Intelligence Applied

The language of emotion

Content themes:

- Brain game
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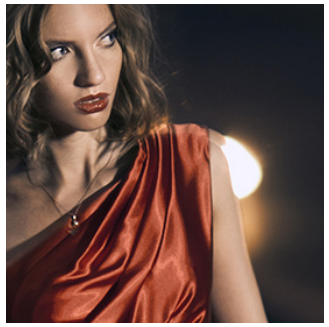
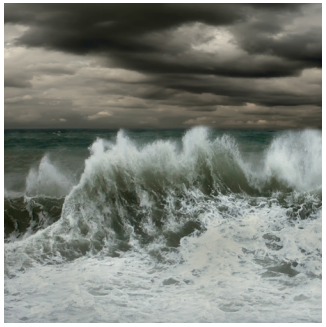
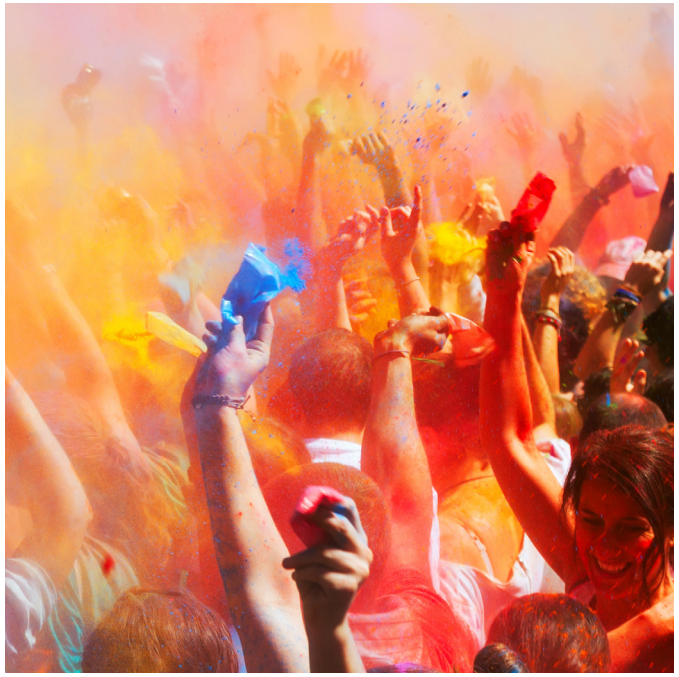


