

Culture-Specific Items in Global Beauty Advertising: A Three-Layer Analysis of Localization Strategies

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Abstract

This paper examines how culture-specific items (CSIs) operate in global beauty advertising and why localization failures exceed lexical translation. Drawing on Aixelá's concept of CSIs, Skopos Theory, and equivalence theory, it proposes a three-layer model of terminological, visual, and narrative CSIs. The model is applied to Schwarzkopf's "virgin hair" case, Dove's body-wash transformation advertisement, and Fenty Beauty's inclusive launch strategy. The analysis identifies a distinct mechanism at each layer: uncontrolled metaphor transfer, culturally activated visual sequencing, and the alignment of product architecture with an inclusive brand narrative. While Schwarzkopf and Dove demonstrate failures of connotative and multimodal equivalence, Fenty Beauty shows both the strategic value and the commercial ambivalence of anticipatory localization. The study argues for CSI-sensitive decision-making across translation, visual design, product development, and brand strategy.

Keywords

culture-specific items; advertising translation; connotative equivalence; multimodal translation; localization; beauty advertising

1. Introduction

Advertising, as an engine of commerce, plays a critical role in the success of global brands in an increasingly commercialized society. In international marketing, advertising is not only a medium for conveying product information but also a symbolic system through which brands communicate identity, desirability, and cultural value. The translation of advertising has therefore evolved from a purely linguistic exercise into a form of cultural negotiation. As Munday (2004) observes, advertising challenges translation theory because it connects verbal meaning with images, market positioning, and the expectations of specific audiences.

Within Translation Studies, the concept of culture-specific items (CSIs), defined by Aixela (1996) as textual elements whose function and connotation are restricted to a particular culture, has long served as an important analytical lens. Although early scholarship mainly examined CSIs in literary and religious translation, contemporary marketing discourse also depends heavily on

culturally embedded signs, which is especially clear in the beauty industry. Beauty advertising attaches commercial value to culturally constructed ideas of skin, hair, youth, gender, purity, modernity, nature, and self-confidence. A product claim that appears neutral in one market may become racially, historically, or politically charged in another.

Despite the growing body of work on advertising localization, a theoretical limitation remains in how CSI frameworks explain localization failures in contemporary beauty advertising. Existing approaches remain predominantly logocentric: they privilege words, slogans, and product names while giving less attention to the distribution of cultural meaning across visual and narrative systems. Such a focus is necessary but insufficient, because beauty advertisements produce meaning through terminology, visual representation, product architecture, and brand narrative. Localization failures may occur when a technical term such as “virgin hair” is literalized without attention to gendered connotation, when a visual sequence unintentionally reproduces racialized beauty hierarchies, or when a global brand tells a story of empowerment while its product range excludes some consumers.

To address this theoretical limitation, this paper proposes a three-layer CSI model that extends analysis from lexical units to multimodal and narrative structures in beauty advertising. The first layer is terminological CSIs, including product labels, shade names, claims, and slogans. The second is visual CSIs, including models, skin tones, color palettes, gestures, and image sequencing. The third is narrative CSIs, including the broader brand story, identity politics, product architecture, and the implied relationship between the consumer and the ideal of beauty.

The paper asks three questions:

1. How do CSI failures in beauty advertising manifest across terminological, visual, and narrative dimensions?
2. How do successful brands negotiate cultural differences across these layers?
3. What can a multi-layered CSI approach contribute to translation practice and international marketing management?

Methodologically, the paper uses comparative qualitative case analysis rather than statistical reception research. The cases were selected for their analytical contrast and their representativeness of different CSI layers: Schwarzkopf makes terminological risk especially visible, Dove demonstrates visual and intersemiotic failure, and Fenty Beauty foregrounds narrative-level integration. The comparative design makes it possible to identify how localization mechanisms differ across semiotic layers while also tracing their interaction. Accordingly, the

analysis reads slogans, product categories, images, sequences, and brand narratives as interconnected signs, treating translation as a socially situated practice rather than the replacement of isolated words.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

The notion of CSIs has been central to discussions of cultural transfer in Translation Studies. Aixela (1996) defines CSIs as items whose meanings are embedded in a source culture and therefore create a problem when transferred into a target culture. His typology, including conservation, substitution, and other strategies, was developed mainly with literary translation in mind. Later work on audiovisual translation expanded the scope of CSIs by examining extralinguistic cultural references, such as institutions, customs, and names that require contextual interpretation (Pedersen 2011). These studies show that translation problems arise not only from linguistic difference but also from unequal cultural knowledge.

