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TITLE The E-semiotics of Luxury

ABSTRACT The relationship that luxury brands have with the digital world is a love-and-hate one: brands wonder how to use it without damaging their brand identity and their spirit of luxury, when relying upon a distribution & communication network with a-prior counter-luxury characteristics. Since luxury consumption assumes a semiotic metacognition from the clients, it makes sense though to try to understand how a new semiotic e-system is set, enabling the audience to acknowledge the luxury nature of the brands on display even if present on an a-prior counter-luxury medium. This paper is focused on such identification. Using content analysis and peircian semiotics, we identify two e-semiotics systems with their various representamen and interpretants. We observe a shift from brand communication to product communication and from purchase experience and context to price. The definition of what is luxury through digital tools is thus specific to its context and yet not similar to its offline definition.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship that luxury brands have with the digital world is a love-and-hate one, the technology being highly embraced by some such as Burberry or considered with suspicion by others such as Prada (which is one of the latest big luxury brands to get a website). However, the Internet is now part of consumers' daily lives, including for the so-called 'Affluents' or HENRYs, i.e. luxury brands' clients or prospects. With the coming digital-natives cohort, questions which are being raised are not related to whether luxury brands should go online and be digital-oriented, but to how to successfully do it without damaging one's brand identity and one's spirit of luxury. From the design of their website to the production of branded content to be displayed on their own YouTube channel, luxury brands do wonder whether the luxury status can be hold online, and how the limit between brand exposure and brand trivialization can be identified and set.

While past research has explored the risks and opportunives related to going online for luxury brands (de Chernatony, 2001; Geerts & Veg-Sala, 2011; A. J. Kim & Ko, 2012), very little work has been done to decipher how luxury brands deal with the transferring of 'luxury codes' on the Internet, a medium with its own 'codes'. Since luxury consumption assumes a semiotic metacognition from the clients, it makes sense though to try to understand how a new semiotic e-system is set, enabling the audience to acknowledge the luxury nature of the brands on display, even if present on an a-prior counter-luxury medium. This paper aims at doing it, filling the gap related to the new 'signs' associated with luxury recognition in the digital area.

After reviewing the very codes of luxury and of the Internet, we collect data from digital presence of the ten first luxury brands, ranked by their turnover. We analyse the data thanks to a strict content analysis process and then derive from the results the new semiotics of luxury brands, based on the peircian definition of a sign (Peirce, 1974), i.e. the tryptic representamen-signified-signifier.

LITTERATURE REVIEW

The aim of this review is to browse existing theoretical and empiric research related to the relationship between the luxury industry and the digital world. It is organized in three parts: first the characteristics of the digital world will be presented. Similarly, the 'codes of luxury' will then be presented, to be confronted to the 'codes' of digital in a third part.

The characteristics of the digital world

Digital Communication Characteristics

The digital world has kept evolving and developing during the past ten years. Its innovative nature initially left marketers sceptical but it is now being acknowledged as part of any marketing strategy. Okonkwo (2009) defines it thanks to this very marketing dimension: it requires a “pull marketing” strategy, inviting consumers to look by themselves for more product information and ultimately to ask for the product in the purchase place. Thus, on the opposite of traditional communication, digital enables rethinking the relationship that consumers hold with brands. It also enables lower ‘switching costs’ for consumers (Okonkwo, 2009), to actually a simple click when it comes to e-commerce.

Apart from this revolutionary redefining of the consumer-brand dyad, the development of digital technologies has made available new communication tools for brands, with a high potential for pre-targeting audiences (Geerts & Veg-Sala, 2011), thus increasing brand-visibility to the general public. It is actually more mass-oriented than specialized magazines for instance. Besides, offline campaigns can be transferred online, in an IMC-oriented strategy: YouTube is actually the second search engine in the world, and the preferred medium to amplify the diffusion of brands’ TV-commercials.

