From Attire to Aesthetic: How Fashion Films Redefine Brand Narratives

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Track: Marketing communication and branding

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Abstract

Fashion films are short audiovisual productions used by apparel companies to build brand identity and to convey specific brand imagery. Being usually hosted on brands' official websites as well as on their social media channels, they blend together elements of fashion, cinema, and the web. Despite their widespread adoption among fashion houses, however, research on fashion film as marketing instruments is still scant. This paper is part of an ongoing academic project whose aim is to unveil the impact of narrative features of fashion films on online brand communities engagement. In this initial stage of the project 80 fashion films have been analysed according to Greimas and Courtés' veridictory square, in order to identify the narrative elements of prominent fashion brands content. Preliminary findings provide evidence that clothes and accessories are no longer the main subjects of fashion narratives, but have started to play the satellite role of helpers in supporting actors reaching their goals. Once this first study will be completed, the focus will shift to understanding the types of engagement these narratives generate.

Keywords

Introduction and theoretical framework

Entertainment plays a crucial role in guiding users' interest towards media content. According to We Are Social's last report (2024), 80.3% of users argue to use social media for fun and entertainment purposes. In the last two decades, the convergence between advertising and the entertainment industry gave birth to new communication tools able to convey brand values in a more effective way (Scaglioni & Suma, 2017). Among these instruments, we find fashion films.

Fashion films are short videos - usually lasting from few to thirty minutes - used by fashion brands to evoke fashion imagery (Rees-Roberts, 2018). They made their first appearance with the rise of social media such as YouTube and Instagram, thus blending together elements of fashion, cinema, and the web (Buffo, 2020). The form of the fashion film can be narrative-led, abstract, experimental or with a documentary structure. Whilst not responding to precise rules or styles, their common aim is to illustrate collections and reveal the aesthetics as well as the universe of values revolving around the brand (Scaglioni & Suma, 2017).

By means of fashion film, brands have developed a new mode of expression, transmitting their imagery in a richer and more fluid way than they had been doing

before (Díaz Soloaga, Muñoz Domínguez, & Woodside, 2023). Literature has framed fashion films as a form of 'transmedia branding', where brands break the barriers of each single medium to share their stories, values, and universes (Buffo, 2024). Moreover, their production is embedded in the creative economy, where brands speak to consumers 'beyond the simply promotional display of the garment, accessory or collection, to sample the emotional experience of the brand as it is disseminated through online digital media' (Rees-Roberts, 2018, p. 184). Hence, far from outdated communication strategies aimed at producing persuasion and control effects on consumers, the aim of fashion films is not to influence consumers' buying behaviours, but rather to share the maison's imagery and values in order to boost followers' engagement (Soloaga & Guerrero, 2016).

Within this interactive context, Online Brand Communities (henceforth OBCs; Martinez-Lopez et al., 2016; Cunningham, & Craig, 2019; Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2021) play a pivotal role in defining fashion films' success or failure. Digital environments have provided companies with new modes of interaction with a consumer who is highly savvy about luxury and accustomed to interacting with high-end brands, despite not having high income levels (Uhlirova, 2022). As well, fashion films have become the language of middle-class youth and young adults, who seek access to an aspirational world (Díaz Soloaga, Muñoz Domínguez, & Woodside, 2023) which no longer seems as distant as it was in the past. Recently, fashion narratives have indeed shifted from portraying an aspirational, distant ideal of perfection to representing more accessible universes through social values such as freedom, sustainability, and inclusivity (Buffo, 2024), making their ideals more relatable and attainable for their audiences.

Since their first appearance, fashion films have become the object of sociological academic attention (see Mijovic, 2013; Uhlirova, 2013). However, despite their increasing dissemination - especially across luxury brands - a marketing perspective on their capabilities as advertising tools is still lacking. This preliminary study seeks to address this gap by developing a taxonomy of the narrative features found in key fashion films, thus unveiling how they contribute to the brand's imagery creation. Once this first study will be completed, the focus will shift to understanding the types of engagement these narratives generate.

