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Narratives of Self-Expression: How Consumers Interpret Fashion Advertising

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Fashion advertising has evolved into a complex cultural system that extends beyond product promotion to shape narratives of identity and self-expression. This study examines how consumers interpret fashion advertising as symbolic narratives that inform and influence their identity construction processes. Drawing on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates semiotics, symbolic interactionism, and postmodern identity theory, the research employs a qualitative methodology based on secondary data, including academic literature, advertising campaigns, and cultural critiques. The findings demonstrate that consumers actively engage in interpretive processes, decoding and negotiating meanings embedded in advertising narratives rather than passively receiving them. Fashion advertisements function as narrative frameworks that offer symbolic resources for identity experimentation, emotional engagement, and social positioning. However, these narratives also reflect ideological tensions, simultaneously enabling self-expression while reinforcing normative ideals and constraints. The study contributes to consumer culture theory by emphasising the dialogical relationship between advertising and consumer interpretation, highlighting the co-creation of meaning in contemporary fashion contexts. It underscores the importance of recognising consumer agency while critically addressing the cultural and ethical implications of advertising practices.

Keywords: fashion advertising, self-expression, consumer interpretation, identity construction, symbolic consumption, narrative analysis, consumer culture

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1. Introduction

Fashion advertising has emerged as a powerful cultural force that extends far beyond its traditional role of promoting apparel and accessories. In contemporary consumer societies, it operates as a symbolic system through which meanings about identity, lifestyle, and social belonging are produced and circulated (McCracken, 1986). Rather than merely informing consumers about products, fashion advertising constructs narratives that invite audiences to imagine and perform particular versions of themselves. These narratives are deeply embedded in broader socio-cultural discourses, making fashion advertising a critical site for examining the interplay between consumption and identity.

The increasing centrality of self-expression in consumer culture has transformed the way individuals engage with fashion. Consumption is no longer understood solely in terms of utility or economic exchange; instead, it has become a key mechanism through which individuals articulate their identities and negotiate their positions within social structures (Belk, 1988). Clothing, in particular, functions as a highly visible and versatile medium of self-expression, enabling individuals to communicate aspects of their personality, values, and aspirations. Fashion advertising amplifies this expressive potential by framing products within narratives that resonate with consumers' desires for individuality, authenticity, and recognition.

The rise of digital media and globalised communication networks has further intensified the role of fashion advertising in shaping identity practices. Social media platforms, influencer cultures, and digital branding strategies have expanded the reach and impact of advertising narratives, allowing them to permeate everyday life in unprecedented ways (Arvidsson, 2006). Consumers are now exposed to a continuous stream of visual and textual content that blurs the boundaries between advertising, entertainment, and personal expression. This convergence has transformed consumers into active participants in the production and circulation of brand meanings, as they engage with, reinterpret, and share advertising content within their social networks.

Despite the pervasive influence of fashion advertising, how consumers interpret these narratives remains complex and multifaceted. Traditional models of advertising effectiveness often assume a linear process in which messages are transmitted from producers to passive recipients. However, contemporary research in consumer culture theory challenges this assumption by emphasising the active role of consumers in meaning-making processes (Thompson, 1997). Consumers do not simply absorb advertising messages; they interpret them through the lens of their own experiences, cultural backgrounds, and social contexts. This interpretive activity can lead to diverse and sometimes contradictory understandings of the same advertisement.

Fashion advertising is particularly significant in this regard because it relies on symbolic and aesthetic elements. Unlike other forms of

advertising that emphasise functional benefits, fashion advertising often communicates through imagery, style, and narrative rather than explicit information. These elements are open to interpretation, allowing consumers to derive meanings that may differ from the intentions of advertisers. As a result, fashion advertisements function as “open texts” that invite multiple readings and interpretations (Barthes, 1977).

At the same time, fashion advertising plays a normative role in shaping cultural ideals and expectations. Advertisements often depict idealised representations of beauty, success, and lifestyle, which can influence consumers’ perceptions of themselves and others (Giddens, 1991). These representations can both empower and constrain self-expression. On one hand, they provide aspirational models that inspire individuals to explore new identities; on the other hand, they may reinforce narrow standards that limit the range of acceptable expressions. This duality underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of how consumers engage with advertising narratives.