Owing to its ongoing evolution and enhanced marketing potential, digital adds a new, modern, and innovative dimension to brands’ discourses, via a leveraging process (P. Berthon, Holbrook, Hulbert, & Pitt, 2012), whatever their positionings. Brands can thus be present on all communication media, for instance thanks to the production and broadcast of ‘branded content’, made available to the audience on laptops, mobiles, tablets, TVs, etc. (Tran-Van, 2013).

In the end, the Internet and other digital technologies compose a complementary set of communication with a three-prone objective: inform, recall & persuade (Nyeck, 2004), which is characterized by an original interactivity since the user is interacting with the media and with the brand through the media. The digital communication world is a mix of statics and dynamics, and of personal and impersonal components.

The digital communication characteristics can thus be summarized: a mass-media communication tool; values of modernity, of innovation and of real-time; a mix of statics & dynamics and of personal & impersonal components.

e-Distribution Characteristics

Digital technologies have offered a new distribution network to companies, through the so-called e-commerce. It has now become a brand strategy on its own, combining branded content, storytelling, gaming and customization as part of the e-purchase experience: consumers are thus immersed with the brand universe (Tran-Van, 2013). However, it is highly different from brick-and-mortar purchase environments, as it makes impossible physical contact with products and salespeople (Okonkwo, 2009). In a marketing environment with an always more important sensory experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), one may wonder how long-lasting the e-commerce business model is. Actually, consumers do expect different things while shopping online, such as comparing possibilities (Gao, Zhang, Wang, & Ba, 2012), lower prices & discounts (Grewal, Roggeveen, Compeau, & Levy, 2012), customized products, and 24-hour-a-day shopping possibilities (Crafts, 2011) from whatever place (Jiang, Yang, & Jun, 2013).

Whatever their motivations and expectations behind making an online purchase, consumers still perceive it as risky (J. Kim & Lennon, 2013). New norms tend to reassure them, esp. regarding the security of online transactions and after sales services (Lee, Rao, Nass, Forssell, & John, 2012).

Digital Worldwide Socializing Potential

One very basic characteristics of the digital world is that it has nor physical nor technological boundaries (Okonkwo, 2009). This means for consumers an almost unlimited access to brands and some product availabilities without time or space constraints. Besides, with the emergence of social media, consumers become empowered and gather themselves in e-communities, still without any geographical or cultural boundaries (P. R. Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012). Brands can capitalize on this trend, via social web strategies (Tran-Van, 2013). Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest or such let brands engage in real dialogues with their consumers and prospects around their brand universe (Murphy, 2011), while at the same time enabling marketing activities leading to actual purchase. When well-done, digital strategies set long-lasting relationships with consumers, via the creation of global and cross-cultural brand communities, with easier more accurate identification of their desires and needs (Chen, 2001).

The Codes of Luxury

The concept of luxury, and hence its business, have been largely explored, be it from an ontological and philosophical perspective or from a more managerial one. Thinkers and scholars from various disciplines such as economics, sociology, psychology or even law have tried to define it without managing to reach a real consensus. However, the components it encompasses and the characteristics required to be considered as part of luxury, are more consistent across scholars and ages. These can thus be called the ‘codes of luxury’: the symbol of a given philosophy and lifestyle, a social status matter, quality and exclusivity of the products and services offered, and historical heritage along with a quest of authenticity.

The subjective nature of luxury actually depends on where and when an individual lives, as it is intrinsically related to a society’s state of development (Heine, 2012), be it for technological advance or for civilizing process (Elias, 1939). What can be called luxury is also more pragmatically related to the economic resources of an individual: what is superficial and expensive for one individual may be mere comfort for another one. This has led to the definition of the so-called Veblen effect (Veblen, 1899), a characteristics of luxury goods. Besides, there would be as many luxury representations as individuals (Bomsel, 1995), for luxury is the association between a real and objective product-element and a subjective image lying in consumers’ imaginary. Such imaginary is highly impacted by the aesthetics of individuals (P. Berthon, Pitt, Parent, & Berthon, 2009), a concept acknowledged as highly subjective as well...

