

# The Language of Luxury Fashion

## Advertising: Technology of the Self and Spectacle

---

### **Abstract**

#### **Purpose**

Ubiquitous internet access and social media make visual consumption possibly the most vital characteristic of the experience economy. A cumulative, integrative framework for the analysis of visual artefacts has thus been called for as existing analytical tools and theoretical frameworks (such as semiotics, discourse analysis, content analysis, iconography, rhetoric, and so on) each provide in isolation only a restricted perspective. To advance best practice towards shaping brand perception and consumer engagement this paper provides a crucial analytical tool to uncover the unique and specific characteristics of identity luxury fashion brand discourse by introducing and applying such an integrative framework.

#### **Design/methodology/approach**

A rigorous grounded theory approach was applied to a corpus of primary data, print advertising in *Vogue* (UK and US) and *Vanity Fair* (UK). Outcomes were distilled to first principles of meaning-making and aggregated in a framework which also integrates long-existing classics from diverse fields of knowledge to present a broad cumulative perspective for the analysis of visual discursive practice. This paper demonstrates the methodological rigour and validity of the framework, that is, its practical adequacy and explanatory power in uncovering the identity brand discourse of luxury fashion.

#### **Findings**

An application of the integrative framework breaks new ground in uncovering the discreet identity characteristics of the discursive practice of the luxury brands under investigation, Chanel and Gucci, which can be encapsulated as gendered technology of the confident self (Foucault) and spectacle (Debord) respectively.

## **Research limitations / implications**

To advance theory that illuminates understanding and shaping of brand perception and consumer engagement with luxury fashion brands, the proposed framework is the first to integrate insight from a rigorous analysis of primary data with long-existing classics from salient fields of knowledge. It, thus, provides a broader, more inclusive perspective that elucidates the multifaceted layers of meaning of luxury fashion discourse in a new and comprehensive way which existing approaches with focus on an isolated dimension such as semiotics or nonverbal behaviour and so on would not have been able to reveal.

## **Practical implications**

The inclusive theoretical framework provides a parsimonious and practical tool that can be applied by non-experts across disciplines to unlock meaning in fashion discourse as a route to shaping brand image and engaging consumers.

## **Originality**

The paper provides a new perspective on the communication practice of luxury fashion advertising as the new integrative framework illuminates layers of meaning crucial to understanding the intricacies of identity brand discourse and to shaping brand perception and engaging consumers.

## Introduction

Fuelled by ubiquitous access to the internet and the use of social media, visual consumption is possibly the most crucial characteristic of the experience economy (Schroeder, 2002). The consumer of the future is digital and highly networked. Online platforms are largely visually dominated, for instance, more than 99% of Facebook posts include an image (Brandwatch, 2015). Shaping the public perception of brands social media empower the consumer and can erode marketers' control. Indeed, the Italian luxury fashion brand Gucci suffered a backlash on social media in 2019, as its black balaclava sweater with a broad red circle around the mouth evoked the demeaning and mocking stereotype of the 'blackface' of minstrel (Illustration 1) shows for its audience (Chiu, 2019). Gucci apologised and withdrew the item. British luxury fashion brand Burberry suffered a backlash for styling the drawstrings of a hoodie like a noose (Picheta, 2019), offensive to African Americans for evoking lynchings and offensive in Britain where a high rate of suicide, especially among young men, has raised concerns.



Illustration 1 Big Minstrel Jubilee. Courtesy of The Advertising Archives

The managerial implications are self-evident: understanding visual discourse presents organisations with a valuable opportunity to (re-)gain control over the conversation around a brand and to steer the direction of the public image. However, in terms of understanding how visual language works, there is still a great deal of theoretical, methodological and empirical diversity, little integration of findings and practices across disciplines leading to visual methods which "seem to be reinvented over and over again without gaining much methodological depth and often without consideration of long-existing classics in the field" (Pauwels, 2015, p.4).

## **The State of the Field**

In the discipline of marketing a long and distinguished tradition has theorised consumer culture and persuasion based on theoretical models rooted in social psychology from Festinger's Social Comparison Theory (1954), Petty and Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model (1986) and Ajzen and Fishbein's Theory of Reasoned Action (1991) to Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Askegaard, 2015). Advertising has received scholarly attention pertaining to a variety of findings such as identification of ideological dimensions (e.g. Goldman, 1992/2000; Messaris, 1996; Williamson, 1978/2002), stylistic and rhetorical properties (e.g. Lester, 2020; McQuarrie & Phillips, 2008) with a particularly strong focus on consumer behaviour and attitude (e.g. Dens & Pelsmacker, 2010; Holiday, Loof, Cummins & McCord, 2019; Scott & Batra, 2003).

Despite the growing marketing interest in luxury and luxury fashion, scholarship of fashion brand advertising is still an emerging area as there has been little research, except into types of models in terms of body type and size (Taylor, 2016) which, moreover, yielded conflicting findings (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2011). A review of fashion advertising research (Taylor & Costello, 2017) shows a focus on persuasion, specifically consumer response, processing, values, attitudes and behaviour and advertising effectiveness. The body of literature reviewed addresses issues such as factors determining advertising effectiveness, including different types of models; cross-national consumer segmentation; social media advertising and the impact of controversial fashion advertising on consumers. The studies often consist of qualitative explorations of fashion magazine ads as stimuli or of experimental research involving manipulated versions of print advertisements (Taylor & Costello, 2017) and

frequently focus how consumers process and respond to advertising (e.g. Special Issues of JFMM 17.4, 2013, and 18.2, 2014; Halwani, 2019).

However, in the "attention economy, the aesthetic economy, and the experience economy" new perspectives and research approaches to the question of how images communicate are also required (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2008, p.277). This article extends Freire's (2014) illustrative semiotic and rhetorical analysis of two luxury fashion advertisements (Louis Vuitton, Hermès) which identifies identity values in the semic richness of the images, Gurzki, Schlatter and Woisetschläger's (2019) analysis of the construction of symbolic meaning in luxury brand print advertising, as well as the work of Kim (2019) and Kim, Lloyd and Cervellon who sought to advance theory by "uncovering narratives for luxury brands" in the rich imagery of advertisements "as route to engagement with brands" (2016, p.304).

## Methodology

A great diversity of approaches to visual research coupled with conflicting views on their strengths and weaknesses (see, for example, Margolis & Pauwels, 2011) suggests a new way of looking is required to understand how visual discourse works:

Whereas the array of analytical tools and theoretical frameworks (e.g., semiotics, discourse analysis, content analysis, framing analysis, iconography, rhetoric, etc.) to examine visuals to date seems very broad [...] the majority of such approaches provide only a narrow perspective on the matter, and few scholars are consumed with the objective to integrate the valuable, yet partial, 'ways of looking' into a more encompassing model for visual analysis. Moreover, many existing approaches lack clear methodological directions and often prove ill-equipped to disclose the complex layers of meaning of visual artefacts produced by distinct visual media (Pauwels, 2016, p.1313).