The concept of narrative provides a valuable framework for analysing fashion advertising. Narratives organise information into coherent structures that make sense of complex social realities. In the context of advertising, narratives often revolve around themes such as transformation, empowerment, belonging, and rebellion. These themes resonate with fundamental human concerns, making narratives a powerful tool for connecting with consumers on an emotional level (Escalas, 2004). By situating products within these narrative

frameworks, fashion advertisements encourage consumers to see consumption as a means of achieving desired identities.

This study seeks to explore how consumers interpret fashion advertising as narratives of self-expression. Specifically, it examines the processes through which consumers decode symbolic meanings, negotiate identity narratives, and integrate these narratives into their own self-concepts. By focusing on interpretation rather than production, the study shifts attention to the consumer as an active agent in the meaning-making process.

The research is grounded in a qualitative approach based on secondary data, drawing on existing literature, advertising campaigns, and cultural analyses. This approach allows for a comprehensive examination of the topic, capturing a wide range of perspectives and insights. The study contributes to the field of consumer culture theory by highlighting the dynamic relationship between advertising narratives and identity construction.

In doing so, it addresses a critical gap in the literature, which has often prioritised the intentions of advertisers over the interpretations of consumers. Understanding how consumers engage with fashion advertising is essential for both academic research and marketing practice, as it provides insights into the ways in which meaning is created, negotiated, and transformed within contemporary consumer culture.

2. Literature Review

Fashion advertising has long been recognised as a cultural and symbolic system that extends beyond the promotion of products. According to McCracken (1986), consumer goods carry cultural meanings that are transferred from the culturally constituted world to the consumer through advertising and other symbolic mechanisms. In this process, fashion advertising acts as a conduit through which meanings related to status, identity, and lifestyle are communicated.

Barthes (1977) conceptualises advertising as a system of signs, where images and texts operate at both denotative and connotative levels. In fashion advertising, denotation refers to the literal representation of clothing or accessories, while connotation involves the symbolic meanings associated with these items, such as elegance, rebellion, or sophistication. These meanings are not inherent in the products themselves but are constructed through cultural codes and conventions.

Baudrillard (1998) further argues that in consumer societies, commodities function as signs within a system of differentiation. Fashion advertising contributes to this system by creating distinctions between products and associating them with particular identities. In this sense, consumption becomes a form of communication, where individuals use goods to convey messages about themselves.

2.1 Consumer Interpretation and Interpretive Flexibility

The interpretation of advertising messages is a central concern in consumer research. Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model

provides a foundational framework for understanding how audiences interpret media texts. According to this model, producers encode messages with preferred meanings, but audiences may decode these messages in dominant, negotiated, or oppositional ways.

Thompson (1997) builds on this perspective by emphasising the interpretive nature of consumer behaviour. He argues that consumers actively construct meanings through their interactions with marketplace texts, drawing on their own experiences and cultural knowledge. This interpretive process is inherently subjective, leading to multiple and often divergent understandings of the same advertisement.

In the context of fashion advertising, interpretive flexibility is particularly pronounced due to the symbolic and aesthetic nature of the content. Consumers may interpret the same image differently based on factors such as gender, age, cultural background, and personal values. This diversity of interpretations highlights the importance of considering the consumer's perspective in analysing advertising effectiveness.

2.2 Self-Expression and Symbolic Consumption

Self-expression is a key concept in understanding the relationship between consumption and identity. Belk (1988) introduces the notion of the "extended self," arguing that possessions play a crucial role in shaping and expressing identity. Through consumption, individuals incorporate objects into their self-concept, using them as symbols of who they are or aspire to be.

Fashion is particularly well-suited for self-expression because of its visibility and variability. As Woodward (2007) notes, clothing allows individuals to present different aspects of themselves in different contexts, making it a flexible tool for identity construction. Fashion advertising enhances this process by providing symbolic frameworks that guide consumers' interpretations of clothing.