Luxury has been defined as a real philosophy, with its own culture and identity (Okonkwo, 2009). It could even be compared to human values, thus leading to a given lifestyle (Heine, 2012). These cultural elements and values drive people to consumption and purchasing desires and processes very specific (Nyeck, 2004), including in the usage made out of the luxury products and services. Luxury brands to add-up another identity-layer and value system (their own ones), which make people semiotically able to recognize that a given brand is a luxury one, while at the same time displaying its own ‘face’ (Fionda & Moore, 2009).

On top of ontological differences, luxury is the direct expression of indirect social stratification of the society (Bastien & Kapferer, 2008; Okonkwo, 2009). It becomes a symbol used to express one’s belonging to a social class, leading to distinction, appreciation and respect. This characteristic of luxury led to one commonly used definition of a luxury product, i.e. an expensive one (Source: CES, 2008). Buying something with an excessively high price is one way to display the acquisition of a new social status, for example (Fionda & Moore, 2009). However, this definition has been challenged as insufficient, especially for the so-called mature markets (mainly Old Europe): in such places, luxury is synonymous with self-pleasure and unprejudiced purchase (Nyeck, 2004). Pleasure, hedonism, self-enhancement,

wellness and desire are the new motivations towards luxury consumption (Carcano, Minichilli, & Corbetta, 2011). Still, the snob and bandwagon effects still apply to luxury consumption, and luxury appears as a desire to belong to an upper-class (Beard, 2008).

The notion of quality is intrinsically linked to luxury (Heine, 2012), be it from a production perspective (Chevalier & Gutsatz, 2012) or from a demand one (Wiedmann, Hennigs, & Siebels, 2007). Product quality can be found in materials, functions, specificities, seize or service provided along with it. Actually, it is the transcription of the functional dimension of any consumption (P. Berthon, et al., 2009), shifting the focus from mere objective performing abilities to more subjective ones (Bomsel, 1995). Among these lasts can be found the rarity principle which applies to any luxury product or purchase environment (Phau & Prendergarst, 2000). This is to preserve exclusivity (and thus to capitalize on the snob effect), a well-managed principle throughout the whole luxury value chain (Fionda & Moore, 2009).

Last but not least, luxury is a matter of historic heritage and authenticity, especially through its actors (i.e. the luxury brands), with strong brand DNAs and iconic products (Beverland, 2006). Historical brands do sound credible and such credibility is reinforced with time (Carcano, et al., 2011). Hence, luxury products are simultaneously timeless and modern (Chaudhuri & Majumdar, 2006). Such brand history is linked to people/families, who bring values and traditions to the empires they have built. In one word, luxury brand are natural storytelling elements, and so are their products (Carcano, et al., 2011).

When Luxury Meets the Internet

Many paradoxes do exist at first sight between the digital world and luxury codes (See Table 1), hence some reluctance from luxury managers to go online (Muller, Kocher, & Ivens, 2007). Because of the intermediary positioning coming from informal exchange of information and a spirit of community, digital communication is closer to mass communication than to selective one, without mentioning the exclusive communication reflected in the rarity principle (Geerts & Veg-Sala, 2011). Thus, there is an apparent risk of loss of image control, which would lead to a prestige loss as well (de Chernatony, 2001): the more information luxury brands share online, the more potential distorted reuse of their stories they face.

However, some scholars do advocate for digital-oriented luxury strategies. Social networks for instance would be a good way to set up a dialogue with clients and prospects (A. J. Kim & Ko, 2012). Such double-sided communication could also allow brands to know more about their targets and thus to anticipate their desires through innovative services or products. Besides, active presence on social networks means active and ongoing presence of the brands in clients' minds, enabling organic viral campaigns to happen (Murphy, 2011). Digital tools actually allow brands to display their values and their identity in a new way (Geerts & Veg-Sala, 2011), and to extend their retail potential through e-commerce. Successful transactional websites in luxury can actually be designed: the ritualistic nature of the in-store purchase experience has to be recreated online, through for instance additional new services such as customization or VIP-community-belonging (Peretz, 1992).

