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## Visual Communication of Festive Shop Window Displays with Customers

### Abstract

The object of the authors' research was the festive Christmas window displays of brick-and-mortar retail stores. The main objective of the research was to identify the dominant colours, symbols and signage of Christmas festive displays of retail brick-and-mortar stores across different product categories and countries around the world. A total of 229 retail Christmas window displays, from 14 countries around the world, across 11 assortment categories, ready for the Christmas season in 2020, 2021 and 2022, were examined. The theme of Christmas resonates in retail store windows from the beginning of November until 24 December. After this date, the issue of sales dominates the window displays. The main method of the research was the content analysis used to analyse the documents in order to determine the frequency of occurrence of the pre-given categories. Given that our interpretation of Christmas is based on its Christian foundation, it is not surprising that the main universal colours and symbols of interpretation identified are

rooted in Christianity, while other, complementary ones (e.g. Santa Claus with a reindeer sleigh, a snowy landscape, or a gingerbread house) and the signage are the result of changes in popular culture over time.

### Key words

Customer. Retail. Visual Communication. Window Display.

### Introduction

Marketers use a specific communication medium – window display – to communicate with customers. The first shop displays, as we know them today, were installed in shops in the late 18th century, when plate glass first became widely available, allowing merchants to build large shop windows along the length of their stores and display their wares in them (Oh & Petrie, 2012). Part of the merchants' decisionmaking about shop windows involves deciding on the appropriate number, size, shape, colour scheme, main idea, the right merchandise to display and the placement of the selected merchandise in the window display (Kalantari et al., 2022). The communication between the retailer and the consumers in the window display is provided by the merchandise on display, merchandising equipment, window decorations, lighting, signage and the colour scheme.

### 1 Methodology of Work and Methods of Research

The object of the research was the Christmas holiday window displays of brick-and-mortar retail stores in 14 countries from around the world in 11 assortment categories. The main objective of the research was to identify the main colours, symbols and lettering of Christmas festive displays of retail stores across different product categories and countries of the world. The main objective was achieved through the following sub-objectives:

- 1) to examine the current state of the art of window displays in the domestic and international literature,
- 2) to characterize the methodology of the work and the methods of investigation,
- 3) to carry out a quantitative content analysis of documents for the period 2020 – 2022, focusing on Christmas store window displays,
- 4) evaluate and interpret the results of the quantitative content analysis,
- 5) verify the formulated assumptions,
- 6) draw conclusions.

In the processing of the current state of the solved problem, we rely on domestic and foreign literature. As secondary sources of information we used monographs, articles from scientific and relevant professional journals. Primary data are drawn from the results of our own research. During data processing we worked with appropriate scientific methods (search, description, deduction, comparison, analysis), however, the main method of research was content analysis. Content analysis is used to analyse documents and texts in order to determine the frequency of occurrence of pre-given categories or the relationships between categories in a document (Hendl, 2005). Content analysis can be conducted in quantitative and non-quantitative ways. Non-quantitative analysis is not expressed in numerical indicators. On the contrary, the results of quantitative content analysis are expressed in terms of numerical variables that express the frequency, order, or degree of the elements under study (Gavora, 2000). The

following procedure is used when conducting content analysis of documents:

- 1) Definition of the study population. A total of 229 holiday window displays of brick-and-mortar retail stores from 14 countries (United States, Argentina, Brazil, United Kingdom, France, Spain, Netherlands, Germany, Czech Republic, Russian Federation, China, Japan, Australia, South Africa) were studied, in 11 product categories (food – coffee, coffee products, tea, confectionery), perfumes and cosmetics, clothing, footwear and leather goods (shoes, handbags, suitcases, belts), jewellery and watches, sporting goods, toys, optics, books, homeware and mixed goods) ready for the Christmas seasons in 2020, 2021 and 2022. We drew on reports from Shop!, a global trade association focused on improving the retail environment. These reports, Christmas Across The Globe, compiled with the help of members from each of the countries involved, map retailers' POP and POS media (physical promotional media placed in the sales area with the intention of promoting sales and which customers do not take away with the goods purchased) and window displays (a specially designed area of the store in which the merchandise is displayed) through hundreds of photographs of the points of sale. Members of the Shop! association in each country selected POP/ POS media and window displays from the most important shopping centres with major brands for the reports. As the reports for a respective year are

not published until the following calendar year, holiday window displays for the 2023 Christmas season are not included in the research.

