Semiotic Interventions in Digital Communication of Luxury Brands in India

[1]Seema Bansal, [2]Prof. Dr. Shalini Sud

Master of Design National Institute of Fashion Technology New Delhi, India

Abstract: The purpose of this research is to argue that greater awareness of the connections between the traditions and conventions of visual art and the production and consumption of images lead to enhanced ability to understand branding as a strategic signifying practice. Global luxury brands seen as key symbols of quality and prestige also struggle to represent their brand cues in trendy and modern digital world. In the twenty-first century the symbiosis of fashion and web design as the interdependence of visual and audio constituents of time has found its development in the frame of marketing theory, which links the branding of luxury fashion branding.

Keywords: Semiotic interventions, luxury brands.

1. INTRODUCTION

Luxury is neither a product, an object, a service nor it is a concept or a lifestyle. It is an identity, a philosophy and a culture that requires understanding before the adoption of business practices because its intricacies and outputs are essentially different from other types of goods such as daily consumer goods. Sometimes luxury is also used as a visual metaphor. The meanings that consumers ascribe to luxury brands are highly contextual and polysemic, constructed by the joint activities of marketers, consumers and cultural influences (Carcano, et al., 2011). Broadly there are three types of attitudes observed towards luxury consumption- elitist, democratic and distant. Although luxury conglomerates vary in terms of their approaches to counter the expanding market and generate more revenue; a common theme can be characterized in all luxury fashion companies i.e. the commitment to brand imagery.

"Brands are trying to be everywhere in every capacity," said Ian Schatzberg, president of Wednesday, a digital creative agency that has advised brands like Calvin Klein (Andersen, et al., 2008). "But it's not enough to be present — it's about what creates the dream. Ultimately, what Alessandro has done is build an authority that exists in popular culture." The brand's success is in its creation of a lifestyle that people want to emulate, and therefore buy into. Visual branding through semiotics represents an interesting point of crossover and interconnection to understand brand imagery (Bastien & Kapferer, 2008).

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The functionality of luxury brands revolves around superiority, performance, craftsmanship and other similar physical manifestations and accoutrements. According to Bain & Co. (2005), consumers emphasize more on emotional benefits than on the physical attributes for the purchase of luxury brand products. Choo et al. (2012) suggest that the poignant benefits create a comprehensive and memorable experience in terms of ownership and consumption. Therefore, luxury brand marketers are capitalizing more on emotional attachment to build a long-term and sustainable customer relationship. However, some authors have focussed on another key characteristic of luxury brands; conspicuousness, which indicates the extent to which a brand is visibly marked by other people, defined as brand prominence.

Consumers in the collectivist society share common values and understanding and so they buy luxury brands to display their delicacy and position to the other members of the society. In the individualist society, consumers do so to portray the emotional independence. This proposition has also been supported to emphasize on self-expression and self-presentation attitude as the key drivers for luxury brand consumption.

3. MACRO-ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS INFLUENCING LUXURY IN INDIA

The consumption of luxury brands in India has been influenced by a number of macro-environmental factors, such as globalisation and cultural convergence, the emergence of new market segments, an incessant rise in the number of wealthy consumers; the increasing attention from the media, the growing popularity of internet shopping; and increased international travel. These factors not only contribute to a rapid growth of the luxury brand industry in India, but they also cause vital changes in the composition of brands within the customer base for luxury brands.

3.1 Globalisation:

an elusive phenomenon that has been receiving a undivided attention in last two decades, can be expressed as an ongoing process by which regional economies, societies and cultures become integrated through economic, social, technological, political, cultural and other exchanges. For the luxury brand industry, the major consequence of globalisation and multicultural influences (Roux, 2014) has been a growing appreciation of global luxury brands (e.g. LV, Gucci) by consumers in Asia. As a result of this, the customer base for luxury products is becoming more culturally diversified, bringing new opportunities and challenges for the managers of luxury brands. Global cultural meanings convey universal beliefs about "an ideological connectedness with the world regardless of habitation and heritage", and foreign cultural meanings, convey "an identifiable cultural source which is different from local culture", calling for a more comprehensive understanding of foreign meanings and other cultural meanings in the local market that influence brand consumption.

3.2 Cultural convergence:

It has been evident that consumers in various cultures across the world seek personal and social gratification by purchasing and using luxury brands (Urboniene, 2016). Thus, cross-cultural studies investigating luxury brand consumption suggest that cultural processes, such as historical context and cultural conventions, play important roles in exploring consumer perceptions and attitudes towards luxury brands. World is moving towards a global culture where consumers are connected through the consumption of the same brands (Tran-Van, 2013), emergent markets will necessarily have brought new connotations to luxury branding within and beyond those cultures. Social norms and values play important role in the consumption of luxury brand. Cultural diversity in the context of international luxury branding when considered not only at the cross-national level, but also at the intra-national level shows that the global-local dichotomy in cross-cultural luxury branding literature needs to be augmented with the local-foreign dimension.

