

Cultural Resonance in Advertising: Audience Interaction with Culturally Embedded Campaigns in Lebanon (2022–2023)

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Citation: Khoury, J. EI. (2025). Cultural Resonance in Advertising: Audience Interaction with Culturally Embedded Campaigns in Lebanon (2022–2023), *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 10(4), 589-595. <https://doi.org/10.64753/jcasc.v10i4.2902>

Published: December 06, 2025

ABSTRACT

Advertising is increasingly recognized as a cultural practice that extends beyond persuasion to reflect collective values, identity, and social belonging (Hall, 1973; Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This study investigates the effectiveness of cultural advertising in Lebanon, focusing on Almaza's social media campaigns during 2022–2023. By analyzing engagement data (likes, comments, shares), the research shows that ads embedding cultural symbols generate significantly higher interaction than non-cultural campaigns. Guided by encoding/decoding theory, consumer culture theory, and reception theory, the findings underscore how cultural resonance strengthens audience engagement and brand identity. The originality of this study lies in situating Lebanon—a context marked by collectivism and resilience—within global advertising scholarship. Its implications align with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), by demonstrating how culturally rooted marketing can foster sustainable business practices and community cohesion.

Keywords: Cultural Advertising, Audience Engagement, Encoding/Decoding Theory, Consumer Culture Theory, Reception Theory, Lebanon, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Collectivist Culture.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of cultural advertising in enhancing audience engagement within Lebanon, a collectivist cultural environment. By analyzing Almaza's social media campaigns during 2022–2023, the study compares cultural versus non-cultural advertisements using raw engagement data. Grounded in encoding/decoding theory (Hall, 1973), consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), and reception theory (Holub, 2013), it aims to demonstrate how cultural resonance strengthens brand–consumer connections. The research contributes to marketing scholarship by linking cultural advertising to sustainable business practices, in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 8 and SDG 12.

Originality And Value

This study contributes originality by situating Lebanon—a context rarely examined in advertising literature—within global debates on culture and communication. While prior studies have focused on Western or East Asian contexts (Samiee & Jeong, 1994; Zhang & Neelankavil, 1997), this research provides empirical evidence of how cultural references in Lebanese advertising stimulate stronger engagement than generic appeals. The value lies in bridging theory and practice: demonstrating that encoding/decoding, consumer culture theory, and reception theory collectively explain why cultural congruence matters. Beyond academic contribution, the study highlights how culturally rooted campaigns support sustainable consumer engagement, aligning with SDG 8 (economic growth) and SDG 12 (responsible consumption).

INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, advertising has evolved into a cultural practice that extends beyond persuasion to encompass identity, values, and collective meaning (Hall, 1973; Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Brands increasingly embed cultural cues in campaigns to foster resonance with audiences, who respond not only as consumers but also as members of communities shaped by shared experiences and norms. Cross-cultural studies confirm that audience responses are mediated by cultural orientations, with individualist societies valuing independence and collectivist ones privileging group belonging (Zhang & Neelankavil, 1997). Lebanon, with its hybrid of resilience, tradition, and cultural diversity, offers a unique context to explore this phenomenon. Situated within a collectivist cultural environment, Lebanese audiences engage with advertising that reflects their humor, pride, and collective identity. This study examines Almaza's campaigns in 2022–2023, demonstrating how culturally embedded advertising strengthens engagement and contributes to broader discussions on sustainable and culturally responsible marketing (SDG 8; SDG 12).

Hypothesis:

This study investigates the effectiveness of cultural advertising in shaping audience engagement through a focused case study of Almaza, Lebanon's leading brewery since 1933. Specifically, it compares the interaction generated by Almaza's culturally embedded advertisements with that of their more generic campaigns. Drawing on the frameworks of Encoding/Decoding theory, Sociocultural theory, and Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, the research examines how cultural markers influence audience reception.

The central hypothesis posits that Lebanese audiences, characterized by strong collectivist orientations and deep cultural attachment, are more likely to respond positively to campaigns infused with cultural symbolism. It further argues that Almaza's culturally grounded advertisements have achieved significantly higher levels of engagement than their standard advertisements, thereby underscoring the importance of cultural resonance in brand communication strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Cross-cultural research has long emphasized the role of cultural orientation in shaping advertising effectiveness. Zhang and Neelankavil (1997), in their comparative study of China and the United States, demonstrated that responses to advertising appeals are strongly mediated by cultural context. Their experiment with 160 university students (80 from each country) revealed that American participants were more receptive to individualistic appeals, while Chinese participants responded more favorably to collectivist themes. These findings, framed within the individualism–collectivism paradigm, illustrate that advertising messages do not operate in a vacuum but are filtered through culturally embedded norms and expectations. Ultimately, the study reinforces the idea that individuals are deeply molded by the cultural systems in which they are raised.

