



When luxury advertising adds the identity values of luxury: A semiotic analysis

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ABSTRACT

The majority of researches on luxury focus on the behaviour and opinions of consumers and let drop the important role that advertising produces on them, as is done in this work and shown with a relational model. In addition to their commercial message, some remarkable and artistic advertisements convey the identity values of luxury (IVL) characterizing luxury parent Houses. We list and analyze these IVL: craft production, raw materials, respect of craftsmen, their knowledge, know-how, gestures and traits of artistic genius. A semiotic and rhetoric analysis of two selected advertisements (Louis Vuitton, Hermès) allow to identify the semic richness of discursive content of symbolic images and identity narratives of each luxury brand (“griffe”), revealing the implicit IVL. We conclude that strength and power of major luxury Houses lie in the global coherence they apply everywhere (creation, products, narratives and advertisements), reinforcing their brand image and attracting more loyal consumers.

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1. Introduction

The great names of French luxury make the world consumers dreaming: Baccarat and St. Louis (crystal), Christofle and Puiforcat (silverware), Chanel, Christian Dior and Yves Saint Laurent (fashion and perfumery), Guerlain (perfumery), Hermès and Louis Vuitton (leather articles and accessories), Moët et Chandon, Veuve Clicquot and Château d'Yquem (champagne and wines), Dalloyau, Lenôtre and Hédiard (gastronomy). But beyond the dreams, ostentatious glamour and distinction that these brands can generate (Assouly, 2011), often associated with a notion of privilege (Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2011) and of eternal luxury (Lipovetsky & Roux, 2003), the luxury sector (Castarede, 2006, 2008) is one of the pillars of French industry. Employing around 270,000 people worldwide, it now generates nearly 200 billion Euros turnover per year. Driven not only by emerging markets (BRICS), but also by the haves from UAE and other oil producing countries, the luxury sector succeeded to ignore the crisis, maintaining double-digit growing rates.

For a long time, many analysts and journalists have argued that luxury did not need advertising to grow, even if brands that would dare fall into temptation *ipso facto* would lose their quality of luxury parent Houses.¹ However, the luxury sector has felt the imperative need to communicate about its own intrinsic and identity values of luxury (IVL), to differentiate from other companies who want to access luxury market, by making products named as being luxury even if they are not, and by using an

abusive terminology: *masstige*, *opuluxe*, *premium*, *ultra-premium*, *trading up*, *hyperluxury*, *real or true luxury* (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009).

We can thus raise the question: how to promote their exceptional products while informing the consumer about the principles and values of true or authentic luxury, without prejudicing both the highly qualitative and prestigious image of luxury brands (“*griffes*”),² and the dimension of dreams, of exceptional sensuality and unique multi-sensory experiences reflected by this sector? To address this dilemma, we analyzed two recent advertising discourses of luxury conducted by Louis Vuitton (hereinafter LV) and Hermès, recognized to be the two greatest luxury brands in the world, based on 2 million consumer interviews in 30-plus countries (Schept et al., 2013: LV ranked first and Hermès second, in the “Top 10 Luxury BrandZ”, p.53–55; and ranked fourth and sixth in the “Top 10 in Europe”, respectively). LV and Hermès “significantly differentiate from other luxury brands” and LV “tends to be more accessible, widely celebrating its heritage in travel and evoking the elegance of earlier periods” (Schept et al., 2013: p.34).

We study the rhetoric (Rhet.) of these two advertisements using a semiotic (syntagmatic and syntactic) approach, in order to emphasize symbolic values of iconographic and filmographic images, and their components (personages, décor elements, luxury products). We highlight different implicit communication techniques used by these two major brands, representative of the French Luxury sector, and show

² In French the word “griffe” refers exclusively to the brand of a manufacturer of luxury products. It also reflects the personality traits of the creator, identified in his artistic works (= fingerprint). Often, it materializes in a piece of cloth sewn into a garment bearing the name or signature of the creator (Rey-Debove & Rey, 2000). While the word “brand” is used for all other products or services.

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¹ Following the terminology used by the Comité Colbert that assemble “75 French luxury Houses and 13 cultural institutions associated to represent French Art de Vivre” (Comité Colbert, Annual Report, 2012).

how the luxury publicity message may become universal (understandable for every one) in an international marketing context.

After being reviewed the literature about luxury parent Houses, their products and customers, their communication and advertising, we establish our research framework. Because the majority of researches focuses on the behaviour and opinions of luxury consumers and let drop the important role of advertising on such attitudes and opinions, we will fill this gap by showing how the explicit and implicit messages in luxury advertising emotionally influence consumers (Fig. 1). We then elaborate the list of implicit and IVL (Table 1).

Within this framework, we selected two remarkable advertisements of LV (ad campaign 2013) and Hermès (ad campaign 2012), that we analyze using a semiotic and rhetoric method. We then relate their symbolic values with implicit IVL and identify their contributions to reinforce the coherence of the luxury brand image. We also emphasize the connections between these two advertisings and Art, and we deduce and explicit the specificities and techniques of luxury advertising. We conclude that thanks to identity coherence (creation, products, narratives and advertisings), luxury “griffes” are able to attract more and more consumers and to reinforce their luxury brand image.

