

From Monsters to Mascots: Anthropomorphized Germs and Hygienic Subjectivity in Turkish and Global Advertising

*By Hande Bilisel**

Hygiene advertising routinely anthropomorphizes invisible pathogens as characters with voices, faces, and intentions. This paper examines how such germ characters construct myths of cleanliness, disgust, and responsibility in Turkish and global contexts. Drawing on a qualitative multiple-case design and Barthesian semiotic analysis, we analyze 11 advertisements and animations featuring personified germs, including Domestos Turkey campaigns, Turkish children's hygiene content, and UK/US Domestos and Listerine spots. The analysis shows that anthropomorphized germs operate as dual-function devices: they dramatize invisible microbial threats through monster, clown, and spokesperson figures, and they naturalize specific versions of the hygienic subject—from vigilant mothers defending bathrooms, through disciplined children "playing" at defeating germs, to responsible citizens supporting school hygiene and adults managing breath to remain socially acceptable.

Keywords: *anthropomorphism, hygiene advertising, semiotics, glocalisation, Türkiye*

Introduction

Hygiene advertising is crowded with germs that talk, sing, protest, and even take selfies. From bleach and surface cleaners to mouthwash and children's handwashing cartoons, microbes that are normally invisible are routinely rendered as characters: spiky villains, pathetic losers, cute sidekicks, or aggrieved spokespersons. For brand managers and health communicators, these anthropomorphized germs are not just visual devices but strategic creative resources that can differentiate brands, shape category meanings, and influence compliance with recommended hygiene behaviors. They dramatize contamination as an intentional act, stage cleanliness as a moral test, and invite viewers to identify with—or laugh at—figures that stand in for invisible risk, thereby affecting how consumers perceive product efficacy, personal vulnerability, and appropriate hygienic conduct in competitive markets. In doing so, they participate in wider cultural struggles over what it means to be a good parent, citizen, child, or partner in an era of heightened concern about contagion and hygiene.

Research on anthropomorphism and disease communication suggests that humanlike pathogens can increase perceived vulnerability and compliance with preventive recommendations, but that their effects depend on tone: cute or humorous germs may soften fear, while monstrous germs amplify disgust and avoidance (Wang et al., 2022; Galoni et al. 2020; Wu et al., 2023). Semiotic and cross-cultural advertising studies, meanwhile, show how brands recycle visual templates

*Associate Professor, Department of Advertising, Bahçeşehir University, Türkiye.

and character types across markets, adapting them to local cultural codes while preserving core brand narratives (Barthes, 1972/1957; Ocak, 2025; Akhan et al., 2022). Building on these strands, this paper examines how anthropomorphized germs in hygiene campaigns construct and circulate myths of cleanliness, disgust, and responsibility in both Turkish and global contexts.

Empirically, I focus on a purposive corpus of 11 advertisements and animations featuring personified germs, including Domestos Turkey television campaigns ("Kötüyüm Ben, Domestos," "Hijyen Ekibi – Sultan Mikrop," "Mikroplar Ağlarmış," "#mikroplariyanda"), Turkish hygiene edutainment content (*Çürük Ali ve Mikrop Necati*; children's handwashing cartoons), and selected UK/global Domestos and Listerine spots with animated germ figures. Using a qualitative multiple-case design and Barthesian semiotic analysis, I ask: (1) How are germs anthropomorphized and narrativized in Turkish hygiene advertising and related animated content? (2) How do these representations compare with germ characters in UK/US campaigns by the same or similar brands? and (3) What myths of cleanliness, citizenship, and selfhood are naturalized through these representations?

I argue that anthropomorphized germs operate as dual-function devices: they dramatize invisible microbial threats through monster, clown, and spokesperson figures, and they naturalize particular versions of the hygienic subject—from the vigilant mother defending the bathroom, through the disciplined child who "plays" at defeating germs, to the responsible citizen who supports clean school toilets, and the adult who manages breath to remain socially acceptable (Barthes, 1972/1957; Douglas, 1966; Stones et al., 2022). By comparing Turkish and UK/US executions, I show how a shared germ universe is glocalised: Turkish campaigns embed germs in national genres of humor and civic activism, whereas UK/US campaigns emphasize horror and romantic self-presentation. The analysis thus contributes to anthropomorphism and disease-communication research, to semiotic studies of advertising, and to broader debates about how contemporary cultures imagine—and govern—the boundaries between bodies, homes, publics, and microbes.

This paper proceeds as follows: I first review the relevant literature on anthropomorphism in health and marketing communication, germs and disgust in consumer behavior, and semiotic approaches to advertising. I then outline our qualitative multiple-case methodology and describe my corpus of 11 Turkish and global advertisements. The analysis section examines three thematic clusters—monsters and invaders, cute clowns and mascots, and moral tests—before comparing Turkish and global patterns. I conclude by discussing strategic implications for brand managers, advertising practitioners, and public health communicators seeking to leverage anthropomorphized characters in health and hygiene campaigns.

Literature Review

Anthropomorphism in Health and Marketing Communication

Anthropomorphism refers to attributing human characteristics—such as thoughts, feelings, intentions, or social roles—to nonhuman entities (Wang et al., 2022; Xiang & Park, 2023). In marketing and branding, this can involve humanlike mascots, talking products, or animated characters that represent otherwise abstract entities (Akhan et al., 2022). Hygiene and health campaigns extend this logic to pathogens: diseases and germs are personified as criminals, invaders, or troublesome guests, sometimes with names, faces, and voices (Wang et al., 2022; Stones, 2022).

