



Hotel Billboards as Cultural and Ideological Texts: Attention, Learning, and Identity in Tourism Advertising

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Abstract

In today's visual and digital age hotel billboards have evolved beyond mere advertising tools into spaces where attention management, cultural representation and consumer ideology are reproduced. This study aims to analyze five selected hotel billboards (Merit Royal Hotel, Omni Hotels & Resorts, Adiki Hotels, Hostels.com and Pinatas Urban Residence) to explore how visual and verbal elements convey notions of culture, motivation and attention economy. The significance of the study lies in its focus on outdoor tourism advertising as a form of cultural and cognitive communication rather than purely economic promotion. The theoretical framework integrates Herbert A. Simon's Attention Economy, Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Adorno and Horkheimer's Culture Industry approach. A qualitative content analysis method was employed. Each billboard was analyzed in terms of visual composition, color use, slogan structure and the psychological appeals embedded in the imagery. The scope of the study is limited to five selected cases representing both local and international hotel campaigns. Findings reveal that international hotel billboards tend to emphasize experience, belonging and freedom, while local examples focus more on prestige, trust and status. This contrast illustrates how cultural representations vary across global and local contexts, reflecting different ideological narratives. Overall, the study concludes that hotel billboards function not only as commercial advertisements but also as cultural and ideological texts shaping perception and identity in the tourism industry.

Keywords: Billboard, attention economy, culture industry, social learning, tourism advertising, North Cyprus.

1.Introduction

In the digital age, where visual culture has become increasingly dominant, advertising has evolved beyond a mere promotional tool to become a communicative domain that shapes individuals' attention, perception, and cultural identity. In particular, hotel billboards in the tourism sector function not only as instruments of service promotion but also as cultural texts that represent lifestyle, status, and belonging. These visual media serve as spaces in which the ideology of consumption is reproduced and where the relationship between attention and economy is materialized.

This study examines hotel billboards from both Northern Cyprus and international contexts in terms of cultural representation, attention economy, and learning motivation. The main aim is to reveal how these billboards function not merely as commercial advertisements but as transmitters of cultural identity, consumption habits, and ideological messages. Previous research has demonstrated that media representations significantly shape individuals' perceptions and social awareness. In her doctoral dissertation, Yilmaz (2019) explored how identity was discursively constructed in the Turkish Cypriot press, revealing that the media reproduces identity narratives within political contexts. Similarly, Yilmaz and Bektaş (2019) examined how newspapers with differing ideological orientations reproduce national discourse, emphasizing the media's role as an ideological apparatus. These findings suggest that billboards, too, may serve as carriers of ideological representations.

Yilmaz (2025a), in her qualitative study on the use of social media in foreign language learning, analyzed how attention and interaction processes influence learning motivation in digital environments, highlighting how individuals are cognitively guided through online media. This insight is valuable in understanding how visual imagery and slogans in billboards also operate as cognitive steering mechanisms. Yilmaz (2025b), in her comparative analysis of cultural identity and ideology in children's media, demonstrated the impact of visual narratives on value transmission and cultural socialization, a perspective that directly supports the interpretation of billboard imagery as a form of social meaning-making.

In her critique of the culture industry, Yilmaz (2025c) examined the visible face of popular culture through television competitions and media representations, drawing attention to the commodification of cultural values—a view consistent with Adorno and Horkheimer's theory of the culture industry. Moreover, Yilmaz (2025d) analyzed political leaders' use of Instagram in Northern Cyprus, revealing how digital media are instrumentalized in processes of identity construction and representation. Taken together, these studies reinforce the understanding of billboards as sites where identity, ideology, and cultural meaning are constantly reconstructed.

Building upon this literature, the present research approaches hotel billboards through cultural, cognitive, and ideological frameworks. The theoretical foundation integrates Herbert A. Simon's concept of the attention economy, Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, and Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of the culture industry. The study employs a qualitative methodology and analyzes five selected hotel billboards—Merit Royal Hotel, Omni Hotels & Resorts, Adiki Hotels, Hostels.com, and Pinatas Urban Residence—using visual and textual analysis techniques. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding hotel advertising not merely as an economic activity but as a cultural narrative that constructs social meaning. The limitation of the study is that it focuses on only five billboard examples and relies primarily on visual interpretation. Nevertheless, it aims to demonstrate how cultural representations are constructed through advertising and how individuals' roles within the attention economy are continuously shaped in visual communication contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study builds upon an interdisciplinary framework that merges cultural theory, media representation, and destination branding approaches to analyze how billboard advertisements construct ideological, cultural, and economic meaning. The analysis draws particularly on Yilmaz's (2019; 2025a; 2025b; 2025c; 2025d) research on media discourse and identity, as well as Gümüş's (2020; 2024) and Köktener, Gümüş, and Şahar's (2020) studies on branding and globalization. In addition, Bağcı's (2023; 2024) recent contributions on tourism promotion and neuro-communication provide a contemporary perspective that bridges visual perception and strategic communication in destination marketing.