3.3 Rise in number of wealthy consumers:

Consumers in India today are reported to be very fashionable and label-conscious (Sahni, 2015). Consumers in emerging Indian market are also characterised by their unique luxury consumption styles. For instance, Mumbai poses challenges and contradictions for luxury brands that managers have not previously encountered in other states. Although, due to its rapid economic growth and large population, Maharashtra has the potential to become the largest market for luxury brands in India. Moreover, there could also be differences in the luxury consumption styles within the market segments themselves. The luxury brand market is experiencing a rapid expansion of its customer base to include more social classes. This is influenced by two factors, a) by an increasing disposable income among those less affluent consumer base; b) by the presence of new luxury brands which combine a perceived prestige with reasonable prices to make luxury products affordable to even larger circle of consumers (Tran-Van, 2013). This trend is also known as the "democratisation of luxury" (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). New consumers of luxury buy such products for different reasons than those of the traditional elite consumers; these include "a desire to emulate the lifestyle of the richest or the social class immediately above them, the superior quality of the products, or on more hedonic grounds on the basis of self-rewards". Therefore, the consumption of luxury brands is not only culturally diversified, but also ranges across different social segments. Chadha and Husband (2006), consistent with other studies (e.g. Michman and Mazze, 2006; Chevalier and Mazzalovo, 2008), identify three distinct social segments of luxury consumers: the "luxury gourmands", the " luxury regulars", and the " luxury nibblers":

(1) At the top end are the luxury gourmands, who devour luxury in great big bites, donning designer labels from head to toe, 24/7. Needless to say these are high net worth individuals (HNWI), with upwards of a million dollars in financial assets.

(2) Next you have the luxury regulars, who while not quite in the gourmand league are nevertheless on staple diet of luxury goods. These are affluent people with financial assets in excess of Rs. 70,00,000.

(3) And finally, there are the luxury nibblers, who partake in a few small bites of luxe every season, a bag here, a watch there, whatever they can afford.

3.4 Internet Shopping:

Luxury brand consumption is also influenced by a number of factors external to the industry, such as the growing popularity of internet shopping (Okonkwo, 2007), the increasing attention that luxury brands receive from mass media (Mandel et al. , 2006), and increasing international travel (Nueno and Quelch, 1998). These trends make luxury products more accessible, and stimulate the purchasing of luxury items. In addition, contrary to cultural differences and the democratisation of luxury, these external trends also encourage communication and information sharing among the consumers of luxury brands, making consumer perceptions of luxury brands increasingly similar.

4. CONSTRUCTING LUXURY BRANDS IN VIRTUAL SPACE

The luxury sector is facing the challenge of understanding that the cyberspace includes an entire universe comprising a virtual world that exists beyond a company's website. Although the development of a website remains essential, applying an integrated strategy that will ensure the appropriate positioning of a luxury brand in the cyberspace has become imperative. The cyberspace includes not only the world of websites but also that of forums, blogs, communities, networks and 2D and 3D platforms. Luxury brands currently require to be appropriately positioned in the cyberspace beyond their own website as the control of the brands' image online is currently shared with online consumers.

The area of challenge for luxury companies as they navigate their way in the virtual world is linked to the luxury consumers, who are apparently the reason why several luxury brands were forced to go online in the first place. For a long time, majority of luxury companies were reluctant to adopt the Internet until it became apparent that the wealthy segment of the consumer population had embraced the Internet and was using it not only beyond information search but also for shopping, converging, sharing and influencing others. Several luxury brands however mistakenly believed that wealthy consumers would stay the same after a decade of being exposed to the Internet. The reality is that the Internet has changed the orientation, behaviours, attitudes, value systems and interests of luxury clients worldwide.

5. CONCLUSION

The results of this research indicate the effectiveness of luxury branding on consumer emotional attachment. The results suggest that luxury brands need to continuously deliver superior functional and aesthetic benefits to the eye in the digital world to build stronger emotional attachment to achieve brand loyalty and high prestige. Luxury brands convey unique sociocultural and individual meanings to their consumers that implicitly convey their own culture and way of life. They offer more than mere objects: they provide reference of "good taste". Over the years, digital communication witnessed a number of social, cultural and external factors that have shaped luxury brand meanings, calling researchers and brand managers to consider the consumer-centric paradigm of luxury branding. Overall, in my pursuit of understanding this paradigm calls for a shift in the focus from the characteristics of luxury brands, and towards phenomenological experiences and socio-cultural influences, that conveys luxury in the broader context of post-modern consumer culture in the webmosphere. It appears that central cues (i.e. advertising copy and visual metaphors) are more important under high involvement and for global-minded Indian consumers.