Moreover, advertising translation intensifies this problem because its communicative goal is persuasive rather than merely informative. Skopos Theory argues that translation strategies should be determined by the purpose of the target text (Vermeer 1989). In advertising, this purpose is market-oriented: the translated advertisement must attract attention, create affective identification, and motivate consumption. Munday (2004) therefore treats advertising translation as a site where linguistic, cultural, and commercial constraints intersect. Also, Chinese scholarship has made similar observations. Jia (2004) emphasizes emotional transmission in external advertising translation, while Kong (2012) argues that successful commercial advertisement translation requires cultural adaptation in addition to linguistic equivalence.

Meanwhile, a second theoretical foundation comes from semiotics and brand studies. Barthes (1972) demonstrates that commodities carry mythic meanings beyond their practical functions. A beauty product is therefore never only a cream, lipstick, or foundation; it also signifies ideals such as purity, confidence, refinement, youth, or naturalness. Danesi (2006) similarly argues that brands operate as sign systems that organize consumer imagination. From this perspective, beauty advertisements are dense semiotic texts in which language, image, packaging, and celebrity endorsement work together.

A third foundation is critical scholarship on representation. Said's (1978) account of Orientalism shows how seemingly attractive representations may still reproduce asymmetrical relations between cultures. In beauty advertising, this insight is useful for analyzing images that exoticize non-Western traditions or reduce cultural difference to decorative motifs. Banet-Weiser (2012)

further shows that contemporary brands often sell authenticity and empowerment, but these narratives are ambivalent because they connect political recognition with consumption. The beauty industry, which increasingly uses the language of diversity and self-expression, is a particularly important field for this tension.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that culture-specific meaning in advertising is not confined to linguistic units but distributed across verbal, visual, material, and narrative systems. Aixelá and Pedersen clarify how cultural references create transfer problems; Skopos Theory and equivalence theory explain why target-market purpose and effect matter; and critical representation theory exposes the power relations within apparently inclusive images and stories. Existing studies rarely integrate these dimensions into one diagnostic framework. The three-layer model therefore synthesizes them as terminological CSIs, visual CSIs, and narrative CSIs for cross-modal analysis of beauty-advertising localization.

The three layers should not be understood as separate boxes. In actual campaigns, a word may guide the interpretation of an image, while an image may expose the ideological assumptions behind a slogan. Similarly, a brand narrative may make certain terminological choices appear credible or hypocritical. The value of the model is therefore diagnostic: it allows the analyst to ask where a localization problem begins, how it travels across semiotic modes, and which professional actors are responsible for preventing it.

