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**VISUAL STRATEGY: the accessibility of organizational
core values by an advertisement's visual and textual
dimensions - a semiotic analysis of the European 'denim &
jeans' market.**
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Abstract

Visual Strategy: the accessibility of organizational core values by an advertisement's visual and textual dimensions - a semiotic analysis of the European 'denim & jeans' market.

Organizations are currently facing an image-centered culture, where people are overwhelmed by pictures. Due to the high level of intensity and constant exposition to such material more and more people are normalizing the images that they are exposed to. Organizations' communication is then lost inside the background noise, failing to be remembered by their target audience and especially to contribute to the fulfillment of the organization's goals because of lacking the *visual strategy* approach. On these premises, the study aims to investigate how are visual advertising strategically promoting the organizational identity in terms of core values. Building on Barthes' semiotic system and Eco's textual theories, the framework is used to analyze the condition of accessibility between the advertisement's visual and textual dimension and its referential world in terms of the organization's core values. Eight different advertisements belonging to eight different brands among the 'denim & jeans' European market are analyzed. The findings demonstrated that *visual strategy* is still quite overlooked by organizations, easily sacrificed to the aesthetics and rhetorical forms to create memorable advertisements that do not help strategically the organisations. Moreover, without this approach, an organization risks sending wrong messages, damaging its identity among the audience. For last, the study argued how in reality *visual strategy* works synergically with the other areas of visual strategic communication in the development of strategically efficient communication, giving them purpose. Further researches are needed to generate more knowledge about this neglected area of strategic communication, in particular long term study to investigate how and if the employment of purposeful advertising could effectively close the gap between stakeholders' perceptions and desired organizational identity in the long run.

Keywords: Barthes, Eco, advertising, accessibility, core values, organisational identity, visual strategy, strategic communication,

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1. Defining the research problem

1.1 Introduction

In today's over-communicated media landscape, the employment of pictures as a medium of communication is rising (Becker, 2004; Crowley & Heyer, 2012). Pictures, however, are ambiguous and organization risks sending signals to their audience that are not in line with their stated values and identity. Indeed, it is a well-known adage that a picture is worth a thousand words. A single image can convey multiples ideas, meanings, beliefs, emotions, and feelings that cannot be easily express by words. More broadly, visual artifacts are an extremely powerful way to store and transfer knowledge and ideas within social groups and communities as through calligraphy and words, which are nothing but a system of glyphs (Meyer et al., 2012). Therefore, images are a tool as important as words in the creation of a view of reality shared among the member of the group.

According to various authors (Becker, 2004; Crowley & Heyer, 2012; Jenkins, 2006) we are currently living in an image-centered culture. Thanks to modern technologies, people are constantly exposed to a countless number of images during their daily life (Crowley & Heyer, 2012; Jenkins, 2006). This trend appears to be gaining strength with every passing year; therefore it appears very likely that in the future images will be even more pervasive. Visual-forward platforms and social media are constantly increasing their users (McCoy, 2019) and multinational tech corporations like Microsoft and Apple are currently developing Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality technologies. Companies are therefore close to achieving what once was imagined or theorized only by the most imaginative artists.

Pictures are invading more and more people's life and psyche. Cases of anxiety and depression are already widely reported among the uses of social media, mostly caused by images, often altered, saw online that taunt them (Rodgers et al., 2020; Hawes et al., 2020). At the same time, more and more people are normalizing the images that they are exposed to, mostly due to the high level of intensity and constant exposition to such material. Messages that are not able to rise above the noise are not to be remembered by their target audience, resulting in the inability of an organization to differentiate

themselves from their competitors. As Infolink (2013) surveys showed, 86% of people exposed to online advertising do not remember the last advertisement they saw. The majority of an organization's communication effort is then lost inside the background noise, hindering the organization's performance. To not fade into the background, organizations end up deploying exaggerated and captivating advertisements that are fundamentally empty shells and fail to live upon their stated corporate values. For example, Reebok's campaign "I am what I am" was criticized by the Advertising Standards Authority and by the public because it was perceived as glorifying gun violence and crime (Gibson, 2005), clashing against the brand statement that sport allows people to be the best version of themselves in every aspect of their life (Adidas Group, n.d.). Such type of advertising fails to communicate organizational identity, confusing the audience, and broadening the gap between stakeholders' perceptions and desired identity. Following these premises, it seems logical that new knowledge about visual strategic communication is more than ever required for organizations to survive and thrive in such a market. However, the majority of communication scholars tend to neglect the understanding of this area of communication (Becker, 2004). Quoting Becker (2004, p.150), "*a common solution to the problem is to ignore the media's visuality altogether.*". Nevertheless, in the age of image explosion this area of communication can not be neglected anymore.

1.2 Problem statement

A large part of organizational communication is made of visual elements. Newton (2005) proved that visual elements affect our perception of the world and influence our behavior. An example supporting this claim is the study of Bottomley & Doyle (2006), which showed the importance that colors play on brand identity and how the brand's performance is affected by people's perceptions of the correctness of a brand's color(s). For example, Gap, a famous brand of denim and clothing, suffered an online backlash after revealing the new logo (Geoghegan, 2010). The new logo was highly criticized for being "*Cheapy, tacky, ordinary*" (Geoghegan, 2010) and it was rejected by its customers. Poorly planned images can jeopardize the core message of an organization and create misinformation, corrupting the narrative that the organization was trying to create. For this reason, a *visual strategy* approach is needed to achieve the organization's goals and fulfill its mission.

Nevertheless, studies about visual strategic communication, and especially in *visual strategy* as identified by Göransson & Fagerholm (2018), are still quite limited. In this regard, it is not hard to argue that strategic communication scholars and practitioners do not appear to be particularly interested in the relationship between strategy and images although nowadays the equality between the medium of writing and images is unquestionable. The majority of academics and practitioners follow a traditional perspective, focusing their studies and theories from a linguistic, literary, and philosophical perspective. However, humans prefer images to words because they are easier to recognize, to process, and to recall (Dewan, 2015). This happens because an image contains a double code, visual and verbal, that gets stored in different parts of the human brain (McBride & Doshier, 2002). Aligned with these theories, recent studies (TechSmith, 2018; GFK, n.d.) revealed that the Millennials process faster and more easily visual communication than verbal communication. Moreover, image-based social media are experiencing a rising number of users (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). In an age where imagery is exceeding the textual communication, becoming the preferred medium of communication, the *visual strategy* approach should obtain the right attention and legitimation from communication scholars.

1.3 Aims and Research question

Following these premises, the study will contribute to strategic communication by generating new knowledge about how the *visual strategy* approach can help organizations in transmitting, strengthen and sustain its organizational identity among its target audience, closing the gap between stakeholders' images and desired identity. Specifically, this study aims to develop a theoretical framework that links visual elements with the organizational strategy. The author aims to achieve these goals employing Barthes' visual semiotic theory and Eco's textual theories, two frameworks that explain how the organizational core values can be used as a referential world for designing purposeful advertisements able to promote the desired identity among stakeholders. On this premise, the developed theoretical framework can be used both by practitioners and scholars as a theoretical background to investigate other visual strategic communication issues and to design more purposeful and efficient advertising. Moreover, the author wants to renew the debate about visual strategic communication.

To achieve this purpose, the author will seek to answer the following research question:

- RQ: how are visual advertising strategically promoting the organizational identity in terms of core values?

Drawing upon Barthes' and Eco's theories, this study investigates how visual and linguistic signs within advertisements allow the reader to understand the organizational identity. The case study is based on a visual semiotic analysis of eight brands' advertisement among the European market of 'denim & jeans'.

1.4 Relevance to Strategic Communication

In 2018 Göransson and Fagerholm conducted a review of the existent literature that focused on visual strategic communication, identifying only 106 articles published in ten years mostly concerning visual rhetoric, visual studies, and visual communication. In this regard, the amount of research regarding *visual strategy*, which can be defined as the purposeful use of visual communication to achieve the organization's goals in compliance with Hallahan et al. (2007) (Göransson & Fagerholm, 2018), is extremely limited. Moreover, visual elements are involved in every aspect of strategic communication – public relations, branding, and organizational communication – since they are a translation of the strategic communication plan of an organization into a visual language (Van Riel & Balmer, 1997). Therefore, it can be argued that a larger number of studies about visual strategic communication and especially *visual strategy* are needed to improve the knowledge about the overall strategic communication field.

For last, this study will show how purposeful advertising, aligned with organizational strategy, can help organizations to achieve the desired organizational identity among its stakeholders. Since advertising is still the medium most used by organizations for self-promotion, knowledge about *visual strategy* is needed to improve an organization's communication effectiveness. Especially in times when people are overwhelmed by images.

1.5 Boundaries of the Study

In strategic communication literature, the concept of an organization's identity is divided into two distinct parts: the *corporate identity and organizational identity* (Hatch & Schultz, 1977). These are different concepts since *organizational identity* focuses on the

perception and beliefs held by internal members towards the organization, and *corporate identity* is mostly focused on the visual aspect of communication towards stakeholders and the role of the management in the formulation and expression of it to external audiences (Hatch & Schultz, 1977). The authors claimed that in practice these two identities work together in the creation of the total identity and image of a company. However, this study focuses only on corporate identity since it investigates the organization's visual communication in terms of advertising, specifically how it could be interpreted by the organization's audience. In this regard, the term organizational identity in the text is always referred to the identity as a *corporate identity*.

Moreover, organizational culture plays an undeniable role in shaping identity (Schein, 2004; Hatch & Schultz, 1977). According to Schein (2004) organizational culture is formed by assumptions and beliefs (deep level) that shape values (middle level or 'espoused values' (p.7)) which then influences behavior that creates artifacts (waterline level). In particular, the middle level is composed of organizational strategies, goals, philosophies, ideologies, vision, mission, etc. The study investigates this level because it gives direction, identity, and purpose to the organization. Specifically, this study is limited to the core values officially claimed by the organization since they represent how the organization wants to be perceived.

2. Literature review

The author starts the literature review by examining scholars' attempts to categorize visual studies in communication and how the field of visual strategic communication originated. After that, the main studies regarding the *visual strategy* approach are illustrated. Both these sections are in chronological order, to show the development of the field. It is important to note that studies about visual artifacts within the arts are excluded from this literature review.

2.1 How to categorize visual studies?

Formal studies about visual communication studies started around the end of the 1950s and its origin are rooted in the arts and design (Moriarty & Barbatsis, 2011; Griffin, 2012). However, despite the rising (although still limited) interest among scholars regarding this field of study, formal attempts to bring order in the visual studies and to clarify precisely what is and what is not visual communication started only in the 21st century (Moriarty & Barbatsis, 2011).

In 2004 Barnhurst et al. tried to define the limit and areas of visual studies in communication. Analyzing books, articles, and journals between 1999-2003, they identified three main areas of study: visual rhetoric (connected with mass media studies and popular culture), visual pragmatism (the production of images and designs) and visual semantics (visual as written language and as a medium for creating and transmitting meaning).

In 2005, Smith et al. also tried to trace the relationships among visual research approaches, building a rhizomatic map designed to give a holistic view of visual communication studies. The map shows how visual communication areas are related to various disciplines as education, law, semiotics, business, neuroscience, info system, and critical/cultural studies. Every field is connected to the other ones through the various areas of studies that compose visual communication studies. For example, the discipline of the info system is connected to the discipline of business through the following areas: aesthetic, creativity, graphic design, and mass media studies. The scholars tried to create

a comprehensive collection of visual research methods, including visual rhetoric approaches and methods of visual cultural studies. Nevertheless, the authors were not able to classify visual studies because of the strong interdisciplinary and fragmented nature of this field of study.

On this insight, in 2011 Martin identified three different approaches within visual studies in communication, and on this basis, he divided the studies in visual rhetoric, visual studies, and visual communication. First, visual rhetoric (rhetorical approach) is a type of communication that uses images, alone or in cooperation with other elements, to construct a specific meaning or argument (Ott & Dickinson, 2009). This approach combines theories of rhetoric, semantics, and semiotic with the visual dimension of communication (Martin, 2011). Secondly, in visual studies (semantic approach) investigates how people and society access to images and how those can support the systems of power (Martin, 2011). Moreover, it concerns the role of images in the meaning-making processes created in a cultural context (Dikovitskaya, 2006). For last, visual communication (problem-oriented approach) is a field of research that use the social scientific method to investigate both the meaning-making processes and the visual phenomena in social, political, economic and cultural context (Müller 2007).

Göransson and Fagerholm (2018) challenged this tripartite categorization of visual communication studies, by introducing the field of visual strategic communication and by adding a fourth area to the traditional ones, which they called *visual strategy* (2018). The authors analyzed different journals of visual communication between 2005-2015, discovering a gap in the classification of the three traditional fields of visual communication studies - *visual rhetoric*, *visual studies*, *visual communication*. These three areas, while encompassing a large part of the literature, are not exhaustive. It is possible to find many different scholars whose methodologies cannot be categorized as one of these three approaches identified by Martin (2011). These scholars are concerned about how the visual elements support, contribute, and are aligned with the strategies of an organization (Göransson & Fagerholm, 2018). According to the authors, the *visual strategy* approach focuses on the purposeful use of visual communication as a way to satisfy the organization's goals, which is aligned to the definition of strategic communication claimed by Hallahan et al. (2007) (Göransson & Fagerholm, 2018, p.13). This area of study covers all communication practices - public relations, branding, organizational communication. Besides, Göransson and Fagerholm (2018) showed that

scholars of *visual strategy* usually employ content and image analysis, semiotics, mixed methods, and experiments for their studies.

It is important to understand that in reality all the areas - *visual communication*, *visual strategy*, *visual rhetoric*, and *visual studies* - are extremely linked to each other and sometimes overlapping (Göransson & Fagerholm, 2018). Consequently, the placement of a study within one of the four areas could be not so simple.

2.2 Visual strategy approach in strategic communication studies

During the 60s, practitioners and scholars of organizational communication started developing studies around visual communication. These practitioners created the ground knowledge about the concept of corporate identity and on this base, scholars started to investigate how visual identity can shape, communicate and support the organizational identity (Van Riel & Balmer, 1997). This particular area of study is the most investigated by scholars of the field.

It is interesting to note that one of the first studies related to *visual strategy* investigated exactly this area and how visual identity can contribute to the performance of organizational identity and fulfill the organization's goal (Baker & Balmer, 1997). Baker & Balmer (1997) revealed that graphic design if strategically planned can help an organization to achieve a stronger and clearer organizational identity. In their study they analyzed various brand visual identities representing Strathclyde University. The authors showed that the highly fragmented visual identities of Strathclyde University's departments were signs of weaknesses in the official university identity. In particular, they were symptomatic of poor brand management and communication. Baker & Balmer (1997) argued that a weak visual identity can represent fragility in the corporate culture, corporate strategy, and/or communications policies. Consequently, organizations must work on the causes, strategically planning their visual language. Changing the logo, without a coherent strategic communication plan as support, it is not enough to fix the underlying organization's weaknesses (Baker & Balmer, 1997).

In 2001, Malewar and Wooldridge argued about the pivotal role that visual identity plays in shaping the perceptions of an organization's stakeholders (Malewar & Wooldridge, 2001). For example, name and logo changes are methods used by organizations to signal changes of identity. In this regard, a strategic approach regarding the choice and

employment of specific visual imagery is critical, especially in pursuing global strategies in multicultural contexts (Malewar & Wooldridge, 2001). In fact, in this type of context the interpretation of symbols and words can be deeply different for each person.

Following this study, in 2002, Melewar and Jenkins tried to define the concept of corporate identity, identifying four different areas: communication and visual identity, behavior, corporate culture, and market conditions. The area of communication and visual identity, in particular, is composed of corporate communications, architecture and locations, corporate visual identity, and uncontrollable communications.

