

RESEARCH

Ophelia and Neo-Victorian Readings: Cultural Analysis of Brand Narratives

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Cultural analysis has been under review by scholars and presents itself today with invaluable tools/methods for the analysis and deconstruction of everyday objects and their sociocultural contexts. In this sense, we approach the object of a marketing campaign for Gucci, entitled "Gucci Hallucination". The video and associated visual narrative(s) under review underline neo-Victorian readings and backgrounds, mainly through the character of Ophelia. The articulation of approaches in textual analysis within brand communication underlines the potential for interdisciplinary research.

Keywords: culture; representation; brand; performance; fashion

Introduction

This paper aims at reviewing perspectives on brand narrative analysis, considering a larger approach to cultural analysis to deconstruct stories and meanings imprinted in texts and objects. In this specific case, we analyze a text from the "Gucci Hallucination" campaign (Spring/Summer 2018) contextualizing the Ophelia character and reviewing the role of neo-Victorian readings. This recent fashion case, within a powerful symbolic industry, was chosen due to the strong association with this character and the meanings it underlines, evidencing a review of cultural narratives.

In terms of methodology, not only do we take into consideration the perspectives of cultural branding (Holt 2004) and cultural strategy (Holt and Cameron 2010), but also the approach of textual analysis (Barker 2007). The articulation of these approaches emphasizes (1) the importance of myth analysis, according to a Barthesian perspective, in connection with the advertising sign context (Volli 87–89); (2) an hermeneutical perspective of the visual text in an analysis that encompasses, as Barker suggests within textual analysis, a semiotic approach to understand "the meanings generated by texts" "through a particular arrangements of signs and cultural codes" and an approach on the text as narratives that offers us "frameworks of understanding and rules of reference about the way social order is constructed" (Barker 39–40). The research implications underline the potential for cultural analysis tools on strategic grounds. There is a special attention to the review of historic cultural elements, signs and codes within a contemporary context and their impact in today's narratives.

The paper starts with a review of textual analysis contexts in close articulation with a cultural management perspective that uses cultural analysis to contextualize strategic practices of businesses and other institutions. The next step is to review a new reading of neo-Victorian symbols and contextualize how they pervade different texts and narratives. This is the foundation for the advert analysis. In the last section, the paper presents the results of the advertising object analysis, interpreting elements and discussing the associated meanings and contexts.

1. The Cultural Analysis and Management of Narratives

Cultural analysis is still a topic of debate, whether we are talking about specific knowledge frontiers or the practices and methods that can be applied and developed. An important concept to consider within this analysis, as Chris Barker suggests, is "articulation", which was used to theorize the relationships between the different elements of "social formation", referring to a temporary unity between elements that are not neces-

sarily connected (Barker 9). This is an important concept to consider in this research, since we are articulating analytical methods ranging from an interpretative to a semiotic approach within textual analysis, taking into consideration not just cultural but also strategic contexts and drivers.

For the purpose of this paper, we approach cultural analysis in order to obtain interpretative data and strategic orientations on current cultural dynamics, in addition to emergent narratives and symbology impacting consumer behavior and mindsets. This specific topic deals with issues in which cultural meaning is managed, articulated, constructed, and imprinted into strategic communication narratives, as well as products. In this sense, we approach the concept of cultural management as the use of a cultural analysis perspective in strategic practices. We follow the perspectives of Douglas Holt (2004), who developed the concept of cultural branding.

We start by considering a definition of culture in a social perspective, as Raymond Williams states, “in which culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behavior” (Williams 57). This is the definition that explores lifestyles and the meaning behind their construction, as well as the narratives of daily life. Taking this definition into consideration, it is possible to study the way in which objects gain meanings that are present or latent in collective mindsets, becoming visible through the production and consumption of artifacts and stories.¹

The liquidity (see Bauman 2000) of today’s world demands this critical appraisal. The consumption of new narratives, which are a result of changing cultural environments and mindsets, impacts audiences and consumers.² This system of production and consumption of narratives and objects produces a constant need for the permanent adaptation of the audience’s references and tools of interpretation, in order to generate narratives that are ever more complex due to the disparity and proliferation of meanings produced globally.³

The production and management of narratives impact consumer culture and individuals incorporate them into their symbolic repertoire, acting upon them. In this sense, it is important to take into consideration such issues as product symbolism, ritual practices and the consumer stories in product and brand meaning (Arnould and Thompson 870).