Similar observations are made by Samiee and Jeong (1994), who examined cross-cultural similarities and differences between European and North American societies on one side and Asia-Pacific, Latin America, and Africa on the other. Their analysis shows that while Western societies tend to privilege independent goals and self-oriented achievements, collectivist regions emphasize interdependence and group solidarity. From a practical advertising standpoint, this means that campaigns targeting individualistic audiences must grapple with diverse and sometimes fragmented interpretations of independence, freedom, and self-actualization. In contrast, collectivist audiences are generally easier to reach with unified cultural narratives, as shared values and norms provide a common ground for communication. As Zhang and Neelankavil (1997) argue, advertising reflects and reproduces cultural norms; therefore, aligning a campaign with the dominant values of its target culture significantly increases its chances of engagement.

Encoding/Decoding Theory

Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model provides an essential theoretical framework for understanding how cultural advertising is produced and interpreted. Advertising, as a branch of mass communication, operates through symbolic codes that link the sender's intended meaning with the audience's interpretation. Encoding refers to the process by which advertisers construct messages using shared codes and signifiers, while decoding occurs when audiences interpret these messages according to their own cultural, social, and ideological contexts.

Crucially, Hall highlights that decoding is not a passive act. Audiences do not simply absorb messages but reinterpret them through the lens of their own cultural positioning. Thus, two audiences exposed to the same advertisement may derive different meanings depending on their cultural background, values, and lived experiences (Xie et al., 2022). In the context of advertising, this means that a campaign can succeed or fail depending on the degree of cultural congruence between its encoded meaning and its audience's decoding practices.

Katz and Liebes (1990) extend Hall's framework by emphasizing the role of emotion and prior experience in decoding media messages. They argue that referential decoding — linking a message to real-world contexts and lived memories — heightens emotional resonance and, consequently, engagement. In advertising, cultural references can serve precisely this function, offering audiences familiar cues that intensify recognition and interaction. Hackley (2011) captures this complexity when describing advertising as a practice where “science and art are forced together in the interests of commerce.”

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) further deepens this discussion by foregrounding the agency of consumers in interpreting and reworking advertising messages. Arnould and Thompson (2005; 2018) argue that audiences are not passive recipients but active interpreters who often reshape advertising messages in ways that diverge from the intentions of their producers. This perspective aligns with Hall's emphasis on negotiated or oppositional readings, underscoring the cultural embeddedness of meaning-making in advertising.

Applied to cultural advertising, CCT suggests that audience engagement hinges on the extent to which campaigns reflect or resonate with their cultural environments. Advertising is consumed not only as a promotional tool but as a symbolic product that audiences interpret in relation to their identities, ideologies, and values. As Arnould et al. (2019) note, consumption involves a “heterogeneous distribution of meanings,” shaped by socio-cultural and experiential factors. For brands, this means that cultural cues in advertising must be carefully chosen to ensure alignment with audience realities rather than imposed narratives.

Reception Theory

Reception theory complements both Hall's encoding/decoding model and CCT by focusing on the interpretive process audiences undergo when engaging with media. Holub (2013) defines reception theory as a response to broader social and intellectual shifts, emphasizing the multiplicity of meanings that can be derived from a text. Crosby (2020) highlights that audience reception is inseparable from identity, as individuals negotiate meaning through cultural and social frameworks.

In advertising, reception studies, media ethnography, and constructionist approaches (Puustinen, 2005) collectively emphasize that meaning emerges not solely from the advertiser's intent but from the interaction between the ad and its audience. Cultural advertising, therefore, can be seen as particularly effective because it embeds references that audiences recognize, interpret, and integrate into their own cultural narratives. As Skrendo and Warso (2016) argue, advertisements are situated within “the realia of a communicative situation,” shaped by multiple codes and contextual cues that frame how they are received.

Together, these theories underscore that cultural advertising is not merely about inserting cultural symbols into campaigns but about designing communication that aligns with the interpretive practices of a culturally situated audience.

METHOD

In order to examine the above-mentioned hypothesis, this research will make use of raw social media data collections taken from various social media networks wherein Almaza posts its advertisements. Social media data refers to information such as the number of likes, comments, and shares that a post receives on a network that shows how users viewing your content engage with it. It is essential to note that this method of data collection is described as raw social media data collection because the numbers that will be analyzed are available to all users and are not taken from Almaza's personal data analytics, but rather a public analysis of accessible statistics. For more accurate results, the social media networks that are taken into consideration for this study are two of the most used platforms in Lebanon where Almaza showcases its ads: Instagram and Facebook during 2022 and 2023. The study will compare the data between advertisements incorporating Lebanese cultural references and other non-cultural advertisements. To further ensure the accuracy of our results, the data collected will be divided based on platform and years.