In response to calls for an encompassing integrative model (see also Bateman, 2018; Forceville, 2014; Ledin & Machin, 2018; O'Halloran, Wignell & Tan, 2018; Wildfeuer & Bateman, 2018) to uncover the complex layers of meaning in visual artefacts, Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory provides a dominant data-analytical approach for the construction of novel theory across sociology, management, social work and so on (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p.168) with "clear and systematic recommendations for

theory building from 1967 onwards" (Urquhart, 2019, p.103). Having previously been applied to advertising consumption and the practices and beliefs of advertising creatives (cf. Goulding, 2017), a rigorous grounded theory approach is applied here to advertising as visual discourse in the manner of Potter & Wetherell's (1987) discourse analytic approach (that is, neither as critical discourse analysis (e.g. Fairclough, 1995; Lin, 2012) nor as visual ethnography (e.g. Banks, 2001; Pink, 2007)).

For an integrative cumulative cross-disciplinary theory, the role of extant theory in a grounded theory approach is salient. Some scholars have lamented a "traditionally reluctant engagement" with theoretical literature in grounded theory (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p.173) when, in fact, Glaser and Strauss's method, "unlike analytic induction, is more likely to be applied in the same study to any kind of qualitative information, including observations, interviews, documents, articles, books, and so forth" and the "literature of other professional areas" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp.104, 111).

The scope of the research was limited to a narrowly defined type of static text, namely a corpus of print advertising in Anglo-American upmarket women's magazines (*Vogue* UK and US, *Vanity Fair* UK) as units of analysis. The particular sample was chosen both for its ubiquity and accessibility to laypersons as well as for facilitating easier access to a potential 'preferred' reading (S. Hall, 1980) in comparison with other texts (e.g. graffiti or modern art). The initial sample consisted of all discreet double-page advertisements taken from the upmarket women's magazines (*Vogue* UK and US and *Vanity Fair* UK) starting September 2015 until the arbitrary number 200 was reached (November 2015). The advertisements feature primarily luxury fashion but also accessories and cosmetics. Additional theoretical sampling (an iterative process of data collection directed by an evolving understanding of the theoretical constructs) included approximately 80 advertisements from *Esquire* and *GQ* UK (September / October 2015) as well as dozens of further individual advertisement chosen because they constituted 'an extreme, typical, deviant, unique, or particularly revelatory unit for shedding light on the issues that the researcher is seeking to elaborate' (Schwandt, 2007, p.270).

Writing up grounded theory for publication as it was conducted '– that is, as a process of presenting the research questions, a discussion of data collection and codes, followed by findings, theory, and recontextualisation in the literature. [...] does not work' (Goulding, 2017, p.68). Different theoretical assumptions and the predominantly qualitative nature of grounded

research also make notions of reliability and validity derived from quantitative research unworkable.

The process of “working through the data, mentally wrestling with the various meanings and interpretations , discarding and refining codes, and ultimately identifying and justifying sets of relationships” (Goulding, 2017, p.67) is too wide-ranging and detailed to be included here. It can only be illustrated briefly, particularly in relation to distilling parsimonious first principles of meaning-making for an encompassing theory that includes existing concepts that have been documented, challenged and renegotiated for decades in salient fields of knowledge. For example in semiotics, Eco (1982) proposes a captivating taxonomy of codes for reading images, namely perceptive codes, codes of recognition, codes of transmission, tonal codes, iconic codes, iconographic codes, codes of taste and sensibility, rhetorical codes, stylistic codes and codes of the unconscious. Peirce’s classic triad of signs (1940/2001, pp.107-113) differentiates the relationship between sign and object based on resemblance (icon), causal connection (index) and convention (symbol). However, with a view to the practicability of an inclusive cross-disciplinary framework, Barthes’s (1964/1999) concepts of denotation (literal depiction) and connotation (cultural associations) stand out as first principles of meaning-making in terms of parsimony and explicatory power. It is argued, that a viewer understands that, say, a figure in a picture resembles a person, smoke might be caused by fire, and that the meaning of a traffic sign needs to be learned without needing to know Peirce’s terminology.

As a result of integrating as much existing theory as necessary into a cumulative framework, some of it may appear reductive as well as self-evident in comparison with the elaborate debates carried out in the academic disciplines drawn on; there may seem to be a certain kind of obviousness. This is to be expected, as the framework unsurprisingly captures in part what has been explored and negotiated in well-established scholarly disciplines over centuries. However, the fundamental principles of meaning did not come "ready identified" (Gill, 2018) as the brief illustration above shows but were entangled in highly challenging conceptual complexity and needed to eschew mere description (cf. for example O’Toole, 1994; Baldry & Thibault, 2006). They had to be identified, clustered, and distilled to first principles from a large corpus of visual discourse as well as prove their explicatory value.

## **The Theoretical Framework**

Due to lack of space, the theory will be presented here differently from the way it was generated, namely firstly as a “set of propositions” which are intended to become useful tools rather than a “theoretical discussion” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.31). Secondly, to assure its theoretical robustness, validity, practicability and explicatory power the framework derived in a grounded theory approach to print advertising from 2015, will be applied to a fresh set of data, luxury fashion advertising in *Vogue* UK and US from 2018. The demonstration of validity, that is, practical adequacy and explicatory power, will furthermore have to be illustrative as in qualitative research the evidence can rarely be expressed in numbers, so the researcher typically presents “characteristic illustrations” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.228). In the development of a theory grounded in data, constructs that aim to explain observable phenomena in visual discourse systematically were distilled from the primary data and existing theory and aggregated into fields of knowledge (domains) which acknowledge and credit the long-existing classics in the respective fields. Figure 1 shows the salient domains and their fundamental constructs or first principles.

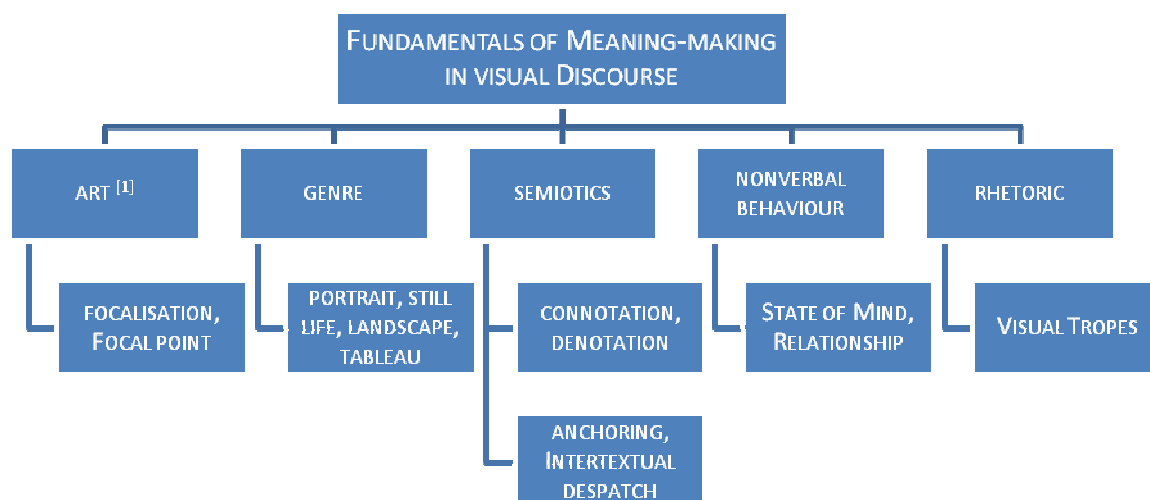


Figure 1 Fundamentals of Meaning-Making in Visual Discourse: Domains and Fundamental Constructs

