Artistic Stylistic Properties of Fashion Luxury Advertisements

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In the aesthetic economy, visual consumption is critical. Images possess distinct meaning according to a given historical, cultural, and social framework. Thus, meaning conveyed through visual rhetoric, symbol theory, and visual literacy are in flux according to the changes in society. Through an exploratory content analysis, this study identifies current artistic and thematic stylistic properties used in fashion luxury advertisements. New indirect visual tropes were identified and included low prototypicality, hyperreality, and pastiche. The study shows a sociohistoric pattern of visual consumption influenced by the social structure of artistic movements, which shapes consumption choices and behaviors.

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Visual consumption is a critical attribute of the experience economy. The visual past is critical as it influences a vocabulary of representation. Traditions of art history inform how consumers relate to the visual world, affecting advertising imagery and creative techniques (Schroeder 2002). Through sophisticated visual rhetoric, advertising images become part of a convention-based symbolic system (Scott 1994). Cultural knowledge allows for a learned system of pictorial conventions. Thus, a symbol theory of pictures is needed for complex visual consumption (McCracken 1987). Furthermore, the theory of visual literacy proposes analogical representation does not need obvious visual similarity between the image and what the image is about. Additionally, the lack of explicitness of visual syntax allows advertisers to convey persuasive messages (Messaris 1998).

Fashion photography has shifted stylistically since the 1960s due to cultural and historical changes. Specifically, style was reinterpreted in terms of the new economy. Fashion photography featured the liberated woman in many distinct images: the working girl who replaced couture with prêt-à-porter and the active girl who favored active wear to formal wear. The new rather than the well-made became preferred, thus, making innovation rather than quality signifiers of style (Bruzzi and Gibson 2000). With this change, the “look” of style, its vocabulary, its iconography, were reversed; low became high.

Fashion photography creates a historical document that captures a given period. It is a vehicle for circulating new patterns of consumption tied to evolving notions of the self. Early fashion photography created a visual fantasy to which women could aspire, and which fashion photography still pursues. Only after the art movements of surrealism, realism, and modernism was the fantasy notion challenged. Modernism influenced fashion photography with graphic and geometric styles while surrealism inspired dream-like images. Realism inspired a less formal approach where models were depicted in movement. Brutal realism portrayed images of melancholy and anxiety, using images that resembled snapshots with a glamorous setting. The School of London Style stripped the fantasies of the fashion industry and presented the reality of everyday life in a defiant anti-glamer style (Bruzzi and Gibson 2000).

The purpose of this study is to identify artistic stylistic properties of fashion luxury advertisements. The dimensions of style can be examined to evaluate brand identity-related styles by using four perceptual dimensions: complexity, representation, movement, and potency (Schmitt and Simonson 1997). The dimension of complexity places style on a continuum from simple to complex. Minimalism, on one end of the spectrum, strives for simplicity of structure and form while ornamentalism possesses complexity and multiple meanings. Representation explores the depiction of reality on a continuum of realism to abstraction. Realism is the depiction of the world of objects and human beings. Conversely, abstraction does not represent any objects in the contemporary real world. Movement is placed on a continuum from dynamic to static. The style dimension of potency refers to whether an identity comes across as loud and strong, or soft and weak.

Coherent themes provide mental anchors and reference points that are a crucial to aesthetics. The thematic stylistic property of prototypicality is the degree to which an object is representative of a category. In most cases, consumers respond more favorably to objects that are highly prototypical as they are more familiar. However, some consumers prefer novelty as seen in non-prototypical images (Veryzer and Hutchinson 1998). The postmodern thematic elements of pastiche and hyper-reality are also investigated. Pastiche refers to irony, parody, and imitation. Hyper-reality involves the loss of a sense of authenticity and the becoming real of what was originally a simulation (Brown 1995).

An exploratory content analysis approach was used to reveal how stylistic properties evolve. A pretest of eighty hundred and twelve fashion luxury advertisements that advertise apparel and leather goods and accessories were sampled. Vogue magazine was selected as it offers visual similarity between the image and what the image is about. Additionally, the lack of explicitness of visual syntax allows advertisers to convey persuasive messages (McCracken 1987). Furthermore, the theory of visual literacy proposes analogical representation does not need obvious visual similarity between the image and what the image is about. Additionally, the lack of explicitness of visual syntax allows advertisers to convey persuasive messages (Messaris 1998).

The study is designed to contribute to the literature in multiple ways. First, the study examines the social and cultural antecedents for fashion luxury advertisements during 1995-2000 exhibited the following perceptual dimensions of style: minimalism (85%), realism (91%), static movement (86%), and soft and weak potency (86%). Interestingly, advertisements during 2005-2010 also featured the same dimensions of style: minimalism (53%), realism (84%), static movement (76%), and soft and weak potency (68%). Currently, the artistic stylistic properties support a traditional classical visual style, which is characterized by simplicity, realism, static movement, and lack of color. However, there is an increasing trend towards the ornamental, abstract, dynamic, and loud and strong styles. The postmodern thematic stylistic properties of hyper-reality and pastiche respectively increased 30% and 10%. During 1995-2000, 63% of ads had no or low prototypicality while 39% had no or low prototypicality during 2005-2010. Although, there was a decrease, there are still a considerable number of ads that lack prototypicality suggesting the social construct of fashion luxury is evolving as it is based on historical and cultural conditions influenced by the broad cultural production system of artistic movements. There are parallels between the artistic movements and advertising. Consumers view advertisements as a cultural text with distinct cultural codes of branding, therefore, advertisers need to understand the meaning based representation system in order to create powerful campaigns.