Experimental work shows that anthropomorphizing diseases can bring them psychologically "closer," increasing perceived vulnerability and compliance with preventive recommendations (Wang et al., 2022; Xiang & Park, 2023). Describing a virus as a deceptive criminal, or depicting mucus and germs as obnoxious intruders, makes an invisible threat more imaginable and therefore harder to ignore (Wang et al., 2022). At the same time, research on anthropomorphized virus icons suggests that effects depend on tone: anthropomorphized warnings can increase risk perception and protective intentions, but highly cute germs may dilute seriousness if not paired with strong messages (Xiang & Park, 2023).

In consumer research, anthropomorphism has also been linked to chronic disease concerns: people who are more concerned about infection are more likely to anthropomorphize germs and disease-related stimuli in everyday life (Galoni et al., 2020; Xiang & Park, 2023). This points to a two-way relationship: communications anthropomorphize germs to influence consumers, but consumers' pre-existing sensitivities and cultural backgrounds shape how such figures are interpreted (Galoni et al., 2020; Akhan et al., 2022). Cross-cultural work on humorous anthropomorphic TV ads shows that the same type of character—a talking object or animal—can support different cultural scripts, more collectivist or more individualist, depending on how its actions and relationships are framed (Ocak, 2025; Akhan et al., 2022).

Beyond health contexts, a broader stream of branding research shows that anthropomorphic mascots can strengthen brand attitudes, identification, and purchase intentions by acting as humanized interfaces between consumers and products (Deligoz & Ünal, 2021). Anthropomorphic mascots enhance brand image and perceived personality and provide narrative hooks that make brands feel more like social actors than mere objects (Deligoz & Ünal, 2021). Although germs represent negative rather than positive brand characters, I argue that germ figures in hygiene advertising operate in a similar way: as quasi-mascots that mediate consumer-brand relations by dramatizing contamination and cleansing and by embodying the enemy that the product promises to defeat. Overall, this literature positions anthropomorphized germs as powerful but ambivalent tools: they can heighten perceived risk and compliance, but comic or cute framing can also soften fear, invite identification, and generate unexpected sympathies (Wang et al., 2022; Xiang & Park, 2023).

Germs, Disgust, and Contagious Disease Cues in Consumer Behavior

Beyond personification, germs enter advertising as contamination cues that trigger disgust and fear (Galoni et al., 2020; Stones et al., 2022). Research on consumer responses to contagious disease cues has traditionally emphasized disgust as an emotion that motivates rejection and avoidance of potential contaminants (Galoni et al., 2020). More recent work shows that disease cues elicit both disgust and fear, and that this combination can systematically shift consumer choices: exposure to reminders of contagious disease leads consumers to prefer more familiar products and options, perceived as safer or less risky. Related work on product contagion further demonstrates how evaluations of clean items can deteriorate when they are placed next to disgusting or contaminated products, even without any actual transfer, underscoring the power of contamination cues in consumer judgment (Galoni et al., 2020).

Anthropomorphized germs in cleaning and hygiene advertising operate within this emotional economy, visualizing otherwise invisible contaminants and dramatizing their ability to invade domestic and public spaces (Stones et al., 2022; Xiang & Park, 2023). Stones (2022) proposes a typology of germ imagery in popular health communication, distinguishing between microscopic, monstrous, and cute character-like germs. Microscopic germs align with scientific authority and clinical distance, monstrous germs emphasize horror and invasion, and cute germs introduce playfulness and pedagogical appeal (Stones et al., 2022).

From a consumer-behavior perspective, these visual strategies interact with broader cultural narratives about cleanliness, morality, and social order (Barthes, 1972/1957; Ocak, 2025). In his classic essay on cleaning products, Barthes (1972/1957) argues that detergents and bleaches are sold not only as technical solutions but as symbolic agents of purification, promising to destroy dirt conceptualized as evil. Strong chlorine products are coded as "absolute fire," annihilating all impurity, while softer detergents are framed as gentle liberators that separate dirt from fabric, washing away stain without overt violence (Barthes, 1972/1957). When germs are anthropomorphized and placed within these older purification narratives, they become moralized figures: not just microbes, but villains, tricksters, or pitiable losers whose destruction or survival is linked to what it means to be a good mother, citizen, child, or partner (Galoni et al., 2020; Stones et al., 2022).

My interest in cleanliness is also informed by classic work on purity and pollution. Douglas (1966) theorized dirt as "matter out of place," arguing that practices of cleaning, classification, and boundary-drawing are central to how societies organize moral and symbolic order. Hygiene communication draws on this logic: germs, stains, and bodily fluids are not only biomedical threats but signs of disorder, while cleaning rituals reassert social and moral boundaries. When anthropomorphized germs invade bathrooms, kitchens, mouths, or school toilets in our corpus, they mark these spaces as out of place and in need of purification; their destruction restores not just physical cleanliness but a sense of normative order.

Semiotics, Myth, and the Glocalization of Germ Characters

To analyze how anthropomorphized germs work in advertising, I draw on Roland Barthes' semiotic framework of denotation, connotation, and myth (Barthes, 1972/1957; Mzoughi & Abdelhak, 2012). At the denotative level, advertisements present concrete images and sounds: cartoon germs with eyes and mouths, specific domestic or public spaces, caregivers and children, branded bottles and sprays, slogans and jingles. At the connotative level, these elements are organized so that they suggest broader ideas and values: the bathroom becomes a battlefield, school toilets stand for the nation's civic health, the caregiver is recast as a heroic defender, while germs become invaders, protesters, or mischievous tricksters (Barthes, 1972/1957; Mzoughi & Abdelhak 2012). Myth, in Barthes' sense, is the level at which these connotations solidify into common-sense truths: not just that toilets should be cleaned, but that a good parent or citizen is someone who constantly hunts invisible germs using the right products and techniques (Barthes, 1972/1957; Ocak, 2025).

