

EMBRACING IMPERFECTION: CONTEMPORARY FASHION COMMUNICATION AND CONSUMER WELLBEING

Abstract

Purpose – Fashion advertising as a contemporary ideological form has the power to deliver semiotic messages which frames individuals' perception. Promoting perfection in consumer culture has resulted in the creation of unrealistic self-image and negative effects that led to psychological illnesses and pathological behaviours. The purpose of this paper was to investigate the ideology behind the contemporary fashion advertising that embraces imperfection and is linked to consumer subjective wellbeing.

Methodology– Nine fashion ads were selected based on the WGSN consumer report *Embracing Imperfection*. A sample of images was analysed applying semiotic analysis combined with the criteria of content analysis.

Findings – The results supported the notion that some contemporary fashion communication brands are challenging the conventional idea of perfection. Five themes were identified as the characteristics that bridged the visual surface of advertising with its hidden ideologies of imperfection. By supporting 'anonymity', fashion brand communication is against excessive self-focus and helps reducing anxiety due to being imperfect. By promoting 'rawness', it encourages authenticity and uniqueness. 'Banality' rejects materialism and promotes the beauty of the boring day. 'Ugliness' advocates for removal of the single standards and celebrate individual differences, and 'spontaneity' is interchangeable for humanity, freedom, openness, and acceptance of self.

Originality– This study is among the few attempts to conduct semiotic analysis of fashion advertising images aiming to identify the visual components and ideologies that could potentially be linked to subjective well-being in fashion communication.

Keywords: Subjective well-being, Fashion advertising, Fashion image-making, Imperfection, Authenticity.

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Fashion is considered to be a powerful form of social and political critiques which reflect societal changes and produce responses towards human needs (Shinkle, 2008; Werner, 2018). The stability of fashion symbols is usually absent as the society is ever changing (Leiss et al.,

1990). In addition, the standards of beauty and goodness are monitored and controlled by the fashion industry and media (Sutton, 2016). Hence, the ideas of perfection and imperfection are never fixed, particularly in the novelty-seeking fashion industry where rules are made to be broken and opposite concepts are often interchangeable (Polhemus, 2011).

Dress and appearance are identified as a fundamental part in the development of one's self cognition and judgment (Casidy et al., 2015). For example, material possessions have been perceived to be important for peer group acceptance since a very young age (Banerjee and Dittmar, 2007). An individual learns to comply with fashion rules and conform to conspicuous consumption in order to behave effectively in the world, gain social approval to maintain interpersonal relationships, thus reinforcing positive self-concept (Swann and Pelham, 2002). Therefore, fashion images and material possessions provide a sense of belonging (Finkelstein, 2007).

According to Dittmar (2007), material goods can enhance or maintain an individual's sense of whom they are, however, there is a hidden section of the consumer culture trend where the perfect body and the material privileged life have been identified as symbols of what life ought to be. The ideas of 'material extended-self' and 'body image' are penetrated in consumer culture and embedded in people's thoughts, feelings and behaviours. This may result in compulsive buying and artificial body modification with the aim of filling in the gap between the actual and the ideal selves (Johnson & Attmann, 2009; Rieke et al., 2016).

On the other hand, the image of perfection can be shaped by fashion movements, influenced by societies (Leiss et al., 1990; Shinkle, 2008; Werner, 2018). Fashion communication has the power to determine the standard of beauty and goodness, meanwhile fashion itself is a reflection of what the majority desires in all respects (Saltzberg & Chrisler, 2006).

Understanding the visual approaches in fashion communication can reveal the contemporary picture that maps the social movements and consumer needs, which is vital for creatives who aim to design meaningful communications (Werner, 2018). In addition, decoding contemporary fashion communication can lead to a recognition of its potential impact on consumers.

Literature Review

Impact of fashion advertising

Advertising is a communication tool that helps spreading shared values. It transforms nothing into something and changes rhetoric into facts and objects (Finkelstein, 2007). Although advertising deals with a considerable number of social issues, its ideological power remains

disguised by visual pleasures which usually seem good-looking, funny and unimportant (Rose, 2001). The ubiquity of fashion advertising gives itself autonomy to create a perceptual reality that relates to individuals' lives and become a contemporary ideological form (Williamson, 1978; Rose, 2001).

There are several approaches that help explaining ways fashion advertising impacts consumers. Firstly, the Consumer Storytelling Theory proposed by Woodside et al. (2008) points out that people naturally think narratively as there is a large amount of data stored and accessed in episodes from their minds. Finkelstein (2007) stated that the importance of any form of art is not its emphasis of the visual, but the cultivation of the viewers' symbolic or narrative interest; the aesthetic realm trains people to read symbols, create stories and gain pleasure through their context and subtext (Trigoni, 2016). There is also a therapeutic function of narrativity named 'catharsis' (Woodside et al., 2008). It is a state where consumers experience the narratives in an archetype and relive by retelling the given stories. Thus, fashion advertising can have a framing effect upon individuals through its narrativity that arouses emotion and memory and eventually shapes one's viewpoints of the world and influences behaviours (Trigoni, 2016).