The study is designed to contribute to the literature in multiple ways. First, the study examines the social and cultural antecedents for fashion luxury advertisements. Secondly, the study illustrates a negotiated concept of luxury that is culturally derived. Thirdly, the study identifies visual creative techniques and execution tactics. The objective is to show a sociohistoric pattern of visual consumption influenced by the social structure of artistic movements, which shapes consumption choices and behaviors.

REFERENCES

When the Same Objects Mean Completely Different Things That Unite Us All

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The role of special objects in the construction of identities is one of the most central concepts in consumer research (Arnould and Thompson 2005). While previous research has focused on the relations between special possessions and either individual identities (Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995) or collective identities (Bell 1992), more recent research stresses the importance of considering objects through the lens of dynamic interplays between individual, relational, and collective identities. For example, Epp and Price (2008) assert (but do not empirically test) that a single activity that is symbolic for a collective identity (e.g., family) can incorporate a diversity of meanings to the individual members of the collective. Going beyond the context of family identities, the purpose of the current research is to empirically explore how special objects help consumers to negotiate tensions that may arise when they seek affiliation in a consumption community and strive to maintain their autonomous identities at the same time.

We examine this question through ethnographic research of the engineering student community at our university. This community resembles more typical consumption communities in that a variety of special objects, most notably a jacket called the “Golden Party Armor” (GPA), are central to this community. Over the last two years, we have visited various community events and have been exposed to many GPAs during our daily commute over campus. In addition to observational research, we conducted on-site and in-depth interviews with several members of the community.

We find that students use the GPA to negotiate individual and collective identities. Four interrelated themes emerged through interpretive analysis. (1) GPA as a community symbol: The GPA is heavily invested with shared meanings, and wearing the GPA enables students to be a part of the community. On a more collective level, wearing the GPA also sets the engineering community apart from other faculties and thereby provides collective identities for our informants. (2) Imbuing individualized meanings: Our informants achieve individuality within their community through physically altering their jacket. Almost all jackets we observed over the last two years have physical alterations in forms of color, bar, and badges. The combination of such additions make each jacket unique. On a more psychological level, we also found our interview partners to achieve individuality within their community by using their jacket as a “scrapbook” to collect individualizing memories and experiences. Through its inclusion in core community events (e.g., slamming the jacket, dyeing the jacket purple, kicking the jacket over the campus, and having cars rolling over the jacket), each jacket becomes a transcript of ones own personal history with the community. (3) Standing out without falling outside: All GPAs have certain features (e.g., the university crest) that reaffirm the communal character of the jacket. Beyond this, community members adhere to firm rules and norms how to individualize their jackets (e.g., which and where badges can be added). In our fieldwork, we hardly ever came across jackets that break with these codes. Even more surprising, we found that some interview partners did not bother to sew on all the badges they had, even if these badges represented important achievements within their community. We interpret such foregone opportunities to highlight individual uniqueness as attempts to emphasize the shared meaning of the jacket for the sake of safeguarding one’s communal identity. (4) Enabling individualization through enacting community: It is interesting to note that opportunities to individualize one’s GPA are provided through community traditions. For example, dyeing one’s jacket purple offers opportunities for individualized experiences (e.g., the act of purpling, or how the purple color fades away) while at the same time the shared rituals reaffirms the community and increases the communal character of the jacket. This link between individuality and community is apparent in how students connect their enactment of a community ritual (i.e., either “kicking home” their jacket as a first year student or interfering with such efforts as an upper year student) with both notions of experiencing community and collecting unique experiences.

In sum, our study demonstrates how community members embed individualized meanings into a shared community symbol while emphasizing and reaffirming – not sacrificing – its shared meanings. In other words, the ‘same object’, by becoming a ‘completely different thing’ in everybody’s own mind, allows community members to feel like individuals, but by being still the ‘same object’ it also ‘unites’ these individuals in a community. We believe that these findings advance our understanding of the meaning of objects and of the nature of object-person relationships. Specifically, we point out how objects can take on different meanings at any singular moment in time (Epp and Price 2010) and how objects allow consumers to negotiate conflicts that can arise from an interplay of various levels of identities (Epp and Price 2008). Previous research exploring multiple layers of meanings emphasizes the relative freedom consumers enjoy in constructing individualized meanings (Hirschman 2001), but also that some meanings are institutionalized as a shared “canon” (Kozinets 2001). However, this research does not pay attention to the interplay between individual and collective identities and therefore curtails our understanding of the dynamic nature of subject-object relationships: By only adopting an individual identity perspective, one fails to recognize how shared meanings are preserved and becomes prone to misinterpret members’ safeguarding activities as sign domination (Murray 2002). On the other hand, by only adopting a communal...