

Luxury Brand Value Communication: Vocabulary and the Media

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ABSTRACT

Purpose

This study investigates the following questions: 1) How are luxury brands understood based on the media's portrayal of those brands and the choice of vocabulary? 2) Are there differences in the brand images that consumers from Europe and Japan develop because of the brand vocabulary used by the media? The results of the study elucidate suggestions for effective brand value communication strategies applicable in a rapidly changing global market.

Methodology

This study focuses on three Italian luxury brands, Armani, Fendi, and Prada. These brands represent effective brand image management, which sustains their market presence. In this context, we use field research, interviews, questionnaires, and analyze fashion magazine vocabulary.

Findings

The findings illustrate differences in brand image perception among brands, the media, and European and Japanese consumers, particularly as a result of media vocabulary choice.

Originality

This study is unique because it focuses on brand image communication effectiveness and investigates vocabulary choice. The study compares the perceptions of European and Japanese consumers considering their exposure to media content.

Keywords: Brand Value, Brand Heritage, Luxury Brand, Brand Vocabulary, Brand Communication

INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

Globalization has compounded the complexity of effectively delivering brand value to consumers because a brand of a single industry segment can assume several types of brand portfolios. Moreover, brand managers must use different communication strategies to reach consumers with different cultural backgrounds and brand experience levels. New tools, such as digital media and social media, now dominate brand information communication methods that once were limited to written information and text. Companies in the fashion and luxury industries rely on non-linguistic methods to deliver brand image to consumers. Companies (brands) should use photographic moving images effectively. However, linguistic information is still effective as a tool to convey brand image (value) now and in the future. Moreover, authors believe that linguistic information will be more essential in the digital era for two reasons.

First, it is impossible for consumers to understand, create, and express brand images without words. Brand image can be enriched by images, pictures, and movies rather than literal information; however, literal information is no less significant than rich content such as pictures and movies. Linguists' claims support this idea. Kramsch considers language a fundamental tool that enables people to conduct their social lives. "To begin with, the words people utter refer to common experience. They express facts, ideas or events that are communicable because they refer to a stock of knowledge about the world that other people share" (Kramsch, 2003, p.3). People perceive the world as objects of a certain quality because of language, and an object cannot appear in a field of vision without appropriate vocabulary to describe that object. (Suzuki, 2008, p.31). Written language is strongly linked to images. "Through typography and layout – wields strong pictorial powers" (Ventola, 2004, p.9). Therefore, language is a necessary tool for the digestion of both visible and invisible object aspects.

Second, digital natives (millennials) will soon represent mainstream consumers. Assuming that the quality of millennials' information access differs from that of existing consumers – non-digital natives – existing marketing methods become less effective. For instance, the average linguistic ability of digital natives might be less than that of non-digital natives. Or, digital natives may comprehend the same objectives, images, or words in different ways than non-digital natives. Broad diffusion of mode (fashion) magazines has changed and improved the mode phenomenon, and written communication contributes to the enrichment and meaning of clothes (Barthes, 1972, p.379-380). The written communication of mode creates independent cultural phenomena, Barthes (1972) insists. Sociological meaning changes. Considering the situation of a major shift in the media landscape from traditional fashion publishing to user-generated content, companies should combine traditional and digital media in order to enrich the overall brand identity (Corbellini and Saviolo, 2012, p.237). Therefore, senders of the information, such as companies (brands) and media, should consider social change and diversify communication methods accordingly.

Substantial research addresses how successful brands utilize visual media effectively.

In terms of linguistic information, research in the fields of marketing and semiology has addressed what and how information has been used. These studies are significant and useful. We examine the language (words) that media use to convey brand information and how consumers perceive that information. We analyze and illustrate brand images and their perception with respect to the effect of vocabulary used by the brand and the media in written texts. Additionally, we examine whether consumers comprehend brands appropriately from that information. The implications of this paper indicate the effectiveness of brand value communication methods of companies and identify effective marketing methods for future application by firms.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study addresses the following questions. 1) How are luxury brands understood based on the media's portrayal of those brands and the choice of vocabulary? 2) Are there differences in the brand images that consumers from Europe and Japan develop because of the brand vocabulary used by the media?