Semiotic analyses of advertising show that such myths systematically encode gendered, classed, and national expectations—for example, positioning mothers as primary guardians of domestic hygiene, or representing middle-class interiors as naturally bright, white, and germ-free (Ocak, 2025; Mzoughi & Abdelhak, 2019). In hygiene campaigns, germs provide a flexible visual device to police these boundaries: germs tend to appear in wrong spaces—dirty bathrooms, neglected school toilets, the mouths of careless or socially awkward people—and their defeat restores not only physical cleanliness but a moral and social order (Barthes, 1972/1957; Stones et al., 2022). Cross-cultural semiotic work demonstrates that when multinational brands move across markets, they often retain the same basic narrative structures while shifting the visual symbolism and character roles to resonate with local norms and humor (Ocak, 2025; Akhan et al., 2022).

I conceptualize germ characters as part of a glocalised brand germ universe. Global brands such as Domestos and Listerine develop recurring visual and narrative templates for germs—spiky blobs, monstrous figures, or cartoon clusters—that travel between countries (Ocak, 2025; Stones et al., 2022). However, as prior research on humorous anthropomorphic TV ads and cross-cultural symbolism shows, these figures are re-voiced, re-costumed, and re-embedded in local storylines (Ocak, 2025; Akhan et al., 2022). Thus, the same underlying figure—a talking germ—may appear as a horror-coded monster in a UK context, a self-pitying band member or political spokesperson in Turkey, or a comic dragon in a US mouthwash ad. The denotative template remains comparable, but the connotative associations and resulting myths differ across markets (Barthes, 1972/1957; Stones et al., 2022).

This process can be understood through the lens of glocalisation, where semiotic resources created in global brand worlds are re-encoded within local cultural repertoires, producing locally resonant myths from transnational templates (Budha, 2024; Ocak, 2025). My comparative analysis uses this framework in two ways. First, at the level of individual ads, I systematically identify how germ characters are visually designed, voiced, and situated, and which myths of cleanliness, responsibility, and subjectivity they help naturalize (Barthes, 1972/1957; Mzoughi & Abdelhak 2012). Second, at the cross-national level, I treat Turkish and UK/US executions as variations within a

shared germ universe and examine how local humor, political references, and institutional concerns—for example, school hygiene in Turkey versus romantic self-presentation in Listerine campaigns—inflect the same basic trope (Ocak, 2025; Akhan et al., 2022). By doing so, I show how anthropomorphized germs do not simply visualize microbes, but participate in the glocal production of myths of the hygienic subject—the vigilant mother, responsible citizen, disciplined child, or socially acceptable partner differently imagined in Turkish and global advertising (Barthes, 1972/1957; Douglas, 1966; Galoni et al., 2020; Stones et al., 2022).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive, multiple-case design to analyze anthropomorphized germs in hygiene advertising. Each advertisement or animated clip is treated as a bounded case of germ personification in health and hygiene communication. Rather than seeking statistical generalization, the goal is analytic generalization in an exploratory, theory-building sense: by systematically comparing carefully selected Turkish and global cases, we refine theoretical concepts such as monster germ, mascot germ, and germ as spokesperson and explore how a shared global advertising trope is adapted to local cultural, political, and regulatory contexts. As such, the study is designed to elaborate concepts and identify patterned configurations rather than to estimate the prevalence of particular representations.

The design is cross-national and comparative, juxtaposing Turkish campaigns—primarily Domestos Turkey and local hygiene animations—with structurally similar UK and US campaigns by the same or analogous brands (Domestos UK/global, Listerine). This approach follows established practice in cross-cultural semiotic advertising research, which examines how multinational brands encode and adapt visual and narrative elements across markets (Ocak, 2025; Akhan et al., 2022).

Corpus and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was used, guided by four inclusion criteria: (1) Explicit anthropomorphization—germs must be visually represented as characters with humanlike traits (speaking, singing, plotting, protesting, expressing emotions, or acting in social roles); (2) Product and campaign focus—material had to promote hygiene products or behaviors or form part of public health/hygiene education campaigns centered on germ reduction; (3) Context diversity—the corpus includes domestic (bathroom, kitchen), institutional (school toilets), and interpersonal (mouth, breath) settings to capture different hygiene domains and associated moral frameworks; (4) Temporal and market range—Turkish cases span approximately 2015–2025, while global cases include both classic (1980s–1990s Listerine) and more recent (2000s–2010s Domestos UK/global) executions.

The final corpus comprises 11 cases, organized into two sub-corpora (see Table 1). Turkish sub-corpus (7 cases) includes four Domestos Turkey campaigns featuring

distinct germ characters (*Kötüyüm Ben, Domestos; Hijyen Ekibi – Sultan Mikrop; Mikroplar Ağlarmış; #mikroplariyanda*), one Turkish hygiene/edutainment animation (*Çürük Ali ve Mikrop Necati – Temizlik*), and two Turkish children's hygiene animations (*Aslan Yavrusu – Ellerinizi sabunla yıkayın; Elif ve Gürbüz, el temizliği*). Global sub-corpus (4 cases) includes three Domestos UK/global campaigns (CG "disgusting germs" compilation; *Grot Buster*; germ monster spray ad) and one Listerine mouthwash advertisement (animated "Clifford" dragon/germ commercial, circa 1987).