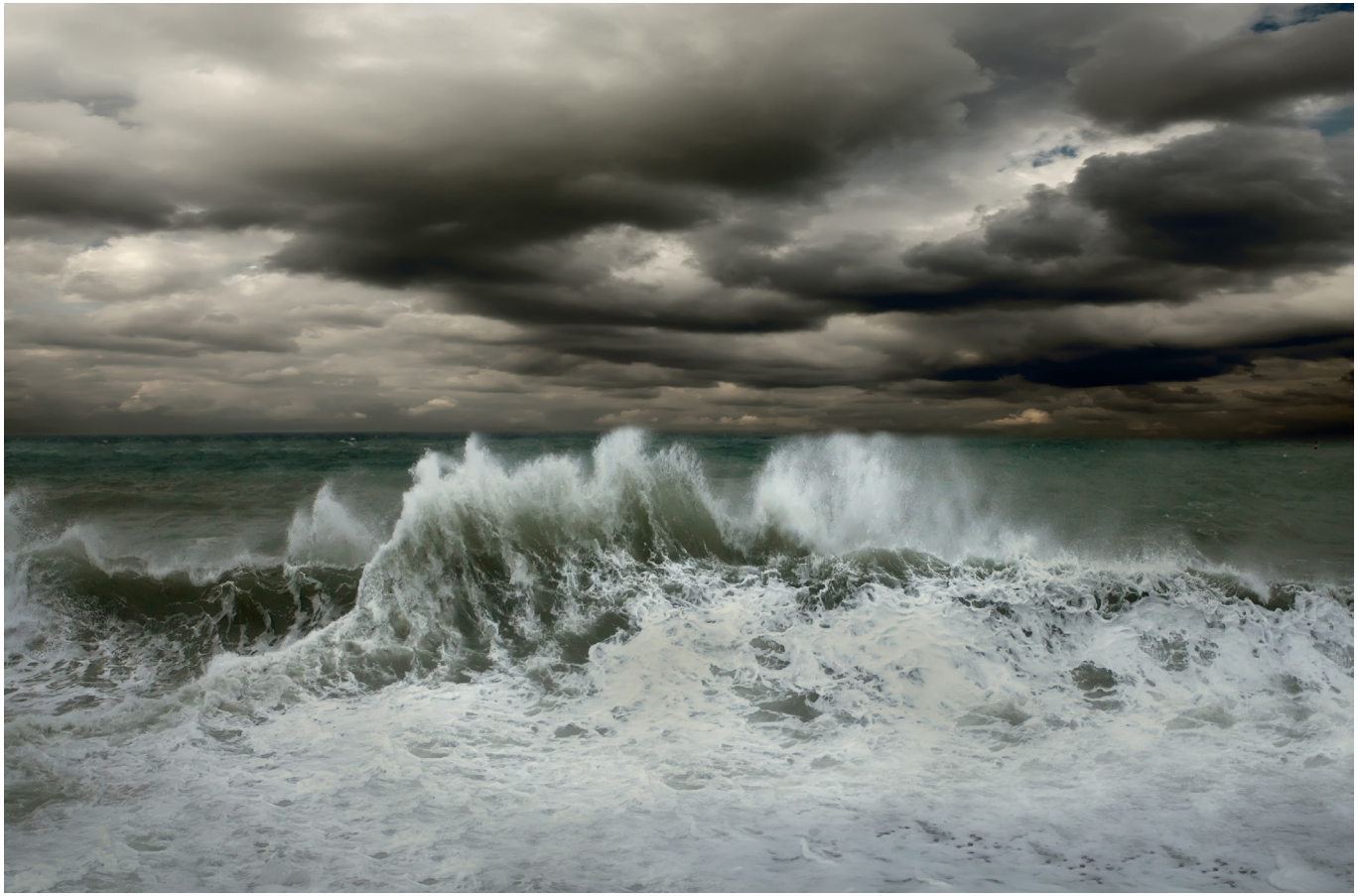




From Disney princesses to Dove and dirty whites to silky chocolate, the power of metaphor has never been more central to marketing – and applying metaphors with precision has never been more important for global brands

The language of emotion

Human experience is filled with intangibles: the emotions, aspirations, fears and expectations that dominate our lives and our personalities. Putting these invisible forces into words has never been easy – but it's where our languages and cultures are often at their most poetic and creative. The techniques we use to express our innermost thoughts and experiences provide marketers with immensely powerful tools, a universal code that can tap into the emotive part of our brain and enlist powerful associations and affective memories[1] for brands. Yet marketers cannot afford to apply these techniques lazily. The terms by which human beings frame, understand and interpret their experiences and emotions can vary hugely from culture to culture, and that requires precision from marketers when it comes to summoning them.



[1]Affective Memory Potential is TNS' measure assessing the long term brand-building potential of advertising – covering the three dimensions of Novelty, Affective Impact and Relevance – which shows whether the campaign will be noticed and brand associations assimilated into long term memory.

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Metaphor: the language of emotion

The language of emotion is the language of metaphor, the linguistic device by which we attach the qualities, characteristics and associations connected with one concept to another. Importantly, this isn't simply a case of describing one thing as being like another (that's a simile, as any language student would tell you); metaphor goes much further. In neuroscientific terms, it doesn't just invite the cognitive, rational part of our consciousness to consider similarities between things (a shirt striped like a zebra, for example); it tells the instinctive, unconscious part of our brain that one thing can, for all intents and purposes, be treated in the same way as something else: a reader is hooked by a story in the same way that a fish is irresistibly attached to a line; a heart is broken in the same shattering way that a treasured physical object is; or to quote Shakespeare's famous take on life: "All the world's a stage". Metaphors carry with them a rich package of associations and the use of them invites us to transfer those associations wholesale from one concept to another.