This study is unique because we elucidate the significance of language as a tool connecting human sensory processes and images. We identify a luxury strategy that companies of different industries can apply. The purpose of a brand/product communication differs depending on the business segment, although it would be useful to refer to the method of different company segments, and the communication must have clear objectives and an integrated process (Corbellini and Saviolo, 2012, p.226). Another unique aspect of this study is that we examine brand images of three Italian brands, Armani, Fendi, and Prada, from the perspective of vocabulary. Consumers cannot understand, create, and express brand image without words. Therefore, two relationships are clarified – the relationship between the information that brands convey and the media's understanding of that brand, and the relationship between the brand vocabulary that the media uses and the brand information conveyed to the consumers.

When companies innovate brands or products, the marketing strategies to create a new brand/product image is effective if consumers have a stereotyped image of an existing brand or product. Consumers see the innovated brand or product as new and current only if they recognize the differences or changes from the original brand or product. Therefore, companies cannot innovate effectively without knowing how the media and consumers comprehend the brand or product images. The implications of this study contribute to brand value delivery effectiveness and possible and valuable options for brand communication in the future.

This study examines the following:

1) The brand image comprehension gap between the brand and the media by analyzing pictures and movie images (non-linguistic information) delivered by the brand and the vocabulary and expressions (linguistic information) used by the media. The purpose is to clarify if the media

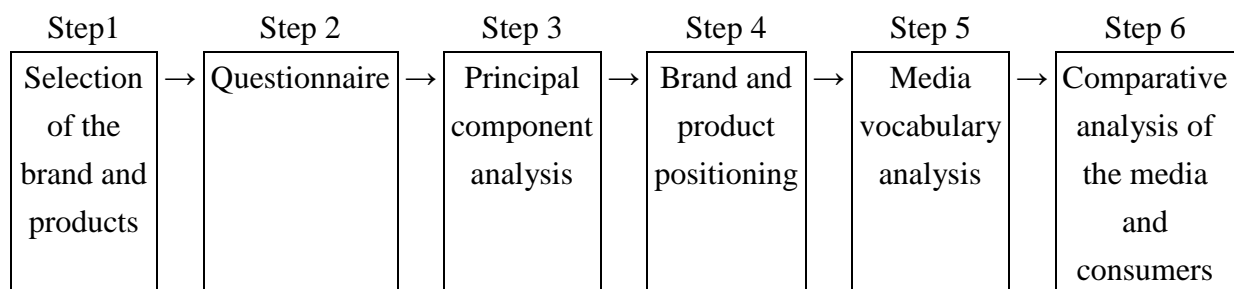
receives and delivers the brand messages and information that the company intends.

2) The brand image comprehension gap between the media and consumers by comparing a vocabulary and expressions analysis and the results of a consumer questionnaire. We examine the image perception gap between media and consumers because we assume that potential consumers are likely to receive brand information from several media sources, not directly from the brand. The purpose of this analysis is to clarify whether consumers comprehend the brand images revealed by the media appropriately.

METHOD

The research was conducted using a literature review, case studies, field research, interviews, and questionnaires. The research required six steps (Table 1).

Table 1: Overview of analysis



Step 1

This study is based on the results of comparative research between Europe and Japan conducted in 2015 (Sugimoto and Nagasawa, 2015), which selected 16 iconic products from eight of the European top luxury brands (Armani, Burberry, Chanel, Fendi, Gucci, Hermès, Louis Vuitton, and Prada), based on the Brandz luxury brand ranking determined by the research and consulting company Millward Brown. Among these brands, we selected three Italian brands for the vocabulary analysis for the following reasons. Corbellini and Saviolo state that it is increasingly difficult to distinguish luxury from fashion (Corbellini and Saviolo, 2012, p.28), and we found unique features concerning consumer perceptions of three Italian brands in the results of our research in 2015. The results implied that some people might hold stereotypical images of Italian brands as fashion industry brands, not luxury brands. On the other hand, each brand defines itself as a luxury brand. We found a gap between consumer images and company intention, and the gap was significant for Italian brands compared to French brands such as Chanel and Hermes. Therefore, we selected three Italian brands (Table 2).