Brands⁴ approach this perspective to generate and manage strategies, corporate/institutional positionings, and stories capable of generating pertinent myths grounded in sociocultural changes based on emerging mindsets. This is the basis for the proposals of Holt (2004) regarding cultural branding, and cultural strategy alongside Cameron (2010).⁵

Cultural analysis allows for the identification of cultural expressions⁶ that “permeate society, providing us with the building blocks with which we construct meaningful lives” (Holt and Cameron 173). The objective is

¹ This reflects on the way people relate to each other, behave, and adhere to certain symbolic constructions, in turn producing changes in the daily sociocultural dynamics. The concept of pattern (see Williams 63) is important to understand the perspectives of Douglas Holt (see Holt and Cameron 2010) that form the basis for this cultural management approach. The latter works to identify changes in the sociocultural landscape to improve the understanding of cultural dynamics, encompassing a corporation/institution and its audiences.

² If the cultural production of meanings and narratives is dependent on collective mindsets and how they generate sociocultural change, these culturally produced meanings and narratives impact the collective mindset in a cycle without an apparent end. The balance is in the capability of social groups to deconstruct and reconstruct meanings associated with narratives and their objects.

³ As McCracken states, we are a culture associated with a restless creativity. “If once we were mainstream and avantgarde, now we are a great wilderness, with thousands of little experiments happening everywhere. [...] The struggle between status and cool is over. We are now a culture overflowing with variety and noise” (McCracken 78).

⁴ It is important to underline here that we are taking into consideration not just corporate brands, but institutional brands in general, including institutions within the cultural and creative industries.

⁵ Holt adds that cultural branding brings forth this perspective of cultural analysis to provide the insights for the construction of meaningful narratives and stories and to generate myths. As the author suggests, communications are here the center of customer value, which buys the object to experience the associated stories (Holt 36). Rossolatos underlines that this approach does not take into consideration the research in the field of semiotics, also suggesting that branding practices in general could take advantage of it (Rossolatos, 2014). In this sense, following the perspective of the author, our approach maps a semiotic path for brand analysis within a semiotic framework that works as an analytical script. Here we advance towards a Barthesian (1972) perspective on the building of myths and its several meaning production layers. As we will see ahead, this is an important process to consider in articulation with the construction of the advertising sign (Volli 87–89). Taking advantage of the words of Cayla and Arnould, commercially mediated mythology should be understood as harnessing myths for commercial purposes through the marketplace (Cayla and Arnould 101).

⁶ As Holt and Cameron state, regarding cultural expressions: “All mass-cultural expressions—whether a film or a retail store design or packaging graphics—rely on elements for which the meaning has been well established historically in the culture. It would be impossible to compose an expression from scratch, because, without historic conventions to fall back upon, each and every element in the composition would have to be defined for the audience in a way that would allow for the proper interpretation. Cultural codes provide a shorthand for consumers, allowing them to easily understand and experience the intended meanings” (Holt and Cameron 175).

to find cultural elements that can be transformed into stories and myths;⁷ the author adds that, with cultural branding, “the brand’s value resides in the specifics of the brand’s cultural expression: the particular cultural contents of the brand’s myth and the particular expression of these contents in the communication” (Holt 36–37).

Heding et al. underline this cultural approach, based on the analysis of brands in the light of cultural influences. For them, the approach highlights the “cultural forces” in society and how they can serve as sources for building iconic brands to understand the impact of branding practices in culture and the market (Heding et al. 208). As the authors add, the cultural brand perspective, inspired by cultural studies, understands culture at a macro level (a sociocultural perspective) in its exchanges with brands, having a close relation with consumer culture as well as the individual consumer (Heding et al. 209). However, although it is important to understand the drivers and forces acting in society, and how they are involved with sociocultural trends and changes, culture serves here as a symbolic repertoire and network of meanings that can be used to create myths.

Also, a “narrative analysis of popular songs, films, literature, theater, the Internet, and other media forms generates a repertoire of mythic resources that can be linked to commercial brands” (Cayla and Arnould 108). Cayla and Arnould even suggest that branding itself is a symbolic form, a translation and a way of looking at the world (Cayla and Arnould 88–9). For them, brands are a part of popular culture and are present in today’s mythology to be studied as cultural texts/forms that have associated meanings (Cayla and Arnould 107). If brands are responsible for the cultural production of commodities/services, they imprint their DNA (the main characteristics of their nature and identity), personality, and assimilated cultural traits on everything they produce—in their services and in all strategic communication. In this sense, they become mediators of culture,⁸ translating cultural innovations/shifts and deciding what should be promoted and what is not pertinent. They become compasses of culture, complex cultural texts.

