

Social and gender identity in the “new fashion” world: “Food and beverage” Made in Italy television commercials Year 2022

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ABSTRACT

In 1961, Roland Barthes highlights a parallelism between food and fashion (R. Barthes, 1961). He states that food, same as fashion, are symbols of society significance. Fashion and food are the two most evident and defined places of language and social culture. Barthes talks about food like a dress, like a garment, like an object of creativity and social conscience. He, for instance, describes the value of sugar in the culture of the United States of America. In “Mythologies” (R. Barthes, 1957), he illustrates the role of wine, milk, steak, fried potatoes, and ornamental cuisine. Three short essays that light up around like an intense lantern: ironic, cynical and exquisite. In the history of fashion photography, images of gender have constantly been anchored to a limited number of archetypes. According to Federica Muzzarelli (2013), these archetypes include those of the androgynous woman, of the exotic woman and of the femme fatale. Although they can be traced back to ancient myths and observed throughout the centuries (as shown in L. Nochlin Representing Women, 1999), these archetypes acquired distinctive and new iconographic shapes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Aby Warburg’s achievements have shown (E. H. Gombrich, ed. 2003), in order to be aware of the role played by a specific iconographic custom in contemporary society, it is important to trace back its tradition. The iconographic and iconological method (E. Panofksy, ed. 1975) can certainly also be applied to images and videos of gender in contemporary society. Does the medium used affect the social significance of images? Has the so-called lo-fi, digital media and the subsequent “Democratization of Fashion” (N. Barile, 2011), changed gender iconography and experimented new styles? Can we find new social identity representations in the television commercials of food and beverage Made in Italy? What can we discover looking at these commercials, starting from the E. Goffman work (Gender Advertisements, 1976)?

My Post Doc dissertation focuses on the social identity representation in the television commercials in Italy in 2022, particularly in the month of April.

Here I will present the results of my Post Doc thesis of representation of old - and maybe some also new? - social identities.

Keywords

Fashion, iconology, ethic and aesthetics, cultural studies, television, food and beverage advertisement, archetypes, gender

INTRODUCTION

Food, besides being pure energy for the body, is actually also an *imaginary*, an *ideology*, a *culture* within which it plays a prominent role. Food is a form of language, like fashion, in its broadest sense. In Roland Barthes' 1961 quotation, the semiologist points out a parallelism between food and fashion. He states:

"From the moment a need is taken over by the norms of consumption production [in short, from the moment it moves to the rank of institution], it is no longer possible in it to dissociate

the function from the sign of the actual function... which is true of clothing, and is equally true of food. ”¹

Fashion and food are the two clearest and most defined places of social language and culture. Barthes talks about food as an object of creativity and social consciousness, just as a dress or as clothing. He does so in the same essay from which the above passage is taken, in which he describes the value of sugar in the culture of the United States of America². But above all I would like to focus on what he writes in *Mythologies* (1957) in which he illustrates the role of wine, milk, steak, French fries, and ornamental cooking. Three short essays that light up around like a bright lantern: so ironic, so cynical, so exquisite. What does Roland Barthes say about wine? Wine for the French is an institution. Wine is an act, it is a gesture, and it is even related to existence, to a person's way of life. Furthermore, wine allows irrational acts. It justifies drunkenness, because it is actually an entity for the French of complete integration. Wine, therefore has a profound sense, and is profoundly artistic, dramatic, theatrical, even in gesture, and, no less, in the semiotic construction of social classes.

Wine is 'socialised', he states, because it is based not only on a *moral* but also on a *scenario*. It is the centre of the 'ceremonials' of the French. It is the pivot around which anything can happen. And, if we notice well, the words that the semiologist repeats are *moral, national, scenario, social, mythology, function*. Everything that lives in a reality far beyond wine itself, but which makes it better understood.

And what is the opposite of wine? Is it water? No, it's milk.

Milk is the real anti – wine. 'It is opposed to fire', he states, 'because of all its molecular density, because of the creamy, and therefore sopitive, nature of its surface. Wine is mutilating, surgical, it transmutes and gives birth. Milk is cosmetic, it connects, covers, restores. Moreover, its purity, associated with childish innocence, is a pledge of strength [...] calm, white, lucid, in all equal to the real.'³

Wine is blood, milk is placenta.

Also steak participates in the same mythology as wine⁴. Meat, for the way it is cooked and put together with other ingredients, becomes a oneiric, prenatal, placental image. This sounds like the description of a Salvador Dali painting. It is no coincidence that to explain his work *The Persistence of Memory* (1931), the painter stated that it was inspired by a dream he had one night after eating too much 'Camembert' for dinner the night before. Food, thus, becomes the place of the social, but also of the dream, of the most hidden and unpredictable desire, like the unconscious.