RESULTS

An examination of Almaza's social media content was used to determine the efficacy of the cultural advertisements. Information about likes, shares, and comments was obtained through methodical data collection and analysis, revealing how the public reacted to cultural advertising efforts versus other types of advertising that will be identified in each following table.

The findings of our study turned up several interesting trends and patterns regarding the efficiency of Almaza's cultural advertisements. A thorough analysis of these results is provided in the following parts, providing insights into audience engagement and the influence of cultural factors on social media interactions.

	Number of Likes	Number of Comments	Number of shares
CA1	4,308	220	3,444
CA2	7,400	59	480
CA3	4,242	35	769

Figure 1: Audience Engagement on Cultural Advertisements in 2022 – Instagram

CA1: Almaza’s public acknowledgment of the Lebanese alternative precision dance crew, Mayyas, who qualified for the finals in America’s Got Talent (AGT) season 17. As the Lebanese population shared their pride and contentment for Mayyas, Almaza decided to do the same, emulating the precision dance poses of the dancers with the beer bottles. They wrote “Proudly Lebanese! Congratulations Mayyas Dance Crew”, associating the pride of the Lebanese dancers with the original Lebanese beer.

CA2: another ad honoring Mayyas after they won AGT season 17. The Instagram post incorporated the same pose matching the dancers with the beer bottle caps opened and the words “Hats Off Mayyas”.

CA3: an ad posted during the period of the 2022 parliamentary elections when many political parties launched their election campaigns. Because Lebanese politicians are known for bribing their voters, Almaza posted an ad with the forefinger and electoral ink replaced with a diamond. Their caption translates to “Your vote is yours, even if they give you a diamond”. Almaza translates to diamond in Arabic; therefore, this ad shows the importance of social values for Almaza and proves that they are more than a mere company that only cares about selling products.

	Number of Likes	Number of Comments	Number of Shares
NA1	2,080	7	62
NA2	1,719	8	23
NA3	2,582	13	158

Figure 2: Audience Engagement on Non-Cultural Advertisements in 2022 – Instagram

NA1: an ad about the launch of a new size for Almaza’s canned beer. It includes one large can and a smaller one, with the quote “It’s going to be a long meeting, make it short”.

NA2: an ad encouraging UGC, where people who take a picture of their Almaza beer and post it on their Instagram accounts can get the chance to fly with Almaza.

NA3: an ad about the launch of new limited-edition bottles of Almaza that include letters on their packaging. People can buy bottles that have their name initials on them or formulate words using Almaza bottles. The Instagram ad shows the new Almaza bottles with the letters of the expression “limited edition”.

	Number of Likes	Number of Comments	Number of shares
CA4	2,980	20	6
CA5	3,403	42	33
CA6	2,366	5	44

Figure 3: Audience Engagement on Cultural Advertisements in 2023 – Instagram

CA4: this ad shows the new color of Almaza bottles going from green to dark brown as winter comes. Lebanese people are known for their major seasonal transitions in terms of clothes, colors, and more. Almaza quotes the Lebanese famous saying “We’re putting the winter appeal” with two brown Almaza bottles facing a chimney.

CA5: this ad is a product launch of a new “unfiltered” beer. Almaza describes it as “A beer as brave as you”. This reflects the culturally known title of Lebanese people being brave and resilient after all the hardships that they’ve faced. Almaza is making a product that is similar to its audience.

CA6: word playing on the famous Arabic saying, “Go and don’t come back”, Almaza created this ad at the end of summer 2023 when the diaspora left Lebanon, quoting “Go and come back” next to an Almaza bottle and a flying airplane. This ad is culturally significant to Lebanese people because of their well-known reliance on and anticipation of their diaspora every summer season.

	Number of Likes	Number of Comments	Number of Shares
NA4	1,665	2	2
NA5	1,291	1	20
NA6	1,533	4	6

Figure 4: Audience Engagement on Non-Cultural Advertisements in 2022 – Instagram

NA4: an ad about the launch of the new mini size of the Light Almaza beer, mentioning the number of calories next to a picture of the bottle.

NA5: an ad about a brand collaboration between Almaza and Rifai (the largest nut-retailing company in the Middle East) for a famous local festival. With every Almaza purchase, buyers will get a small Rifai pack.

