

*International Advertising of Fashion Luxury Brands:
A Multidisciplinary Qualitative Analysis*

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Abstract

The study explores, through a qualitative approach, the role of multimodal discourse in international print advertising campaigns of fashion luxury brands. Ten advertisements were analyzed from a semiotic point of view, exploring the potential impact of linguistic and imagery structures on consumers' perception. Results show that most of the advertisements convey a meaning of luxury mainly based on individual style, instead of status. The study sheds light on the potential use of semiotic analysis in planning more effective communication campaigns for luxury goods.

Keywords: Luxury brands, Semiotics, International advertising, English language.

Research overview

Luxury fashion is considered not only an economic sector in continuous growth, relatively new in terms of industrial, managerial and academic formalization, but also one of the most relevant keys for understanding interpretations of social evolution in different countries and cultures in the world (Boston Consulting Group, 2012). Nevertheless, despite the growing number of studies on fashion and luxury, no research has been previously implemented in order to formalize new methods that may facilitate the analysis of advertising messages from a semiotic (i.e., the study of signs) and a linguistic (i.e., the study of linguistic signs) point of view. More specifically, no research has been found on the analysis of the semiotic meanings and use of English in the international print advertising campaigns of high-end fashion brands. In order to fill this gap in the literature, the present study focuses on the print advertising of international luxury fashion brands, and, in particular, on the categories of more traditional luxury products, that is clothing and accessories (Fionda and Moore, 2009). This study aims to increase current knowledge about the process of analyzing the multimodal semiotic grammar of the advertising of fashion luxury products, the semiotic-values strategies, and

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the strategies related to the use of the English language (Vestergaard and Schröder, 1985) implemented by international fashion brands. The goal is to develop a framework that could allow analyzing, through a critical-cognitive approach, the strategic role of multimodal discourse in international print advertising campaigns for market fashion luxury products. In particular, through a cognitive linguistics approach (Kress and Leeuwen, 2001), the present study aims to analyze the English words in advertisements not as isolated, but in the overall interaction with the images and other elements that make up the campaign, as well as considering the interaction of those elements with consumers who make up the audience, external to the advertising itself, but who, in the process of semiosis, interpret it and, therefore, may have a specific experience.

The present study analyzes the advertising of luxury brands as discourse, emphasizing that although the main focus of the “discourse analysis” is the language (in this case English), it is not the only component: an analysis has been made of the use of the English language, but simultaneously other means of communication frequently used in luxury fashion advertising have been considered. In particular, given that a complex, but common, feature of contemporary advertising is the metaphor (Forceville, 1996), including the visual type (see Cook, 2001), the role of rhetorical figures as main marketing tool is explored. The study also makes reference to the style pattern, meant as a substitute for the language of advertising (or part thereof) developed for the fashion products, analyzing the role of “silence” (i.e., absence of copy, headlines, body copy, slogans and verbal part) that becomes part of the discourse – just as happens with breaks in music, or rhythm, and the articulation of verses in a poem (see Tranströmer, 2004). Moreover, on the basis of the dichotomous conceptualization of “externalized luxury” (i.e., luxury as ostentation) vs. “internalized luxury” (i.e., luxury as lifestyle) (Amatulli and Guido, 2011, 2012), this study focuses on the analysis of possible opposing semiotic frameworks ascribable to these two consumption approaches.

Methodology

Ten full-page advertisements were randomly sampled out of a total of 26 advertisements from one issue of an international popular fashion magazine. Data were provided by VisualBox s.r.l., an Italian market research company specializing in the fashion industry and owning a database where it is possible to select all print advertisements related to certain brands, published in certain magazines, over a given period of time. Two analysts (one with extensive research experience in luxury marketing and semiotics, one representing consumers) conducted the analyses. The analysts received a list of concepts related to externalized luxury and a list of concepts related to internalized luxury. Then, each of the two analysts received the ten advertisements one by one. They had three hours to analyze each advertisement and to write down their findings.

The analysts were asked to assess the main single elements of the advertisements (e.g., language, copy, layout, benefit, color, photography, graphics, brand, rhetorical tropes, etc.), considering the theoretical dichotomy between externalized vs. externalized luxury. Therefore, each single analysis was referred to one of these two opposite approaches. In particular, the material collected - as usual in the high-end fashion sector,

mainly composed of photographic elements (Jobling, 1999) – has been analyzed from a linguistics and semiotics point of view. In addition to the texts in English, other semiotic components surrounding the text have been analyzed in linguistic terms (see Myers, 1999): images, possible aspects attributable to paralanguage, the “situation” (relationships between text and objects/persons represented) around the text, the function, the participants (the receivers of the messages) and their possible intentions or interpretations (in particular as related to the interiorized/exteriorized luxury dichotomy). Part of the analyses also considered the common objectives ascribable to different modes of communication used in advertising discourse (Swales, 1990) and the related applied techniques (Bernstein, 1974).