Secondly, fashion advertisements are attractive and persuasive, yet the action of reading ads seems to be routine, and people often are not seriously engrossed in the deep assumptions inside the advertisements (Crisp, 1987; Rose, 2001). In the book *The Hidden Power of Advertising*, Heath (2001) talks about how people barely use active processing that is supposed to be the working memory for thinking or interpretation when encountering ads. Instead, they use automatic and shallow processes that allow subconscious operation (Heath, 2001). It has also been suggested that the implicit memory system, which stores perceptions and concepts attached to what is perceived, gives advertising the hidden power that makes it autonomous without people realising it (Shapiro & Krishnan, 2013; Penn, 2016). With such continuous, automatic and almost inexhaustible capacity, implicit memory effortlessly operates through the processing of repeatedly perceived occurrences and concepts at a low level of attention, and consequently leads to the accumulation of a meaningful and associated attachment to the brands (Heath, 2001; Yoo, 2008; Shapiro & Krishnan, 2013). Therefore, fashion advertising becomes the social control and extrinsic constraint upon individual's self concept by delivering its embedded ideologies (Rose, 2001).

Finally, material possessions have been perceived to be important for peer group acceptance (Banerjee & Dittmar, 2007). Hence, in order to provide a verification of membership and a sense of belonging, fashion advertising targets audiences and appeals to them with the

association of the groups that the target consumers belong to or desire to belong (Cannon et al., 2000; Finkelstein, 2007).

Outcomes of fashion advertising

The role that mass media plays in the society with respect to the creation of low self-esteem has been a subject of extensive studies (Burnette et al., 2017). Researchers argued that advertisements are selling people “themselves” by suggesting that people can move towards their ideal self through the symbolic possessions (Leiss et al., 1990). Hence, advertising is about wanting to be the person inside the clothes or wanting to live the life shown in the images (Werner, 2018).

The dissemination of beauty standards creates an environment where individuals tend to compare themselves to the fantasy created by fashion advertising, which usually results in dissatisfaction (Rieke et al., 2016). In addition, the unrealistic self-images constructed to get approval from society result in individuals becoming distant from their real selves (Harter, 2002).

According to Saltzberg and Chrisler (2006), the standard of the desired beauty is often the hardest to achieve and never conforms to the law of nature. High costs are incurred to accomplish the task and such costs may at times be both economic and psychological. For example, an individual can be directed to chase after the ever-changing rules of beauty and goodness (economic cost), yet, once the goal appears to be unachievable, such pursuit may result in anxiety and self-loathing (psychological cost) (Johnson & Attmann, 2009).

An unrealistic self-image can be constructed if consumers are continuously exposed to the visual images that anchor the unrealistic ‘good life’ (Harter, 2002). Most of the pathological behaviours of consumption are caused by the failure of achieving self-completion and not acquiring the real self-image (Dittmar, 2007). Empirical research showed that the discrepancy between the actual and ideal self is related to depression, anxiety and generally negative effects (Dittmar & Halliwell, 2007). In extreme cases, this may result in compulsive shopping and body modification behaviours (Dittmar, 2007; Johnson & Attmann, 2009; Rieke et al., 2016).

Imperfection

The modern ideals of beauty and perfection, such as deodorised, cosmeticised, slimmed, youthful and urban women have long dominated the Western fashion industry, whereas the image of anorexic and extremely adolescent female features with smooth glowing skin and

high sexuality has been considered 'perfect' in recent decades (Sutton, 2016). Perfection is always rare, absent and unnatural irrespective of the social context (Coleman & Figueroa, 2010). Individuals can never achieve perfection, because being perfect is being 'not present', yet the pursuit of perfection continues and unrealistic goals can cause the construction of an unrealistic self-image (Engeln-Maddox, 2006).

Imperfection advocates diversity, a sense of autonomy and freedom from judgments (Rees & Housle, 2016). It refers to any ideas against the traditional definitions of perfection. The ideas of perfection are often closed, frozen and lack of vitality while imperfection can offer openness and make for flow (Slemmons, 2008). This means that imperfection is about refusing the extrinsic constraints upon the self and being free from anxiety of single standards (i.e. ideas of perfection) (Rees & Housle, 2016).

Embracing imperfection is the wholeheartedness that lets go the unrealistic self image and accepts the real self (Brown, 2010). Recognising, accepting the true self and embracing its flaws can be conducive to cultivating one's sense of uniqueness (Lynn & Snyder, 2002). It derives from the authenticity that involves people staying true to themselves and has been highlighted as a crucial component leading to hope for the future, high self-esteem and positive emotions (Harter, 2002). Such flexibility and inclusivity also reduces competition and conflicts over limited resources, which provides a ground for diversity and creativity (Lynn & Snyder, 2002).

According to Tangney (2002), the 'unserved' approach is an alternative way of embracing imperfection which appreciates the nature and rejects to stand out of the crowd. This humility involves accurately assessing the self and at times letting go of the over self-focus and concentration on an outward orientation as being a part of a world rather than as a whole itself. Trends like 'social media suicide' and 'social ghost' literally imply the sense of escaping from the self and being without an ego or persona during social life (Rees & Housle, 2016). Consumers in this generation pay more attention to the experiences themselves rather than on their self-image, and their pursuits have become more intrinsic and natural (Bell, 2018).

There are many psychological and physical advantages to the process of becoming 'unserved', detaching from the overwhelming self-preoccupation and enhancing the vulnerable self (Tangney, 2002). Therefore, embracing imperfection is becoming an art of letting the unrealistic self image go and accepting the real self image.

Moving towards imperfection

In this Internet age, faced with an overwhelming pool of information and the anxiety of unstable fashion rules, individuals start challenging enforced marketing messages and turn to rethinking the self-value (Werner, 2018). A shift from extrinsic motivation to self-determination in fashion movement has emerged (Bell, 2018). According to the Economic Theory of Everything proposed by Gilmore and Pine (1999), there is a shift of economic offering from commodities and goods to services and experiences. Gilmore and Pine (1999) pointed out that transformation is the highest economic offering after services and experience, which involves transforming the customers into who they want to be with their own power. Consuming transformation is what's happening in this age for the reason that consumers become more and more autonomous and self-determined during consumptions (Bell, 2018).