Table 2: Brand and iconic product selection

1	Armani	Unconstructed jacket	2	Fendi	Fur coat	3	Prada	Nylon tote bag
		Dress for the red carpet			Baguette			Nylon bag pack

Step 2

We conducted qualitative research with a literature review and field research. We selected six products from three top Italian luxury brands based on the ranking determined by the research and consulting company Millward Brown. We selected two iconic products of three brands based on information from major fashion magazines and personal interviews conducted in shops in Milan, New York, Paris, and Tokyo (Table 1). We conducted the questionnaire in Italy (at the SDA Bocconi School of Management, Milan, in March 2014) and in Japan (the WASEDA Business School, Tokyo, in June 2014). The total number of participants was 102 (Table 4). These participants were selected because they represent a group of potential customers of luxury brands. Kapferer and Bastien (2009) indicated that highly educated people are more likely to buy luxury goods.

Table 3: Questionnaire

	THIS PRODUCT IS ICONIC BECAUSE OF ITS	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	AGREE NOR DISAGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1	Color	5	4	3	2	1
2	Shape	5	4	3	2	1
3	Material	5	4	3	2	1
4	Brand logo	5	4	3	2	1
5	Brand name	5	4	3	2	1
6	Parts	5	4	3	2	1
7	Pattern/print	5	4	3	2	1
8	History	5	4	3	2	1
9	Legend/story	5	4	3	2	1
10	Personnel	5	4	3	2	1
11	Place of origin	5	4	3	2	1
12	Feeling of luxury	5	4	3	2	1
13	Nobility	5	4	3	2	1
14	Tradition	5	4	3	2	1
15	Culture	5	4	3	2	1
16	Trendiness	5	4	3	2	1
17	Creativity	5	4	3	2	1

18	Exclusiveness	5	4	3	2	1
19	Overall design	5	4	3	2	1
20	I think this product is iconic	5	4	3	2	1

Table 4: Participant attributes

	Number of participants
Residents in Europe: University students (20 to 24 years old)	41
Residents in Europe: Graduate students (22 to 30 years old)	28
Residents in Japan: Graduate students (23 to 59 years old)	33

We conducted the questionnaire because iconic products are highly valued as an essential source of brand identity (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009). The questionnaire was composed of 20 questions using a rating scale method. The survey participants were given the following instructions: “Look at the product picture. If you understand the question concerning the product, please choose an answer according to the ranking “5” for strongly agree to “1” for strongly disagree.

Step 3

We analyzed the results of the questionnaire through principal component analysis using SPSS (IBM) software to identify the components (images) of luxury brand iconic products.

Step 4

We used scatter diagrams based on the results of the principal component analysis to compare the comprehension differences in brand/product positioning in Europe and Japan.

Step 5

We selected two major fashion magazines for the vocabulary analysis –Women's Wear Daily (WWD) and the online version of Vogue Magazine –because both magazines include luxury and fashion brands, have extensive global reach, and deliver the same content in most cases including a high percentage of text content compared to other fashion magazines. Most importantly, the two magazines are available online. In the current market, particularly markets targeting the younger generation, consumers obtain information from online media rather than print media. Therefore, it is more pertinent to examine online content vocabulary for the

purposes of this study.

We collected articles from September 2014 to September 2015 that related to the brands, products, and collections. We manually selected the words and expressions associated with the company (brand), collections/products, and personnel (creator/designer and models/celebrities) and categorized the words and expressions.

Step 6

Finally, we compared the results of the brand/product images of the consumers and the vocabulary used by media.

FINDINGS

The results of consumer perception analysis

Table 5 shows the analysis of the questionnaire results using principal component analysis and SPSS.