Because so much of life is intangible and difficult to describe without reference to something else, we tend to use metaphors extremely frequently; and because metaphors are instinctive associations, much of our use of them is unconscious. We cannot refer to love, anger or sexuality without metaphor: love burns; our sexual responses take the form of magnetic attraction; anger is a hot liquid under pressure, a wild animal waiting to be unleashed or an opponent to be wrestled with. Yet the metaphors of most value to brands are those that are able to summon more complex associations of emotions: memories, concepts and themes that resonate with us deeply as individuals, yet do so on a universal scale.

These metaphors often resonate with us from childhood onwards, and one children's storytelling brand provides a masterclass in the recruitment and execution of them. From Snow White's magic mirrors, poisoned apples, dark forests and animal-nurturing heroine to Beauty and the Beast's wilting rose, and the juxtaposition of absolute power and slavery embodied by Aladdin's genie: Disney demonstrates just how versatile, complex and resonant the emotional experiences summoned by metaphor can be – and just how successfully those metaphors can cross cultural boundaries.

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Recruiting metaphor for brands

For brands there are obvious benefits to taking a leaf from the House of Mouse's book and co-opting the right metaphors for themselves. When Galaxy asks chocolate lovers "Why have cotton when you can have silk?" it isn't simply trying to describe the texture of its bars; it's inviting them to buy into an emotive concept of luxury, extravagance and chic seduction. It's something that has been consciously reinforced in Galaxy's TV Advertising from the moment the line was first introduced (along with a glamorous Manhattan skyline and Gershwin soundtrack) through to its recent channeling of Audrey Hepburn. Silk isn't just a fabric; it's a bundle of sensual aspirations and motivations. These associations have been formed in the minds of consumers over the course of their lifetimes, in a form of commonly shared affective memory. Co-opting the metaphor provides Galaxy with a shortcut to those powerful, emotive associations.

Metaphorical dynamite such as this can take brands a long way fast as far as establishing Power in the Mind[2] is concerned. However, they can also create problems when metaphors turn out not to be quite so universal as we first assumed them to be – or not to be received in the same universally positive way. Silk is also the metaphor for another global chocolate brand, yet the specifically purple silk adopted by Cadbury can elicit more complicated reactions. The imperial purple communicates power and luxury at a primal level in every culture on earth. In the context of China however, where revolution has consciously rejected the imperial past, it comes with inherently negative associations. As brands become more global, the true universality of metaphors they have long taken for granted is being increasingly put to the test.

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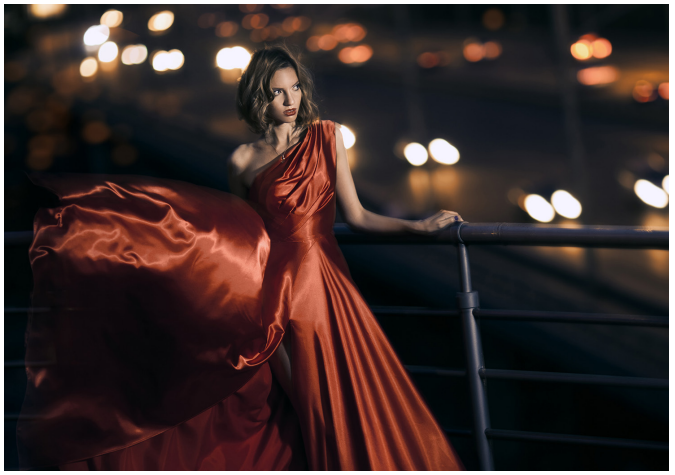

[2]Power in the Mind is TNS' measure of emotional connection or psychological attachment. It is a purely attitudinal measure, and reflects the way an individual feels about a brand. Validations show that this psychological attachment translates into in-market decisions and brand performance.

