

Transcreating Persuasion: A Functionalist Approach to Slogan Translation in Global Fashion Advertising

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Abstract: *This study bridges functionalist translation theory and practical marketing localization by analyzing fashion advertising slogans. Grounded in Reiss's Text Typology and Vermeer's Skopos Theory, this paper identifies the loss of persuasion as the core challenge in cross-cultural slogan transcreation. Methodologically innovative, this research employs a dual analytical framework, encompassing cultural, rhetorical and visual dimensions; Contrastive case studies of failed vs. optimized translations. Findings reveal that effective transcreation requires: 1) Converting self-orientation to collective aesthetics via four character idioms; 2) Strategic sacrifice of semantic fidelity for rhythmic persuasion; 3) Typographic textual synchronization for website ecosystems.*

Keywords: Skopos Theory; Advertising Slogan Translation; Cross-cultural Communication; Transcreation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global apparel market is estimated to reach \$1.84 trillion in 2025 (Statista, 2025), among which the largest one is Women's Apparel, with an anticipated market volume of \$963.39 billion in the same year. Companies strive vigorously to develop marketing strategies and provide great customer service to boost sales and stay on brand. A translation error or a mis-translation of an advertisement, however, risks jeopardizing all work. A mistranslated label, a mistake in a user manual, a single wrong word in a contract may result in misuse, refunds, injury, and even legal ramifications and huge monetary losses.

As a high-persuasive and low-informative genre, advertisement has the following features. First, frequent use of emotional and evocative language. Advertising language prioritizes emotional resonance over factual information. Evaluative adjectives are frequently seen in advertisements to amplify product advantages. Take Victoria's Secret's perfume advertisement for instance, "Glamorous and luxe, Very Sexy is a deep, woody slow-burn that lingers." In this short advertisement with only 12 words, there are five evaluative adjectives (glamorous, luxe, deep, woody, slow-burn), which altogether vividly portray the scent of the perfume, urging the readers to feel and buy it.

Second, verbal and visual rhetoric devices are heavily used in advertising languages to enhance persuasiveness and aesthetic appeal. The advertising slogan "Trust us. Over 5000 ears of experience" comes from a hearing aid company. Humorous and memorable, this slogan exploits words that sound identical (ears and years) but have different meanings, combining product credibility and brand authority in one compact phrase.

Third, regulatory vulnerability is an undeniable feature. Advertising language faces legal constraints that shape lexical choices. Based on China's Advertising Law (Article 9), absolute terms including first-class, perfect, best are banned in advertising slogans to prevent misleading claims. Translators have to balance persuasive impact with legal safety, often requiring creative circumvention.

The particularity of advertising means that a promotional translator not only has to be familiar with the specific fields and terminology, but also develop non-linguistic skills including agility, the mastery of emotional or evocative persuasiveness, creativity, and the knowledge of relevant laws and restrictions about advertising of the target language.

This study pioneers a Skopos-Driven Transcreation (SDT) model applying Reiss and Vermeer's functionalism to contemporary fashion localization. Through analysis of real-world E-C slogan cases, we address: How can functionalist principles guide legally compliant, persuasive slogan transcreation?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: BEYOND EQUIVALENCE

Traditional translation theories have long been dominated by the concept of equivalence, which prioritizes linguistic accuracy and fidelity to the source text. However, in the context of commercial and advertising translation—where cultural resonance, persuasive power, and brand identity are paramount—such approaches often fall short. This section outlines three theoretical pillars that move beyond equivalence: Reiss's text typology, Skopos theory, and the practice of transcreation. Together, they provide a more flexible and functionally oriented framework for translating business and advertising texts in digital and global contexts.

2.1 Reiss's Typology in Digital Contexts

Katharina Reiss's text typology theory classifies texts into three primary types: informative, expressive, and operative (vocative). Each type requires a distinct translation strategy: informative texts prioritize accuracy and clarity, expressive texts focus on aesthetic and stylistic fidelity, and operative texts aim to elicit a specific response from the target audience (Reiss, 2000). In digital environments, where multimedia and multimodal texts are common, Reiss's typology remains highly relevant. For instance, technical specifications of a product (informative) demand literal accuracy, while brand storytelling (expressive) and call-to-action slogans (operative) require adaptive strategies to maintain engagement across cultures. The rise of e-commerce and social media has further amplified the need for typology-aware translations that align with platform-specific communication styles and user behaviors.