Table 5: Principal component analysis results

EUROPE

Factor 1		Name	Factor 2		Name	Factor 3		Name	Factor 4		Name
Exclusiveness	.795	Distinction	History	.809	Heritage	Brand name	.842	Logo/Name	Parts	.716	Form/Material
Overall design	.710		Legend/Story	.802		Brand logo	.835		Material	.689	
Creativity	.705		Personnel	.667					Shape	.678	
Trendy touch	.701										
Noble touch	.678										

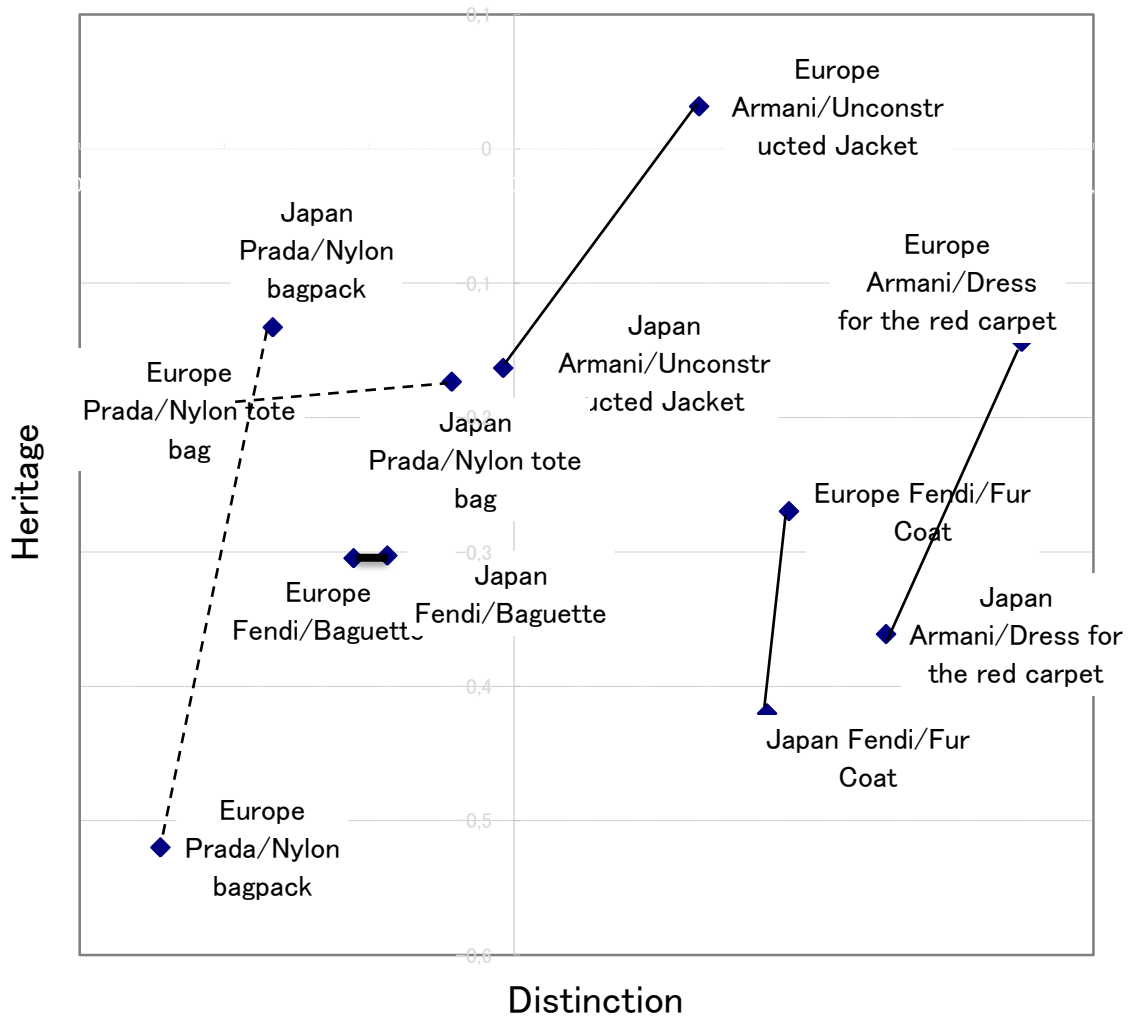
JAPAN

Factor 1		Name	Factor 2		Name	Factor 3		Name	Factor 4		Name
Legend/Story	.841	Heritage	Noble touch	.727	Distinction	Color	.759	Form/Material	Brand logo	.789	Logo/Name
History	.807		Feeling of luxury	.718		Material	.756		Brand name	.784	
Personnel	.729		Exclusiveness	.712		Shape	.726				
			Creativity	.703							

