Store Display of New Masculine Aesthetic Codes: a Semiotic Approach

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Socio-cultural changes impact gender roles and the marketplace. Few studies have addressed the relationship between retail strategies and masculine consumption and values. Brands successfully develop new lines for men including jewelry, the lingerie and cosmetics. This paper intends to understand and describe how the new postmodern masculine values and codes shape retailing strategies. Therefore, our study performs a semiotic analysis of 20 brands store visuals applied to sectors related to appearance (Skincare, Fashion, Lingerie). We deeply explore the meaning of each of them and the way they give an account of brands evolving masculine rep today.

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References

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**Abstract**

Socio-cultural changes impact gender roles and the marketplace. Few studies have addressed the relationship between retail strategies and masculine consumption and values. Brands successfully develop new lines for men including jewelry, the lingerie and cosmetics. This paper intends to understand and describe how the new postmodern masculine values and codes shape retailing strategies. Therefore, our study performs a semiotic analysis of 20 brands store visuals applied to sectors related to appearance (Skincare, Fashion, Lingerie). We deeply explore the meaning of each of them and the way they give an account of brands evolving masculine rep today.

**Introduction**

Gender is an important issue in consumer research. Yet, few studies have addressed the relationship between retail strategies and masculine consumption and values. Some scholars developed a framework to understand male consumption (Holt and Thompson, 2004, Schroder and Zwick, 2004, Elliott and Elliott, 2006). While sociocultural changes are taking place in this postmodern era, the traditional masculine and feminine values are evolving, leading to changing gender roles and having impact on the market place (Kimmel and Tissier-Desbordes, 2000). Men are becoming concerned with appearance and beauty, in the traditional feminine way, and sales of male cosmetics and fashion are increasing. Trendy words are used to describe this “new man” sensitive to appearance, body conscious: metrosexual, übersexual... (Tuncay, 2006, Rinallo, forthcoming). Brands successfully develop new lines for men including jewelry, the lingerie and cosmetics. New departments stores dedicated to men opened recently with innovative concepts. Brands need to adapt their retailing strategies to changing male consumers. An efficient display of the new offer and persuasive brand communication in the store/Pos are key factors of success.

This paper intends to understand and describe how the new postmodern masculine values and codes shape retailing strategies.

**Retailing and brand communication**

The POS/Store are valuable place for communication and exchange with effective and potential customers. In this space, an aspect of the distinctive experience of the brand is also lived: it is particularly true for products linked to appearance (Hetzel, 2002). Key factors of success of these products rely on their own physical properties but also mainly on brand communication and the specific relation built with the consumer in the store. The development of the masculine segment linked to appearance seems to require new sale environments as they were previously mainly shaped to welcome female consumers. The context of new masculine aesthetic codes and the social fears largely expressed by men as regard to the consumption of fashion/beauty convey a theoretical account for a new definition of retailing strategies targeting men.

**Masculinity and Consumer research**

Male consumption and masculinity are of a renewed interest in consumer research. Scholars have recently proposed conceptualizations of masculinity (Tuncay and Ottes, 2007), started also exploring male reactions to media and fashion discourses (Elliot and Elliott, 2005, Rinallo, 2007), or analyzed male rep in advertising (Schroder and Zwick, 04, Ourahmoune and Nyeck, forthcoming). Yet, though communication in the POS/store is an essential link between brand narratives and “new male shoppers” discourses, it is insufficiently researched. Moreover, male shoppers behavior research has often involved expected traditional masculine category products and scarcely the fashion consumption. Despite some research, which indicates that men and women shop differently, Ottes and McGrath (2001) found that myths still exist on how men shop. They found in their study of male shoppers that some men did indeed enjoy shopping and even purchased “feminine” goods such as crystal. Also, study by Rinallo (2007) of (real) male discourses on fashion revealed that the distribution canal could have an impact on men’s behavior toward the new offer and their decision to step into it. Therefore, we propose ton enhance our knowledge of brand discourses on masculinity through the retailing.

**Research questions**

- How do brands display new masculine codes in department stores, concept stores, and flagships to stay in touch with evolving male consumers?
- How do the stores and products display successfully convey the diverse masculine representations vs the former unique one (traditional)?
Methodology

Structural semiotic allows discovering the meaning of cultural codes contained in brand narratives (Floch, 1995). An observation on the POS for each brand is followed by immediate report on a grid previously conceived by the researchers with systematic analysis categories (design, style, light, colors, forms, furniture, male/female rep, itinerary, store windows...). Also, researchers use a journal with free comments. Multiple visits to a same store by different authors of the paper allow to gather a maximum of information and to operate a triangulation. It is forbidden by law to take pictures on the POS. Then, each grid is analyzed and brands discourses compared to come up with our findings.

Data

Our study performs a semiotic analysis of 20 brands store visuals applied to sectors related to appearance (Skincare, Fashion, Lingerie): Vuitton, Gucci, Dior, Boss, Dolce & Gabbana, Smalto, Rolex, Cartier, Philippe Patek, Dunhill, Guerlain, Nickel, Clarins, Dim, Hom, Aubade, Barbara, Chanel, Celine, Mac.

Brands under study are leaders on their specific. We selected brands only for men, only for women, and brands for both men and women to analyze a wide variety of gender brands discourses.

Major Findings

Semiotic brand analysis on the POS display different discourses addressed to male shoppers: traditional masculine themes vs feminine, undifferentiated masculine and feminine codes (androgynous) and finally new masculine codes. We deeply explore the meaning of each of them and the way they give an account of brands evolving masculine rep today. Yet, we found out that the majority of brands still emphasize a traditional masculinity on the POS clashing with mass media new masculine rep (ads, magazines, web site…). Then, some territories of communication are left empty by brands on the POS when dealing with masculine rep. The authors suggest that the media discourse might always been advanced when dealing with new values. Also, postmodern values are rising but are still not dominant.

Brands seem to hesitate applying them to all of their customers.

Concluding comments

The paper is consistent with previous research that emphasizes male resistance to new brand discourses on masculinity that upset traditional masculine rep. Our study reveals that most brands take into account social fears expressed by male consumers when dealing with communication on the POS. Even brands that display very new media/ advertising discourses on masculinity follow a prudent retailing communication. Then, we address a lack in the literature as regard to masculinity and retailing. However, the paper also anticipates innovative communication territories crucial to brands managers that target male consumers specifically on the POS/store.

Limits

Future research should explore more deeply the reason of such a difference between brands communication on the POS and brands ads/media discourses as regard to masculinity.

References


Ourahmoune, Nacima and Simon Nyeck (forthcoming), “Gender Values and Brand Communication: The transfer of masculine representations to brand narratives”, European Advances in Consumer Research, Vol VIII.