Cases were identified via systematic keyword searches on video platforms and in advertising archives (e.g., "Domestos mikroplar," "germ character ad," "Listerine animated") and selected to maximize variation in germ roles (villain, clown, spokesperson, victim), affective tone (fear, humor, pity), and moral context (maternal care, citizenship, romantic acceptability). This selection logic is consistent with semiotic and cross-cultural advertising studies that work with theoretically driven, information-rich samples (Ocak, 2025; Akhan et al., 2022).

Semiotic Coding and Analysis

The analysis applies Barthesian semiotics in three main steps, supplemented by a structured cross-case comparison. Step 1: Case sheets and denotative coding—for each case, a detailed case sheet documented what is literally seen and heard: germ character design (number, shape, color, facial features, movement, clothing), human characters and their roles, settings and spatial coding, product presentation, key verbal elements, and music and sound effects. This denotative inventory provides the empirical basis for subsequent interpretation and ensures that connotative claims remain grounded in observable signs (Barthes, 1972/1957; Mzoughi & Abdelhak, 2012).

Step 2: Connotative interpretation—I interpreted the cultural meanings and associations activated by these signs: the dominant emotional tone, the narrative roles ascribed to germs, and the broader scenarios in which they operate. Particular attention was given to cultural references and codes—for example, Ottoman "sultan" imagery and protest rhetoric in Turkish Domestos spots, or horror-film and monster conventions in UK campaigns—as well as to gendered, classed, and national coding of cleanliness and responsibility (Ocak, 2025; Mzoughi & Abdelhak 2012).

Table 1. *Case Corpus Overview*

Code	Title/Campaign	Brand/Platform	Country	Year(s)
T1	<i>Kötüyüm Ben, Domestos</i>	Domestos Turkey	Turkey	~2018
T2	<i>Hijyen Ekibi – Sultan Mikrop</i>	Domestos Turkey	Turkey	~2019
T3	<i>Mikroplar Ağlarmış</i>	Domestos Turkey	Turkey	~2020
T4	<i>#mikroplariyanda</i>	Domestos Turkey	Turkey	~2021
T5	<i>Çürük Ali ve Mikrop Necati</i>	Edutainment	Turkey	~2015–2020

T6	<i>Aslan Yavrusu</i> handwashing	Children's hygiene	Turkey	~2020
T7	<i>Elif ve Gürbüz</i> hand hygiene	Educational content	Turkey	~2020
G1	<i>Disgusting Germs</i> compilation	Domestos UK/global	UK	~2010s
G2	<i>Grot Buster</i>	Domestos UK/global	UK	~2010s
G3	Germ monster spray ad	Domestos UK	UK	~2010s
G4	<i>Clifford</i> dragon/germ ad	Listerine	USA	~1987

Source: Authors' compilation.

Step 3: Myth analysis—building on this, I synthesized denotation and connotation into what Barthes terms myth: the seemingly natural stories about cleanliness, responsibility, and subjectivity that each ad constructs (Barthes, 1972/1957). Examples include myths such as "a good mother must relentlessly hunt invisible germs in the bathroom to protect her family," "a good citizen supports school hygiene infrastructure to fulfill collective responsibility," or "a modern individual must manage bad breath to remain socially and romantically acceptable." This level of analysis reveals how germ characters function not only as persuasive devices but as symbolic figures that produce and police hygienic subjectivity (Douglas, 1966; Stones et al., 2022).

Step 4: Cross-case and cross-national comparison—after coding all cases individually, I conducted structured within-corpus and across-corpus comparisons along four predefined axes, adapted from cross-cultural semiotic advertising work (Ocak, 2025; Akhan & Altintas et al., 2022): (1) Characterization—how are germs designed and voiced? (2) Affect—what is the dominant emotional register? (3) Moral economy—what is being tested, and who carries responsibility? (4) Cultural coding and globalization—what local references, humor, and regulatory boundaries shape germ representation?

Within each of the three analysis subsections—"Monsters and invaders," "Cute clowns and reluctant mascots," and "Moral tests and hygienic subjectivity"—I first compare Turkish cases with one another, then global cases with one another, and finally conduct an explicit cross-national comparison along these axes. This strategy allows us to identify both global continuities in germ anthropomorphism and local inflections that reveal how hygiene myths are adapted to Turkish versus UK/US cultural and institutional settings.

Results

Monsters and Invaders: Domestic Battlefields

Across both Turkish and global campaigns, one prominent configuration is the monster germ as domestic invader. In these ads, germs are anthropomorphized as hostile agents that threaten the integrity of bathrooms, toilets, and other intimate spaces. Their narrative function is to dramatize invisible contamination as an active invasion and to position cleaning products as weapons or defensive shields.

In *Kötüyüm Ben, Domestos* (T1), a single germ character introduces itself in the first person as explicitly evil, boasting about making people sick and reveling in dirt before Domestos arrives. Denotatively, the germ is small, spiky, and brightly colored, with a face, limbs, and exaggerated expressions; it moves through a grimy bathroom environment and addresses the viewer directly. Connotatively, this design fuses children's-cartoon aesthetics with villain tropes: the germ is comic, but its song about causing illness frames it as a morally charged enemy. The myth that emerges is that of the vigilant household defender: a good caregiver must treat germs as declared enemies and use powerful bleach to protect the family, or risk being complicit in their spread.