2.2 Skopos Theory as Strategic Compass

Skopos theory, developed by Hans Vermeer and later refined by Christiane Nord, posits that the purpose (skopos) of the translation should determine the translation methods and strategies employed. This principle liberates translators from strict source-text fidelity and empowers them to make decisions based on the intended function of the target text (Vermeer, 1996). In commercial translation, the skopos is often persuasive or promotional—aimed at driving consumer action, enhancing brand image, or entering new markets. For example, advertising slogans may be creatively adapted to evoke emotional responses in the target culture, even if this involves deviating from the original wording. The theory's emphasis on the target audience's cultural and linguistic expectations makes it particularly suitable for global marketing campaigns where consumer psychology varies significantly across regions.

2.3 Transcreation: The Creative Imperative

Transcreation—a portmanteau of translation and creation—refers to the adaptive process of recreating a message in another language while preserving its intent, tone, and impact. Often used in advertising and branding, transcreation goes beyond linguistic transfer to incorporate cultural nuance, humor, idioms, and local trends. This approach is especially critical in markets where literal translations may fail to resonate or even cause offense. For instance, the Chinese translation of Coca-Cola as “可口可乐” (meaning “tasty and fun”) is a classic example of transcreation that enhances brand appeal through phonetic and semantic adaptation. Transcreation acknowledges that effective communication in commercial contexts requires not just linguistic skill, but also marketing insight and cultural empathy.

3. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Cultural Axis: Individualism Versus Collectivism Tension

Advertising translation is an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural behavior that involves multiple fields such as linguistics, psychology, aesthetics, and marketing. Cultural aspects including values, psychological characteristics, language habits and cultural practices need to be considered during advertising planning and marketing communication. The purpose of advertising translation is not limited to language conversion and understanding. It is persuasiveness — the power of encouraging customers to endorse the values promoted in the advertisement and thus purchase the product that matters most. Thus, many international companies take the local culture into consideration while publishing advertising strategy campaigns. In such translations, the factors of cultural differences that are mainly considered include values, psychological characteristics, language habits, and cultural practices.

The Western countries value self-advocacy, pragmatism, challenge and adventurous spirit, while Chinese culture attaches great importance to group consciousness and has a profound humanistic spirit. These differences of values are naturally reflected in advertising. For example, Nike's well-known advertising slogan "Just do it!" actually has no official Chinese translation version. The slogan advocates care-free and do whatever you want. But it also indicates that one is regardless of the consequences, which conflicts with the values of humility pursued by the Chinese.

3.2 Rhetorical Axis: Pun/rhyme Conservation Feasibility

Sometimes, we find that the magic of an advertisement lies in its creative use of language; despite grammatical or logical flaws, we come to realize its ingenuity. Employing rhetorical devices in advertising copies captures the consumers' attention through the cognitive requirement for active semantic processing, thereby transforming passive reception into an interactive meaning-making endeavor.

Punning is a frequently used rhetorical device in advertising language. Copywriters leverage homophones or polysemous words to convey dual meanings, creating humor and intellectual intrigue. Take an advertisement for a speaker company, for example. The E-C translation of its advertising slogan "Explore Sound of Life" is "探索声活圈", which is a play on the common phrase "探索生活圈", meaning "Explore social life". Here the original word "生" (shēng), meaning "life" or "living" is substituted with the word "声" (shēng), meaning "sound" or "voice". Both characters are pronounced identically as "shēng", thus the advertising slogan immediately and directly points to a product or service related to audio. In addition, "声活圈" (Sound-life-circle) effectively creates a new compound word meaning "a life surrounded by sound."

From this example we find the magic of the use of punning in advertising slogan. It is concise, culturally relevant, memorable, and transforms a simple imperative into an aspirational invitation. Other rhetorical devices including metaphor, simile, personification. These creative approaches will indeed enhance the appeal of words and catch the audience's attention.

3.3 Visual Axis: Typographic and Layout Constraints in Transcreation

Typography, layout, colour, and spatial design as non-verbal elements are significant semiotic resources in multimodal advertising discourse and may greatly influence translation strategies.

As highlighted by Torresi (2021, p. 171), these elements "achieve coherence and cohesion across all modes of expression", which necessitates close coordination between linguistic and visual rhetoric. Translators often adopt amplification and omission to solve typographic constraints, including font size, style, and spacing.