The cultural context for metaphor

The key to decoding this interpretation of emotion often lies in understanding the cultural context. Metaphors inevitably change when the meaning of the familiar concept used for the metaphor itself changes. This was the challenge that Persil faced when exporting its hugely successful 'Dirt is good' campaign from developed EU markets to Asia. In countries such as the UK, dirt has all kinds of positive metaphorical associations and recollections built around it. Being prepared to get one's hands dirty is a symbol of practicality and utilitarianism, as well as being literally 'down to earth' and unpretentious. Getting dirty as a child is usually a positive and powerful affective memory, stirring associations with feeling free and unfettered and having fun. In many Asian markets, both the practical experiences and metaphorical implications surrounding dirt are very different. Embracing dirt increases the very real risk of disease on one level; on another, it positions people firmly towards the foot of inherently unequal societies. Brown symbolises poor while white at many conscious and unconscious levels stands for privilege – a metaphor much used and leveraged by detergent brands in the past. Unilever addressed this issue brilliantly in Indonesia by equipping the concept of dirt with a social purpose that would resonate with mothers. Rather than celebrating freedom from responsibility, play became the means by which children acquired the strength to survive, compete and be better equipped for the future. They even used a softly spoken teacher watching the play, who served as an authority figure and provided an ideal metaphor for honing competitive instincts in a competitive society. Not only did this keep the integrity of the brand story intact, but it also translated culturally. It gave the Asian homemaker the permission to pay a premium – a challenge in markets where discretionary income is limited.

A framework for translating metaphor

Sometimes shifts in cultural context are as tangible as dirt; but usually they are not. Many of the greatest metaphorical differences stem from the archetypal ideals[3] and themes that occupy our collective unconscious as human beings, but take very different forms in different cultures. Everyone admires the power of the archetypal Ruler, is tempted by the sensuality of the Lover and craves the nurturing attention of the Caregiver. And yet these ideals that we gravitate towards find very different expressions in different cultures. We are all inspired by our Heroes, but the nature of those Heroes changes significantly according to our background. The vast majority of the metaphors that brands use describe archetypes such as these – and understanding the different forms that the archetypes take in each market is therefore essential for understanding which metaphors to use.

[3]The TNS NeedScope archetypal model provides a framework for decoding metaphor.

Dove: the Caregiver archetype in action

The universal impact of Dove's celebrated Real Beauty campaign comes from an archetyptal Caregiver brand applying its themes and metaphors to areas of life traditionally reserved for the Lover archetype. Dove embodies caregiving in a distinct way, addressing the theme of women's need for nurturing, but demonstrating that such nurture can come from oneself. And the Caregiver archetype provides the perfect metaphor for the brand's product features of moisturising gentleness.

Dove's billboard ads showing liberated naked women of different physical shapes proved a highly effective expression of the metaphor in a market such as Australia, where nudity is interpreted as purity, authenticity and unashamed naturalness; a celebration of who you are. But such executions could never expect the same positive reaction in markets such as Saudi Arabia or India, where real-life bodies are clothed and hidden, and have no role as a metaphor for self-worth.

Real Beauty Sketches, the next installment of the Dove campaign, which was rolled out across many global markets in 2013, centred on a metaphor for Dove's caregiving that proved far more universal. The story of women unable to describe themselves to a sketch artist in beautiful terms spoke directly to the inherent competitiveness of the beauty industry. By providing a nurturing alternative to the concept of beauty as a battlefield, it resonated with archetypal needs across all markets where women look in the mirror and see a need to improve.