O’Reilly is in tune with this perspective, agreeing that brands can be read as cultural texts, which are produced and consumed within culture, with a performative quality. He also suggests that consumers have a role in meaning construction and management (O’Reilly 582). Torelli adds that, like other cultural icons, exposure to a culturally symbolic brand can bring to the fore its associated cultural knowledge. In turn, this accessible cultural knowledge can induce people to behave in culturally consistent ways (Torelli 82). In this sense, as Heding et al. underline, the process of adding meaning and creating a myth associated with a brand can only work if it is in tune with the collective identity projects of the moment (Heding et al. 210), raising again the question of the importance of emotional relation and identification between brand and consumer/audience.

This is where the analysis of strategic objects comes into place. As Cayla and Arnould state, “identifying the strengths and weaknesses of a brand’s mythic positioning provides insight for developing a firm’s communication tactics” (Cayla and Arnould 108). In this sense, by analyzing the narrative objects of brands, one can understand the cultural meanings embedded within the brand’s DNA. It is also possible to review the strength of symbolic constructions and how they resonate with the consumers, possibly providing the grounds for the sociocultural production of brand-related myths. As O’Reilly suggests, considering the symbolic dimensions of culture and that branding is a symbolic exercise by itself, an analytical approach to the discursive practices of branding can help to critically understand the relations between institutions and macro culture (O’Reilly 585).

2. Neo-Victorian Readings

Neo-Victorian cultural readings are not unusual, as in the twenty-first century not only have several exhibitions on Pre-Raphaelite art taken place in Europe, based on reinterpretations of critical perspectives, but Pre-Raphaelite themes have also been appropriated by contemporary visual culture. Indeed, during the first two decades of this century there have been many amazing exhibitions of superb collections of nineteenth-century art, such as the Pre-Raphaelite exhibition at the Tate Britain in 2012 and “Femmes Fatales/Vrouwen

⁷ Schroeder also highlights this question by adding that “brand culture refers to the cultural codes of brands—history, images, myths, art, theatre—that influence brand meaning and value in the marketplace. From this perspective, research questions often include understanding cultural influences and implications of brands in two ways. First, we live in a branded world: brands infuse culture with meaning and branding profoundly influences contemporary society. Second, brand culture constitutes a third dimension for brand research—in conjunction with traditional research areas of brand identity and brand image, brand culture provides the necessary cultural, historical, and political grounding to understand brands in context” (Schroeder 124).

⁸ As Mark Batey states, “a brand is a cluster of meanings [...] as consumers use the symbolic meanings inherent in the cultural environment to create and maintain their multiple identities, they learn to accommodate shared meaning and also to develop individual symbolic interpretations of their own” (Batey 6 and 16).

Fatales, 1860–1910” at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts (Musée Royal des Beaux Arts) in Antwerp in 2003. Meanwhile, in 2009, we were also able to visit “J. W. (John William) Waterhouse (1849–1917): the Modern Pre-Raphaelite” in the Groninger Museum, Netherlands, and watch the tv series *Desperate Romantics: the Private Lives of the Pre-Raphaelites* (2009). The previous exhibitions, the film, and the exhibition at Tate Britain, “Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde” (September 2012–January 2013)⁹ also contributed to a renewal of the cultural dialogues on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. For several scholars, both labels, romantic and avantgarde, were at least controversial, illustrating different modes of the twenty-first century cultural reception of the ways of displaying Pre-Raphaelite Art. The BBC series *Desperate Romantics: the Private Lives of the Pre-Raphaelites*, inspired by Franny Moyle’s book on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and adapted by Peter Bowker, was also contentious, as it corresponds to recent neo-Victorian strands of research deserving to be studied. In fact, the Victorian era is one of the most revisited historical moments in visual terms (film, television series, fashion, and branding, for example), dealing with cultural and social issues, as Julie Sanders states in relation to adaptation and appropriation:

So the Victorian era proves in the end ripe for appropriation because it throws into sharp relief many of the overriding concerns of the post-modern era: questions of identity; of environmental and genetic conditioning; repressed and oppressed modes of sexuality; criminality and violence; the urban phenomenon; the operations of law and authority; science and religion; the postcolonial legacies of the empire. (Sanders 129)