The sense of authentic self, which can be described as knowing and understanding who as a person an individual is, is crucial during the improvement of subjective well-being (Harter, 2002). Accepting the real self is likely to satisfy basic and inherent psychological needs (Oleson, 2004). Consumers in this generation are looking for authenticity through all aspects of consumption and believe that there is a representation of their self-image in terms of what they wear and what brands they choose (Leiss et al., 1997). Moreover, individuals whose basic needs (e.g. physiological needs, safety needs, esteem needs) are long met prefer to engage with natural and spontaneous activities that promote self-acceptance (McLeod, 2007). Hence, consumers displaying greater psychological needs (self-enhancement, self-actualisation, transcendence) tend to pursue authenticity during the construction of self-concept, which eventually affects the buying choices (Leiss et al., 1997; McLeod, 2007). Finally, in accord with a WGSN trend report titled *Future Consumer 2020* (Bell, 2018), anxiety has reached critical mass and people will lean towards selective apathy to cope with the standards of perfection. The concepts of perfection are being challenged and a growing global cohort of imperfectionists who are focused on self-awareness and anti-anxiety is making use of self-deprecation and at times subverted humour to enhance the admittance of flaws (Bell, 2018). In line with what has been already mentioned, Rees and Housle (2016) indicated that the younger generation of consumers start to embrace imperfection, which is a sign of refusing the extrinsic constraint upon the self. Hence, it seems that imperfection is becoming the new perfection and a symbol of individuality, freedom and democracy in fashion communication (Bell, 2018; Rees & Housle, 2016).

Applying the Self-Determination Theory

The self-determination theory indicates that the fulfillment of the intrinsic needs for relatedness, competence and autonomy are meaningful to the enhancement of subjective well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Fashion changes are motivated by societal pressure that continually inputs new desires to the consumers of becoming a better self with the products linked to the lifestyle dream (Dittar, 2007). These changes can also be motivated by a desire to conform that is driven by the psychological need to fit in and feel secure, and as a consequence improves self-image (Lynch & Strauss, 2007).

On the other side, recognising and accepting the flaws of the authentic self can be conducive to cultivating one's sense of uniqueness (Lynn & Snyder, 2002). The idea of embracing the authentic self can facilitate one's feelings of competence which is one of the core human needs and has been proved to have a positive effect on individuals' wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In addition, embedding the appreciation of uniqueness in fashion advertising can foster diversity and inclusivity which are linked to choice, acknowledgment of feelings, and opportunities for self direction. This allows people to have a greater feeling of autonomy – one of the core psychological need of individuals (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Lynn & Snyder, 2002). Finally, authenticity was linked to the three psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness in the previous research (Thomaes et al., 2017). Therefore, embracing imperfection, which is equivalent to authenticity and uniqueness is likely to fulfill individuals' intrinsic needs and enhance consumers' subjective wellbeing.

Current study

Considering that the fashion trends are ever changing and there is a recent shift towards authentic-self rather than perfect and unachievable model, the main aim of the current study is to investigate the ideologies linked to consumer subjective wellbeing behind the contemporary fashion advertising. To achieve the main aim, the current study reviews fashion advertising images and aims understanding its messages to the viewer.

Methodology

Nine series of 'imperfect' fashion advertising campaigns were analysed using a semiotic analysis. Semiotics is concerned with an image's social meaning, which means that not only the compositional modality but also the social modality are crucial for the meaning construction (Rose, 2001). Hence, semiotics has been identified as the appropriate approach to decrypt signs and codes within images (Anido Freire, 2014).

According to Rose (2001), in semiotics all meanings are relational not only within the image but also in relation to other images and to broader dominant codes, referent systems and mythologies. The current study employed the semiological method suggested by Rose (2001), which focuses on identifying (a) the individual transfer of meaning for each sign, (b) their relation to other signs and the meanings they convey, (c) the interconnection to other outside sources of myths. Content analysis was applied with the aim of identifying themes that capture the patterns of the sources and techniques used in the fashion communication.

Sampling Method

The images for the analysis were selected linking to the characteristics of the trends identified in the WGSN report (Rees & Housle, 2016). Seven types of imperfection trends were identified, namely ‘Instaunknown’, being anonymous in social media; ‘No filter’, a searching for authenticity on beauty; ‘Web brutalism’, doing wonderful things without so-called ‘best practice’; ‘Pretty imperfect’, imperfection as the new beauty; ‘No judgement zone’, being inclusive to all people regardless of their gender, race, age, size, or ability; ‘Food gets real’, to rebel against the perfectly styled food and restrictive diets and ‘The homely home’, search for authenticity on house options (Rees & Housle, 2016). A diagram (Figure. 1) was drawn by one of the authors of the current study to demonstrate trends and characteristics that were used in the images’ selection.

A visual screening for eligible fashion brand communication campaigns that fit under the trends identified in the WGSN report was conducted on the fashion advertising images of the contemporary fashion brands from 2016 (since the above report published) to 2018. The selection of contemporary fashion brands was derived from the Deloitte report of luxury

goods (2018).