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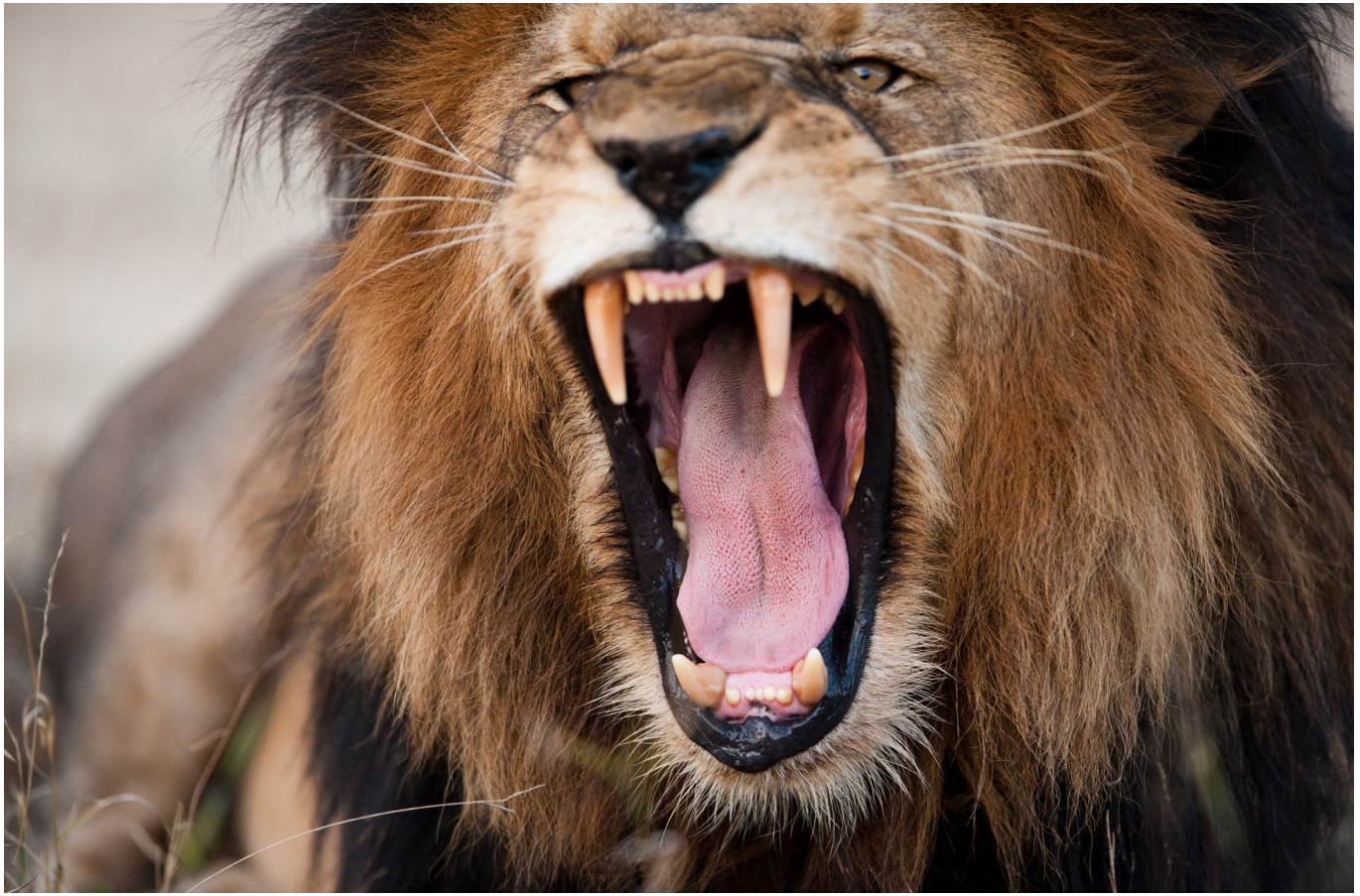
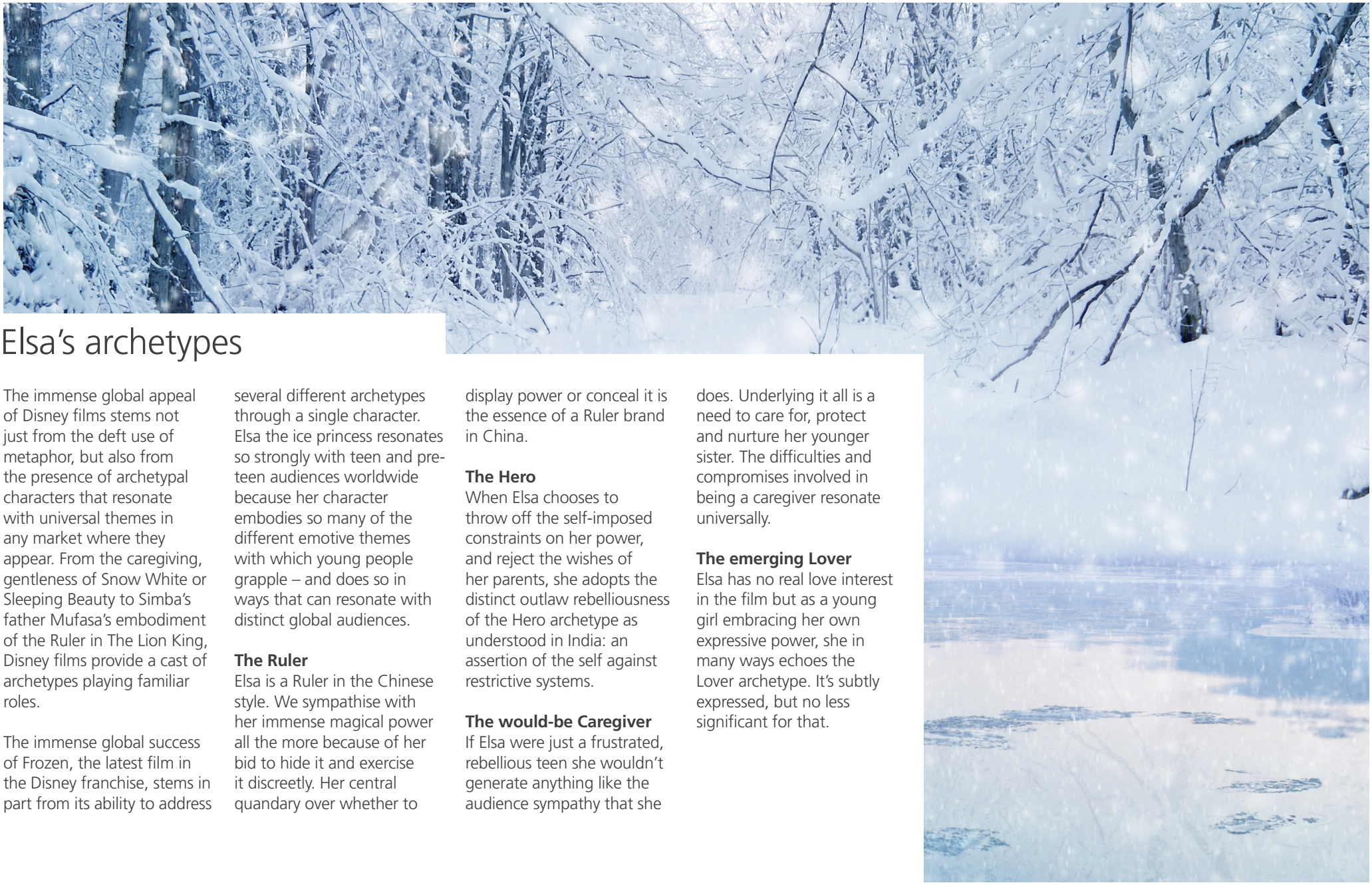
Translating the language of emotion
A precise understanding of emotion gives us the starting point for positioning a brand against different need-states and maximising its irresistibility for consumers. However, addressing those need-states effectively in different markets requires something more. For marketers it will increasingly demand self-awareness about the metaphors they use to position their product, and an informed exploration as to whether those metaphors will carry the same meaning in the markets they move to. Getting metaphor wrong can cause offence and leave audiences confused. Just as seriously, it disables the essential language of emotion. And very few brands can succeed without that.