2) Definition of the meaning unit.

The chosen unit of meaning was the festive Christmas window displays of brick-and-mortar stores, full-colour A6 photographs of which were published in the newsletter of the global trade association Shop!, titled Christmas Across the Globe. We excluded photographs of the festive shop windows of luxury department stores from the research, in whose narratives the main colours and symbols associated with Christmas could not be clearly identified, as well as brick-and-mortar stores of luxury brands such as Fendi, Chanel and Dior, which reacted to the arrival of the Christmas season by decorating the store facades or the space in front of the stores rather than directly in the windows.

3) Determination of analytical categories. Drawing on both theoretical and our own knowledge, we focused our examination of retailers' Christmas displays on colour design, Christmas symbols, and holiday signage.

- We investigated the colour schemes in accordance with the colour circle theory: yellow, yellow-orange, orange, red-orange, red, red-violet, violet, blue-violet, blue, blue-green, yellow-green, green (Čábyová et al., 2020). In the course of the investigation, we found that due to the frequency of occurrence, it is appropriate to include white, silver and brown among the colours studied.

- We investigated Christmas

symbols in accordance with our own empirical knowledge and in contrast with the knowledge of other authors, e.g. (Santos et al., 2021): Christmas tree, star, reindeer, Santa, Advent wreath, Christmas garland, bear, Christmas presents, snowflakes, Christmas decorations, gingerbread. In the course of the research, we found that because of the frequency of occurrence it is appropriate to include winter landscapes, winter cities and tin soldiers in the symbols studied.

- The holiday signage we examined was consistent with the previous pilot research: traditional holiday wishes, puns with the brand, appeals and sales.

4) Quantification of analytical categories. We focused on finding the frequency of occurrence and absolute abundance of those categories that were sufficiently represented. However, as a matter of interest, we also describe some categories of low frequency that reflected the culture of the country under study.

5) Interpretation of the observed frequencies. We interpret the results of the quantitative content analysis both verbally and visually in the results section of the paper.

In accordance with the formulated objectives, identified methods of research and work procedure, we formulated the following assumptions:

A1 We assume that the main colours of the festive Christmas displays reflect the Colour of The Year announced by the Pantone Colour Institute for the respective year.

A2 We assume that the main symbols of the Christmas festive window displays of brick-and-mortar retail stores will vary from continent to continent.

A3 We assume that the lettering on the glass surfaces of the Christmas festive windows of retail bricks and mortar stores will be traditional festive wishes.

## 2 Results

Christmas, along with Easter, has been shaped by the cultures of countries around the world, and therefore has its own ethnic, religious, regional or local specificities. Along with Easter, it is the oldest and most beloved season of the population. They are primarily attributed to Christianity, which commemorates and celebrates the events associated with the birth of Jesus Christ, but their symbols also contain pre-Christian elements, referring to the rites and festivities of the winter solstice, as well as extra-religious and profane elements. It is the intermingling of the material and immaterial elements of Christmas, its sharing, passing on from generation to generation, that allows each person to choose what he or she identifies with (Popelková et al., 2014).

Of the 195 officially recognized countries in the world, Christmas is celebrated by the inhabitants of 161 countries (Leontievová, 2020). For believers, the Christmas season is formally tied to so-called Advent (the four-week period before Christmas), which usually begins on the last

Sunday in November and ends on January 6. However, the population accepts the Christmas season set by the activities of marketers and the media, beginning in November and ending on 24 December. After this date, sales dominate the display windows, and media content with Christmas themes is replaced by a recapitulation of the major events of the ending calendar year.

Based on the results of the content analysis, we have identified the main colours, symbols and signage of the festive Christmas shop windows, which are universal across the countries and the period under study:

1) Main universal colours in 2020, 2021 and 2022 were white, red, gold and green (see Figure 1).