	Codes of Luxury	VS.	Digital Characteristics
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elitist and prestigious image • Values: Tradition – Family history – Timeless • Exclusivity • Rarity 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mass media image • Values: Modernity – Innovation – Instantaneity • Large diffusion • Unlimited
Distribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-store experience through the five senses • Service personalization • Physical dedicated retail space and sometimes exclusive • Product display is key, price is secondary 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visual experience mainly • Common service to all users • A retail space without any special boundaries • Price and product display do matter similarly

Table 1: Opposed characteristics between luxury & digital

METHODOLOGY & DATA COLLECTION

Our objective is to understand how luxury brands make use of the digital tools to communicate about and distribute their products, while still preserving the luxury ‘spirit’. This should lead to the identification of a new semiotic system, setting-up the codes of luxury for and through the online environment, reconciling the apparent opposed dimensions of luxury and of digital (see Table 1).

To achieve this, a two-step analytic process has been followed. Firstly, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of selected luxury brands’ websites and digital productions (forums, blogs, social media...), to spot the elements which would support the ‘codes of luxury’ as identified in the literature. Then we used peircean semiotics to identify the various components of the e-semiotics of luxury. Content analysis appeared the most appropriate methodology, as a logical deductive process (De Bonville, 2000) enabling to grasp the in-depth complexity of a given phenomenon under study. As we wanted to get the realistic picture of what brands are doing, observing their digital productions was more relevant than surveying people. Besides, the object of the semiotics analysis being ‘the e-codes’ of luxury, this is not about what luxury brands want to communicate or what the audience and clients perceive: the object under study (and hence the corpus of documents to be analyzed) is actually the content present on digital media. Even if quite recent, content analysis of websites has already been used, and acknowledged as a valid research tool, e.g. to analyze the biggest companies of Fortune 500’s websites (Perry & Bodkin, 2000). Given the lack of previous work on the topic under investigation, it appeared more relevant to have an inductive approach for this analysis: data has been collected from the digital contents of the ten first luxury fashion brands (ranked by their turnover in 2011): Louis Vuitton, Hermès, Gucci, Chanel, Giorgio Armani, Ermenegildo Zegna, Christian Dior, Ferragamo, Fendi and Prada.

Data was then coded in an analytic grid which was built as data was collected and which took into account the complexity of digital tools and their various media (text, pictures, animations, videos, audio), as well as the interactivity, the ergonomics and the presence of related or decentralized supports (mini-sites, mobile apps...), following the recommendations of Kim & Kuljis (2010). The grid was designed to respect some principles (Berelson, 1952): mutual exclusion, homogeneity, relevance, productivity and objectivity. Then data was observed and separately coded by two researchers. Results were confronted and when there was disagreement both coders discussed their choice. Only five cases of such occurred, comforting in the reliability of the coding grid, available in Table 2.

	Category	Element	Code
e-communication	Know-how	Videos/Photos of the creation process	SF1
		Colour of oldness (black & white, sepia)	SF2
	History, Heritage	Timeline	H1
		Historical pictures	H2
		A dedicated webpage to brand-history	H3
	Lifestyle	Smartphone App.	L1
		Games	L2
		Community platform	L3
	Storytelling	Product staging	S1
		Videos of products	S2
		Audio files or background music	S3
		Presence on the following social networks: Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest	S4
	Product display	Quality and level of tack-sharpness of the picture	P1
		Size of the pictures	P2
		3D usages	P3
		Online catwalk	P4
	Visual emotion	Invitation to travel	E1
Dream-making		E2	
e-distribution	Rarity	Limited quantities	R1
		Product 'booking'	R2
	Service personalisation	Free samples when purchasing	SP1
		Chat, online advice, opportunity to ask for an appointment, etc	SP2
		Advices of products	SP3
		Bespoke delivery option	SP4
		Personal account	SP5
	Original experience	Wishlist	EO1
		Product customisation option	EO2
	Quality of products	Image quality	QP1
		3D-usage	QP2
		Zoom option	QP3
	Price	Price appears on the product file	PX1
		Price appears after adding the product to one's selection list	PX2
Purchase emotion	Original e-purchase experience triggering emotions	EA1	

Table 2: Coding grid

RESULTS & ANALYSIS

After coding whole set of collected data (See Appendix 1 for full details of the coding), we analysed the results in a two-step process. First of all, we identified the relevant and significant information related to the themes and sub-themes used by luxury brands online to convey their luxury definition. This led us to a typology of strategies, each of them with a specific way of arranging the various elements. A semiotic reading of such communication systems was then performed, to identify the e-semiotics of luxury.