3. Analysis: Three Layers of CSI Management in Beauty Advertising

3.1 Terminological CSIs: Schwarzkopf's "Virgin Hair"

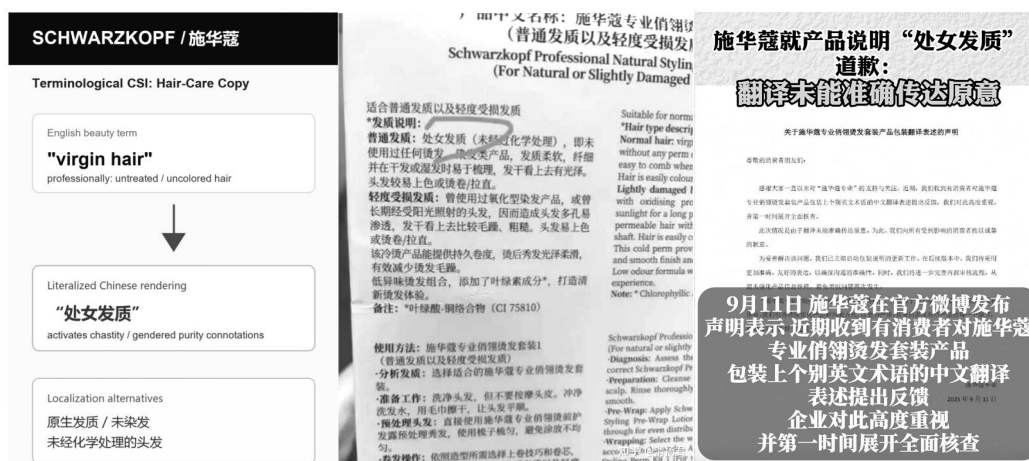


Figure 1. Schwarzkopf's "virgin hair" / "处女发质" case, illustrating how a professional hair-care term can shift into a culturally charged gendered sign in Chinese consumer discourse. Sources: analytical reconstruction (left) and a circulated Chinese product-instruction image (right), based on CIViW (2025).

The first case demonstrates how specialized beauty terminology can become a terminological CSI when it moves from professional English into consumer-facing Chinese. In hair-color discourse, “virgin hair” commonly refers to hair that has not been chemically colored, bleached, or otherwise processed. A Chinese-language discussion of Schwarzkopf advertising reports the rendering “处女发质” (CIViW 2025). The English term is technical but already metaphorical; the Chinese wording foregrounds virginity and sexual purity rather than the product-relevant idea of untreated hair.

From a CSI perspective, the problem is not a simple lexical error but a failure of register and connotative control. In a salon or product-development context, “virgin hair” may function as professional shorthand. In public Chinese advertising discourse, however, “处女” is strongly tied to gendered moral judgment and the policing of female sexuality. When attached to hair, the term makes the consumer’s body carry an unnecessary sexual metaphor. This case illustrates that terminological CSIs emerge not only from lexical mismatch but also from the uncontrolled transfer of a professional metaphor into culturally sensitive moral discourse.

In translation terms, a literal strategy preserves the source metaphor but fails to reproduce its intended communicative effect in the target market (Nida 1964; Vermeer 1989). A more appropriate localization strategy would use substitution or explicitation, such as “原生发质”, depending on the advertising context. This alternative retains the technical distinction between treated and untreated hair while removing the gendered association with chastity. Effective localization therefore requires not literal equivalence but connotative risk management at the lexical level.

The case also shows why beauty brands need terminology review before campaigns are released. Hair-care and skincare advertising often borrows professional vocabulary, but professional terms do not automatically travel well into mass-market copy. A glossary entry that is acceptable in internal training may sound awkward, comic, or offensive in public promotion. For beauty brands, words such as virgin, pure, fair, nude, normal, flawless, and natural require particular attention because they attach product claims to culturally sensitive ideas of the body. CSI-sensitive localization would therefore combine linguistic revision with market testing and cultural consultation.

3.2 Visual CSIs: Dove's Body-Wash Transformation Ad



Figure 2. Dove's body-wash transformation sequence, where visual order and skin-tone contrast became the main site of localization failure. Source: Hartman (2024), reproduced for analysis.

The second case concerns visual CSIs. In 2017, Dove faced backlash after a short body-wash advertisement on Facebook showed a Black woman removing her shirt and appearing to transform into a white woman (Quackenbush 2017). Dove explained that the full advertisement was intended to represent diversity and that the circulated clip removed context. Nevertheless, many viewers read the image sequence through a long history of soap and skincare advertising in which Blackness had been associated with dirt and whiteness with cleanliness. The controversy illustrates that visual meaning is not determined only by brand intention, but also is culturally activated through audience memory and sociohistorical association.

Dove's case differs from Schwarzkopf's because the main problem was not one word but a visual grammar. The advertisement relied on sequential transformation that one body gives way to another after the implied use of a cleansing product. In a putatively neutral reading, this could mean that Dove body wash is suitable for many women regardless of race. But in a racialized reading, the same sequence suggests purification from Black to white. The CSI is thus embedded not in an isolated visual element but in the temporal juxtaposition of bodies, skin tones, clothing, and product use. Meaning is produced by their order, which explains why a translator who checks only captions or subtitles would miss the central localization risk.

This mechanism can be understood as a failure of intersemiotic translation (Jakobson 1959) that the verbal brand value of diversity is re-encoded through images, bodies, and sequence, yet the

visual text produces an effect contrary to that value. The historical association arises when culturally situated viewers connect the transformation structure with racialized conventions in cleansing advertising. The case therefore extends CSI analysis beyond visible objects to relations among signs across time.