2) Main universal symbols in 2020, 2021 and 2022 were the Christmas tree, Christmas decorations, Christmas presents and stars (see Figure 2).

3) Main universal signage in 2020, 2021 and 2022 were traditional holiday wishes in the respective language version (see Figure 3).

Given that our interpretation of Christmas is based on its Christian foundation, it is not surprising that the main universal colours and symbols are rooted in Christianity, while other, complementary ones (e.g. Santa Claus with a sleigh of reindeers, snowy landscapes, or gingerbread houses) and signage are the result of changes in pop culture over time.



**Figure 1: Main colours of festive window display.**

Source: own processing, 2024

White symbolizes the beginning, purity, peace, snowflakes and winter landscapes. Kafka and Kotyza (2014) describe white as an extreme colour as they are symbols of both birth (in Western culture) and death (in Eastern culture). In the context of the Christmas season, apart from its religious significance (the purity of the birth of Jesus Christ), the colour white is naturally associated with snow that covers the landscape during the winter months. Although snow does not cover all countries celebrating Christmas, depending on the climate zone, it is present in the festive decorations of shop windows (snowflakes, snowmen, snowy landscapes or city streets). In the shop windows studied, in 2021 and 2022, we observed a low frequency of the motif of snowy landscapes or cities, especially

for German merchants, and of snowflakes for Chinese and Spanish merchants.

Leaving aside the symbolic meaning of the colour red associated with religion (sin, the blood of Christ's crucifixion), we interpret the colour red in both positive (love, passion) and negative (anger, aggression) senses (Caldwell, 2020). The popularity of the colour red in the Christmas season has been linked in commercial settings to the Coca-Cola advertising campaign of the 1930s. At that time, Coca-Cola was already an established brand on the American market, but its beverage was perceived by customers only as a summer refreshment, which meant that they did not buy it in winter. However, the company's management was interested in year-round sales, so they decided to associate the drink with the Christmas theme. The result was an advert showing a fat, smiling

grandfather in a red suit, his cheeks chapped by frost, relaxing after a hard day's work of delivering presents, a glass of Coca-Cola in his hand. This visual motif was so successful that, with minor changes, it is still a significant feature of the brand's visual style today (Kuna & Pavlík Káčerová, 2023).

The colour red was mainly associated with the visual design of Christmas presents and Christmas decorations in the shop windows studied. The gifts and presents remind us of the gifts brought by the wise men to the baby Jesus. The appearance (cube or block) and colouring of the gifts were uniform across all the shop windows examined. In all the windows studied, the gifts were wrapped with red material and tied with a gold ribbon. Their position was on the floor of the shop window, in the immediate vicinity of the Christmas tree, or they served to frame the bottom edge of the shop window. In some shop windows they were not only placed side by side around the tree, but also on top of each other, in small pyramids. Only their outer sides were always visible, not their inner contents. We noted a small amount of red in the form of clothing for Santa Claus, whether climbing up the chimney, sitting in a chair, or flying on a reindeer sleigh. Interestingly, it is mainly merchants in Brazil, Australia, Japan and South Africa who have opted for the figure of Santa Claus as a symbol of Christmas. The most frequent appearance of this figure in festive shop windows was recorded in 2021.



**Figure 2: Main symbols of festive window display.**

Source: own processing, 2024

The golden colour symbolizes the star of Bethlehem, the gifts of the Magi, prosperity, abundance and celebration. In the windows studied, it was mainly associated with decorations in the form of stars and Christmas ornaments. The stars symbolise the Star of Bethlehem, which brought the Magi and their gifts to the baby Jesus. At the same time, the meaning is explained as hope for humanity in dark times (Santos et al., 2021). Last but not least, the golden colour promotes the extraordinariness of the season and festive moments in the family circle, workplace or in churches.