Additionally, Schein (2004) argued for the importance that visual elements play inside an organization, influencing corporate culture, employees' behavior, and closing the gap between current identity and its images and the desired ones. Visual language influences corporate culture, helping to change employees' behavior, closing the gap between current identity and images, and the desired ones. According to Schein (2004), organizational culture is formed by three different levels: assumptions and beliefs (deep level) shape norms and values (middle level) which then influences behavior that create artifacts (waterline level). Meaning-making activities turn artifacts - as actions, processes, visible design and structures, stories - into symbols shared by the members through associations. According to the author, changes in culture and employees' behavior are possible when the new values carried by artifacts are perceived as worthy, accepted, and absorbed into the deep level. Therefore, the change starts at the artifact level, introducing new artifacts and filling them with new cultural values to provoke new activities that generate meanings. According to Schein (2004), the duty of the management should be to make values clear and prove their worthiness. The *visual strategy* approach is therefore needed to achieve the desired organizational culture and identity.

In 2005, Van den Bosch, De Jong, and Elvig investigated the relationship between visual elements of corporate identity and organizational reputation. They intertwined the five elements of the visual identity (CVI: Corporate Visual Identity) - name, logo, typography, colors, and tagline (and other visual elements in practice) - with the five dimensions of organizational reputation model – transparency, authenticity, distinctiveness, visibility, and consistency. The authors explained how these five dimensions are based on behavior, communication, and symbols. CVI supports the organization's visibility by employing the elements on media exposure, organization's buildings and stores, organizational vehicles, working clothing, etc. The visual identity symbolizes the organization's existence and reputation among the audience. Distinctiveness can be achieved by

implementing a distinctive CVI design that is emotionally appealing and unforgettable, aligned with the organizational communication strategy for the desired identity. For Van den Bosch, De Jong & Elving (2005), authenticity is not directly connected with CVI but with the process of developing a clear and coherent visual identity from the organization's roots. The story embedded in a CVI, about its development and the elements that inspired its creation, can guide the organization's employees in their actions, helping them to understand the organization's meaning. Their behaviors will then enhance the perception of authenticity and organizational image among external stakeholders. Transparency can also be improved via CVI through corporate and endorsed brands, and the employment of a special logo as a certification or quality label. For last, the authors claimed that consistency can be achieved through visual coherence, established by CVI guidelines.

Moreover, having a *visual strategy* can enhance organizational identification of stakeholders. Whan Park et al. (2013) discovered by an experiment that brands with symbols as logos provide more self-identity/expressiveness benefits than logos as brand names. Besides, they are efficient at communicating the functional benefits of a brand.

Another example of a study that contributes to this approach is the experiment carried out by Maier and Andersen (2014). The scholars investigated how identity can be strategically used to communicate a specific identity to the employees through images and texts in magazines. The authors showed how it is possible to improve employee identification with an organization employing identification strategies and tactics. These tactics are multilayered in nature and they are a synergy of text (visual or written), context, and voices (Maier & Andersen, 2014). In particular, the scholars noticed the strong influence that images played on employees' identification and identity. For example, they noticed that images of smiling colleagues affected positively employee, allowing them to be more susceptible to identification tactics. A strategic approach in the choice of the smiling faces could help to increase employees' empathy and commitment to the organization

For last, the *visual strategy* approach can be successfully used also to engage organizational stakeholders and influencing their behavior. Valentini et al. (2018) investigated how the engagement of Instagram users - based on the sharing, liking, commenting, and following of image-based content - and purchase intention are correlated. Their experiment shows a positive correlation between the two digital visual engagement and purchase intentions. Additionally, it was discovered that images with a direct gaze and high product salience positively affect digital visual engagement.

2.3 Synthesis and research gap

The literature review shows that the area of *visual strategy* is clearly a recently identified subset of the strategic communication field and that it is still quite unexplored by communication scholars. The field presents a high level of fragmentation and the studies that fell under its umbrella show little connection between each other. However, its contribution as support to an organization's communication strategy and to achieve an organization's aims can no longer be underestimated and neglected as shown by the authors discussed above (Van Riel & Balmer, 1997; Melewar & Wooldridge, 2001; Margulies, 1970; *ibid.*). More studies should be carried out to broaden the knowledge of strategic communication and to raise awareness about the vital role that *visual strategy* plays in achieving an organization's goals.

Currently, the most explored area of *visual strategy* is about organizational identity and how visual elements can affect the audience's images and perceptions, organizational culture, reputation, employee behavior, organizational identification. However, the existing literature is composed of single case studies and there is a lack of theoretical frameworks able to connect the field of visual communication to implementable strategies. Moreover, there is a lack of knowledge about how visual advertising can support and transmit the organizational identity (in terms of organizational core values). Although advertising has always been investigated and explored by communication scholars and practitioners, since it is one of the most powerful to reach and influence its audience, there are no attempts to understand how a purposeful use of the *visual strategy* approach in designing advertisement helps to project the desired image, strengthening and clarifying organizational identity in consumers' minds. In this regard, the theoretical assumption is that organizational core values should be used as a referential dimension during the designing of advertisements to guarantee a relationship of accessibility to the organizational values by its readers. Therefore, if strategically designed, the reader should be able to generate the core values of the organizational identity. In this way the organization projects a specific and desired image that contributes to close the gap between stakeholders' images and desired identity.

3. Theory

In this chapter the author will introduce the theoretical framework and the authors that will be at the center of the methodology used in the remaining of the thesis: the post-structuralist perspective and the authors Barthes and Eco. Before doing so the author will lay the groundwork necessary to understand both framework and authors by introducing the necessary background: the main theories about semiotics and the structuralism tradition.

3.1 Introduction to semiotics: the two traditions

The term semiology was firstly introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure in 1916, and it identifies a science “*that studies the life of signs within society*” (Belsey, 2002, p. 24). In particular semiology studies how meanings are created by people through both linguistic and non-linguistic means (Hawkes, 2003; Belsey, 2002). Although the existence of a “science of signs” was already theorized at the beginning of the 20th century, the term was widely adopted only in the 1960s (Culler, 2002).

Saussure is considered the father of modern linguistic and one of the most important representatives of the European semiotic field and structuralism tradition (Hawkes, 2003). Among many other contributions, he challenged the belief that the world is made up of independently objects, objectively accessible by human understanding. According to the positivist perspective, linguistics is composed of units called ‘words’ that can be assembled in different orders to create a sentence (Hawkes, 2003). Every word carries out a specific meaning that can be impartially analyzed and known. Saussure rejected this conception in favor of a view of linguistics based on relational causes (Saussure, 2018). Moreover, Saussure formulated a sign in a language as a dyadic relationship between signified and the signifier (Image 2.1) (Saussure, 2018). The signifier is the form that sign takes and the signified is the concept that is expressed by the sign. In this perspective, every language is a system of signs.

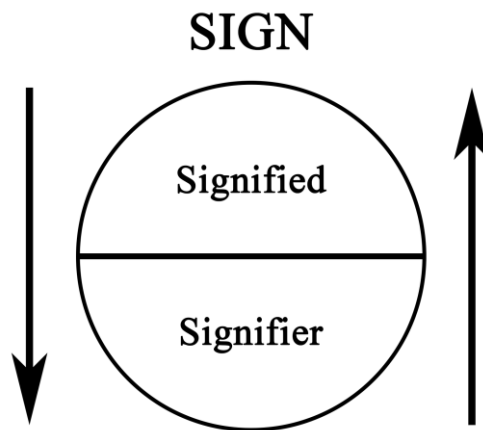


Image 3.1: Saussure's dyadic model of semiosis (based on Saussure, 2018).

The Great War severed contacts between Europe and the US, delaying the translation and printing of Saussure's books which reached the US only in 1959, allowing the growth of a separate school of linguistic, independent from the European tradition (Hawkes, 2003). In contraposition to the European idea of signs as a dyadic relationship, American scholars interpret signs as a triadic relationship. The American science of signs is commonly known as semiotics (Pierce, 1998/2007) and Charles Sanders Peirce is considered was the first and most influential semiotic scholar.

According to Pierce (1998/2007) a sign is created through the interaction of its three parts: the sign or representamen (a thing having a signification), the object (something on which the sign is based) and the interpretant (the belief developed by the relation sign/object) (Image 2.2). Pierce visualizes this process as a pyramid. The base is the mediation between sign and object, and its peak is the interpretant (Pierce, 1998/2007).

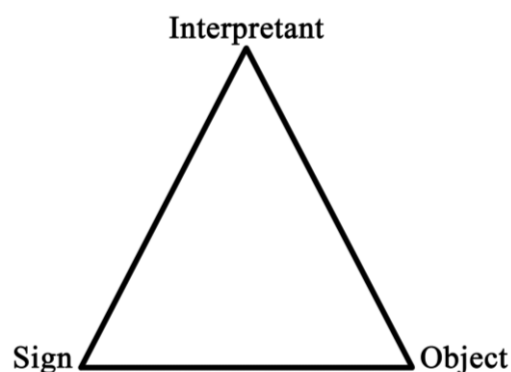


Image 3.2: Peirce's triadic model of semiosis (based on Pierce, 1998/2007).

In reality this pyramid is more like a never-ending chain and it is called ‘Infinite Semiosis’ (Eco, 2001, p.44) (Image 2.3). This happens because a sign needs an interpretant in order to exist and the interpretant is a sign as well, embodying a mental representation of the relation sign/object (Eco, 2001).

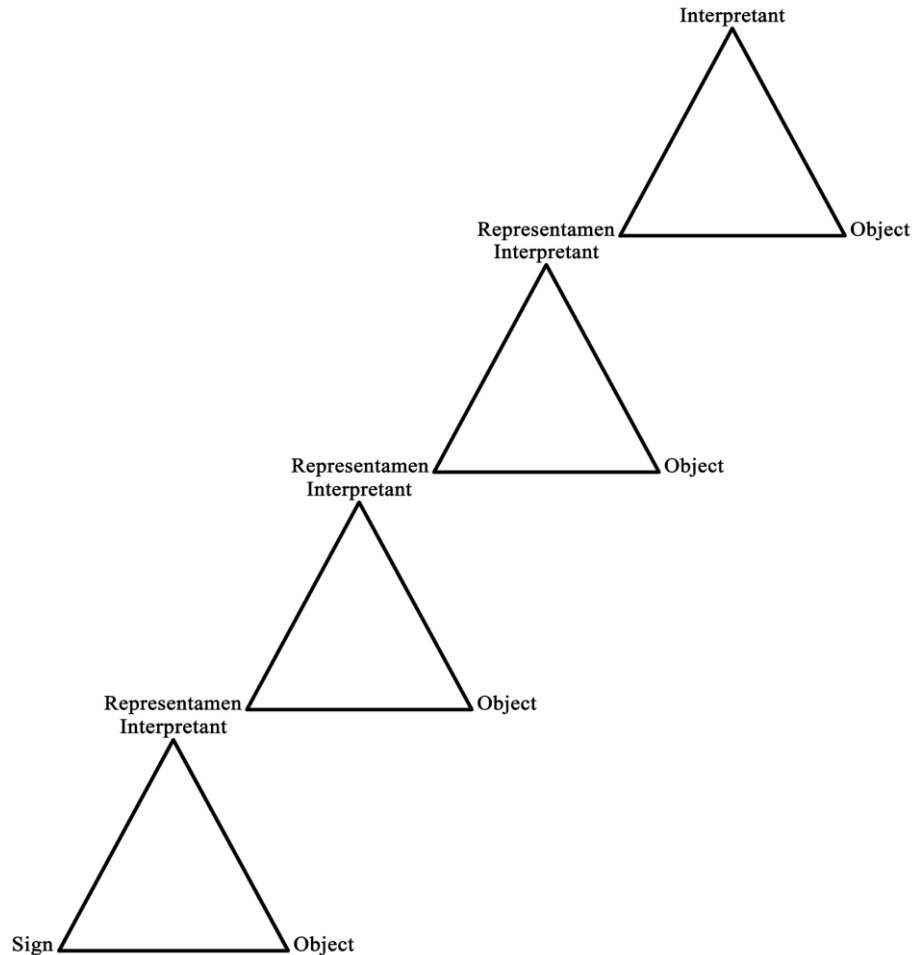


Image 3.3: Peirce’s “Infinite Semiosis” (based on Eco, 2001, p.44; Pierce, 1998/2007).

Both Saussure and Peirce’s theories are considered fundamental pillars of the semiotic discipline despite their differences in understanding signs and meanings. Their influence is wide-reaching throughout linguistic, anthropology, sociology, and many other disciplines.

3.2 Structuralism and Post-structuralism Tradition

Saussure’s semiology belongs to the structuralism tradition, which is a methodology developed from the 19th century that aims at analyzing social phenomena by

understanding the underlying deep structure of reality (Prasad, 2017). Structuralism rejects subjectivity and individuality, focusing on the structure of elements in a system (Hawkes, 2003). The true knowledge lies in understanding the structure; how the elements interact with each other following rules, codes, and patterns of signs. For structuralists it is possible to reach the truth about reality, although reality does not exist outside human perception (Hawkes, 2003).

The core concepts of this tradition can be found in Saussure's works. Firstly, his studies about language claim that the signifier has no objective connection nor with the reality nor with the object it refers to (Saussure, 2018). This reveals how a language is in reality an "*arrangement of a collective system of signs that generates a fundamental framework for organizing all human experiences through the basic linguistic categories it provides*" (Prasad, 2017, p.110). A language then becomes a system of signs with different inner logic and rules of classification. A second important theme is the shifting from diachronic form (historical) to synchronic (not-historical) form of linguistics analysis (Saussure, 2018). For structuralism, in order to reveal the inner functioning of language, the word should be investigated in its synchronic form, i.e. at a specific moment of time without reference to its past. Another central theme is the relational principle that underlies language as a system. The meaning, and limit, of the system lies in itself: there is no significance outside the linguistic structure and the meaning is created by means of their relationships (Saussure, 2018). Fourthly, a semiotic system is constituted of both paradigmatic and syntagmatic relationships and their interplay is needed to understand the inner functioning of any system (Saussure, 2018). Paradigmatic relationships are oppositions between signs: for example, we understand black because it is not white, or cold because it is not hot. Syntagmatic relationships are associative relationships (of degree and space) between different signs. For last, the denotative and connotative meanings of a sign (Barthes, 1987). The denotative meaning is the most obvious and basic meaning of the signified, whereas the connotative meaning refers to a secondary and less intuitive system of meanings that relate to the context, religion, society, and culture.

These themes were used and expanded by many scholars during and after the Second World War. One of the most famous and notable representatives of the tradition was Claude Levi-Strauss, a French anthropologist, who inspired by Saussure's ideas claimed that a culture should be understood in terms of relations between elements within a structure (Lévi-Strauss, 2001). Levi-Strauss (2001) claimed that myths are a key element in the understanding of a culture. According to the author, myths among cultures follow

a similar pattern. Myths have a synchronous structure that remains stable in time although details and words change from myth to myth and culture to culture, reflecting a universal pattern that mirrors invariant structures in the human mind (Lévi-Strauss, 2001). Lévi-Strauss (2001) believed that the analysis of these structural similarities among cultures and of the relationships between the cultural elements could lead to an understanding of the archetypes of human thoughts.