The leading global luxury brands in India studied for this research are using innovative digital design strategies to communicate their perceived prestige. Merging social networking platforms is trending more than ever in today's website designs. Using the product campaigns, behind the scenes content and catwalk footage as backdrop has been observed unimous 75% of luxury brands studied in this research. 37.5% of brands have used Snapchat immensely as it has been picked up by Indian consumers shooting the number of millions of followers. Brands like Michael Kors and Gucci have made their own Snapchat filters with their new Summer collection of sunglasses. The enduring success resulting from these trendsetting innovations in connecting with their consumers digitally reflects on their brand globalness as well. As the brand imagery must be authentic and grounded in an emerging zeitgeist, the implied meanings of the design metaphors used are equally relevant as the impressive craft of product materials and design of these luxury brands.

6. LIMITATIONS

The present study has a number of limitations that provide opportunities for further research. First, India is a developing country with increasing foreign trade, a large immigrant population and a high openness to other. Possibly, the differences between local and global brand positioning would be different or more outspoken in term of ethnocentricity. Therefore, future research should try and replicate these findings in different countries with different cultural backgrounds and degrees of economic development. The findings can also be used to explain which design metaphors communicate brand globalness formation across the consumer.

Further, I have used official websites of the luxury websites in the present study. The results could differ when audio/visual advertising (i.e. radio and TV) or physical media (e.g. print ads) are used. Researchers have indicated that advertisements are processed differently in different media, which could impact the results. Using more physical media would allow for the manipulation of print materials, a factor that is currently neglected. In addition, the use of music, for example, or spoken language, could also impact the relative importance of the cues under study.

REFERENCES

[1] Rossolatos, G., 2012. Applying structuralist semiotics to brand image research. The Public Journal of Semiotics, October, IV(1), pp. 25-83.

[2] Eves, B. & Hewitt, J., 2009. Style-Branding, Aesthetic Design DNA. UK, University of Brighton.

[3] Crilly, N., Maier, A. & Clarkson, P. J., 2008. Representing Artefacts as Media: Modelling the Relationship between Designer Intent and Consumer Experience. International Journal of Design, 2(3), pp. 15-28.

[4] Carcano, L., Minichilli, A. & & Corbetta, G., 2011. Why luxury firms are often family firms? Family identity, symbolic capital and value creation in luxury-related industries. Universial Business Review, pp. 40-52.

[5] Andersen, C., Andersen, C., Sørensen, B. & Danesi, M., 2008. A Semiotic Note on Branding. Cybernetics & Human Knowing, 14(4), pp. 59-69.

[6] Bastien, V. & Kapferer, J., 2008. Luxe oblige France: Eyrolles. Paris: s.n.

[7] George, R., 2012. Applying structuralist semiotics to brand image research. The Public Journal of Semiotics , October, IV(1), pp. 25-83.

[8] George, R., 2015. Handbook of Brand Semiotics. 1st Edition ed. Kassel: Deutsche Nationalbibliothek.

[9] Marcus, A., John P., S. & Holland, R., 2007. 'Brand' as Category; An Analysis of Categorisation and Branded Product Concepts.. International Association of Desgin Research, Hongkong Polytechnic University.

[10] Rossolatos, G., 2013. Brand Equity Planning with Structuralist Rhetorical Semiotics: A Conceptual Framework, Kassel: s.n.

[11] Sahni, A., 2015. BRANDING – THE SEMIOTICS WAY. International Journal of Business and Administration Research Review, September, 2(II), p. 5.

[12] Lawes, R., 2005. De-mystifying Semiotics: Some Key Questions Answered. LAWES: DEMYSTIFYING SEMIOTICS.

[13] Mingers, J., 2014. Guidelines for Conducting Semiotic Research in Information Systems. Kent Business School, October.

[14] Davison, J., 2009. Icon, iconography, iconology Visual branding, banking and the case of the bowler hat. Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal, 22(6), pp. 883-906.

[15] Wang, X., 2013. Inauthentic authenticity: Semiotic design & globalization in the margins of China, s.l.: s.n.

[16] Conley, J. G., 2008. Inventing Brands: Opportunities at the Nexus of Semiotics and Intellectual Property. Design Management Review, Volume Spring, p. 12.

[17] Roux, E., 2014. A semiotic analysis of the extendibility of luxury brands. Journal of Product & Brand Management, 23(2), p. 103–113.