We examined the stars as separate bodies, not as decorations on Christmas trees. In holiday windows, they were two- and three-

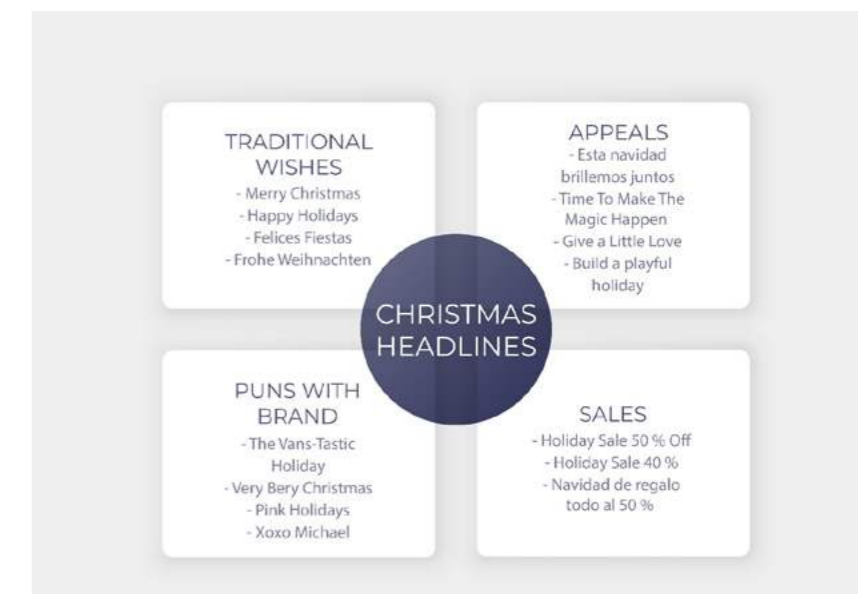
dimensional, depending on the material used and the way they were installed in the window. In shop windows they were mostly installed as three-dimensional bodies hanging from the ceiling of the shop window. In the case of special stickers applied to the glass surface of the shop window, they were of course two-dimensional in shape and were made in white or silver. In the case of shop windows, the colour of the stickers is limited in particular by their lighting and the lighting of the premises in which the stores are situated. This has an impact on the correct identification and interpretation of images or signage on shop windows (Nagyová & Klementis, 2023). Stars, as a symbol of Christmas, were found in sufficient quantities, especially in Spanish, Argentinian, Dutch and German holiday shop windows.

In addition to the stars, Christmas decorations (Christmas baubles) were also made in gold, and other shapes, the so-called Christmas olives and rockets, were found in small quantities. Christmas decorations symbolize people's wishes, their sacrifice or are just an aesthetic decoration (Deering & Lemire, 2022). However, the Christmas tree decorations or the Advent wreath were not involved in the research. These decorations or baubles were installed in the shop windows as bodies hanging from the ceiling of the shop window, as bodies embedded in the floor of the shop window, as floor decoration near the Christmas tree along with the presents, or as decoration fixed along with the goods on the presentation pyramids. If they were not only gold, blue, pink and red completed the colour balance or, on the contrary, the appropriate contrast. A small number of gold-coloured figures of bears were also placed in the shop windows (a bear in gold gilt in the confectionery window, a golden bear with golden Christmas bauble in the shop window of a department store).

We associate the colour green with evergreen decorating during Christmas time. Originally, holly branches and ivy cuttings were used for decorations, but in the 16th century these were replaced by conifer branches and later by whole trees. The symbolic meaning of the colour green associated with religion (Christ's eternal life) aptly complements the profane meaning, linking the colour green with peace,

protection, hope and happiness (Deering & Lemire, 2022). In the store, it serves not only as a colour for decorations (Advent wreaths, Christmas trees and garlands), but also as a colour involved in creating a pleasant atmosphere that helps customers to make a decision without pressure (Jesenský et al., 2018).

dimensional LED trees and trees in the form of a special sticker applied to the glass part of the shop window, but these were white. In four shop windows examined, instead of a Christmas tree, the central symbol was an Advent wreath, one of which was designed to serve not only as a decoration but also as a shelving system for displaying goods.