To a certain extent, these assumptions justify revisions in which adaptation and appropriation play a crucial role—not only in literature and culture, but also in articulated fields such as museums, exhibitions, films, fashion, and branding among others, as “questions concerning how artworks perspectivise and employ the past, how they recreate the period’s materiality, or how they position the reader in order to re-visualise the Victorian era are part and parcel of the neo-Victorian project” (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2). Now two decades into the twenty-first century, Neo-Victorianism gains popularity in fashion, ways of exhibiting, advertising, etc. It also deals with the different ways fashion and branding have gone back to many cultural expressions of the Victorian era.

Yet, for the purpose of our reflections, *Ophelia* (1852) shall be the main topic as it illustrates many Victorian cultural polarities which are visible in the “Gucci Hallucination”¹⁰ campaign. Shakespeare being a favorite inspiration for Victorian painters and poets, Ophelia was seen as the tragic heroine of *Hamlet*, a symbol of gender subordination and female fragility. The scene which is mostly represented is from act iv, scene vii, in which Ophelia, in her grief and madness, drowns herself in a stream.¹¹ For many years there were preconceptions towards the Pre-Raphaelite models, as they were seen by contemporary feminists as women who were subaltern to men, their names thus being tarnished as Pre-Raphaelite Sisters, the exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, London, points out. It “explores the overlooked contribution of twelve women to this iconic artistic movement”. In it we discover the centrality of women, models, sitters artists, partners and poets as well as the distinction between ladies and women was a lived preconception which contributed to exclusion:

The majority of the feminine models were also very important for the Pre-Raphaelites in emotional terms and, thus, in many cases, these women’s representations echoed Victorian antinomic values. Therefore, although some artists had tried to challenge conventions, we perceive that stereotypes are present in their paintings, either in a very non-canonical way, at times in trying to deal with issues related to the perfect innocent and sexually ignorant woman, or to the “fallen woman” theme, where some understanding and compassion seem to be evident. (Malafaia 453)

In relation to *Ophelia* (1851–2), John Everett Millais spent nearly four months (from July to October 1851) working on its background, on the bank of the Hogsmill river in Surrey. He endured great difficulties showing not only the young artist’s dedication to his art, but also his concern with “truth to nature,” as the display caption at Tate Britain called attention to when emphasizing the symbolism of the painted flowers:

⁹ In fact, according to Barringer and Rosenfeld, “the term ‘avant-garde’ describes an organising grouping with a self-conscious, radical collective project of overturning current orthodoxies in art and replacing them with new, critical practices often directly engaged with the contemporary world” (Barringer and Rosenfeld 9)

¹⁰ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UU6EwAhGuMg>.

¹¹ *Hamlet* is also a grand opera in five acts (1868) by the French composer Ambroise Thomas, with a libretto by Michel Carré and Jules Barbier based on a French adaptation by Alexandre Dumas and Paul Meurice of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

This is the drowning Ophelia from Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. Picking flowers she slips and falls into a stream. Mad with grief after her father's murder by Hamlet, her lover, she allows herself to die. The flowers she holds are symbolic: the poppy means death, daisies innocence and pansies love in vain. The painting was regarded in its day as one of the most accurate and elaborate studies of nature ever made. The background was painted from life by the Hogsmill river in Surrey. Elizabeth Siddal posed for Ophelia in a bath of water kept warm by lamps underneath.¹²

However, as we see in the TV series *Desperate Romantics* (episode two, scene two), it was only after this process that Millais inserted the feminine figure. The model was Elizabeth Siddal who, using a brocade gown, posed in a tub filled with water kept warm by candles underneath (Marsh 1987, 8). Once these candles went out Siddal became serious ill. Though Jan Marsh justifies this episode in terms of Millais' concentration (138), in the film this happened due his dreaming of Effie, Ruskin's wife. Being a narrative, this episode does not correspond to the story, as Millais fell in love with Effie while painting Ruskin's portrait in the Trossachs in Scotland in 1853, showing the translocation frequently found in film adaptations.

