

THE ROLE OF T-SHIRTS IN THE CREATION OF TOURIST DESTINATION IMAGES

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Abstract: *In the last few years T-shirts have come to play a very important role as tourist souvenirs for several reasons: they are easy to carry about and they have a practical application even after the tourism experience is over. This paper describes the designs of the images printed on T-shirts sold as a product of the “industry of memories”. Finally, their role in creating tourism images is analysed.*

KEY WORDS: *T-shirts, souvenirs, destination images, tourism.*

INTRODUCTION

During the last few decades, T-shirts have acquired great importance as a promotional element both in terms of products and services. Goss (1992:4) points out that this is due to two main factors: the extent of the application of the message; and the preference for forms of dress which are more informal, "not however implying that they are more economical or less elegant".

The use that is given to the T-shirt, both in the place of residence and when warm destinations are visited ensures that those wearing them are transformed into "walking graffiti". The printed message thus acquires a cultural and geographic diffusion that is extremely important, greatly superior to that of a brochure (Schlüter 1993). At the same time, Goss (1992:4) affirms that:

It is sufficient to visit the centre of whatever locality in question to become aware of this multifaceted promotional element that is omnipresent. If 100 brochures are sent by post, 200 people will probably see them. However, if 100 T-shirts with an agreeable design are sent, this is tantamount to 100 posters.

The T-shirts destined for tourist consumption provide the purchasers with a testimony of having visited a specific place or of having participated in a specific event, thus evoking happy moments spent during the holidays or bearing witness to solidarity for a specific cause.

It is estimated that every tourist buys at least one T-shirt for personal use or to give as a gift. Recently, T-shirt swapping has become fashionable, this consisting of the exchange of T-shirts between participants at international events.

In the design of T-shirts what has primacy is the commercial criterion of the designer/producer but this can be at odds with the criterion of tourism promotion of official organisms. For this reason these organisms, conscious of the cost of tourist brochures and their short life-in the end they generally end up in some drawer or the nearest wastepaper basket once the trip is over-are beginning to design and commercialise their own T-shirts so as to create and diffuse the desired image of the destination. The garments are sold at economical prices in information centres where further material requested by the tourist is provided in simple photocopied sheets of paper. The T-shirts also are freely distributed as promotional material in events in which organisms of tourism promotion participate.

Despite the importance of the T-shirts as an element of communication between the visitor and the visited and its socio-cultural implications, the theme has not received much attention by students of tourism. An exception is the case of Hamilton-Smith (1987) and Shenhav-Keller (1993) who undertake a tangential approximation of the theme. The analysis of photographs (Albers and James 1983, 1988; Brown 1992; Graburn 1992; Markwell 1997), of the postcards (Albers and James 1988; Cohen 1993) and the promotional brochures (Uzzel 1984; Urbain 1989, 1993; Cohen 1993) has awakened, in their turn, a greater interest.

This work sets out to be an approximation to the theme of T-shirts as creators of images of tourism destinations. As a method of study, the analysis of content and semiotics were applied. The techniques of recollection of data were: the observation of T-shirts in tourism shops; observation of people in areas of high tourist concentration; structured and unstructured interviews of employees of shops selling souvenirs and producers of T-shirts. Approximately 2,100 T-shirts were analysed.

T - SHIRTS AS TOURIST SOUVENIRS

Graburn (1992) affirms that souvenirs are the tangible proof of having undertaken a trip but that their real function is to remember experiences. Quoting Carpenter (p. 63) he adds the following:

The relation between symbol and object derives from the fact that the symbol-word or image (or artefact) - contributes to giving the "object" its identity, its clarity, and its definition. It contributes to transforming a concrete reality into a reality that is experienced and felt and is, moreover, an indispensable part of the total experience.

The need the tourist feels of taking with him elements that perpetuate the tourist experience has given rise to an important industry of "memories" or "souvenirs", dedicated to the fabrication of products which are bought by the tourist for his own use and also given as gifts to members of the social nucleus closest to him (Schlüter 1993).

The souvenir industry encompasses both handmade objects and those produced on a massive scale. It includes products that have a practical application outside the context in which they are produced; objects which only comply with a decorative function and products that in the society that the tourist belongs to fulfil a function different from that they fulfil in the society in which they were produced.