Lévi-Strauss's studies regarding the concept of myth were deepened by Roland Gerard Barthes using his visual semiotic approach. His work focuses on the exploration of hidden meaning and the relationship between meaning and form of visual elements, analyzing cultural visual products as media, cinema, advertising, etc. (Belsey, 1973). He differentiated between linguistic and non-linguistic systems, theorizing the first framework of visual semiotics (Barthes, 2009). In this regard, he distinguished between the linguistic sign, created by the relationship between image-sound (signifier) and concept (signified) in a linguistic system, and the sign, typical of the non-linguistic system and created by the total of signifier and signified (associative total) (Barthes, 2009). Furthermore, he challenged the semiotic traditions, claiming that the relationship between signifier and signified is of equivalence (correlation) and not sequential (Barthes, 2009). In his most influential book, "Mythologies" (2009), he outlined the semiotic framework for a non-linguistic system. He uses for example a bunch of roses, symbolizing passion. In this semiotic process, at the first-order of the semiotic system, the bunch of roses signified literally a bunch of roses. The relationship between signifier and signified, called 'associative total' (Barthes, 2009, p.137), creates a third term, the sign (Image 2.4), which is the bunch of roses. In the second-order the bunch is the signifier and the passion is the signified (Barthes, 2009). This because the bunch of roses as sign and signifier are different. Barthes (2009) claimed that as a signifier - first-order (first signification) of the semiotic system - the roses are empty, and as a sign they are full of signification. Barthes (2009) claimed that the second-order generates the 'myth' (p.138), which is a "*complex system of images and beliefs which a society construct in order to sustain and authenticate its sense of its own being: i.e. the very fabric of its system of 'meaning'*" (Hawkes, 2003 p. 107). At this level, the sign of the first system is used as a signifier of the second level, generating a third term within the myth level called 'signification' (Barthes, 2009). With the theorizing of the signification, Barthes moves away from Saussure's theories about sign and meaning.

Barthes (1987) makes an important distinction between the two different layers of meaning: the first-order is denotation - the direct meaning of the language - and the second-order is called connotation - a secondary meaning where the language is used to communicate something different from the direct meaning (aesthetic of the language). Connotation takes place at the second-order signifying system when the sign becomes the signifier (Barthes, 2009). The denotation works at the first-order level.

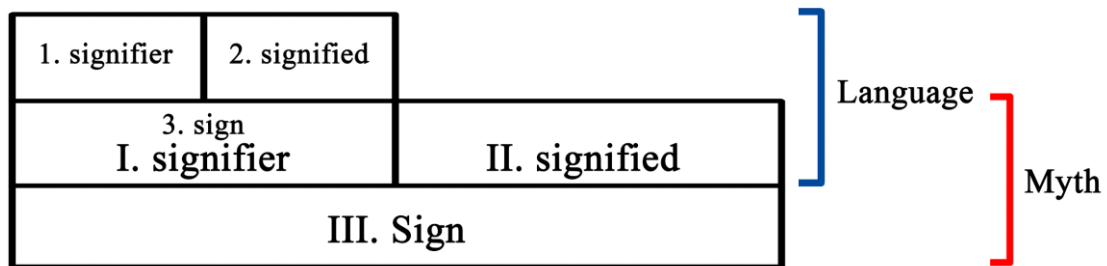


Image 3.4: Barthes's model of semiosis (based on Barthes, 2009).

According to Barthes (2009), the signifying system is an endless chain, or semiosis, that turns in a metalanguage. The aesthetic messages have the same interplay of denotation and connotation as any language and emotive and cognitive dimensions as well (Barthes, 1987). For last, Barthes (1987) makes an important distinction about how the meanings of the two orders are created in the visual sign: the denotative meaning is not coded since it has not further meanings than the literal one, whereas the connotative meaning is coded since requires specific knowledge for being understood by the readers.

Structuralism ended with the birth of Postmodernism, a broader movement originated around the second half of the 20th century across different fields as a pushback against the Enlightenment, the modern institutions in terms of authority and legitimacy and the 'Zeitgeist' of the time (Prasad, 2017). The movement opposed the belief in the superiority of the scientific method as the only and valid way to reach the 'Truth' about the world (Kellner, 1990). Postmodernism looked with nostalgia towards the past and the old traditions, celebrating and encouraging a return to the subjectivity (Vaillancourt, 1987).

Within this context, the post-structuralism movement began in the 1960s in France and influenced various subjects as arts, politics, literature, photography, sociology, cultural criticisms, etc (Williams, 2005). Post-structuralism is a critical and creative practice, constantly open to the new and it refers to a group of theories about the relationship between human beings and the ability to make and reproducing meanings (Belsey, 2002).

In addition, post-structuralism shares a conflicting relationship with structuralism and the semiotic tradition of Saussure, Pierce, and Levi-Strauss. First of all, the term 'post' is used to symbolize the aftermath of structuralism like a rupture with the past (Williams, 2005). Secondly, the term refers to the improvement and regeneration of the old perspective (Howarth, 2013) since post-structuralism rejects the possibility to know an objective reality and the concept of knowledgeable truth that is fundamental in structuralism tradition (Vaillancourt, 1987). For post-structuralism, the limits of knowledge and the impossibility of achieving an objective 'Truth' are the core and a common topic among the scholars of the movement. Post-structuralism is against all the forms of essentialism, determinism, dogmatism, and naturalism (Williams, 2005; Vaillancourt, 1987; Kellner, 1990). The idea of the limit of consciousness and resistance of boundaries in terms of content and identity is at the core of the tradition's philosophy (Williams, 2005). In post-structuralism boundaries are transcendental conditions for the core, which is not caused by them and therefore not objective and knowledgeable. The limits "*are like causal laws, rather than actual causes, in standing outside the things they apply to*" (Williams, 2005, p. 12). For last, Nietzsche's philosophy influenced deeply the tradition by means of his genealogical method, a critique to the concept of transcendence (Williams, 2005): everything is evolved and evolving through historical struggles, so there are not transcendent and independent values. Everything is immanent and not transcendent.

This concept was explored by Jacques Derrida by means of his deconstructionism, a form of transformed structuralism. Moreover, it is argued that post-structuralism is deconstruction (Cooper, 1989, Williams, 2005), which is a style of writing and textual analysis (Williams, 2005). Derrida challenged the entire western tradition of philosophy and the idea of a binary and hierarchical oppositions (Belsey, 2002). In particular, he denied the western idea of Logocentrism - the idea that written texts are accurate representations of the speech and that they are able to capture the true meaning (Culler, 1982) - and Saussure's phonocentrism - the idea that speech and voice are superior to texts (Belsey, 2002). This because, as Derrida (1998) reveals, speech is mediated by language as writing, therefore there is no escape from representation. Derrida's deconstruction showed that language is characterized by instability as texts and their meaning is not fixed and objective (Cooper, 1989). For deconstructionism the antithesis subjective against objective is trivial because one is the cause of the other (Derrida, 1998).

The outside forms the inside and vice versa: a person can know the outside (objectivity) just through its subjectivity (Derrida, 1998).

3.3 Barthes' semiotics and the 'possible worlds' of Eco

Some structuralist scholars and practitioners joined the post-structuralism tradition towards the end of their careers. Among them, Roland Gerard Barthes was a notable figure in the field of semiotics and visual media studies, with works that spanned both structuralism and post-structuralism (Safavi & Gümüs, 2019). He claimed that semiotic analysis goes behind simply the language and it can be applied to sign system in media and images (Barthes, 1987). Although he started his career from a structuralist perspective, in his later years, Barthes embraced a post-structuralist perspective. Such change was mostly influenced by Derrida's attack on structuralism, which had a deep impact on Barthes inducing him to change his approach to semiotics. Barthes joined Derrida in claiming the impossibility of knowing an objective truth in the science of semiology (Oxman, 2010). Moreover, Barthes's late works can be compared to the deconstructionism of Derrida, sharing a common point of view about truth, identity, and meaning. As Derrida, he criticizes the desire of obtaining an objective semiotic science and the desire to obtain a fixed meaning, a metaphysics of presence over absence (Derrida 1998). For Derrida (1998), the sign is a historical concept that has not a true origin, not determinate identity and limits. Semiology is then a metaphysic of truth, not a positivist science: the loss of a transcendental signified sets the semiotic field free from phonocentrism, opening the world to an unlimited possibility of significations and legitimates the writing. Moreover, Derrida's concept of 'difference' (1998) demystifies the notion of a pure and absolute presence because everything is mediated, therefore impure. This is aligned with Barthes thinking of impossibility to encounter a pure literal image; denotation always coexists with connotation therefore it is impossible to reach a 'pure image' (Barthes, 2009). For last, for Derrida (1998) a text has no ultimate meaning and no specific structure or limits. Barthes (1987) agrees with this claim by means of his never-ending semiosis of the sign becoming signifier. Moreover, Barthes theorized a third-order level of meaning that is not separate from the other two levels (the obvious and the symbolic meaning) but at the same time is beyond them: the 'obtuse meaning', a signifier without signified (Barthes, 1987, p.54). According to too the author, the 'obtuse meaning' cannot be described, but just grasped: it works outside meaning and it is beyond

knowledge and culture. It was theorized in Barthes' studies on cinema, photographic, and visual media, and just in these contexts it can be achieved (Barthes, 1987). The third meaning is composed of elements without meanings that however contribute to generating significance of the visual fabrics. An absence of meaning that creates a presence in the overall signification (Barthes, 1987).

Similar to Barthes, Umberto Eco also shifted from a structuralist to a post-structuralist perspective. Umberto Eco was an important Italian semiotician, philosopher, linguistic and literary critic (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). He was influenced by both the European approach to semiology and linguistic as well as by the American ones. In particular it is clear the influence on Eco of Peirce and his idea of unlimited semiosis (via the interpretant) (2001). During his early stages, his ideology was strongly influenced by a structuralist perspective, and, applying Peirce's semiotics, he tried to develop a semiotic theory of literary interpretation (1996). However, already in his book, the "Absent Structure" (1996), Eco struggles to give a clear definition of meaning, forewarning the shifting from a structuralist to a post-structuralist perspective. This shift happened towards the end of his career: he shifted to a post-structuralism perspective, arguing for the unstable character of interpretation and defining merely its limits in his book "The Limits of Interpretation" (2016a) and "Interpretation and Overinterpretation" (2002).

Eco (2016b) recognized two main semiotic fields: a theory of codes and a theory of sign-making. According to Eco (2016b), a code links the elements of a binding system (expression) to the elements of a bound system (content): the first becomes the expression of the second system, and the latter becomes the content of the first one. When an expression is linked to content there is a sign function. The concept of the sign is then limited by the element(s) of expression conventionally linked to element(s) of content (Eco, 2016b). Moreover, a sign is an abstract entity. Within a sign there is an interplay of mutually independent elements because every element can have a sign function with other elements: in this regard, the division between sign and meaning dies (Eco, 2016b). Furthermore, Eco (2016b) theorized the superelevation of codes: the first code establishes a meaning (denotative meaning) and a second code builds on it a second level of meaning (connotative meaning). For Eco (2016b) a text is composed of messages limited by codes and sub-codes, which are not fixed and universally shared. The differences between these codes, create the success or unsuccess of communication.

The concepts of code(s) and the structure was used by Eco to analyze the interpretation activity, in particular the cooperative interpretation of narrative texts. Eco (2001) claimed that the success of a text lies in the ability of the author to adopt a flexible narrative strategy, i.e., a strategy opens to various interpretations that connects the text with a multitude of readers. In this regard, the text is not characterized by a fixed meaning but by a condition of accessibility to the reader for developing his interpretation (Eco, 2001; 2002). The text is created by the author based on a fictional 'model reader' (Eco, 2001, p.50) that guides readers' decoding, limiting the space of infinite meanings by stating which are the wrong interpretations since they are against the internal coherence of the text (Eco, 2001). On this premise, the 'model reader' is the internal structure that is required by the text in order to be transmitted and it can not be avoided by the author. If the internal coherence is respected, all the interpretations work, also the ones that the author never thought about or even wanted.

Strictly connected with the concepts of interpretation and accessibility is the relationship between 'possible' (p.122) worlds [my translation], specifically the relationship between a fictional narrative and its referential world (Eco, 2001). The 'possible' worlds are linguistic constructs, specifically semiotic, which can be thought by means of narrative restrictions and compared to each other by means of matrices. For Eco (2001), a 'possible' world can be expressed as a set of propositions or characteristics, which are just metalinguistic conditions for building worlds and not types of truth. Since this world is not real but 'possible' or fictional, the world depends on someone that acts on it, creating it. In a fictional world, individuals have specific limited characteristics (Eco, 2001). Some of these properties can follow the rules of the real worlds and others can work just in that world. Different combinations of proprieties generate various and different 'possible' worlds (Eco, 2001). According to Eco (2001) the 'possible' world is a cultural construction, because a fictional world can not exist autonomous from reality otherwise it would be impossible to understand. The boundaries of the fictional world overlap the boundaries of the referential world, in a coexistence, allowing the understanding of the fictional world (Eco, 2001).

In practice, building a world means giving specific properties to an individual, which are essentials (Eco, 2001). From the textual semiotic approach, properties are discriminated the narrative main topic of the world. According to Eco (2001) the essentiality of the characteristics is obtained by means of contextual comparison. However, this set is never complete because of the never-ending semiosis of sign, then it is required to establish

some rules of the material conditional in order to contain the set (Eco, 2001). These characteristics, if existing in both a 'possible' world and its referential world, allow the relationship of identity (Eco, 2001). The worlds are characterized by the same essential properties and they differ from each other by means of non-essential properties. In the narrative, this case is represented by the historical fiction genre. Moreover, and particularly, the presence and absence of essential properties permit a relationship of accessibility of one world to the other (Eco, 2001). Accordingly, to Eco it is possible to assess the accessibility of the referential world (W_i) by a 'possible' world (W_j) if the essential properties of W_i are contained in W_j (Eco, 2001). In this way, it is possible to generate and understand W_i from W_j . Eco describes the relationship of accessibility as $W_i R W_j$ (Eco, 2001, p.146).

3.4 The similarities between Eco and Barthes

Barthes' semiotic theory is used during the analysis since specifically designed for non-linguistic systems but also relevant for linguistic systems within visual elements. A visual semiotic approach is required since advertising combine text with cultural signs and icons to communicate a specific and understandable message to its target audience. On the other side, Eco's structural and narrative theories allow us to understand if an advertisement can promote its organization's desired identity among the audience.

Although Barthes and Eco are experts respectively in visual media studies and textual studies, looking particularly to different semiotic traditions - Barthes to the European semiology of Saussure and Eco to the American semiotic of Pierce - the authors show similarities. The sharing of similar perspectives - regarding meaning, semiotic process, and interpretations - make Eco and Barthes perfectly suitable to each other since, and for last as a framework for the analysis.

First of all, both the authors agree with each other about the author's loss of power in creating the meaning of his text(s), sacrificed to the readers' various interpretations of the text. However, if Barthes argues for an unlimited semiosis (via the connotation), Eco tries to limit its possible infinite interpretations claiming that there are internal structures within the text which are required for its transmission. The internal textual coherence guides the reading and limits the interpretations, which can nevertheless be different from the original meanings of the author. In this regard, Eco agrees with Barthes (1987) regarding what is matter to the text's interpretation is not its writer and the 'original

meaning(s)' of the text but its internal coherence; the interpretations are subordinated to this latter, allowing to the reader to understand which interpretations are unreliable since against the internal coherence. Moreover, thanks to the relationship of accessibility to a text/image, interpretation is a cooperative process between authors and readers where they are both creators.

Secondly, Eco and Barthes' semiotics are quite similar to each other, although one focuses on literary interpretation and the other on visual studies. The signifier and signified of Barthes can be seen respectively as the binding system and the bound system of Eco. Both recognized the possibility of a superelevation of the sign from its denotative meaning to the connotative meaning, which uses the former as a base. Moreover, both the authors agree that the link between the two independent elements of the sign is of correlation, created by specific codes and sub-codes within the reader that allow specific interpretations.

For last, the structure that signs and myth need in order to be internally coherent, transmissible and decoded, is what Eco called 'model reader'. Although Barthes never truly investigated this concept except in terms of 'anchorage' (Barthes, 1987, p.38), the internal coherence (model reader) allows signs (visual and linguistic) and myths' existence and guides the interpretations. This is particularly relevant for the second-order of meaning because it is based on the denotative layer that guides the process of significations as an 'anchorage' (Barthes, 1987).