The brilliant color and luminosity of *Ophelia* are the result of a technique of painting in pure colors on a pure white ground. This technique was used by the Pre-Raphaelites, who sometimes needed to lay fresh ground for each day's work. This "wet white" technique really added brilliance to the painting and experts recognize it in *Ophelia*, particularly in the flowers. Actually, the work represents several different plants and flowers painted with the most painstaking botanical fidelity and symbolic significance, for example the willow and the nettle growing within its branches, and the daisies near Ophelia's right hand, which are associated with forsaken love, pain, and innocence, respectively. Actually, Ophelia's theme represents what happened to women who reacted against social norms or were unable to accept abandon and/or reacted against subaltern conditions.¹³ Moreover, this awareness points out how the dichotomy of fragile women versus terrible/fallen women is represented, which according to Gilbert and Gubar led at the time to insanity and death:

[The] aesthetic cult of ladylike fragility and delicate beauty—no doubt associated with the moral cult of the angel-woman—obliged "genteel" women to "kill" themselves [...] into art-objects: slim, pale, passive beings whose "charms" eerily recalled the snowy, porcelain immobility of the dead. (Gilbert and Gubar 25)

To a certain extent, and in spite of the transformations of conventional norms of beauty, this exploration of what can be understood as the fragile and desolate young woman contributed to the Pre-Raphaelites' success, which at the present time in popular culture and performance is emphasized in Gucci's proposal where the feminine model is rescued by the man. In fact, this twenty-first century appropriation of women's representations echoes Victorian antinomic values, as seen when Ignasi Monreal, a fashion illustrator and graphic designer, who plays the curator of the Gucci Gallery, and who showed classic art colors in his works, steps inside the painting inspired by Ophelia to reveal the details of a gold sequin dress designed by Alessandro Michele. Therefore, although some artists tried to challenge conventions, we perceive that stereotypes are present in their paintings, either in a very non-canonical way, at times in trying to deal with issues related to the perfectly innocent and sexually ignorant woman, or with the "fallen woman" theme, where some understanding and compassion seem to be evident (Malafaia, "Reading Gender in Art: Morris's Guinevere" 453).

According to Jan Marsh in "Pre-Raphaelite Models", in the past, artists' models were often regarded as little more than animate mannequins, passive accessories who barely contributed to the pictorial result. Now, partly owing to the prestige of fashion models, their active participation in the creation of visual culture is recognized (Marsh 2019, 15).

3. Methodological Approaches

The interpretation of sociocultural and strategic narratives comes as an exercise of cultural analysis that allows for the contextualization of how brands and institutions are managing cultural changes and translating them into the building blocks of myths. Cultural analysis allows for the understanding of how myths are present as a way to represent audience's tensions, interests, and mindsets. As Isabel Capeloa Gil sug-

¹² <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-ophelia-n01506/text-display-caption>.

¹³ Painting Ophelia, namely due to the choice of Elisabeth Siddal as a model (the story of her unhappy life, her artistic career, Rossetti's family criticism, etc) contributed to emphasize prejudices against the Pre-Raphaelites. We would like to add that in 2010, Hélia Correia, a Portuguese writer, wrote about Lizzie in *Adoecer* (Edited by Relógio d'Água).

gests, culture studies share a hermeneutical interest with the reading and interpretation of diverse sign systems (Gil 146). We follow a critical (and interpretative) approach in parallel with a visual semiotic analysis (see Gil 2016) of the texts.¹⁴ This underlines an important textual analysis of the objects in hand, within a frame of culture studies. The works of Chris Barker and Maria Manuel Baptista, considering different references, articulate a perspective of the textual approach with semiotic analysis where the text can be seen as a sign (looking to find ideologies and myths) or a narrative with stories that explains the world (Barker 35–8; Baptista 458). Several authors have also reviewed a semiotic approach to interpret advertisements (Williamson, 1978; Rose, 2001; Oswald, 2012).

Following this methodological setting, according to Roland Barthes, when a sign becomes a new signifier embedded with new meanings (signified) it gathers mythic qualities. This means that the sign is emptied of its original meaning and receives a new one. As the author underlines:

In myth, we find again the tri-dimensional pattern which I have just described: the signifier, the signified and the sign. But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a *second-order semiological system*. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. [...] Whether it deals with alphabetical or pictorial writing, myth wants to see in them only a sum of signs, a global sign, the final term of a first semiological chain. And it is precisely this final term which will become the first term of the greater system which it builds and of which it is only a part. [...] The myth is a metalanguage that acts as a second semiotic system, transforming a sign into a new signifier and adding new meanings to the sign that weren't original to it. [...] the semiologist [...] will only need to know its total term, or global sign, and only inasmuch as this term lends itself to myth. This is why the semiologist is entitled to treat in the same way writing and pictures: what he retains from them is the fact that they are both *signs*, that they both reach the threshold of myth endowed with the same signifying function, that they constitute, one just as much as the other, a language-object. (Barthes 113–114)