Another word repeated by the scholar is 'national', or 'nationalised'. Food becomes Homeland, for the French, sometimes more Homeland than Society. But at the same time, it describes, in the way it is 'processed' and cooked, the social environment in which it is served and savoured and also advertised.

In fact, another essay in *Mythologies* is crucial for understanding the *communication* of food, namely the one on ornamental food. Here, Barthes describes the food displayed in the photographs of the *Elle* newspaper⁵. He traces different images displayed by the newspaper, characterised by exaggeratedly processed and covered, packaged, embellished, ornamented food: glazed, coloured, shiny, baroque food, but at the same time, as if hidden, and magically, among other things, only photographed from above. This photographic viewpoint accentuates the fact that that sweet is an object, close but elusive, whose consumption can only be accomplished through the eyes, through sight. So, the way the image of food is made, produced, displayed, photographed, narrated, is also a *sign*, a clue to the society to which it is offered. Just, if we think about it, like the image of fashion. And like the image of advertising.

Food and Beverage could, therefore, be the new *Fashion*: an aesthetic and cultural quest that goes beyond the purely functional, more so perhaps than any other social language.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1 Barthes R., 1961, trad. it. Marrone G., pp. 33 – 34, 1998, in Ivi, pp. 14 – 15

2 Barthes R., 1961

3 Therein, p. 69

4 Therein, pp. 71 – 73

5 Therein, pp. 125 – 126

The main objective of this study is to investigate the representation of social identity in the most played Made in Italy Food and Beverage commercials on television in April 2022. The analysed channels are: Rai 1, Rai 2, Rai 3, Rete 4, Canale 5, Italia 1, La7. The time examined is the evening time, from 19.00 to 23.00. The choice was made to focus on adult, youth and family target brands.

The most played commercials of Food - Brand Made in Italy - are:

Riso Flora, Nutella Be Ready, Magnum Michelangelo "The Universal Pleasure", Spaghetti Barilla Pasta al Bronzo, Pesto Barilla, Pan Bauletto Mulino Bianco, Insalata Bonduelle, Gelato NUII, Gocciolate Pavesi, Biscotti Gran Cereale Frutta, Pesto Tigullio, Galletto Vallespluga, Sabelli Mozzarelle e Ricotte.

The most played commercials of Beverage - Brand Made in Italy - are:

Birra Peroni, Birra Moretti, Birra Ichnusa, Acqua Vitasnella, Acqua Levissima, Estathé, Crodino. This resulted in a **total of 20 spots** to be analysed: **13** of food and **7** of beverage.

METHODOLOGY

An interesting point from which to approach the analysis of the commercials is the Semiotic System table expressed by B. Martin and R. Felizitas, in *Key terms in Semiotic*⁶:

Table 1 - Semiotic System Table

SIGN	COMMERCIAL FILM
Signified	Visual text (all visual elements in the commercial film and their presentation style), verbal text (external sound, slogan, speech, music and sound effects), written text (slogan, logo)
Signifier	The connotations that took part beside signified in the commercial movie.
Analysis	Assessment of the relationship between the signified and signifier.

However, it is worth highlighting the fact that advertising in contemporary society is increasingly imposing itself not only as an autonomous language, but as a true *discursive form*, as 'the configuration that a given set of social practices, interest systems, social groups, ethical convictions and cultural orientations takes on at a given time and in a given society'⁷. From a marginal role in social dynamics, advertising is increasingly becoming an 'advertising form'⁸. i.e. it has developed its own discourse, its own way of representing social characters and their relationships. Therefore, in addition to the table above, the contribution of Jean - Marie Floch's work on the consumption value system is fundamental in this perspective. The square of consumption values is proposed by Floch in an essay dedicated to various car advertising campaigns, with a particular focus on that of Citroën.⁹ In this essay, the semiologist creates the classification of value types, dividing consumption values into four groups, structured in a theoretical square. The famous square that the scholar calls 'of the axiologies of consumption behaviour' is as follows:¹⁰