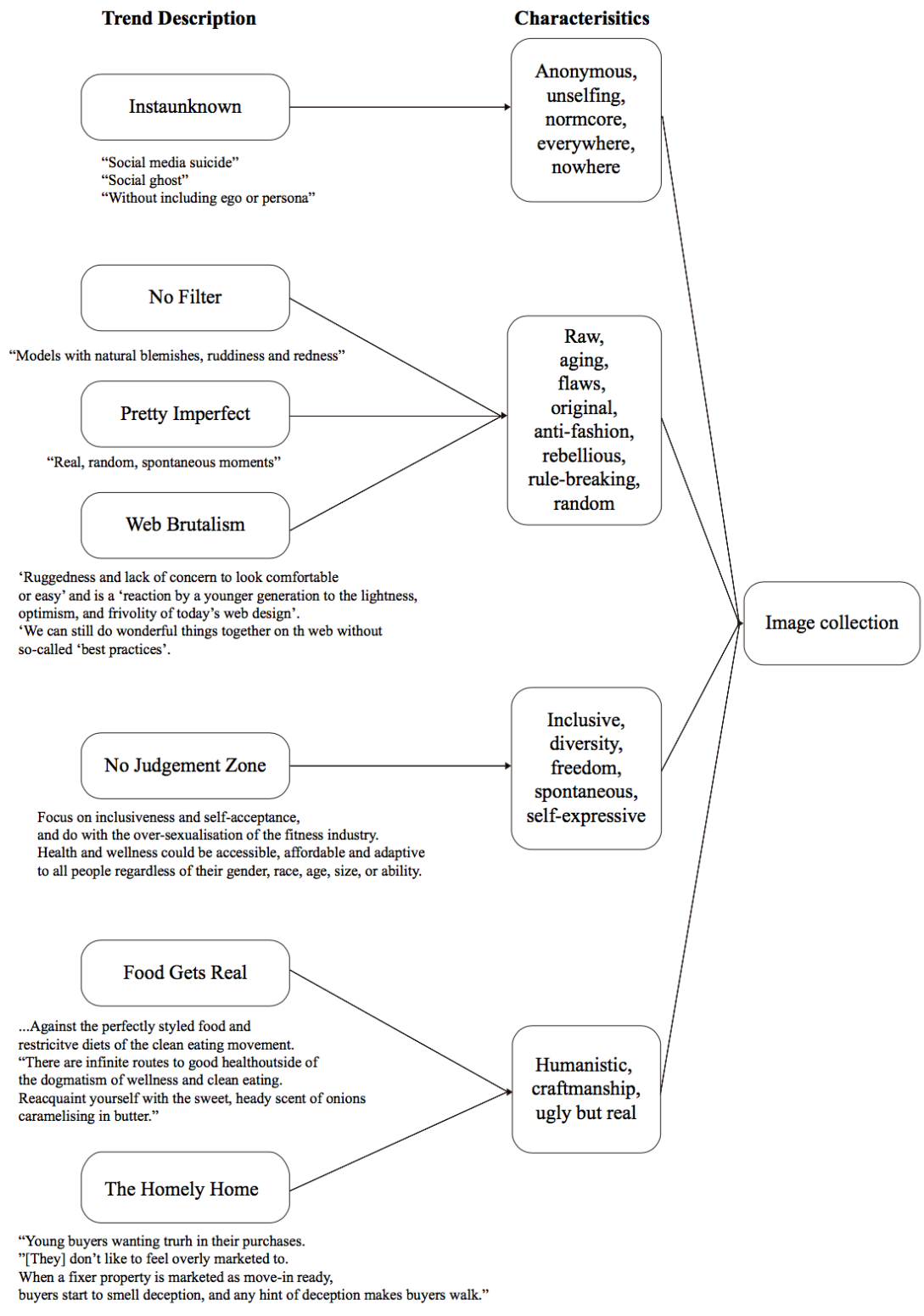


Fig.1. Sampling process (Rees and Housle, 2016)

Results: Images' Analysis, Coding and Interpretation

This section analyses nine fashion campaigns by identifying and translating the visual components such as bodies, manners, activities and settings. A thematic approach (Clarke & Braun, 2017) was applied to identify patterns within the fashion advertising images: (a) describe the images and extract the preliminary codes; (b) search for themes in the codes; (c) define and name the themes. The codes are identified in the analysis' figures specified for each campaign. All the codes are categorised into different themes based on the degree of thematic closeness after analysis.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

The location of this series of photographs is a cultural landscape listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Mallorca, Spain ("Spring/summer campaign," 2017). Surrounded by agriculture and heritage buildings, the site provides a primitive and ecological feel with an implication of rawness. The colourful portraits in the warm tone call for an idyllic narrative, and the black-and-white suggests a sense of silence, banality and poetry. In these photographs (Fig.2), the girl jumping off of the cliff while the sun is sinking into the golden-tinted sea symbolises the idea of freedom and hope in a dreamlike quality ("Spring/summer campaign," 2017). The girl covers her face with her hand holding a dry insect suggesting anonymity and the tininess of human existence. The details on the body parts, such as the skin imprint upon and the visible veins under the skin, reveal an imperfect body with a touch of intimacy. The models were captured while rolling the glass, diving in the water and dancing wildly over the deadwood. These moments were spontaneous and blend with the joyful spirit of youth. The hay, the deadwood, the sea, the fishing net and the garment entangled with the woods altogether render an image of the untamed nature with its eternity. In terms of brand identity, the fashion house Jil Sander is known for its minimalism, neutrality, whiteness and simplicity (Rosenqvist, 2018). These images celebrate life in nature and tease the beauty out of the banal, which on the whole emphasise the purity and the rawness of the brand image.