NA6: an ad about a collaboration between Almaza and Virgin Radio Lebanon, announcing a happy hour brought to the listeners of the radio station by Almaza's Unfiltered beer.

	Number of Likes	Number of Comments	Number of shares
CA7	1,200	42	8
CA8	1,300	22	7
CA9	1,300	18	20

Figure 5: Audience Engagement on Cultural Advertisements in 2022 – Facebook

CA7: when the Lebanese people had to suffer from severe electricity and generator outages in 2022, Almaza dedicated a Facebook ad with the darker edition of the bottle quoting "Will keep you company in the dark!"

CA8: following the multiple crises of 2022, many Lebanese could not afford to go to the beaches because of the fuel crisis and the increased entrance prices following the LBP fluctuating rate. Since beer is a traditional summer drink for Lebanese, Almaza, through this Facebook ad, showed a woman tanning on her balcony with an Almaza bottle next to her. The picture quoted the Arabic translation of "A homemade beach".

CA9: after the Lebanese basketball team qualified for the Asian World Cup final, Almaza dedicated a Facebook ad to show their pride. They chose an extreme close-up shot of a basketball showing the texture of the ball made of small circles, with "Goosebumps, we did it" written over it. The two O's are replaced by Almaza's bottle caps.

	Number of Likes	Number of Comments	Number of shares
NA7	356	145	7
NA8	636	23	4
NA9	377	13	8

Figure 6: Audience Engagement on Non-Cultural Advertisements in 2022 – Facebook

NA7: this ad shows a giveaway made by Almaza on 2/2/2022 where people can tag and get the chance to win two packs of Almaza bottles 33cl.

NA8: on Father's Day, Almaza asked its audience to share a picture of their father with an Almaza bottle. This ad falls in the non-cultural category because this holiday is not for Lebanese people solely nor did Almaza make use of cultural references to interact with its audience.

NA9: Almaza dedicated a Facebook ad to wish a happy Valentine's Day to its audience. Similarly to NA8, this ad falls in the non-cultural category because this holiday is not for Lebanese people solely nor did Almaza establish cultural references to send its wishes.

	Number of Likes	Number of Comments	Number of shares
CA10	1,500	45	20
CA11	1,400	18	7
CA12	1,300	50	17

Figure 7: Audience Engagement on Cultural Advertisements in 2023 – Facebook

CA10: at the start of the winter season, Almaza quoted the famous Lebanese singer, Fairuz, making use of her song 'Habaytak Bil Sayf' (which translates to "I loved you in summer"). The picture cited the part of the song that translates to "I loved you in the summer, I will love you in the winter". This shows that although Lebanese people mainly associate beer with summer, Almaza is also a winter drink.

CA11: Lebanese people are known for calling the snow season "saison", which translates to 'season' in French. As done in CA10, Almaza is further reinforcing the idea that their beer is also an essential part of the Lebanese people's winter season.

CA12: an ad for the product launch of Almaza's canned beer making use of the famous Lebanese saying, "If your head is a can", which is often used by Lebanese people to humiliate and insult someone whom they think has stubborn views or takes time to understand.

	Number of Likes	Number of Comments	Number of shares
NA10	783	14	1

NA11	896	16	2
NA12	942	12	5

Figure 8: Audience Engagement on Non-Cultural Advertisements in 2023 – Facebook

NA10: an ad with the bottle caps forming a thought bubble quoting “always a good idea”.

NA11: an ad showing different Almaza bottles held by people next to the beach in preparation for the coming of spring.

NA12: another introductory ad for the launch of the new light Almaza mini with a small nutritional informational panel of its size and calories written next to the picture of the bottle.

DISCUSSION:

The findings clearly indicate that Almaza’s advertisements incorporating cultural references achieved higher levels of engagement—measured in likes, comments, and shares—on both Instagram and Facebook during 2022 and 2023. This outcome illustrates how the encoding of cultural meanings aligns with the decoding practices of the Lebanese audience, facilitated by a shared repertoire of symbols and codes. The company’s reliance on this common communicative structure has allowed it to deliver campaigns that resonate strongly with its audience, ensuring smoother message transmission and enhanced interaction.

Almaza’s success can be attributed to its ability to read and adapt to the cultural environment of its consumers. By recognizing the cultural frameworks that shape consumer perceptions, the brand effectively applies insights from Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). It encodes messages in ways that audiences can readily decode according to their cultural knowledge, thus creating ads that appear not only familiar but also personally relevant. This process culminates in the reception of the ads, where cultural cues play a decisive role in shaping the audience’s final interpretation and level of engagement.