In conclusion, Eco and Barthes' theories explain why in reality an advertisement is interpreted by the readers with a certain degree of similarity despite their subjective differences. The differences in codes among the readers create various infinite interpretations. Nevertheless, the internal coherence of signs (visual and linguistic) and myths, based on specific codes and sub-codes, allow the rejection of unreliable meanings reducing interpretation instability. Moreover, the employment of myths guarantees a condition of accessibility to the largest numbers of readers since they are designed based on cultural beliefs and imaginary which are shared among members of a specific culture. Moreover, the employment of shared and common beliefs helps to reduce the instability of the signification.

4. Methodology

4.1 Epistemological approach

The study works inside the post-structuralist tradition, where reality can be understood just through personal subjectivity. Consequently, reality becomes a matter of perception, not something that can be objectively known. There is not an objective reality because the human mind does not have direct access to things, but it can just understand their representations (Burr, 2015). Our understanding of the world is constructed by our perspective, experiences, consciousness, and social interactions (Falkheimer & Heide, 2006). Knowledge is then not an innate quality within a human being, but it is individually and socially constructed. According to Barthes (2009) myths are one of the main tools used by humanity to normalize ideologies and shared narratives. Consider for example a bunch of roses, they are just flowers but in our culture we mythologize them into something that symbolizes passion and love. A person can decode the myth behind the bunch of roses since the codes used to correlate the signifier and the signified are part of his social experiences, social environment, and culture. Moreover, Eco (2001) supports the social construction of reality claiming that the meaning of a text is a cooperative process between author and readers, where the original meaning of the author is lost among readers' interpretations. Therefore, readers are authors themselves.

In this perspective, the possible interpretations of reality are infinite. However, in reality this unlimited interpretation is limited in two ways. The first limitation lies in the single person himself. The theoretical unlimited possibilities of interpretation that an individual is capable of in practice are limited by the codes and sub-codes generated by their experience, language, interactions, and culture. The second limit lies within the 'model reader'. Eco (2012) argued for a "minimum realism" [my translation] counterposed to the excessive relativism of postmodernism: although it is not possible to claim when an interpretation is right, it is possible to know its invalidity when it does not match real data. The meaning is then limited, and the "minimum realism" allows a certain degree of stability to our understanding. What it is possible to certainly know is just negative interpretations. This epistemology is reflected in the understanding that is the internal

coherence of signs (visual and linguistic) and myths that guides the reader's process of significance, limiting his interpretations. In this regard, the reader of an advertisement knows which interpretations are wrong because contrasting with the internal structure that signs (visual and linguistic) and myths require to be correctly transmitted and understood by the audience.

4.2 Research design

The study is designed to be qualitative, understanding, and exploratory in nature. Its qualitiveness aims to capture the various features of this phenomenon, which can not be reduced to objective truth, data, and results since the semiotic process is not a scientific process, and meaning is characterized by instability. Semiotics is a logical process that studies signs in relation to culture, language, society, social activity, philosophy, and human subjectivity. Therefore, a qualitative study is then required in order to reflect "*the irreducibility of human experience*" (O'Reilly, 2005. p.7). The aim of the study is to analyze the condition of accessibility of an organization's core values through its advertisements. Since this relationship has not been thoroughly investigated in the past, an appropriate theoretical framework is needed to better understand the existing lack of attention, both academically and in practice, towards the area of *visual strategy*. An understanding part will also take place in order to generate knowledge about the phenomenon under investigation, which will be useful for further research.

4.2.1 Case selection and sample

The research investigates the advertisement inside the clothing sector, specifically the 'denim & jeans' market. The research design thus falls within the case study approach for two reasons. First of all, this approach is especially suitable when it is not possible to draw clear boundaries between a phenomenon and its context (Yin, 2003). Moreover, according to Yin (2003), the case study approach is useful when there is an investigation about a new phenomenon or an anomaly and for making a comparative analysis in order to generate knowledge about the investigated topic. Additionally, although the analysis is focused on a specific type of market, the following framework and analysis could be applied to different market sectors and visual artifacts, that based on an organization's communication strategy should transmit specific messages. However, the framework is applied to this sector for two reasons. Firstly, because the advertisements of the clothing

sector are based on a wide range of cultural beliefs and myths, which are often taken to extremes, rejected, or revolutionized. In this never-ending battle for consumers' attention, it could be easy to sacrifice the strategy in the name of creativity. Secondly, the 'denim & jeans' sector allows a certain degree of homogeneity among the analyzed organizations and their products, reducing the wide apparel's offer. This simplifies their comparison. The sample is composed of advertisements selected from some of the biggest brand players among the denim and jeans sector. The analysis is then limited to the brand operating in the European market (Image 4.2). Moreover, in order to compare the selected brands to each other and limiting their difference caused by their belonging to different segments, the eight brands are selected based on their belonging to the same price category. In this specific case the price category of "Medium: €50-100". In addition, among this category, two brands are selected from every fashion segment in order to represent the full 'denim & jeans' European market experience. Furthermore, this choice gives a glimpse of how the *visual strategy* approach can be overlooked both by the leaders of the market and their followers.

The analyzed brands are:

- Late adopters: Levi Strauss and Lee jeans
- Trend followers: Mustang and Dockers
- Trendsetter: Guess and Pepe
- Innovators: Diesel and G-star Raw

For each brand an advertisement is analyzed. The collected material belongs to the timeframe 2010-2020.

Fashion acceptance:	Innovators	Trendsetters	Trend followers	Late adopters
Price categories:				
High € 80-200+	M&F Girbaud DSquared2 Blue Blood	True Religion Nudie Edun True Jeans	Seven for all mankind J Brand DKNY jeans Armani jeans	--
Medium €50-120	Diesel G-Star Levi Red Premium Replay	Only Guess Pepe Miss Sixty	Dockers Mustang Edwin	Levi Strauss Lee Jeans Wrangler
Low €20-60	--	Cheap Monday Dr Denim &D (H&M) MNG (Mango) TRFC (Zara)	Cars Jeans Gap Jinglers (C&A)	Tesco Matalan Zeeman No-brand names

Image 4.2: Major players in European market of 'denim & jeans'. (Fashion & Vision, 2008 In CBI Market Information Database, 2009).

4.2.2 Data collection and analysis

The raw data from advertisements is collected employing Barthes' semiotic system, relevant to both non-linguistic systems and linguistic systems within visual elements. First, both the textual and visual dimensions are investigated through the first order for collecting the denotation layer or direct meaning of an advertisement. The first-order is then used to investigate the second-order of the system (the connotation layer) and to understand the cultural myths within the advertisement. This process is applied to the collected advertisement's signifiers and signifieds. It is important to notice that the denotative function is an 'anchorage' of all the possible meanings of the connotative signifieds, helping the reader to choose "*the right level of perception*" (Barthes, 1987, p.39). During the understanding of the symbolic message, the denotative meaning(s) of the textual/visual message guides the interpretation of the connotative meaning(s).

The collected signifiers and meanings are then compared to the organizational core values, which are labeled as essential properties. All the proprieties should be within an advertisement's meanings to guarantee to readers the condition of accessibility to the organizational core values. And since organizational values are beliefs and cultural myths, just the second-order of meaning is investigated employing the matrix. However, the first-order of meaning is analyzed because it creates the second-order.

The organizational values of the companies are the ones stated on their official websites, except for the brand Guess which will be used the official information on its Facebook page. Following Eco's theories about identity and accessibility of possible worlds, the raw data are arranged in a matrix to see if it is possible to generate the referential world of the core values from the advertisement's signs (both visual and linguistic) and myths (Image 4.2). In the analysis the individuals are replaced with signifiers, the proprieties with signifieds and the essential properties with the organizational values. Then, the signifieds/properties within the advertisement are compared with the essential properties resulting in three different outcomes: + = presence of the propriety: - = its absence and 0 = indeterminate. This comparison allows the understanding of the presence or absence of a relationship of accessibility: if all the essential properties are signified in the advertisement it is possible to generate the referential world from it just deleting the meanings that are not related to the core values (non-essential properties).

Signifiers /Essential properties	Wi	Referential world		
Wj	Wi R Wj	Essential propriety - Core value 1: Real, honest and authentic	Essential propriety - Core value 2: Curiosity about individuality	Essential propriety - Core value 3: Creativity
Possible World	Signifier 1	+	-	+
	Signifier 2	-	-	+

Image 4.2: An example of the matrix.

4.3 Methodological reflections and limitations

The first limitation of the research is the instability of the interpretation originating from the semiotic process. Since meaning is not objective and is not identical for everyone, as it is subjected to the different codes that we held, it is possible that the findings of the following analysis of the signs (both visual and linguistic) and the myths within the advertisements could be different from the findings presented by another researcher. However, as pointed out by Barthes (1987), the signification in advertisements is limited because its signification is intentional since its signifieds are created to carry out specific meanings. *“If the image contains signs, we can be sure that in advertising these signs are full, formed with a view to the optimum reading: the advertising image is frank, or at least emphatic”* (Barthes, 1987, p.33). Therefore, the instability of the interpretation process should be significantly reduced, since an advertisement is designed to leverage common and culturally shared signs and myths in order to guarantee that the largest number of people possible has access to it. Nevertheless, it is impossible to know which findings are the correct ones, it is simply possible to know such findings are wrong.

Moreover, we need to account for the impossibility to state the third order of signification: the ‘obtuse meaning’, which plays an important role in visual images. Although the third order of meaning could be considered essential to the visual world, in the study it is considered as a non-essential property since it is behind human knowledge.

For last, the proposed framework of analysis cannot assess an advertisement's performance and its success among the audience, but just the relationship of accessibility and possibility for readers of understanding organizational core values. However, it is possible to argue that theoretically an advertisement with a good relationship of accessibility has more probability of contributing to raising an organization's performance than a poor strategic design one.

5. Analysis

5.1 Innovator: Diesel

Diesel was founded by Renzo Rosso in 1978 and it is a worldwide leader in the ‘jeans & denim’ sector (Diesel, n.d.). It is an iconic worldwide brand and one of the best innovators in the sector (Serwe, 2015; Pavarini, 2016). The brand distinguishes itself for its eccentric, irreverent, and provocative communication campaign, using global and social issues (Green, 2016). Diesel’s core values¹ are passion, distinctiveness, and expression of the personality. The term “distinctiveness” can be quite misleading: in the analysis it is considered as something peculiar and outstanding in a person. The analyzed advertisement belongs to the campaign “Be stupid” of 2010 (Image 5.1) (Ads Of The World, n.d.).



Image 5.1: Diesel - Be Stupid (Ads Of The World, n.d.)

¹ Retrieved March 28, 2020, from <https://it.diesel.com/it/help-show?content=diesel>

Within the textual dimension it is possible to distinguish three linguistic messages, which literal meanings can be understood through knowledge of the English language. The first message transmitted by the advertisement is the text: “Smart listens to the head. Stupid listens to the heart”, which covers half the space of the advertisement. Its second-order of meaning promotes the cultural myth that intelligent people are boring, conventional, serious, and cold whereas stupid people are the ones that have more fun and who are open to everything and happy. This cultural assumption is nowadays worldwide present within popular culture and it is possible to decode correctly the significance by knowing these cultural codes. For example, the myth lies in the derogatory stereotypes of ‘Geek’ (Dictionary, n.d.b) or ‘Nerd’ (Dictionary, n.d.c), often used to make light of highly intelligent people but lacking social skills or popularity, that is worldwide used and accepted in the common language. In particular, the myth can be also traced in cinema, music, media content and narratives: some movies like “Forrest Gump”² and “Dumb and Dumber”³ celebrate stupidity as a virtue and stigmatize intelligence (Drake, 2004), whereas numerous songs connect foolishness with the theme of love as the recent music video “Dance Monkey” of the “Tones And I” (2019). This linguistic message is filled with positive values.

The second and third linguistic messages are represented respectively by the brand’s logo and the slogan “Be Stupid”. At the connotational level, the phrase shows its connection with the bigger linguistic message because sharing the same purple color, allowing the understanding that it is the name of the communication campaign. Moreover, the brand name Diesel reminds the namesake fuel and it signifies the concept of a non-conventional fashion. However, this interpretation is accessible with the knowledge that at the end of the 70s, when the brand was created, diesel fuel was considered as the alternative energy to conventional fuels as fossil ones (Diesel, n.d.).

In the visual dimension, thanks to the linguistic messages are possible to identify correctly the main visual elements of the scene: the girl, the boy, the friends helping the boy to reach the girls, the bus, the embrace, and the kiss. Their literal meanings are accessible through basic knowledge about genders, common objects, and human gestures obtained by living in almost every nation of the world.

The first and third linguistic messages help the reader at the second-order of signification, guiding his level of reading and perception of the visual iconic message. In this regard,

² 1994, directed by Robert Zemeckis

³ 1994, directed by Peter Farrelly

the first signified is the forthcoming separation of the two lovers: since the girl is outside the bus she is probably not going to the same destination. This signifier implies the value of urgency and acting fast. The signifier can be understood by everyone who has experience with public transportation and their strict timetables. The second sign is the protagonist of the scene; its signifiers are created by the kiss and the embrace between the two lovers. Its signifiers are passion, desire, and the need for strong feelings and emotions. To access this meaning, the reader should have experienced the same feelings in his life towards another person or have been exposed to this social construct through social interaction, narrative, movies, etc. A third sign is represented by the two friends holding the boy; its signifiers are amusement, playfulness, carelessness, the indifference of etiquette, and stupidity - often linked to young age and childish personality. To acknowledge this sign is required only to have experience of youth, immaturity, of rebelliousness, and the freedom from various social rules and social expectations that characterize adolescence. The second and third visual signs are a celebration of stupidity as a virtuous way of experiencing life fully.



Image 5.2: Korean War Goodbye Kiss, Los Angeles, Sept. 6, 1950 (Nèjè, 2017).

Moreover, since passion is commonly linked with the concept of ‘heart’, the reader easily associates the linguistic messages with the signifiers of the embrace and kiss between the two young.

Finally, a more subtle sign is brought together by the arrangement of the scene: it is possible to notice a relationship of resemblance between the Diesel's advertisement and some famous historical photo (Image 5.2). Its signifier is a subtle feeling that it could be the last kiss forever (because of the war) and therefore it is important to enjoy the moment without being afraid of the etiquette and following their feelings (therefore the heart and not the mind) because there could not be another chance. The knowledge drawn upon is quite particular because the reader needs to have been exposed to this kind of historical images to understand.

“Be stupid” - Diesel advertisement

Signifier (second-order) /Essential properties	Wi	Referential World		
Wj	Wi R Wj	Core Value: Passion	Core Value: Distinctiveness	Core Value: Expression of the personality
Possible World	Signifier: Slogan	+	-	+
	Signifier: Brand Name	-	+	-
	Signifier: Text	+	-	+
	Signifier: Kiss + Embrace	+	-	0
	Signifier: Arrangement of the scene	+	-	+
	Signifier: Bus	-	-	-
	Signifier: Two friends	-	-	+

As the matrix shows, it is possible to understand the 'core values' world from advertisements signifiers. Diesel's advertisement is filled with both the core values of passion and expression of the personality; however, the core of distinctiveness is not apparent. Without the knowledge of the significance behind the brand's name (as an alternative and unique way of dressing to the common fashion) the value would be lost followed by the accessibility to the core values world of Diesel. Lastly, to access the

meanings the understanding of the linguistic dimension is required. Without it, the significations are different, and the referential world would not be known.

5.2 Innovator: G-star Raw

G-star, officially G-star Raw, was founded in 1989 by Jos Van Tilburg (Charlton, 2014) and it is a Dutch premium clothing brand specialized in denim clothing, particularly in untreated denim (G-star Raw, n.d.). The core organizational value⁴ is “just the product” (G-star Raw, n.d.). However, this value delivers three important sub-values of the brand’s identity: the high-technological level of craftsmanship, raw denim as wearable and desirable material, and their distinctive design (G-star Raw, n.d.). In the analysis, these three aspects are explored and investigated separately to each other. The selected advertisement belongs to the international campaign of spring/summer 2013, “The art of Raw” (Patrick, 2016).