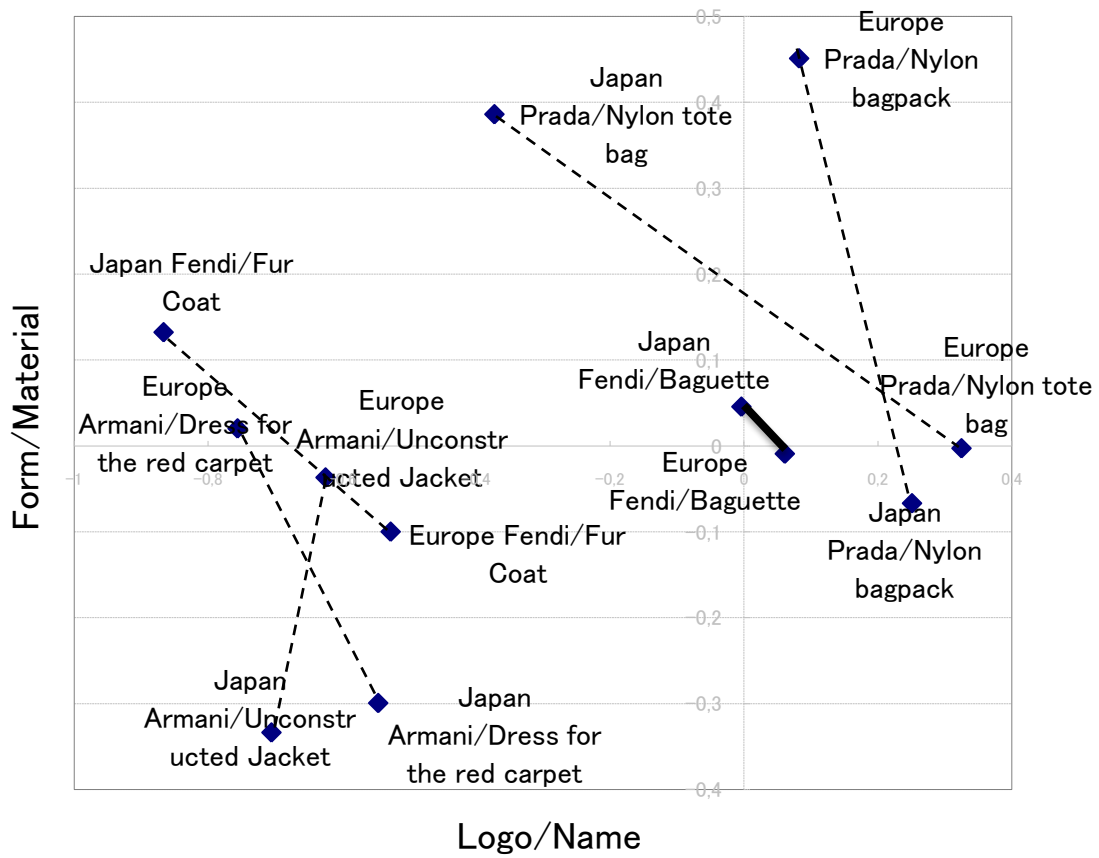
The scatter diagram shows how consumers perceive brand identity with respect to both invisible and visible factors (Figure 1). The perception differences between European and Japanese consumers are clearly shown. For instance, the Euclidean distance of Fendi for both visible and invisible factors is short, which implies effective brand image communication. Similarly, brand image is disseminated in Europe and Japan.