Methodology

In order to gather relevant data, a purposive sample of fashion films from Miu Miu and Versace was chosen. The data were collected from Youtube and included 80 fashion films. The choice of these specific two brands was driven by their relevance in the fashion field as well as their digital presence. In 2011, Miu Miu launched a fashion film saga, *Women's Tales*, whose aim was to stage the many complexities and contradictions of being a woman today. Each episode is filmed by an international female director, exploring the multifaceted and contradictory feminine world in daily life. Versace, on the other hand, was chosen as it was depicted as the brand with the highest level of social media engagement according to a ranking proposed by Luxedigital in 2022 (the year this project commenced).

In order to uncover the narrative characteristics of fashion film, a semiotic content analysis was undertaken. Data have been manually coded according to the following categories: film language (Buffo, 2020), aesthetic code (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010), canonical narrative schema and veridictory square (Greimas, 1983), and narrative structures (Eco, 1979). The coding procedures followed an iterative inductive and deductive coding. Every brand was assigned to a coder (author) and regular meetings in order to assess coding reliability were held. The first preliminary results are outlined in the following section.

Preliminary results

The preliminary results of the study highlight that fashion films now stage more complex and meaningful narrative paths compared to the past, where depictions of an exclusive, unattainable ideal were predominant.

Miu Miu portrays the complexities and contradictions of being a woman today, delving into the nuanced and sometimes conflicting aspects of female life and their everyday experiences. From a semiotic perspective, the story unfolds through a series of state changes and transformations that the 'subject' undergoes to achieve her goals. Miu Miu's subject - usually models and muses of the brand - was found to face challenges and conflicts with her 'opponents' to attain her goals, that is, a brave and independent spirit. Opponents can be internal, such as personal limitations, or external, like societal constraints, while the subjects' positive virtues function as 'helpers'. As well, the role of clothing has changed from being the primary focus of traditional advertising to playing the supportive role of helpers.

Versace data displays homogeneous characteristics across aesthetics, cinematic language, and narrative structures. All the fashion films share a common aesthetic code described as 'portraitism', which focuses on an aesthetic that is closely aligned with the brand and emphasizes realistic visual elements. The cinematic language in these films is characterized as both 'productive' and 'reproductive', meaning some films utilize complex cinematic editing that reproduces sequences and stories, while others focus on evocative frames and branded content. The narrative level is categorized as 'state of being', emphasizing the connection between subjective narratives and the object of value. On a deeper narrative level, these films are described as involving 'deception', suggesting elements of deceit or falsity within their storytelling or aesthetic. Structurally, all the fashion films are classified as having a 'closed story', where each film contains a self-contained and complete narrative, without leaving room for an open or ongoing story. To sum up, Versace fashion films are part of a cohesive narrative that focuses on portraitism, employs productive and sometimes reproductive cinematic language, explores the state of being, uses simulation, and presents autonomous narratives in each film.

General discussion and conclusion

The paper presents a novel approach grounded in semiotics to examine fashion films. Given the transmedia nature of contemporary promotional communication, a richer

understanding of its narrative characteristics is needed. Semiotics has helped identify a key novelty in fashion communication, namely the introduction of more complex narrative paths in fashion-related stories. For instance, subjects are shown to face various trials and transformations to achieve their desires, with branded items often serving as 'helpers' that assist them in reaching their goals, rather than being the central focus of the ads. This shift aligns with luxury brands presenting an ideal that, though still challenging, appears more accessible to a wider audience rather than being reserved for an exclusive elite.

This approach seeks to advance research on contemporary fashion communication by deepening the understanding of its narrative features, which could potentially contribute to its success by strengthening bonds with online communities. However, a deeper understanding of the relationship between narrative features and user engagement is needed. Once this second part of the project is completed, brand managers and communication professionals could benefit from these findings and improve their content production strategies.

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