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

With a simple setting in this advertising campaign (Fig.3), these images emphasise the positions swapping between the photographer and the models in a hyper-realistic exchange of glances in a location that is not even a 'real' place. The act of photographing becomes the main subject of the image. The synchronised photographs from various angles reveal an image of 'women behind the scene' and 'women at work', while all the models in these images are anonymous with their face covered. These images attempt to depict a female character that concentrates on her work with their faces covered not caring about how she looks and who she 'is' in the others' eyes ("Marni spring summer," 2017). These signs suggest that the judgement upon women is beyond appearance and the position swapping is challenging the traditionally defined fashion photography that models are always models while photographers can only be photographers during image-making.

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

The images in Figure. 4 showcase Calvin Klein's signature items: denim jeans, a cotton tank and white men's briefs alongside the contemporary works of famous American artists Andy Warhol, Sterling Ruby, Richard Prince and Dan Flavin. This campaign demonstrates the essence of American classics through a display of distinctive American artists which respectively stand for different contemporary concepts that go against the conventional restraints (Estiler, 2017). Warhol represents American pop which challenges the traditional aesthetic with its bold, eye-catching and vulgarish approach ("What Was Andy Warhol Thinking?," n.d.). Ruby's artworks examine the psychological space where individual expression confronts social constraints influenced by the ubiquity of urban graffiti, underground subcultures, craft and political movements (Johnson, 2011). Prince's technique of appropriation and provocation and his subjects inspired by subcultures and cultural clichés have an implication on the autonomous, powerful and brainwashing marketing messages and stereotypes (Sharkey, 2016). The artwork of American Dan Flavin stands for the classic minimalism (Feldman and Schubert, 2004). Contextualised in these artworks, the campaign is a testament to how Calvin Klein's classic garments helped to build the foundation of American fashion, as much as these contemporary arts define a part of the American art world. The artworks in the background create the 'contemporary American classic' image of

Calvin Klein while the unusual posing with nudity suggests to embrace the human nature and resists the social constraints.

INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE

In the Balenciaga 2016 autumn/winter campaign (Fig. 5), the photographs were created in an everyday setting with a sense of randomness. None of these models were actually posing: they were sipping coffee from a paper cup on a sidewalk or casually standing and walking. The reflection of a car by the roadside in the mirror, a blurred walking passer-by in front of the model and the cheap laundry sack like a tote bag suggest a banal and routine daily life. No fancy props, actresses or elaborate concepts; such realness marked a break from the previous Balenciaga campaigns that in the past had always featured supermodels and celebrities in elaborate poses. This drew attention to the new creative director Demna Gvasalia and his inspiration from the street and everyday things (Socha, 2015). The unvarnished imagery and the ‘real’ approach of this campaign demonstrated the embracing of banality, the ordinary life and a challenge to the traditionally perfecting fashion photography.

INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE

The imagery of Balenciaga 2018 spring/summer campaign (Fig. 6) consisted of mock paparazzi shots, which borrowed from a celebrity milieu to set the scene. These images were photographed by actual paparazzi and were credited to the French wire, Best Image Agency (Satenstein, 2018). With the models playing the ‘no cameras, please!’ role and hiding their faces behind bags, this campaign blends the vulgarity of the tabloid press into the brand image and again attempts to challenge conventional fashion photography. Such voyeur-style and out-of-fashion photographs apply a tongue-in-cheek point of view which may have a connotation to question the perfection in fashion photography and the line between perfect ‘fashion’ and the vulgar, mundane daily. No models in this campaign are professional, they are basically celebrities ‘with stories’. The casting seems to present an idea that ‘stories’ are more important than ‘appearances’ for the reason that the people in these images were not professional models, rather, they are famous people with their very own stories (Krentcil, 2016). Especially, the actress and costume designer Marjatta Nissinen featured in the campaign as a ‘mature model’, suggests the inclusivity and diversity of the new Balenciaga.

INSERT FIGURE 7 HERE

The Diesel 2017 spring/summer campaign (Fig.7) features with the caption ‘Make love not walls’ conveyed a message of love and unity against the mental and physical walls that separate people. It relevantly recalled the 45th American President Trump and his proposed wall with the caption text and the metaphoric wall in these images and emphasised togetherness in the name of unity and love. The rainbow-coloured inflatable tank suggested a bright, hopeful, loving yet autonomous power that breaks the wall with a heart shape turning a symbol of separation into a happy place full of flowers celebrating freedom and love. The colourfulness and the collage approach of these images render a sense of love, diversity and unity into this compelling campaign of Diesel. These images propose the freedom to ‘be true to yourself’ and to ‘love whom you want’ through a display of the unconventional kisses and joyful togetherness across races (Batista, 2017). With this storytelling of anti-division, Diesel enhanced its brand image of being loving, caring, fearless, autonomous and always culturally or politically relevant.

INSERT FIGURE 8 HERE

Diesel challenges the conformity of perfection with its 2017 fall/winter campaign (Fig.8) captioned as ‘Go with the flaw’. These images essentially tell people that being unique is more beautiful than being perfect; the secret of having a successful life is to embrace what you have even when it is not ideal or not perfect, and be brave to wear your flaws with pride. The models joyfully shopping in a messy supermarket holding a bunch of snacks and drinks, such a scene literally gives a shout to forget the restrictive diets in the dogmatism of clean eating and the freedom to enjoy flavourful pleasure. This unconventional and frisky celebration of life echoes the spirit of the Diesel brand which promotes a risky, reckless and emotional attitude to life (Turra, 2017). With a cheeky phrase as the tagline ‘For successful living’, there is an ironic rebelliousness that questions the status quo of successful beings; the models running away from the shooting range symbolises a rejection of accuracy, which

suggests an idea of being listless, aimless and reckless. Embrace imperfection and whatever you cannot control; this is the key to being successful (Sidhu, 2017).