This case is especially significant because Dove had already built a narrative of “real beauty” and diversity. The backlash shows that inclusive brand narratives can be undermined when visual details reproduce the very hierarchy the brand claims to resist. It also suggests that localization review should include visual semiotic testing with culturally diverse viewers. For beauty advertising, the represented body is never a neutral object. Skin tone, hair texture, body size, age, and facial features are signs through which consumers evaluate whether the brand sees them, ignores them, or asks them to transform into an idealized other.

3.3 Narrative CSIs: Fenty Beauty and Inclusion as a Localization Strategy



Figure 3. Fenty Beauty's inclusive complexion campaign, showing how visual diversity supports a narrative of pre-translation localization. Source: Elite Daily (2017).

The third case shows a more successful management of CSIs. Fenty Beauty, launched by Rihanna in 2017, entered the market with a notably broad foundation range and campaigns featuring models across different skin tones and identities. The brand was widely discussed as a turning point in beauty inclusivity, and the term “Fenty Effect” came to describe the pressure placed on other brands to expand shade ranges. Unlike cases where localization occurs after an

advertisement has already been designed, Fenty integrated cultural difference into whole branding process, including product development, naming, visual representation, and brand story.

At the terminological layer, Fenty challenged the narrow cultural meaning of words such as “nude” and “universal”. By offering a wider shade range and presenting darker shades as central rather than exceptional, Fenty Beauty changed the semantic field of complexion marketing. At the visual layer, its campaigns used diverse models not as peripheral tokens but as evidence of the product’s purpose. The advertising image and the product architecture supported each other.

Most importantly, Fenty Beauty operates at the narrative layer. Its promise was not merely that consumers could buy makeup, but that previously neglected consumers were included in the definition of beauty from the beginning. This narrative was persuasive because it corresponded to a material product feature of shade availability. Diversity is both recognition and a marketable aesthetic, so successful CSI integration does not eliminate commodification but restructures it. In translation terms, Fenty Beauty turns localization into anticipatory design that target audiences are imagined before slogans, visuals, and shade names circulate. Its relative success therefore depends on cross-layer coherence between product architecture, visual casting, and narrative, rather than on inclusive language alone.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The comparison supports the analytical utility of the proposed three-layer CSI model. While Schwarzkopf shows how uncontrolled metaphor transfer creates terminological risk, and Dove shows how temporal visual juxtaposition activates sociohistorical memory, Fenty Beauty shows how product architecture can support an inclusive narrative. Localization outcomes are therefore shaped not by one layer in isolation but by the interaction of terminological precision, visual semiotics, and narrative coherence.

This analysis has two implications for translation practice. First, advertising translators should be understood as cultural consultants rather than final-stage language technicians. Their work should include the evaluation of slogans, product claims, color terms, shade names, visuals, and campaign narratives. Second, localization review should be collaborative. Translators, marketers, designers, and local cultural experts need to identify CSI risks before campaigns circulate globally. A checklist limited to grammar, tone, and legal compliance cannot account for the semiotic density of beauty advertising.

The study also has implications for international marketing management. Beauty brands often treat diversity as a communicative theme, but audiences judge it through material and visual

evidence. If a brand promises inclusion while offering stereotyped imagery, the narrative becomes fragile. Conversely, when inclusion is built into product design, visual casting, and language, localization becomes more credible, although it still operates within commercial logic. Rather than treating translation as a post-production linguistic task, brands should integrate CSI management into brand strategy, visual design, product development, and local review from the outset.

This paper nevertheless has important limitations. It relies on a small number of selected qualitative cases, which enables in-depth semiotic interpretation but limits the generalizability of the findings. Thus, future research could expand the dataset by collecting consumer-generated data, such as social media comments on global beauty campaigns, and applying sentiment analysis, a Natural Language Processing (NLP) approach to examine how different types of CSIs are actually interpreted by audiences. Despite these limitations, the three-layer CSI model provides a diagnostic framework for understanding how cultural meaning is distributed and transformed across linguistic, visual, and narrative systems, and for identifying strategic points of intervention in global localization practice.

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