Thompson and Haytko (1997) explore how consumers use fashion discourses to negotiate identity. They find that consumers draw on both dominant and countervailing meanings in fashion advertising, appropriating these meanings in ways that align with their personal identities. This process involves both acceptance and resistance, reflecting the complex relationship between individuals and cultural norms.

2.3 Identity Construction in Postmodern Consumer Culture

Postmodern theories of identity challenge the notion of a stable and coherent self. Instead, identity is seen as fragmented, fluid, and continuously constructed through social and cultural interactions (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). In this context, consumption becomes a primary means of identity construction, as individuals use goods and brands to create and express multiple selves.

Giddens (1991) describes identity as a reflexive project, where individuals actively construct their self-concepts through ongoing reflection and choice. Fashion advertising contributes to this project by offering a range of identity options that consumers can adopt

or adapt. These options are often presented as lifestyle narratives, emphasising the connection between consumption and self-expression.

Arnould and Thompson (2005) further develop this perspective within the framework of consumer culture theory. They argue that consumers are not merely influenced by market forces but actively engage with them, creating meanings that reflect their own identities and experiences. This engagement is shaped by broader cultural and social structures, which both enable and constrain individual agency.

2.4 Narrative and Emotional Engagement in Advertising

Narrative plays a crucial role in shaping consumer responses to advertising. Escalas (2004) suggests that narratives facilitate self-referencing, allowing consumers to relate advertising messages to their own experiences. This process enhances emotional engagement and increases the likelihood that consumers will internalise the message.

In fashion advertising, narratives often revolve around themes of transformation, empowerment, and belonging. These themes resonate with consumers' desires for self-expression, making narratives an effective tool for connecting with audiences. By presenting products as part of a larger story, advertisements encourage consumers to see consumption as a meaningful and transformative activity.

Emotional engagement is closely linked to symbolic resonance, where consumers find personal meaning in advertising narratives.

This resonance strengthens the relationship between the consumer and the brand, fostering loyalty and identification. However, it also raises questions about the extent to which advertising shapes or reflects consumer identities.

2.5 Critical Perspectives on Fashion Advertising

While fashion advertising offers opportunities for self-expression, it has also been criticised for promoting unrealistic and restrictive ideals. Scholars argue that advertisements often depict narrow standards of beauty and success, which can negatively impact consumers' self-perceptions (Kilbourne, 1999). These representations may limit the diversity of identities that are considered acceptable.

At the same time, there has been a growing trend toward more inclusive and diverse representations in fashion advertising. Brands are increasingly incorporating different body types, ethnicities, and gender identities into their campaigns. While this shift reflects changing social norms, it also raises questions about the authenticity and motivations behind these representations.

This tension highlights the dual role of fashion advertising as both a site of empowerment and a mechanism of control. Understanding how consumers navigate this tension is essential for a comprehensive analysis of advertising's impact on self-expression.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates semiotics, symbolic interactionism, and postmodern identity theory to examine how consumers interpret fashion advertising as narratives of self-expression. These perspectives collectively provide a comprehensive lens for understanding the production, circulation, and interpretation of symbolic meanings within consumer culture.

3.1 Semiotics and the Construction of Meaning

Semiotics, the study of signs and sign systems, offers a foundational framework for analysing how fashion advertising constructs and communicates meaning. According to Barthes (1977), advertisements operate as systems of signification in which images, texts, and stylistic elements function as signs that convey both denotative and connotative meanings. In fashion advertising, the denotative level refers to the literal depiction of clothing and models, while the connotative level involves the symbolic associations attached to these elements, such as luxury, rebellion, elegance, or modernity.

These connotative meanings are shaped by cultural codes that are shared within a society. As McCracken (1986) argues, advertising plays a crucial role in transferring cultural meanings from the broader social world to consumer goods. Through carefully constructed imagery and narratives, fashion advertisements imbue products with symbolic significance, transforming them into carriers of identity-related meanings.

Semiotics also highlights the polysemic nature of advertising texts, meaning that they can generate multiple interpretations depending on the viewer's cultural background and personal experiences (Hall, 1980). This openness is particularly evident in fashion advertising, where ambiguity and aesthetic complexity invite diverse readings. As a result, consumers are not passive recipients of meaning but active interpreters who decode and reinterpret advertising messages in ways that align with their own identity projects.

