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FUTURE OF THE PAST: Semiotic Analysis of Gucci's Futurist Renaissance through Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

This paper examines Gucci's strategy in its Chengdu store, blending Italian and Chinese cultures through innovative design and AI. Analyzing brand heritage using semiotic analysis, it explores Gucci's balance of historical legacy and modern relevance, emphasizing storytelling, glocalization, and cultural sensitivity in the luxury brand's navigation of diverse cultural landscapes.

Keywords: Semiosis, Brand heritage, Cultural diversity, Consumption, Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI)

Introduction

Founded in 1921 by Guccio Gucci, inspired by his work at the Savoy Hotel, Gucci initially focused on luxury luggage. By the 1950s, it gained international acclaim, embraced by figures like Jackie Kennedy. After family control until 1982, Gucci went public, later joining the Kering conglomerate in 1993. Over a century, creative talents like Tom Ford and Alessandro Michele contributed to multiple brand revivals (Moura, 2023).

Gucci, celebrating its centenary in 2021, expanded its portfolio into clothing and accessories while preserving artisanal traditions and Italy's cultural heritage, navigating the tension between artisanal and industrial logic, and generating plural luxuries (Perez, 2007). It is now the top revenue generator for the second-largest global luxury conglomerate, the Kering Group (Danziger, 2023). The rapid growth of China as a global luxury consumer market has played a pivotal role in the industry, influencing trends and business strategies

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and making it an epicenter for sustainable growth. This reshapes the global luxury landscape and triggers a profound reassessment of traditional market dynamics and cultural influence in the luxury universe. According to Bain Luxury Goods, the global luxury goods market analysis reveals continuous and significant growth, solidifying China as a crucial player (Lanne, 2018). Recognizing China's significance, Gucci opened a Chengdu store in June 2023, integrating AI to connect with new generations. The digital fresco, showcased on 33 LED panels, portrays landscapes of Chengdu and Renaissance architecture in Florence. The incorporation of new narratives and languages reflects the fashion industry's ability to express and create symbolic value in modern society (Meneguete, 2020). In the fusion of two cultures, Gucci introduces "remix culture," a digital interconnection reshaping creation, involving conscious choices of symbolic systems in media, where each fragment carries cultural, visual, and imaginative connections (Leão, 2012).



Figure 1Figure 1 - Images of the Gucci Chengdu Store with the digital fresco created through Generative Artificial Intelligence. Retrieved: November 20, 2023 - Source https://frameweb.com/article/retail/is-ai-the-key-to-a-dynamic-retail-experience-see-this-ran

Brand Heritage and Semiotic Analysis of the Digital Fresco at Gucci Chengdu Store Brand heritage is a concept that connects a brand's historical status to its identity and appeal to consumers (Hudson, 2011). It engages consumers with the brand's history or history through the brand, fostering a sense of legitimacy, conflict, and negotiation in the process of creating heritage (Pecot & Barnier, 2017; Hakala et al., 2011). The use of visual symbols, blending history and enduring values, is especially important in the innovation processes of luxury brands to enhance brand positioning and value propositions (Sammour et al., 2020). The video created by Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) for the new Gucci Chengdu store's digital fresco merges Italian and Chinese cultures. It depicts Florentine architecture and Italian Renaissance landscapes alongside the natural scenery of Sichuan, the Chinese region where Chengdu is located. Despite Chengdu's modern urban setting, the brand chooses to portray dreamlike landscapes from Sichuan's interior.



Figure 2 Figure 2 - Elements from the digital fresco video of the Gucci Chengdu Store.

Locality enhances customer pride and connection, as consumers appreciate companies that are deeply rooted in their communities. On the other hand, global visibility lends prestige and suggests innovation and quality on a worldwide scale, boosting brand recognition and respect. The challenge, however, is to maintain a global presence while staying accessible and attentive to customer needs (Aaker, 2004). Hepferer (2015) suggests that a brand's heritage, being a key factor in consumers' choice process, adds value to luxury brands by offering a sense of history, authenticity, and exclusivity. This heritage serves as a powerful indicator of quality and craftsmanship, influencing consumers' perceptions and decisions in selecting luxury goods or services.