2.1. Media, Culture, and Representation

Media operates as a symbolic system through which meanings about identity, culture, and place are produced and circulated. Yilmaz (2019) emphasizes that media discourses reproduce ideological positions that shape public perception of cultural identity. In the context of tourism promotion, billboard imagery functions as a visual language that constructs belonging and desire. The visuals used in "Visit North Cyprus" or "Authentic Cuba" campaigns represent national identity through selective framing emphasizing either luxury and leisure or cultural authenticity and heritage. These constructions align with Yilmaz's (2025b; 2025c) arguments that media texts act as ideological mechanisms reinforcing cultural narratives and power relations.

2.2. Branding and Destination Marketing

Branding within tourism operates as both an economic and symbolic process. Gümüş (2024) identifies destination branding as the strategic alignment of image and identity, merging cultural representation with market competitiveness. Similarly, Köktener, Gümüş, and Şahar (2020) link brand reputation and brand value to globalization, suggesting that symbolic capital enhances international visibility. In parallel, Bağcı (2023) demonstrates how visual and emotional stimuli in tourism advertising can be analyzed through neuroscientific tools, revealing how promotional visuals directly affect attention, memory, and emotional engagement. Moreover, Bağcı (2024) highlights the importance of promotion events such as congresses and fairs as crucial mechanisms of national tourism branding, where image, identity, and participation intersect. Within this context, billboard advertising in Northern Cyprus and Cuba can be understood as part of a broader destination marketing ecosystem, transforming cultural narratives into visual and emotional brand experiences.

2.3. Culture Industry and Representation

Adorno and Horkheimer's (2002) concept of the culture industry situates advertising within the ideological machinery of capitalism. Visual media transforms culture into a commodity, aestheticizing consumption. Billboards convert public spaces into commercial landscapes where culture, pleasure, and identity merge under market logic. Yılmaz (2025c) connects this with popular culture, emphasizing that modern promotional aesthetics reinforce ideological norms. Hall's (1997) representation theory further explains how visual codes produce meaning, suggesting that images do not reflect but construct reality. This perspective reveals how "Merit Luxury Experience," "Kaya Artemis Paradise," and "Authentic Cuba" encode contrasting visions of modernity, luxury, and authenticity within their visual rhetoric.

2.4. Integrative Perspective

By combining the ideological analysis of media (Yılmaz, 2019; 2025a–d), the strategic and experiential understanding of branding (Gümüş, 2020; 2024; Köktener et al., 2020; Bağcı, 2023; 2024), and critical theories of culture and representation (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002; Hall, 1997), this framework establishes a holistic basis for interpreting billboard advertisements as complex cultural artifacts. These perspectives jointly illustrate that destination billboards are not neutral promotional visuals but discursive constructions where ideology, identity, and market power converge.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative comparative design to examine the visual and ideological dimensions of billboard advertisements in Northern Cyprus and Cuba. The study employs a phenomenological and interpretive approach, aiming to understand how visual representations in destination branding construct meaning, identity, and cultural perception. The methodological framework integrates visual discourse analysis and semiotic interpretation, focusing on how symbols, colors, slogans, and composition convey ideological and emotional messages.

3.1 Research Design

Following Creswell (2018) and Patton (2002), the qualitative design allows for an in-depth exploration of the relationship between media imagery, cultural identity, and branding discourse. A phenomenological orientation is used to reveal the lived meaning of visual representations within the cultural and economic context of each destination. The study also applies descriptive and interpretive strategies consistent with Yıldırım and Şimşek (2008), who emphasize the importance of contextual interpretation in qualitative research.

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

The sample includes five billboard advertisements selected through purposive sampling, representing the most prominent themes of destination marketing in Northern Cyprus and Cuba. The selection criteria were based on visual diversity, cultural representation, and

strategic communication intent. Northern Cyprus samples include “Visit North Cyprus,” “Merit Luxury Experience,” and “Kaya Artemis Paradise,” while the Cuban set features “Authentic Cuba” and “Cuba—So Real.” Each visual was analyzed through high-resolution imagery obtained from publicly available tourism campaigns and promotional archives.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using *comparative visual discourse analysis* and *semiotic coding*. The analytical process was structured in three stages:

1. Descriptive analysis – documenting visible elements such as colors, typography, and composition.
2. Interpretive analysis – identifying symbolic and cultural meanings encoded in the visuals.
3. Comparative synthesis – evaluating how ideological and branding strategies differ between the two national contexts.