[1] includes visual arts, photography, film studies, literary and narrative theory



## Art Fundamentals

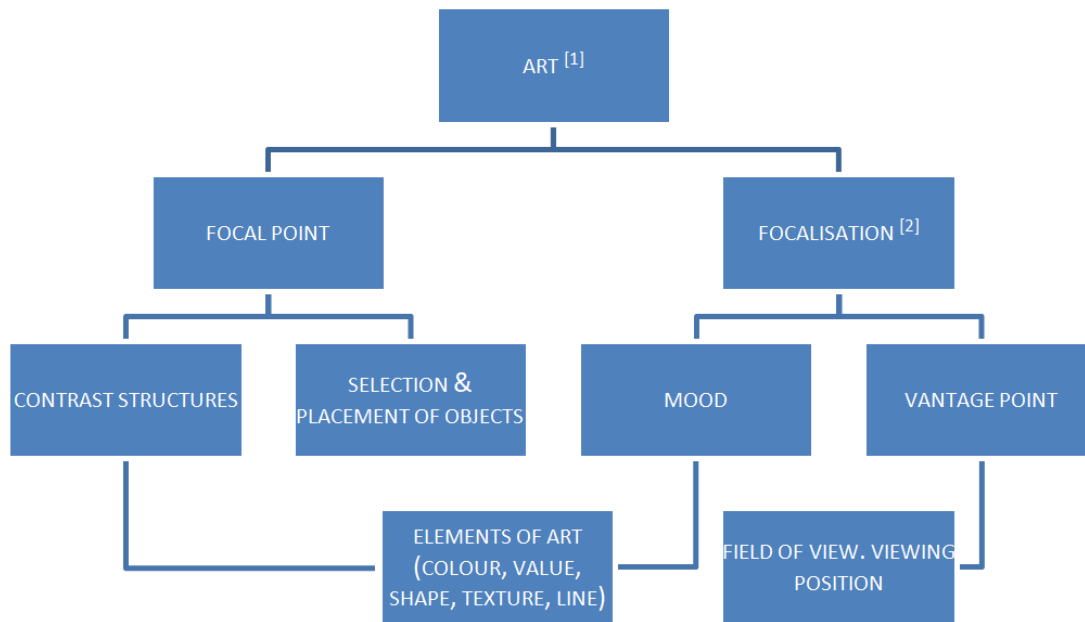


Figure 2 Art Fundamentals

<sup>[1]</sup> Adapted from visual arts, photography, film studies, literary and narrative theory (e.g. Bordwell & Thompson, 2013; Bowen & Thompson, 2013; Lewis & Lewis, 2014; Ocvirk, Stinson, Wigg, Bone & Cayton, 2013); <sup>[2]</sup> Adapted from Abbott (2010), Culler (2000)

Art fundamentals address form, that is, “the total appearance, organization, or inventive arrangement of all the visual elements” (Ocvirk, Stinson et al., 2013, p.2). Simply put, at the most abstract level, **focal point** informs what to look at, that is, the main point(s) of interest that seize the viewer’s attention, realised through the **selection and placement of objects** (in isolation or clusters / groupings) and **contrast structures** (or their absence) using the **elements of art** colour, line, value (light v. darkness), texture and shape.

**Focalisation** informs how to look at it, that is the lens or consciousness through which the social world is filtered. The somewhat awkward term **focalisation** borrowed from literary and narrative theory (Abbott, 2010; Culler, 2000) was chosen over the term ‘point of view’ frequently used in photography and film studies to avoid confusion with its many divergent definitions and to emphasise the idea of seeing something through the eyes of someone (the ‘focaliser’ / narrator) similar to narrative perspective in literature where variables can be limitations of knowledge (omniscient v limited) and degrees of objectivity or reliability (Culler, 2000). A narrator in literary fiction may be unable or unwilling to tell it ‘as it is.’ Similarly, **focalisation** (aligned with the camera) is determined by the focaliser’s / narrator’s choice of **vantage point**, that is the field of view and viewing position (above, below, eye

level, oblique, far, close and so on). It constructs and presents a discreet identity experience / interpretation of the world. The **elements of art** often through colour (warm, cold, bright, dark) and value (darkness or light) but sometimes also through line, shape and texture create **mood**, that is, affect, an "[e]motion or subjectively experienced feeling, such as happiness, sadness, fear, or anger" (Colman, 2015, n.p.).

### *Semiotic Fundamentals*

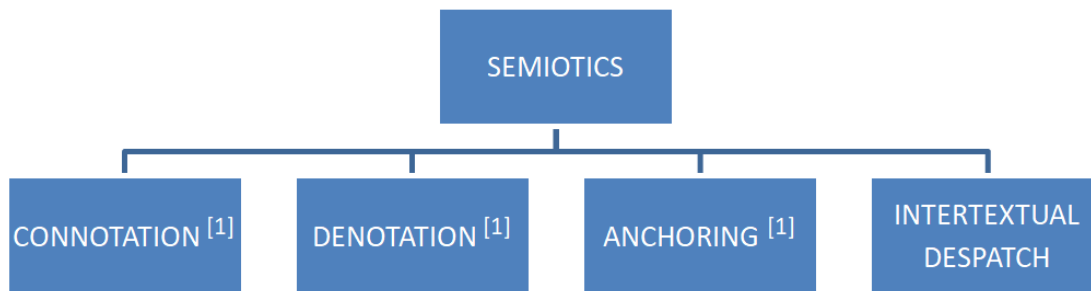


Figure 3 Semiotic Fundamentals

<sup>[1]</sup> Barthes (1964/1999)

As noted above, even though a plethora of valuable theory exists in semiotics, Barthes’s (1964/1999) notion of **denotation** (the literal depiction of what is represented in an image, object identification) and **connotation** (associations, cultural meaning) must suffice as first principles in a parsimonious inclusive theoretical framework. As most visual discourse typically includes some verbal elements (claims, hashtags, headlines, labels, logos, etc.), Barthes’s notion of '**anchorage**' accounts for how textual elements direct the reading of a piece of visual discourse causing the reader "to avoid some [interpretations] and receive others" (1964/1999, pp.37-38). Barthes’s concept of “relay” which serves to “advance the action” (Barthes, 1964/1999, p.38) did not present in the analysis. Indeed, Barthes himself considered it rare in the fixed image and associates it with sequential images such as comics or film. However, verbal elements were found to function to access ‘meanings not found in the image itself’ (Barthes, 1964/1999, p.38) in that they direct to meaning in other texts, for example, by pointing the viewer to social media (Twitter, Instagram and so on). The descriptor **intertextual despatch** was chosen for this construct to describe that the viewer is being sent or despatched somewhere (to other texts such as Twitter, websites, QR code data, apps and so on) for a purpose (to engage further with the brand).