Domestos Hijyen Ekibi – Sultan Mikrop (T2) extends this logic from the individual villain to an invading army. Here, multiple germs, led by a "Sultan Mikrop," occupy various parts of the house; they speak to one another in a hierarchical, quasi-military register about having taken over surfaces. The domestic interior is reframed as contested territory, and Ottoman-style sultan imagery invokes Turkish historical dramas and political satire: germs become cartoon despots ruling over a dirty empire that must be overthrown. At the mythic level, cleanliness is equated with liberation from tyrannical rule; using Domestos is not just a matter of hygiene but an act of reclaiming rightful order in the home.

The Domestos UK/global *Disgusting Germs* and *Grot Buster* spots (G1, G2) deploy similar monster tropes but with different tonal inflections. In these ads, CG germs are shown living inside grime on tiles, in plugholes, or on toilet surfaces; they speak in exaggerated voices, often with British comedic timing, and react in terror when the product appears. Denotatively, the germs are rendered as grotesque blobs with eyes, teeth, and slimy textures, inhabiting dark, gross micro-worlds that are revealed by an imaginary camera. Connotatively, they combine horror and humor: their world is disgusting enough to trigger aversion, but their banter and over-the-top reactions prompt amusement. The myth here aligns with a forensic warrior narrative: Domestos is a microscopic soldier that can enter hidden grot and annihilate life forms ordinary cleaning cannot reach, justifying high-strength chemicals as necessary for true safety.

The reported UK germ monster spray advertisement (G3) intensifies the horror dimension. A grey, human-sized germ creature narrates how humans now hunt and exterminate germs with sprays, depicted in a way that some viewers and regulators considered frightening for children. This execution shifts the affective balance towards fear, with less compensatory humor than in the Turkish sultan parody or the more comic UK CG germs. The resulting myth edges toward a total war framing: germs are not just bothersome but existential threats that must be relentlessly pursued, even at the risk of disturbing sensibilities.

Comparing these Turkish and UK/global cases highlights both continuity and inflection. All rely on denotative features such as spiky or slimy bodies, grimy settings, and dramatic annihilation effects to frame germs as invading monsters, and all cast bleach as a violent but necessary purifying force. However, the Turkish spots fold this invasion into local genres of humor and politics: the *Kötüyüm Ben* germ sings and jokes, and *Sultan Mikrop* explicitly references Ottoman-style authority and contemporary satire, softening horror through parody and connecting domestic hygiene to narratives of resisting corrupt rulers. The UK/global ads, by contrast, lean more heavily on horror and disgust, with the germ monster approaching the threshold of regulatory acceptability, and the *Grot Buster* germs visually embedded in extreme filth. In Barthesian terms, both sets construct myths of domestic battlefields where good subjects must fight invisible invaders, but Turkish ads tie this battle to playful, nationally specific codes, whereas UK/global ads emphasize visceral disgust and cinematic monstrosity as their primary persuasive resources (Barthes, 1972/1957; Stones et al., 2022).

Cute Clowns and Reluctant Mascots

A second configuration in the corpus reworks germs from pure monsters into comic clowns or reluctant mascots. Here, germs still represent contamination, but their anthropomorphism invites amusement, pity, or even mild identification, creating a more ambivalent affective field around hygiene.

In *Domestos Mikroplar Ağlarmış* (T3), germs form a music band and sing about how Domestos has made their lives miserable. Denotatively, the germs have band instruments, expressive faces, and perform on a makeshift stage, while lyrics and visuals foreground their sadness and self-pity. Connotatively, they oscillate between villains and victims: they are still bad in principle, but the ad invites viewers to laugh at their complaints and perhaps momentarily sympathize with them. The myth that emerges is one of inevitable progress: powerful cleaning products have changed the world so thoroughly that even germs now feel oppressed, and their protests are ultimately ridiculous. Cleanliness becomes both non-negotiable and slightly comic, as if the only ones who truly suffer are germs themselves.

The Turkish edutainment animation *Çürük Ali ve Mikrop Necati – Temizlik* (T5) pushes further towards cuteness. Mikrop Necati is a named germ character with a distinct voice and personality who jokes, complains, and interacts with human protagonists inside teeth or the body. Denotatively, he is rendered as a small, stylized figure, closer to a cartoon sidekick than a horror monster. Connotatively, this casting aligns germs with children's sitcom humor: Necati is annoying but entertaining, an excuse for didactic dialogue about brushing, washing, and doing the right thing. The myth here centers on moral education through play: children learn that germs are naughty companions they must eventually banish, but the learning process itself is framed as fun, story-driven, and emotionally engaging rather than purely fear-based.

A similar strategy appears in Turkish children's handwashing cartoons such as *Aslan Yavrusu – Ellerinizi sabunla yıkayın* and *Elif ve Gürbüz, el temizliği* (T6, T7). In these clips, germs are depicted as colorful, squealing creatures that chase or bite the protagonists and then scream or pop when attacked by soap and water. Denotatively, they often have big eyes, exaggerated mouths, and bouncy movements, supported by

upbeat music and sound effects. Connotatively, germs become playful antagonists: they are clearly undesirable, but their antics are comic and their defeat is staged as a satisfying game. The resulting myth suggests that being a good child involves mastering a playful battle with germs—following hygiene rules not out of terror but as part of a fun, quasi-heroic routine.

