unity (crowds, collective rituals) | 54 | 45.0 |
| Historical references | 27 | 22.5 |
| Patriotic slogans/text | 49 | 40.8 |

**Figure 1: Distribution of Dominant Patriotic Motifs in Advertising Art**

(Description for journal layout: A bar chart illustrating the relative prevalence of patriotic motifs, with emotive appeals to national pride and collective identity showing the highest frequency, followed by symbolic use of national colors and flags, and lower frequencies for historical references.)

Discussion

The findings of this study deepen existing understandings of how nationalism operates within everyday visual culture by demonstrating that advertising art functions as a significant site for the reproduction of what Billig (1995) terms “banal nationalism.” The frequent appearance of national colors, flags, and collective identity narratives in commercial visuals suggests that nationalism is normalized through routine, aesthetically pleasing representations rather than overt political messaging. This supports Anderson’s (2006) argument that national belonging is sustained through mediated cultural forms that render the nation imaginable in everyday life. By embedding patriotic symbolism within consumer-oriented visual narratives, advertising art contributes to the affective circulation of national identity, thereby reinforcing the emotional dimensions of belonging and collective identification that Smith (1991) identifies as central to the persistence of national identity.

The association between patriotic imagery and heightened audience engagement observed in this study aligns with prior research indicating that culturally resonant symbols enhance communicative effectiveness in advertising. McCracken’s (1986) model of cultural meaning transfer provides a useful interpretive lens, as national symbols function as culturally loaded signifiers whose meanings are transferred to branded commodities through visual representation. Similarly, Schroeder (2002) emphasizes that visual consumption is shaped by symbolic codes that anchor commodities within broader cultural narratives, including those of nationhood and identity. The present findings extend this body of work by demonstrating that patriotic discourses in advertising art are not merely decorative but operate as ideological resources that enhance emotional appeal and symbolic legitimacy in the marketplace. From a critical visual perspective, the predominance of subtle and aestheticized forms of nationalism over explicit political iconography reflects broader shifts in contemporary media strategies. Machin and Mayr’s (2012) multimodal critical discourse

framework helps explain how visual choices—such as composition, color symbolism, and representational framing—naturalize ideological meanings while obscuring their political character. The preference for emotive and implicit representations observed in this study resonates with Rose's (2016) argument that visual methodologies must attend to how images work affectively and discursively to produce meaning. This suggests that visual nationalism in advertising art operates through what could be described as a "soft" ideological mechanism, wherein nationalism is rendered palatable, emotionally appealing, and commercially productive. These findings also speak to broader debates on the commodification of culture and identity in late capitalist societies. Aronczyk's (2013) analysis of nation branding highlights how national identity is increasingly mobilized as a marketable asset within globalized communication regimes. The present study complements this perspective by showing that commercial advertising participates in similar processes of commodification at the level of everyday visual culture, thereby blurring distinctions between cultural belonging and consumer affiliation. The aestheticization of nationalism within advertising art raises critical questions about the ethical and cultural implications of transforming collective identity and historical symbolism into instruments of market persuasion. In line with Hall's (1997) cultural theory of representation, such practices underscore how meanings of nationhood are not fixed but are continually produced, negotiated, and circulated through visual media practices that intersect with power, ideology, and commerce. Overall, the discussion situates the findings within established theoretical frameworks on nationalism, visual culture, and advertising, reinforcing the view that patriotic discourses in advertising art are not neutral reflections of national sentiment but active cultural constructions with ideological consequences. By foregrounding the visual and aesthetic dimensions of nationalism, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how national identity is reproduced within everyday consumer environments and highlights the need for continued critical scrutiny of commercial visual culture as a site of ideological formation.

Conclusion

This study examined the visual and discursive construction of patriotic narratives in advertising art, situating commercial imagery within broader theoretical frameworks of nationalism and visual culture. The findings demonstrate that advertising art plays an active role in the everyday reproduction of national identity by embedding patriotic symbols and narratives within aesthetically appealing and emotionally resonant visual forms. In line with Anderson's (2006) notion of the nation as an imagined community and Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism, the study shows that nationalist meanings are frequently normalized through routine visual encounters in commercial environments. By foregrounding the aesthetic strategies through which national identity is rendered consumable, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how nationalism is sustained within contemporary media ecologies. Overall, the study reinforces the argument that advertising art should be understood not merely as a commercial practice but as a cultural and ideological site where meanings of nationhood are produced, circulated, and naturalized within everyday visual culture.

The findings of this study carry important theoretical, methodological, and practical implications. Theoretically, the research extends scholarship on nationalism and visual culture by demonstrating how commercial advertising operates as a subtle yet powerful mechanism for the circulation of nationalist ideology, complementing existing work on media and banal nationalism (Billig, 1995; Hall, 1997). Methodologically, the integration of critical visual analysis with systematic content analysis underscores the value of mixed-methods approaches for capturing both the qualitative depth and empirical patterns of visual ideology in media texts (Rose, 2016; Neuendorf, 2017). Practically, the study has implications for advertising practitioners and media regulators by highlighting the ethical considerations involved in mobilizing national symbols and patriotic sentiments for commercial purposes. The commodification of national identity raises questions about cultural responsibility, representation, and the potential reinforcement of exclusionary or homogenized narratives of belonging, aligning with broader critiques of the commercialization of culture in globalized media environments (Aronczyk, 2013).

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to certain limitations. The analysis was confined to a selected corpus of advertisements within a defined temporal frame, which may limit the generalizability of the findings across different cultural contexts and historical periods. Moreover, while the study employed a mixed-methods design, the interpretation of visual meanings remains partially dependent on researcher judgment, reflecting a broader methodological challenge within visual and discourse-analytic research (Rose, 2016). Future research could expand the scope of analysis by incorporating cross-cultural or comparative studies to examine how visual nationalism operates across different national and regional advertising contexts. Longitudinal research designs may further illuminate how patriotic discourses in advertising evolve over time in response to political, social, and technological changes. Additionally, future studies could integrate audience reception research to explore how viewers interpret and negotiate nationalist imagery in advertising, thereby extending current findings beyond textual analysis to include the lived experiences and interpretive practices of media audiences (Hall, 1997). Such directions would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic relationship between visual culture, nationalism, and consumer media.

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