INSERT FIGURE 9 HERE

The minimal, discreetly luxurious aesthetic of the former creative director Phoebe Philo has shaped the brand image of Céline which stands for a strong and modern image of women with a seductive and tingling pragmatism (Seidler, 2012). In the 2017 resort campaign (Fig.9), the model with a gender-neutral face relaxes while lying down on a ground covered with dead leaves, which may suggest a sense of nature and silence. A mature model stands in front of a black plastic backdrop showing a juxtaposition of sophisticated elegance with weak and dirty rawness. The Céline ballerina shoes are showcased from a self-looking angle, which may suggest a self-focus approach, a fulfilment of intrinsic needs.

INSERT FIGURE 10 HERE

The Céline 2018 spring/summer campaign (Fig.10) was photographed by the fashion photographer Juergen Teller who is known for his casual and continuous shooting style embracing the idiosyncrasies of his subjects and the spontaneity of the moment (Martinique, 2018). The seemingly random composition and improvisational approach is the signature of the photographer that set the tone of these images. The gender-neutral face with natural wrinkles and freckles, an expressionless model sitting restfully in a blank state - such neutrality and emptiness within a decadent, simple, farming place recall the aesthetics of Wabi-Sabi, which is described as the beauty of 'imperfect, impermanent and incomplete' (Juniper, 2003). A leg is seemingly captured by an accident which reveals a touch of humanity surrounded by the greens, the nature. The Céline bag held between the legs that were spread open with a hand reaching in is associated with erotic cues, yet the outfit (look) of the model is nothing erotic. Such a contradiction (inconsistency) presents an inclusivity (coexistence) of both the 'sexy woman' and the 'sexless woman' in this image.

Results and Discussion

Five themes capturing imperfection emerged from the interpretation of the images, namely ‘anonymity’, ‘rawness’, ‘banality’, ‘ugliness’ and ‘spontaneity’. A figure of coding process is presented in Figure. 11.

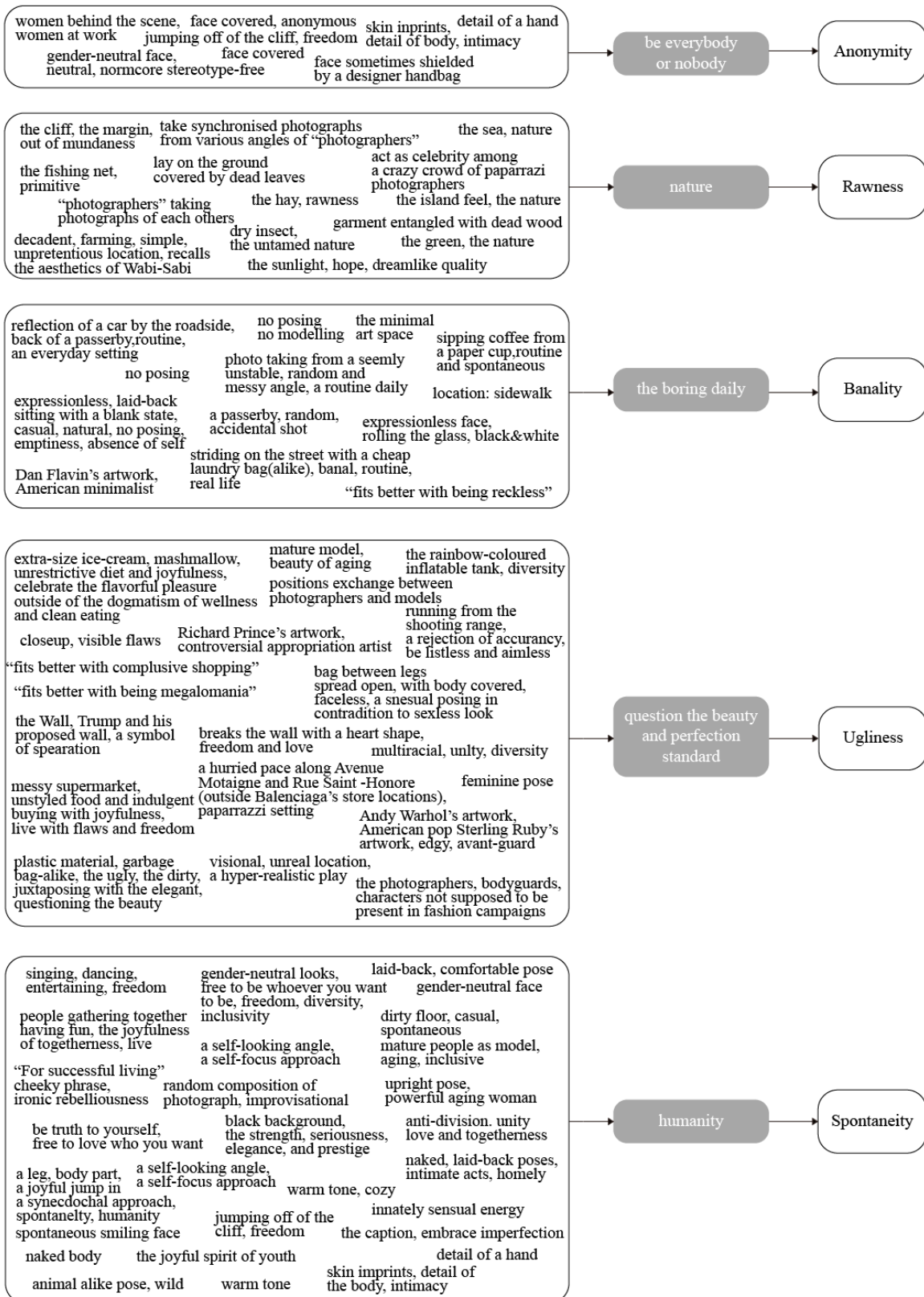


Fig. 11. Coding process

Embracing 'Anonymity'