Global Domestos campaigns in the disgusting germs or germ-world family (G1) and related executions also flirt with cuteness despite their gross label. CG germs are shown lounging, partying, or taking selfies in filth before being wiped out, often with humorous dialogue and exaggerated reactions. Denotatively, their designs mix grotesque textures with expressive, sometimes goofy faces. Connotatively, they straddle disgust and amusement: they inhabit revolting spaces, yet their social interactions make them oddly relatable. The myth here is one of carefree germs disrupted by necessary violence: cleaning products abruptly end their fun, reinforcing the legitimacy of harsh interventions while briefly acknowledging the germs' quasi-social world.

Taken together, these cases illustrate how germ characters slide from monsters to mascots. Turkish examples foreground named characters, bands, and children's companions, embedding germs in local comic traditions and educational formats, while Domestos' global germ-world turns pathogens into semi-likable losers whose destruction is framed as both necessary and entertaining. In Barthesian terms, the connotative codes of humor, music, and cuteness inflect the basic germ-as-enemy signifier with new associations, producing myths in which the hygienic subject is encouraged to be vigilant but also to enjoy the battle against germs. This ambivalence complicates the emotional economy established in the monsters and invaders cluster: fear and disgust remain present, but are cushioned by laughter and affection, potentially making intensive hygiene feel more natural, less anxiety-laden, and more compatible with everyday pleasure.

Moral Tests and Hygienic Subjectivity

A third configuration stages germs as agents in moral tests, where cleanliness becomes a marker of good parenting, responsible citizenship, disciplined childhood, or acceptable self-presentation. Here, anthropomorphized germs function less as simple enemies and more as narrative tools to evaluate human characters.

In the Turkish school-toilet campaign *Domestos şimdi de okul tuvaletlerinde! #mikroplarıyanda* (T4), a germ character speaks on behalf of all germs about the threat posed by clean school toilets. Denotatively, the germ is personified as a spokesperson, addressing the audience and commenting on Domestos' presence in schools. Connotatively, this framing turns germs into quasi-political actors: they protest against improved hygiene infrastructure and implicitly position parents, citizens, and brands on the opposite side. The resulting myth casts cleanliness as a civic duty: being a good parent or citizen means supporting campaigns that expel germs from public institutions, particularly schools, thereby protecting children and contributing to the collective good (Douglas, 1966; Stones et al., 2022).

Turkish children's hand-hygiene animations, such as *Elif ve Gürbüz, el temizliği* and *Aslan Yavrusu – Ellerinizi sabunla yıkayın* (T6, T7), frame germs as tests of child behavior. Denotatively, germs appear as small, noisy creatures that enter the body

when hands are dirty and react loudly when washed away. Narratively, children are instructed to wash properly after specific activities; failure to do so allows germs to win. Connotatively, hygiene becomes a matter of obedience and self-discipline: good children follow rules and defeat germs; careless children neglect washing and risk illness. The myth constructed is that of the disciplined hygienic child, whose moral worth is partially evaluated through adherence to cleanliness routines taught by adults and institutions.

In *Çürük Ali ve Mikrop Necati – Temizlik* (T5), Mikrop Necati similarly functions as a moral test for the young viewer. His antics inside teeth or the body dramatize what happens when proper cleaning is neglected: he thrives when brushing and washing are skipped and complains when routines are followed. The connotative lesson is clear: aligning with Necati's interests equals lax hygiene and decay, while opposing him through correct routines equals health and virtue. This reinforces a myth of everyday self-governance, where children are encouraged to monitor their own bodies and habits in line with public-health norms.

The Listerine animated "Clifford" dragon/germ advertisement (G4) shifts the moral test from civic and childhood contexts to the realm of social and romantic acceptability. Denotatively, a dragon-like character embodies germs causing bad breath and plaque; the narrative often ties his presence to social embarrassment, unattractive breath, or failed romantic encounters. Connotatively, germs become stand-ins for social stigma: they threaten not physical survival but one's chances of intimacy and belonging. The myth here is that of the socially acceptable self: the responsible adult manages invisible germs in their mouth to avoid shame and rejection, with Listerine positioned as a tool of self-presentation and affective security.

Taken together, these cases show how germ characters help construct different versions of the hygienic subject. Turkish campaigns foreground civic and collective dimensions—good citizens and parents support clean schools; good children obey hygiene rules—while global mouthwash campaigns emphasize individual self-presentation and interpersonal judgment. In both contexts, anthropomorphized germs serve as narrative devices that test whether characters live up to cultural expectations of care, responsibility, and discipline. Through Barthesian myth, these tests are naturalized: it comes to seem obvious that responsible people must constantly manage germs, whether to protect public institutions, meet parental and educational standards, or maintain romantic and social viability (Barthes, 1972/1957; Douglas, 1966).

Global-Turkish Contrasts in the Germ Universe

Across the three clusters—monsters, clowns, and moral tests—our cases suggest that Domestos and Listerine participate in a broadly shared germ universe, yet this universe is locally re-scripted in Turkish and UK/US contexts. At a denotative level, the building blocks recur: spiky or slimy bodies, expressive faces, group formations (bands, armies, crowds), and dramatic annihilation by branded products. Connotatively, however, these elements are combined with different genres—Ottoman parody, protest rhetoric, children's comedy, or horror cinema—so that the same germs participate in distinct cultural storylines.