The advertisement (image 5.3) is composed of two linguistic messages: “The art of Raw: the unlimited possibilities of denim” and the brand’ name and logo “G-star Raw”. The text is in English and to decode its denotational message the knowledge of the language is needed. Furthermore, the second-order of the signification of the first linguistic message works synergically with the visual dimension in delivering meanings and myths: the visual sign of the skeleton wearing a denim garment guides the interpretation process of the linguistic messages. In the first linguistic message it is possible to identify two different myths of “raw”. The first myth is related to the long history of jeans and denim and their numerous meanings. Raw denim was initially connected with employees, cowboys, and military sought for its endurance and comfort (Sullivan, 2007), strengthened by the denim garment worn by the dog. To access this myth one must know the origin of denim fabric. The second myth transmits the symbolic idea of something natural, untouched, and therefore authentic, which is supported and strengthened by the visual element of bones as the primary form of humans and mammals. This can be understood through basic knowledge/experience about anatomy and about the western common theme of nature (perceived as authentic and primitive) vs industrialization (as alienating and fake) born during the advent of modernity, which can be also traced in the cultural myth of cowboys and jeans (Hegarty, 2012). Moreover, the linguistic message claims “the art of”, promoting the idea of raw jeans as single and unique art pieces and

⁴ Retrieved April 26, 2020, from https://www.g-star.com/en_it/about-us

comparing the denim's manufacturing to an artistic process: the brand becomes an atelier. Basic knowledge of art history is required to access these meanings. The last piece of the message works synergically with the visual element of the dog and denim cloth to transmit the idea of incessant innovation and advanced technologies which allow the creation of apparently infinite new denim designs and products. Common knowledge regarding the innovative and technological progress of creating new products as necessary for organizations to drive is needed to understand this.

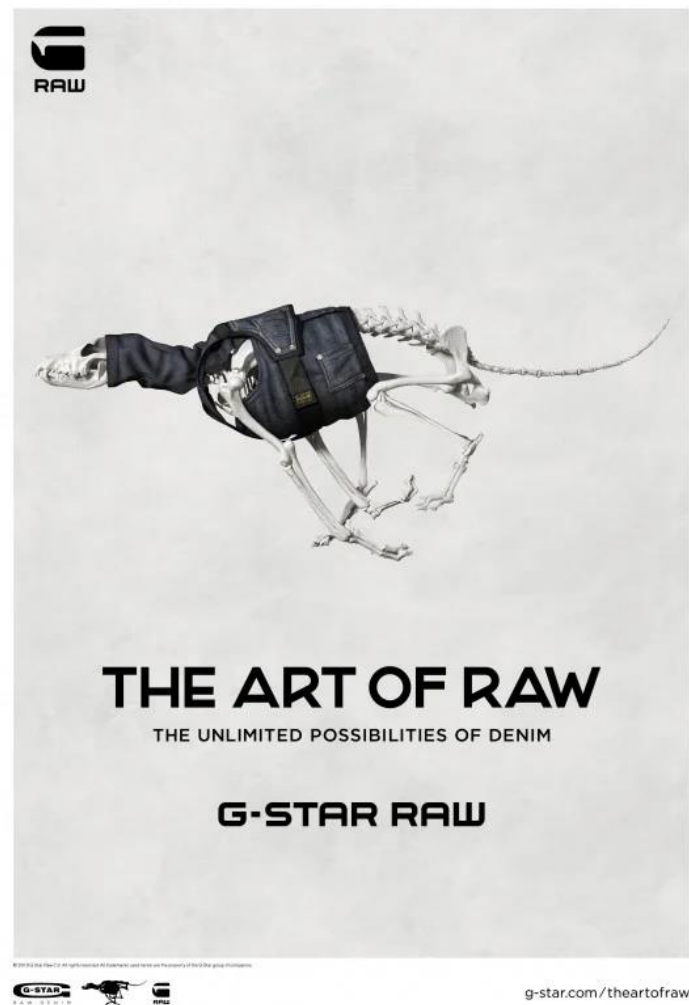


Image 5.3: G-star - The art of Raw (Patrick, 2016)

The connotational message of the second linguistic message, the brand name, and logo, is instead mostly connected with the urban myth of gangs. The name was developed appositely to sound like the word “gangsta”, slang for the word gangster (Urban Dictionary, n.d.; Richards, 2016). First, the name recalls the beliefs and images connected with gangs. Furthermore, it represents a genre of music that is connected with the

phenomenon of gangs and has positive connotations among the street culture. It is used to describe something/someone cool, tough, and awesome (The Online Slang Dictionary, n.d.; Urban dictionary, n.d.; Dictionary, n.d.a). The access to this myth is granted through knowledge about street culture, especially American one (place of origin), and gangster rap music (Hip-hop genre) that emphasized the violent ‘thug-life’ lifestyle (Dictionary, n.d.; Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.; The Online Slang Dictionary, n.d.). The word “raw” adds the myth of naturalness.

The linguistic messages help the reader to identify the main visual signifiers of the advertisement: the running dog, the skeleton, the color palette, and the denim clothing. At a denotational level, the direct signifiers are accessible through common experience and knowledge about animals, basic anatomy, colors, and denim fabric.

The linguistic messages’ myths help the reader in the decoding of the visual iconic messages. The first visual sign is the color palette. The grayscale (signifier) is related to the cultural myth of “raw” and naturalness (signifier) since, during the middle ages, gray was the color of undyed and raw wool (the myth of naturalness) (Snell, 2019). Moreover, it is also the color of bones, as the skeleton suggests. However, to access the first meaning, it is required a particular knowledge about clothing history or middle ages. Furthermore, the color is nowadays connected with the city environment, and understanding this signifier is possible through the experience of the urban landscape.

The second visual sign is the dog’s skeleton with the denim garment. It helps to deliver part of the connotational messages of the first linguistic message. The garment’s extravagant shape works with the first linguistic message to show the brand’s creativity and distinctive design. Furthermore, it transmits the idea of resistance and versatility of the fabric with the dog seems comfortable in its gear. the myth of “raw” as genuine is added by the bones, which are animals’ and humans’ natural and raw form. This is strengthened by the color palette. Basic knowledge/experience of anatomy is required to understand it.

The third visual sign is the dog’s shape, where the running symbolizes the idea of movement and energy. These significations can be understood by everyone that has experienced the body's movement and stillness. The dog is commonly associated with the values of loyalty (man’s best friend), guidance (hunting dog and guide dog), and protection (house guardian) (Vanacore, 2020).

“The art of Raw” - G-star Raw advertisement

Signifier (second-order) /Essential properties	Wi	Referential World		
Wj	Wi R Wj	Core Value: High-technological level of craftsmanship	Core Value: Untreated denim as wereable and desirable material	Core Value: Distinctive design
Possible World	Signifier: The art of raw	+	+	+
	Signifier: Brand name	-	-	-
	Signifier: Color palette	-	0	-
	Signifier: Dog’s skeleton + Denim garment	-	+	+
	Signifier: Dog’s shape	-	-	-

In conclusion, G-star Raw’s advertisement shows a condition of accessibility to its organizational values since the meanings do not require specific understanding but daily experience and common knowledge. With this, the referential world is accessible to a large and various audience. Moreover, the two dimensions work synergically to deliver the overall meaning: one guides and limits the significations of the other, and both the dimensions would not be able to convey the organizational values on their own since one is needed for understanding the other. However, without the skill of the English language, the significances would be different, possibly making the core values inaccessible.

5.3 Trendsetter: Pepe Jeans London

Pepe Jeans London is English denim and casual wear jeans brand founded by the brothers Nitin, Arun, and Milan Shahn in 1973. The brand mainly employs fashion models and celebrity endorsements for its advertising, preferring short text like a slogan or name

campaign and/or just the brand logo. The brand's core values⁵ are creativity, authenticity, uniqueness, and self-confidence (Pepe Jeans, n.d.) and the selected advertisement belongs to the international campaign autumn/winter 2013 "Have you seen Pepe?" (Image 5.4; FashionFad, 2018).



Image 5.4: Pepe Jeans London - Have you seen Pepe? (Pepe Jeans India, n.d)

The advertisement shows two linguistic messages: the name campaign and the brand name. The denotational meanings of both linguistic messages are accessible through the knowledge of the English language and it has a literal meaning. The construction of the sentence indicates the word "Pepe" to be something or someone that is missing. In this regard, the connotational level of the first linguistic message can be understood using the brand name as a code for its decoding. At this level of meaning, the brand is humanized: the brand becomes a missing person that must be found. The linguistic message encourages the reader to find "Pepe", and its products, wherever he goes. This analogy

⁵ Retrieved April 21, 2020, from https://www.pepejeans.com/en_int/page/customer-service.html

can be understood by anyone whoever has looked for a person or animal and asked other people: “Mum, have you seen Dad?”; “Have you seen Mark? He was here one hour ago”; etc.

The second linguistic sign is the brand name. For a common reader, the current name recalls the origin of the brand through the word “London”. Moreover, London is well known to be a meeting point of cultures, languages, and persons. As stated on the official website of the city, in London there are over 300 languages spoken and 197 festivals (London, n.d.). The unique and eclectic cultural atmosphere that defines London, the cultural myth, is also reflected in the brand. Furthermore, London hosts the “London Fashion Week”, one of the major global events about fashion (London, n.d.). In the mind of the reader, his beliefs about the brand’s expertise could be improved by means of this relationship.

In the visual dimensions, there are three visual signs: the landscape, the flag, and the fashion models. Its denotative meanings are accessible by means of the knowledge about English culture and experience of genders. The linguistic message of the campaign name frames the connotational message of the fashion models’ visual sign. By means of the questions, the reader can understand that the fashion models are looking at him, asking to find Pepe. The persons do not seem worried or in rush but focused on the reader to hear his reply. However, they do not look particularly curious about the answer. Just the male wearing the teal sweater seems to be on alert, eager to receive an answer. Instead, the girl on the left looks a little bit surprised by means of her mouth slightly open. Readers can obtain all the information by means of their experience about nonverbal communication that people unconsciously and consciously employ during social situations.

The connotational meaning of the visual signs of the Union Jack flag and London’s landscape is the cultural myth previously explained. Furthermore, the Big Ben in the photo signifies guidance, leadership, and reliability of the British nation, since it is the origin point of the Prime Meridian of the Greenwich Meantime, which is referential time system applied world-wide (Royal Museum Greenwich, n.d.). Moreover, the tower means power and order, since it belongs to the Westminster Palace, house of the English government. The Union Jack implies the historical facts, popular beliefs and stereotypes associated with the United Kingdom as the imperialism, the Queen, tea time, rainy weather, etc. These meanings are accessible by means of basic knowledge about English culture and history. Moreover, it is possible to guess, thanks to the clothing worn fashion models, that the photo was shot during fall/winter.

“Have you seen pepe?” - Pepe Jeans London advertisement

Signifier (second-order) /Essential properties	Wi	Referential World			
Wj	Wi R Wj	Core Value: Creativity	Core Value: Authenticity	Core Value: Uniqueness	Core Value: Self-confidence
Possible World	Signifier: Name campaign	-	-	-	-
	Signifier: Brand name	-	-	+	-
	Signifier: London (landscape)	-	-	+	-
	Signifier: Fashion models	-	-	-	-
	Signifier: Flag	-	-	+	-
	Signifier: Palette	-	-	-	-

The advertisement lacks accessibility to the referential world of organizational values. Only the value of uniqueness is properly addressed by its signifiers. The employment of people who can not adequately represent the brand’s values without other signs that grant accessibility leads to “empty” advertising (not subjected to the organizational strategy): it is aesthetically enjoyable, but it does not promote brand identity and does not help the organization to fulfill its goals. This kind of advertisement is particularly subjected to be overpowered by the background noise and does not support the brand to achieve its goals.

5.4 Trendsetter: Guess

Guess is an American luxury denim brand founded in 1981 by the four Marciano brothers, specialized in apparel and accessories (Guess, n.d.a). The brand’s advertising is usually based on celebrity endorsement, mostly in black-and-white photography (Fashion Rouge, 2019). The brand employs celebrities’ popularity to promote itself among its target audience (Fashion rouge, 2019), taking advantage of the celebrities’ fame to promote

itself among its target audience. The brand's core values⁶ are sexy, young, and adventurous (Guess, n.d.b) and the selected advertisement belongs to the spring/summer campaign of 2018, "Jennifer Lopez for", starring Jennifer Lopez (Hola! USA, 2018) (Image 5.5).

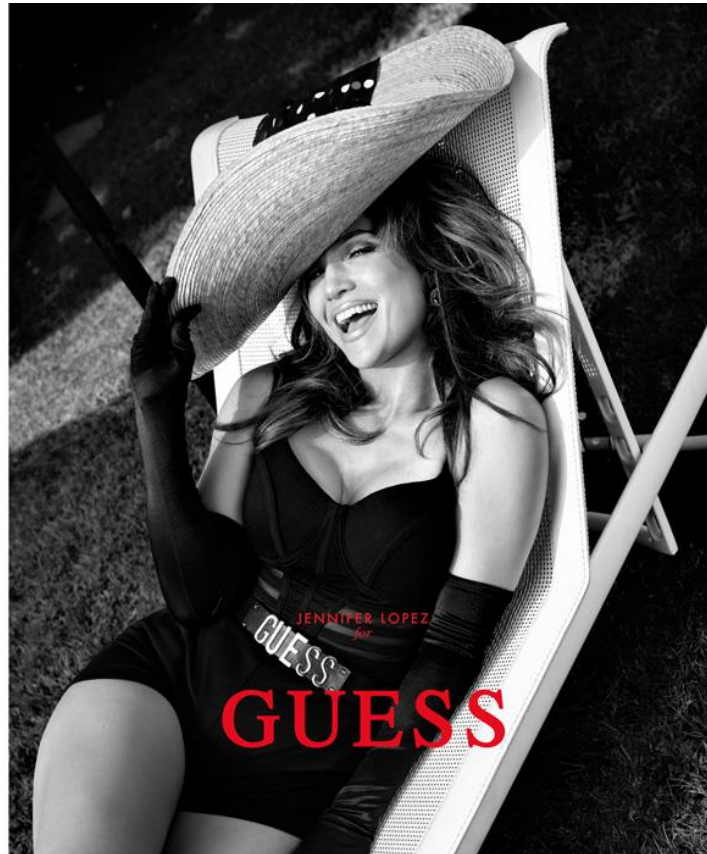


Image 5.5: Guess - Jennifer Lopez (Hola! USA, 2018)

Within the textual level, two different linguistic messages are identified: the brand name and the campaign name. To understand the literal meaning of both the linguistic signs it is required the knowledge of the English language, of female names and Spanish surnames (to understand that Jennifer Lopez is a named person, not an English word). The connotational level of the brand name can be better understood if the reader knows the Guess emblem (image 5.6), which is not represented in the advert. The emblem resembles the yield street sign (cultural myth), which indicates that the driver must stop

⁶ Retrieved April 30, 2020, from https://www.facebook.com/pg/GUESSEURO/about/?ref=page_internal

to let a driver on another approach proceed (image 5.7). The emblem works as a signal to others: the emblem asks the reader to slow down or stop and pay attention to the sign's owner. The emblem demands that the person wearing the brand product must be the protagonist of the scene. The question: "Guess?" is extended in the reader's mind in "Guess who is coming?". However, this cultural myth and meanings are accessible just to the readers who know the brand emblem and the traffic signs.



Image 5.6: Guess Emblem (Gioielli Gioielli, n.d.)