[18] Sunčana, M., 2008. ADVANTAGES OF A NEW GLOBAL VISUAL LANGUAGE.

[19] Isaac, C., Ian, P., Calvin, C. & Anwar, S. S., 2015. Antecedents and outcomes of brand prominence on willingness to buy luxury brands. Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management, 19(4), pp. 402-415.

[20] Shroedar, J., 2005. The artist and the brand. European Journal of Marketing, 39(11), pp. 1291-1305.

[21] Ewing, M. T., 2006. Brands, artifacts and design theory: a call to action. Journal of Product & Brand Management, 15(4), p. 255–256.

[22] Roper, S., Caruana, R., Medway, D. & Murphy, P., 2013. Constructing luxury brands: exploring the role of consumer discourse. European Journal of Marketing, October, 47(3), pp. 375-400.

[23] Oyedele, A., 2016. Consumer Culture and Political Ideology Plots in Social Media Campaigns. s.l., s.n.

[24] Jing, T. S., 2013. Corporate branding, emotional attachment and brand loyalty: the case of luxury fashion branding. Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management, 17(4), pp. 403-423.

[25] Harvey, M. & Evans, M., 2001. Decoding competitive propositions: A semiotic alternative to traditional advertising research. International Journal of Market Research, Second Quarter, 43(2), p. 171.

[26] Uggla, H., 2016. Leveraging Luxury Brands: Prevailing Trends and Research Challenges, Sweden: s.n.

[27] Davison, J., McLean, C. & Warren, S., 2015. Looking back: ten years of visual qualitative research. Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management:, 10(4), pp. 355-359.

[28] Seo, Y. & Buchanan-Oliver, M., 2015. Luxury branding: the industry, trends, and future conceptualisations. Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics, 27(1), pp. 82-98.

[29] Miller, K. W. & MK. Mills, i., 2012. Probing brand luxury: A multiple lens approach. Journal of Brand Management, 23 March.p. 41 – 51.

[30] Urboniene, A., 2016. Storytelling in Country Branding: A Semiotic Approach. International Journal on Global Business Management and Research, August, 5(2), pp. 17-30.

[31] Østergaard, P., Hermansen, J. & Fitchett, J., 2015. Structures of brand and anti-brand meaning: A semiotic square analysis of reflexive consumption. Journal of Brand Management, 22(I), p. 60–77.

[32] Arrigo, E., 2015. The role of the flagship store location in luxury branding. An international exploratory study. International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management, 43(6), pp. 518-537.

[33] Meulenaer, S. D., Dens, N. & Pelsmacker, P. D., 2015. Which cues cause consumers to perceive brands as more global? A conjoint analysis. International Marketing Review, 32(6), pp. 606-626.

[34] Tsotra, D., Janson, M. & Cecez-Kecmanovic, D., 2004. Marketing on the Internet: A Semiotic Analysis. New York, s.n.

[35] Macnamara, J., 2003. Media content analysis: Its uses; benefits and best practice methodology. Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal, 6(1), p. 1–34.

[36] Crilly, N., Maier, A. & Clarkson, P. J., 2008. Representing Artefacts as Media: Modelling the Relationship Between Designer Intent and Consumer Experience. International Journal of Design, 2(3), pp. 15-28.

[37] Oswald, L. R., 2007. Semiotics and Strategic Brand Management. Marketing Semiotics.

[38] Gordon, A., 2005. Signs and Wonders The Transformative Power of International Semiotics. In: London: s.n., p. 23.

[39] Mériem, M. & Kaouther, S. B. R., 2012. Sources of Brand Value from Semiotics to Marketing Perspectives. American International Journal of Contemporary Research, June.2(6).

[40] Grilo, A. & Marques, T., 2015. Strategic Brand Design: Conceptualization Through Semiotics' Levels. Future Studies Research Journal, July.7(1).

[41] Eves, B. & Hewitt, J., 2009. Style-Branding, Aesthetic Design DNA. s.l., University Of Brighton, UK.

[42] Bernsau, K. M., 2004. The Brand –Economics of Signs, Iconographics of Economy. About the Necessity of a Semiotic Criticism of the Concept "Brand". Congress of the International Association of Semiotic Studies.

[43] Bevins, C., 2014. A Visual Social Semiotic Analysis of Target's Branding using Instagram, s.l.: s.n.

[44] Culache, O., 2015. The Symbolic Language Of A Brnad: Semiotic Modeling, s.l.: Prof. univ. dr. Traian D. Stănciulescu.

[45] Evans, M., 1999. Semiotics, culture and communications— The common sense of the 21st century. s.l., s.n.

[46] Larraufie, A.-F. M., 2013. The E-semiotics of Luxury. Digital Worldwide Socializing Potential.