In the Turkish sub-corpus, germs are consistently woven into local humor and civic concerns. *Kötüyüm Ben* and *Sultan Mikrop* appropriate villain and sultan figures familiar from Turkish television and satire, while *Mikroplar Ağlarmış* and *#mikroplariyanda* mobilize protest and spokesperson tropes to frame germs as comically frustrated political actors. Children's animations and Mikrop Necati extend germ narratives into pedagogical settings, constructing cleanliness as both playful and morally obligatory for young viewers. The myths that emerge foreground collective and relational obligations: being a good mother, citizen, or child is tightly linked to supporting school hygiene, following public-health routines, and participating in national humor about germs as unruly but ultimately controllable figures.

In the UK/global sub-corpus, germs are framed more strongly through horror, disgust, and interpersonal self-presentation. The *Disgusting Germs*, *Grot Buster*, and germ monster ads lean into grotesque textures and frightening scenarios, at times testing regulatory boundaries regarding what is appropriate for children. Listerine's dragon/germ shifts the focus from civic and domestic spaces to the intimate sphere of breath and romance, making germs symbols of social risk and embarrassment rather than of collective hygiene infrastructure. The dominant myths here stress individual risk management and self-presentation: responsible subjects protect their families and relationships by policing their own bodies and homes against invisible threats.

Seen through a Barthesian and glocalization lens, these differences suggest that anthropomorphized germs act as semiotic pivot points where global brand templates meet local concerns (Barthes, 1972/1957; Budha, 2024). Domestos' core promise—total germ destruction—remains intact, but Turkish campaigns re-encode it through motifs of political satire, school activism, and children's comedy, while UK/US campaigns emphasize horror spectacle and romantic self-management. This supports my broader argument that germ characters do not merely visualize microbes; they help construct locally specific versions of the hygienic subject, in which vigilance, care, and responsibility are differently anchored in domestic, civic, and interpersonal imaginaries (Douglas, 1966; Stones et al., 2022).

Discussion

Across the corpus, anthropomorphized germs emerge as dual-function devices that both dramatize invisible microbial threats and naturalize particular visions of the hygienic subject. Monsters and invaders make germs visible as hostile agents that infiltrate domestic and bodily spaces, justifying strong cleaning products as necessary weapons. Cute clowns and reluctant mascots soften this horror through humor and characterization, turning germs into entertaining losers or sidekicks whose inevitable defeat is pleasurable to watch. Moral-test narratives, finally, mobilize germs to evaluate whether caregivers, citizens, children, and adults meet culturally specific expectations of care, discipline, and self-presentation. Together, these patterns extend existing work on disease anthropomorphism by showing how visual and narrative design calibrate the balance between fear, disgust, amusement, and sympathy in everyday commercial media (Wang et al., 2022; Xiang & Park, 2023; Stones et al., 2022).

My findings contribute to debates on anthropomorphism and disease communication in three ways. First, they confirm that anthropomorphized germs increase the psychological salience of contamination by giving invisible pathogens voices, faces, and intentions, thus reinforcing perceived vulnerability and the perceived need for preventive action. Second, they show that cuteness and humor—especially in children's content and protest-style Domestos campaigns—do not simply undermine risk messages; instead, they create ambivalent affective packages in which fear and disgust are modulated rather than removed. This nuance complements experimental work on anthropomorphized virus icons and cuteness, suggesting that comic germs can support compliance when they are ultimately defeated and clearly positioned as undesirable. Third, by situating germ characters alongside brand mascots and product contagion research, I highlight their role as quasi-mascots that anchor brand meaning and mediate consumer-product relations, even though they represent the enemy rather than the brand itself.

From a semiotic and glocalization perspective, the comparison between Turkish and UK/US campaigns shows how a shared germ universe is locally re-encoded. At the denotative level, both contexts deploy similar visual templates—spiky or slimy bodies, swarms and armies, reaction shots to bleach or mouthwash—but at the connotative and mythic levels they diverge. Turkish Domestos spots fold germs into genres of Ottoman parody, music video, and political satire, casting them as sultans, protest bands, or spokespersons who mirror national debates about authority, activism, and public institutions. Children's animations and Mikrop Necati extend this into edutainment, where germs are comic companions that help inculcate hygienic discipline and citizenship in young viewers. UK/global Domestos and Listerine campaigns lean more heavily on horror iconography, grotesque disgusting germs, and romantic embarrassment, emphasizing individual risk management and social self-presentation. These differences illustrate how global brand templates are glocalised, producing locally resonant myths from transnational semiotic resources.

Finally, my analysis has implications for how cleanliness, morality, and social order are communicated in everyday advertising. Following Douglas's (1966) notion of dirt as matter out of place, anthropomorphized germs mark bathrooms, kitchens, mouths, and school toilets as potentially disorderly zones that must be constantly monitored and purified. Turkish school-toilet campaigns explicitly link germ destruction to civic responsibility and institutional care, suggesting that good citizenship includes supporting the hygienic maintenance of public infrastructures. Children's narratives and Listerine spots, in turn, encourage viewers to internalize cleanliness norms as part of being a good child or an acceptable partner, reinforcing the idea that managing germs is a continuous personal obligation.

For brand managers and marketing practitioners, these findings offer several strategic implications. First, germ anthropomorphism is a double-edged sword: while it increases threat salience and product differentiation, positioning hygiene as a constant moral test may unintentionally alienate consumers who lack access to adequate infrastructure or who cannot meet intensive cleanliness standards, potentially narrowing brand appeal or inviting criticism. Second, balancing monster imagery with playful mascots requires careful calibration to avoid either excessive anxiety (which may trigger avoidance or regulatory pushback) or trivialization of health risks in children's content.