## Genre Fundamentals

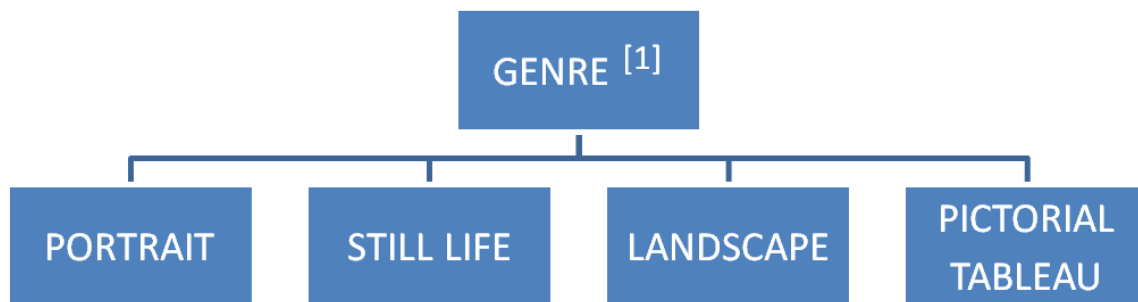


Figure 4 Genre Fundamentals

<sup>[1]</sup> Adapted from Tate (n.d.), Bate (2016)

Genre with its “conventionalised realisations”(Bateman, 2018, p.6) organises and structures meaning by grouping types of visual discourse into categories which "generate fields of 'expectation and hypothesis'" (Bate, 2016, p.4). In advertising brand logos unambiguously indicate that interpretations are constrained by the objective to sell something. Within the genre of advertising foregrounding a human figure or objects, for instance, plays off the expectations for portraiture or still life respectively. For the sake of parsimony in a cumulative framework the well known genre typology informed by the classic canon of art, that is **landscape** (urban / rural space etc.), **pictorial tableau** (history painting as everyday life), **still life** and **portraiture** (Bate, 2016) is given preference over “other art genres such as the nude and non-art genres such as soft-core pornography, fashion photography and the snapshot” (Soutter, 2018, p.17).

## Nonverbal Behaviour Fundamentals

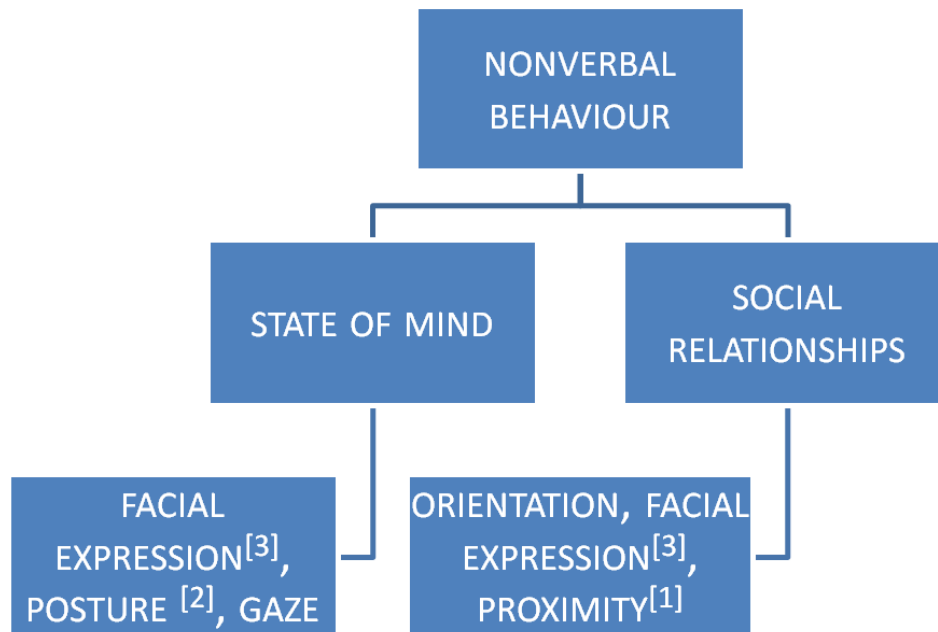


Figure 5 Nonverbal Behaviour Fundamentals

Adapted from <sup>[1]</sup> E.T. Hall (1959; 1963), <sup>[2]</sup> Carney, Cuddy & Yap (2010), <sup>[3]</sup> Ekman (1985)

Human ability to read the **state of mind** and **social relationships** of others through body language means nonverbal behaviour can be taken out of the original social context. Advertisers can "quote" nonverbal behaviour in the "make-believe scenes in advertisements" and are thus able "to use a few models and props to evoke a lifelike scene" (Goffman, 1979, pp.3, 23). The features of nonverbal behaviour facial expression, posture and gaze can be clustered as markers for **state of mind**, while body orientation, facial expression and proximity indicate **social relationships**.

## Rhetorical Fundamentals

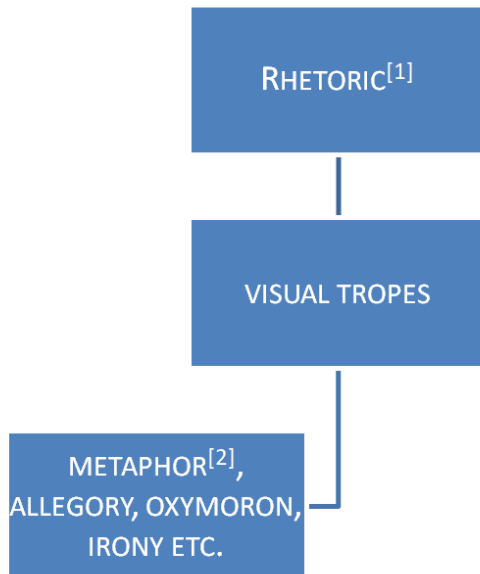


Figure 6 Rhetorical Fundamentals

Adapted from <sup>[1]</sup>Lanham (1991), <sup>[2]</sup>Forceville (1998)

If rhetoric is the “effective use of language, to persuade, give pleasure, and so on” (Matthews, 2007, p.347), rhetorical fundamentals address the use of visual tropes to persuade, give pleasure and so on. Many rhetorical terms "are near-synonyms and many have broad or disputed meanings. This should not deter anyone from using them with assurance; it certainly has not in the past" (Lanham, 1991, p.xv). In this spirit analogous to verbal rhetoric, “unusual or striking configurations” (Lanham, 1991, p.78) of the component elements of visual discourse are identified as **visual tropes** such as irony, hyperbole or oxymora.

Clearly, the first principles of meaning-making in the five domains that evolved from the grounded theory approach are only provided with the briefest descriptions here leaving out much salient detail. Also, experts in any of the fields of knowledge can add much interesting and valuable detail to any analysis of visual discourse. However, the purpose here is to suggest first principles for an inclusive analytical framework, fundamentals that can become useful conceptual tools for a layperson. To test the validity and the explanatory power of the first principles derived from the grounded theory approach, the theoretical framework is next applied to fresh data to illuminate discursive practice in luxury fashion advertising.