Furthermore, the semiotic perspective underscores the role of myth in advertising. Barthes (1977) conceptualises myth as a second-order system of signification that naturalises cultural values and ideologies. In fashion advertising, myths often take the form of narratives about beauty, success, freedom, and individuality. These narratives present culturally constructed ideals as natural and desirable, shaping consumers' perceptions of themselves and others.

3.2 Symbolic Interactionism and Identity Negotiation

Symbolic interactionism provides a sociological perspective on how individuals construct and negotiate their identities through interaction with symbolic resources. Rooted in the work of Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969), this perspective emphasises that meaning is not inherent in objects but emerges through social interaction. Individuals interpret symbols based on shared meanings, and these interpretations influence their actions and self-concepts.

In the context of fashion advertising, symbolic interactionism highlights the role of advertisements as social texts that provide symbols for identity construction. Consumers engage with these symbols by interpreting, appropriating, and integrating them into their self-concepts. As Belk (1988) suggests, consumption objects become part of the "extended self," serving as external representations of identity.

Fashion advertising contributes to this process by offering symbolic repertoires that consumers can draw upon in constructing their identities. These repertoires include visual styles, narratives, and cultural references that signal particular lifestyles or social positions. For example, an advertisement that associates a brand with urban sophistication provides consumers with a symbolic resource for expressing that identity.

Importantly, symbolic interactionism emphasises the dynamic and negotiated nature of identity. Consumers do not simply adopt the meanings presented in advertisements; they actively interpret and modify these meanings based on their own experiences and social contexts (Thompson, 1997). This process involves both alignment and resistance, as individuals may accept certain aspects of an advertising narrative while rejecting others.

The concept of the "looking-glass self" is also relevant in this context. Individuals develop their self-concepts based on how they believe others perceive them (Cooley, 1902). Fashion advertising influences this process by shaping societal standards and expectations, thereby affecting how

individuals imagine they are viewed by others. This interaction between personal identity and social perception underscores the importance of advertising as a site of identity negotiation.

3.3 Postmodern Identity Theory and the Fragmented Self

Postmodern identity theory provides a critical perspective on the nature of identity in contemporary consumer culture. Unlike traditional theories that view identity as stable and coherent, postmodern perspectives conceptualise identity as fragmented, fluid, and continuously constructed through consumption practices (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

In this framework, fashion advertising plays a central role in offering a multiplicity of identity narratives. These narratives are often diverse and even contradictory, reflecting the pluralistic nature of postmodern society. Consumers are encouraged to experiment with different identities, using fashion as a means of self-expression and transformation.

Giddens (1991) describes identity as a reflexive project in which individuals actively construct their self-concepts through ongoing choices and actions. Fashion advertising contributes to this project by providing symbolic materials that individuals can use to craft their identities. These materials include not only products but also the narratives and meanings associated with them.

However, postmodern theory also highlights the commodification of identity. As Baudrillard (1998) argues, consumer culture transforms identity into a series of signs that

can be purchased and displayed. Fashion advertising reinforces this process by linking identity to consumption, suggesting that self-expression can be achieved through the acquisition of branded goods.

This commodification raises important questions about authenticity and agency. While consumers are presented with a wide range of identity options, these options are often shaped by market forces and cultural norms. As a result, self-expression may be both enabled and constrained by the structures of consumer culture.

3.4 Integrative Perspective

By integrating semiotics, symbolic interactionism, and postmodern identity theory, this study provides a comprehensive framework for analysing fashion advertising as a site of meaning-making and identity construction. Semiotics focuses on the structure of meaning within advertisements, symbolic interactionism emphasises the interpretive processes of consumers, and postmodern theory situates these processes within broader cultural and economic contexts.

Together, these perspectives highlight the dynamic and interactive nature of consumer interpretation. Fashion advertising is not simply a tool for persuasion but a complex cultural system in which meanings are created, negotiated, and transformed. This framework enables a deeper understanding of how consumers engage with advertising narratives as resources for self-expression.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm. The interpretivist approach is particularly appropriate for exploring how consumers derive meaning from fashion advertising, as it emphasises the subjective and socially constructed nature of reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Rather than seeking to measure causal relationships, the study aims to understand the processes through which consumers interpret advertising narratives and integrate them into their identity practices.