Semiotic analysis, as explained by Perez & Pompeu (2012), explores layers of meaning to assess a brand's communication effectiveness, supporting Eco's (2009) view on the cultural significance grounded in underlying rules. Gucci uses semiotics to connect cultures through images, aligning with concepts of meaning, emulation, and innovation via strategic use of symbols, narratives, and visual representations (Santangelo & Leone, 2023).

Peirce's semiotic theory focuses on the interaction among signs, represented objects, and interpretants, leading to infinite interpretations (Traini, 2018). It looks at how communities interpret signs through a semiotic lens to evaluate something. "It is participatory meaning construction that deals with the structural coupling between a community of interpreters and a world of interpretants" (Paolucci, 2021, p.67). Peirce identified Categories in his semiotic theory to represent the diverse relationships between signs, the world, and the mind, shedding light on the complexity of meaning-making and interpretation. By showing that signs can operate in different ways—through resemblance (icons), real or causal connections (indices), or social conventions (symbols)—Peirce lays a comprehensive groundwork for understanding how we attribute meaning to signs in various contexts.



Figure 3 Peircean Triad -Gucci Chengdu Video. Created by the authors.

Peircean semiotic analysis reveals the triadic relationship within signs, highlighting the crucial role of the interpretant in linking the sign and its object (Santaella, 2023). Culture is seen as a collective, ongoing process of symbol growth, enabling a dynamic flow of meanings in constant evolution (Cardoso, 2021). In the context of a Gucci video, semiotic perspectives identify iconic qualisigns conveying visible and abstract qualities, indexical sinsigns reflecting spatial-temporal existence and brand affiliation, and symbolic legisigns representing cultural expectations and brand significance. This aesthetic narrative goes beyond mere promotion, enriching the viewer's experience and especially reinforcing Gucci's brand heritage identity. The inferential nature of culture, as seen in works like the Gucci video, highlights the imprecisions of the world and the sensory experiences they provoke (Ibri, 1992). Peirce's concept of diagrammatic thought provides insights into semiotic dynamics within cultural systems, helping to understand their vibrant forms.

What is the nature of the sign?

Qualisign - the visual image of the red hibiscus flower in the video, considering its distinctive physical characteristics, such as color, shape, and texture.

Icon - the red hibiscus flower in the video, as it physically resembles a real hibiscus flower, being recognizable by its specific visual features.

Rheme - the symbolism of beauty, lush nature, or the specific cultural connection associated with the hibiscus.



What is the nature of the sign-object relationship?

Sinsign - the direct presence of the Duomo in the visual representation, considering its physical and immediate presence in the landscape.

Index - the Florence Duomo is linked to Gucci's connection with the city of Florence, where it was founded. It acts as an indicator or index of the brand's origin.

Dicent - associated with the Florence Duomo would be the symbolic representation of the history and heritage of the Gucci brand



What is the nature of the relationship between the sign and its object for its interpretant?



Figure 4 Authors' Interpretative Framework for Gucci Chengdu Video.

Artificial Intelligence, Cultural Hybridism, and Consumption.

The emergence of digital interactive experiences within intangible cultural heritage represents a multifaceted evolution in modern culture. Intangible cultural heritage represents significant cultural forms transmitted across generations through oral and experiential methods, and in an era of societal transformation and globalization, the preservation and dissemination of this heritage are paramount, with the utilization of AI's capabilities, including historical reproduction and immersive experiences, offering opportunities to enhance accessibility and engagement with cultural heritage, promoting appreciation and understanding among diverse communities (Zhang & Jing, 2022). Peirce's

philosophical logic remains extremely relevant, as a semiotic process, observed in various phenomena extending beyond the human mind, also applies to Artificial Intelligence programs, particularly in their ability to comprehend and represent meanings by translating symbols into actions. According to Martino (2017, p.45), "there is a perfect transitivity or complementarity between the technological aspects of the means and culture." The Gucci Chengdu video is innovative not only because it is the first from a leading global luxury brand to employ Generative Artificial Intelligence significantly but also because it highlights Gucci's technological forefront, representing a disruptive strategy in the context of the Digital Transformation of the Fashion brand.