## Chanel and Gucci's Discursive Practice

More than a hundred luxury fashion brands from Alexander McQueen to Valentino advertised in British and American *Vogue* in 2018 with at least one double page spread of which Chanel and Gucci were the most prolific (with 10% of the total of over 600). Putting the practical adequacy and explicatory power of the theoretical framework to the test, their discreet advertising discourse in 2018 is analysed in turn.

### *Chanel: Gendered Technology of the Confident Self*

Chanel employs a visual discourse that gains its specificity through the privileging and identity expression in the application of selected first principles of meaning-making which can ultimately be described as gendered technology of the confident self.

The **genre** selection of **portrait** is the most immediate and striking characteristic of Chanel's visual discourse though fundamental principles in the domains of **art**, **semiotics**, **nonverbal behaviour** and **rhetoric** all play a part in establishing a coherent visual discourse.

### *Genre Fundamentals*

Chanel's 24 discreet double page advertisements (discounting duplicates) in *Vogue* UK and US in 2018 fall into the classical canon of **portrait**. The majority of Chanel's executions are double portraits either showing two facets of the same sitter or a group of between two and four women posing together for a group shot in one image with a close-up of a single figure in the second image. The portrait which as a genre foregrounds the human figure is expected to "expose the character of its subject" (Higgins, 2014, p.9). Arguably, when Chanel depicts the same sitter in different apparel it shows two facets of the sitter as identity in late modernity is not only defined through actions but also through products and possessions (Giddens, 1991).

### *Art Fundamentals*

Chanel's **focalisation** (look at it this way), that is, the filter or consciousness through which the sitters are presented, is characterised by a **vantage point** with an eye-level viewing point at medium-close distance which is conventional for formal studio shots and is a neutral,

restrained, understated way of looking. A limited palette of subdued harmonious colours or black and white creates a corresponding **mood**. The sitters can be viewed with detachment from a distance.

The **focal point** (look at this) is informed by the **selection and placement of objects**, namely the sitters which fill the frame. **Contrast structures** are discreet as they serve to put emphasis clearly on the sitter with neutral backgrounds or a dark suit against light panelling or vice versa in portraits with a *mise-en-scene*. In a street scene the light face and highlights reflecting from the sitter's top against a dark background allow the viewer to make out the sitter, though the overall dark values of the image and the shadowy figures in the background serve here to create a **mood** suggesting a sense of mystery.

### *Semiotic Fundamentals*

The portraits present the sitter in a variety of indoor and outdoor settings, but most often in a 'studio shot' with a monochrome background that gives no clue as to time and place. The settings (a social scene or lack of it) and the physical proximity of objects, clothing, and props denoted in the image connote social class, status, values and attitudes of the sitter. Chanel's apparel can be characterised as a classic style of simplicity, timeless elegance, luxury as well as functionality. An urban exterior denotes a street scene at night, through the architecture and the dress of the men in the background possibly connoting Paris, the seat of the French fashion brand Chanel.

Interiors denote large, rooms with high ceilings and elegant wood panelling or a large sofa in front of a wall covered with shelves with books in what appear to be leather bindings with gold lettering connoting wealth and luxury. The variety of different, seemingly unrelated, settings for the portraits (urban exteriors, various interiors, neutral studio portraits as well as highly patterned decorative backgrounds, clouds, some in colour some in black and white) seem somewhat disparate. Nonetheless, Chanel's visual discourse is unified by consistently connoting luxury, elegance, class and status using the **genre of portrait** as well as restrained **focalisation**.

### *Nonverbal Behaviour Fundamentals*

**Nonverbal behaviour** in Chanel's visual discourse shows figures displaying predominantly informal postures as the almost exclusively female sitters strike casual and relaxed poses. Hands are often on hips, in dress / skirt / trouser pockets or maybe holding an accessory (bag). In the group portraits the sitters are often leaning in towards one another, bodies

touching, thus, orientation of bodies, touch and proximity signalling friendly **social relationships** as appropriate for group portraits. Facial expressions are consistently neutral. The gaze is almost always levied at the viewer even in four instances where the model is naked under a jacket that casually falls open indicating unashamedness and self-assurance. The composite of these elements of body language shows **state of mind**. The female sitters have a strong presence and signal assertiveness and confidence.

### *Rhetorical Fundamentals*

With the exception of the brand's logo which as part of the brand stands for the whole brand (pars pro toto), Chanel's visual discourse is 'literal' in the absence of unusual or striking configurations that suggest visual tropes.

### *Chanel's Identitary Discourse: Gendered Technology of the Confident Self*

A comparison of Chanel's discourse with a deviant and 'particularly revelatory unit for shedding light on the issues that the researcher is seeking to elaborate' (Schwandt, 2007, p.270), namely a **portrait** by another luxury fashion brand, Andreas Kronthaler Vivienne Westwood, illuminates the specificity of Chanel's brand discourse further. In terms of **nonverbal behaviour** Andreas Kronthaler Vivienne Westwood also presents a **portrait** of a figure with a confident assertive **state of mind** similar to Chanel, that is, a confident gaze is directed at the viewer, the posture is relaxed, hands in pockets, one foot each on the two steps of a diminutive bright orange-coloured pedestal. However, in the domain of **art fundamentals, contrast structures** (tiny orange pedestal v the predominantly blue/grey colour of the image overall) make both the man in the suit as well as the pedestal **focal points**. The unusual presentation suggests a visual metaphor, in which features from a source, i.e. a male figure being placed on a pedestal, that is, being in a position of esteem, admired, glorified, heroic etc. are mapped onto a target, the luxury fashion brand. **Focalisation**, the consciousness or filter through which the male figure is seen is from an eye-level **vantage point** while looking down on the tiny pedestal, not up to it. The relaxed **nonverbal behaviour** of the male figure is the opposite of a heroic pose. This creates a visual **oxymoron** in which opposing ideas are joined to create an effect (e.g. 'living death' or 'open secret'). Here, the oxymoron of the unheroic hero also suggests an element of self-**irony**, that is "implying meaning opposite to the literal meaning" (Lanham, 1991, p.189). It suggests that the brand, unlike Chanel, does not take itself entirely seriously.



In contrast, Chanel's visual discourse is straightforward in its **focalisation**, the consciousness or filter through which the figures are seen, in the manner of classic portraits. The restrained **mood** reinforces the luxury and elegance of the literal presentation in the absence of visual tropes. The assertive confident women dressed in Chanel luxury garments is the meaning. Possibly unwittingly, Chanel expresses a gendered 'technology of the self' (Foucault, 1988) which has materialised in contemporary culture as previous research has shown. The 'confident woman' is a distinct visual leitmotif which is part of current representational practice diffused in advertising and in popular culture which can be located in broader debates about postfeminism and and new femininities dubbed the 'confidence cult(ure)' (Banet-Weiser, 2017; Favaro, 2017; Gill & Orgad, 2015; 2017; Kohrs & Gill, forthcoming; Wood, 2017). As Gill and Orgad (2015) have argued, confidence has materialised as a gendered 'technology of the self' inviting women to transform themselves to construct their subjective identity around individualised expressions of self-belief. Emptied of political force, feminism as 'style' becomes discursive strategy.

### *Gucci: Spectacle*

Gucci presented a total of 26 discreet double page print advertisements in *Vogue* US and UK in 2018 (discounting duplicates) using a very different kind of identitary visual discourse from Chanel, however, as the application of the framework reveals. Its essence can be described as spectacle.