Figure 1: Comparison of brand image positioning in Europe and Japan

Invisible factors

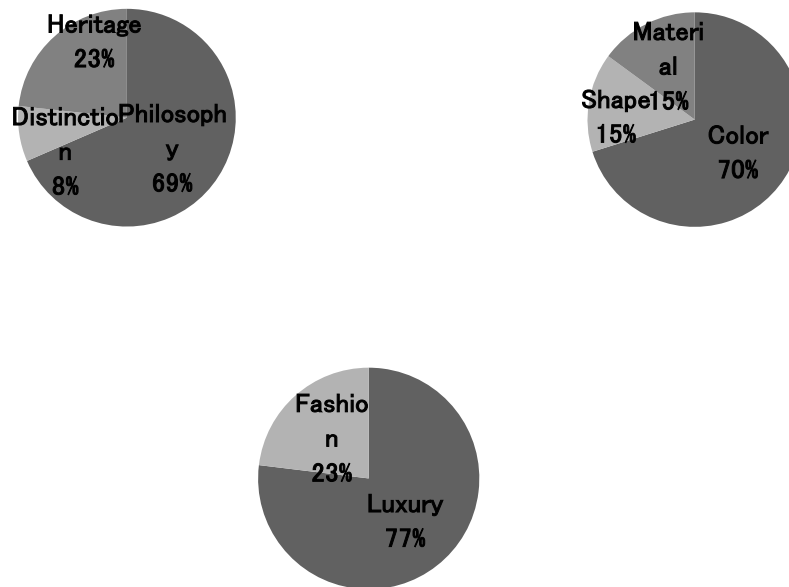


Visible factors



Results of media vocabulary analysis and a comparative analysis of media and consumer perceptions

Figure 2: Media vocabulary for Armani



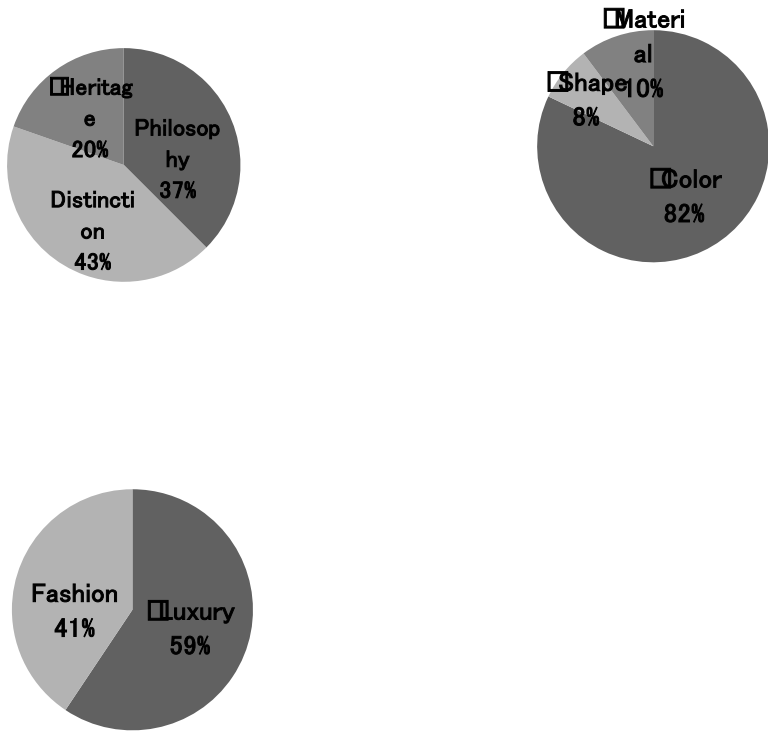
Giorgio Armani described his original vision for the Armani brand on the 40th anniversary brand website, "I believed in getting rid of the artifice of clothing. I believed in neutral colors." The Armani brand first became famous for its unconstructed menswear jacket in 1975 and launched the "power suit" for working women made with traditional menswear fabrics in 1976. "It was as simple and soft as the man's and bore a masculine authority." The Armani brand is valued because of its exceptional tailoring and Giorgio Armani's pioneering approach and design philosophy of deconstruction. Armani is defined as "the visual arbiter of a global vision, not only capturing the public's imagination with his distinctive style of relaxed, spontaneous refinement, but also transforming this personal vision into a central philosophy of modern life." The question, "How to separate the man Giorgio Armani from the brand he has created?" reflects the uniqueness of the Armani brand identity, and the answer supports that identity. "You can't – they are one and the same."