Garments as tourist souvenirs can be grouped according to four different categories:

- *Handcrafted textile goods with an ethnic content.* These are garments which can be categorized within functional handcrafted goods and which have suffered a process of transformation due to the tourist/intermediary/craft interaction. The garments of this kind most popular in Latin America are the *poncho* and the *ruana*.

- *Clothes with an ethnic content that are produced industrially.* To this category belong Western garments, made with natural and synthetic materials, for the print of which a design with ethnic motifs was used. Examples of this kind of garment are those made by Silvana Prints in Lima, Peru and by "La Escalera" in Mexico.

- *Garments with a designer label.* These are garments designed by the most prestigious fashion houses, the headquarters of which are to be found in the most important cities in the Western world.

T-shirts. These fall within the category of what Graburn (1984) called "souvenirs" or "trinkets". However, with the boom in "nature" tourism characterized by visits to sites whose ecosystems are extremely fragile and where it is expected that the tourist will leave his money in return for a pleasant experience, the role of the T-shirt has varied considerably. This is due to the fact that it comes to constitute a more refined element of the appropriation of the visited place and of the flora and fauna found there. For example, in the Valdes Peninsula, Argentina the tourists who undertake sightings of whales can take back with them some souvenir produced on a massive scale or opts for a T-shirt which displays the tail of a whale accompanied with an inscription with which the tourist identifies.

THE PROFILE OF THE CONSUMER

Graburn (1992) affirms that each kind of tourism has as its counterpart its own kind of souvenir. He adds that the environmentally- minded tourists inclines towards pictures or illustrations and postcards; the tourist with a preference for hunting and collection seeks out rocks and snails or archaeological pieces which include points of arrows are pieces of archaeological ruins and animal remains; and the ethnic tourist, not being able to take back

home with him the society he has visited, is content with articles that symbolize the culture that has been visited.

Hamilton Smith (1987), basing his findings on the classic typology of tourists oriented to search and to escapism, points out that the consumers of souvenirs can be classified according to two main categories:

1. *Tourists with a marked preference for authentic crafts*; especially for those that are not sold in shops specializing in the sale of articles for tourist consumption. This tourist oriented to search is satisfied with the tasks that he performs on a daily basis due to the fact that this enables him to develop his creativity and skills and, at the same time, he enjoys an elevated status within the social structure he belongs to. When he decides which T-shirt to buy, it is important to him that this has a message that is committed to reality.

The theme that currently preoccupies humanity in general is environmental. Because of this, each country, in language ranging from mocking to tender, distils its main preoccupation in its T-shirts. For example, the mortality of penguins caused by oil spillages was, at the time, the theme of greatest concern in Argentina. In Brazil the burning of the tropical forests was of major concern and here the allusive inscriptions were more important than the motif. Zimbabwe had recourse to humour to raise consciousness of the dangers facing the rhinoceros (Figure 1), printing on the back of the T-shirts "save our horned friend" in huge letters. In Zimbabwe, as well as in South Africa and the other countries in West Africa, a marketing strategy has been adopted, announcing that a percentage of the sale of T-shirts is destined to a protection fund for the conservation of wildlife.

Figure 1: Concern for rhinoceros



2. *Tourists oriented to escapism.* They generally have a profession that enjoys only a little social recognition and at the same time consider their daily routine asphyxiating. These kinds of tourists will tend to acquire as souvenirs articles of massive production that make clear that they were bought in the destination visited.