The spread of new technologies such as artificial intelligence, for example, allows users access to an immense quantity of images and visual streams, and, above all, enables them to learn much more easily than before to produce, manage, and modify them. The social codes that guide signification in their various forms are known or recognized by the individuals who possess them and interpret them visually. "The knowledge of a language or another social code is not a reflective and conscious knowing but a practical competence, a know-how that, the more constraining, is less recognized by those who, nevertheless, act based on it" (Marrone, 2001, p.13).

Gucci innovates by introducing Artificial Intelligence as a medium to bridge cultures and generations, using visual exposure to locate and even decompose phenomena, although not necessarily to explain and comprehend them fully. In today's context, the act of seeing is perhaps less associated with knowledge, information, or awareness than with experience, having personally lived through that moment visually, participated, and thus been part of the event. Contemporary semiotics seeks to position its work within broader hypotheses about the conditions of possibility for social phenomena and cultural dynamics (Pezzini, 2008). Socio-semiotic approaches have significantly characterized developments in cultural communication, languages, and forms of expression. When dealing with cultural products like written narratives, films, advertisements, or photographs, their entity as material objects is highlighted, constituted as texts based on specific needs and choices of a method (Geninasca, 2000). Therefore, understanding the notion of a text suggests that these cultural objects are organized and structured according to certain principles, either narrative or visual, aiding in understanding how they communicate meanings and influence consumers' experience and interpretation. The starting point of a socio-semiotic cultural approach to brand narrative is how a society engages with itself, thinks, and reflects through texts, discourses, and stories it produces internally. The empirical object of this approach is defined as the set of discourses that intervene in the constitution and/or transformation of interaction conditions between subjects (Landowski, 1999).

Like Peircean philosophy, Chinese thought is pragmatic, with change being driven not by inner essence but by the external influence of tradition and circumstances, manifesting through "silent" evolutions and transformations. Chinese art, aligned with a functional approach to nature, aims not to reproduce reality hyper-realistically but to reflect its essence (Chul-Han, 2023). In the case of the Gucci Chengdu store, the intention to combine seemingly disparate elements cohesively demonstrates an innovative and unique approach to expressing the brand's identity. "A luxury brand must reconcile contradictory imperatives: perpetuate a tradition and innovate, be faithful to heritage while being modern" (Lipovetsky & Roux, 2003, p.82). However, the brand appears to not delve deeply into sociocultural fusion, which could be a strategy to bring closer the two cultures, Chinese and Italian.

Culture serves as the "lens" through which an individual perceives, learns, and assimilates phenomena in society. It constitutes the world, imbuing it with meaning characterized in terms of cultural categories and cultural principles (McCracken, 1986). Luxury brands, when entering diverse cultural markets, face the challenge of transferring their cultural meaning effectively. Cultural tension occurs when there is a disconnection between the meaning originally associated with a brand and how it is interpreted in different cultural contexts. Categories of culture are fundamental, according to McCracken (1985), to represent the basic distinctions a culture uses to divide the world of phenomena.

McCracken suggests that culture is not just an additional element in the world but constitutes the world itself. It provides a set of conceptual tools, categories, and principles used to attribute meaning to things around us, influencing how we classify objects, interpret events, and understand social relations. In the Gucci Chengdu video, cultural categories such as tradition, beauty, and success have culturally constructed meanings that may not reflect the local culture where it is being exhibited. Cultural principles refer to the fundamental values guiding behavior and choices within a society, shaping preferences, norms, ethics, and impacting decisions. Culture is not static but in constant movement, influencing and being influenced by consumption practices and the construction of individual and collective identities that shape how we understand and relate to the world around us. The glocal approach seeks to incorporate local Chinese elements into the brand narrative, respecting local culture and contributing to greater acceptance and appreciation of the global brand in diverse cultural contexts. The importance of combining global and local elements in marketing and production strategies allows brands to customize communication to meet specific preferences and values in different markets, increasing local relevance and acceptance. This approach enables companies to navigate successfully

in diverse cultural contexts, building more authentic and sustainable connections with consumers worldwide. Therefore, glocal consumption not only acknowledges globalization but also values local adaptation as an integral part of a brand's commercial success. Luxury consumption economies such as China function as exporters of cultural products and images, influencing the marketing and advertising actions of global brands. This trend can either unify the world into a single cultural "global village," where certain images, ideas, values, narratives, products, and styles are marketed globally or increase diversity by allowing local cultural characteristics to reach a global audience (Manovich, 2018). Although the influence of cultural Artificial Intelligence Generative (IAG) may not be the most significant at the moment, the trend is expected to grow increasingly in the future.