A qualitative design allows for an in-depth exploration of symbolic meanings, cultural contexts, and interpretive dynamics. Given the focus on narratives and self-expression, qualitative methods are well-suited to capturing the richness and complexity of consumer experiences.

4.1 Secondary Data Approach

The study is based on secondary data analysis, which involves the systematic examination of existing data sources. Secondary data were selected due to their breadth, accessibility, and relevance to the research objectives. This approach enables the researcher to draw on a wide range of perspectives, including academic research, industry practices, and cultural analyses.

The use of secondary data is particularly valuable in studies of advertising and consumer culture, where rich textual and visual materials are readily available. By analysing these materials, the study can identify patterns and themes that may not be

evident in smaller-scale primary data collection.

4.2 Data Sources

The data for this study were collected from multiple sources to ensure diversity and depth of analysis. These sources include:

- **Academic Literature:** Peer-reviewed journal articles and books on consumer culture theory, advertising, and fashion studies provided theoretical and empirical insights (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Thompson, 1997).
- **Fashion Advertising Campaigns:** Visual and textual content from well-known fashion brands was examined to identify narrative structures and symbolic elements.
- **Media and Cultural Critiques:** Articles, essays, and critiques from media outlets and cultural commentators were used to understand broader societal interpretations of fashion advertising.
- **Industry Reports:** Reports from marketing and branding organisations provided contextual information about trends and practices in fashion advertising.

The combination of these sources allows for a comprehensive analysis that integrates theoretical perspectives with real-world examples.

4.3 Data Analysis Method

The study employs thematic analysis as the primary method of data analysis. Thematic analysis is a flexible and widely used

qualitative method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is particularly suitable for studies that aim to explore meanings and narratives.

The analysis followed a systematic process:

- **Familiarisation:** The researcher reviewed all data sources to gain an overall understanding of the content.
- **Coding:** Relevant segments of data were coded based on recurring themes related to self-expression, identity, and interpretation.
- **Theme Development:** Codes were grouped into broader themes that captured key patterns in the data.
- **Interpretation:** Themes were analysed in relation to the theoretical framework to generate insights about consumer interpretation.

This process allowed for the identification of key themes such as narrative construction, identity negotiation, emotional engagement, and symbolic resonance.

4.4 Trustworthiness and Rigour

To ensure the credibility and rigour of the research, several strategies were employed. First, data triangulation was used by incorporating multiple sources of data, which enhances the validity of the findings (Denzin, 1978). Second, theoretical triangulation was achieved by integrating multiple theoretical perspectives, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Additionally, the study maintained transparency in the research process by

clearly outlining the methods of data collection and analysis. This transparency allows for the replication and evaluation of the study by other researchers.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

As the study is based on secondary data, it does not involve direct interaction with human participants. However, ethical considerations remain important. All sources were properly cited in accordance with APA (7th edition) guidelines, ensuring academic integrity and avoiding plagiarism.

Furthermore, the study critically engages with advertising content without promoting or endorsing specific brands. The analysis is conducted with an awareness of the potential social and cultural implications of fashion advertising, particularly in relation to issues of representation and identity (Mannan & Farhana, 2026).

4.6 Limitations of the Methodology

While secondary data analysis offers several advantages, it also has limitations. One limitation is the lack of direct access to consumers' personal experiences and interpretations. Although existing studies and critiques provide valuable insights, they may not fully capture the diversity of consumer perspectives.

Another limitation is the potential bias in the selection of data sources. The findings are influenced by the availability and scope of existing materials, which may reflect certain cultural or academic biases. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating primary data collection methods such as interviews or focus groups.

Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a robust framework for exploring the research questions. By combining multiple data sources and analytical techniques, the study offers a nuanced understanding of how consumers interpret fashion advertising as narratives of self-expression.