Image 5.7: Give Way sign (Moree Champion, 2016)

In the visual dimensions, there are three visual signs: the color palette, the clothing, and Jennifer Lopez. Their denotational meanings are accessible through knowledge about clothing, genders, and colors. The second linguistic message works synergically with the visual sign of the color palette and the clothing to deliver its cultural icon myth. The black-and-white color palette recalls the last centuries and a type of photography technique. The cultural myth behind the name of Jennifer Lopez (Hollywood star) and the clothing (long gloves and hat) brings to life the old Hollywood and its iconic actresses (Image 5.8). To grasp this iconic myth within the advertisement knowledge about old Hollywoodian culture is required. Additionally, Jennifer Lopez was awarded a star on Hollywood walk of fame, recognizing officially her contribution to the cinema (Bergman, 2013) which emphasizes her symbolizing iconic Hollywood. Moreover, the palette wants to transmit the official brand logos: the color black, white, and red.

The visual signs of clothing and Jennifer Lopez, at their connotational level, work together to transmit the cultural icon myth of the femme fatale where beauty and mystery create a woman that seduces, enchants, and is dangerous. Jennifer smiles artificially, studied to be mischievous and provocative. Her eyes are not lifted as usually happens when a person feels happiness and joy (Paul Ekman Group, n.d.). She is perfectly at ease, confident, and alluring. Moreover, her clothing reveals her sensuality. The femme fatale is an adventure and deadly challenge for men. She is an ‘ice queen’, extremely clever, cunning, and has a strong character and cold heart. This behavior is often justified by a cruel and terrible past that caused permanent changes (Haubrich, 2018).



Image 5.8: Hedy Lamarr 1940 (A Women Fashion List, n.d.)

Image 5.9: Gilda (Rita Hayworth) (Haubrich, 2018)

The femme fatale is an archetype of literature and art and is widely used among literature and cinema as “Atomic Blonde”⁷, “Lucy”⁸, “Kill Bill”⁹, etc. (Patel, 2017). But the most resembling Hollywoodian fictional femme fatale character comes from the movie “Gilda”¹⁰ in 1946 (Image 5.9) and her iconic, sensual, and infamous black dress (Haubrich, 2018). To access this level of significance one needs knowledge or experience about this archetype.

⁷ 2017, directed by David Leitch

⁸ 2014, directed by Luc Besson

⁹ 2003 and 2004, directed by Quentin Tarantino

¹⁰ 1946, directed by Charles Vidor

The photo seems to be shot in a garden or close to a pool during summer, identified by the beach chair the model is lying on that is usually placed close to the swimming pool to offer a place for relaxation in the sun. the setting and the straw hat suggest that the clothing is actually a swimming suit. However, the elegant gloves that are usually worn with formal dresses break that image and might confuse readers.

“Jennifer Lopez for” - Guess advertisement

Signifier (second-order) /Essential properties	Wi	Referential World		
Wj	Wi R Wj	Core Value: Sexy	Core Value: Young	Core Value: Adventurous
Possible World	Signifier: Name campaign	0	-	-
	Signifier: Brand name	-	-	-
	Signifier: Jennifer Lopez	+	-	+
	Signifier: Color palette	-	-	-
	Signifier: Clothing	+	0	+

Although the advertisement is graphically stunning and charming, Guess fails to channel its core values within the linguistic and visual signs. The core value young is not represented because Jennifer Lopez is a lady and not a young girl/woman anymore (she is currently in her fifties). Moreover, it could be also argued that the archetype of the femme fatale is not usually applied to girls or young women, but it represents an experienced and worldly woman (Haubrich, 2018). On this premise, she fails to symbolize the brand’s core values preventing knowing the advertisement's referential world. Celebrity endorsement has proven successful in brand attitude and commitment when the celebrity can channel the brand identity (Noël et al., 2017). But without transmitting the organizational values to the audience, the endorsement contributes to creating advertisements that are unable to help the organization strategically.

5.5 Trend followers: Mustang Jeans

Mustang Jeans is a German denim brand founded in 1932 by Luise Hermann, specialized in casual clothing (Mustang Jeans, n.d.a). The organizational values¹¹ are authenticity, confidence and strength of character (Mustang Jeans, n.d.b) and the selected advertisement belongs to the campaign of 2012 (Sodirmumtaz, 2012; Image 5.10).

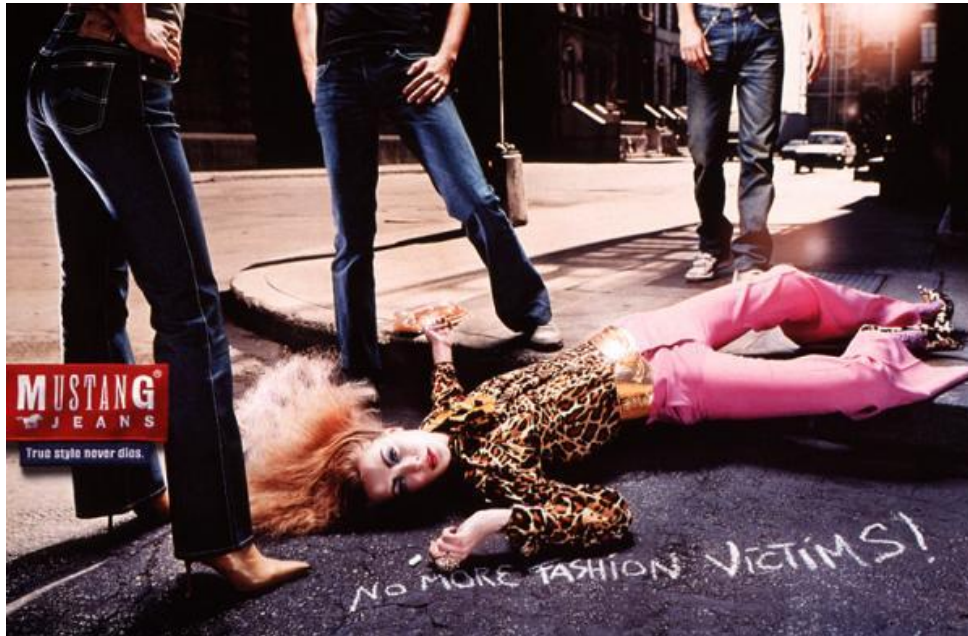


Image 5.10: Mustang Jeans' advertisement - No more fashion victims! (Sodirmumtaz, 2012)

Three linguistic messages can be identified in the advertisement and their direct meaning is accessible through the knowledge of the English language. In particular, the mustang is a race of wild horses typical of the American plains (Dictionary Cambridge, n.d.). The first textual message is the brand logo is also a visual sign. This linguistic sign works synergically with the sign of the horse to communicate the myth of the cowboys (rugged, authentic, and free life) and the myth of the American Old West (Friday, 2012; Hegarty, 2012; Marsh, 1996). Tough and gunslinger men: the quintessential symbol of the American frontier. The cowboys used to catch these free-roaming stallions and the race was once a symbol of the American frontier as well (Smithsonian Magazine, 2017). These

¹¹ Retrieved April 28, 2020, from <https://www.mustang-jeans.com/de-de/unternehmen/philosophie>

meanings are available to everyone who knows old American' history, culture about the far west, or/and about the race of horses.

The second linguistic sign is the brand tagline: "true style never dies". The connotational level of the slogan wants to transmit the idea of an everlasting and, therefore, more authentic style that survives times like some kind of transcendent phenomenon not subjected to human laws, opinions, changes, etc. Moreover, it promotes a link between style and love, since it resembles a common adage - "true love never dies" - which is specially promoted among narrative and music. Examples of this myth are Broadway's musical "The love never dies: the phantom returns" (Webber, n.d.) or the American hard rock band Otherwise with their album "True love never dies" (Otherwise music, n.d.). Whoever has knowledge of this adage can decode this level of signification.

The third linguistic message works synergistically with the visual sign of the woman and the three persons to transmit the idea of a crime scene. The woman, wearing extravagant clothing that resembles the disco music's outfit, lies seemingly dead on the street, a victim of her poor taste of style. The linguistic phrase "No more fashion victims" allows the reader to contextualize the scene. The "murders" seem to be the three persons wearing jeans (the never-ending style - second linguistic message). The persons seem at ease with their crime, confident of their style. Lastly, it is possible to distinguish between a dynamic of power within the advertisement: the victim and her style were too weak to survive to the skirmish. These meanings are accessible through basic knowledge or experience about how a crime scene is, through reality, literature, movies, comics, etc.

The visual sign of the landscape transforms the city environment in an American frontier in which just the strongest survive. The reader can easily notice how the girl does not belong in the rough urban environment. The bright colors of her clothing contrast the color palette of the city and the clothing of the modern cowboys strongly. Her clothing can be perceived as fake and disturbing because of the powerful colors and because it is difficult to experience such clothing style in real life. If the girl is perceived as fake, the person's clothing seems authentic because it is close to how we dress daily. It is arguable that the girl was killed because she was a fashion criminal. However, the slogan and the photo's time frame seem to invalidate this significance because the photo seems to be shot around the evening or dawn. It seems that the victim has been "murdered" on her way home after a disco night because of her extravagant clothing, and the body was been found just at the end of the night. On this premise, the three persons are not murders anymore, but they are sheriffs with the duty of investigating and finding the killer - "No

more fashion victims”. The advertisement could be also interpreted by the reader as a warning to dress “properly” to not become a victim himself. The photo seems staged in the past century, generated by the disco-style clothing of the girl, by the relaxed fit of the jeans, by the color palette that reminds of yellow patina on old photographs and by the car that looks like the old Ford Mustang.

The denotative meanings of the visual signs are accessible through the experience of urban landscape, genders, and clothing.

“No more fashion victims!”- Mustang Jeans advertisement

Signifier (second-order) /Essential properties	Wi	Referential World		
		Core Value: Authenticity	Core Value: Confidence	Core Value: Strength of character
Wj	Wi R Wj			
Possible World	Signifier: Brand logo	+	+	+
	Signifier: Campaign name	-	-	-
	Signifier: Tagline	+	+	-
	Signifier: Girl	-	0	0
	Signifier: Persons	+	+	+
	Signifier: Landscape	0	+	+
	Signifier: Palette	+	-	-

The advertisement grants a good condition of accessibility to the referential world. Except for the brand logo, the other signs do not require specific knowledge than common knowledge and experiences. Furthermore, Mustang's is characterized by the condition of accessibility within both the two advertisement's dimensions. Sure enough, the reader does not need the textual 'anchorages' for understanding the core values of the brand. Even without the textual dimension, the advertisement is self-explanatory. The referential world of Mustang could be then known both by a reader that knows English and by one who is not able to read its textual dimension. This type of design is nowadays particularly

relevant because organizations are facing multilingual contexts and they can not take for granted that everyone can know the applied language in their communication.

5.6 Trend followers: Dockers

Dockers is an American clothing brand specialized in khaki garments, denim, and other accessories founded by Levi Strauss & Co. Levi Strauss & Co. in 1986 (Dockers, n.d.a). Its organizational values¹² are innovation and style (Dockers, n.d.b), and the selected advertisement belongs to the campaign of 2009-2010 “Wear the pants!” (Image 5.11) (FCB West, n.d.).

The advertisement has four linguistic messages. Their denotational level is accessible by the understanding of the English language. The first linguistic message is the campaign name; “Wear the pants!”. Its connotation level works synergistically with the visual sign of the man silhouette and trousers to transmit a gender stereotype: the true man wears pants (cultural myth). Until the 19th century, pants were an emblem of the male gender, symbols of manliness, power, authority, and patriarchy (Mas, 2017). At that time it was unacceptable for women to wear them. Similarly, the linguistic message asks the male reader to take back the “forgotten” manhood and the lost male-aesthetic, encouraging old stereotypes. This myth is reflected in a widely common phrase among heterosexual couples, “He/She wears the pants”, that clarify who has the power in the relationship. This phrase is particularly used when the female partner has a strong character and behaves in a way that emasculates him. This myth is available with basic knowledge about clothing history and common knowledge about gender stereotypes during the last centuries. However, it is also true that the reader could perceive this “call to Manhood” as a moment to reflect on what it means to be a man. Especially in the current society that promotes the homogenization of genders in every aspect of life. The advertisement could promote self-awareness and rejection of social norms: the male reader could start to investigate what it means to him to be a man.

The second linguistic message is the brand logo. The word “dockers” works with the visual sign of the anchor to symbolize the debut of the Khaki pants (the specialty of the brand) as clothing for Naval use in the British army and U.S. navy army in the 19th and 20th century (Levi Strauss, 2014). However, this level of significance is accessible by knowing military clothing styles and that the brand name comes from the Levi Strauss’s

¹² Retrieved May 1, 2020, from https://www.dockers.com/US/en_US/features/about-us

model Dockers khakis of 1986 “as an homage to the English dock employees” (Levi Strauss, 2014). For a reader who is unaware of this coded meaning, the brand logo just recalls general and common ideas regarding harbor life.

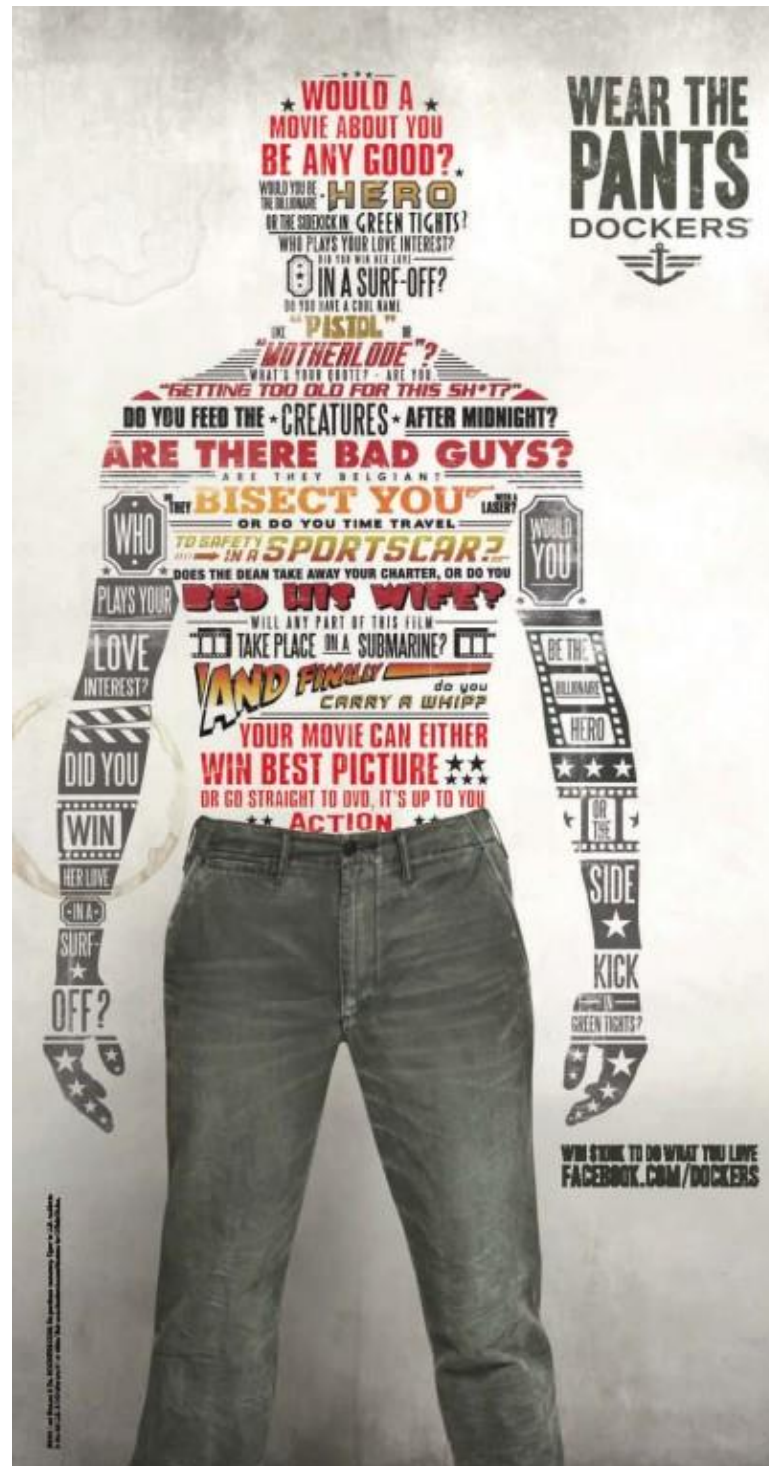


Image 5.11: Dockers - “Wear the pants.” (FCB West, n.d.)