**Figure 3: Main universal signage of festive window displays.**

Source: own processing, 2024

The shop windows examined contained trees in a variety of material and shapes, with the exception of cut or real ones in pots, which is understandable regarding the installation and maintenance throughout the Christmas period. Three-dimensional green floor trees, whether artificial or natural-looking fir trees, were the most numerous in the windows, followed by pyramids made from gift boxes, assembled into a form resembling a tree, and trees cut or assembled from cardboard parts. In a few shop windows were illuminated two-

As for the signage, we examined those that were applied in the form of a special sticker on the glass surface of the shop window. The most numerous occurrences of signage were recorded in 2021. In terms of content, we divided all the signs we examined into four categories: traditional wishes, branded puns, appeals and sales. As noted above, the topic of sales typically dominates merchants'

shop windows on December 25 and later on, so it is surprising that it appeared in sufficient numbers in the Christmas displays we examined. The research years (2020 to 2022) were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken, and the negative impacts of military conflicts and economic sanctions on the purchasing power of the population.

Thus, it is possible to conclude that the retailers concerned (clothing and footwear assortment) apparently responded to rising inflation and decreasing purchasing power by announcing sales, with the intention of maximising sales at the most important season of the year. Several retailers have used puns as part of their Christmas campaigns for the respective year(s), e.g. Vans, the clothing and footwear brand (The Vans-Tastic Holiday) did so in 2021, and luxury department store brand Takashimaya (A Very Berry Christmas – the campaign's main character Bailey the bear was berry picking) in 2021 and 2022. We also noticed a sufficient amount of signage based on established customs (traditional signage) and appeals. We consider traditional holiday and universal signage to be wishes of a profane nature, e.g. Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, Felices Fiestas, Frohe Weihnachten, occurring in the common communication of the population and passed on from generation to generation. They were very actively and numerous used by retailers in Argentina and Germany. While in Argentina the signage was exclusively in Spanish, in Germany it was both in German and English. The appeals are

broadly divided into emotional and informational. In those examined, we noticed signage of emotional nature, encouraging sense of belonging (Time To Make The Magic Happen, Give a Little Love) or actively celebrating holidays (Build a playful holiday).

### Conclusion

We examined a total of 229 holiday shop window displays of brick-and-mortar retail stores, from 14 countries, in 11 product categories, prepared for the Christmas season in 2020, 2021 and 2022. The main method of the research was the content analysis. We focused on the colour scheme, Christmas symbols and festive signage. We formulated three assumptions. The first assumption was not confirmed. Taking into account the intense media coverage of the so-called Colour of the Year, we assumed that this colour scheme would also be reflected in the colour scheme of the shop window displays. However, the results showed that the main universal colours were white, red, gold and green, while the Colours of the Year were classic blue, grey and yellow and blue, with purple-red undertones (Pantone@ USA, n.d.). Marketers across all countries surveyed the colours used based on historical foundations. The second assumption was not confirmed. The results showed that the main universal symbols of Christmas shop window displays are the Christmas tree, Christmas decorations, Christmas presents and stars. As with the colour scheme, merchants in different countries around the world used culturally shared symbols in their shop windows; they did not limit themselves to the features

of their domestic culture. The third assumption was confirmed. In terms of the content, we divided the signage we studied into four categories, with the most numerous representation in the category of traditional holiday wishes, whether in the language of the respective country or in the currently universal English language.

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In her scientific work Eva Habiňáková focuses on the didactics of foreign language teaching, the integration of cultural content into foreign language teaching and the field of mass media. The scope of cultural content itself includes both lingual and extra lingual features of a society and its life. As a result, she focuses on the scope and forms of cultural content integration (in teaching English) and its overall comprehension by recipients (mostly students). She is also the author of several papers published in domestic and foreign scientific collection of papers.

Andrea Tománková works as a researcher at the FMK UCM in Trnava. Her publications focus on various aspects of marketing communication. She is the author of several domestic and foreign outputs, especially from scientific conferences and journals.

In his scientific activity, Andrii Kushnarevych primarily focuses on loyalty programs, consumer behaviour, artificial intelligence, trends in marketing communication and digital marketing. He is the author of scientific publications on the topics of AR and VR in the context of consumer behaviour, AI personalization in marketing, potential usage of GPT in education, types of loyalty programs and in-game advertisement.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34135/ejmap-24-01-06>