5. Findings and Analysis

The analysis of secondary data reveals that fashion advertising operates as a complex narrative system through which consumers engage in processes of meaning-making, identity negotiation, and self-expression. Rather than functioning as a unidirectional transmission of persuasive messages, fashion advertising emerges as a dynamic interpretive space where meanings are co-created by producers and consumers. This section presents five interrelated thematic findings: narrative construction and symbolic storytelling, active interpretation and negotiated meanings, identity experimentation and performativity, emotional engagement and symbolic resonance, and (5) ambivalence and ideological tension.

5.1 Narrative Construction and Symbolic Storytelling

One of the most significant findings is that fashion advertising consistently employs narrative structures to communicate symbolic meanings. These narratives often follow recognisable patterns, such as transformation journeys, aspirational lifestyles, and moments of self-realisation. Drawing on narrative theory, these structures

provide coherence and emotional engagement, enabling consumers to situate themselves within the story (Escalas, 2004).

Fashion advertisements rarely present products in isolation; instead, they embed them within broader storylines that convey identity-related meanings. For example, campaigns frequently depict individuals transitioning from ordinary to extraordinary states, symbolising personal transformation through fashion consumption. This narrative structure aligns with what Giddens (1991) describes as the reflexive project of the self, where individuals continuously construct their identities through choices and actions.

From a semiotic perspective, these narratives function through the interplay of signs and symbols. Visual elements such as colour, setting, body posture, and styling contribute to the construction of meaning at both denotative and connotative levels (Barthes, 1977). For instance, minimalist aesthetics may connote sophistication and modernity, while vibrant and eclectic visuals may signify creativity and individuality. These symbolic cues are not arbitrary; they draw on culturally shared codes that enable consumers to interpret the narrative.

Moreover, fashion advertising frequently draws on mythic structures to naturalise certain ideals. As Barthes (1977) argues, myths transform culturally constructed meanings into seemingly universal truths. In fashion advertising, myths often revolve around beauty, success, freedom, and authenticity. These myths serve to legitimise particular lifestyles and identity forms, presenting them as desirable and attainable.

However, the analysis also reveals that these narratives are not fixed but open to reinterpretation. Consumers may engage with the same narrative in different ways, depending on their personal experiences and cultural contexts. This openness underscores the importance of viewing fashion advertising as a dialogical rather than deterministic process.

5.2 Active Interpretation and Negotiated Meanings

A central finding of this study is that consumers actively interpret and negotiate the meanings embedded in fashion advertising. This aligns with Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, which suggests that audiences are not passive recipients but active participants in the communication process.

Consumers engage in what Thompson (1997) describes as "interpretive work," drawing on their own experiences, values, and cultural knowledge to make sense of advertising messages. This process often results in multiple and sometimes contradictory interpretations. For example, an advertisement portraying luxury and exclusivity may be interpreted by some consumers as aspirational, while others may perceive it as elitist or unrealistic.

This interpretive flexibility is particularly evident in fashion advertising due to its reliance on symbolic and aesthetic elements. Unlike informational advertising, which emphasises functional attributes, fashion advertising leaves room for ambiguity, allowing consumers to project their own meanings onto the content. This ambiguity

enhances engagement by inviting consumers to participate in the meaning-making process.

Negotiated readings are especially common, where consumers partially accept and partially resist the dominant message of the advertisement. For instance, a consumer may appreciate the aesthetic appeal of an advertisement while rejecting its underlying assumptions about beauty or gender roles. This selective engagement reflects the agency of consumers in shaping their own interpretations.

Furthermore, social context plays a crucial role in interpretation. Consumers do not interpret advertisements in isolation but within the context of their social environments, including peer groups, cultural norms, and media discourses. These contexts influence how meanings are constructed and shared, highlighting the collective dimension of interpretation (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

5.3 Identity Experimentation and Performativity

Fashion advertising provides a rich resource for identity experimentation, enabling consumers to explore different aspects of themselves. This finding aligns with postmodern theories of identity, which emphasise fluidity and multiplicity (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

Consumers use fashion as a form of performative expression, adopting and adapting the identities presented in advertisements. This performativity is not limited to physical appearance but extends to attitudes, behaviours, and lifestyles. For example, an advertisement that portrays a

confident and independent persona may inspire consumers to adopt similar traits in their own lives.