There are a number of signs in these campaigns suggesting the idea of anonymity, with denotations such as the model's face covered by a hand or a camera, face cropped-out or showing the back of the body instead of the front, models being "unimpressive" and passers-by-alike, and the vibe that calls for silence, emptiness and the absence of self.

As proposed by Warner (2018), advertising is about wanting to be the person inside the clothes or wanting to live the life shown in the images, thus fashion brands often depict a life that is dreamy and inexistent in real life to meet the desire of consumers (Woodside et al., 2008; Rieke et al., 2016). However, people seek self-verification through visual experience in search for a stable self-concept (Swann and Pelham, 2002). Hence, brands now create images that are free from social judgements and promote the sense of anonymity.

The promotion of being anonymous in fashion advertising contradicts the traditionally defined perfection (Coleman and Figueroa, 2010). This should be beneficial for the consumer, because self-focus derives from the social comparison and usually ends with negative self-discrepancy and self-loathing (Rieke et al., 2016). The idea of 'unselfing' can be considered to be against the excessive self-focus in the contemporary consumer culture (Tangney, 2002). 'Forgetting the self', such a sense of humility embedded in these fashion ads can potentially reduce consumers' anxiety of being imperfect (Heath, 2001; Tangney, 2002). Therefore, using the signs of anonymity in fashion advertising suggests the idea of unselfing that aims to reduce individual's anxiety and value the self as a part of the whole. Compared with the conspicuous standards of perfection in contemporary consumer culture (Dittar, 2007), it pictures an easier and healthier life for consumers which is likely to win more positive feedback.

Embracing 'Rawness'

The seemingly primitive, natural and unpolished setting, the naked bodies and the cues of intimacy among these fashion campaigns suggest a sense of rawness. In today's consumer culture, the 'over packaging' of goods and the overwhelming advertised information pour into society where people start to escape from the well manufactured and marketed products and turn to the experiences of primitivity, craftsmanship and pre-industrialisation (Bell, 2018; Werner, 2018; Dickinson, 2018). The basic human needs have long been met and consumers look for higher economic offerings (in regard to the higher psychological needs) to enhance their existence (Leiss et al., 1990). Experience and transformation are identified as the most meaningful economic offerings in human history (Gilmore and Pine, 1999). Consuming meaning and the sense of authenticity can be considered to be the reasons underlying the

pursuit of rawness while authenticity has been identified as a crucial component leading to hope for the future, high self-esteem and positive emotions (Harter, 2002).

The promotion of rawness in fashion ads suggests a reduction to things back to what they were and an appreciation towards imperfection. Moreover, rawness can also refer to the uniqueness that is identified as vital in the development of self concept (Lynn and Snyder, 2002). The signs of rawness are unpolished and imperfect, yet, unique. This pursuit of nature satisfy the intrinsic need of autonomy as it encourages people to accept the imperfect but unique self, search for meaning in the real life and reject the manipulated perfection (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Embracing ‘Banality’

The gestures of ‘banality’ are displayed through the models with laid-back poses and no posing, the routine sunrises and sunsets, passer-by characters, the aging women and the black and white colours. Banality is the unremarkable routine status/periods/moments that occupies the most of lifetime that can either be neglected or treasured.

According to Dittmar (2007), the over-emphasis of materialism and body modification towards perfection in the contemporary consumer culture has resulted as a rejection to the banality of life. People struggle to live a successful life defined by materialism with various biased judgements of ‘perfection’ (Bell, 2018). However, the actual lives that people lead are generally not glamorous or extraordinary.

Based on the original meaning from dictionary, banality in this case refers to a state penetrated in the everyday human life that is repeating, unoriginal, routine and boring, yet familiar to all human beings. In this case, embracing banality in fashion communication is about visualising and revealing the underlying beauty of the boring daily that is usually neglected. The signs in these fashion ads with the brands’ aesthetics created an image for consumers to show how banality can be beautiful. Such an appreciation of banality in these ads has a zoom-in effect on the details and the nuances of distinctiveness in the triviality. The potential idea behind the promotion of banality is to cultivate the ability to understand the reality and discover the uniqueness underlying the ordinariness. Hence, fashion brands can take benefits through using signs of banality in order to gain customer trust and simultaneously support their self-image as being a part of the ordinary life.

Embracing ‘Ugliness’

The signs of ‘ugliness’ are displayed through the reference to the vulgarity of the tabloid press, the style of the dirty realities, the ‘tacky’ colourfulness, the not-so-clean diet and the ‘no-filter’ exposure of human flaws, such as wrinkles, freckles, imperfect bodies and signs of aging. The idea of ugliness here referred to the idea that contradicts any traditional beauty standards defined by the majority and mass media—the ‘ugly’ models, ‘ugly’ settings and the ‘ugly’ poses.