Connecting with branding strategy

As an attempt to connect the semiotic analysis from Gucci's strategy, we decided to highlight the three main topics in branding to discuss how Gucci's strategy can be viewed as a successful case study for branding in the contemporary luxury market:

The power of the combination of heritage and storytelling in branding

The discussion of heritage and storytelling in branding has gained significant attention in academic literature. Corporate heritage marketing, brand narratives, and the impact of cultural heritage on branding have been key areas of focus. Balmer (2013) emphasizes the significance of corporate heritage marketing and its relation to corporate heritage brands. Similarly, Hakala et al. (2011) highlight brand heritage as a future priority in branding research, emphasizing its importance in brand management. Pfannes et al. (2021) delve

into the content and consequences of brand narratives, particularly among heritage brands, shedding light on the stories told by managers and consumer responses to these narratives. Furthermore, Dai et al. (2022) discuss the impact of national heritage designation on city branding and tourism management, particularly focusing on the extensive discussion regarding its impacts on tourism destination branding.

The role of storytelling in branding is evident in the study by (Spielmann et al., 2021), which emphasizes the link between heritage and history in corporate marketing and branding contexts, relating it to the present, past, and future. Furthermore, the study by Schroeder et al. (2015) presents case studies of Chinese brands that use cultural heritage in their branding strategy, shedding light on the approach to Chinese cultural heritage brands. In this context, Gucci exemplifies a brand that masterfully blends heritage and storytelling. The Gucci Chengdu store is not just an expression of tradition and luxury; it is a dynamic contribution to the perpetuation and revitalization of local cultural identity. By transforming the symbolic value of sociocultural heritage into economic value, Gucci demonstrates the ability to continuously regenerate it. The use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) enriches the understanding of cultural heritage and collective memory, merging tradition with technology to create new cultural expressions for the digital age. Gucci's use of semiotics reveals symbolic layers that add richness to the brand's cultural narrative, connecting artistic creation with the language of consumption to offer a unique experience. Peircean semiotic analysis aids Gucci in understanding diverse cultural signs and interpretations. When incorporated into a brand narrative, cultural sensitivity in the choice of signs, colors, and symbols creates communication that resonates authentically and harmoniously. This approach respects both cultural diversities and the brand's commercial and institutional facets, emphasizing the importance of an authentic and harmonious resonance. Furthermore, the Gucci Chengdu store's approach to combining disparate cultural elements cohesively represents an innovative expression of the brand's identity. Gucci's centenary strategy prioritizes heritage preservation and innovation for global markets, but the Chengdu store falls short in sociocultural fusion. Luxury brands face the challenge of maintaining cultural coherence across diverse markets, ensuring the preservation of their original significance.

Glocalization, adapting global brands to local consumers.