Figure 2 shows that fashion magazines use words and expressions for color more often than materials and shapes. Phrases such as "colored in natural shades," "gray color palette," and "sand-colored" are typically used. The colors used by the Armani brand reflect the philosophies of Giorgio Armani. Additionally, the phrases "culinary lifestyle vision," "easy, manageable," "minimalist approach to glamour," "elegant sobriety" reflecting Giorgio's philosophy, and "red carpet dresses," "Italian maestro," and "exquisite tailoring" reflecting brand heritage, are often seen in articles.

However, Figure 1 shows a lack of coherence between the perceptions of European and Japanese consumers and the image portrayed by the brand and media to consumers for both

visible and invisible factors. Thus, the brand and media convey the same brand image, but consumers understand the information differently.

Figure 3: Media vocabulary for Fendi

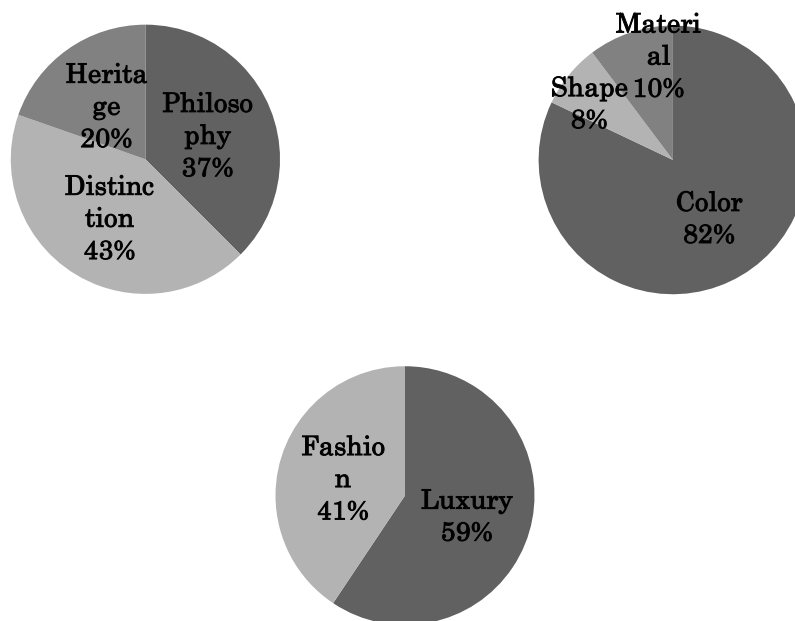


Pietro Beccari, CEO of Fendi, states, “At Fendi we go beyond creating excellent products; it’s the singular experience we provide that sets us apart. Luxury is something able to transmit emotions and create a special moment, memory for life.” Fendi originated in Rome in 1925 as a small and medium leather goods shop. Fendi soon became the only brand to have an in-house fur atelier. Fendi family members, and the distinguished designer Karl Lagerfeld, have been “revolutionizing how to wear fur by fully reinterpreting it, transforming it into a fashionable, soft, light item of clothing from a social status symbol to a fashion phenomenon.” Careful attention to the quality of materials is the core of the brand’s identity.

Media see Fendi as the brand of heritage and associate the brand with Rome, fur, and luxury. Words expressing brand heritage, such as “symbol of Rome,” “craftsmanship in-house,” “status symbol,” “fur roots,” “Italian excellence,” “Roman house,” and words emphasizing distinction such as “new techniques,” “renovation,” “fresh and vibrant,” and “something brand new” are typically and frequently used in articles.

The Euclidean distances for the Fendi iconic bag for both visible and invisible factors are short, and the Fendi bag image is disseminated similarly in Europe and Japan (Figure 1). However, the brand's heritage is not necessarily valued in the same way by consumers. The core of the brand identity is embodied by fur as both the brand and media emphasize. There is a lack of coherence between the perceptions of consumers both in terms of product category and brand image in Europe and Japan. The brand and media reveal mostly the same brand image, but the comprehension of consumers in Europe and Japan is different.