### *Genre Fundamentals*

Gucci's visual discourse is broadly a hybrid of the classical art **genres** of **landscape** (urban/rural space), **pictorial tableau** (history painting as everyday life), **still life** and **portraiture** as it depicts content that is incongruous with the classical subject matter. Gucci's **still-lives**, for example, do not only contain inanimate or dead objects on table tops. Instead, a Gucci bag rests on the leaves of a pond defying gravity observed by a curious goldfish (#GucciHallucinations) or a table top is entirely covered with plates, other tableware and porcelain figurines as well as human feet and legs (cut off above the knees) and a monkey. In other executions the notion of a **portrait** as an image of a sitter with objects depicting something salient about their identity is taken *ad absurdum* as the sitter is surrounded by an extraordinary quantity of unusual collector's items such as wigs (#GucciCollectors). The genre of **pictorial tableau** features prominently in Gucci's visual discourse often with

unusual surreal, bizarre subject matter such as three people flying on a fishing rod catching tiny airplanes (#UtopianFantasy), two women in evening dress in a Japanese interior filled with soap bubbles ([pop]), a candle-light dinner party where guests wear baroque-style dress, wigs and white make-up (#GucciCollectors), and so on.

### *Semiotic Fundamentals*

The somewhat genre incongruous subject matter denoted in Gucci's images is rich in **connotations** referencing high as well as popular culture. The pond still-life is complemented by another execution which pays homage to John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (1851-2) as a fully dressed woman with long red hair floats in a pond (#UtopianFantasy, *Vanity Fair* UK, February 2018). A #GucciGothic execution denoting a wooden boat populated by human figures and animals in torrential rain on a sea of water connotes Noah's ark **Intertextual despatchers** (hashtags, URL) direct to other texts such as Instagram and Gucci's website where Gucci fashion and accessories can be purchased and background is provided.

Illustrating the inherently polysemic nature of visual discourse, Gucci suggests an interpretation of the ark motif that moves beyond the religious storyline of Noah's ark or an archetypal voyage to a secular reading that is situated in 21<sup>st</sup>-century concerns about the environment and animal welfare: “Young farmer-punks appear in a surreal, mythological world, where an agricultural landscape and the changing weather emphasize the power of nature. (...) [and] where animals and people co-exist in harmony” (Gucci, 2016).

### *Art Fundamentals*

The **art** fundamentals complement and reinforce the strangeness and dissonance of the viewing experience created through the **genre** and **semiotic** fundamentals in Gucci's visual discourse, often by means of multifaceted and complex **focal points**. The tightly framed ark, for instance, fills almost the entire picture with its wooden structure populated by countless human figures and animals. **Elements of art**, colour and shape, provide **contrast structures**, spots of brighter, contrasting colour dotted around, attracting the viewer's attention to various points of interest successively: a large figure in green, a yellow cardigan, a red and green sweater, a yellow hat, a greyish white horse and so on.

**Focalisation** (look at it this way) disconcertingly enhances the somewhat unsettling feeling which the multiplicity of focal points creates. **Vantage point** positions the viewer very close

at arm's length from the tilted hull of the ark with its rope drawing him or her in, almost an invitation to climb aboard. All of the human figures and animals are in sharp technical focus in the hull of the ship and appear equally close. Only the quantity and diminishing size of the roughly 25 human figures, two pigs, one llama, two horses, and four geese among other animals in the bow of the ship suggest a sizeable space. Also, despite the apparent closeness, the field of view is much wider than that of the human eye, providing a panoramic view of the ark which one would normally only have from a distance. The consciousness through which the scene is presented is characterised by extremes of a close as well as wide field of view which brings the figures, animals and objects in the image into a somewhat disquieting and unnaturally close physical connection with the viewer. The **mood** informed by a dark colour palette dominated by brown and grey is gloomy. Thus, **focalisation** is immersive, it is intimate close-up, in *medias res*, drawing the viewer into the action in a dramatic, theatrical, extraordinary, unreal environment and a disquieting narrative. It attracts interest and engages the viewer almost turning him or her into a participant rather than a spectator.

Another example of Gucci's unusual discursive world connotes Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights Triptych* (1490-1500) making use of similarly disconcerting **focalisation** and **focal points**. It is the **contrast** in size here which privileges the two human figures in the foreground as primary **focal point**. However, the image has numerous secondary focal points created through **contrast** in colour. Thus, the viewer's attention is again diverted, moving around the image.

**Focalisation** (look at it this way) creates a sense of detached distance from which the viewer can explore the unusual proportions and surreal objects such as animal heads on human figures from a **vantage point** which again provides a wide panoramic field of view but is not close. **Contrast** in size and scale are disorienting as the image confounds expectations built on perspective. People in the distance should be smaller than those in front, a frog, bird, skull and cherry should be smaller in relation to human figures, giraffes larger. Contrast in colour and lighting, the juxtaposition of the dark ominous palette on the right with the lighter brighter landscape on the left create **mood** which mirrors Bosch's vision of earthly delights and hell (<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-garden-of-earthly-delights-triptych/02388242-6d6a-4e9e-a992-e1311eab3609>).

### *Nonverbal Behaviour Fundamentals*

The nakedness of the figures and their nonverbal behaviour cue the sexual nature of Bosch's earthly delights and the depiction of torture in the right hand panel their punishment. Gucci's human figures in the garden, on the other hand, are carefully posed in their beautifully detailed and colourful dress, mostly in relaxed body language gazing at the viewer, foregrounding the beauty of material goods and pleasure of consumption. The dark values on the right hand side add drama to the image but Gucci's earthly delights remain unpunished and fun.

Nonverbal behaviour informs Gucci's visual discourse in augmenting its disquieting effect and theatricality. On the ark, for instance, drenched human figures stand upright and still in torrential rain, their faces expressionless, their gaze directed at the viewer, some hidden behind sunglasses. **Vantage point** is informed by closeness which draws the viewer in, but the frontal body language of the human figures staring at the viewer is not welcoming. While a rope hanging over the hull of the ark appears to invite the viewer to climb aboard, the two children leaning against the railing block access physically.

### *Rhetorical Fundamentals*

Both the narrative of the *Garden of Earthly Delights* and the narrative of the ark, can be considered an **allegory**, that is an "extended [visual] metaphor" (Lanham, 1991, p.188) drawing parallels between man's sinfulness punished by a biblical God with eternal damnation and a flood (Genesis 6: 5,11) respectively and, in Gucci's storyworld, humankind's conspicuous consumptions and unscrupulous exploitation of the earth's resources causing extreme weather including floods.

A dichotomy between the biblical story time suggested by the wooden ark and the modern clothes and sunglasses is a form of **metalepsis**, "a violation of narrative levels" (Abbott, 2010, p.237). The story world of Gucci collides with the biblical story, which can also indicate **irony**, juxtaposing man's wickedness in biblical times and the 'wickedness' of conspicuous consumption. Stylised and overstated through art fundamentals the entire visual representation becomes **hyperbole**, an "exaggerated or extravagant [expression] used for emphasis and not to be taken literally" (adapted from Lanham, 1991, p.189).