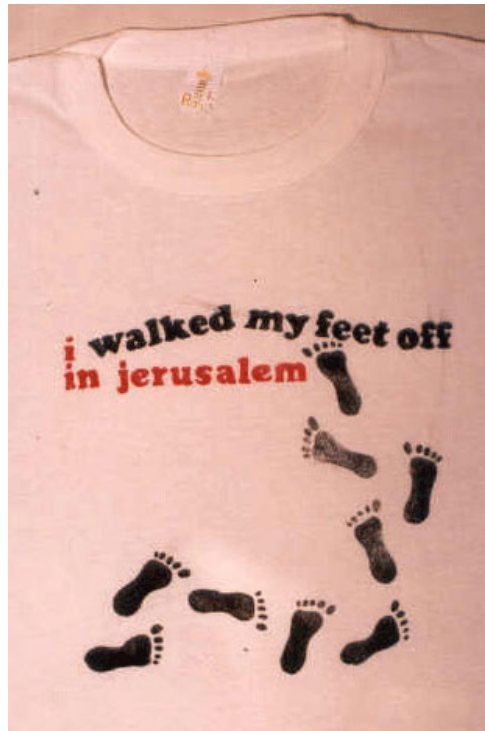
The design must incorporate elements of the place that has been visited and elements that constitute symbols that indicate "good life in the societies from which the tourists hail". The T-shirt most commonly sold in Kenya shows on the front the label of the universally known Tusker beer. To reinforce the image, on the back has been stamped the inscription "made to accompany good moments". At the same time, to satisfy tourists oriented towards escapism in Kenya, there have been launched onto the market T-shirts whose motifs reinforce "the good moments" such as, for example, anthropomorphic crocodiles sunbathing and the inscription "this is life" (Figure 2) or two elephants with their tails intertwined and the inscription "Kenya: in love at the end of the day". In Mexican T-shirts the iguana replaces the crocodile and symbolizes those who only go in search of the sun during their holidays.

Figure 2: T-shirt from Kenya



There have also been designed T-shirts which have the same inscription but are sold in very different places such as Jerusalem (Israel) and Madrid (Spain). The most common inscriptions are "My sister/friend/etc. went to ... and all I got was this lousy T-shirt"; and I "I walked my feet off in ..." (Figure 3). This last inscription is accompanied by pictures of bare feet.

Figure 3: T-shirt from Israel



THE DESIGN OF T SHIRTS

The T-shirts present a number of limitations to designers due to the fact that they are printed on fabrics and they thus cannot achieve the delicate details, which allow for their impression on paper (Goss 1992).

As is the case in a good impression on paper, the cost of the T-shirts depend on the quantity that is fabricated. For this reason, those who want to produce a limited number of T-shirts at a low price have recourse to a colour photocopier. The final product that is obtained is not only of low quality but it frequently gives a distorted image of the socio-cultural heritage of the people concerned. An example here is the structured design around motifs of the time of the Pharaohs in Egypt that is sold in South Africa with the inscription "African Rock Art". A T-shirt with the photocopy of the same design is sold with the inscription "Costa Rica" in this country that has a culture not remotely similar to that of the Egyptian.

However, the photocopier is not the only device responsible for the repetition of designs of the T-shirts. The bright colours of the parrot have been transformed into a symbol of sun and colour. The same design (colour included) can be obtained with the inscription "Mexico" and "the Canary Islands" in the shops of the respective destinations.

While in the beginning the motifs were printed on the front of the T-shirt, nowadays they appear both on the front and on the back. It is also frequent to find them on the sleeves.

Exceptionally only the name of a specific place such as, for example, Bahia, Santorini and Masai Mara is to be found. In this case the sign is transformed into a symbol of prestige which can only be shared with peers when the T-shirt is used in places both very distant and culturally different from the place acquired.

RECURRENT MOTIFS

While the motif that is printed on the T-shirts occasionally responds to a market study, in general the intuitive criterion of the producer or designer has primacy. According to how people perceive the image of a country or a region as a tourist destination—sun and beach, nature, cultural—this will be the motif that predominates in the design of the T-shirts.

The Argentines in general are convinced that their country is known by virtue of outstanding figures in sport and politics. It is sufficient to present an Argentine passport in a hotel in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, or mention in a cafe in a small German town that one is based in Argentina to ensure that the name Maradona is mentioned immediately. Recently the musical notes of "Don't cry for me Argentina" ensure that curious glances directed at any Argentine national finding himself abroad. Given that the face of Madonna is more attractive than that of a footballer, the official organism of tourism used the balcony scene from the "Evita" film in its promotional brochures. This provoked serious criticisms in the country as a consequence of the controversy sparked by the film. The question was deftly solved by the producers of T-shirts who made important sales by pressing into service a design based on postage stamps of the time. The sign "Evita" came to symbolize Argentina.