The concept of glocalization, which refers to the adaptation of global products and brands to local markets, has been a subject of extensive discussion in the context of branding. Scholars have emphasized the interplay between global and local influences, highlighting the significance of glocalization in brand management. The term "glocalization" was introduced to describe the interpenetration and co-shaping of local cultures and the forces of globalization, particularly in the context of global brands and mass media (Thompson & Arsel, 2004). This concept has been further explored in the context of consumer behavior, with empirical research demonstrating the existence of glocal identities among consumers in emerging countries, who respond positively to both global and local brands (Gup, 2013). Moreover, the relevance of glocalization in branding strategies has been emphasized, with discussions on marketing hybridization and glocalization strategies that enable foreign global brands to tap into local markets through cultural adaptability (Liu et al., 2021). The significance of achieving global acceptance while maintaining local relevance has been highlighted, with local brands striving to become "gloCal" by achieving global acceptance while retaining local identity (Schmidt-Devlin et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the impact of glocalization on consumer perceptions and purchase intentions has been a focal point, with studies examining the effects of perceived brand global presence and localness on consumer behavior, particularly in diverse cultural and economic contexts (Tsuchiya et al., 2021). The adaptation and customization of global brands to suit local cultural preferences have been underscored as essential components of glocal marketing, contributing to the creation of cultural brand identities (Lugina et al., 2019). Additionally, the glocalization of brands has been studied in various cultural and geographical contexts, including the influence of European football leagues on Nigerian society, highlighting the glocal responses and adaptations in different cultural settings (Igwe et al., 2021). The role of glocalization in luxury brand markets and the need for a multicultural branding approach have also been discussed, emphasizing the importance of overcoming local brand image inconsistencies and cultivating brand identity within the organization (Seo et al., 2015). In line with these studies, Gucci's strategy for its Chengdu store exemplifies a sophisticated form of glocalization. The store is a harmonious blend of Italian and Chinese cultural elements, reflecting the brand's global identity while also paying homage to local heritage and aesthetics. This glocal approach has allowed Gucci to respect local culture and contribute to its acceptance in the Chinese market, showcasing a narrative that merges global luxury with local relevance through its store design and customer experience.

Gucci's innovative use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the store's digital fresco, which displays landscapes of Chengdu alongside Renaissance architecture, is a testament to its commitment to blending tradition with modernity. It introduces the "remix culture," a contemporary digital interconnection that reconfigures the nature of creation and storytelling. This not only aligns with the brand's glocalization efforts but also underscores its dedication to innovativeness and cultural hybridism, as it strategically blends global luxury with local relevance to create a unique and resonant brand narrative.

Innovativeness as a positioning strategy

The primary focus of innovativeness in marketing strategies for branding involves the use of storytelling and heritage to develop compelling brand narratives that resonate with consumers. Furthermore, the impact of brand history on consumers' cognitive processes and brand attitudes has been discussed, emphasizing the uniqueness of the brand over time and the legacy of technological innovation as incitements to events and important personages (Guo & Zhang, 2020). This highlights the relevance of incorporating brand history and heritage into marketing strategies to enhance consumer perceptions and brand attitudes.

Gucci's innovative approach in its Chengdu store reflects its investment in innovativeness and the blend of tradition with cutting-edge technology. The use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) to create a digital fresco is a testament to the brand's efforts to connect with new generations and maintain its relevance in the modern fashion industry. The fusion of cultural narratives and the emphasis on local identities within the global framework of the brand illustrates a successful glocalization strategy, offering a unique experience that resonates with both global and local consumers. This innovative use of AI not only aligns with Gucci's storytelling and heritage but also showcases the brand's commitment to embracing new technologies to enrich its cultural narrative and create symbolic value.

Discussion

We use signs to express content, and this content is sculpted and organized in different forms by different cultures and languages. "[...] There are things that cannot be done (or said). The fact that these things have been said once does not matter" (Eco, 2009, p.52-53). In the vibrant intersection of art, history, tradition, cultural production, and consumption, the video for the Gucci store in Chengdu reveals the complex relationship between artistic autonomy and submission to the language of consumption (Plaza, 1997). This dialogue emphasizes the brand's adaptability and its awareness of the need to respect and value local heritage. Gucci Chengdu stands not just as an expression of tradition and luxury but as a dynamic force in the perpetuation and revitalization of local cultural identity. "Being able to transform the symbolic value of a sociocultural heritage into economic value means being able to regenerate it continuously" (Leone, 2020, p.217).