Myths provide additional readings to objects. They are imprinted on top of original associations and promote new interpretations. Myths are embedded in propaganda and advertising, as the author suggests. The construction of a strategic brand narrative involves the capability to manage different elements to construct a cohesive story that impacts consumers. In this sense, as Oswald (2015) suggests, semiotics applies to advertising and the study of cultural texts, considering multiple levels at which meaning is produced and structural, contextual, and performative levels of analysis, among others.¹⁵ As the author adds, “the advertising research literature falls roughly into five major categories: critical literary theory, rhetoric, reader response theory, content analysis and semiotics” (Oswald 2015). This is important to understand brands as symbolic systems that are built in narratives as discursive structures.

Nonetheless, as Ugo Volli states, the idea of text is underlined by a great level of complexity in terms of the qualitative heterogeneity of the objects and the way they work, and their capacity to produce meaning beyond the surface (Volli 16). The author's idea of a profound structure present in texts entails a complex coding system, which requires an interpretative analysis capable of contextualizing tensions, as well as the actors that work as references, drivers, and forces, not to mention the different elements that can be aggregated to generate new pertinent ideas that can be correctly interpreted by the audiences.

As Davis proposes, in this regard we must take into consideration the individuals that are featured and how the texts are presented and composed. It is also necessary to review the terms and phrases, as well as their symbolic meaning, to understand the cultural conventions present in the texts (Davis 56).

Volli also adds that advertising always acts through texts, which also entail images—drawings, photographs, advert videos, and other audiovisual materials. It is also an act of mediation taking place in a third space and time (Volli 16). We are discussing a connection to culture, a process of mediation of meanings that

¹⁴ It is important to underline the analysis of the #DG Family campaign by Isabel Capelo Gil (2015) within a framework of culture studies that articulates critical approaches and visual semiotics. This interpretative and contextual analysis within the study of culture calls to attention an analytical perspective that can review brand communication, and its pertinence and articulation with a macro cultural framework/context.

¹⁵ According to the author: “A frequently overlooked function of semiotic research is the ability to develop coherent brand strategy. When executed upstream, semiotics research can integrate consumer insights, brand legacy, and cultural creativity into a platform from which other marketing functions spring, such as product development, pricing strategy, retailing, and advertising strategy” (Oswald 2012, 46).

generate further processes of cultural decoding and the emergence of new symbolic constructs that impact mindsets, lifestyles, and behaviors.¹⁶

This conceptual-methodological framework underlines a complex analysis exercise of texts, which here takes the form of an advertising campaign. Advertising is an important representation medium and the use of Victorian, among other elements, in the “Gucci Hallucination” campaign¹⁷ shows important symbolic connections within art, history, culture, fashion, and brand meaning. In this campaign, our object of study, we see the creative work developed by Ignasi Monreal for the brand’s Spring/Summer 2018 collection,¹⁸ with a specific focus on the work *Ophelia* by John Millais that has a special place in the advert’s video.

4. The “Gucci Hallucinations” Campaign: Readings and Analysis

We can now pay more attention to our specific object of study¹⁹—the “Gucci Hallucinations” 2018 campaign from fashion brand Gucci, focusing on the visual aspects of the document in which we can see the timeless nature of the cultural repertoire. With a duration of 1:41 minutes, the action takes place in an atelier/office, a daily space of creation. It takes the form of a gallery, an idea underlined by the sign showing the word “gallery” at the beginning of the video. This concept of the gallery draws the viewer to the processes of selection (and deselection), also implying the notion of display. The digital reinterpretation of *Ophelia* was incorporated, as other representations (for example, Hieronymus Bosch’s “Garden of Earthly Delights”), in a videoformat in the label’s boutique in Milan Montnapoleone as if it were an artwork in a museum or gallery. This performance proposal was emphasized by benches facing the screen on which mannequins sat as if they were looking at art on a gallery wall.