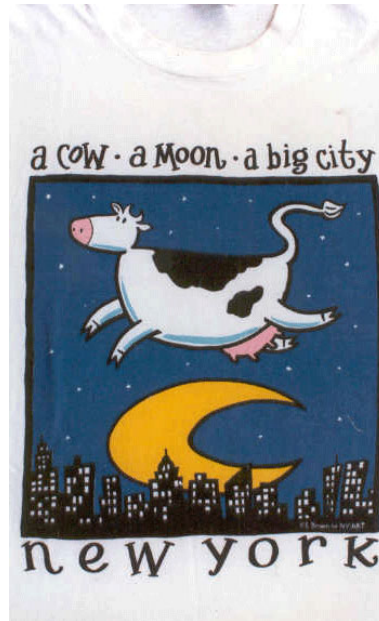
The inscription "a different world around the corner" which is to be observed with great frequency in the T-shirts that are sold in the east of Canada try to make clear the cultural differences that exist between the French heritage of that region—principally in the province of Quebec—and the Anglo-Saxons in the north of the USA. At the same time, Australian T-shirts repeat the inscription "the world down under".

Countries with a striking geography, such as Chile and Greece, are usually represented only with a map. However, the map is also used to show the sites of the main tourist attractions in natural, cultural and recreational terms. This can be mostly observed in the T-shirts that are sold on islands that are important tourism destinations such as Cyprus, Borneo or Easter Island. Portugal, for example, uses motifs in which the caravel is the central figure, this being an effective way of associating the present with the glorious past of King Henry the navigator.

The most important cities in the world also try to disseminate their image through T-shirts. New York, in the USA, has come to be known as "the big apple" and this inscription in black accompanied by a bitten red apple is the motif that is to be most frequently observed. At the

same time, the city attracts people from all over the world and they inevitably get lost in the most central parts of the city. This situation is reflected in T-shirts where geese symbolize the tourists and Central Park the city itself. For many people New York has a special magic and is a city associated with many fantasies. The flying cow symbolizes the exotic element that so easily blends in with the natural in this city (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Fantasies of a great city



São Paulo, Brazil, mainly uses signs that unite the three main components it can offer; art; culture and leisure. Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, is synonymous with the tango and the places that are mentioned in the tango have come to be the motifs that most frequently appear on the T-shirts.

The tourism destinations that basically offer sun and beach mostly have recourse to indicators of "the good life". This is also the case that the main attraction is referred to, as happens for instance in a T-shirt often sold in Mexico which has the inscription "Destination SUN - Ixtapa Zihuatanejo". In some cases, with the objective of differentiating itself from the nearest competitors, the resort in question has recourse to motifs from a more aristocratic past such as can be observed in T-shirts from Benidorm in Spain.

The destinations aimed at nature tourism emphasize the elements that attract tourist currents. The motif is simple and what is most outstanding here is the message accompanying it. If there are cultural attractions in the place, these appear on a lesser scale given that they are considered secondary. This is the case, for example, with cave art in Costa Rica's national parks or the Welsh heritage in the Valdes Peninsula in Argentina.

Those destinations whose attraction is principally cultural represent this heritage in the most diverse ways. The motif is the most outstanding and, in general, is not accompanied with an inscription, being limited to the name of the place where they are sold. The motif that most commonly appears is that which, according to the perception of the people, symbolizes the society to which they belong. Among those symbols that most commonly appear the following can be mentioned:

Writing. This is mainly the case in Israel (Hebrew) and Egypt (hieroglyphics) [Figure 5].

Figure 5: T-shirt from Egypt



Architecture. As examples the architecture of the Spanish period in Mexico and the typical architecture of the city of Valparaiso, Chile (Figure 6), can be mentioned here.

Figure 6: Architecture from Valparaiso on a T-shirt from Chile



Traditional artistic manifestations. In Thailand there is a line of T-shirts with various motifs that have the inscription "Thailand arts and crafts". Something similar occurs in Malaysia where a series of artistically elaborated motifs is accompanied by the inscription, "Malaysian art". Australia and the states of the USA, such as Arizona that has important aboriginal settlements, symbolize their culture by having recourse to mythological figures of the so-called "native" societies. Other artistic manifestations witnessed in the T-shirts are examples of cave art and pre-Columbian art.

The latter appears with considerable frequency in T-shirts from Peru and Mexico. Malaysia has recourse to the "batik" to represent its culture and Panama to the "molas" whose designs also appear in the yokes of dresses. The "molas" are the blouses of women belonging to the Kuna culture of the Islands of San Blas. The technique of production of the "molas" consists, basically, of the superimposition of pieces of fabrics of different colours. Magrassi (1976:87) gives a more detailed description when he points out the following:

On a fabric considered as a base is placed another on which has been practiced cuts in the form of animals, birds, plants and multiple combinations, elements of the mythic world or fabulous personages and human figures. The borders of the drawing are held in place by sewing, with stitches, on the base fabric in such a way that the colour emerges as a drawing in negative, showing its design in contrast to the other.