(which may undermine credibility). Third, germ narratives that focus on individual failings—bad breath, domestic negligence—can shift attention away from structural determinants of hygiene (e.g., school facilities, housing quality) and onto individual consumers, a framing that may be commercially effective but ethically and politically contested. Fourth, glocalised germ characters offer powerful opportunities for cultural resonance and market adaptation, but drawing on national humor and political tropes carries reputational risk if such references are perceived as reductive or exclusionary.

From a strategic brand-building perspective, germ characters function as quasi-mascots that mediate consumer-product relationships and anchor brand narratives across markets. However, unlike positive mascots that embody brand values, germ figures embody the threat that products promise to eliminate, requiring brands to manage a more complex emotional economy of fear, disgust, humor, and relief. Successful campaigns in our corpus leverage this complexity: Turkish Domestos spots embed germs in locally resonant satire and civic activism to build brand relevance and goodwill, while UK/global executions deploy horror and social embarrassment to justify premium products and intensive routines. These contrasting strategies suggest that germ anthropomorphism is not a one-size-fits-all tactic but a flexible brand tool whose effectiveness depends on aligning character design, narrative framing, and emotional tone with target audiences' cultural codes and consumption contexts.

In sum, germ characters do more than help sell cleaning products and hygiene routines; they participate in the broader, glocal production of hygienic subjectivity, where everyday practices of washing, scrubbing, and rinsing become visible markers of moral character, social belonging, and civic virtue (Douglas, 1966; Stones et al., 2022). For health communication practitioners and brand strategists alike, understanding how these characters work—and how their meanings shift across markets—is essential for designing campaigns that are both commercially effective and culturally responsible.

Conclusions

This paper examined how anthropomorphized germs in Turkish and global hygiene advertising construct meanings around cleanliness, disgust, responsibility, and citizenship, using a qualitative multiple-case, semiotic design. By analyzing 11 advertisements and animations across three thematic clusters—monsters and invaders, cute clowns and reluctant mascots, and moral tests—I showed that germ characters operate as dual-function devices: they dramatize invisible microbial threats and naturalize specific myths of the hygienic subject (Barthes, 1972/1957; Stones et al., 2022). Turkish campaigns tend to embed these figures in local genres of humor, political rhetoric, and school activism, foregrounding collective obligations and citizenship, while UK/US executions emphasize horror and romantic self-presentation, stressing individual risk management and social acceptability (Ocak, 2025).

The study has several limitations. My corpus is purposive and relatively small, focusing on a handful of high-profile campaigns and animations; it therefore cannot claim statistical representativeness of all hygiene advertising. I also analyzed texts only, without examining how different audiences actually interpret or resist these germ characters in everyday viewing situations. In addition, the temporal scope is

selective, combining recent Turkish Domestos and children's content with earlier Listerine and Domestos UK executions rather than providing a systematic longitudinal history.

Future research could extend this approach in several directions. First, a broader cross-national comparison—including additional European, Asian, or Latin American markets—would allow more systematic mapping of how germ universes travel and mutate across cultures. Second, reception studies could explore how different groups (children, parents, health professionals) interpret and emotionally respond to anthropomorphized germs, testing and refining the affective patterns suggested here. Third, post-pandemic hygiene campaigns—especially those produced during COVID-19—may have altered the balance between fear, humor, and civic duty in germ imagery, offering a rich site for longitudinal semiotic and anthropological analysis.

By connecting commercial germ characters to broader literatures on anthropomorphism, disgust, purity, and glocalisation, this study highlights the importance of seemingly playful hygiene animations and adverts as key sites where contemporary cultures imagine—and govern—the boundaries between bodies, homes, publics, and microbes.

References

- Akhan C. E., Altintas M.H., Isin F. B., Dentiste Mueller, R (2022). Humorous anthropomorphic TV ads: A cross-cultural analysis using collectivist and individualist elements. *Pazarlama ve Pazarlama Araştırmaları Dergisi* 15(2): 325-346.
- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*, Lavers A (Trans). Hill and Wang. (Original work published 1957)
- Budha, K. (2024). *Semiotics and glocalising brands*. LinkedIn Articles. Retrieved February 3, 2026. Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/semiotics-glocalising-brands-kishore-budha-gbdwrf>
- Deligoz, K., & Ünal, S. (2021). The effect of anthropomorphic mascot on the purchasing intention of consumers: An experimental study. *Sosyoekonomi* 29(50): 229–254.
- Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. Routledge.
- Galoni, C., Carpenter, G.S., & Rao, H. (2020). Disgusted and afraid: Consumer choices under the threat of contagious disease. *Journal of Consumer Research* 47: 373–392.
- Ocak, A. (2025). Visual symbolism in cross-cultural advertising: A comparative study of South Africa and Kenya. *The Retail and Marketing Review* 21(2): 87–105.
- Mzoughi, N., & Abdelhak, S. (2012). Visual and verbal rhetoric in advertising: Impact on emotions and attitudes. *International Journal of Business and Management Studies* 1(3): 413-422.
- Stones, C. M., Stark, J., Rutter, S., & McDuff, C. (2022). The visual representation of germs: A typology of popular germ depictions. *Visual Communication* 21(1): 97–122.
- Wang, L., Toure-Tillery, M., & McGill, A. L. (2022). The effect of disease anthropomorphism on compliance with health recommendations. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 51(3): 266-285.
- Xiang, L., Park, H.J. (2023). Effects of anthropomorphized virus warnings and perceived cuteness on compliance intention. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics* 35(12): 2897–2911.