Particular attention has also been paid to the different relationships of meaning generated from the use of the English language in consideration of the different cultures of potential consumers (i.e., interpretants). In the same cross-cultural perspective, an analysis was made about the presence of rhetorical tropes such as metaphor (Forceville, 1996; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) and metonymy (Belk, 1987), the possible use of prosodic models - for example in the composition of jingles in advertising narrative (Cook, 2000, 2001) and the role of polysemy in communication of luxury. Analysts also considered connotative power, meanings and, thus, the impact on consumer perception of linguistic structure, regarding brand and product names (Lowrey, Shrum, and Dubitsky, 2003). In particular, in the analysis of the text, and, therefore, of the use of English, the different elements of connectivity and cohesion within the discourse (Thomas, 1995) have been highlighted.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study may allow going beyond the traditional logic of the market, increasing the possibility for fashion luxury companies to become more aware of the strategic importance of the strengthening of the brand based on a more managerial use of multimodal semiotic discourse. The analysis framework developed in this study reveals that most of the advertisements analyzed do not use headline, body-copy or pay-off. At the same time, when companies use texts they always use English, irrespective of the country of the magazine. Most of the analyzed advertisements communicate through imagery. A central role is played by the presentation of the product itself, which is always well visible. Within all the advertisements of the sample a strong use of metaphors can be identified; metaphors help advertisers to convey messages regarding brand values or to symbolize specific (realistic or unrealistic) contextual situations.

Considering the luxury dichotomy (externalized vs. internalized), the analysis reveals that most of the semiotic elements refer to internalized luxury approach and brand positioning. This result could depend on the fact that analysis regarded advertisements in western countries where the approach to luxury consumption is mainly linked to individual style than to status symbols, as on the contrary happens in emerging countries (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998).

The present study suggests that semiotic analysis of luxury advertising by the intended and unintended audiences is a necessary step in developing an advertising

campaign that is well integrated with the marketing strategies of the brand. Given that all advertisements and other kind of images and messages (e.g., point of purchase displays, direct mails, press releases) are subject to multiple interpretation from different kind of consumers, prior analysis and discussions of the semiotic content of the print advertisement might be useful in order to more correctly position the communication message as externalized or internalized. This study also helps to more broadly analyze the informative process performed by advertising, presenting results that explain, in particular, the process and the interpretative content generated by the multimedia messages transmitted by fashion luxury brands through their advertisements in international press, based on the use/non-use of linguistic texts (in English). Indeed, the study highlights the semiotic mechanisms that characterize the discourse of luxury advertising in which “no text” is written, hence strongly figurative rather than textual.

Implications

The results of this study contribute to improving the knowledge relative to semiotic analysis in a particular context, i.e. that of luxury print advertising. In particular, our results emphasize the strategic role of multimodal discourse in international advertising campaigns in the English language of marketing luxury goods. The theoretical implications of the study concern: (1) the formalization of new methods that may facilitate the analysis of advertising messages from a semiotic and a more specific linguistic point of view; and (2) the extension of the theories on the language of fashion to the broader discussion of the language of luxury, through multimodal analysis. At the same time, the study contributes to the development of new international marketing strategies for luxury goods. The managerial implications related to the empirical results of the study include: (1) the opportunity, for the advertising agencies or fashion companies, to use multimodal semiotic-linguistic analysis in a more detailed and precise manner; (2) the opportunity to compose more effective advertising campaigns for luxury products; (3) the opportunity to compose, through print advertisements, *ad hoc* semiotic systems according to the type of target consumer, also in view of the dichotomy of externalized and internalized luxury; (4) the definition and description of various categories of advertising on the basis of homogeneous structures of meaning that luxury companies can use as guidelines in the preliminary stages, for example at briefings with advertising agencies on new print advertising campaigns. Based on such results, it can be argued that marketers should seek to understand the sociolinguistic adaptations of varieties of specialized English for advertising campaigns aimed at consumers of luxury. Furthermore, it can be advanced that, in order to increase their visibility in new markets characterized by increasing crowding (which causes a destabilizing effect on the competitive position acquired), the marketing managers of luxury companies should be able to direct their attention to the effective management of their brand through strong and durable new strategic approaches, which will be put into effect via the dimension of English sociolinguistics and socio-semiotic values.

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