4. DECODING FAILURE: THREE CORE CHALLENGES AND THEIR SOLUTIONS

Advertising slogans are appeal-focused text that always present information with an explicit purpose, persuading or dissuading the readers to take an action. This explains why an advertising translator sometimes assumes more responsibilities and has to possess more skills to survive in the constantly changing market. While translating advertising slogans, translators may face potential pitfalls that dilute persuasive impact, specifically, cultural mismatches in persuasive mechanics, the collapse of rhetorical devices, and the decoupling of visual and textual elements. These failures highlight the complexities of achieving functional equivalence in cross-cultural advertising.

4.1 Cultural Mismatches in Persuasive Mechanics

Advertising constitutes a culturally embedded communicative practice, and its persuasive strategies are inevitably molded by the core values of the target cultural context. Notable divergences characterize the value systems of Chinese and Western societies: Western contexts generally place emphasis on individualism and a propensity for change, while Chinese culture attaches greater priority to collectivism and the pursuit of stability. Such cultural distinctions exert a substantial impact on how target audiences receive and interpret advertising texts.

In this context, translators are compelled to prioritize an in-depth understanding of the target audience's value

orientations, psychological tendencies, and aesthetic preferences. If translators take literal translations that retain the individualistic persuasive appeals inherent in Western advertising—for example, themes of assertiveness and personal autonomy—risk alienating consumers within collectivist cultural settings.

For example, Victoria's Secret's (American lingerie brand) slogan "Daring to follow the night wherever it takes you" was translated first as "敢于追随暗夜，不问终点" in an imperative tone emphasizing adventure. This captures the daring individualism but might be perceived as slightly reckless. The amended version, "敢于追随暗夜，无畏不问终点", shifts the highlights from recklessness to the fearless aspects and themes of uncharted exploration, which holds stronger cultural resonance in Chinese culture.

Similarly, take lululemon's slogan as an illustration: "Only you know the path to your ultimate mind-body balance" was initially translated into Chinese in a word-for-word manner —— "只有你知道怎么达到最终的身心平衡". Yet the published version "获得身心平衡的方式对每个人而言各有不同" reveals a clear preference for the revised translation that universalizes the original message—adjustments that effectively diminish the sense of individualism conveyed and strengthen the text's relatability to the target audience.

These examples underscore the necessity of cultural adaptation in advertising translation, which extends far beyond mere literal conversion of words.

4.2 Rhetorical Collapse in Translation

The transcreation process often stumbles when encountering wordplay, rhyme, or other rhetorical flourishes intrinsic to the original slogan's memorability and appeal. The semantic content might be transferred, but the aesthetic and persuasive charm is lost.

A clear example is the loss of punning potential in the KEF campaign line "Explore Sound of Life." A literal translation would focus solely on the semantic meaning. However, the corpus provides an excellent example of rhetorical transcreation: "探索声活圈". This brilliantly homophonic pun replaces the character for "life" or "living" (生, shēng) with the character for "sound" or "voice" (声, shēng), which are pronounced identically. It plays on the common phrase "探索生活圈" (explore the social life circle), instantly signaling the product domain (sound) while creating a catchy, memorable neologism meaning "a circle/surround of sound-life." This successfully conserves the rhetorical device's function: capturing attention through cognitive engagement with wordplay.

Conversely, slogans like lululemon's "It's routines reimagined" / "颠覆传统" (Overthrow tradition) and "Playing outside the lines" / "特立独行" (Be independent and act independently) demonstrate a common strategy when rhyme or subtle wordplay is untranslatable: abandoning the original structure for concise, idiom-like phrases that convey the core brand attitude (innovation, non-conformity) with cultural resonance, even if the specific rhetorical form collapses.

4.3 Visual Textual Decoupling

Chinese advertising slogan shows a preference for four-character idioms. For example, lululemon's English slogan "Wear to? Anywhere. Starting line: Wherever" was adapted into Chinese version "运动不停，思绪不止" and "找准目标，即刻启程". This translation maintains visual harmony in a layout of a printed sheet. Layout-imposed economy, exemplified by platforms like TikTok with caption limits of 55 characters, further necessitates syntactic condensation—as seen in the shift from the literal translation "适合各种活动，减少洗涤次数" (9 characters) to the concise "无惧热汗" (4 characters) for "More moving, less washing," aligning with webpage's vertical layout requirements. The sportswear slogan "More moving, less washing" presents an imagery of active athletes who wear sweat-wicking fabric. The initial literal translation serves as a loyal explanation, but it failed to conform to spatial constraint. The solution "无惧热汗", meaning "No fear of sweat", mirrors the brevity of the wearer, and can reinforce the visual message of comfort and dryness.