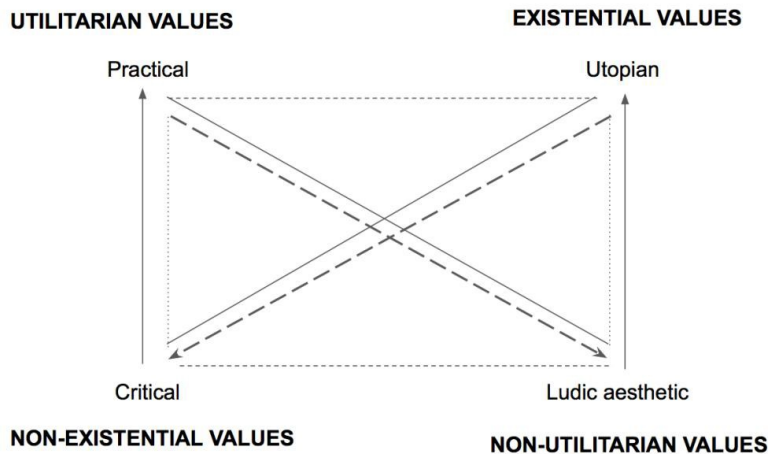
6 Martin B., Felizitas R., (2006), in Balci V., Özgen, C. 2017, p. 25

7 Semprini A., 2003, p. 101, in Bianchi C., 2005, p. 77

8 Codeluppi V., 1996, in Ibidem

9 Floch J. M., 1990, cap. 6: "J'aime, j'aime, j'aime", Car advertising and the consumer value system

10 Floch J. M., 1990, in Pozzato M. P., 2013, pp. 152 – 153



The categories identified by Floch seldom appear divided in advertising campaigns, often campaigns focus on a mixture of the four types of values.

Speaking of 'values', another necessary point to illustrate, before concluding this presentation of the research methodology, is the subject of brand identity. Mauro Ferraresi is the one who recently has deeply investigated the combination of brand identity and image¹¹. The brand performs the functions of *differentiating* and *enhancing*; as it creates a difference between itself and the context, it builds its own identity with own values¹². This process is possible thanks to the *image system*. Ferraresi¹³ points out that many of the typical characteristics of the brand world are common to what Umberto Eco defines as the 'possible world of narration':

"cultural construction of the narrated universe, the high level of cohesion (i.e. internal connections within the text at surface level) and coherence (i.e. stability and continuity of meaning), the suppression of disbelief necessary to understand them, the production of moods, sensations and synaesthesia."¹⁴

But it is also true that what is represented - which is often narrated as a great revolution in form and content - is nothing more than a tiny variation within the same theme of values. Furthermore, the types of possible narratives that the brand discourse proposes vary between the 'verisimilar' and the 'improbable', and only rarely do new narratives arise. Advertising communication must propose values compatible with those the consumer is willing to accept, advertising must first of all be reassuring, maternal, parental, citing Jean Baudrillard's articulate thought.¹⁵ In fact, Volli states: 'brand discourses are weak, confused, usually careful not to create divisions in the target audience (and therefore not to be too incisive)'.¹⁶ It is as if everything is always fiction, a narrative that wants to seem real, but is always far from the truth. René Magritte's 1928 – 1929 work 'The Betrayal of Images' or 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe', a masterpiece of Surrealism and the psychoanalytic link between objects and the human being's vision, between objects and their subjective meaning, thus comes to mind once again. Dealing with advertising thus seems a game between intentions and ideas, between active and passive - or unconscious and unpredictable - meaning, between subject and representation of the subject. That *Cut* that Lucio Fontana, years later, would make on a canvas seems to mean: 'go beyond representation, this is only fiction'. The spatial concept is nothing other than understanding 'La Trahison des Images'.

11 Ferraresi M., 2003, in Bianchi C., 2005, p. 99

12 Ferraresi M., 2003

13 Ferraresi M., 2003, pp. 102 – 103, in Ibidem

14 Bianchi C., 2005, p. 100

15 Baudrillard J., 2003, p. 213

16 Volli U., 2003, p. 91, in Bianchi C., 2005, p. 101

Furthermore, conscious of having to deal with continuous betrayals of images, with iconological memories, with improbable and sometimes grotesque narratives, the aforementioned methodological approaches were used in the analysis of the chosen spots, in which Erving Goffman's ritualisations and hyper – ritualisations and the representations and archetypes found and investigated in my previous research work were also analysed.¹⁷

THE INTERPRETATIVE FRAMEWORK

"Every era has the revival of antiquity that it deserves."¹⁸

The results of the research can be summarised as follows:

SPOT FOOD	PRACTICAL V.	UTOPIAN V.	CRITICAL V.	LUDIC – AESTHETIC V.
RISO FLORA	X			X
NUTELLA B READY				X
MAGNUM MICHELANGELO				X
SPAGHETTI BARILLA		X		X
PESTO BARILLA	X	X		X
PAN BAULETTO MULINO BIANCO		X		
INSALATA BONDUELLE	X			X
GELATO NUii	X			X
GOCCIOLE PAVESI EXTRA DARK				X
BISCOTTI GRAN CEREALE FRUTTA	X			X
PESTO TIGULLIO	X			X
GALLETTO VALLESPLUGA	X			X
SABELLI MOZZARELLE E RICOTTE	X	X		X

¹⁷ Marrella F. M., 2019

¹⁸ E. H. Gombrich, 2003, p. 206

SPOT BEVERAGE	PRACTICAL V.	UTOPIAN V.	CRITICAL V.	LUDIC – AESTHETIC V.
BIRRA PERONI		X		X
BIRRA ICHNUSA	X	X		
BIRRA MORETTI		X		X
ACQUA VITASNELLA	X			X
CRODINO		X		X
ESTATHÉ				X
ACQUA LEVISSIMA				X

Observing the tables, we can summarise as follows:

- In general, there is an almost continuous presence of Playful-Aesthetic Enhancement, both in Food and Beverage: in a total of 18 out of 20 spots, except in the Mulino Bianco Bauletto Bread and Ichnusa Beer spots;
- Secondly, there is Practical Valorisation, in 10 commercials but, interestingly, only in 2 out of 7 Beverage commercials, and instead in a much higher percentage in Food: in 8 out of 13 commercials;
- Utopian Valorisation, can be found in 8 spots: 4 out of 13 (Food), 4 out of 7 (Beverage);
- Critical Valorisation is completely absent.

Food and beverages, in Italy, are not the place where the Italian consumer wants to save money. The virtually absent Critical Appreciation seems to affirm just this, as it is equally affirmed that on food the Italian demands quality (Practical Appreciation is very present). Both food and drink are an invitation to joy, fun, beauty, pleasure, sociability (Ludic-Aesthetic Valuation). Through this world of *Food* and *Beverage*, they also want to address utopian and chimerical themes: union, peace, humanity, the fight against prejudice, love and happiness.

As far as 'fashion bodies', archetypes, stereotypes, ritualisations and hyper – ritualisations are concerned, we can summarise as follows:

- The *female 'Touch - Taste'*: it is almost omnipresent. It is the woman who tastes, especially in Food. In Beverage, tasting is more masculine, except in water commercials - Levissima and Vitasnella;
- *Female ecstasy*: the moment of female ecstasy, often represented with close-ups and sighs, occurs immediately after the product has been tasted. Female sensuality is linked to the pleasure of taste.
- The *female 'touch'*: the female sensual touch, narrated by Erving Goffman, is present here mainly through the touch of the product with the mouth, and thus through the sense of taste. However, in some commercials, we have the touch of the woman caressing her face, or her hair, an attitude reminiscent of sensuality.
- The *authorised female estrangement*: we encountered it in two commercials, and it indicates a somewhat distracted, scatter-brained, immersed in her own thoughts female representation. Elements that do not make the spectator experience her as a reassuring and credible character. Or rather, she is such in the tasting, in the taste of the product, not in the practical enhancement of it. A situation that is also related to and expressed in the next point.