The concept of the “extended self” is particularly relevant in this context (Belk, 1988). Consumers incorporate fashion products into their self-concepts, using them as tools for self-expression. Advertising plays a crucial role in this process by providing symbolic meanings that consumers can appropriate.

However, identity experimentation is not entirely unconstrained. The range of identities available to consumers is shaped by the narratives presented in advertising, which often reflect dominant cultural norms. While there has been a growing emphasis on diversity and inclusivity in fashion advertising, these representations are still mediated by commercial interests.

The analysis also highlights the role of resistance in identity construction. Consumers may use fashion to challenge or subvert dominant norms, drawing on alternative interpretations of advertising narratives. This resistance reflects the complex interplay between individual agency and cultural structures.

5.4 Emotional Engagement and Symbolic Resonance

Emotional engagement emerges as a key factor in the effectiveness of fashion advertising. Narratives that evoke strong emotions are more likely to be internalised and integrated into consumers’ identity practices (Escalas, 2004).

Emotions such as desire, aspiration, nostalgia, and empowerment play a central role in shaping consumer responses. These emotions are often elicited through storytelling, visual aesthetics, and music, creating a multisensory experience that enhances engagement.

Symbolic resonance occurs when consumers find personal meaning in an advertisement, connecting it to their own experiences and aspirations. This resonance strengthens the relationship between the consumer and the brand, fostering a sense of identification and loyalty.

Importantly, emotional engagement is not uniform across consumers. Different individuals may respond to the same advertisement in different ways, depending on their personal and cultural contexts. This variability underscores the importance of considering the diversity of consumer experiences.

5.5 Ambivalence and Ideological Tension

The final theme highlights the ambivalent nature of fashion advertising. While advertisements promote narratives of self-expression and empowerment, they also reinforce certain ideals and constraints.

On one hand, fashion advertising offers opportunities for self-expression by presenting diverse and aspirational identities. On the other hand, it often perpetuates narrow standards of beauty and success, limiting the range of acceptable identities (Kilbourne, 1999).

This tension reflects the dual role of advertising as both a cultural resource and a mechanism of control. Consumers must navigate this tension as they interpret and engage with advertising narratives, balancing their desire for self-expression with the pressures of conformity.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study provide significant insights into the complex and dynamic relationship between fashion advertising and consumer self-expression. By integrating semiotics, symbolic interactionism, and postmodern identity theory, the discussion highlights how advertising functions as both a cultural resource and a site of ideological negotiation.

6.1 Reframing Advertising as a Dialogical Process

One of the key contributions of this study is the reconceptualisation of fashion advertising as a dialogical process. Traditional models of advertising often assume a linear flow of communication from producer to consumer. However, the findings demonstrate that meaning is co-created through the interaction between advertising texts and consumer interpretations (Hall, 1980; Thompson, 1997).

This dialogical perspective emphasises the active role of consumers in shaping the meanings of advertisements. Rather than passively absorbing messages, consumers engage in interpretive work, drawing on their own experiences and cultural contexts. This process results in a multiplicity of meanings,

challenging the notion of a single, fixed interpretation.

From a theoretical standpoint, this finding aligns with the principles of consumer culture theory, which emphasise the agency of consumers in constructing meaning (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). It also underscores the importance of considering the audience's perspective in analysing advertising effectiveness.

6.2 Advertising Narratives and the Reflexive Project of the Self

The study highlights the central role of narrative in connecting fashion advertising to identity construction. Advertising narratives provide frameworks through which consumers can make sense of their experiences and aspirations. These narratives often align with what Giddens (1991) describes as the reflexive project of the self, where individuals actively construct their identities through ongoing choices and actions.

Fashion advertising contributes to this project by offering symbolic resources that consumers can use to articulate their identities. These resources include not only products but also the meanings and narratives associated with them. By engaging with these narratives, consumers participate in a process of self-construction that is both individual and collective.

However, the reflexive nature of identity also means that consumers are constantly evaluating and reinterpreting the narratives they encounter. This ongoing process highlights the fluid and dynamic nature of identity in contemporary society.

6.3 The Paradox of Choice and Constraint

A critical insight from the findings is the paradoxical nature of self-expression in consumer culture. While fashion advertising offers a wide range of identity options, these options are often shaped by market forces and cultural norms. This creates a tension between freedom and constraint.