Events also have an important place in T-shirts. In some cases, such as congresses, sporting competitions etc., they serve as testimony of having participated. In the case of "megaevents", such as The Olympic Games or Expo Seville '92, the logotype designed is converted into the symbol of the host city.

Official tourism organisations, the organisms of culture, the associations protecting nature, etc., have started to design their own T-shirts so as to create the image of a new tourism destination, to modify the image of a destination already consolidated or promote the protection of a species that is in danger of extinction.

Lujan is the most important religious centre in the whole of Argentina. Despite being very near Buenos Aires, the capital of the country and the most important destination in terms of international tourism, Lujan receives a considerable number of pilgrims but very few foreign tourists. Aware of the valuable historical and cultural heritage of the city, the Directorate of Municipal Culture has commissioned an outstanding artist to design something exclusive for the production of T-shirts. It is hoped that this will facilitate a change of image for Lujan, thus ensuring a greater tourist interest.

The Basque Country in Spain, associated with terrorist acts committed by a separatist group, uses T-shirts to emphasize its positive aspects with the objective of modifying its image and attracting tourists.

The Peruvian government, through its Official Tourism Organism, has made a great effort to attract adventure tourism through the projection of videos of suitable sites for its practice. These efforts have been supported by the private sector that has designed allusive motifs that are printed on T-shirts made from the finest-quality cotton.

For their part, the associations of nature protection have centred their efforts on messages that raise awareness of the species that each country in question considers vulnerable. For example, the African Wildlife Society appeals to messages such as "only elephants should wear ivory" which appear in a striking form while the logotype of the association is itself hardly perceptible. It is necessary to point out here that if in Africa these associations are dedicated to protecting all species of the autochthonous fauna, each country gives importance to a species in particular. For example, in T-shirts from Kenya mostly appear the elephant and in Zimbabwe the rhinoceros.

While it is the case, that its associates originally designed the T-shirts of the Argentine Wildlife Foundation, nowadays they can be acquired in theme park gift-shops where the Institution gives technical assistance. The motifs or inscriptions ("Let us look after our roots" or "You are not the only Argentine with problems", etc.) make reference to the Argentine flora and fauna in danger of extinction.

THE T-SHIRTS AS INDIRECT SOUVENIR

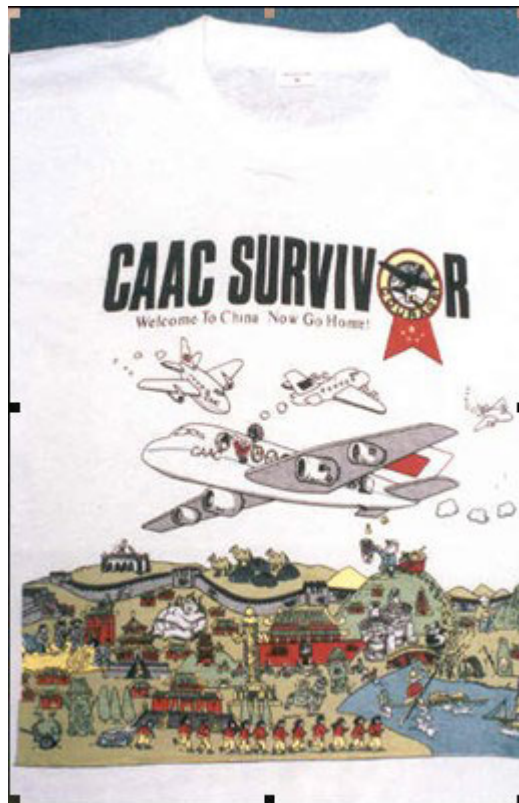
The popularity acquired by T-shirts as a means of expression has led to their being produced for internal consumption, especially by the young. They are principally sold in the periphery of tourism circuits but it is also possible to find them in souvenir shops. The T-shirts reflect the sentiments and values of a more or less numerous social group. In general, the message is constituted by affirmations about a contemporary problem-sovereignty, peace, national identity, etc. and is not necessarily interpreted in the same way by tourists who belong to a different social context.