Figure 4: Media vocabulary for Prada



The Prada brand began by selling leather handbags, travel trunks, beauty cases, refined luxury accessories, jewelry, and articles of value in Milan in 1913. The brand then became an official supplier of the Royal Family in 1919. According to the Prada Annual Report for 2014, the brand's distinctive features and prestige lies in its particular management of the creative and production processes that enable the brand to offer customers worldwide products with extraordinary quality, creativity, and exclusivity. Moreover, the brand core is explained by, "For Prada, fashion, luxury, and style have always been core aspects of a project that goes beyond production of clothes, footwear, and handbags."

Prada is considered a fashion and luxury brand by the media. The media perceive strong identity in the brand's use of color, philosophy, and distinction, as shown in Figure 4. Words expressing the brand philosophy – Miuccia Prada's philosophy – include "both genders," "artful," "respect for fabric craft," "new, more democratic perspective," "accessibility," "minimal," "cultural need," "echoes the seventies," and "masculine and feminine ideals,"

and phrases such as “utility hybrid,” “smidgen nostalgic,” “product mix with new item,” “modernize,” and “innovation and quality” express the brand distinction in articles.

On the other hand, consumers do not perceive a strong brand image because the Euclidean distance between two products in both Europe and Japan are relatively long compared to the distance for Fendi products. The media show a strong brand image for Prada, but that image might not reach consumers effectively. Another explanation is that media editors and writers have biased images of the brand that differ from the original brand image.

Thus, we compare the world of brand delivered by the brand and the brand images illustrated by fashion magazines according to the choice of vocabulary and consumer perceptions.

CONCLUSION

The media vocabulary analysis and the comparative analysis of the media and consumers indicate two points. First, fashion writers/editors interpret the brand and express the images mostly in the same way that the brands intend. The media may hold stereotyped images of the brand, its personnel (designer, creator, and founder) and the product and convey these perceptions to the consumers.

Second, consumers develop different brand images depending on the product (seen in the case of Fendi) or product category (seen in the case of Armani Dress and Fendi Fur Coat in Japan). This implies that both brands and media should consider the cultural background of the country that corresponds to each item. For example, the typical understanding of a fur coat and red carpet dress is different in Europe than it is in Japan, and the optimal way to express the value of these products and how to link them with the overall desired brand image in terms of vocabulary should be carefully and strategically planned. Even if the same words and expressions are used, the images those words convey can be completely different depending on the culture.

In conclusion, the findings imply that more effective brand communication can be achieved by strategic utilization of vocabulary. Even in a market with advanced technology, the intelligent use of traditional communication tools, such as phrasing, remains significant and effective. The results of the media vocabulary analysis show that the media has its own unique language to express brand images. “Words also reflect their authors’ attitudes and beliefs, their point of view, that are also those of others” (Kramsch, 2003, p.3). Considering the possibility of biased and objective comprehension by the editors and authors of the media, companies should be conscious of the effect of the information they deliver to the market. The result of this study particularly implies that brand images can be understood based on several factors such as cultural background and the level of knowledge. Kramsch (2003) states that language helps communicants to identify themselves and others. Language symbolizes cultural identity.

Barthes (1972, p.8) raises the question of why fashion includes diversity in the form of colorful language? The fashion system exists based on the discord between the manufacturers and consumers. Consumers buy products because of the names and the meanings attributed to them, Barthes (1972) explains. Therefore, brands must recognize how the media understands brand image and the information that the media conveys to consumers. The vocabulary used by media and brands are tools that allow the consumer to objectively understand the product.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

While this study's findings are significant, they are subject to some limitations. This study analyzed only six products from three Italian luxury brands; thus, the number of products is limited. Further studies that analyze a greater number of products and a wider variety of brands and segments may strengthen the validity of our findings. Further, the questionnaire participants were limited in number, generation, nationality, and financial and social status. Thus, broader, in-depth interviews should be conducted to validate our findings. Moreover, we should review the semiotic, linguistic, and sociological factors to validate the different perceptions of brand image and the significance of vocabulary with respect to brand image implementation.

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