

**TITLE :** The Evolving Identity of Fabric: A Semiotic Analysis of the “Vichy Checks”

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**ABSTRACT :**

Fabrics play a pivotal role within the fashion system, both from an industrial perspective (Maman Larraufie, 2014) and as carriers of consumer-driven meaning (Barthes, 1990). This research focuses on the Vichy checks fabric, historically known as Gingham, a French textile innovation from the 19th century emblematic of the Second Empire, the Industrial Revolution, and thermal cities such as Vichy. Throughout time, this fabric has undergone a unique trajectory, moving from bespoke couture to mass-market adoption and back to high fashion, while also taking on new significance in other industries, such as hospitality.

Through a semiotic analysis based on structural (Greimas, 1966) and interpretative frameworks (Peirce, 1974), we explore the evolving meanings of the Vichy checks fabric across various periods and cultural contexts. Our research aims to uncover how a fabric's social meaning can shift and evolve, eventually reaching a state of hyperreality (Perry, 2012). We also propose a new methodology to decode the relationship between society and fabric, offering a model that could be applied to other iconic textiles, such as the Burberry pattern, to better understand how a fabric or pattern becomes emblematic of a specific place, era, or political message.

**KEYWORDS :** Fabric, Fashion system, Semiotics, Historical Research, Icon

## INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

Fabrics are at the heart of the fashion system from an industrial standpoint (Maman Larraufie, 2014) but also from a consumer-meaning one (Barthes, 1990). Their supply is fundamental for fashion houses, with luxury ones looking after iconic / rare or innovative fabrics, to fast fashion who often inspire themselves from the fabric look to replicate only its pattern.

The Vichy checks fabric, also known historically as the Gingham fabric, is a French innovative fabric from the XIXth century emblematic of a given historical period (the Second Empire in France), the industrial revolution, a place (Vichy is a city) and a lifestyle (Thermal cities). Throughout the decades until now it has been endowed with specific meanings for some individuals or groups of people (e.g. the 60s). Its journey from bespoke couture to mass-market and low-cost and then back to high fashion is an unusual path, esp. when considering its meaning beyond the fashion system in the hospitality industry.

In this research we aim at understanding how the social meaning of a fabric can evolve throughout time and become a multi-faceted icon to ultimately reach the level of hyperreality (Perry, 2012).

## METHODOLOGY

To do this we have collected material artifacts produced by various communication media around the fabric / pattern and have coded the material thanks to structural (Greimas, 1966) and interpretative semiotics (Peirce, 1974).

Structural semiotics is a method of analyzing signs and systems of meaning, heavily influenced by the linguistic structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure and developed further by thinkers like Algirdas Julien Greimas. It seeks to understand how elements in a communication system—whether language, myths, narratives, or material objects—interact to produce meaning. Structural semiotics is concerned not with individual elements (signs) but with how these signs work together within a larger system to generate meaning. For example, a narrative is understood not just through isolated events but by how those events interact according to structural rules (Barthes, 1967).

Interpretative semiotics, also known as *Peircean semiotics*, is grounded in the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, who developed a theory of signs that focuses on how meaning is created and interpreted by individuals in real-life contexts. This approach emphasizes the dynamic, interpretive process through which signs acquire meaning, in contrast to structural semiotics, which focuses more on the relationships between signs in a closed system. Peirce emphasized that interpretation is a continuous, dynamic process. The interpretant itself can become a new representamen, leading to further interpretations—a process he called *unlimited semiosis* (Peirce, 1931-1958). Meaning is always in flux, shaped by the interaction between the sign, its object, and the interpreter's cultural or personal context. Interpretative semiotics places greater emphasis on how signs are understood in specific cultural, historical, and social contexts. It recognizes that meaning can change depending on the interpreter's background, experience, and the broader cultural environment (Peirce, 1931-1958).