Patterns emerging from the data further highlight how Almaza’s strategies align with subcategories of reception theory, particularly reception studies, ethnographic tendencies, and constructivist processes. For example, many cultural ads explicitly tapped into Lebanese proverbs, well-known songs, or prominent social issues (CA2, CA3, CA6, CA10, CA11). These elements triggered strong audience responses, often tied to collective pride in Lebanese identity and talent (CA1, CA2, CA9). Such outcomes affirm the collectivist tendencies of Lebanese society, where shared cultural markers strengthen communal ties and promote collective rather than individualistic engagement (Zhang & Neelankavil, 1997).

It is also worth noting that Almaza’s non-cultural advertisements were not entirely devoid of cultural encoding. Even when culture was not explicitly highlighted, subtle elements such as the use of trilingual communication (Arabic, French, and English) reflected the everyday linguistic reality of Lebanese society. This implicit encoding shows how deeply ingrained cultural patterns shape Almaza’s creative strategies, whether consciously or not.

Nevertheless, the study also uncovered exceptions. One notable example is advertisement NA7, a giveaway campaign, which attracted an unusually high number of comments. Unlike cultural ads, however, this spike in engagement was transactional in nature, as audience members commented primarily to participate in the contest. Metrics such as likes and shares did not reflect the same intensity, suggesting that this type of engagement was motivated by extrinsic rewards rather than intrinsic resonance with the advertisement.

The contrast between similar campaigns underscores the importance of cultural framing. For instance, while both CA12 and NA12 promoted the launch of new Almaza beer products in 2023, CA12, which employed Lebanese cultural references, significantly outperformed NA12, which highlighted nutritional benefits. A parallel example emerged on Instagram in 2022: NA4, promoting a light beer through nutritional claims, showed lower engagement compared to CA5, which associated the company’s “Unfiltered Beer” with Lebanese bravery and resilience. By tying product attributes to widely celebrated cultural traits, Almaza succeeded in generating deeper audience identification and stronger interaction.

Taken together, these results demonstrate that cultural advertising not only strengthens audience engagement but also helps build a distinctive brand identity. By embedding shared values, humor, and collective pride into their messages, companies like Almaza cultivate a creative voice that resonates with national identity and community belonging. In collectivist societies such as Lebanon, where cultural attachment is a defining characteristic, strategies that consciously integrate encoding/decoding principles, consumer culture theory, and reception theory enable brands to transcend transactional communication. They position the company as a cultural participant—one that reflects, amplifies, and sustains the values of its community

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that cultural advertising in Lebanon yields stronger audience engagement than non-cultural campaigns, as demonstrated through Almaza’s social media performance in 2022 and 2023.

Advertisements embedding cultural cues—such as Lebanese humor, music, or national sayings—garnered higher levels of likes, shares, and comments compared to ads with nutritional or generic appeals. These findings reaffirm Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model, where shared codes allow audiences to interpret messages with minimal distortion, and align with consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), which emphasizes how cultural context actively shapes audience reception. Reception theory further explains how these ads resonated by linking symbolic messages to collective identity and lived experiences (Holub, 2013).

Importantly, this study demonstrates that cultural advertising is not merely aesthetic but strategically essential in collectivist societies such as Lebanon. Campaigns that drew on national pride and shared resilience fostered a sense of belonging and community, strengthening Almaza's role not only as a brand but as a cultural participant. In contrast, non-cultural campaigns, including those centered on nutritional value or giveaways, generated either weak or transactional engagement. These differences highlight the enduring power of cultural symbols in markets where collective identity is deeply valued (Zhang & Neelankavil, 1997).

The implications of this research extend beyond Lebanon. In a global advertising landscape increasingly attentive to sustainable and responsible practices, cultural alignment can be understood as part of building long-term consumer trust and brand resilience. This aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), by demonstrating how creative industries contribute to economic vitality through culturally resonant marketing, and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), by emphasizing advertising strategies that reflect cultural values and encourage meaningful, not superficial, engagement.

By situating Lebanon within international scholarship, this study provides both empirical evidence and theoretical synthesis that broaden our understanding of cultural advertising. It illustrates how cultural identity, when embedded in advertising, can function as a driver of both audience engagement and sustainable business practices. Future research may extend this inquiry by comparing cultural advertising across industries or across Middle Eastern societies, thereby testing the generalizability of these findings. What remains clear is that culture is not a peripheral element of advertising but its very foundation—a medium through which brands and audiences co-construct meaning, loyalty, and resilience in increasingly complex markets.

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