2. Literature review

2.1. The luxury parent Houses, products and customers

Luxury sector has a long history (Castarede, 2006, 2008) and has been continuously enriched by new contributions and innovations (Bastien & Kapferer, 2008; Dubois, Laurent & Czellar, 2001; Fionda & Moore, 2009; Lipovetsky & Roux, 2003; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004), enabling then its internationalization (Moore, Doherty & Doyle, 2010; Zhang & Kim, 2013).

Formerly restricted to an elite (Castarede, 2008; Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2011) in search of authenticity (Cova & Cova, 2002b), luxury has gradually moved towards other clienteles (Castarede, 2006; Heilbrunn, 1999; Lipovetsky & Roux, 2003). Now, luxury is oriented towards the acquisition of new sensations and experiences (Boutaud, 2007; Ladwein, 2002), to conspicuous consumption (Lipovetsky & Roux, 2003; Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2013; Sicard, 2005) and to search for emotional benefits (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2009; Truong & McColl, 2011).

There are two components in the consumer behaviour (Backstrom & Johansson, 2006; Carù & Cova, 2007; Chaudhuri, 2002; Graillot, 2003; Ladwein, 1999): the *cognitive or rational* (consumers need to learn about the product before buying it), and the *subjective or emotional* (resulting from cumulative shopping experiences).

Traditionally, luxury brands have always staged their products so as to bring out their mythical and sacred aspect (Chevalier & Gutsatz, 2012; Dion, 2007) not only when exhibiting in parent Houses but also in luxury advertising.

Social behaviour today and excessive advertising induce disproportionate and extravagant consumption (Hetzl, 2002) trying to “sell [consumers] the experience of another self” (Dampérat, Drago & Larivet, 2002).

As pointed out by Stokburger-Sauer and Teichmann (2013), luxury is more an affair of women than of men: “for female consumers, luxury brands provide more uniqueness, status and hedonic value than non-luxury brands”, allowing luxury Houses to sell at higher prices the female luxury products. Women would perceive more than men, the high symbolic and social value of such luxury brands through the effective possession of branded products. Because this gender specificity predominance, we analyze here two luxury’s advertising campaigns devoted to women consumers. In general, women search for conspicuousness, uniqueness, quality, hedonic value and extended self-value (De Lassus & Anido Freire, 2013; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004) buying luxury products.

2.2. Communication of luxury Houses

Communication is intended to provide a meaning to available information (Sicard, 2001). But to achieve this goal it is essential that this communication be conceived appropriately. This is especially true when we are dealing with luxury communication (Knafo, 2008).

Luxury is often regarded as the empire of the ephemeral (Lipovetsky, 1987) and useless (Paquot, 2007), devoted to “make ostentation” (Assouly, 2011) and satisfy the superfluous desires of consumers (Giardino, 2007). However, many researchers agree that, thanks to the strength of the brands (Kapferer, 1995) and their strong sense of identity belonging (Marseille, 2000), luxury has become eternal (Lipovetsky & Roux, 2003). Nevertheless, the power and reputation of a luxury brand and the respect it imposes to competitors are not eternal. Luxury brands require the application of irreproachable marketing (Semprini, 1992) and management (Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2003). Moreover, they must be dynamic and constantly adapt to socio-economic (Danziger, 2005) and cultural changes in society (Dubois & Duquesne, 1993). In this way, the luxury sector is able to better meet the daily dreams and desires (Duguay, 2007; Haie, 2002), of national and international consumers (Mutscheler, 1992; Twitchell, 2002) and to build their loyalty (Oechsl, 2004). Luxury advertising accompanies

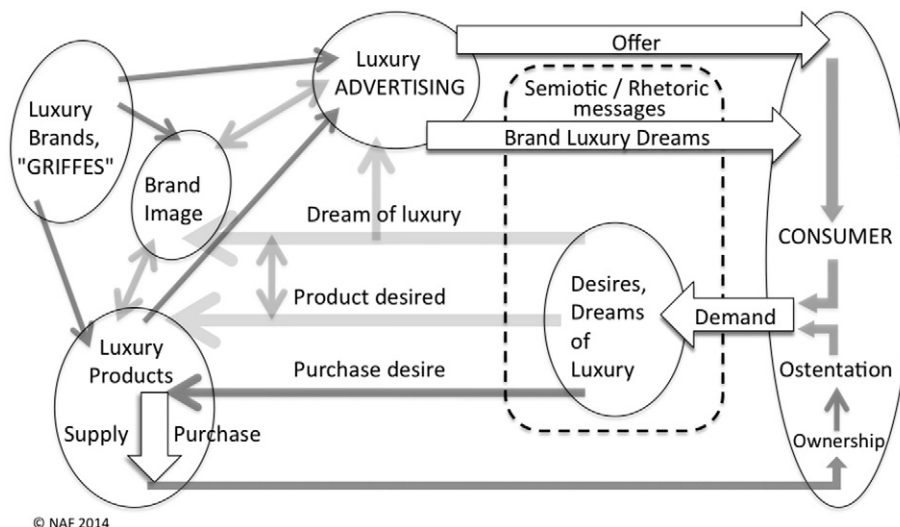


Fig. 1. Model of relationships between luxury brands and consumers, outlining two paths: the initiatory and the confirmatory paths.

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