The wall is filled with a selection of visual works, a set of illustrations which underline a concept of fusion and subversion of cultural references from mythology (such as Greek) and artistic movements, such as the Renaissance, Baroque, and Romanticism. The representations suggest Pegasus, the winged horse symbolizing imagination, and mermaids, which are all hybrid²⁰ representations. We can also see Don Quixote, Sleeping Beauty (wearing a sweater with a picture of Disney’s representation of the same character, while the other character wears a jacket with the inscription “Privilegium Perpetuum”), the Arnolfini Portrait (1434, National Gallery, London) by Van Eyck, and *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1504, Prado Museum, Madrid) by Bosch. This underlines intercessions within a Western art tradition and cultural references/myths. There is also a heritage perspective and narratives/descriptions regarding the explanation of the colors used.

In both the references and the narrative of the video there is always a contrast between tradition and the avantgarde to underline the sophistication of the brand and topics of heritage.

There is a sense of reality (3D), although in the video the representations do not move, except for the last — *Ophelia*. The artist takes special attention with this representation. There is an interactive articulation between the artist and the model, as it is the only moment where he steps into the work, changing it into a real setting with movement— a space of interactivity with the representations.

We also recognize a neo-Victorian approach in the visual document²¹ in the articulation between the Victorian theme of the mad/melancholic *Ophelia* and its postmodern way of seeing this feeling.²² We further review this specific segment referring to *Ophelia*’s character. In it, we do not see a passive *Ophelia* and instead apprehend a relation between the artist and the model.

Moment one of this segment: Within the illustration of the visual document, Ignasio Monreal enters the image (portraying an allusion to Millais’s *Ophelia*). He and the *Ophelia* character/model look at one another.

¹⁶ As Grant McCracken states, “without a connection to culture, Coke is just merely carbonated water and syrup. Without culture, it’s just a fizzy drink. So culture counts” (McCracken 10).

¹⁷ See www.youtube.com/watch?v=UU6EwAhGuMg.

¹⁸ As we can read on the official Gucci website: “Describing the paint colors used in his works, the video campaign is an ironic twist on reality: all of the illustrations were created digitally [...] At the end of the film, Ignasi steps into the lily covered pond his own painting—inspired by the work *Ophelia* (1852) by John Everett Millais—to help the tragic beauty dressed in Alessandro Michele’s gold sequinned dress—out of her watery grave” (see www.gucci.com/us/en/stories/advertising-campaign/article/spring-summer-2018-ignasi-monreal).

¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UU6EwAhGuMg>.

²⁰ Apart from the hybridism of figures, there is also a hybrid contrast between the different reference layers in each representation, and between the physical world (the real) and the illustration (the representation). Actually, hybridity is not a new cultural expression; though it was used in relation to cross-fertilization (i.e. in Darwin’s experiments), it re-emerged in post-colonial discourse. However, in this context, it is applied to a transdisciplinary project and frontier areas of art, fashion, and technologies.

²¹ It clearly underlines the reference to Millais’s *Ophelia*, since it is the last element represented in the add and not only there is a longer focus in this segment (the narrative spends more time in this segment than on others from minute 1:10 to 1:40). It is not merely one cultural allusion among others, also because this is the only image that the artist enters in and becomes animated, clearly setting it apart from all other representations in the add.

²² See John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* (1972) for a consideration of the canonical aesthetics and the presence of hidden ideologies in visual culture expressions.

She has an apathetic expression at the beginning of the scene, a representation of death by drowning, according to Millais' original conception. We follow this reading with an analysis of important signs:²³

1. "The Dress"

Denotative Reading

Signifier: the physical dress worn by the model; Signified: the idea of a piece of clothing. Thus, the denotative sign of a dress is generated.

Connotative Reading(s)

Signifier: the denotative sign; Signified: The dress calls for the cultural context of the original painting in a retro design. Beyond the original sense of the illustrated work, it calls upon the charm and sophistication associated to the brand, permitting a connotative reading of elegance with the blasé feel that is drawn from the contextual setting. The pearls and more golden nature of the dress illustrate an update on Ophelia's character, underlining again a mix of sophistication with traditional upper-class elements.²⁴

2. "The Flowers"

Denotative Reading

Signifier: the physical flowers present (water lily); Signified: the idea of flowers (water lilies). Thus, the denotative sign of a flower is generated.

Connotative Reading(s)

Signifier: the denotative sign; Signified: The water lily can mean purity and new life, not to mention the underlining association with water.²⁵ This underlines the aspect latent in the following moment when Ophelia's character awakens and is brought back to life.