Thus, visual components could guide translators toward reaching the translation skopos. Based on Vermeer's skopos theory, the overarching skopos justifies strategic deviations from semantic fidelity to achieve visual-textual harmony. Therefore, effective transcreation demands visual literacy, meaning that translators need to interpret and

use non-verbal clues.

5. FUNCTIONALIST SOLUTIONS: SKOPOS-DRIVEN TRANSCREATION PROTOCOL

Rooted in functionalist translation theory, this study proposes the Skopos-Driven Transcreation (SDT) model, which systematically addresses the trilemma of legal compliance, cultural adaptation, and persuasive impact through a structured three-step protocol. This approach transforms theoretical principles into actionable strategies for advertising localization.

At the first step, translators need to audit skopos hierarchy. The initial phase requires the translator to identify and prioritize the multiple, often competing purposes underlying each advertising slogan, based on Vermeer's Skopos Theory. The primary skopos remains commercial: enhancing conversion rates and ROI. Secondary objectives include legal compliance (e.g., adhering to Article 9 of China's Advertising Law, which prohibits superlatives) and cultural fluency (aligning with target audience values and aesthetics). For instance, translating "The best performance you can get" as "卓越性能" avoids regulatory risks while retaining persuasive force. This hierarchy informs all subsequent decisions, ensuring that semantic choices serve overarching communicative goals rather than superficial fidelity.

Once the skopos hierarchy is established, translators can employ specific transcreation techniques to achieve functional equivalence. Translators sometimes need to shift puns to idioms in E-C advertising translation. Wordplay, which is often culturally specific, can be replaced with culturally resonant idioms or parallel structures. For example, "Put the go in goals" was transcreated as "找准目标, 即刻启程" (Aim accurately, set out immediately). This translation replaces the homophonic pun with a rhythmic four-character couplet, restoring motion semantics and evoking a sense of proactive achievement. Cultural aspects should not be neglected in E-C advertising translation. Individualistic messaging is recalibrated to align with collectivist cultural norms. The phrase "For all your who-needs-plans" was adapted into "肆意动, 随心穿" (Move freely, wear as you wish). The original negation of planning was replaced with paired verbs suggesting shared, unrestrained experience, avoiding potential negative connotations in Chinese while promoting a sense of communal freedom.

At the final step, translators need to confirm platform-specific requirements. Different digital platforms impose unique constraints on slogan length, layout, and functionality. Translators must adapt slogans to platform-specific requirements while maintaining visual-textual harmony. For instance, on short-video platforms like TikTok with strict character limits (e.g., 55 characters), slogans must be syntactically condensed and rhythmically crafted to suit vertical screen layouts and fast-paced browsing behavior.

6. CONCLUSION

This study confirms the enduring relevance of functionalist translation theory when dynamically applied to the transcreation of advertising slogans. The proposed Skopos-Driven Transcreation (SDT) model effectively resolves the core trilemma of legal compliance, cultural resonance, and persuasive impact through three strategic pillars: purpose-guided creativity, which prioritizes communicative function over strict semantic precision; rhetorical compensation, where culturally specific idioms and structures replace untranslatable puns or wordplay; and platform-native restructuring, which achieves visual-textual symbiosis across diverse digital ecosystems.

Looking forward, several avenues for future research emerge. On the one hand, the development of AI-assisted transcreation tools promises to revolutionize real-time localization, though it necessitates careful ethical and quality frameworks. On the other hand, the rising imperative of sustainability demands exploration into the peculiarities of "eco-slogans" within sustainable fashion, a niche where ethical claims must be communicated with utmost authenticity to avoid charges of greenwashing.

As digital ecosystems continue to evolve at a rapid pace, translation paradigms must adapt with equal agility. Yet, amidst this technological transformation, Hans Vermeer's central tenet endures with renewed force for his recognition of the status of the translator. The human translator's role as a cultural strategist, legal consultant, and creative mediator remains more critical than ever in navigating the complex interplay of language, culture, and commerce.

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