The third linguistic message advertises a contest through the brand Facebook page that offers a monetary prize. The linguistic message does not add a further level of significance to the advertisement.

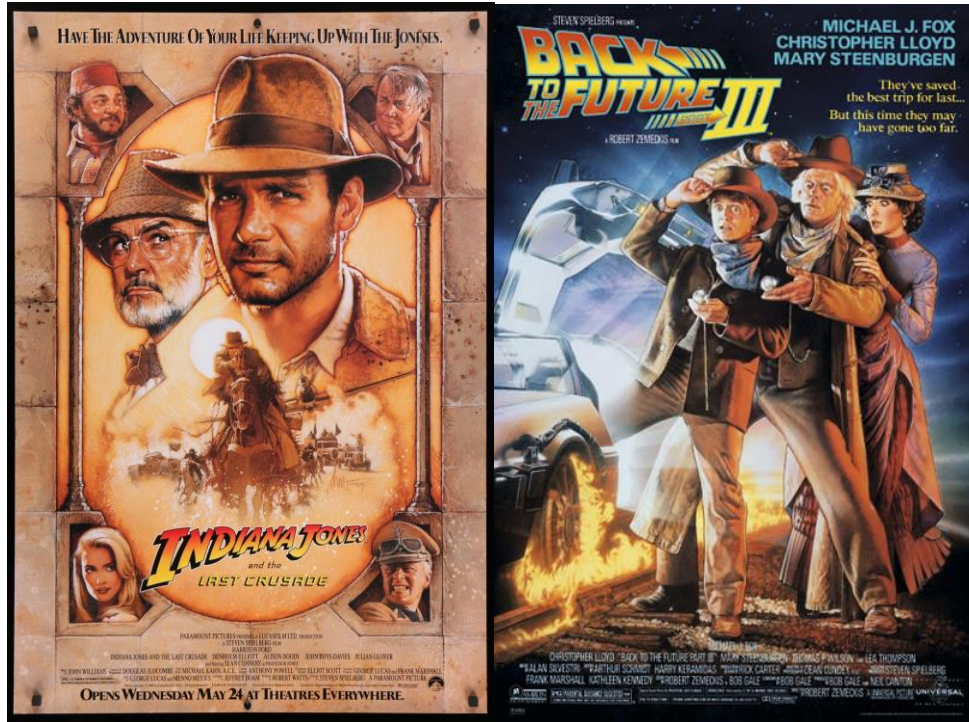


Image 5.12: Indiana Jones and the last crusade (Original Film Art, n.d.)

Image 5.13: Back to the future (Europoster, n.d)

The fourth linguistic message is the colorful writing inside the man's silhouette. The linguistic message exhorts the reader to be self-critical, to reflect whether his life would be suitable for a great movie and if it is time to actively turn his life into a great experience. Moreover, the text asks the reader to compare their life experiences with the ones made by fictional characters of some famous movies among the pop culture. To help the decoding of the linguistic message, the writing was made to be also a visual sign, resembling famous movie titles such as “Indiana Jones”¹³ (Image 5.12) or “Back to the future”¹⁴ (Image 5.13). The titles are linguistically wrong since their text is not the original movies’ one, but they are visually efficient for the reader to recall the movies and

¹³ 1989, directed by Steven Spielberg

¹⁴ 1985, directed by Robert Zemeckis

his beliefs, perceptions, images, and opinions of them. The writing is, hence, filled with meanings and myths connected with these movies. This linguistic/visual sign works with the gender stereotype to promote the “call to Manhood”. The title movies were not casually chosen by the designer, but they are all characterized by strong and independent male protagonist characters. Men that have never been emasculated by society or someone. Men that create their reality as the handsome James Bond, the fearless Indiana Jones, the clever Marty Mcfly, etc. To understand this level of signification, the reader must know about them.

The denotational level of the visual signs is accessible by the knowledge or experience of denim fabric, gender, and the shape of an anchor.

“Wear the pants!” - Dockers advertisement

Signifier (second-order) /Essential properties	Wi	Referential World	
Wj	Wi R Wj	Core Value: Innovation	Core Value: Style
Possible World	Signifier: Brand logo	-	+
	Signifier: Campaign name	-	+
	Signifier: Movie titles	0	0
	Signifier: Man silhouette + pants	-	+
	Signifier: Invitation to the contest	-	-

The matrix reveals an absence of accessibility to the referential world. Moreover, the advertisement risks promoting organizational values contrasting to the official ones, damaging the organizational identity among the audience. Indeed, the designer adopted gender stereotypes to be provocative as claimed by the global VP of marketing for Dockers (Britten, 2009). However, this “original” could be easily misunderstood by the reader, who could interpret it as a manifesto to old gender stereotypes. This is particularly true in countries, such as the Nordic ones, where gender equality and freedom are an

important issue that is daily addressed by the government and the population. If the reader perceives the advertisement as a tribute to this old sexist cultural myth, the brand would transmit a value opposite from its official one. In this case the key code for interpreting the meanings lies in the textual dimensions. Without the knowledge of English, the interpretation process would be profoundly different.

5.7 Late adopters: Lee Jeans

Lee jeans is one of the oldest worldwide denim brands. Founded in 1889 by Henry David Lee, the brand was one of the first brands to be worn by Hollywood actors in iconic movies, such as Marlon Brando in 1953 in “Rebel without a cause” and “The wild one” and James Dean in 1955 in “East of Eden” (Lee, n.d.a). Its organizational core values¹⁵ are authenticity, integrity, and drive (Lee, n.d.b) and the selected advertisement belongs to the spring campaign of “A Lee do not lie” (Dazed Digital, 2011; image 5.14).

Within the textual dimension, three different linguistic messages are identified. Their denotational level is accessible by knowledge of the English language. The connotational level of the brand name (first message), symbolizes a common surname of English origin. People that know this can understand these meanings. The brand name helps to contextualize the other linguistic messages by giving a code to the reader: at the second-order of signification ‘Lee’ becomes a true person. This understanding is also supported by the male model of the visual dimension, guiding the interpretation of the word. In this regard, also a reader unaware of ‘Lee’ being a surname can nevertheless perceive a relationship with the man and the clothing in the center of the scene.

The second linguistic message is the campaign name “A Lee don’t lie”, and it works synergically with the visual signs of the denim garments and the man. The denotational level wants to transmit the idea that a Lee is not just denim garments but also a person (Lee is a surname): whoever wears the brand’s jeans belongs to the Lee family. Moreover, the linguistic message transmits the beliefs that a Lee is always sincere and authentic (in this case the man). These interpretations have two different dimensions: the jeans Lee cannot hide the body’s shape of its owner and the person is honest and trustworthy.

The third linguistic message is the slogan campaign “A Lee is washed with your sweat”. This message works with the visual sign of the denim garments and the fashion model.

¹⁵ Retrieved May 1, 2020, from <https://www.lee.com/about/careers/culture-and-values.html>

The phrase is a metaphor of the wash process that characterizes the not raw denim to make the garment wearable and remove residual dye (Method Of Denim, n.d.). The meaning is accessible to whoever has the basic knowledge about the jeans manufacturing process. The message claims that the final wash is not made by water but by the sweat of the owner. This image is contextualized and reinforced by the wet hair and open mouth of the fashion model who seems just back from some physical activity. This is also supported by the rolled-up sleeves, transmitting the idea that during the activity his hands' movements were impeded by the denim shirt. These meanings can be understood by readers with the experience of physical activity or wearing “uncomfortable” workwear.

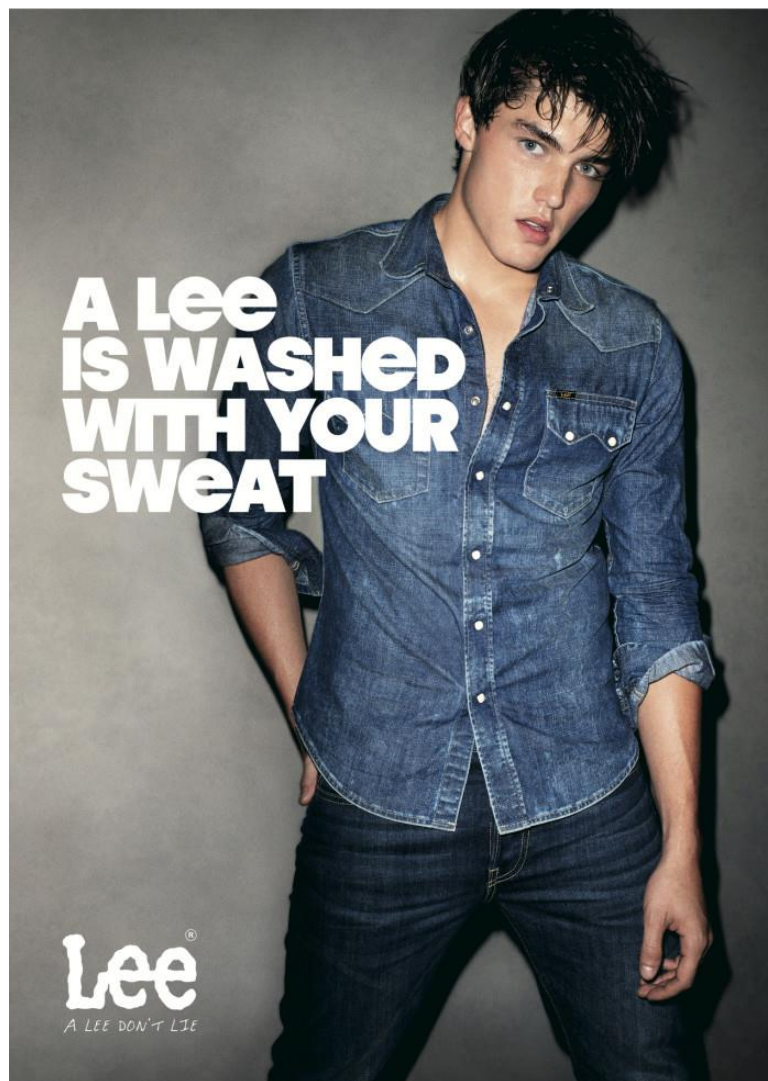


Image 5.14: Lee Jeans campaign “A lee don’t lie” (Baaam, n.d)

The denotative meanings of the visual dimensions are accessible to readers with knowledge about denim fabrics, clothing, colors, and gender. The visual sign of the color palette recalls the official color of the logo and the website: black, white, gray, and denim's hues. However, the true protagonist of the advertisement is the visual sign of the fashion model, who looks confident and at ease in his central position. Because of his attitude the reader could perceive him as a celebrity. His facial features, especially the jawline could remind the reader of Elvis Presley in his youth (Image 5.15; Image 5.16).

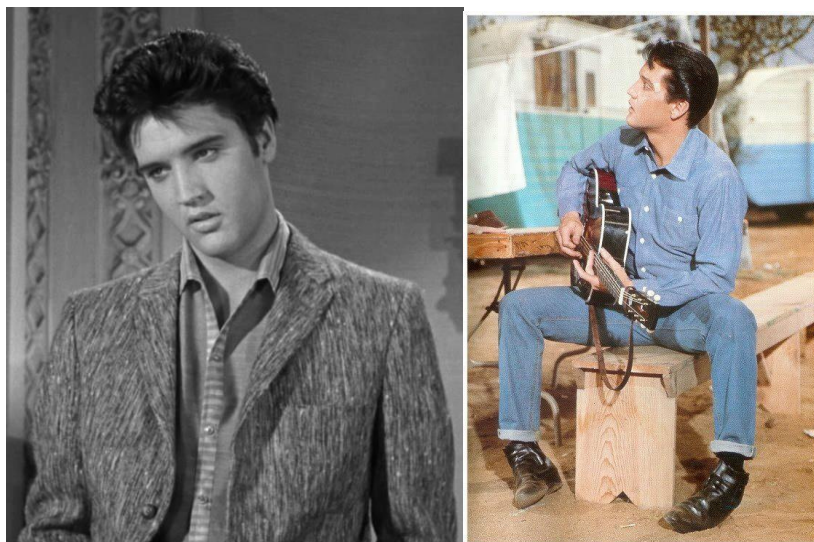


Image 5.15: Elvis Presley (Elvis1Aron, n.d.)

Image 5.16: Elvis Presley wearing denim (Weaver, n.d.)

Through this association, the signifier is full of the iconic role and meanings that Elvis Presley, “the king of rock’n’roll” (Graceland n.d.), covers in the collective (especially American) imagination (McConnel, 2019). Presley’s story can be summarized by the expression “from rags to riches”, from a two-room apartment in Tupelo, Mississippi, to become one of the world’s most popular music icons (Graceland, n.d.). Furthermore, Presley was a symbol of the American youth: independent, ambitious, benevolent, confident, and innocent (McConnel, 2019). His aura of benevolence was specially created through the archetypal young American he played in movies, always happy and charming (McConnel, 2019; Graceland, n.d.). Furthermore, his music challenged social and racial barriers of the time and he served his country by joining the army (Graceland, n.d.). On these premises, Presley signifies a wide range of meanings as success, charisma, charm, talent, sensuality, patriotism, enthusiasm, open mind, etc. This level of

significance is accessible through knowledge about Elvis Presley’s personal life and carrier.

“A Lee don’t lie” - Lee Jeans advertisement

Signifier (second-order) /Essential properties	Wi	Referential World		
Wj	Wi R Wj	Core Value: Authenticity	Core Value: Integrity	Core Value: Drive
Possible World	Signifier: Brand name	-	-	-
	Signifier: Campaign name	+	+	-
	Signifier: Slogan	-	-	+
	Signifier: Denim garments	+	-	-
	Signifier: Man	+	+	+

The matrix reveals a good level of accessibility to the referential world. The advertisement is pleasant to see, and the core values are well represented. It could be argued that the signifier of the fashion model in terms of Elvis Presley could also signify the core value of “authenticity” since the “King” was known for his innocence, passion, and enthusiasm. However, as in other previous advertisements, the key code for its decoding and the understanding of its referential world lies in the knowledge of the English language. Without it, the visual dimension would fail to deliver the organizational core values because the fashion model can channel them only if the reader perceives Presley in him.

5.8 Late adopters: Levi Strauss Jeans

Levi Strauss & Co. is an American denim brand that is known for inventing the “blue jeans” in 1873 by adding metal rivets to work pants (Levi Strauss, n.d.a). The brand was founded in 1853 by Levi Strauss and the organizational values¹⁶ of the brand are empathy,

¹⁶ Retrieved May 1, 2020, from <https://www.levistrauss.com/who-we-are/company/>

originality, integrity, and courage (Levi Strauss, n.d.b). The selected advertisement belongs to the spring campaign “Go forth” of 2017 (Image 5.17).



Image 5.17: Levi's “Go forth” (Blackburn, n.d)

In this advertisement, four different linguistic messages can be identified. Their denotational level is accessible through the understanding of the English language. At its second-order of meaning, the first linguistic message “Levi.com/goforth” invites the reader to visit the official website of the campaign and brand. The invitation is understood by the reader through their knowledge/experience of the world wide web.