On one hand, consumers have access to an unprecedented diversity of styles and identities, enabling them to experiment with different forms of self-expression. On the other hand, these choices are influenced by advertising narratives that promote certain ideals over others. As Baudrillard (1998) argues, consumption operates within a system of signs that structures and limits meaning.

This paradox raises important questions about the authenticity of self-expression. If identity is mediated through consumption, to what extent can it be considered authentic? The findings suggest that authenticity is not a fixed attribute but a negotiated and context-dependent construct.

6.4 Emotional Engagement and Brand Relationships

The role of emotion in shaping consumer responses to fashion advertising is another important area of discussion. Emotional engagement enhances the effectiveness of advertising by creating a deeper connection between the consumer and the brand (Escalas, 2004).

This connection is not purely cognitive but involves affective and experiential

dimensions. Consumers are drawn to advertisements that resonate with their emotions and experiences, leading to stronger identification with the brand. This identification can influence not only purchasing behaviour but also broader identity practices.

However, emotional engagement also raises ethical considerations. Advertisements that manipulate emotions may exploit consumers' vulnerabilities, particularly in relation to issues of self-esteem and body image. This highlights the need for responsible advertising practices that consider the well-being of consumers.

6.5 Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings have several implications for both theory and practice. From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the literature on consumer culture by emphasising the interpretive and narrative dimensions of advertising. It demonstrates the value of integrating multiple theoretical perspectives to capture the complexity of consumer behaviour.

From a practical perspective, the study suggests that marketers should move beyond traditional models of persuasion and focus on creating meaningful and inclusive narratives. By recognising the active role of consumers, brands can design advertising campaigns that resonate with diverse audiences and support authentic self-expression.

At the same time, marketers must be mindful of the ethical implications of their narratives. The promotion of unrealistic ideals can have negative consequences for consumers,

highlighting the importance of responsible and inclusive representation.

6.6 Directions for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, it also points to areas for future research. One important direction is the use of primary data to capture consumers' lived experiences and interpretations. Methods such as interviews and ethnography could provide deeper insights into how individuals engage with fashion advertising in their lives.

Another area for future research is the exploration of cross-cultural differences in interpretation. As fashion advertising operates in a global context, understanding how cultural factors influence interpretation is essential.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how consumers interpret fashion advertising as narratives of self-expression, with a particular focus on the processes of meaning-making, identity construction, and symbolic engagement. By drawing on semiotics, symbolic interactionism, and postmodern identity theory, the research has demonstrated that fashion advertising operates as a complex cultural system rather than a simple mechanism of persuasion. It functions as a narrative medium through which identities are imagined, negotiated, and performed within contemporary consumer culture.

The findings reveal that consumers are not passive recipients of advertising messages but active interpreters who engage in dynamic processes of decoding and reinterpretation. Through these processes,

individuals draw on personal experiences, cultural contexts, and social interactions to construct meanings that align with their identity projects. Fashion advertising provides symbolic resources-images, narratives, and aesthetic codes-that consumers appropriate in shaping their self-concepts. In this sense, self-expression emerges as a dialogical process, co-created through the interaction between advertising texts and consumer interpretations.

At the same time, the study highlights the ambivalent nature of fashion advertising. While advertisements offer opportunities for identity experimentation and creative self-expression, they also reproduce dominant cultural ideals related to beauty, success, and lifestyle. This dual role reflects a broader tension within consumer culture, where the pursuit of individuality is intertwined with the pressures of conformity and commodification. As a result, self-expression through fashion is both enabled and constrained by the symbolic structures of the marketplace.

The study contributes to the existing literature by foregrounding the interpretive agency of consumers and emphasising the importance of narrative in understanding advertising's cultural impact. It also offers practical implications for marketers, suggesting that more inclusive, flexible, and ethically responsible narratives are essential for engaging contemporary consumers.

Future research should build on these insights by incorporating primary data and exploring cross-cultural variations in interpretation. Such approaches would deepen our understanding of how diverse audiences

engage with fashion advertising in an increasingly globalised and mediated world.

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