- The *male voice - functional hierarchy*: the male voice-over is present in 14 out of 20 commercials. The female voice-over can be found only in 2 out of 20 spots. In the other commercials, there is no voice-over. This detail is extremely interesting. It suggests that the voice - which represents not the aesthetic and sensual image, but knowledge, reassurance, accompaniment to understanding the product - is almost always male. This detail ties in with Goffman's ritualisation of the functional hierarchy. When it comes to the explanation of a product, it is always the man who is the protagonist, and the woman stands by to listen to his reading of instructions. This happened in the representation of the advertisements analysed by Goffman. Here it happens with hearing. The female spectator - the main target of these products - feels more reassured by a male voice, which is warm, welcoming, but at the same time, evokes security, professionalism, knowledge and rigour.
- *The Traditional Body (often Nordic) VS The Multicultural Body*: an element that is repeated in several commercials is the presence of bodies that I would call 'natural', and also 'Nordic': women not wearing make-up, simple, dressed in light colours, blue eyes, light hair. We could find the multicultural body in just two spots, and in just one spot, the Italian Mediterranean body. The traditional idea of 'wellness' is linked to this iconography: if you eat and drink healthy, you are blond, tall, blue-eyed. We found the multicultural body in two commercials that clearly target young people: Barilla's 'Le Roommates', and Birra Moretti. We find it also in the Crodino ad, but it is a multicultural body mainly related to the message of internationality and world unity, not multicultural in an event-sharing place.
- The '*Sacred Rite*': food, the sharing of it, white as the colour of purity, the breaking of bread or the cutting of mozzarella cheese, are elements that recall the Christian rite of the sacredness of sharing food: an idea present in several commercials.
- The *fable and romance*: the fable of happiness is an undisputed protagonist of these narratives. Love, dreams, pleasure are the most repeated words in the claims of these commercials.
- *The Colours of Italy*: the value of 'Made in Italy' is not only told through words - Pesto Tigullio and Sabelli commercials, for example - but also through colour: as in the advertisement analysed by Roland Barthes of 'Panzani'. Here, green, white and red are the colours that praise the Homeland: Italy as a place of quality raw materials, and as a place and thought of national pride.
- *Food and Beverage, the two genders*: it seems, from the representations analysed, that food has a more feminine valorisation; beverages, except for water, a more masculine one. As if food and drink were actually the visual representation of two genders, female and male. This makes us think that the target audience of the representation of food is mainly women, while that of drinks is mainly men. With the exception of water, that is associated to well-being and health, and to purity, elements that in our narratives seem to be purely feminine, while fun and goliardia are considered to be mainly masculine.
- *Sexual and gender identity*: in the analysed advertisements, we have only found homosexual representation once, in Barilla's 'The Roommates', and in a fairly stereotyped and superficial way. The world of food and drink in Italy is only male and female, and heterosexual; anything else is non-existent.
- *The family*: once again, the family represented is generally traditional: mother, father, grandparents, children, grandchildren: a basic heterosexual family, or a mother with daughters/children. Single mothers and single fathers are never shown. Single grandparents with grandchildren. Adult women and men alone with parents. Everything remains very close to the perfect ideal of a large, loving family, and also the family of friends. The idea of group, of number, is present. There is little loneliness, and little representation of families other than the 'traditional' and 'ideal' one.
- *The pandemic*: it cannot be overlooked that these commercials were made and also broadcast in the years of a pandemic. *Smart working*, for example, has a specific value in these narratives. But above all, the continuous reiteration of ideals such as Love, dreams, feelings, happiness, sweetness, companionship, pleasure, friendship, hugs, sharing underlines how much these are thoughts structured around their lack and the tragedy that occurred in the years 2020 - 2022. Food and drink, even more, meant in the language of these advertisements sharing, sacredness, closeness, affection. 'Staying human', the ironic

phrase of the Gorilla in the Crodino spot, actually seems to be the *leitmotif* of the majority of the commercials taken into consideration.

RESEARCH LIMITS AND POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS

The analysis of each image, and of the moving image, with quotations from Erwin Panofsky to Cinzia Bianchi and beyond, is in itself a subjective, partial analysis, in any case filtered by the view and experience of the scholar, however much he or she tries to draw inspiration from studies, techniques, methodologies. Regarding the language of the commercial in particular, the analysis must be multidisciplinary, because each element has its own value: voice, music, shots, cinematographic language, iconography, iconology, semiotics, words, language, silences, pauses, colours. This is the first limitation found not only in this research, but in any research that approaches the study of images and creative representations: the extreme relativity of what one has tried to read, decipher, describe and narrate.

Another central point is the *medium*: television is now defined as a residual medium. Who watches it? When? Is the world of communication now only that of the web? So what does advertising on the web look like instead? Does the Barilla brand use a different image on the web from the one it uses on television? Do the commercials, the images, the narratives change? The analysis of each major Made in Italy food and beverage brand between television, the web and social networks could be another possible focus of the research: that is, their way of declining advertising according to the medium that shares it.

It would also be interesting to study viewers' *engagement* in social media advertisements. How do consumers comment on advertising images? How do they comment on YouTube videos? What is the *feed-back* on viewers? How do 'prosumers' behave?

Furthermore, it would be stimulating to study how the communication of a Made in Italy brand is abroad: how do narratives change? Do they adapt to the cultures they address? Or do they take up the same stylistic features intended for the Italian public?

Remaining in the medium of television, it would also be engaging to carry out an analysis based on the times of day and the seasons of the year. Here, the focus was on the evening time, in the month of April. Would anything change in the morning time? Or in the afternoon? What are the programmes at that given time? And what is the main target of a chosen time? And what if we changed the month of the year instead? What would the findings be?

This area of research is indeed wide and complex, and both the limits and the new possibilities for investigation are many and unpredictable. And this is perhaps the fascination of communication: its extreme vivacity and difficulty, its layering and dimension. Its consistency and inconsistency. Its concreteness and fickleness.

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