### *Gucci's Identity Discourse: Spectacle*

Gucci's extravagant discursive style and spectacular visual opulence celebrates artificiality and illusion to draw attention, immerse the viewer and engage emotionally. Indeed, Gucci's identity discourse can be likened to Debord's spectacle (1967 / 2004) as he equates Feuerbach's critique of 19<sup>th</sup>-century normative religion to 20<sup>th</sup>-century consumerism:

In an "age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, appearance to essence, ... truth is considered profane, and only illusion is sacred (quoted in Debord, 1967 / 2004, para 1)

Gucci's visual discourse, like Debord's spectacle is "a set of images that disguise and replace reality" (Soutter, 2018, p.116). Gucci seduces through an imaginative and innovative visual discourse of opulence and theatricality. Ironically, Gucci's 2019 spring summer campaign #GucciShowtime, takes the theme of spectacle literally. It depicts a "large scale and elaborate" site or show (Pooke & Newall, 2008, p.227) evoking the glitz and glamour of Hollywood's Golden Age with sets and costumes, including a woman jumping out of a cake.

### **Conclusion**

To advance theory that facilitates the shaping of brand perception and enhances consumer engagement with luxury fashion brands in an age in which visual consumption is possibly the most crucial characteristic of the experience economy, this paper responded to calls for an inclusive, cross-disciplinary theoretical framework able to reveal the complex layers of meaning in visual artefacts. The proposed framework breaks new ground by integrating insight from a rigorous analysis of primary data with long-existing classics from salient fields of knowledge. It is, thus, able to provide a broader inclusive perspective that illuminates the multifaceted layers of meaning of luxury fashion discourse in a new and comprehensive way which existing approaches with a focus on an isolated dimension such as semiotics or nonverbal behaviour would not have been able to reveal.

Future directions for research suggest themselves in expanding the application of the framework to both different types of discourse and discourse over time. On the one hand, an analysis of the identity discourses of other types of fashion brands, such as massige brands or fast fashion, can provide further illuminating insight and heighten

understanding of brand perception. On the other hand, the present analysis reveals the unique identitary discourses of two discreet luxury fashion brands, that is, Chanel's classical, confident, elegant and restrained discursive practice which can ultimately be described as gendered technology of the confident self as well as Gucci's discursive practice dominated by a sense of extravagance and flamboyant theatricality which enthusiastically immerses the consumer in artifice and illusion that resonates with Debord's notion of spectacle. Expanding on these two different types of discourse in the context of the experience economy an interesting avenue of further research would be an investigation of the specificity of the experiential dimension of discreet brand discourses over time. Such research could, for example, focus on exploring the utilisation of immersive focalisation, that is, a filter or consciousness through which the viewer is invited to evolve from a role as spectator to participant in the brand world of the visual discourse (as suggested in the case of Gucci's ark) in conjunction with and enhanced by other types of active consumer engagement such as apps and social media initiated through the construct of intertextual despatch. The explicatory power of the encompassing practicable framework could thus be further validated all the while it aids in illuminating and shaping fashion brand images that engage consumers.

## References

- Abbott, H. P. (2010). *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*. 2nd Ed. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Ajzen, I. (1991). The Theory of Planned Behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* **50**(2): 179-211.
- Arnould, Eric J. and Thompson, Craig J. (2005). Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research. *The Journal of Consumer Research* **31**(4): 868-882.
- Askegaard, S. (2015). *Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)*. In *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Consumption and Consumer Studies*. D. T. Cook and J. M. Ryan. Chichester, John Wiley & Sons: 124-127.
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2017). 'I'm Beautiful the Way I Am': Empowerment, Beauty, and Aesthetic Labour. In *Aesthetic Labour. Dynamics of Virtual Work*. A. S. Elias, R. Gill and C. Scharff. London, Palgrave Macmillan: 265-282.
- Banks, M. (2001). *Visual Methods in Social Research*. London, SAGE.
- Barthes, R. (1964/1999). *Rhetoric of the Image*. In *Visual Culture: The Reader*. J. Evans and S. Hall. London, Sage: 33-40.
- Bate, D. (2016). *Photography: The Key Concepts*. 2 Ed. London, Bloomsbury.
- Bateman, J. A. (2018). Towards critical multimodal discourse analysis: a response to Ledin and Machin. *Critical Discourse Studies*: 1-9.
- Bordwell, D. and Thompson, K. (2013). *Film Art: An Introduction*. 10 Ed. New York, McGraw-Hill.
- Bosch, H. (1490-1500). *The Garden of Earthly Delights Triptych*. Available from: <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-garden-of-earthly-delights-triptych/02388242-6d6a-4e9e-a992-e1311eab3609> (Accessed May 06, 2019).
- Bowen, C. J. and Thompson, R. (2013). *Grammar of the Shot*. 3 Ed. New York, Focal Press.
- Brandwatch. (2015). "Social Insights into the Luxury Fashion Industry." Available at: <https://www.brandwatch.com/reports/social-insights-on-the-luxury-fashion-industry/view/> (Accessed: 09 June 2018).
- Carney, D. R., Cuddy, A. J. C. and Yap, A. J. (2010). Power Posing: Brief Nonverbal Displays Affect Neuroendocrine Levels and Risk Tolerance. *Psychological Science* **21**(10): 1363-1368.
- Chiu, A. (2019). "'Haute Couture Blackface': Gucci apologizes and pulls 'racist' sweater." Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/02/07/haute-couture-blackface-gucci-apologizes-pulls-racist-sweater/> (Accessed: January 21, 2020).
- Colman, A. M. (2015). "affect." Available at: <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199657681.001.0001/acref-9780199657681-e-196> (Accessed: March 14, 2019).
- Culler, J. (2000). *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Debord, G. (1967 / 2004). *The Society of Spectacle*. London, Rebel Press.
- Dens, N. and Pelsmacker, P. D. (2010). Consumer response to different advertising appeals for new products: the moderating influence of branding strategy and product category involvement. *Journal of Brand Management* **18**(1): 50-65.
- Eco, U. (1982). *Critique of the Image*. In *Thinking Photography*. V. Burgin. Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan: 32-38.
- Ekman, P. (1985). *Telling lies: Clues to deceit in the marketplace, politics, and marriage*. New York, Norton.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London, Longman.
- Favaro, L. (2017). 'Just Be Confident Girls!': Confidence Chic as Neoliberal Governmentality. In *Aesthetic Labour. Dynamics of Virtual Work*. A. Elias, R. Gill and C. Scharff. London, Palgrave Macmillan: 283 - 299.
- Festinger, L. (1954). A Theory of Social Comparison Processes. *Human Relations* **7**(2): 117-140.