The various themes developed online by luxury brands to state their luxury

In the coding grid, each component of the 'Communication' or 'Distribution' is linked to a given feature identified as part of the previously identified 'Codes of Luxury'. Table 4

presents the results for the ten observed brands, with the figure stating the average score for each component.

Axis developed	Score (/10)
Know-how	5
History, Heritage	5.5
Lifestyle	3
Storytelling	7.5
Product display	6
Visual Emotion	1
Rarity	1.5
Service personalisation	2.4
Original experience	3.5
Quality of products	5
Price	6
Purchase emotion	3

Table 4: Results from the analysis – Scores by axis developed

Based on table 4, we are able to identify three categories of themes depending on their score (below, equal to or above five). Those with scores below five points appear as few developed by the sampled luxury brands. In terms of e-communication, luxury brands thus use very little ‘lifestyle’ branding strategies and do not convey much visual emotion. In terms of e-distribution, rarity is not something highlighted. Besides, service personalisation, original experience and purchase emotion are not quite yet part of the picture.

On the opposite, the way luxury brands state their belonging to luxury online is related to ‘Storytelling’ communication strategies and nice product display/staging, while price-marking appears as a discriminating e-distribution strategy.

Some themes are not discriminating for brands: half of them use them, while the other half doesn’t. These are know-how and heritage for e-communication, and product quality for e-distribution.

The three types of usage of the various themes lead to three different ways of conveying luxury online:

	Recurring themes	Occasional themes	Ambivalent themes
e-communication	Storytelling Product display	Lifestyle Visual emotion	Know-how Heritage
e-distribution	Price	Rarity Service personalisation Original experience Purchase emotion	Quality of products

The e-semiotics of luxury

To identify the e-semiotics of luxury, we had to spot the common used strategies of building a luxury meaning online, thus we focus on the recurring themes only. In peircian semiotics, the process of semiosis is a triadic relationship between a sign or representamen, an object and an interpretant. In our present case, the object is always the concept of luxury, defined in two semiotics-contexts (e-communication and e-distribution).

In the e-communication semiotic system, two interpretants have been identified: storytelling and product display. Based on the scores for each observed component in the observation grid (see Appendix 1), we have the following representamen: S1 & S4 for storytelling, and P1, P2

& P4 for product display. Thus, to state 'luxury', brands communicate with the following tools (signs): Staging of the products and a presence on social networks to tell their brand story; A good-quality and large-sized picture of the product and an online catwalk to advantageously display their products. 'Products' are the entry-key to luxury, online.

In the e-distribution semiotic system, only one interpretant has been identified: price, through the PX1 representamen. A display of an expensive price on a product sheet is thus necessary to state 'luxury belonging' online.

Figure 1 enables readers to get a visual perspective of such e-semiotics of luxury.