The use of AI plays an innovative role in enriching the understanding of cultural heritage and valuing collective memory (Santaella, 2021). In the era of globalization, AI has become a vital tool for facilitating cross-cultural communication, offering significant opportunities for brand heritage applications. This paper explores the utilization of artificial intelligence technology in this endeavor, aiming to protect and promote such cultural assets comprehensively. The union of tradition and technology not only underscores intelligent adaptation to contemporaneity but also opens new horizons for cultural expression in the digital age. Semiotics adds a significant layer to the understanding of the Gucci Chengdu video, highlighting how signs and symbols communicate emotions, values, and cultural identity. Through the lens of semiotics, we perceive how artistic creation connected to the language of consumption converges to create a unique experience, revealing symbolic layers that contribute to the richness and depth of the brand's cultural narrative. From a brand heritage perspective, Gucci's approach to the contemporary luxury market serves as a paragon of how heritage and storytelling can powerfully resonate with consumers. Academic literature has increasingly recognized the importance of corporate heritage marketing and brand narratives, as they imbue brands with a rich emotional and historical dimension that appeals to consumers. Gucci's Chengdu store stands as a testament to this approach, where the brand's storied legacy is not merely preserved but dynamically interwoven with local cultural identity. This interlacing of tradition and innovation, particularly using Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI), showcases Gucci's ability to continuously regenerate its sociocultural heritage into economic value. The brand's strategy encompasses a semiotic understanding of cultural symbols and a nuanced integration of colors and designs, creating a harmonious narrative that honors both its storied past and its contemporary market presence.

Furthermore, Gucci's Chengdu store exemplifies the concept of glocalization—adapting global brands to resonate with local tastes and cultural contexts. This strategy acknowledges the complex interplay between global branding and local consumer behavior, aiming for a "gloCal" identity that appeals universally while maintaining local relevance. Gucci's utilization of AI to present a digital fresco featuring Chinese landscapes alongside Renaissance architecture symbolizes a "remix culture," blending global luxury with local relevance. This sophisticated glocalization strategy emphasizes the brand's commitment to innovation and cultural hybridism. Through such approaches, Gucci not only fosters a unique brand narrative but also strengthens its position in the global luxury market, ensuring its appeal to both international audiences and specific local markets. Gucci's endeavors highlight the importance of storytelling in crafting a compelling brand narrative, where the fusion of heritage with innovation serves as a powerful narrative.

device. This approach enriches the consumer experience, connecting them emotionally to the brand's legacy through a contemporary lens. It also illustrates Gucci's role as a cultural intermediary, contributing to cultural sustainability by weaving together past and future, local and global, tradition and innovation, thereby enriching both cultural and commercial landscapes of the luxury market.

Final Remarks

The exploration of Gucci's Chengdu store through the lenses of semiotics, brand heritage, and the innovative use of artificial intelligence underscores the intricate balance between maintaining cultural identity and embracing technological advancement in the luxury market. Gucci's approach exemplifies the power of storytelling and heritage marketing in creating a deep, emotive connection with consumers, illustrating how luxury brands can navigate the complexities of global and local dynamics. By integrating Generative Artificial Intelligence with a nuanced understanding of cultural symbols and glocalization strategies, Gucci not only honors its storied legacy but also dynamically engages with contemporary cultural narratives. This strategic fusion of tradition and innovation not only enhances the brand's appeal across diverse consumer landscapes but also sets a precedent for the role of luxury brands in fostering cultural dialogue and sustainability in a globalized world. Through this case study, we gain insights into the potential of luxury brands to serve as custodians of cultural heritage, leveraging technology and storytelling to enrich both the consumer experience and the broader cultural landscape. Gucci's Chengdu initiative serves as a vibrant illustration of the evolving relationship between brand heritage, cultural identity, and innovation, offering a compelling blueprint for the future of luxury branding.

The examination of Gucci's strategic approach in Chengdu has both managerial and theoretical implications, shedding light on the effectiveness of integrating traditional cultural heritage with contemporary technological advancements like artificial intelligence in the luxury sector. From a managerial perspective, this case study underscores the importance of adaptive strategies that respect and leverage local culture while incorporating global branding elements, suggesting that the future success of luxury brands may increasingly depend on their ability to navigate the intricacies of cultural specificity and innovation. Theoretically, Gucci's example contributes to a broader understanding of how brands can act as cultural intermediaries, challenging existing paradigms around global marketing strategies and offering new insights into the dynamics of cultural preservation, brand heritage, and consumer engagement in an era marked by rapid technological change and globalization. This synthesis of tradition and modernity provides a valuable framework for future research and practice, emphasizing the role of luxury brands in shaping cultural discourse and identity in the digital age.

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