- Forceville, C. (1998). *Pictorial Metaphor in Advertising*. London, Routledge.
- Forceville, C. (2014). *Relevance Theory as model for analysing visual and multimodal communication*. In *Visual Communication (Handbooks of Communication Science)*. D. Machin. Berlin, Boston, De Gruyter Mouton: 51-70.
- Foucault, M. (1988). *Technologies of the Self*. In *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. London, Tavistock Publications: 16 - 49.
- Freire, A. N. (2014). When luxury advertising adds the identitary values of luxury: A semiotic analysis. *Journal of Business Research* **67**(12): 2666-2675.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Gill, R. and Orgad, S. (2015). The Confidence Cult(ure). *Australian Feminist Studies* **30**(86): 324-344.
- Gill, R. and Orgad, S. (2017). Confidence culture and the remaking of feminism. *New Formations: a journal of culture / theory / politics* **91**: 16-34.
- Glaser, B. G. and Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New Brunswick, Aldine Transactions.
- Goffman, E. (1979). *Gender Advertisements*. London, The Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Goldman, R. (1992/2000). *Reading ads socially*. London, Routledge.
- Goulding, C. (2017). Navigating the Complexities of Grounded Theory Research in Advertising. *Journal of Advertising* **46**(1): 61-70.
- Gucci, G. (2016). "Gucci Gothic." Available at: <https://www.gucci.com/us/en/st/stories/advertising-campaign/article/2019-cruise-advertising-campaign-shoppable> (Accessed: 18/03/2019).
- Gurzki, H., Schlatter, N. and Woisetschläger, D. M. (2019). Crafting Extraordinary Stories: Decoding Luxury Brand Communications. *Journal of Advertising* **48**(4): 401-414.
- Hall, E. T. (1959). *The Silent Language*. Garden City, NY, Doubleday.
- Hall, E. T. (1963). A System for the Notation of Proxemic Behavior. *American Anthropologist* **65**(5): 1003-1026.
- Hall, S. (1980). *Encoding / Decoding*. In *Culture, Media, Language*. S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe and P. Willis. London, Hutchinson: 128-138.
- Halwani, L. (2019). Making sense of heritage luxury brands: consumer perceptions across different age groups. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal* **22**(3): 301-324.
- Higgins, J. (2014). *Why It Does Not Have to Be in Focus: Modern Photography Explained*. London, Thames & Hudson.
- Holiday, S., Loof, T., Cummins, R. G. and McCord, A. (2019). Consumer Response to Selfies in Advertisements: Visual Rhetoric for the Me Me Me Generation. *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising* **40**(2): 123-146.
- Kim, J.-E. (2019). Decoding fashion advertising symbolism in masstige and luxury brands. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal* **23**(2): 277-295.
- Kim, J.-E., Lloyd, S. and Cervellon, M.-C. (2016). Narrative-transportation storylines in luxury brand advertising: Motivating consumer engagement. *Journal of Business Research* **69**(1): 304-313.
- Kohrs, K. and Gill, R. (forthcoming). *Confident appearing: Revisiting 'Gender Advertisements' in contemporary culture*. In *The Routledge Handbook of Language, Gender and Sexuality*. J. Baxter and J. Angouri. Abingdon, Oxfordshire, Routledge.
- Lanham, R. A. (1991). *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*. 2nd Ed. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Ledin, P. and Machin, D. (2018). Doing critical discourse studies with multimodality: From metafunctions to materiality. *Critical Discourse Studies*: 1-17.
- Lester, M. P. (2020). *Visual Communication: Images with Messages*. 8th Ed. Dallas, Texas, Lex
- Lewis, R. and Lewis, S. I. (2014). *The Power of Art*. 3 Ed. Boston, Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.
- Lin, A. (2012). *Critical Discourse Analysis: Overview*. In *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Margolis, E. M. and Pauwels, L. (2011). *The Sage Handbook of Visual Research Methods*. London, Sage Publications.



- Matthews, P. H. (2007). *rhetoric. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- McQuarrie, E. F. and Phillips, B. J., Eds. (2008). *Go Figure! New Directions in Advertising Rhetoric*. Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge.
- Messaris, P. (1996). *Visual persuasion: the role of images in advertising*. Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage.
- O'Halloran, K., Wignell, P. and Tan, S. (2018). 'Doing critical discourse studies with multimodality: From metafunctions to materiality' by Per Ledin and David Machin. *Critical Discourse Studies*: 1-8.
- Ocvirk, O. G., Stinson, R. E., Wigg, P. R., Bone, R. O. and Cayton, D. L. (2013). *Art Fundamentals: Theory and Practice*. 12 Ed. New York, McGraw Hill.
- Pauwels, L. (2015). *Reframing Visual Social Science: Towards a More Visual Sociology and Anthropology*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Pauwels, L. (2016). Urban Communication Research| Visually Researching and Communicating the City: A Systematic Assessment of Methods and Resources. *International Journal of Communication* **10**: 1309–1330.
- Peirce, C. (1940/2001). *Logic as semiotic: the theory of signs*. In *The philosophy of Peirce: selected writings*. J. Buchler. London, Routledge: 98-119.
- Petty, R. E. and Cacioppo, J. T. (1986). The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* **19**: 123-205.
- Phillips, B. J. and McQuarrie, E. F. (2011). Contesting the social impact of marketing: A re-characterization of women's fashion advertising. *Marketing Theory* **11**(2): 99-126.
- Picheta, R. (2019). "'Suicide isn't fashion': Burberry apologizes for hoodie with noose around the neck." Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/burberry-noose-hoodie-scli-gbr-intl/index.html> (Accessed: 21st February 2019).
- Pink, S. (2007). *Doing visual ethnography: Images, media and representation in research*. London, SAGE.
- Pooke, G. and Newall, D. (2008). *Art History: The Basics*. Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge.
- Schroeder, J. E. (2002). *Visual Consumption*. London, Routledge.
- Schwandt, T. A. (2007). *The Sage Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*. 3 Ed. Thousand Oaks, California, Sage Publications.
- Scott, L. M. and Batra, R., Eds. (2003). *Persuasive Imagery: A Consumer Response Perspective*. Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Soutter, L. (2018). *Why Art Photography?* 2 Ed. Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge.
- Tate. (n.d.). "Art Terms." Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms> (Accessed: 10 July 2019).
- Taylor, C. R. (2016). Advertising for Luxury and Fashion Goods: An Emerging Area. *International Journal of Advertising* **35**(3): 389-390.
- Taylor, C. R. and Costello, J. P. (2017). What do we know about fashion advertising? A review of the literature and suggested research directions. *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing* **8**(1): 1-20.
- Timmermans, S. and Tavory, I. (2012). Theory Construction in Qualitative Research: From Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis. *Sociological Theory* **30**(3): 167-186.
- Urquhart, C. (2019). *Grounded theory's best kept secret: the ability to build theory*. In *The Sage Handbook of Current Developments in Grounded Theory*. A. Bryant and K. Charmaz. London, Sage: 89-106.
- Wildfeuer, J. and Bateman, J. A. (2018). Theoretische und methodologische Perspektiven des Multimodalitätskonzepts aus linguistischer Sicht. *Image* **28**: 5-46.
- Williamson, J. (1978/2002). *Decoding advertisements: Ideology and meaning in advertising*. London, Marion Boyars.
- Wood, R. (2017). *Look Good, Feel Good: Sexiness and Sexual Pleasure in Neoliberalism*. In *Aesthetic Labour. Dynamics of Virtual Work*. A. Elias, R. Gill and C. Scharff. London, Palgrave Macmillan.