Here can be mentioned as an example T-shirts with the inscription "The Malvinas (Falklands) are Argentine". For the Argentines this implies the affirmation of sovereignty of these islands but most tourists who acquire these (mostly those from the USA) use them to tease British nationals, whether in the workplace or within a social context.

Something similar happens with the inscription "I am not a tourist, I live here" which can be observed in T-shirts produced in both Argentina and Egypt. In Argentina (Sainz 1993) this responds to the rise of a nationalism that, as opposed to other countries, is only reflected in garments. However, in both cases they are consumed by the "anti-tourists" -in the sense that Urbain (1993) gives to the term-.

The T-shirts that are sold in New York (USA) with the logotype of Pan American and the inscription "gone but not forgotten" were produced with the objective of raising funds for the creation of an association of friends for the recently expired airline, counting among its most important clients the employees of other airlines and those passengers dissatisfied with the service offered by airlines covering the former routes of Pan American Airlines. At the same time, the T-shirts reflect the dissatisfaction with flight conditions with respect to some airlines such as is the case with a Chinese company (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Not all airlines are safe ...



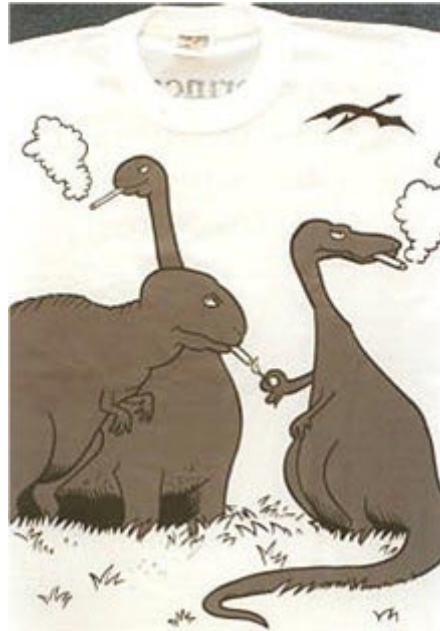
On other occasions the T-shirts designed for the consumption of the local population has some other element which makes them attractive for tourists, whether on account of design characteristics or because they can identify with the message.

At the beginning of the 1990's in Phoenix, Arizona the heat was so intense that for many days the airplanes could not take off. The American public was completely amazed that this did not result in fatalities among the local population, leading to their coining of the phrase "but...it

was dry heat", this being printed on a commemorative T-shirt which was to become one most commonly sold in tourist shops.

The habit of smoking is constantly questioned but never abandoned. The motif with smoking dinosaurs on the front and the inscription "the main reason for the extinction of dinosaurs" on the back is worn by nonsmokers as an element which promotes their convictions and which can be taken back as a souvenir of Brazil to friends and family (Figure 8).

Figura 8: "The main reason for the extinction of dinosaurs"



CONCLUSIONS

The challenge of this study arises precisely from the lack of a bibliography concerning the theme. Taking into account the number of T-shirts analysed, it is possible to arrive at some general conclusions.

In the first place, it can be affirmed that the T-shirts are tangible souvenirs that prolong the tourist experience and, at the same time, allow for the symbolic appropriation of the place visited, evidencing the economic capacity of achieving a collective desire that is not possible for all.

Secondly, it is possible to observe that the T-shirts reinforce both the stereotyped image of the country as a tourism product (sun and beach, cultural tourism, ecotourism) as well as a cultural stereotype.

Thirdly, the design of the T-shirts replaces the brochure for the creation of images of different tourism destinations and, at the same time, has a power of penetration that is a lot more important on account of its duration and visibility.

Fourthly, the T-shirts of tourism consumption reflect the existence of a fashion which today affects humanity in general (with reference to the physical environment). In the T-shirts there is constant reference-in all the countries studied-to the need to save the planet but almost inexistent is an appeal to a harmonious co-existence between different populations and solidarity with one's neighbours.

Finally, it should be pointed out that T-shirts are produced for the consumption of the nationals of a country, that they reflect the feelings of a specific social group in their messages, serving as an element of communication between the members of different cultures despite the different interpretations that can be given to their original message.

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Received 20 November 1996

Accepted 07 January 1997

Refereed anonymously