The removal of the single standards in fashion image-making can prompt a tolerance of the individual differences and reduce competition and conflicts over limited resources (Lynn & Snyder, 2002). The signs of ugliness thus encourage consumers to embrace individual differences and be brave to resist the mainstream of beauty standards, which helps to create an anxiety-free, inclusive environment (Lynn & Snyder, 2002; Bell, 2018).

In addition, evidence shows that advertising’s communicative dimension has been shifting from promoting utility and symbolic consumption to promoting personalisation (Leiss et al., 1990). In other words, in contrast to the single standards of perfection defined by the majority, individual starts to accept the real self and expect the personalised consumption. The promotion of ugliness in fashion image-making, which is equivalent to individual differences, can potentially resonate with consumers in this generation in terms of the self-verification and the pursuit of personalisation.

Embracing ‘Spontaneity’

The indication of ‘spontaneity’ contains a connotation of ‘humanity’. In these fashion campaigns, the detailed body parts, the nudity revealed in silence, the animal-like posing, the natural facial expressions and the intimacy captured between human interactions, render a touch of spontaneity.

‘Spontaneity’ is improvisational and not limited by the standards of perfection, which means that it can offer openness, contain energy and make for flow (Slemmons, 2008). With this interpretation of spontaneity in fashion images, it can create the internal conversation within the viewers, which can potentially encourage embracing the human spontaneity and thus enhancing their self-acceptance (Rose, 2001; Harter, 2002).

The signs of spontaneity reminds of whatever inside people that they always wanted to hide from the public, which in most cases, is the imperfect self. However, as a powerful ideological form, advertising has the power to direct the social perception from the fake, artificial conventionally defined ‘perfection’ to the natural and unique ‘imperfection’ (Leiss et al., 1990; Rose, 2001). The sense of intimacy created by these fashion images appreciate

the human spontaneity with its creativity and social influence. In addition, spontaneity is the condition of being spontaneous, which is unexpected and out of control. The promotion of spontaneity in fashion image-making encourages a compromise between human and human nature and a discovery to the beauty of human spontaneity. Embracing the spontaneity of humanity is to appreciate the freedom of being the real self or whoever individuals want to be. Such a view responds and confirms to the intrinsic needs of competence and autonomy (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Conclusion

The ideas of conventional perfection were historically derived from the political, economic and cultural ideologies for societal development (Shinkle, 2008). It has long been the myths dominating fashion and its communication, attempting to impose certain values on consumers. However, perfection is always defined and stable while imperfection holds countless possibilities; it offers an openness during the fashion image-making and has the potential to effortlessly resonate with the viewers (Coleman & Figueroa, 2010; Slemmons, 2008).

The current study demonstrated the transition of ideologies behind fashion advertising from pursuing the single standards of perfection to the contemporary embracing of the imperfect self. The findings demonstrated there was a shift from the concern of unhappiness and ill-health that the fashion industry has long been accused of, to an explicit focus on factors that may enhance consumers' subjective well-being through fashion communication.

Five themes identified from the analysis of the contemporary fashion advertising images demonstrated embracing of imperfection that is against the traditionally defined perfection, i.e. flawless, incomparably polished and the conformity of single standards. By supporting 'anonymity', fashion brand communication is against excessive self-focus and helps reducing anxiety that is due to being imperfect. By promoting 'rawness', fashion communication encourages authenticity and uniqueness. 'Banality' rejects materialism and promotes the beauty of the boring day. 'Ugliness' advocates for removal of the single standards and celebrate individual differences, and 'spontaneity' is interchangeable for humanity, freedom, openness, and acceptance of self. Standing for the signs supporting individual differences, and self-acceptance in the branded visual communication seems to be a smart move to maintain a brand's position as a fashion leader and innovator. Therefore, designers, advertisers and image-makers should attract their consumers with not only the physical

attributes of products but also intangible values that strategically target and meet their consumers' increasingly complex psychological needs (Werner, 2018).

Limitations and Implications

This study was based on an analysis upon the latest fashion advertising images from prestigious fashion brands established in the 20th century; the contemporary emerging fashion labels and designers could also have a considerable social impact on the society. Thus, this analysis can only be considered to be an initial study for the contemporary phenomena of embracing imperfection in fashion communication.

Due to the nature of semiotic analysis, there is an assumption that the image viewers possess certain common sense in image-reading such as visual elements derived from the daily life, basic perception within psychological functioning, and importantly, a certain understanding of the brands as the brands do have their target consumers in mind during image-making. Such assumption does not ensure the success of the message delivery during the advertising communication, and therefore, the sample images in this study were selected on the basis of the brand reputations evaluated by a Deloitte report (2018).

Although semiotic analysis model and the model of the meaning transfer process were applied in the current study, the analysis of images did not detail the process of the image coding because a semiotic analysis generally aims to investigate details while the sample size and the words limit of this study did not allow us to present the entire semiotic process of the sample.

The linkage between the psychological wellbeing and the fashion image-making can be further explored and worth investigating as it can help to improve the construction of contemporary fashion industry and consumer culture. Future research for the subjective wellbeing and fashion communication can either concentrate the analysis of a single image (small sample size) to reach a deeper understanding of where every sign is derived from for an ideological study in fashion communication; or conduct a content analysis based on an image collection of the emerging fashion labels to investigate the communication techniques in contemporary image-making with a specific number of similar elements interpretative of imperfection within the images to see how the trend develops.

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