The second linguistic message is the brand logo, which is also a visual sign. The writing “Levi’s” symbolizes that the products belong to a person (Levi) and the logo shape

symbolizes the typical batwing' shape on Levi's jeans' backside pockets (Image 5.18). Moreover, the color red in the western culture symbolizes passion, rebellion, blood, love, war, rage (the common adage "I see red"), danger (used in the road signs), and boldness (Robson, 2014). These meanings are accessible to readers with the experience of Levi's jeans design and through the common knowledge of meanings of the color red, which can be formed through books, movies, art, color theory, etc.

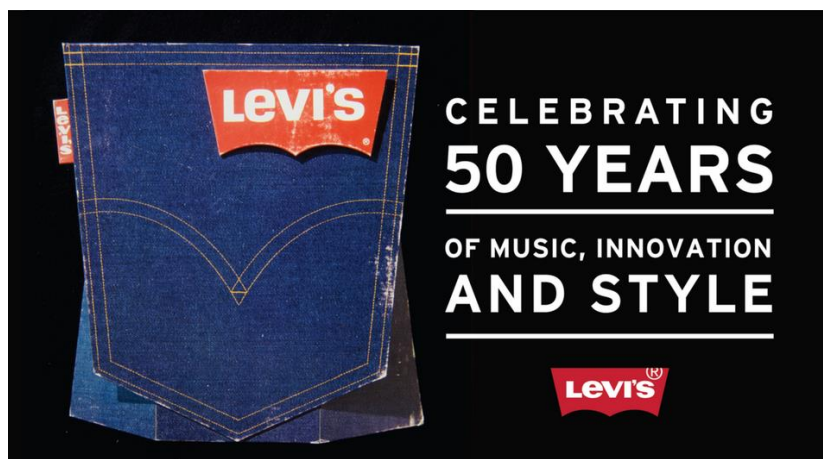


Image 5.18: Levi's batwing shape (Levi Strauss, 2017)

The third linguistic language is the slogan "Make something or be forgotten". The text invites the reader to be courageous, strong-willed, creative, and leave a mark on the world before it ends. To leave something behind, a heritage, like celebrities and famous characters. This message is supported by the fourth linguistic message of the brand campaign "Go forth" and the visual sign of the running man. The man is running towards the future and what he desires - as the slogan demands him to do. However, his sight is focused on something/someone behind him. Maybe, among the dust and far behind him, there are persons, not determined and courageous enough to catch up and for this reason destined for being forgotten. Instead, the male has stamina. Furthermore, the reader, could perceive the denim as the worthy uniform for this type of person. A fabric that is strong, adaptable and that does not easily break, similar to their soul and dreams. These meanings are accessible through the common understanding of cause-and-effect: to be famous (effect) a person must do something (cause) that makes them worthwhile to be remembered. However, the reader could also perceive this running like a flight from something because he is focused on something far behind him. The boy seems in distress,

worried, and on alert. Maybe he was attacked by someone and now he is running for his life. Moreover, the visual sign could remember the icon movie “Forrest Gump” (1994), where the main protagonist became famous, gathering a wide audience of followers with his three years-long run across the United States. A run that changed his life. The phrases "Run Forrest Run" or "Keep it up, Forest" are nowadays part of our collective imagination, especially in America (Movie Quote DB, n.d.) (Image 5.19). Through this cultural myth, the reader could bestow Forrest’s virtues to the advertisement’s protagonist as simplicity, authenticity, integrity, innocence, stupidity, good-heart, and stamina.



Image 5.19: Forrest starts his long run - Forrest Gump (Imdb, n.d.)

The visual sign of the landscape represents an environment that is hilly, grassy, and dusty. The background looks like a country road. On this premise, the reader could recall the worldwide famous song of Denver John “Take me Home, Country Roads” (Denver, 2013). The song’s phrases “[...] *dark and dusty, painted on the sky*” and “[...] *take me home, To the place I belong*” (Denver, 2013) could be easily applied to the advertisement, especially if the reader has knowledge about the movie “Forrest Gump”, where the

protagonist at the end of his long cross country run claimed to his astonished followers “I’m pretty tired... I think I’ll go home now” (Movie Quote DB, n.d.). The song could arise a feeling of nostalgia and a desire for home. The running boy could be on his way home, trying to reach a safe place and where he truly belongs.

Lastly, the visual sign of the color palette reminds of an old photograph of the past century through its grayscale hues. Also, the running seems “frozen” in time because of the cold color. However, the overall palette - red, white, greyscale - was probably chosen to recall the official brand colors that are also applied to its website.

The denotational meanings of the visual signs are accessible through knowledge of color, gender, clothing, and country landscape.

“Go forth” - Levi Strauss advertisement

Signifier (second-order) /Essential properties	Wi	Referential World			
	Wi R Wj	Core Value: Empathy	Core Value: Originality	Core Value: Courage	Core Value: Integrity
Possible World	Signifier: Brand logo	-	-	+	-
	Signifier: Campaign name	-	-	+	-
	Signifier: Running guy	-	-	+	0
	Signifier: Slogan	-	+	+	-
	Signifier: Website	-	-	-	-
	Signifier: Landscape	-	-	-	-
	Signifier: Color palette	-	-	-	-

The matrix shows, the advertisement alone is not able to grant a condition of accessibility to the referential world. The core values are poorly represented, especially the values of empathy and integrity. Without knowledge of the English language, readers are missing

the key code for decoding the advertisement's meanings and would develop different meanings from the ones identified.

6. Findings

The analysis shows that four of eight advertisements have a condition of accessibility, with different levels of efficiency and stability to the referential world. However, it is important to acknowledge that the investigated advertisements do not cover the whole advertising landscape. Nevertheless, the findings reveal a certain degree of ignorance of planning visual communication as a strategic tool to support and promote the organizational identity among the audience.

The first important finding is that the lack of strategy does not characterize a specific group of brands/organizations, for example the late adopters, but is a common phenomenon across every fashion segment. The analysis indicates that not all the organizations, independently from their positioning in the market, are aware of the greater performance that the *visual strategy* could bring in designing their advertisements. Moreover, since the condition of accessibility discovered in the four analyzed advertisements is weak, it is possible that the referential world was signified by the advertisement by chance and not purposely.

Secondly, the analysis shows that visually beautiful or extravagant advertisements, but purposefully empty, add more noise to a media landscape already overfilled with images. The employment of fashion models or celebrities unable to embody an organization's identity is strategically useless if it is not supported by other linguistic or visual signs (Pepe Jeans London, Levi Strauss, and Guess). Moreover, the organization could promote contrasting values by creating bold and captivating advertisements as in the case of Dockers, which advertisement promotes old gender and sexist stereotypes. This purposeless and naive approach can cause damages to the organizational reputation and stakeholders' images, which could be avoided by employing the *visual strategy* approach. The third finding is that the linguistic dimension still performs a vital role as the key to decoding the advertisement's meanings. As proved by some of the investigated advertisements, the reader cannot understand the visual signs and myths, and therefore the referential world, if he does not use deciphering codes as the linguistic messages. It is true that the linguistic signs and visual signs work synergically to contextualize each other reciprocally, however the ignorance or knowledge of the applied language profoundly

alter the process of interpretation. Moreover, the analysis and the matrices identify that the linguistic dimension often signifies more organizational values than the visual dimension. The visualization seems to work mostly as a cosmetic tool and a way to better contextualize the linguistic messages. This is also supported by the fact that just one advertisement on eight shows a condition of accessibility to its referential world through a self-explanatory visual dimension. On these premises, it can be argued that in reality the visual and textual dimension do not share the same importance for the designer/communicator because the condition of accessibility is mainly allowed by the text.

In conclusion, these findings reflect the current state of the visual strategic communication in organizations, especially about *visual strategy*. Although we are currently living in an image-based culture, the analysis showed the *visual strategy* approach is still not fully employed by organizations. From an organizational identity perspective, brands promote noise with purposeless advertisements, which does not contribute to fulfilling the organization's goals and mission. Organizations should no longer neglect the *visual strategy* approach and embrace it to sustain, defend, and strengthen their positioning in the audience's mind, helping to differentiate themselves from their competitors.

7. General discussion

As previously stated, the field of visual strategic communication is composed of four different areas - *visual rhetoric*, *visual communication*, *visual studies*, and *visual strategy* - which boundaries overlap each other (Göransson & Fagerholm, 2018). Since strategic *visual communication* is part of organizational communication tactics, all the areas are needed to create powerful communication visual artifacts. Indeed, the *visual strategy* should be used by communication practitioners in the development and implementation of advertising because it gives purpose to the fulfillment of an organization's goals and mission - the essential function of strategic communication (Hallahan et al., 2007). This allows communication to be efficient and effective from a strategic perspective. Therefore, the following paragraphs illustrate why *visual rhetoric*, *visual studies*, and *visual communication* need the *visual strategy* approach to be completely relevant to the strategic communication field.

First of all, *visual rhetoric* studies how visual elements work on their own or together to create and deliver a specific argument visually (Ott & Dickinson, 2009). Central to this approach is the human intervention: visual elements are intentionally created and used to signify specific meanings which are then decoded by the audience. Therefore the communicator use *visual rhetoric* to intentionally develop visual signs through codes (as cultural, linguistic, etc.) that are known by its target audience (Foss, 2005). This is exactly what happens in advertisement. The communicator/designer employs rhetorical forms and different types of visual elements that create specific signs and myths accessible by its target audience through their cultural competency. In this regard, the audience must be sufficiently cultured to understand the frameworks of symbols and signs in which the messages are signified. Because of its complexity, *visual rhetoric* can engage the reader through developing advertising that requires active reading (Scott, 1994). This claim is supported by McQuarrie and Mick (1999) whose experiment also discovered that *visual rhetoric* develops a more favorable attitude toward the advertisement if the reader knows (codes) to understand it. Moreover, *visual rhetoric* is a tool of indirect persuasion that influences the reader promoting messages that viewers internalize as their own beliefs (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005; Lagerwerf & Meijers, 2008).

Distinct, but in practice not truly separable from *visual rhetoric*, is the area of *visual studies*, which concerns the interpretation process and how society accesses images (Göransson & Fagerholm, 2018). The boundaries of the two areas are overlapping because *visual rhetoric* also investigates the sensemaking process, although indirectly. Moreover, the approach concerns the concept of representation and how this has an impact on an individual. Although, Elkins (2003) points out a lack of attention to the form of the representation and an overabundance of studies about social meanings. Fundamental to this area of studies is Hall's (1973) work about the interpretation process. His theory of encoding/decoding model focuses on how cultures, media, and communities influence and shape each other (1980). Hall claimed that media are encoded by the producer, filled with messages and values, that they are later decoded by the audience. During the decoding process, an individual can employ one of three different types of reading, understanding correctly and accurately, partially or rejecting completely the 'original' meaning(s) of the message. As Hall (1980) showed, a message, in this instance an advertisement, can be decoded in various and an endless number of interpretations. Therefore, the approach investigates the codes that an individual uses during the sensemaking process and their connection to individual experience, culture, and society (Smith, 2008). On this premise, it is possible to understand how *visual rhetoric* needs the area of *visual studies* to be successful. Since the rhetoric forms need to be built on specific cultural codes and sub-codes to signify the correct meaning to the audience and grant a condition of accessibility. For this reason, it could be argued that the two areas are in practice two faces of the same coin; one requires the other to develop transmissible visual signs and myths. However, these two approaches concern respectively how elements work together to create specific and persuasive meanings and the codes and the sensemaking process, without addressing the topic of which messages should be transmitted to be strategically relevant for an organization. On these premises, the *visual strategy* is essential to *visual rhetoric* and *visual studies* for clarifying which meanings should be depicted through signs and myths according to the organization's communication strategy. The two areas would then be purposefully lacking and, thus, not helpful to the organizations, opposing the definition of strategic communication claimed by Hallahan et al. (2007). This is supported by the findings that show how communicators build purposeless advertising from a strategic perspective but consciously and masterly filled with rhetorical devices (as celebrity endorsement, fashion models, myths, metaphors, etc.) and contents employing specific frameworks of cultural codes. The

advertisements are full of significances that are not strategically relevant for achieving the organizational desired identity. It could be argued that this type of visual artifact is more similar to what is defined as art than true advertising, because of the lack of strategy during their creation. On the other side, the *visual strategy* approach would be incomplete without *visual rhetoric* and *visual studies* since the approach does not concern about persuasion and the process of signing. In this regard, an advertisement would be filled with the organization's values, but it would be powerless, unable to be accessible, of influencing readers' beliefs and engaging them in active reading.

The last area of visual strategic communication is *visual communication*, which provides an understanding of how the visual elements can communicate messages directly or indirectly (Göransson & Fagerholm, 2018). Moreover, according to Martin (2011), it investigates the organization and supports the visual artifacts and how their presence affects the audience. Indeed, the approach focuses on the message itself but in terms of communication style (Zhang et al., 2014; Nagel et al. 2012), presentation (Verser & Wicks, 2006), and audience's response (Saxton & Waters, 2014). Fundamental to this area of studies is the framing theory of mass communication. According to this theory, the presentation of visual artifacts to the audience affects how people process that information (Goffman, 1974). On these premises, *visual communication* is a vital approach for creating efficient and effective visual messages since it concerns the interaction between media frames and the individual during the process of signification (Goffman, 1974). Frames affect an individual's reading of the visual artifacts and this is particularly relevant for advertising, which can not be easily separated by its context of transmission. Because of this, an advertisement's meanings are always framed by its presentation to the audience. Therefore, this approach is needed to decrease the risk of creating a reader's significations that are different from the communicator's desired meanings. This argument is supported also by Hallahan (1999) who claimed that the framing theory is a useful tool for examining the efficiency, efficacy, and performance of the strategic visual artifacts and the audience's response. However, this approach does not address which meanings should be transmitted to be strategically relevant to fulfill the organization's' goals, which is also translated in an inability of choosing the right and best frame were to present the advertisement.

In conclusion, all three areas - *visual rhetoric*, *visual studies*, and *visual communication* - are needed to develop persuasive communication. However, the *visual strategy* is needed to create a strategically relevant communication. Their synergic work is

indispensable to create a powerful visual strategic communication and *visual strategy* is what should guide all the process of designing.

8. Conclusion

This study aimed to show and raise awareness regarding how the visual strategy approach is still quite neglected by organizations and communicators. The findings prove that the strategic approach is sacrificed to the aesthetics and rhetorical forms to create memorable advertisements that are nevertheless destined to disappear into the noise without helping strategically the organisations. Further, as previously illustrated, in reality visual strategy cannot be separated from the other areas of visual strategic communication since each approach covers a vital part in the development of strategically efficient communication. Further studies about visual strategy should be carried out to gain more knowledge and raise awareness of the importance of visual strategic communication. In particular, since the findings showed a preference for the linguistic dimension over the visual ones, new studies are needed to promote the equality of the two dimensions as suitable tools of strategic communication. Moreover, because of the raising globalization and multi-language contexts hiding the reading key within the linguistic dimensions is risky. In this sense, experimental studies in multilingual contexts are needed to investigate if linguistic-based advertisements are still nowadays truly more efficient and effective than visual-based advertisements in transmitting and guiding the process of interpretation. Besides, long-term researches are needed to show how visual strategy impacts an organization's performance and fulfillment of its goals. For example, it could be interesting to investigate how and if the employment of purposeful advertisements could effectively close the gap between stakeholders' perceptions and desired organizational identity in the long run. Such studies would be particularly useful to prove the real strength and power of the visual strategy approach and finally legitimate it.

In closing, the field of advertising as a strategic tool for organizations offers various areas of research for strategic communication scholars. Moreover, due to the high level of market competitiveness, knowledge about visual strategy is particularly needed because the strategy is what nowadays truly allows to differentiate an organization from its competitors and what grants its surviving (O'Connor, 2006). In this regard, strategically designed visual artifacts as advertising can be an indispensable instrument of positioning for organizations and shaping the audience's beliefs. As Bernbach, one of the most

important American advertisers of the last century claimed “*we are so busy measuring public opinion that we forget we can mold it; We are so busy listening to statistics we forget we can create them*” (Hershman, 2018).

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