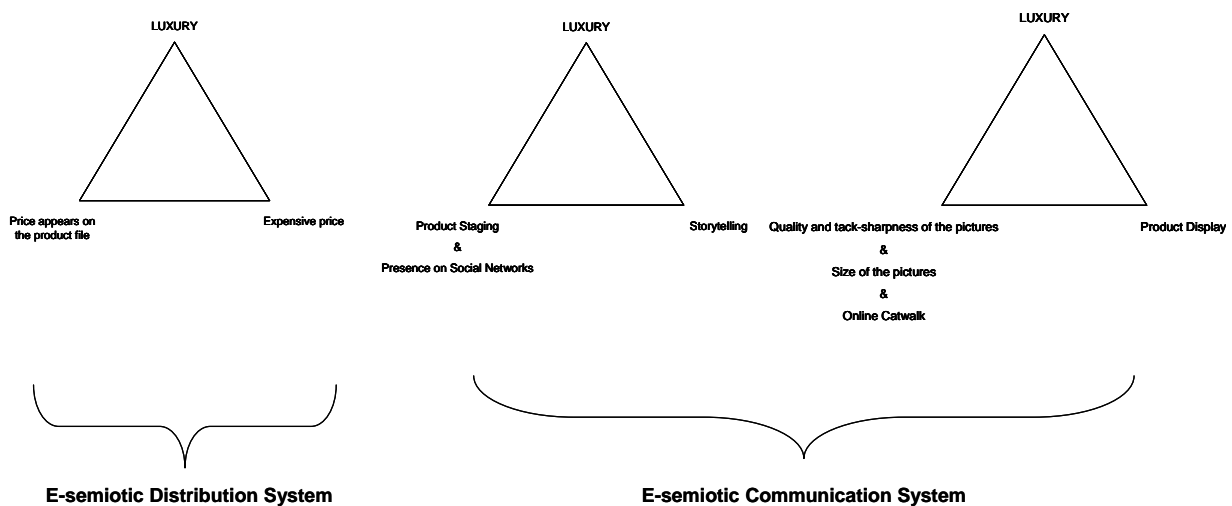


Figure 1: Graphic representation of the e-semiotic systems of luxury

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Let's compare the e-semiotics of luxury with the traditionally used codes of luxury (see table 1). Overall, we see that there is a shift from brand communication to product communication, and a shift from purchase experience and context to price. Going online would thus mean being more down-to-earth for luxury brands, focusing less on emotions and experience. However, as we have already acknowledged, no luxury brand actually only use the identified e-semiotics of luxury, but adds-up additional components to full embrace its online presence and express its luxury status. Know-how and heritage are for example widely used by Louis Vuitton, Hermès, Gucci, Chanel, Dior and Ferragamo, while Zegna only uses heritage and Armani, Fendi and Prada use none of them. Some codes of luxury are not at all (or barely) used online: the rarity concept (be it in terms of communication or distribution), the brand-lifestyle concept, visual emotion, service personalisation, original experience and purchase emotion. So far, luxury brands have thus not succeeded in transferring the luxury boutique experience online, and do not manage to reconcile the rarity principle of luxury with the 'mass' principle of digital...

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APPENDIXES

Appendix 1: Coding results

CATEGORY	CODE	Louis Vuitton	Hermès	Gucci	Chanel	Giorgio Armani	Ermenegildo Zegna	Christian Dior	Salvatore Ferragamo	Fendi	Prada	TOTAL
Kow-how	SF1	x	x	x	x			x	x	x		7
	SF2	x						x	x			3
History, Heritage	H1			x	x		x					3
	H2	x	x	x	x		x	x	x			7
	H3	x	x	x	x		x	x	x			7
« Lifestyle »	L1	x		x	x	x	x	x				6
	L2	x	x								x	3
	L3	x										1
« Storytelling »	S1	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	10
	S2	x	x	x		x	x	x				6
	S3	x	x	x		x		x				5
	S4	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	10
Product display	P1	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	10
	P2	x			x	x	x	x	x	x		7
	P3											0
	P4	x		x	x		x	x	x	x	x	8
Visual emotion	E1	x	x									2
	E2											0
Rarity	R1		x			x	x					3
	R2											0
Personalisation of service	SP1											0
	SP2	x		x								2
	SP3							x				1
	SP4	x										1
	SP5	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			8
Original experience	EO1	x		x		x	x		x			5
	EO2	x		x								2
Quality of product display	QP1	x	x	x		x	x	x	x			7
	QP2	x										1
	QP3	x	x	x		x	x	x	x			7
Price	PX1	x	x	x		x	x		x			6
Purchase emotion	EA1	x				x		x				3