Elsa's archetypes

The immense global appeal of Disney films stems not just from the deft use of metaphor, but also from the presence of archetypal characters that resonate with universal themes in any market where they appear. From the caregiving, gentleness of Snow White or Sleeping Beauty to Simba's father Mufasa's embodiment of the Ruler in The Lion King, Disney films provide a cast of archetypes playing familiar roles.

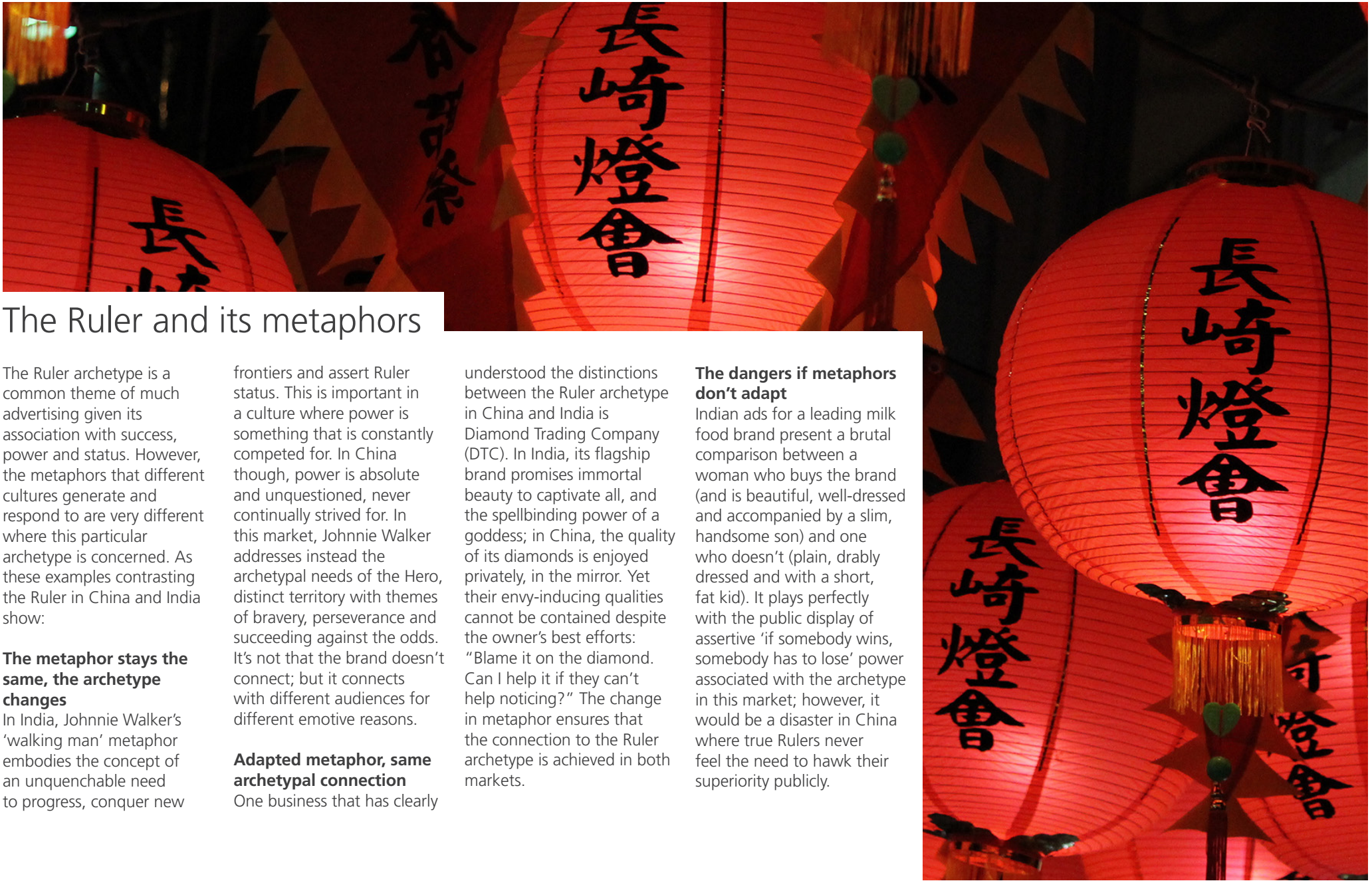
The immense global success of Frozen, the latest film in the Disney franchise, stems in part from its ability to address several different archetypes through a single character. Elsa the ice princess resonates so strongly with teen and pre-teen audiences worldwide because her character embodies so many of the different emotive themes with which young people grapple – and does so in ways that can resonate with distinct global audiences.