In examining the evolving meanings of the Vichy checks fabric, both structural and interpretative semiotics offer valuable frameworks. Together, they provide complementary approaches to understanding how this iconic textile has moved through different cultural contexts, acquiring new meanings as it transitioned from bespoke fashion to mass-market, and back to high fashion.

Structural semiotics, rooted in the work of Saussure (1916/1983) and developed by Greimas (1966), focuses on the underlying structures that organize meaning within a system. In this context, the Vichy checks fabric can be seen as part of a broader system of fashion symbols that derive meaning from their relationships with one another.

For example, using Greimas's semiotic square, we can map the oppositions and complementarities that have defined the fabric's journey over time. Initially, during the Second Empire, the fabric might have signified a sense of bourgeois respectability or refined leisure, particularly in the context of its association with thermal cities like Vichy. This meaning would stand in opposition to more utilitarian or industrial fabrics of the time. Later, during its adoption in mass-market fashion in the 20th century, the Vichy checks came to represent affordability and simplicity, directly opposing its earlier associations with high status.

The structuralist perspective allows us to systematically track these shifts, identifying how the fabric's meaning is constructed by its position within a network of signs. The semiotic square can also be applied to its current revival in luxury fashion, where it regains a sense of exclusivity and craftsmanship, yet now carries an additional historical weight, layered with its past as a widely accessible material.

While structural semiotics helps us outline these oppositions and map the system of meanings, interpretative semiotics, drawing on Peirce's triadic model of the sign (1931-1958), focuses on how these meanings are interpreted and reinterpreted by different social groups over time. The triadic model—comprising the representamen (the fabric itself), the object (the concept it refers to), and the interpretant (the meaning constructed in the mind of the viewer)—is particularly useful for understanding the dynamic and evolving nature of Vichy checks.

In the 1960s, for instance, the fabric became associated with youth and rebellion, partly due to cultural icons like Brigitte Bardot, who popularized it as a playful, non-conformist material. At this point, the interpretant of the fabric shifted from its previous associations with bourgeois life to one more closely aligned with youth culture and countercultural ideals. The interpretant in Peirce's model can further change over time, depending on how the fabric is re-contextualized. For instance, the current revival of the fabric in luxury fashion may involve interpretations of nostalgia or heritage, but also an element of irony, as the once accessible pattern is reclaimed by elite fashion houses.

Unlimited semiosis, a concept from Peirce (1931-1958), illustrates how this fabric's meaning is never fixed. Each interpretation—whether in fashion, hospitality, or political movements—can give rise to new interpretations. For example, the pattern's use in hospitality branding could evolve into a symbol of comfort and tradition, reflecting both its historical associations with Vichy as a thermal spa city and its widespread familiarity as a fabric used in home decor. This demonstrates how Vichy checks function not just as a static sign, but as a multi-faceted icon whose meaning continually adapts to new cultural and commercial contexts.

By combining both approaches, our research can offer a comprehensive model for analyzing how a textile like the Vichy checks fabric becomes a multi-layered cultural symbol. The structuralist lens helps us systematically trace the relationships between the fabric and other elements in the fashion system, while the interpretative lens allows us to explore how different audiences, across time and context, have shaped and re-shaped its meaning.

Ultimately, this dual perspective enables us to theorize the next stage of the fabric's meaning. For instance, using Greimas's structural tools, we might identify potential oppositions or new associations that could emerge in future fashion trends. Meanwhile, Peirce's interpretative model can guide us in exploring how future audiences might re-interpret the fabric in the context of evolving cultural values, such as sustainability or heritage revival.

## FINDINGS

We thus propose the ‘Vichy Checks’ system of meanings throughout its existence and try to anticipate what could be the next stage of meaning. As we are still in the analytics of the collected data we cannot disclose the full results here but everything will be ready by the time of the conference.

## IMPLICATIONS

Ultimately, we propose a new methodology to decipher the relationship between society and a fabric/pattern, which could be reused to study other fabrics/patterns, including some branded ones (e.g. the Burberry pattern), to better understand how a fabric/pattern can become emblematic of a place / period / political message, etc.

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