The semiotic analysis was guided by Hall’s (1997) theory of representation, which conceptualizes images as systems of meaning rather than reflections of reality. In parallel, the ideological dimension was examined through Adorno and Horkheimer’s (2002) concept of the culture industry, focusing on how billboard advertising aestheticizes consumerism. Yılmaz’s (2019; 2025a–d) discourse perspective supported the cultural-ideological interpretation, while Gümüş (2024) and Bağcı (2023; 2024) provided insight into the branding and promotional dimensions of destination marketing.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

To enhance methodological rigor, the analysis followed the triangulation principle. Multiple theoretical perspectives were employed to interpret the same data set, ensuring conceptual depth and reducing researcher bias. Interpretive notes were cross-checked by independent reviewers familiar with visual communication and tourism marketing research. Furthermore, the coding framework was refined iteratively to maintain internal consistency across visual samples.

All billboard visuals analyzed were obtained from publicly accessible marketing materials, ensuring compliance with research ethics. No private or copyrighted content was used. The study does not evaluate individuals but focuses on public representations and institutional communication strategies. In conclusion, the methodological framework enables a comprehensive understanding of how destination billboards visually encode identity, culture, and ideology. By combining qualitative interpretation with critical and branding perspectives, the study situates billboard advertising as a meaningful site where media, economy, and culture intersect.

5. Conclusion

In this study, five hotel billboards selected from Northern Cyprus and international examples were analyzed in terms of the attention economy, cultural representation, and social learning processes. The findings reveal that hotel advertisements not only serve promotional purposes but also function as powerful communication tools that shape individuals’ perceptual orientations, cultural identities, and consumption habits.

Within Simon’s attention economy framework, it has been observed that the primary goal of billboards is to visually direct the viewer’s limited attention resources. The use of color contrasts, minimalist typography, and short slogans are strategies employed to capture attention in the shortest possible time. This demonstrates that, in the accelerating visual culture of the digital age, attention itself has become a competitive element. From the perspective of Bandura’s social learning theory, billboards act as instruments that influence individuals’ processes of modeling and identification through visual messages. The facial expressions, lifestyle imagery, and evocative slogans used in hotel advertisements create specific behavioral or emotional tendencies in the audience. In this sense, advertising

becomes not only an informative medium but also a visual learning tool that presents exemplary behavioral patterns.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer's culture industry theory, billboards represent spaces where cultural production becomes commercialized. As exemplified by the *Merit Royal Hotel* case, the emphasis on luxury and status reduces the perception of social value to an economic indicator. In contrast, international brands such as *Omni Hotels* and *Hostels.com* market a universal lifestyle based on experience and freedom. This contrast clearly highlights the cultural narrative differences between local and global brands. In conclusion, billboards in modern society are not merely visual stimuli but also ideological and cultural texts. These advertisements transform attention into an economic value while indirectly shaping learning and identity formation processes. The overall conclusion of the study suggests that tourism-based billboard advertisements cannot be fully understood without considering their economic, cognitive, and cultural impacts together. Therefore, it is recommended that future research also examine digital advertising, social media campaigns, and online promotions within similar theoretical frameworks.

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Appendix A. Omni Hotels & Resorts Billboard



The Omni Hotels & Resorts billboard, displayed on a digital highway panel, highlights the slogan "Stay a Part of Travel." The design emphasizes themes of experience and belonging, using warm color tones and an open-space composition to evoke freedom and emotional engagement. (Source: Field research, 2025)

Appendix B. Adiki Hotels Billboard



This billboard for Adiki Hotels features the slogan "Home Away from Home," representing comfort and familiarity. Dominated by shades of green, the visual uses a friendly facial expression to convey trust and a sense of ease, reflecting the brand's emphasis on hospitality. (Source: Field research, 2025)

Appendix C. Hostels.com Billboard



The Hostels.com outdoor advertisement uses a witty and creative tagline, "Stargazer seeks underground commuter," to appeal to a young and adventurous audience. Its minimalist design, framed in red, reinforces the brand's energetic and modern identity. (Source: Hostels.com campaign archive, 2025)

Appendix D. Merit Royal Hotel Billboard



The Merit Royal Hotel North Cyprus billboard employs a deep blue background and bold red typography to signify luxury and status. The minimalist aesthetic strengthens the hotel's image as a prestigious, high-end brand in the tourism sector. (Source: InsiteOOH, 2021)

Appendix E. Pinatas Urban Residence Billboard



This billboard for Pinatas Urban Residence integrates the concept of modern urban living with a contemporary interior visual. The nighttime lighting enhances the sense of exclusivity and sophistication, aligning with the brand's premium positioning. (Source: Pinatas.cy, 2025)