The Ruler
Elsa is a Ruler in the Chinese style. We sympathise with her immense magical power all the more because of her bid to hide it and exercise it discreetly. Her central quandary over whether to display power or conceal it is the essence of a Ruler brand in China.

The Hero
When Elsa chooses to throw off the self-imposed constraints on her power, and reject the wishes of her parents, she adopts the distinct outlaw rebelliousness of the Hero archetype as understood in India: an assertion of the self against restrictive systems.

The would-be Caregiver
If Elsa were just a frustrated, rebellious teen she wouldn't generate anything like the audience sympathy that she does. Underlying it all is a need to care for, protect and nurture her younger sister. The difficulties and compromises involved in being a caregiver resonate universally.

The emerging Lover
Elsa has no real love interest in the film but as a young girl embracing her own expressive power, she in many ways echoes the Lover archetype. It's subtly expressed, but no less significant for that.



The Ruler and its metaphors

The Ruler archetype is a common theme of much advertising given its association with success, power and status. However, the metaphors that different cultures generate and respond to are very different where this particular archetype is concerned. As these examples contrasting the Ruler in China and India show:

The metaphor stays the same, the archetype changes
In India, Johnnie Walker's 'walking man' metaphor embodies the concept of an unquenchable need to progress, conquer new frontiers and assert Ruler status. This is important in a culture where power is something that is constantly competed for. In China though, power is absolute and unquestioned, never continually strived for. In this market, Johnnie Walker addresses instead the archetypal needs of the Hero, distinct territory with themes of bravery, perseverance and succeeding against the odds. It's not that the brand doesn't connect; but it connects with different audiences for different emotive reasons.

Adapted metaphor, same archetypal connection
One business that has clearly understood the distinctions between the Ruler archetype in China and India is Diamond Trading Company (DTC). In India, its flagship brand promises immortal beauty to captivate all, and the spellbinding power of a goddess; in China, the quality of its diamonds is enjoyed privately, in the mirror. Yet their envy-inducing qualities cannot be contained despite the owner's best efforts: "Blame it on the diamond. Can I help it if they can't help noticing?" The change in metaphor ensures that the connection to the Ruler archetype is achieved in both markets.

The dangers if metaphors don't adapt
Indian ads for a leading milk food brand present a brutal comparison between a woman who buys the brand (and is beautiful, well-dressed and accompanied by a slim, handsome son) and one who doesn't (plain, drably dressed and with a short, fat kid). It plays perfectly with the public display of assertive 'if somebody wins, somebody has to lose' power associated with the archetype in this market; however, it would be a disaster in China where true Rulers never feel the need to hawk their superiority publicly.

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