Moment Two of the segment: Suddenly she smiles and is awakened. The artist helps her to get up and they embrace in the water. The appearance of the hashtag #GucciHallucination at the end highlights the idea that everything is a hallucination. Yet, we should consider Hélène Cixous, "beauties slept in their woods, waiting for princes to come and wake them up. In their beds, in their glass coffins, in their childhood forests like dead women" (Cixous 120). We perceive in the representations new and old performances of gender roles. Though this reading is not emphasized in Gucci's digital approach to Ophelia's theme, the model's performance illustrates women's fragile attitude, which was common in Pre-Raphaelite art "as conventions around female modesty and worthlessness of female opinions contributed to render most Victorian models voiceless" (Marsh 2019, 15). We now approach the full segment of Ophelia in this video as an advertising sign, following the process underlined by Volli (87–89):

Level 1. *Denotative Reading*

We can see a setting in the margins of a pond, or a lake, surrounded by vegetation, where a man, smiling, stands looking at a woman laid down on the water with a golden dress, half immersed, with an apathetic look (changed to a smile expression in later seconds of the segment) and surrounded by water lilies. In the later moments of the segment, the artist gives her a hand and we see her standing up.

Level 2. *Connotative Reading(s)*

The way in which the man looks at the woman underlines a calm and peaceful demeanor that highlights the tranquility of the space, helped also by the soundtrack that conveys this spirit. This is a moment of transformation and rebirth for the character, where she smiles and shows happiness, changing her fate portrayed in the original painting and play. When the artist helps the model to stand up, it can also be read as an iteration of the "helpless female" trope.

Level 3. *The Advertising Sign*

The described denotative context is the basis for the dress (the product) to become an idea of femininity, good taste and sophistication with history. In turn, both the dress and the idea become an immediate representation of the Gucci brand.²⁶

²³ In articulation with a Barthesian perspective, we underline different views on denotation (the more literal or descriptive reading of something, close to a dictionary meaning) and connotation (as a broader reading that encompasses further associations and meanings, taking contexts into considerations) (Volli 86–87; Rose 79; Oswald 54–55) that provide here the operational concepts for this analysis.

²⁴ In tune with a luxury and sophisticated positioning of the brand and its audiences.

²⁵ These are not the flowers represented in Millais's original Ophelia. In the original painting we can see pansies, violets, forget-me-nots, fritillaries, daisies, and a red poppy.

²⁶ As Ugo Volli indicates, the more numerous the common characteristics between level 1 and 3 are, the easier it is to generate a relation between the represented object (1st, denotative level) and the product (3rd, advertising sign level) (Volli 89).

Focusing on the segment of Ophelia, the underlining myth of this narrative can be understood as one of sophisticated femininity, which is aware of cultural references and capable of appropriating them in a new fashion and in tune with emerging sociocultural trends that affect style and taste. This reading, and interpretation, of a Victorian representation shows an orientation to incorporate elements of cultural heritage, in line with the brand perspective for this video. It underlines the possibility, a better term could be capability, to transport references into a current popular culture context, associating new meanings based on similar signifiers with new cultural readings and a wider range of associations that can take place in the consumer's mind. This way, Gucci is not just a luxury clothing brand, it's a space of strong symbolic meaning that articulates inspiration from different popular and artistic, cultural in general, webs of meaning.

Final Considerations

This paper underlines the potential connections between textual analysis and cultural management in the perspective of cultural analysis applied in a strategic setting. Taking advantage of a neo-Victorian setting, we reviewed a set of cultural narratives to create the necessary context and basis for the review of our case study. The study focuses its attention on the "Gucci Hallucinations" advertising campaign, specifically the video created by Ignasi Monreal. The analysis of the advert considers a textual analysis of the narrative. The findings underline a rich audiovisual text that suggests emerging cultural mindsets related to gender roles and the intensity of cultural hybrid representations in a fusion of references that create new objects with new meanings, sometimes losing their original sense and heritage. This is a good example of using cultural elements present in the collective mindset to create a cultural expression that has good enough foundations to allow for the identification of some of its origin and heritage, while maintaining a sense of freshness and innovation that captivates consumers. We confirm the articulation of this advert with the cultural branding assumptions and as an example of the potential for in-depth cultural analysis in strategic communication. Future studies should review other case studies and consolidate the textual analysis approach within this cultural management perspective.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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